A PROPOSAL FOR SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYER BRAND: FROM MARKET AND PRODUCT THEORY TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT THEORIES

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Abstract:
The concept of employer brand involves a multidisciplinary field synthesizing theory from a range of academic disciplines often based on research on large organizations embracing the issues of recruitment and retention. The purpose of this article is to analyze whether theories of sustainable development programs can provide an additional basis for the predominant brand and market literature in order to understand how investments in financial and human resources can become more socially sustainable. The results of a literature review highlight certain similarities indicating that theories from sustainable development programs can support the understanding and practice of employer branding. This will hopefully inspire more deductive and empirical research on how to improve the sustainability of an employer brand. The practical implication is a de-mystification of the concept of employer brand in the eyes of practitioners by suggesting strategies and division of responsibilities when an organization decides to take the first steps to mobilize in "the war for talent."

Keywords:
Employer brand, development programs, sustainable, participation

1   Introduction

There is a constant development and dissemination of new concepts, ideals, and "recipes" designed to provide clarity about how organizations and management can be improved to become more efficient and/or profitable. However, some of these "recipes" can sometimes result in confusion, frustration, and investments without reflection or strategic plans (Alvesson, 2006). One explanation for organizational and business trends being disseminated and adopted may be found in the tendency among organizations to imitate each other, sometimes stimulated by consultants or management trends (March, 1981; Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2009). The inclination to copy can stem from a concern by managers of not being perceived as attentive or progressive as others in the business sector, impressions that may jeopardize a manager's personal image or the business brand (Alvesson, 2006).

The notion of employer brand derives from theories regarding marketing and branding. Thus, strategies for how to develop an employer brand have many parallels with the marketing sphere (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Moroko & Uncles, 2008). Sutherland, Torricelli, and Karg (2002) argue that a company's recruitment and retention strategy requires the application of marketing principles. Nevertheless, since branding often is stressed as being a long-term process, this article will discuss an alternative perspective based on sustainable development programs in order to understand how both small and middle size firms and organizations could make their investments in financial and human resources more sustainable, and thus attempt to become an "employer of choice."

The notion of sustainability is a broad and evolving construct; in one popular formulation, the Brundtland Commission defined it thus: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"

(WCED, 1987, p. 43). In this perspective, the concept is often related to focusing on global sustainable development to enhance global well-being, health, and life with justice and peace (Renoldner, 2013). However, in this article, the notion of sustainability denotes social sustainability, referring to the preservation of characteristics that underpin current and potential employees' willingness to contribute with competence and motivation for an employer, also known as a "maintenance sustainability" (cf. Vallance et al., 2011). Thus, it includes developments extending beyond a formal project period and includes knowledge formation among the participants and where the results are applied and become part of future activities in an organization (Brulin and Svensson, 2012). Here, it involves the process of developing the underlying value propositions forming an employer brand.

1.1   A fast growing field needing principles for implementation

Compared with many other concepts related to human management and organizational behavior, the concept of employer brand is relatively new, originating in the mid 1990s. Ambler and Barrow (1996, p. 1) first introduced the notion arguing, "there is considerable synergy between the processes of nurturing brands on the one hand and human resources on the other." Subsequently, there was a rapid growth in interest regarding the concept of employer brand in different industrial sectors, consulting agencies, and academia. The notions of brand and employer brand frequently appeared in scientific journals, news articles, conference titles, and as a prefix for job titles, such as, for example, Employer Brand Strategist or Employer Brand Manager and as themes for interest groups in social media (e.g., LinkedIn and Facebook). Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) highlighted the growing interest in employer branding more than a decade ago and referred to Internet searches using Google and Yahoo, each yielding over 3,000 hits. In 2012, the same search using Google showed roughly 176,000 hits, and in 2015, it yielded 4,750,000 hits. It is true that these result shows hits in general, regardless of context. Nevertheless, after searching in the Scopus database for published scientific articles, the resulting analysis indicates a strong growth on the number of articles from 2005 to today. Hence, we can conclude that interest in the notion has increased rapidly over the years. The contemporary research is spread all over the world, albeit with nuances regarding purpose and motives for addressing the notion. From reviewing scientific literature, it can generally be distinguished that many articles are conceptual in nature, and that a great number of other types of research are based on empirical findings from investigating large, often multinational enterprises or large organizations (cf. Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Pietersis, Leeuwen & Crawford, 2005; Lievens, 2007; Stahl et al., 2012), which often have well-organized human resource departments. There are also numerous articles scrutinizing what students and potential employees perceive as an attractive employer (cf. Sutherland et al., 2002; Berthon et al., 2005; Khan & Naseem, 2015) and much of the research focuses on understanding what makes an employer brand attractive (cf. Maxwell & Knox, 2009; Biswas & Suar, 2014). The research has often focused on recruitment rather than on examining the characteristics that determine whether existing employees perceive their employment as attractive (Keefe, 2007; Maxwell & Knox, 2009; Kunerth & Mosley, 2011). Maxwell and Knox (2009, p. 2) argue that "researchers have yet to explain what makes an organisation's employer brand attractive to current employees."

