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# Conceptualising employer branding in sustainable organisations

Employer  
branding

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to reconceptualise employer branding in sustainable organizations at the intersection of branding, strategic human resource management (HRM) and corporate social responsibility (CSR).

**Design/methodology/approach** – Based on an outline of current conceptualisations of employer branding, the paper discusses the strategic potentials of merging corporate branding processes, strategic HRM and CSR into a theoretical framework for reconceptualising employer branding as co-created processes and sustainable employer-employee relationships.

**Findings** – When organizations adapt strategies for sustainable development (including CSR), it affects how to approach stakeholder relations and organizational processes, including the employee-employer relationship and employer branding processes. However, current employer branding conceptualisations do not comply with such changed corporate conditions. The suggested framework reconceptualises employer branding as an integrated part of a CSR strategy, thus offering a new way of approaching employer branding as supporting sustainable organizational development and long-term employer-employee relationships.

**Practical implications** – The proposed conceptualisation of employer branding implies a shift in focus from end result to process. As part of the process, organizations need to approach employees as corporate partners in order to co-create employer-employee values.

**Originality/value** – This paper suggests and discusses a new conceptualisation of employer branding, which appreciates co-creation and employer-employee dialogue as strategic processes for supporting sustainable organizational development.

**Keywords** Corporate communications, Employers, Branding, Corporate social responsibility, Human resource management

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## 1. Introduction

During the last decade, we have witnessed an increasing number of moral statements on issues of ethics, sustainability or social responsibility entering corporate communication and corporate branding (Elving, 2010; Morsing, 2006). In the wake of globalisation, organizations are increasingly encouraged to take on an ethical or social responsibility and contribute to sustainable development (United Nations, 1987). With this focus in general paired with an increased focus on “the business case” for social responsibility (Carroll and Shabana, 2010), and on establishing a link between business and social responsibility (Porter and Kramer, 2006), we are likely to see more organizations integrating these issues as part of their corporate brands.

This trend has far-reaching implications for the relationship between an organization and its employees and potential employees. Organizations both depend on a high degree



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of employee commitment to their corporate moral brands and expect a high degree of employee commitment as a result of their corporate moral brands (Morsing, 2006). However, introducing ethics into corporate brands is committing for employees, as it is about choosing between “good” and “bad”. Employees’ personal morals become tied to the organization as they are expected to enact the corporate morals (Weick, 1995) and take on the identity of their job (Gossett and Kilker, 2006). While organizations increasingly recognize that the strengthening of the employer-employee relationship and their attractiveness, future profitability and “licence to operate” depend on their willingness and ability to recognize employees and potential employees as important stakeholders and contributors to the corporate brand, research indicates that they do not yet approach the issue strategically, and that sustainability or social responsibility in human resource management (HRM) is ignored (Preuss *et al.*, 2009). This also seems to be the case in the field of employer branding.

In light of this and other challenges facing organizations when sustainability is a primary strategic objective, we argue that there is a need to expand the domain of employer branding by including a broader range of strategic HRM and social responsibility aspects than previously found in the employer branding literature. In more general terms, we argue that there is a need to apply more stakeholder and relationship thinking to employer branding in support of the paradigmatic understanding of the concept within a social-constructivist tradition (Burr, 2003; Gotsi and Andriopoulos, 2007). This argumentation is supported by an ontological turn in the overall understanding of the organization and its members. The new understanding manifests itself within central areas: work life is no longer restricted to working hours and the physical presence within the organizational setting but is seen as an important resource for the construction of the individual identity (Baldry *et al.*, 2007; Bourne *et al.*, 2009); organizations are no longer conceptualised as static entities but rather as dynamic, emergent and social co-constructions negotiated by all organizational stakeholders (Taylor and Van Every, 2000; Cheney *et al.*, 2004); employees are no longer defined within a Tayloristic notion of humans as raw material but recognized as meaning-making corporate citizens (Baldry *et al.*, 2007; Cunha *et al.*, 2008); and communication is no longer merely understood as a tool or mean to solving a specific problem but recognized as constitutive of the organization in terms of dialogical processes, complex discursive formations and interpretation of meaning among the organizational stakeholders (Deetz, 1995, 2003b; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000). Thus, within such a constitutive communication paradigm, the employer brand should not be considered a pre-existing and separate entity to communication but rather constitutive within and brought into being through communicative processes (Taylor and Van Every, 2000).

