Pitfalls and possibilities of career programs within employer branding

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Abstract:

The development of employees is recognized as a strategic tool for an organization's growth, productivity, and ability to retain valuable employees. Companies may choose to support the development of employees in various ways, from providing interesting and inspiring job tasks to offering career programs for personal growth and development. Investing in employees impacts company's employer brand and today, a strong employer brand provides many opportunities to a company.

This thesis studies the pitfalls and possibilities of systematic career programs and the influence of career programs on an organization's employer brand. The study is conducted from management's perspective and aims to clarify the value of strategic career programs for a company's performance. In addition, different career program strategies, including talent management, are examined.

There is previous research that has shown that career programs can benefit company profitability and competitive advantage. However, no previous literature has studied the positive and negative effects of such programs on a company's employer brand.

The study applied a qualitative research approach, and three different sample groups were interviewed: companies with a career program, companies without a career program and HR Consultants who work with both types of companies. The collected data was analyzed according to guidelines of qualitative analysis.

Based on the empirical study, dogmatic processes and employer's lack of commitment were identified as pitfalls of career programs. These cause challenges on company performance and employer brand. The identified possibilities of career programs were transparency and a straightforward approach which, consequently, has positive effects on company performance and employer brand. Further, the findings provide insights into the future needs of employees and identified key qualities of successful programs: flexibility, diversity, transparency and clarity. Yet, future studies focusing on employees point-of-view are recommended.

CONTENTS

APPENDICES

TABLES

FIGURES

1 INTRODUCTION

To build a successful business, every company needs skilled and experienced professionals that are motivated to take the company forward. In today's competitive environment, attracting and retaining the best talent is critical for companies to be successful. From providing interesting and inspiring job tasks to offering career paths for personal growth and development, there are different ways to build a unique value proposition that helps retaining the very best employees.

The essential elements of HR are, for example, performance management, training and development, recruitment, and reinforcing company values. Strategic human resource management (SHRM) seeks ways to maximize the influence of HR practices and reinforce the competitive advantage of a company (Mitchell et al., 2013). Several studies show that factors such as meaningfulness, opportunities to learn new skills, and the ability of top management enhance employee engagement and lead to the best possible outcome (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Boon et al., 2018; Crook et al. 2011; Kraimer et al., 2010). In addition, Kaimer et al. (2010) suggest that companies that apply different types of development and career planning practices in their human resource management efforts are getting the best results from their HR investments.

In 2018, McKinsey published a global survey that shows the positive relationship between talent management practices and financial performance. According to the survey, companies with talent management programs are more competitive against their rivals and are expected to outperform their peers' shareholder returns. As a continuation, BCG (2019) studied the significance of career programs, and the study confirms that people are eager to develop their skills to stay competitive in their current roles but are also willing to reskill themselves for a new job. Furthermore, the study implies that by establishing a strategic workforce plan and people programs, companies stay competitive and attract the best talent. Thus, studies show that career programs can benefit company profitability and competitive advantage. However, what has received much less attention is whether there are challenges that systematic career programs and talent management practices can emerge for company operations and its employer brand?

Global companies, such as PwC and Salesforce, are famous for having systematic career programs and successful talent management practices. Over the years, Harvard Business Review has interviewed the management from such companies several times to understand the cornerstones and secrets of companies' career development and

employer branding practices. However, there are also large and profitable companies, such as Netflix, that have chosen not to have systematic career programs included in the company strategy.

Creating a unique and leading employer brand is not a simple task. Ultimately, the company's management is responsible for defining, finding, and adopting the best practices and strategies that lead to the best possible performance of a company. This study aims to identify how career programs as a strategic decision influence the employer brand and what positive and negative effects such programs may have on a company's performance.

1.1   Research area

There is an abundant number of studies that focus on components of employee satisfaction and motivation and how it affects company performance (Smith and Bititci, 2016; Truss et al., 2013; Breevaart et al., 2013; Eldor and Vigoda-Gadot, 2016). However, more specific research related to systematic career programs and their influence on employer brand remains scarce. De Vos and Dries (2013) have acknowledged the importance of career development in connection to employee motivation and company performance, and Maurya and Agarwal (2018) claim that talent management programs have the ability to give a positive impact on employer branding, yet, they also indicate that future studies are needed.

As Martin et al. (2011) describe, employer branding aims to provide high-quality employment and employee experience and create unique company identity that employees value and are willing to promote to others. It is considered to be a marketing and communication tool that can help to attract potential employees, but also engage current employees. On Google Search, the keyword "employer branding" yields almost 66 million hits with branding strategy suggestions, lists of companies with "killer employer brands", new ideas to improve employer brand, and examples on activities for a unique employer brand – just to name a few. When scrolling further, words such as company values and culture, benefits, and career opportunities are constantly repeated. For example, Salesforce has been ranked year after year as one of the world's best companies to work for and has created a strong employer brand (Fortune, 2020). Salesforce has been recognized on FORTUNE's "100 Best Companies to Work For" list for twelve years in a row. The company names practices such as commitment to

employee growth, diversity, charity, and winning working culture as reasons behind their success (Salesforce, 2020).

Like Salesforce, some companies have adopted career programs, including talent management practices, in their company's human resource management strategy. However, the views and attitudes of management towards strategic human resource management (SHRM), including career programs, and employer branding vary, and some companies are hesitating to adopt any SHRM practices in their corporate strategy. Often, one reason for this is the challenge of measuring SHRM practices in connection with organizational performance and revenue. Examining and understanding the role and accountable value of systematic career programs becomes even more challenging when connecting it with an employer brand.

1.2   Aim of the study

The aim of this study is to identify and critically analyze the pitfalls and possibilities of systematic career programs and to learn more about the effectiveness of career programs on employer brand. The study is conducted from management's perspective and aims to clarify the value of strategic career programs for a company's performance. In addition, different career program strategies, including talent management, are examined.

This study is also aiming to identify managerial implications that compare the results to actions and indicate what actions – or non-actions – companies could be taking in terms of career programs.

1.3   Research problem

Often, career programs are introduced to employees as motivational platforms to enhance their skills, move on with their careers and expand their knowledge. Enhancing employees' commitment and responding to their expectations can lead to uniqueness against competitors, better retention, and stronger financial performance (Huselid, 1995). However, there is a lack of literature that aims to identify the negative and positive outcomes of such career programs for business performance and, in addition, how these programs affect employer brand.