Interestingly, after reviewing the increasing amount of research and practice during the last two decades, a problem can be distinguished in the lack of method or consistency in the descriptions and suggestions for strategies about how to develop an employer brand (Moroko & Uncles, 2005; Mosley 2007). In their recommendation for further research, Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) stress the need to study how to implement an employer brand and especially how to develop the underlying value proposition of the employer brand.

Positioning employer branding as a product development process underlines the assumption that an organization striving for an enhanced employer brand ought to see this as a long-term process (cf. Ambler & Barrow, 1996) or as a journey (Rosethorn, 2010), not merely as a delimited campaign. Thus, the process of developing the employer brand has to start within the organization, as with the phrase "Know Thyself" (Keefe, 2007, p.20), involving as many stakeholders as possible including owner,

management, employees, and external stakeholders, as well as potential employees (Edwards & Kelan, 2011). If we picture employer branding as a long-term process of learning and building a brand targeting current and potential employees, the guidelines for plans and action might be found in the field of sustainable development programs.

1.2   Purpose

The purpose of this article is to analyze whether theories of sustainable development programs (Brulin and Svensson, 2012) can provide an additional basis to the contemporary dominance of marketing theories for further development of the understanding of how an organization's employer brand can become more socially sustainable in a long-term perspective.

Thus, this article contributes with proposing multi-disciplinary perspectives for researchers' and practitioners' understanding of how an employer branding processes can be designed in a more sustainable manner. This can inspire research-led practical field studiesof how sustainable employer brand processes can be implemented in both small and large organizations.

2   Method

The approach taken for this paper entails primarily reviewing academic articles found in the Scopus[1]and Google Scholar. However, also books written by experts with long experience from practical work in the field of employer brand have also been a source for knowledge. From the review the paper will present a theoretical conclusion with a suggestion on how to enhance the development of an employer brand.

3   Theorizing employer brand and development programs

Below is a brief review of existing research on brand and employer brand to be presented as a frame for the later discussion.

3.1   Brand and employer brand

As with the field of project management and development programs, there are vast volumes covering the concept of a brand, as well as many subcategories where the word brand is used. The word can be found in different combinations and in different contexts such as: personal,consumer, corporate, internal, and placebrand. Associated with the employees in an organization, the combinations of employer brand (employer branding), employment brand, and employee branding, can be found. This versatility illustrates a crucial part of brand's nature with different functions and purposes depending on whose perspective is considered or how it is used (Melin 1999). However, Olins (2008) states that even though many in leading positions have a sense that corporate reputation affects vital factors for an organization, as for example recruitment, sales, acquisitions, and relationship with stakeholders, there exists an ignorance about how to manage, control, and place a value on their brand. He states, "because brands are now understood to be assets valuable to any organization, it is clearly mandatory to husband them with extreme care even though the truth is that very few people know how" (ibid, p. 18).