The paper is based on the premise, that adapting and practicing of sustainable corporate strategies necessitate rethinking stakeholder relationships in general and the employer-employee relationship in particular, i.e. the employer brand. Consequently, in this paper, we re-conceptualize employer branding as communicative, relationship building and cross-disciplinary processes, which create, negotiate and enact sustainable employer-employee relationships, i.e. long-term relationships between an organization and its potential and existing employees initiated by corporate branding processes integrating the notion of corporate social responsibility (CSR) through sustainable HRM[1]. Based on an outline of the current conceptualisation of employer branding, we argue that by merging research within the theoretical fields of corporate branding

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and sustainable HRM the concept of employer branding can facilitate sustainable organizational development and become an integrated dimension of a CSR strategy. Thus, the paper is stimulated by the overall question of how to conceptualise the processes of creating strategic, sustainable employer-employee relationships in the conceptual intersection of corporate branding and sustainable HRM.

The paper is organized around three theoretical areas: we argue that by adapting recent theories on corporate branding processes, employer branding can be redefined as a dynamic and interactional process of negotiating and co-creating brand values; that the introduction of strategic HRM redefines the notion of employees and thus the relation between employer and employee; and finally, that by rooting employer branding in the philosophy of CSR, employer branding is transformed into a sustainable and trustworthy value-creating process. On this basis, a theoretical framework for reconceptualizing employer branding as strategic communication for sustainable development is proposed, which will provide a point of departure for a reflection upon how the employer branding strategy and the processes of relationship building come into play in various corporate contexts. Finally, implications for organizational practice and future research are suggested.

## 2. Sustainable organizations

Sustainability is a broad and evolving construct. Most definitions draw on the principles of the Brundtland Commission: “Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, p. 8). An emerging consensus is that there are three CSR pillars of sustainability, i.e. economic, social and environmental (Elkington, 1997). Economic sustainability is fundamental to corporate financial success – the organization cannot survive if expenditure exceeds income. Social sustainability embodies the humanitarian context of business and relates to issues of poverty, income inequality, health care, education, etc. Environmental sustainability considers the impact of business on natural resources, the environment, global warming, etc. Another emerging consensus is that the three CSR pillars of sustainability include three kinds of social responsibilities: economic, legal and ethical, and that organizations should aim at operating “in the middle”, i.e. activities should aim at fulfilling economic, legal and ethical responsibilities simultaneously (Schwartz and Carroll, 2003).

Integrating sustainability is not mandatory. However, a pressure for sustainability has come from three general sources: first, corporate stakeholders such as investors, employees, customers and suppliers; second, societal stakeholders such as legislation, regulations and voluntary codes of practice, i.e. the United Nations Global Compact, and finally, institutional forces in the shape of norms and expectations (WBCSD, 2000). Recently, it has also been argued that there is a need to reconsider CSR within a global framework (Stohl *et al.*, 2007, 2009). According to this argument, a global CSR “is responsive to the multiple cultures, value sets, and communicative practices of different nations while recognizing that (inter) organizational contexts are no longer bounded by the nation-state” (Stohl *et al.*, 2007, p. 34). The main problem with this argument is that there are many aspects surrounding CSR that continue to reinforce localized rather than globalized frameworks (Stohl *et al.*, 2007, p. 36). The same conclusion is drawn by Matten and Moon (2008) who argue, however, that there is a move towards institutionalisation and standardisation. Corporations can address, demonstrate and communicate sustainability through internal voluntary initiatives as well as externally through partnerships and collaborations. As societal awareness of and interest in sustainability increases,

and pressure group activity in this domain becomes more visible, senior managers have made increased efforts to integrate these issues into the responsibilities of their organizations and to demonstrate and communicate their sustainable practices to their stakeholders (Haugh and Talwar, 2010). Demonstrating and communicating sustainability has potential benefits for the corporation, as it signals to stakeholders that it is committed to social and environmental goals, and this has been linked to positive corporate performance, competitive advantage, customer loyalty, enhanced company image and goodwill, legitimacy, and improvements in employee recruitment and retention (Haugh and Talwar, 2010). Research shows for example that CSR initiatives increase employee-company identification and that employee-company identification, in turn, influences employees' commitment to their company (Kim *et al.*, 2010; Scott, 2001).

Corporations that aim to integrate sustainability into their corporate strategy, processes, and products are likely to face significant challenges to adapt, and in some cases, completely redesign their businesses and practices. Radically changing the orientation of the organization to focus on sustainability will mean "a shift in managerial mindset on the role, purpose and impact of the [corporation] on society" (Waddock and McIntosh, 2009, p. 298) and will need more than the dissemination of leaflets and reports and a few training days for selected employees. Instead, it requires the incorporation of changing business practices, dialogue and interaction with multiple stakeholders as well as the implementation of new and sustainable business strategies in order to accomplish a change in the fundamental value system of the firm (Waddock and McIntosh, 2009, p. 298). Hence, sustainability affects organizational structures and behaviours, including the notion of how to be a sustainable employer, and thus for the practice and processes of employer branding.