The framework of this study and the research problem are illustrated in **Figure 1.**

Figure 1   **Framework of this study and the research gap.**

The interest towards strategic human resource management, including career programs, is growing among companies. Companies are debating whether it would be beneficial to offer their employees systematic career programs and what is the most beneficial way to execute such programs in order to generate the best value and outcomes from the investment.

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the pitfalls and possibilities of career programs?

RQ2: What are the effects of career programs on employer brand?

The study will be conducted from a managerial perspective. The managerial perspective was chosen for this study for two reasons. First, in some companies, there are clear prejudices towards SHRM, which, consequently, impacts companies' strategic choices. The understandable reason for this is the difficulty of measuring the actual value of such actions. Therefore, it is important to understand the managerial perspective when identifying the pitfalls and possibilities of systematic career programs in connection to company strategy. Second, employer branding may be a team responsibility, but the tactics and final decisions of companies lie in the hands of management.

1.4   Delimitations

In order to highlight the managerial point of view and strategic angle in connection with company performance, employees' personal views were excluded from the study. HR Consultants were interviewed and that generated a slightly wider perspective, nevertheless, the focus stayed in management's frame of reference.

In addition, when viewing career development practices in connection with the employer brand, they can be addressed for employees and potential employees. When employer branding is designed for existing employees, it is also known as internal marketing. Internal marketing is pursuing to convey the brand promise to the employees after recruitment (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). This study focuses on existing employees, and therefore the recruiting process is mainly delimited from the study.

It was decided to narrow the participants to well-performing companies and companies that have demonstrated strong financial performance during the last couple of years. The qualification of the company was confirmed by reviewing the company's financial statements and by securing the company's willingness to invest in human capital. By doing so, it was ensured that the financial status of the companies does not affect management's thoughts or attitudes towards SHRM practices and all the participants are having equal possibilities to do – or not to do – investments in career programs.

All respondents are Finnish and live in Finland. However, the sample includes management from both global and national companies.

1.5   Key concepts

This chapter aims to introduce the key concepts that are used throughout this thesis. These concepts construct the structure of this thesis and serve as a framework. The main concepts are employer branding, brand equity, strategic human resource management, human capital, career development, career program, and talent management.

Employer branding. The term employer branding is used when branding principles are applied to human resource management (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) define employer branding as "a targeted, long-term strategy to manage the awareness and perceptions of employees, potential employees, and related stakeholders with regards to a particular firm". As they explain, employer brand helps companies differentiate themselves from their competitors and can be targeted at potential

employees and current employees. This thesis focuses mainly on branding efforts exploited to current employees, which is also called internal marketing.

Brand equity. Brand equity demonstrates the value of brand and is composed of brand awareness (brand recognition) and brand image (associations to brand) (Vomberg et al., 2014).

Human resource management (HRM). The term human resource management (HRM) is commonly used and implies the application of management principles for managing the employees of a company (Kramar, 2014).

Strategic human resource management, abbreviation SHRM. As explained above, human resource management means that the management principles are applied to managing the company's employees. The concept of strategic human resource management (SHRM) is the next level of such measurements and means that the process is also included in the company's strategy and linked with the financial performance of a company. (Kramar, 2014)

Human capital. Human capital refers to characteristics possessed by an individual employee that can bring profits and value to a company (Wright and McMahan, 2011).

Career development. The term career development refers to the process that includes the development of one's career identity (Hoekstra, 2010) and often includes training and other development programs offered by an employer that aim to advance the job-related skills and competencies to support top work performance (Kraimer et al., 2011).

Career program. As explained by Mayangdarastri and Khusna (2020), career paths and career development practices are often built around career programs. Career programs consist of actions undertaken by the employees and the employer and provide the structure needed for career development.

Talent management. In the paper of Maurya and Agarwal (2018), the authors have quoted Blass (2007) and describe talent management as "the additional management, processes and opportunities that are made available to people in the organization considered to be talented".

1.6   The structure of the thesis

This thesis includes five main chapters, which are the introduction, theoretical framework, methodology, empirical findings, and conclusions. In addition, references and appendices are at the end of this thesis.

Chapter one, the introduction, aims to give the reader an outlook of the research topic by explaining the research area and the aim of the study and by introducing the research questions. Further, delimitations and key concepts are presented.

Chapter two, which is the theoretical framework, represents the existing literature that is relevant for this research around themes of employer branding, strategic human resource management, career programs, and talent management. The theoretical framework concludes in the summary of the existing literature and implications for the study.

Chapter three, methodology, motivates the research design and chosen sampling method. In this chapter, the data collection process, interview guide, data analysis process and the quality of the research are discussed.

The empirical findings are presented in chapter four. This chapter describes and summarizes the results of the interviews and is divided into three sub-chapters: *different career program strategies, the pitfalls and possibilities of career programs within employer branding* as well as *the future of career programs and its effect to employer brand.*

The final and fifth chapter concludes the thesis. It integrates the empirical findings to the theories derived from past studies and presents managerial implications. Further, the recommendations for further research are discussed in the final chapter.

2   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter starts by introducing existing literature on employer branding and activities that employer branding covers, continues by linking the role of management to employer branding and then explains how companies can financially benefit from a unique employer brand. After that, the strategic human resource management and the importance of human capital to a company's success is further explained. Finally, career programs and different ways of implementing such programs are discussed real-life examples of successful companies and their career development practices are introduced. This chapter concludes with a summary of the abovementioned themes.

2.1   Employer branding

According to Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), brand management is a series of techniques used to increase the perceived value of a product or service. The study introduces brands as key assets of a company, and therefore brand management is an important activity within a company. Increasingly, companies have started to acknowledge the value of their employees and employer branding is being adopted as a sustainable part of the business (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004).

Employer branding covers topics such as corporate reputation, talent management and employee engagement agendas. As explained by Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), the main aim of employer branding is to show the employees and potential employees that the company is a unique and desirable company to work for. Employer branding has been studied broadly (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Martin et al., 2011; Chhabra and Sharma, 2014; Maurya and Agarwal, 2018) and it is proven to lead to competitive advantage, educate employees on the company values and reduce retention. Research conducted by Chhabra and Sharma (2014) states that employer branding is a value adding element and should be used as a strategic tool to attract and keep the most talented individuals within a company.

Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) define employer branding as "a targeted, long-term strategy to manage the awareness and perceptions of employees, potential employees, and related stakeholders with regards to a particular firm". They also highlight that employer branding is based on the presumption that human capital brings value to the company and by investing in employees, the performance of a company will improve.

As previously indicated, attracting and keeping the best talent in the house brings long-term value in today's competitive environment. Building a distinctive and compelling brand image is a process that will help to differentiate from competitors and can indirectly support employee satisfaction (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) introduce three-step employer branding activities that are refined by human resource practitioners:

1. *Value proposition*

   The starting point: to develop the employer branding value proposition. The value proposition is created by utilizing information such as company culture, management style, current employees and product or service impressions. Value proposition aims to outline why this particular employer adds more value than the competitor. The value proposition introduces a declaration of intent that is conveyed by the brand.

2. *Marketing value proposition to an external audience*

   Once the value proposition is developed, the company uses it to attract the talent they are targeting. It can also help to support and enhance the product or corporate brand, and therefore it is critical to have the employer branding activities in line with other branding efforts.

3. *Value proposition activities inside an organization*

   The third angle is internal marketing, which aims to retain the brand promise made in the recruiting phase. Employer branding's objective is to teach the values of a company to existing employees and commit them to the organization's goals and ways of business.

This thesis focuses especially on the third aspect of employer branding meaning the value proposition inside the organization. The value proposition for existing employees can mean activities such as clear goal setting, recognizing and rewarding, supporting knowledge sharing, and offering career growth as well as competitive salary and benefits. Career programs take all the abovementioned tactics into account.

As mentioned, employer branding activities should follow the same path as company's other branding activities. According to Davies (2008), typical branding activities aim to

differentiate from competitors, create loyalty, satisfy and create a strong emotional attachment, and these same attributes apply to employer branding. However, as Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) explain, employer branding differs in some parts: first, the key function of employer branding is to indicate a company's identity as an employer. Second, contrary to product branding, employer branding is targeted at both externals and internals. Biswas and Suar (2014) argue that product or service branding efforts enable company representatives to understand their customers, but employer branding gives the company a platform for understanding their employees. On the contrary to consumer branding, Davies (2008) stresses the importance of perceived differentiation, loyalty, satisfaction and affinity.

According to Martin et al. (2011), organizations need to connect different company functions to make employer branding as effective as possible. They also highlight that it is not enough for companies to be something, but rather be known for being something. That is where the employer branding steps in the picture.

2.1.1 *Employer branding management*

There are differences of opinions between Academicians who should be in charge of employer branding within the organization.

Based on the study conducted by Biswas and Suar (2014), organization's employer brand is strongly in the hands of management. The study argues that company management's views, attitudes, knowledge and performance affect external stakeholders' opinions of the company and form a unique company image and employer brand. It is also noted that managers play an important role when it comes to the promotion of employer brand and strategic alignment. Top management's role is often even more important symbolically than operationally.

Davies (2008) states, based on his research, that managing the employer brand can be a difficult job. He debates whether it should be in the hands of marketing, HR professionals or even requires a completely new function within a company. This function would take the responsibility of managing and coordinating different stakeholders and would enable the full potential of employer branding. Davies (2008) sees that efficient employer branding activities require responsibility from a dedicated function.

Biswas and Suar (2014) imply that employer branding is a shared effort across a company and should involve people from the following groups with own areas of responsibility:

1. The top management: responsible for endorsement, vision, and direction

2. The business processing group: responsible for staffing, process management, and system lead

3. The cross-functional group: responsible for HR, communication, and marketing

This particular thesis focuses on understanding the top management, and their role in adopting the right strategic decisions for company success. As Biswas and Suar (2014) explain, these strategic decisions that management is responsible for making, include components such as promotions, job tasks, innovation, compensation variations, physical workplace environment and career development possibilities. Moreover, Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) argue that management should take the leading role in developing productive organizational culture that will lead to high-quality work and the commitment of employees, which will support the creation of a strong and productive employer brand. They claim that the right kind of organizational identity is a strong benefactor towards a sustainable employer brand. In addition, an article published in Harvard Business Review by Banta and Watras (2019) suggests that the employer brand should be integrated as part of a corporate brand and be led by the CEO and the executive team, not entirely delegated to HR and communications people.

Biswas and Suar (2014) summarize that even though HR and other functions support the implementation of the right practices and help to optimize and develop the guidelines of employer branding, top management is responsible for giving the consent and proactive support for the execution of the strategy.

2.1.2 *The relationship between employer branding and company performance*

Buttenberg (2013) claims that the shift and development in the corporate world have strengthened the role of a corporate brand. Once products and services are becoming more comparable, and knowledge and practices easier to duplicate, the brand can act as a crucial differentiator. Buttenberg (2013) argues that the same shift is happening in the field of employer branding and building up an efficient brand equity management system can help maximizing long-term profits. As explained by Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), in

terms of employer branding, brand equity applies to the effect of brand knowledge on potential and current employees. From existing employees' perspective, it means that strong brand equity motivates them to stay with the company and execute its values.

Vomberg et al. (2014) study the correlation between brand equity and company performance and the research showed a positive interaction between these two. Based on their study, a strong brand can assist employees' identification with the company, which can reinforce the positive attitudes and give employees motivation to deploy their human capital in favor of company goals.

Biswas and Suar's study (2014) aims to identify antecedents of employer branding and expose its impact on company performance. Furthermore, their research suggests that there is a correlation between efficient employer branding and the financial performance of a company. Also, Davies (2008) confirms that the potential of employer brand for company performance should be taken seriously and is seen as an important component from a profit point-of-view.

Backhaus and Tikoo's (2004) study contributes to the researches above by examining the connection of employer branding and company performance from a person-organization value perspective and how, for example, retention or working habits can support the financial performance of a company. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) claim that the employer branding efforts should be measured by examining the individual level of productivity and the company's turnover increase. They argue that employer branding is a profitable concept and "can be especially valuable in the search for an organizing framework for strategic human resource management".