3.1.1 The Brand

The concept of brand is used in a diversity of contexts and has a broader definition than just the business logo or slogan; it can be seen as the business offer to the public (cf. Jacobs, 2003; Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2006). In recent years, both academics and practitioners have ascribed to a well-

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[1]Scopus is the largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature (https://www.elsevier.com/solutions/scopus)

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managed brand increasing significance, and many emphasize the importance of a strong brand, as well as brand equity (e.g.,Aaker, 2012; Keller, 1993; Melin, 1999). However, the complexity of the creation of a brand has been recognized since the traditional marketing logic does not fully serve as an adequate framework (Maxwell &Knox, 2009). The brand is not only underpinned by how the functionality of the product is perceived, or to what extent the services meet the customer's expectations. It is also a matter of to what degree the company manages to create a total experience out of the business. Thus the brand can be described as a social construction that connects the product to a number of beliefs about the product's tangible and intangible attributes (Harquail,2006). It can, in extreme cases, be compared to an informal agreement where customers and other stakeholders almost have a religious loyalty to the company brand (Boyd &Sutherland, 2006). The focus on the importance of the brand can even be seen as sometimes more important than the original function of the product where the product almost serves as a platform for the brand; as noted by Alvesson, (2006, p. 41[2]),"the little Lacoste crocodile needs something to be sewn on."

Because businesses and business models are replicable by competitors, the employee's interpretation and ability to "live" the brand will sometimes be a pivotal competitive advantage (Boyd & Sutherland, 2006; Maxwell & Knox, 2009; Vallaster & Chernatony, 2006). Several studies show that one of the most decisive factors for customer satisfaction and brand loyalty is the behavior of the employees (Jacobs, 2003; Mosley, 2007). However, despite the impact employees have in maintaining a strong brand, and the fact that they play a determining factor in a strong and sustainable identity, many organizations neglect to inform their employees about their brand's existence and importance (Jacobs, 2003). This can be seen as a lapse in the perspective that all employees can be considered marketers of an organization or company (Balmer&Greasy, 2006) and that effective corporate branding begins within the organization (Maxwell & Knox, 2009). Thus, should it be desirable for any employer that employees understand and appreciate what the brand stands for so that they can "live" the brand and deliver on the brand's promises (cf. Jacobs, 2003; Maxwell & Knox, 2009). Consequently, strategies for the internal and external brand are strongly interlinked since a strong internal brand and employee understanding of the brand will most likely contribute to customers and clients perceiving the external brand more positively (Maxwell & Knox, 2009).

As a way to increase the customer experience of the brand, employees in some organizations are expected to wear special clothing or act in a particular manner. However, if employees experience a discrepancy between the brand attributes they are expected to represent, and the experiencean organization provides the employees, the authenticity of an organization's brand can be questioned (Harquail, 2006; KrygerAggerholm et al., 2011). This dissonance can bring out counter-productive effects if not monitored or if neglected by an employer. The result can become resistance to working conditions since both autonomy and dignity often are important qualities for employees to perceive work as attractive (Hodson, 2001; Karlsson, 2008). Thus, in order to motivate the employees to "live" the brand or to become "ambassadors" for the brand, it can be of great importance that employees perceive an organization's employer brand as authentic.

3.1.2 The employer brand

The origin of the notion of employer brand is often ascribed to Ambler and Barrow (1996) who found that brand thinking could be applied to employment situations. They defined "Employer Brand" as "the package of functional, economic, and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company" (ibid., p.8). The concept of employer brand has since gained vast attention both within academia and especially among practitioners and is recognized as a multidisciplinary field (cf. Edwards, 2010; Joo et al., 2006).

Some reasons for the rapid growth in interest can be found in demographic changes (c.f. Leyhausen, 2009; Åteg, Andersson &Rosén, 2009), an increased focus on talented employees as a key

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[2] Translated by the author

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determinant (Cable & Turban, 2003), and a shortage of labor in various markets with the business sector exposed to competition regarding recruiting "talent" (cf. Chambers, Foulon, Handfield-Jones, Hankin& Michaels, 1998; Lievens &Highhouse, 2003; Joo& McLean, 2006; Wilden, Gudergan& Lings, 2010). Many organizations are thus gradually becoming more aware that an applicant's attraction toan organization is vital for its long-term success (Ehrhart&Ziegert, 2005). The fact that companies and organizations invest considerable resources in employer branding campaigns can be taken as an indicator that they find value in the practice of employer branding (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). However, branding should not be seen as a delimited campaign; it is a long-term process that inter alia requires the commitment of top management (Ambler & Barrow, 1996) and is carefully managed (Backhause&Tikko, 2004).