### 3. Current conceptualisation of employer branding

Ambler and Barrow (1996) initially introduced employer branding as a research discipline with an explorative study among UK companies of the relevance of applying brand management techniques to HRM. Regardless of a certain empirical resistance to introducing marketing vocabularies and practices to the HRM discipline, the authors conclude that the employer brand concept is potentially valuable for organizations and that applying brand management to the HRM function reinforces the strength of and adds value to corporate equity from a customer perspective. Thus, it brings return to both HRM and branding (Ambler and Barrow, 1996).

Inspired by Aaker's (1991) notion of a strong brand, Ambler and Barrow (1996, p. 187) define the employer brand as: "the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company". The definition has later become a key definition in research on employer branding, thus rooting present research on employer branding in the underlying assumptions that have guided the classical branding paradigm (e.g. static, sender focused and independent of any relational influences, cf. Csaba and Bengtsson, 2006), and furthermore framed in relation to obsolete organizational contexts and challenges (Schultz, 2005) without consideration for the societal demand of corporate sustainability. Following this notion, current conceptualisations of employer branding are characterized by:

- A static inside-out notion of the employer brand: the employer brand propositions are defined by brand strategists on the basis of brand identity, conceptualised as stable and enduring core characteristics, or the brand DNA (Aaker, 1996).

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- The exposing and transmission of employer brand propositions, internally (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007) or externally (Elwing *et al.*, 2002).
  - A linear employer branding practice entailing static sender (employer) and receiver (employees) positions (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004).
  - A channel to enhance customer experiences (Mosley, 2007) and organizational performance (Ambler and Barrow, 1996).

This summation of the current research in employer branding is correspondingly present in a recent review of corporate, internal and employer branding, respectively, and their inter-relationship (Foster *et al.*, 2010). The authors argue that each branding concept provide insights into reconceptualising more integrated corporate brand management. Based on a review of the three brand concepts, they highlight internal branding as a concept to ensure that employees deliver the brand promise to external customers; and employer branding as a way to recruit the right candidates in order to ensure a high-quality delivery of brand promise to external stakeholders. The merging of internal branding and employer branding (as argued by the authors) thus corresponds with the summation above as it conceptualises employees as channels to customer experiences. On this notion, the goal is not to ensure quality in employer-employee relations, but rather to secure a quality in building and sustaining long-term brand-customer relationships.

Following this, a final characteristic of the current research on employer branding is the absence of employer-employee relationship building processes, which is a central element of organizations' ethical responsibilities (Schwartz and Carroll, 2003). Schultz *et al.* (2005, p. 15) point out the missing focus on employees in what they term the first wave of corporate branding, stating that a central myth in adapting branding to the organizational level is that branding processes automatically mobilize the organization's employees. From a relational perspective, this is crucial since employees otherwise may feel alienated from the corporate values (Hatch and Schultz, 2003).

As outlined, current employer branding adopts an outdated notion of brand management, rooted in functionalistic ideals and conceptualisations of the relation between employers and employees, thus failing to respond to present organizational challenges and societal pressures. We argue that the underlying assumptions prevent employer branding from developing and unfolding its full potential as strategic support for sustainable organizational development. As argued by Beckman *et al.* (2006), increased stakeholder pressures and demands have reformulated the famous statement "the social responsibility of business is to increase its profit" (Friedman, 1970) into "the business of business is value creating" (Beckman *et al.*, 2006, p. 15), thus claiming businesses to move beyond profit maximizations and economic precedence and instead to make equal priorities among all stakeholders. To create value not only for the firm but towards all stakeholders including the employees, thus, becomes at the centre of any sustainable business model. The persisting question at stake is how the employer branding processes can strategically support sustainable development. On this basis, the purpose of this paper is to theoretically discuss the strategic potentials of employer branding processes in sustainable organizations when merging the concept of corporate branding with sustainable HRM.

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#### 4. Theoretical approaches to understanding employer branding as processes of co-creation

Following the notion of employer branding as the co-creation of strategic, sustainable employer-employee relations, we argue that a reconceptualization of employer branding draws on the three theoretical fields of branding, HRM and CSR defined within a paradigm of social constructivism from which the concept of co-creation emerges.