Schlager et al. (2011) research the phenomenon from the customer experience perspective. Their study focused on understanding the connection between employees' attitudes and customer experience combined with the concept of perceived employer brand and how it can support the service profit chain. The study identified positive outcomes of strong employer brand and indirect valuable profit-making elements, such as stronger control on employees, including their skills and attitudes (Ibid).

2.2 Strategic human resource management

Strategic human resource management (SHRM) aims to increase company performance and helps to achieve strategic goals by investing in human capital and utilizing planned systems and activities. It also seeks ways to maximize the influence of HR practices and reinforce competitive advantage (Mitchell et al., 2013).

Investing in human capital and maximizing its effects are believed to benefit both employees as well as employers (Crook et al., 2011). In fact, many studies have proven that human capital can potentially be the most important factor of a company and enhance the company performance, but only if it is efficiently and effectively managed (Chen et al., 2016; Boon et al., 2018). As Boon et al. (2018) explain, from the strategic perspective, it may work as a valuable resource and explores issues related to value capture and creation, and mobility of knowledge and skills. However, as Gambardella et al. (2015) state, companies often struggle with establishing a framework for effective human capital management and finding ways to veritably measure the performance of SHRM. Andersen and Minbaeva (2013) claim that common mistakes companies make in HR strategy planning are only having a central strategy planning activity and forgetting the variations concerning local circumstances and conditions. As they explain, central activities refer to rational process planning, such as company's mission, long-term goals, action plans and environmental policies. Decentralized practices mean that the decision-making power is given to managers all over the organization so that they are also required to make strategic decisions that benefit the company, and get a feeling of being personally responsible for the company's success. Thus, Andersen and Minbaeva (2013) suggest that adopting both centralized and decentralized strategy activities supports a company's success and will lead to a competitive advantage.

Mitchell et al. (2013) argue that giving a bigger strategic role to HR professionals may benefit companies and give competitive leverage against competitors. Their study also claims that focus on SHRM can lead to high-performance human resource practices that, indirectly, support the financial performance of a company. However, they did not identify any direct effect between SHRM and organizational performance and highlight the complexity of human resource management from a strategic perspective.

Most of the studies focus on the outcome of SHRM but rarely separate the role of different activities, such as career development, within. Many studies are also somewhat conflicting, mainly because of the challenge of measuring HR related functions. One of

the few studies (Kraimer et al., 2010) that have researched the effects of organizational support for career development (OSD), argue that by developing career programs, companies can offer better opportunities for their employees and simultaneously show its commitment towards them. This on the other hand, will support employee's own career goals and reciprocate the commitment. From the company's perspective this may lead to enhanced human capital and better performance of a company (Kraimer et al. 2010).

2.2.1 The contribution of human capital to company value

Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) claim that investing in human capital can give a competitive advantage to a company. In addition, Martin et al. (2011) describe different corporate assets that can be turned into value creating elements, and human capital is one of them. They state that once an organization's resources are efficiently linked together and tied to sustainable processes, they create value for customers and a competitive advantage for a company. When different operations are linked, they provide employees' motivation and opportunities to develop and use their skills, which will, in turn, enhance the value of human capital.

Studies on SHRM have proved a connection between human capital focus and company performance. For example, Crook et al. (2011) found that human capital relates strongly to the performance of a company, however, they suggest that in order to carry out the full potential of the workforce, the human capital should be present on all levels of a company. As they explain, this means that companies that invest in all levels – from top management to lower level employees – can create high-performance work practices across the business. However, their study implies that further research is needed concerning the use of high-performance work practices and systems within companies and how they enhance human capital. De Vos and Dries (2013) introduce two dimensions that help to categorize human capital: value and uniqueness. As they explain, value means the potential that human capital can offer to a company and simultaneously enhance a company's core business and competitive advantage. Uniqueness is the measurement of being replaceable – higher uniqueness, more difficult to replace. Based on these attributes, De Vos and Dries (2013) claim that talented individuals possess both qualities, high-value and high-uniqueness, and are extremely important capital for the company's performance.

On the contrary, a study conducted by Vomberg et al. (2014) imply that there is no direct effect of human capital on firm value. Two reasons for this are given. First, Vomberg et al. (2014) claim that human capital influences company performance only if employees are contributing to achieving the company goals. Second, they argue that skilled employees have the power to negotiate higher salaries which leads to smaller profitability. Nevertheless, they indicate that companies can balance their efforts by setting up proper organizational structures leading to better management of branding and human capital assets.

When discussing the contribution of human capital to company value, the role of employee engagement must be understood. In many studies (Eldor and Vigoda-Gadot, 2016; Truss et al., 2013), employee engagement is mentioned to be a fulfilling concept that leads to multidimensional energies that benefit organizations. The commitment is expressed through physical involvement, cognitive awareness and emotional connections. Hence, as Eldor and Vigoda-Gadot (2016) claim, the companies that understand the magnitude of employee engagement can leverage their competitive advantage through their staff. Reciprocally, employees benefit as they are given the space to flourish and grow.

Holbeche and Matthews (2012) understand employee-employer relationship as a "psychological contract". Again, both parties expect something from one another. If the give-and-receive balance is right, the motivation and commitment of an employee is higher. In case the conditions of "the contract" would deteriorate, a strong psychological engagement can keep employees engaged during tough times as well. On the other hand, if the contract is significantly violated, it often leads to less effort making behavior which may be, in the long term, extremely harmful for company. In addition, Biswas and Suar (2014) confirm in their study, that companies that manage to attain the psychological contract can use current employees to amplify their brand among talents. However, this requires the fulfillment of employee's expectations regarding training, career opportunities and personal growth. Holbeche and Matthews (2012) argue that employee engagement is a shared responsibility between leaders, managers, HR and employees themselves.

Gering and Conner (2002) introduced a study that focus on a relationship between job satisfaction and attrition. In this study, eight satisfaction factors were recognized. The factors are presented in the table below, number one being the biggest influencer, number two being the next significant factor and so on.

Table 1 Eight employee satisfaction factors.