From being a field and practice closely associated with marketing and communication, the concept has become more interdisciplinary, synthesizing theory from a range of academic disciplines within the human resource area (cf. Backhause&Tikko, 2004; Edwards 2010; Biswas&Suar, 2014). And from mostly consisting of theories and action for recruitment, the concept of employer brand has grown to include theories and measures for retention (Kunerth& Mosley, 2011).

Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) argued for more research on how organizations could develop and implement employer branding, and in particular how to develop the underlying value propositions of the employer brand. This latter issue, how to create a winning value proposition, answering the question "Why would a talented person choose to work here?" (Michaels et al., 2001, p. 14), should be clearly defined and be seen as crucial to the process of developing an employer brand (cf. Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Parment &Dyhre, 2009; Kunerth& Mosley, 2011). Considering the concept's origins, is it self-evident that the broader branding literature covering the characteristics of successful consumer and corporate brands still dominates and often is suggested as a useful starting point (cf. Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Moroko & Uncles, 2008; Biswas et al., 2014). In that perspective, employees' employment experience can be seen as a product where the human resource function manages both product and product development, assisted by the marketing department to influence the target groups (Moroko & Uncles, 2008). As an example, within the consumer market, terms such as "Unique Value Proposition" (UVP) or"Unique Selling Proposition"(USP) are used, as is a comparable concept from the field of employer branding, Employer Value Proposition (EVP) (cf. Parment & Dyhre, 2009). With EVP, the employment experience can be seen as the proposition, intended to be an accurate representation of what the firm offers to its employees (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). An EVP should contain and convey the central message of theoverall brand (ibid.). The attributes in the value proposition should embrace the entity of an organization's culture, systems, attitudes, and employee relationships (Bhutani, 2010) and in order to be perceived attractive for current and potential employees they must reflect the authentic conditions at work (cf. Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Parment & Dyhre, 2009;Lundkvist, 2015). However, it is not enough to be attractive, authentic, and fulfill expected obligations and implied promises between employers and employees; the challenge is to offer something unique compared to competitive offerings – i.e., to differentiate themselves against others (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Lievens, 2007; Parmet& Dyhre 2009).

The unique offerings can be divided into instrumental and symbolic attributes, which can be defined as hard and soft attributes that the recipient can observe and evaluate (Lievens, 2007). What attributes an employer chooses to adopt and communicate and how the target group will perceive them may differ depending on the workplace and on an individual's values and life situation (Hedlund et al., 2010). Thus, there are no standards or templates for what attributes an EVP should compile and if "blueprints" existed for good attributes, any strategy to imitate others would not provide a competitive edge to create unique offerings in comparison with competitors (Moroko & Uncles, 2008). The mission to find authentic, unique, and attractive attributes is a challenge and cannot be brought into being without clear consent and proactive support from top leaders (Biswas etal., 2014). Sometimes, development will require behavioral changes regarding culture, attitudes, and interaction between participants in an organization (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). However, this intervention – creating and

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fostering a new organizational culture—requires the support of the senior leadership team (Love & Singh, 2011).

Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), Rosethorn (2009), and Parment and Dyhre (2009) all describe the process of developing an employer brand as a stepwise process. The latter describes the employer branding process in five steps: research, development of the EVP, creation of a communication strategy, production of communication materials, and finally, action (Parment & Dyhre, 2009, p.58). Starting with research – doing the "homework" (Berthon et al., 2005), to "know thyself" (Keefe, 2007), and thus, compiling an honest picture of the "present situation" before taking measures for a "desired situation" – is important for any development process (Brulin & Svensson, 2012). Parment & Dyhre (2009) state that, "in order to be an attractive employer, you need to understand how attractive you are with respect to different target groups" (p.59).