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##### 4.1 *Co-creation of value*

The concept of value creation has been proposed by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) as an emerging alternative to the traditional concept of the value chain and its firm-centric view (Porter, 1980). According to Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), a new mode of value creation has emerged in which the market transforms from a *locus* of economic value extraction into a *locus* of co-creating values. “The market is becoming a forum for conversation and interactions between consumer, consumer communities, and firms” (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004, p. 5). Within this perspective, values are not predefined but rather contextualized, contingent and continuously renegotiated with stakeholders according to their stakes and expectations. Thus, what is interesting is not the value in itself, but rather the process of creating and negotiating *per se*, and which manifests itself, e.g. as a mutually beneficial dialogue between management and employees:

Becoming a co-creative organization is about changing the very nature of engagement and relationship between the institution of management and its employees, and between them and co-creators of value – customers, stakeholders, partners or other employees (Ramaswamy, 2009, p. 33).

From an employer branding perspective, this translates into a shift from a linear, communicative transmission of employment propositions and exchange of employer brand benefits within working hours into a process of dialogical co-creating not only economic and organizational value, but also a preoccupation of what is valuable and meaningful for the employee as a human being and corporate citizen through dual citizenship in a corporation and society as a whole (Baldry *et al.*, 2007; Karnes, 2009; Bourne *et al.*, 2009). The concept of co-creating values fosters a fundamental shift in conceptualising brand management and stakeholder relations.

Below, we first, present brand management as a dynamic process of negotiating identities and relations followed by a presentation of sustainable HRM as a process of negotiating socially responsible employer-employee relations.

##### 4.2 *Branding: negotiating identities and relations*

One of the early key concepts in brand management is the notion of brand identity, introduced and developed by Aaker (1996) and Kapferer (1997), and distilled into concepts such as brand essence (Aaker and Joachimstahler, 2000), core identity (Aaker, 1996), or simply the brand DNA (Kapferer, 1997), implying that brands have intrinsic values, are self-contained and independent of any relational influences. However, a new stream of brand management theorists adopts a more dynamic approach to brand identity, as they recognize the fluidity, social contingency, multiplicity, reflexivity and discursivity of identity (Fournier, 1998; Csaba and Bengtsson, 2006) in light of recent theories of social and cultural identity (Hall, 1996). From a consumer-brand relational perspective, Fournier (1998, p. 367) argues that:

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[...] [w]hat matters in the construction of brand relationship is not simply what managers intend for them, or what brand images “contain” in the culture [...], but rather what consumers do with brands to add meaning in their lives.

So saying, Fournier dislocates the production of brand meaning from the brand strategist towards a *locus* of social construction: brand meaning is negotiated in social settings.

Following this notion, the management of brand identity and subsequently the derivation of brand benefits and promises in relation to diverse groups of stakeholders take on new configurations as the processes of negotiating and the social construction of brand identity is what brand management is all about (McCracken, 1993; Sherry, 2005), requiring new strategies for brand management (Csaba and Bengtsson, 2006).

Branding and brand management are no longer a question of transmitting values but have evolved into a process of value creation, resonating a shift from a short-term sales and marketing-based discipline to a strategic resource in developing and negotiating corporate and individual identities and stakeholder relations (Balmer and Greyser, 2002; Hatch and Schultz, 2003).

#### *4.3 Sustainable HR: negotiating socially responsible employer-employee relations*

Over the last 25 years, it has become widely accepted that one of the most crucial factors in the whole array of strategic, competitiveness-inducing variables is the management of human resources (Wright and McMahan, 1992). The interest for HRM stems from the understanding of internal firm resources as unique sources for generating a sustainable competitive advantage – by academics termed the resource-based view – thereby making people strategically important to organizations’ success (Hoskisson *et al.*, 1999). Within the resource-based view, overall strategic goals are met by normative means of employee selection, assessment, evaluation, retention, rewards and development (Fombrun *et al.*, 1984) – often equalling HRM to “utilitarian instrumentalism” (Legge, 1995) as the purpose of HRM is to ensure a fit between the management of an organization’s employees, and the overall strategic direction of the company.

As an alternative to this understanding of HRM, Iles (2001) proposes that HRM serves as a set of guiding assumptions, techniques, data, frames, models and assessments making sense and giving direction to the restructuring of organizations and management, within which resourcing emerges, contributes and make sense. With this definition, HRM is accentuated as a subjective, emergent and social process of sense making, implying that reality – including HRM – is socially constructed (Weick, 1995), and thereby focusing less on differences, measurements, predictions and performance, which are characteristic of the traditional, objective and more static understanding of HRM (Holt Larsen, 2005). The theoretical point of departure can be termed “developmental humanism” (Legge, 1995), in which the individual is assimilated into a work process appreciating trust, commitment and communication (Beardwell and Holden, 2001).