1	use of one's skills and abilities
2	the ability of top management
3	company's own sense of direction
4	advancement opportunities
5	opportunity to learn new skills
6	coaching and counseling
7	pay
8	training

The study was conducted from a strategic perspective to employee retention and its positive effects on a company's performance. Based on the results, the authors argue that developing opportunities and career programs enhance employees' accountability for their job performance and strengthen the commitment to the company and its values. Smith and Bititci (2016) studied a relationship between performance measurement, management practices, employee engagement and performance. Their research suggests that measures and targets have a positive impact on engagement, however, the engagement can be impacted if the measures and targets are not properly used or used in the wrong way.

Crook et al. (2011) emphasize that a company's value lies in the hands of human capital, and the development of human capital is vital for company's success. For managers, their study implies that talented individuals bring the biggest value and high performance. For researchers, it confirms that the right kind of human capital is the key to success.

2.3   Career programs and talent management

Simplified, a career is a series of a person's work experience that expands over time (Hoekstra, 2011). As explained by Hoekstra (2011), previously, it often meant structured and systematic career stages. Yet, nowadays, career paths are more dynamic, open and constantly evolving, both vertically and horizontally. Both, companies and individuals can influence one's career development.

De Vos and Dries (2013) studied how a company's human capital composition affects the way they design and implement their career management practices. Expectedly, the results suggest that companies that put high value on their employees' knowledge and

see them as an asset for a company, are also willing to provide more opportunities in terms of career development and talent management. Correspondingly, organizations with lower expectations towards their human capital are willing to put less efforts to the employee's careers and mobility.

Kraimer et al. (2010) studied a concept called organizational support for development (OSD) and its effects on employee behavior. OSD refers to actions and programs developed by a company that supports employee's skills development and future career opportunities. The study conducted by Kraimer et al. (2010) suggests that the baseline for effective career programs is the compatibility of career paths offered by a company and employee's own career goals. The same study suggests that companies that embed variation of managerial development and career planning practices in their human resource management efforts, are most likely getting the best results from their HRM investments. Further, Barnett and Bradley (2007) studied the relation of OSD and career satisfaction and their research indicates that OSD has a positive effect on employee satisfaction. The results proposed that companies may potentially use career programs to attract, motivate and retain the best employees.

Traditionally, career programs are intended for the whole organization despite the position within the organization or the level of competence. Talent programs aim to identify and discover the most talented employees within a company and focus on supporting carefully selected individual's motivation and satisfaction through career progression. Hoekstra (2011) states that to some extent, systematic career ladders have disappeared and are replaced by more complex and dynamic career outlooks. Regardless, many companies acknowledge the important role of talented employees and the need for talent acquisition and retention (Biswas and Suar, 2014). De Vos and Dries (2013) state that the majority of academicians in the career literature claim that the traditional career practices are no longer valid, and the focus has turned from the traditional views to talent management and, for example, succession planning and retention initiatives.

Most of the few studies around the career development topic are conducted from the talent management perspective. Son et al. (2018) claim the views and arguments of talent management and its effects on a company's performance vary to some extent. According to them, most of the literature around talent management claims that talented employees can bring innovation and competitive advantage to a company, and when effectively managed, employees are valuable resources that can help to enhance company

attractiveness, business goal achievement, customer satisfaction and profitability of a company. However, there are also white paper studies that contest the effects of talent management. These studies state that talent management may result in a negative competition between employees, and for example, reduce information exchange and knowledge aggregation. However, what is important to be noted and Kontoghiorghes (2015) highlights, is that the studies around talent management are still lacking a holistic understanding of the impacts of talent management practices in connection with organizational culture and employee attitudes. The compatibility between company culture and people's values is proven to be a major factor in employee satisfaction and performance, and therefore they should not be excluded from the talent management research (Kontoghiorghes, 2015).

Son et al. (2018) identified that the effect of career programs depends mainly on the organization's investments in human resource management on the company-wide level, not only for talented individuals. According to their study, if HRM efforts touch every individual within a company, all employees have the feeling of appreciation and equality. This supports cooperation and knowledge sharing in a company, which leads to new innovations and overall positive effects. Kraimer et al. (2010) also suggest that efforts in training and mentoring are important, but companies should understand the potential that lies in job rotation and diversity of careers.

Moreover, Maurya and Agarwal (2018) argue that talent management programs can have a positive impact on employer branding. They also suggest that talent management programs should be involved and aligned to company's strategy work and used with key employees.

In their study, Kraimer et al. (2010) claim that academic research has confirmed that training and development programs support employees' skill and competence development and will conduct higher job performance. However, they also mention that studies regarding company's support towards employee's career development and its connection to employees' motivation and company performance remain scarce. Is there truly a validated reason to invest in employees' career development, if the connection between made investments and company's success is not certain?

2.3.1 Career programs and talent management as a strategic decision

As studies conducted in recent years (Huang and Tansley, 2012; De Vos and Dries, 2013; Son et al., 2020) emphasize, career development and talent management practices as a

strategic decision are growing interest among company management and HR practitioners. Regardless, there is a lack of theoretical attention and research related to such practices and their contribution to company outcomes and human capital performance remains scarce.

Interestingly, Hoekstra (2011) argues that educated people are taking control of their own career development, and the responsibility is shifting more and more from organizations to individuals. Based on the study, organizations use different strategies to devote and motivate the best talent, and the most valuable workers, but leave out the replaceable majority of employees. In case the control of careers is slowly shifting from companies to employees, it is important for companies to consider the qualities of the best employees. As Kontoghiorghes (2015) reminds, often high-quality individuals are career-driven, and they expect high-performing companies to present opportunities to grow and develop their skills. Career program could be one way to respond to this demand.

Some companies have resolved this dilemma by setting up talent pools and career programs that are offered only for selected employees. On the other hand, Son et al. (2020) highlight that talent programs may cause a negative competition between employees because of limited talent pool resources. Talent management is defined as "the additional management, processes, and opportunities that are made available to people in the organization considered to be talented" (Maurya and Agarwal, 2018). Huang and Tansley (2012) describe the aim of talent management by referring Cappelli (2009); it is group of different practices used by organizations for succession planning and advanced career development paths. They add that it is often applied for potential executives, or only executive level roles, with people of highest success potentiality.