One strategy is to involve current employees when describing the present situation and the desired conditions for the organization to be perceived as an attractive employer (Hedlund et al., 2010). Employees can be considered experts since they experience the existing employer brand regularly, in contrast to the consumers' more sporadic interaction with products (Moroko & Uncles, 2008). Edwards and Kelan (2011) assert that because "employees can be considered important stakeholders of employer branding, their participation in the employer branding process is therefore a very important part of the process." Another reason for involving current employees is that they play a crucial role when building the overall brand that primarily targets external stakeholders, (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Sutherland et al., 2002), and also since the corporate brand and the employer brand are interdependent on each other (cf.Rosethorn, 2009; Rampl& Kenning, 2013). Thus is it important to anchor and support the overall corporate brand strategy since the concept of employer branding is a strategic branding discipline (KrygerAggerholm et al. 2011). The co-creation of values can be seen as a continuous negotiation over time with stakeholders in alliance with their incentives and expectations to secure the employer-employee relationships oriented towards a continuous reflection on mutual needs as well as current and future expectations (ibid).

3.2   Sustainable development programs

This article takes as its point of departure theories and experiences regarding management of sustainable development programs. With a critical view of traditional development programs, Brulin and Svensson (2012) evaluated a vast number of development programs and projects with public funding in Sweden. The common denominators for the evaluated programs were that they all aimed to accomplish regional growth, innovation, and sustainable development. Scrutinizing these initiatives, the authors identified different mechanisms, functions, tasks, and areas of responsibility required for programs and projects to contribute to sustainable change. For a change to be sustainable, they stress the importance of active owners, collaboration, and developmental learning.

Development in organizations takes place in various forms and degrees, woven into regular operations or pursued as demarcated projects. Usually these efforts have unambiguous goals, such as contributing to improved customer satisfaction, increased sales, increased knowledge, or increased competitiveness (Kotter, 1995). However, in a period where more and more activities turn into projects, even life itself (Svensson et al., 2007), it is important to have fundamental knowledge regarding development programs (here meaning development from actual state to desired state), and how to manage and steer the process in order to achieve the desired effects. Linear plans or program-logics may initially give an impression of causality for desired organizational change. However, it is rare that plans are followed and implemented exactly as first designed due to unforeseen incidents (cf. Taleb, 2010; Alvesson &Speicer, 2012). Consequently, successful development programs ought be considered long-term processes with a number of stages and with unexpected incidents over a long period of time (Brulin & Svensson, 2012). It can be tempting to take shortcuts and overlook some of the required stages, which can give the illusion of saving time but rarely contribute to the desired results (Svensson et al., 2007; Burkett, 2015). Usually the first step, the point of departure, of an organizational change

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program arises from a person or group of persons who perceive change as necessary regarding market, technology, or competition for continued development (Kotter, 1995). This initial stage, the anchoring process, often requires both information and interaction to persuade a critical mass of people in the organization who share the understanding that it can be hazardous to continue in the old way (Kotter, 1995; Svensson et al., 2007). Mobilizing such a critical mass can be a persuasive challenge covering a combination of elements, such as an imaginative vision of the future and a realistic perspective on the present combined with a selective description of the past to contrast the future. Using clear and easily formulated messages can then be valuable since simplicity often leads to action (Pfeffer& Sutton, 2000). The first goal for the organization striving for change is to influence sufficient number of carriers, various stakeholders, concerning vision and purpose. However, this anchoring process can sometimes require an initial learning project, known as "pre-anchoring," to secure learning and ensure that desired results are applied and become part of ongoing future activities, and thus achieve sustainability (Svensson et al., 2007). When planning, in terms of analyzing the present situation and the desired goal, the analysis can according to some studies become more comprehensive if a gender perspective is integrated, understanding gender as a social construction of sex, an interactive action performed by and between the members of an organization. With a scientifically defined gender perspective, cultures, old traditions, power structures, and stereotypical presumptions can be disclosed and challenged. This can improve the quality of the process, make it more holistic, and subsequently enhance the likeliness of becoming sustainable (cf. Gunnarsson, 1994; Andersson & Amundsdotter, 2012; Lundkvist, 2015).