Applying this social-constructivist perspective to HRM opens up new and interesting perspectives for research and managerial actions as it focuses more on social-psychological aspects such as relations, attitudes, interactions, negotiations, identities and self-images. Following this notion, pivotal to HRM becomes the management of employee and/or employer identities based on mutual trust, commitment and matching of expectations in relation to diverse groups of stakeholders. With this focus on matching expectations, CSR and the concept of sustainable or socially responsible employers come into play. For example, in addition to the traditional relational and transactional types of psychological

contracts (Rousseau, 1990), Martin and Hetrick (2006) add a third type of psychological contract that can be applied to the idea of employer branding as a sustainable discipline. As argued by Thompson and Bunderson (2003, p. 574), ideological currency involves “credible commitments to pursue a valued cause or principle” and such organizational acting for some ideological purpose in accordance with a particular set of values and principles can be considered an important aspect of what some employers would be expected to provide for employees. Following this line of thought, an interesting study carried out by Turban and Greening (1996) found that when organizations were rated higher on a full range of socially responsible features (community and employee relations, environmental policies, product quality and treatment of minority groups), they tended to be seen as more attractive as a potential employer (Albinger and Freeman, 2000; Sen *et al.*, 2006).

In line with the above, Thom and Zaugg (2004, p. 217) define sustainable HRM as “those long-term oriented conceptual approaches and activities aimed at a socially responsible and economically appropriate recruitment and selection, development, deployment, and downsizing of employees”, interpreting sustainable HRM as a cross-functional task in which value creation and sustained competitive advantage are the focal points (Ehnert, 2009). As a result, sustainable or socially responsible employers can be defined as employers who seek more than just profit maximization in making business decisions. It is employers who seek to be good corporate citizens by contributing to the general welfare of the larger community or society even though it may mean some trade-offs or concessions in the area of profit making (Wines and Lau, 2004, p. 248).

#### *4.4 Stakeholder dialogue*

In light of recent theories and studies of stakeholder dialogue (Burchell and Cook, 2008; O’Riordan and Fairbrass, 2008) and sense-making processes (Nijhof and Jeurissen, 2006; Basu and Palazzo, 2008; Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010), a new direction in CSR research has emerged which focuses on how CSR is socially constructed in a specific context (Nijhof and Jeurissen, 2006). Morsing and Schultz (2006) unfold a CSR stakeholder involvement strategy, which places the co-construction of CSR initiatives at its core. The authors suggest that the involvement strategy invites to continuous stakeholder dialogue ensuring not only that the organization “keeps abreast of its stakeholders’ changing expectations, but also of its potential influence on those expectations, as well as letting those expectations influence and change the company itself” (2006, p. 144). Following this, the concept of CSR is transformed into dynamic processes of negotiating the mutual responsibilities of the corporation and its stakeholders, thus ensuring that the corporation gets social values into the decisional chain (Deetz, 2003a, b) and continuously meets and responds to stakeholder needs and expectations, not only financially, but also in relation to its role in society as a corporate citizen.

From a corporate branding perspective, Gregory (2007) argues that interaction and stakeholder dialogue are crucial, however noting that relatively few studies provide insights into how stakeholders can be actively involved. Based on a literature study, Gregory (2007, p. 59) finds, that “stakeholders are usually regarded as targets rather than partners in its development”. Following this, the author introduces the concept of “negotiated brand”, which is constituted by stakeholder interaction and engagement, and which constantly evaluate and refine core values of the corporate brand, which again provide a dynamic platform for corporate and stakeholder actions to unfold (Gregory, 2007). The author illustrates the concept of stakeholder dialogue in corporate

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branding processes by the use of an example in which communication with different stakeholder groups, segmented into four categories of low power/low interest, low power/high interest, high power/low interest and high power/high interest were tailored accordingly, ranging from communication as information, consultation, involvement and partnering (Gregory, 2007). By involving stakeholders (e.g. through personal CEO briefings, invitations to board briefings and by gathering advices on best practise among stakeholders, Gregory, 2007, p. 68) and partnering with key stakeholders (e.g. through formally organized discussions visions, values and goals, Gregory, 2007) in the process of developing corporate brand values, the case illustrates a best practise of stakeholder dialogue in corporate branding. The case illustrates both the processes of and values of including stakeholders, not only in relation to enhancing stakeholder identification and stakeholder relationships but also in defining and understanding the corporate values. In other words, the case illustrates the corporate brand as a process of negotiation – as co-created values in continuous development – placing communication processes at its very core.