Maurya and Agarwal (2018) claim that the talented employees are the essence of every company as they enable the success of a company, efficient profit making, and make organizations competitive. Banta and Watras (2019) suggest in their Harvard Business Review article, that employer branding should be rethought, and the process of talent management included in the framework. They claim that by integrating talent into the center of the company brand, the right people will be recognized, maintained, and retained. Hence, integrating the talent work in the strategy of a company can play a vital role in company's success. However, Son et al. (2020) remind that the majority of talent management literature have studied the positive sides of talent management and

excluded the possible negative effects entirely and therefore question the objectivity of the existing literature.

Maurya and Agarwal (2018) somewhat support the claim of Banta and Watras (2019) of integrating talent into center of a company. As they claim, previously talent management was often seen as a separate administrative process, but in the modern world, should be moved to more strategic practice that drives organizational performance and profits. However, as Maurya and Agarwal (2018) highlight, the views whether the talented individuals should be separated from other employees are strongly divided by academicians.

Most of the academic literature around career development, talent management and career programs indicate that there is some level connection between career development actions and company's success. However, many of the studies also highlight the importance of further research on the topic, and there are rather fundamental questions unsolved regarding career programs and what is the best and most profitable way to support employee motivation and development. Son et al. (2020) claim that there is a growing interest in adopting talent management practices in organization's strategy, thus, they encourage companies to be aware of possible negative effects of talent management. Their study indicates that implementing talent management practices in the company culture that it does not fit, may result in high employee turnover. Therefore, instead of following trends, Son et al. (2020) suggest companies first understand their company culture and organizational characteristics, and only after that, implement career practices suitable for the organization.

2.3.2 The strategic choice of a company

The majority of large, global companies have adopted some career development activities, and many have also implemented talent management practices in the strategy. However, Netflix is not one of these companies. Regardless, Netflix is well-known for its rather unconventional talent management practices that have shaped the company's culture. Patty McCord, Chief Talent Officer at Netflix from 1998 to 2012, explained the fundaments of Netflix's HR approach in Harvard Business Review article. In the article, McCord (2014) introduced Netflix's HR practices to attract, retain and manage the best talent: trust on employees' logic and common sense, hire only people with the right skills and let go of them who no longer add value to the company, and instead of having formal yearly reviews make the managers have regular conversations with their subordinates.

He also highlights the role of leaders in creating the desired company culture, the importance of speaking the truth and the urgency of innovating mindset. In the interview of Forbes (2018) McCord says that hiring the right talent has a multiplier effect: "motivation is about talent density and appealing challenges. We didn't understand right away at Netflix that great colleagues and tough challenges to tackle were the strongest draws to working at the company."

On the other hand, PwC introduces a different approach to talent management and career paths. The U.S. Chairman of PwC Bob Moritz (2014) explained in Harvard Business Review article their ways to handle talent management practices. Moritz noted that the workforce of the company is young and that has reinvented their talent management practices enormously. In the article, he explains that Millennials expect companies to give them the freedom to manage their own careers and are expecting companies to offer various career paths. With this in mind, PwC decided to break down artificial barriers and started to offer various new opportunities for their employees once they have been on board for a certain number of years. Moritz (2014) introduces several career paths that employees can choose to follow and change their chosen path if their life situation or interests change. PwC's talent management practices are based on flexibility and for example, they also let their employees to have own technology ventures while still working at PwC. As a follow-up to the previous article, Harvard Business Review published an article by Anne Donovan (2019), the U.S People Experience Leader at PwC, who confirms that the chosen flexible career management practices have resulted in a more productive and healthier workforce, and keeps attracting the right talents in the company.

In 2018, McKinsey published a global survey that shows the positive relationship between talent management practices and financial performance. According to the survey, companies with talent management programs are more competitive against their rivals and are expected to outperform their peers' returns to shareholders. The survey results emphasizes that there is no one universal approach to effective management of human capital, but three practices were identified to support the effective talent management and company performance: fast movement of talent from project to project, HR's participation in employee experience to link it with the business priorities and team of innovating and strategic minded people. However, the survey shows that the movement of talent across strategic priorities has the most significant impact on company performance.

The research conducted by Maurya and Agarwal (2018) supports McKinsey's survey results. They confirm that companies can reinforce their employer brand by developing suitable strategies for career programs and launching differentiated talent management practices. As they claim, unique employer brand makes the company more attractive in the eyes of employees and reduces retention among current employees.

2.4 Summary of the theoretical framework and implications for the study

The theoretical framework links career programs with employer branding and company performance by reviewing previous research on employer branding, SHRM and various career development strategies. Previous studies indicate that there is a connection between efficiently managed employer branding and company's success, however, the strategic choices of such measures differ to some extent depending on a company.

When employer branding is managed efficiently, it can be a powerful instrument for company's success by attracting the best talent and keeping the most valuable employees within a company. In addition, strong employer brand can create a unique company identity that employees value and want to support. For example, the study conducted by Schlager et al. (2011) identified positive outcomes of strong employer brand and indirect profit-making elements, such as control of employees' values and attitudes. This is believed indirectly support the financial performance of a company.

It was also identified that employer brand is the strongest and most beneficial for a company when it is part of a company image and in line with firm's other branding efforts. When effectively managed, it can lead to a competitive advantage and help companies to triumph over their peers. However, there are conflicting studies concerning such efforts, presumably because of the complexity of measuring HR related functions and practices. Many studies also debate who within the company should take the responsibility of human resource management as well as employer branding – top management, CEO alone, HR people or some other function.

Employer brand can be seen as a tool for tempting, managing and maintaining company's human capital. As best practices indicate, human capital is a valuable asset for a company, and SHRM can support high-performance and bring long-term profits for a company (Martin et al., 2011). The world is becoming more and more knowledge-based and having the right individuals in the company is becoming increasingly important and vital for a company's success. SHRM aims to meet the needs of employees by linking company's strategy with human resource management, and career programs

can be seen as one aspect of such practices. However, there is a rapport between researchers and HR practitioners that the current literature concerning career development practices and career programs remains still scarce. Furthermore, studies concerning talent management are limited, despite the fact that several companies have adopted such practices in their HR strategy.