One dilemma that is often described with development programs is whether the process should be initiated from the "top down" or "bottom up" (Brulin & Svensson, 2012). Projects initiated and steered with a "top down" perspective are often linear, pre-planed, and aimed at specific goals in detail. The issue can be substantial for the process and can affect motivation for participation, consideringa "bottom up" approach usually stimulates the participants' involvement and creativity more (ibid.). However, previous research indicates that most desirable for sustainable development is an integrated top-down-bottom-up approach. This requires interaction and collaboration between multiple stakeholders in the organization (Svensson et al., 2007).Participation is an essential prerequisite for example in the context of change, organizational change, improving the working environment, increased gender equality, and planning professional development (ibid.). The opportunity to participate often contributes to increasing motivation and improving the quality of a solution, as well as to reducing the risk of unwanted side effects (Werr et al., 1997; Svensson et al., 2007). However, the effort to give employees the opportunity to participate must not be at the expense of the ability to perform ordinary tasks (Svensson et al., 2007). The risk with high demands on participation and multiple parallel processes is that they can contribute to unfair working conditions and/or to "change fatigue" (Burkett, 2015) that counteracts the sustainability of development projects.

Previous studies have proven that organizational management has significant responsibility as opinion leaders and role models during the change process. A manager acting contradictory to stated actions or goals can jeopardize the motivation and loyalty of others involved in the process, thus undermining the initiative (Kotter, 1995). Although executives and supervisors play a vital part in the process, Antoni (2007) states that the members of the organization are also key resources, since the energy in the process is largely dependent on their motivation, commitment, and involvement.

Creating a sustainable change is not a smooth path (Burkett, 2015) since it seldom is sufficient to just change organizations or structures to achieve perceived goals, which may only cause a superficial or formal change. To create genuine change, it requires new systems, approaches, and practices to be created, which in turn requires leadership (Kotter, 1995; Brulin & Svensson, 2012). Thus, to achieve sustainable change, change must take place both within the individuals and their surroundings simultaneously (Brulin & Svensson, 2012). Previous studies suggest that it can be favorable to include as many employees/stakeholders as possible to ensure the necessary momentum for advancement, and to achieve the diffusion of knowledge, goals, and strategies necessary in order to influence the cultural behavior in a workplace. Transformation of behavior and attitudes has been achieved when

social norms and shared values are rooted in the organization – when it "seeps into the bloodstream of the corporate body" and when a representative says that it is "the way we do things here" (Kotter, 1995, p.67).

Brulin and Svensson (2012) highlight the value of a more critical approach to the theoretical scheduled linear development of organizations, which can be seen as a realistic adoption to reality since the world of competitive business is rarely linear. From their research, they conclude that there are three crucial mechanisms that support sustainable change. By using theories about work organization, they stress the importance of "active ownership." A second mechanism is collaboration for joint learning, while the final mechanism is to practice developmental learning during the process. The latter is also stated by Ellstöm (2010) who stresses the importance of having conscious and development-oriented learning while the project progresses and of implementing, reinvesting, and institutionalizing the results in the organization to reach desired goals.

The foundations for the mechanisms pinpointed by Brulin & Svensson are the steering of the project in combination with learning, collaboration, and multiplier effects. In the initial stage of a project, they stress focusing on the project organization itself rather than the role of project management and stress the importance of collaboration between the different stakeholders. Below is a summarized theoretical description for a project organization with different functions, tasks, and areas of responsibilities, suggested by Brulin and Svensson (2012).