Drawing on the concepts of stakeholder dialogue and co-creation in corporate branding processes related to the discipline of sustainable HRM and thus specifically associated to the negotiation of socially responsible employer-employee relations, we argue for re-conceptualising the notion of employer branding.

### **5. Re-conceptualizing employer branding premises and processes**

Thus, when organizations buy into stakeholder demands on responsible behaviour and adapt strategies for sustainable development, it affects how to approach stakeholders, stakeholder relations and value creation. Our theoretical framework established above demonstrates that new theoretical steams within brand management, CSR and HRM management emphasise processes more than predefined outcomes, resonating a shift from a functionalistic reasoning towards a new paradigmatic understanding within a social-constructivist tradition in which social interaction is seen to be produced and limited by discursive conditions (Burr, 2003). This perspective paves the way for reconceptualizing employer branding as a question of co-constructing and negotiating values between management and employees/potential employees. On this basis, we re-conceptualize employer branding in sustainable organizations as:

Strategic branding processes which creates, negotiates and enacts sustainable relationships between an organization and its potential and existing employees under the influence of the varying corporate contexts with the purpose of co-creating sustainable values for the individual, the organization and society as a whole.

As mentioned, sustainable organizations are driven by the notion of enacting sustainable relations towards present and future stakeholders as well as being able to navigate between contrasting and even conflicting interests (Neville and Menguc, 2006) which make demands on transversal processes within the organization, that is, across organizational functions and units. Based on the notion of corporate branding and its triadic integration of management vision, organizational culture and stakeholder image (Hatch and Schultz, 2003), the employer brand processes are ensured to be an integrated part of the entire organization. Though employer branding specifically concentrates on the employer-employee relations and thus draws primarily on HRM processes and tools, the rooting in the corporate brand (and the overall sustainable corporate strategy)

ensures a constant attentiveness towards all organizational units, their primary stakeholders and the issues and agendas addressed.

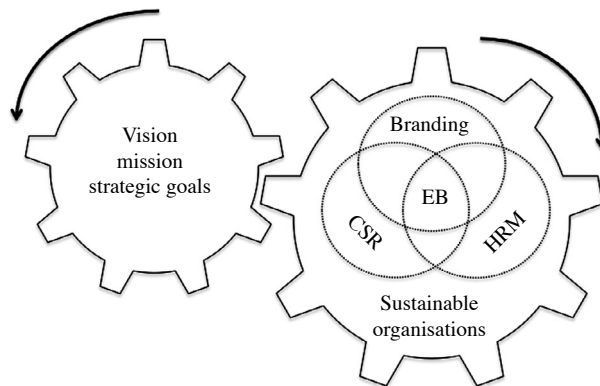
Being a strategic branding discipline, the employer brand is linked to the overall corporate sustainable vision, mission and strategic goals, which articulate the values and expectations of stakeholders, which, from a corporate brand perspective, is translated into corporate brand values (Hatch and Schultz, 2003), continuously negotiated and re-negotiated in stakeholder dialogues (Morsing and Schultz, 2006). The corporate values serve as common starting points and as a corporate platform for performing sustainable employer-employee relationships, which, thus, continuously echo and resonate with the sustainable corporate strategy. Following this, employer branding is no longer merely a one-way instrumental tool for recruitment, retention and employment reduction programmes, but serves as and facilitate communicative, strategic processes for supporting sustainable development and organizational value creation. The employer branding processes are shown in Figure 1, suggesting the dynamic link between the corporate strategy and the merging of corporate branding, strategic HRM and CSR as integrated communicative processes in sustainable organizations.

Strategic HRM offers a range of organizational behaviour processes such as the creation of the psychological contract and organizational identity (Edwards, 2010), which contribute to management and employees' dialogical creation of the employer brand and ensure an anchoring with the employee of the overall corporate brand. Understanding HRM as an emergent, communicative and social process of sense making, the discipline addresses and includes the employee stakeholders in the mutual interpretation of the organization as a unique and particular employment experience, i.e. the employer brand, thereby inviting the employees to take part in the corporate branding process (Edwards, 2010), ensuring employers' support of sustainable organizational developments through co-creating communicative processes.

## 6. Employer branding processes: characteristics and reflections

As outlined, strategic, sustainable employer branding processes feature three distinctive characteristics:

- (1) the anchoring in and supporting of the overall corporate strategy, thus being a strategic branding discipline;



**Figure 1.**  
Employer branding  
processes in sustainable  
organizations

- 
- (2) the co-creation of values, i.e. continuous renegotiation of values with stakeholders according to their stakes and expectations; and
  - (3) the establishment of sustainable employer-employee relationships oriented towards a continuous reflection on mutual needs as well as current and future expectations.