During recent years, there has been a shift in career management and educated people are increasingly taking the control of their own careers unlike before. There are companies that have responded to this need by setting up different talent pools and career programs. As studies conducted in recent years (Huang and Tansley, 2012; De Vos and Dries, 2013; Son et al., 2020) emphasize, career programs and talent management practices as a strategic decision are growing interest among company management and HR practitioners.

The opinions of leaders and study results are especially distributed when it comes to adopting talent management practices. Son et al. (2020) identified that talent programs may result in a negative competition between employees due to the limited talent pool resources and the effect of such programs depends on company's investments in human resource management on company-level, not only for the most talented individuals. On the contrary, Maurya and Agarwal (2018) as well as Banta and Watras (2019) claim that companies should integrate talent into the center of a company and be a part of company's strategic practice to drive organizational performance and profits.

As summary, it is evident that the research on these topics indicates that investments in human capital lead to competitive advantage, enhance company performance and may lead to higher profits once efficiently managed. Employer branding is proven to play a vital role in finding, maintaining and retaining the best talent within a company. However, there are different views on the most efficient practices that companies should adopt, when it comes to career programs and talent management.

The empirical study focuses on identifying the pitfalls and possibilities of career programs and its effect on employer brand. The study is conducted from the management's point of view. Thus, the interviewees are carefully selected: management from the companies with career programs, management from the companies without career programs, and HR Consultants that advise managers on such themes.

The empirical research aims to elaborate the understanding of various strategic choices when it comes to career programs, learn about management's own experiences and identify both negative and positive sides they have experienced during their careers.

3   METHODOLOGY

This chapter introduces and motivates the methodology of the empirical study. First, the research design and sampling are discussed. Second, the data collection process, interview guide and data analysis process are further explained. Finally, the quality of the research is discussed.

3.1   Research design

The aim of this study is to identify and critically analyze pitfalls and possibilities of career programs and the effectiveness of such programs on employer brand from management's point of view. This research is aiming to find answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the pitfalls and possibilities of systematic career programs?

RQ2: What are the effects of career programs on employer brand?

The study is conducted from the management's perspective and aims to provide insights into the career programs when they are included in a company's strategy. In addition, this study's objective is to learn more about career program's effectiveness on employer branding.

As there is a limited amount of studies that focus on career programs, and none of them focus on identifying negative and positive sides of career programs, the study was decided to conduct as qualitative research. As explained by Gummesson (2004), qualitative research aims to analyze complex and diverse perspectives and understand synergies between different phenomena and circumstances, whereas quantitative techniques often focus mainly on building a cause and effect relationships between different variables. In addition, qualitative approach enables data creation in interaction and the researcher is engaged in analysis from the early stage of the research.

The purpose of this empirical study was to learn and analyze the attitudes, experiences and opinions of participants, and therefore creating a valid questionnaire would have been extremely difficult. The qualitative inquiry aims to an in-depth, individualized understanding of management's thoughts and may create a deeper understanding of the issue (Patton, 2015). The main aim of the interviews was to hear leaders talk freely about their views and learn about their own experiences. The focus was in the participant's personal views, perceptions, experiences, and judgments.

The qualitative approach was also found to be the most appropriate to answer the research question because it allows the researcher to ask questions that generate individual variations (Patton, 2015). This helped to identify the differences between members of management and their personal experiences, despite the company they are working for. In addition, qualitative methods were seen as more purposeful for this thesis compared to the quantitative approach as the main objective of the research was to focus on real-life examples.

3.2 Sampling

The empirical part of this research was conducted with a selected sample of management from companies that represent both sides of interest: companies that have a career program implemented in their strategy and companies that do not have it included in the strategy. To gain as informative data as possible, also insights from HR Consultants, who work with management on such themes, were collected.

It was decided to narrow the participants to well performing companies and companies that have demonstrated strong financial performance during the last couple of years. The qualification of the company was confirmed by reviewing company's financial statements and by securing company's willingness to invest in their human capital. By doing so, it was ensured that the possible weak financial status of the company would not influence management's thoughts or attitudes towards SHRM practices and all the participants are having equal possibilities to do – or not to do – investments in career programs.

The sample was chosen to support in achieving the aim of this study. Other important criteria for sample selection were the researcher's access to data and selection of individuals that are specifically experienced with the phenomenon. Therefore, the sampling method of this study was purposeful sampling, more specifically comparison-focused sampling.

As Patton (2015) explains, the steps for the design alignment of purposeful sampling are the following: determining inquiry purpose and inquiry questions, choosing what data to collect and selecting the right cases. The sampling strategy used in the study is *matched comparisons*, which means that selected groups were established by non-random method and were compared to each other (Patton, 2015). These groups have similar important characteristics but differ significantly on some dimensions of interest.

In this study, purposeful sampling is the foundation of this qualitative inquiry. The sample was be selected in such a way that it offered information-rich data and generated information about the main issues of this study. As mentioned, the data was collected from three different groups: **group A)** managers from companies that have a systematic career program included in the strategy, **group B)** managers from the companies that do not have a systematic career program included in the strategy, and **group C)** HR Consultants who work with both type of companies. Because of the researcher's rather long job history in different kinds of corporations, her network consists of people from each group.

The researcher contacted the suitable informants directly and inquired about their interest in taking part in the study. It was stressed that the interview is conducted completely anonymously, and the companies of respondents are not mentioned in the study. An overview of the sample can be found in **table 2**.

Table 2 Respondents of the empirical research

Respondent	Title	Gender	Group
Yes-A1	Managing Partner	Male	Group A: companies with a career program
Yes-A2	Managing Partner	Male	Group A: companies with a career program
No-B1	CFO	Female	Group B: companies without a career program
No-B2	CEO	Male	Group B: companies without a career program
Consultant-C1	HR Consultant	Female	Group C: HR Consultants
Consultant-C2	HR Consultant	Female	Group C: HR Consultants

To secure the clarity of the respondents' group in chapter 4, empirical findings, the following abbreviations are used.