1. **Demanding funders.** The financiers (i.e., public or private stakeholders) willing to fund the extraordinary expenses of a change project who can support the process by prioritizing different problem areas and making demands that the implementation and impact of the process increases its sustainability and leads to knowledge formation beneficial for the organization after the intervention.
2. **Active ownership.** Active owners, that is, strong actors, who clarify the vision, determine the purpose, appoint a steering group, provide necessary opportunities and resources in terms of time and funding, monitor the development process, and ensure that results are implemented in the business.
3. **Professional steering.** An appointed steering committee, or project reference board, who can make strategic decisions in consultation with the owners, monitor and control development, report, and both support and control the project.
4. **Competent management.** The management for a development program who has the operational responsibility for implementation, which involves making decisions, coordinating, inspiring, supporting, informing, and representing the project.
5. **Involved participants.** Committed participants, members of the organizations involved in the process, who are loyal to the process by actively participating critically and constructively during the development program.
6. **Target group influence.** In a development program where the intention is that the effect should be perceived by people other than just the organization's own participants, it is important to continuously interact with the target audience. Depending on context, the target audience can, for example, comprise users, customers, suppliers, current and potential employees, students, and public stakeholders. Thus, they are individuals and groups that can contribute with knowledge regarding trends and demands from the surrounding world as well as giving feedback and criticism regarding the program. Their involvement can also boost the participants' motivation and loyalty to remain a target group.

According to the authors, all of the functions and responsibilities outlined above arenot only important links in a chain for a sustainable development program, it is also important that a balance exists between the different functions of ownership, steering, and management (Brulin & Svensson, 2012).

4   Results

As stated earlier, the purpose of this article is to analyze whether theories of sustainable development programs can provide an additional basis for the process of developing its employer brand. The results from the review above provide several observable indications supporting the idea that theories from development programs can provide a sustainable and additional basis to the predominant brand and market literature. Thus, researchers and organizations can practice theories from the field of development programs rather than primarily from the fields of marketing and branding, when studying and developing an employer brand. Below will the result be discussed and a proposal on how the result can be implemented based on presented theories.

5   Discussion

Both development programs and employer branding are long-term processes comprising research of the current situation and the requirement of dedicated leadership in order to reach a new desired situation. As for employer branding, the new situation is to facilitate the potential to retain and attract the employees needed for future prosperity, to be an "employer of choice."

Antoni (2007) among others stress that although supervisors play a crucial role in the success of a process, the members are also key resources, a statement inline with the conclusion Edwards and Kelan (2011) make regarding building an employer brand. Since current employees have an everyday experience of the employment situation, their knowledge is important for the initial research to understand the present situation and when planning and prioritizing measures to develop the employer value proposition. However, when researching the present situation and forming the EVP, a balance must be found to avoid getting caught with just employees' everyday issues, since a sustainable employer brand also ought be perceived attractive for the next generation of employees, an audience that might have other values and priorities regarding employment.Furthermore, adding conscious developmental learning to the process can give the employer a natural opening for increasing employees' knowledge regarding the overall brand and the value of building the brand (Kryger Aggerholm et al., 2011). Increased brand awareness can also enhance the possibility for employees to be ambassadors of the employer brand when interacting with potential employees and the surrounding society. Moreover, they may be more motivated to deliver on the consumer brand promise to increase the customer satisfaction. Consequently, employee participation and explicit developmental learning, advocated within the field of development programs, can be important components of a sustainable employer brand.

In order to explain the concept of employer brand and in particular the employees' employment experience, analogies with customers and products are sometimes used (cf. Moroko & Uncles, 2008). In an employer brand context, current and potential employees are the "customer" and their work experience is the product they invest time and loyalty in. Although the metaphor contributes to an understanding of the concept in general, it does not explain or problematize the process needed when developing a product. Here, this refers to the efforts required to secure functionality, quality, and usability of the product as well as the interaction often performed with end-users during the development process to understand their needs and willingness to consume the product. Thus, using the metaphor without stressing the long-term perspective and interaction with employees and stakeholders will not describe the complexity of the concept of employer brand. It rather validates the history of the concept. Depending solely on theories from marketing and brand strategies and allowing these theories and practice to be dominant can in the worst case reduce the employer branding process to a campaign and divert the focus from employees as meaning-making corporate citizens. Consequently, theories from sustainable development and change programs involving challenges, possibilities, measures,and hindrances for sustainable changes can contribute as a complementary strategy to the predominant brand and market literature.

5.1   An example of how to organize for sustainable employer brand

As noted, the broader branding literature covering consumer and corporate brands still dominates the understanding of employer brand and is often the starting point for the process of developing an employer brand. However, conclusions regarding management and responsibilities from development projects made by Brulin and Svensson (2012) below can serve as an example of an alternative perspective when developing an employer brand. However, in this paper, the development of an employer brand is regarded as an internal concern for a company or organization and thus is here understood to be financed by internal resources. For this reason, the function "Demanding funders" will not be discussed in the following section. The remaining five functions and responsibilities are deliberately grouped in three organizational functions to better match an organization.