Following this, employer brand management extracts into the processes of initiating, managing and negotiating strategic sustainable employer-employee relationships. Furthermore, the employer branding processes are influenced by the varying societal contexts facing organizations-in-society. Contexts such as societal prosperity, stability and recession underline how the employer brand is created, enacted and negotiated under the influence of societal changes. Worded differently, the varying contexts influence stakeholder goals, needs and expectations and thus the nature of the psychological contract and the employer-employee relationship. Organizations must continuously address these contextual challenges and associated questions and reflect on the strategic employer brand management across differing strategic contexts, i.e. does the organization brand itself as employer with one voice at all times or does the voice change depending on the differing strategic contexts?

What might seem as valuable in times of prosperity, i.e. high wages, might seem less relevant in times of crisis in which job security is a first priority. In for instance, a strategic context characterized by prosperity, low unemployment, increased competition in attracting talented employees and the occurrence of new strategic opportunities, one of the persistent purposes of an employer brand is to attract and retain highly qualified employees to the organization.

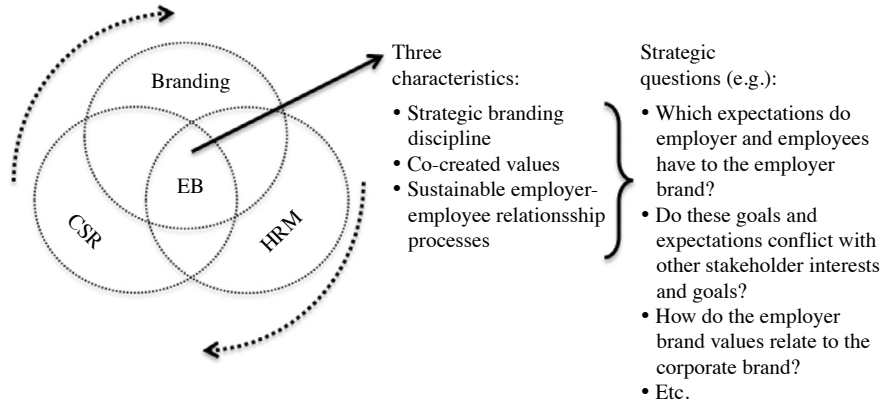
On the other hand, in times of crisis, an organization (and stakeholders accordingly) may reinterpret its own role in society. Thus, from an employer branding perspective, organizations must reflect upon new challenges and questions, i.e. should the organization prioritize economic growth or underline the CSR, giving priority to the emotional relation to the individual? And does the employee experience a shift in the psychological contract due to harder times, and if so how does such a shift impact the employer brand?

These aspects of strategic employer branding in varying organizational contexts accentuate the importance of inviting stakeholders to negotiate and co-construct the brand and prioritize the processes of value creation as proposed in our redefined notion of employer branding. With the shift from a product-oriented perspective to a process-oriented perspective, elements such as dialogue, trust and transparency are crucial to ensure strategic, sustainable relationships between employers and employees/potential employees and thus to ensure constructive employer branding processes, regardless of any organizational context (Figure 2).

## **7. Conclusion: implications and further research**

Now that the attractiveness, future profitability and “licence to operate” of modern organizations increasingly depend on their willingness and ability to recognize employees and potential employees as important stakeholders, it is more pertinent than ever before to re-conceptualize the understanding of employer branding away from the traditional functionalistic perspective towards a focus on dialogue and co-creation. Still, many challenges remain. We have offered a re-conceptualization of the employer

**Figure 2.**  
Employer branding  
processes in sustainable  
organisations:  
characteristics and  
reflections



brand concept as a holistic and processual discipline including the theoretical fields of branding, HRM and CSR. On the basis of this, we have introduced a new definition of employer branding and the premises and processes related hereto, e.g. stakeholder dialogue and sense-making processes resulting in the formulation of three distinct features of the employer brand as shown in Figure 1.

Applying this new stakeholder-oriented definition to various organizational contexts opens up new interesting perspectives for employer branding. It is, for example, characteristic for this definition that successful employer branding not only requires the application of specific techniques or benefits but also co-creation, negotiation and enactment of new sustainable relationships between the organization and its potential and current employees. This relationship is under the influence of varying corporate contexts, e.g. prosperity and crisis, and in order to create sustainable values for the individual, the organization and society in general, corporations need to continuously negotiate the employer brand with employees and potential employees. Organizations must reflect upon a series of strategic questions related to its role in society, its corporate context and its relation to the individual employee as well as how the employer brand is rooted in the overall corporate brand strategy (Figure 1).

The reconceptualisation of employer branding as suggested in this paper paves the way for new corporate practises and subsequently for future research as the following closing hypothetical example illustrates[2]. The case is constructed as a worst-case scenario of employer branding, thus allowing us to suggest an alternative approach to employer branding as proposed in the paper:

Connect Public is a global company, providing IT solutions to the public sector worldwide. As part of a global corporate rebranding strategy, Connect Public launched a new corporate strategy, stating a vision of Sustainable Development through Intelligence, emphasising Resources, Relations and Results as corporate core brand values. The new strategy was unveiled to stakeholders during a live streaming of the charismatic CEO telling about the future of Connect Public, simultaneously with the presentation of a new series of innovative IT solutions. The speech thus marked not only a move towards times of prosperity, but also a positioning of the corporate strength compared to competitors, thereby carrying strong marketing values. The strategy was also presented in a corporate publication, entitled “Connect Public to the Future” in which employees and other stakeholders could read

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more about the strategy and its concrete initiatives for reaching corporate goals of sustainable development. The initiatives included first and foremost new energy- and cost-reduced, so-called green IT-solutions and specific steps for reducing corporate energy consumption, inciting employees to take joint responsibility in reaching corporate goals. In other words, employees were addressed as means to produce external stakeholder value (including new product and marketing value for customers, cost-savings and future investments for shareholders and a resource awareness in relation to “nature”).

The launching event gained extensive media coverage and in an interview, the CEO was asked about the role of the employees in the new corporate strategy and what they gained in taking joint responsibility. The CEO answered:

In the IT industry, employees are truly dedicated to their job. They are loyal, hard-working people. The new strategy adds new incentives as it emphasises that Connect Public actually makes a difference, both to customers, to shareholders and to the worlds around us.

The case demonstrates a strong focus on brand values as an end result, emphasising the presentation of a clear and complete “this is Connect Public”. In continuation of this, the case presumes that employees automatically relate to, identify with and are motivated by distributed pre-defined corporate values and thereby automatically translate into employer brand values. And finally, the case shows a conception of employees as mere channels to produce economic growth and external stakeholder value.

From the perspective of employer branding defined as the enactment of sustainable employer-employee relationships with the purpose of co-creating sustainable values for the individual, the organization and society as a whole, the case is failing in understanding the specific challenges relating to employees as key stakeholders. Following the reasoning presented in this paper, we suggest an alternative approach, in which Connect Public should have engaged employees in a dialogue on corporate values in order to ensure that sustainable development through intelligent solutions is also integrated in the employer-employee relationship, thereby continuously co-reflect on the meaning of “sustainability” and “intelligence” for the employee (e.g. corporate initiatives that support a sustainable work-life balance in order to avoid stress; or, e.g. focus on developing employee competencies through further education or on cultivating employee creativity). The approach thus implies a shift in focus from end result to process. As part of the process, Connect Public should have approached the employees as corporate partners in order to co-create employer-employee values, e.g. co-reflect on resources not only as a concern for natural and economic resources, but including human resources as well; on relations to not only include shareholders and external stakeholders, but the creation, nurturing and sustaining of long-term employer-employee relationships; and finally, on results to not only be defined by economic profit but to include human development and growth.

The reconceptualisation of employer branding as proposed in this paper, thus have fundamental implications for corporate practise and subsequently, for future research. We suggest, that in order to explore the strategic potentials as well as the meaning and values of employer branding, future research should focus on:

- Employees as key stakeholders rather than means or channels to fulfil brand promise to external stakeholders, e.g. by exploring employer-employee relationship in various corporate contexts.

- Employer branding processes rather than employer branding outcome, e.g. by exploring actual co-creation processes and ways to engage employees in co-creation processes.
- Communication as dynamic, e.g. by exploring aspects and quality dimension of employer-employee dialogue.

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### Notes

1. As a matter of form, it should be noted, as will also be pointed out below, that we relate the notion of “sustainability” to the overall corporate strategy as a corporate philosophy, concordant to Van Marrewijk (2003) and the concept of “corporate sustainability”. “Sustainable” thus represents a superior concept to “corporate social responsibility”, which can be defined as a discipline of implementations, which support sustainable visions.
2. The example is, as noted, hypothetical, however it draws on insights from previous case studies, which we re-address from the perspective of employer branding and co-created values, e.g. Gregory (2007), who addresses stakeholder dialogue and brand negotiation in a corporate brand perspective; and Mark and Toelken (2009), who present a worst case scenario of employer branding, however not due to lack of employee involvement, but rather due to senior executives who compromise employer brand promises in favouring their own ambitions.

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