The board and management of an organization represent its "Active ownership" in an employer brand context. They are expected to formulate a vision inline with the overall brand, describing the focus on the company's identity and the desired employment experience offered to existing and prospective employees. In addition, an active owner must have motivation, knowledge, and insight that new systems, approaches, cultures, behaviors, and practices might be required in order to develop the authentic, unique, and attractive employer value propositions necessary to become an "employer of choice." The process requires both financial resources as well as long-term commitment. To motivate engagement, they must understand their responsibility as role models and be the first to "live the brand." Thus, a great responsibility rests on the owners when it comes to initiating, securing, implementing, monitoring, and applying the results during the employer brand process to secure sustainable effects.

The "Professional steering" and "Competent management" can be ascribed to the HR functions supported by a steering group. Since the process of developing an employer brand includes all the practices that an HR function handles (Edwards, 2010), the responsibility for the operational activities ought to be a task that a traditional HR department can assume without too much effort given the right conditions. The multidisciplinary nature and complexity of an employer brand process however requires collaboration between multiple resources in the organization (e.g., market, information, or purchase department). This can be seen as an additional challenge for a traditional HR department or as an opportunity to enhance its internal position as an important asset manager within the organization.

Finally, the two last, "Involved participants" and "Target group influence" can be understood as current and potential employees. Since employer brand targets internal as well as external audiences both current and potential employees are target groups. Being engaged in the process, current employees are able to share their opinions on how the organization meets (or fails to meet) the proposed employment experiences (Edwards, 2010), while developing their own understanding of the overall brand and how their behavior and attitude can affect future applicants, customers, and other audiences of the brand.

This example shows that theories from development programs, can serve as inspiration when developing an employer brand. If an organization fails with poor leadership, a lack of collaboration, and approaching employer brand as a simple process, a quotation from Botha et al. (2011) will be apt: the process risks becoming nothing more than a project "that burns cash and creates employee cynicism" (p.4).

6   Limitations and implications for further research and practice

Employer brand is a relatively new notion originating from brand and marketing theories targeting the multidisciplinary practice of human resource management. However, to further develop the understanding and practice of this scientific field, the concept must be approached from different theoretical perspectives as well as be applied and researched in various contexts. From reviewing employer brand and development program literature, it has been found that theories from development programs can expand the theoretical understanding and practice for a more sustainable employer brand. The epistemological entrance for this article can thus be explained by using the product/customer

metaphor, here accentuating the importance of performing a methodical development process based on the customers' (employees') demands before the product (employment experience) is promoted to the target groups. The focus has thus been to analyze whether development program theories can provide a basis to manage the internal process with the intention of enhancing the employment experiences and making the investment in financial and human resources more sustainable. It is thus a deliberate limitation to merely focus on internal work and stakeholders, failing to describe or problematize other issues as, for example, the influence of the corporate brand, the importance of selecting external target groups, or how to communicate the brand.

Due to the method, reviewing scientific articles, the theoretical conclusions found in this article leave many openings for further and more deductive research. For example, one could conduct a comparative study between two or more organizations with different proportions of employee participations in the process. Will there be a disparity regarding employees' brand awareness and employee appreciation between the organizations? Another investigation could examine whether the "Eight Steps to Transforming Your Organization" (Kotter, 1995, p. 61) or similar recommendations could be a constructive framework when building an employer brand.

For practitioners, those who intend to take action for an enhanced employer brand but are confused regarding the notion and hesitate when planning action, this paper provides an overview regarding the concept of employer brand and the change orientated field of development programs. The example above, covering the recommendations on how to organize and allocate responsibilities in a project (Brulin and Svensson, 2012), can be converted to more general functions in an organization that will de-mystify the notion and hopefully stimulate small and middle-sized organizations to launch a long-term process become an "employers of choice."

7   Bibliography

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