Group A: companies with a career program:

- Yes-A1
- Yes-A2

Group B: companies without a career program:

- No-B1
- No-B2

Group C: HR Consultants:

- Consultant-C1
- Consultant-C2

3.3   Data collection process

The sample was divided into three groups as the researcher wanted to learn if the current company strategy has an influence on respondents' opinions and identify if the attitudes towards employer branding were different depending on the group. The groups were designed to meet the research goal. To help to answer the research question, each group's interview started with a group-specific introductory question. The purpose of the question was to understand the fundamental idea behind the company's strategic decision concerning career programs and to identify if there are distinctive reasons for the chosen operating model. The provocative introductory question was meant to inspire the respondent to reflect on why the company has chosen this particular strategy. After the introductory questions, the transition to questions concerning negative and positive outcomes of career programs was smooth, as many of the respondents already touched on the themes during the introductory discussion. The groups and the introductory questions for each group are illustrated in **Figure 2.**
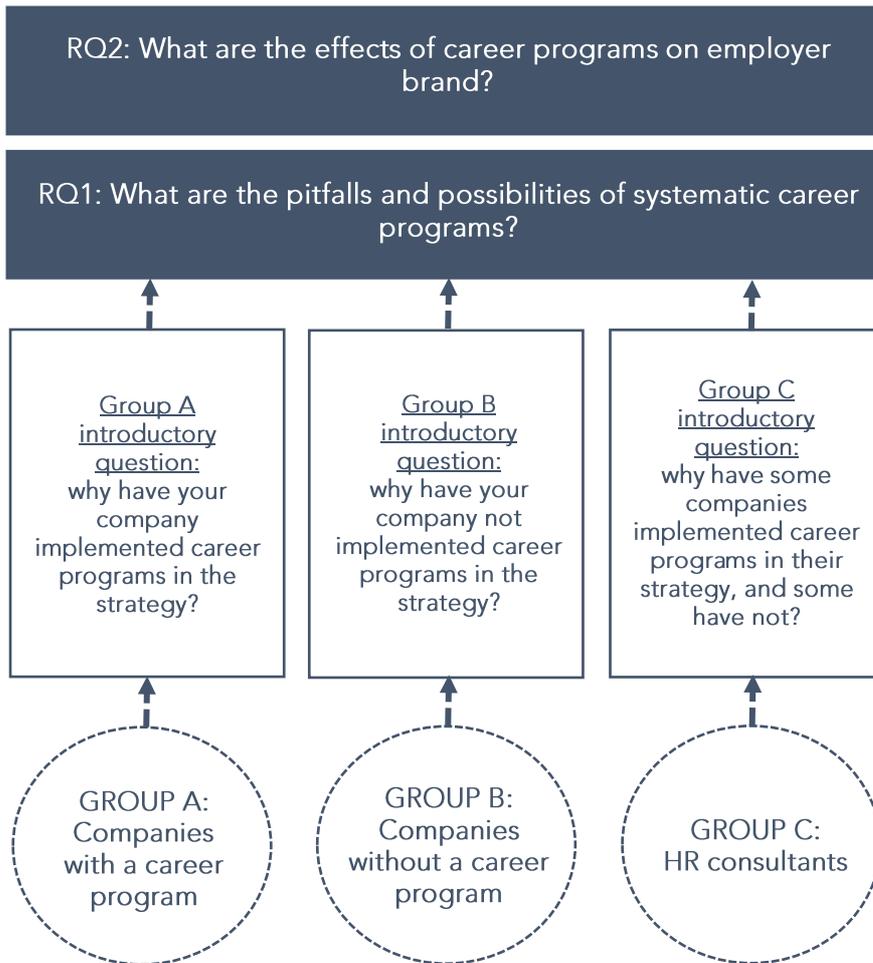
Figure 2   **The groups and group-specific introductory questions.**

One of the key factors for a successful interview is consensus and common understanding between interviewer and interviewee (Patton, 2015). The data was collected in one-to-one in-depth interviews, and there was the existing rapport between the researcher and each interviewee. This is for two reasons: the researcher knew each one of the participants in advance and the objective of the research was introduced before the interview took place. As there was no need to link interviews to any special period of time, the data collection happened one-point-in-time. The data was collected in May 2021 via Teams. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted via Teams and recorded with the permission of the respondent.

Supporting data for existing literature was collected by utilizing the interview guide. Since the questions for different groups could not be exactly equal, the group-specific

introductory questions were formulated (Figure 2), and the follow-up questions were designed to fit the group. This structure kept the goal clear in the interview situations.

The interviews were informal in nature. The discussion was constructed in a way that it enabled respondents to answer as freely as possible using their own words. To ensure the quality of data, the role of a researcher was mainly observing, and the researcher's personal beliefs were not included in the discussion.

3.4 Interview guide

As mentioned, the interview guide was utilized. As introduced by Patton (2015), the interview guide is a checklist that makes sure that all the relevant topics and questions are discussed during the interview. It helps to make the data collection more systematic and standardized. According to Patton (2015), this approach has proven to make the interview situation very effective because it guides the direction of the interview but supports versatile answers and views.

By utilizing the interview guide, the aim was to collect high-quality information and answer research questions *RQ1) what are the pitfalls and possibilities of career programs?* and *RQ2) what are the effects of career programs on employer brand?.* This was achieved by asking relevant and meaningful open-ended questions in the informal interviewing situation. Every group had own interview questions suitable for their group, however, the themes were identical, and each interview situation followed the same structure.

The themes, sections and purposes are presented in **table 3**.

Table 3 Sections of the interview.

Themes	Section	Purpose
Employer branding Strategic human resource management Career programs Talent management Company performance	WHY	- To understand why companies have chosen to have a systematic career program included in the strategy - To understand why companies have chosen not to have a systematic career program included in the strategy
	WHAT	- To identify the positive effects of systematic career programs - To identify the negative effects of systematic career programs
	HOW	- To gain an understanding of how career programs can influence employer brand - To learn about respondent's own preferences concerning career programs and talent management
	WHEN AND WHERE	- To discover the future plans of a company in regard to career programs - To discover respondent's opinions on the future of career programs

Eventually, the aim was to answer the introductory questions that naturally propelled the discussion to the follow-up questions that helped to formulate an answer to the research question.

Group A introductory question: why have your company implemented career programs in the strategy?

- introductory question for organizations that have involved career program activities in their strategy. Intend to identify the reasons for having a career program and how it affects company's daily operations, how it has shaped company's employer brand and its overall effects on company's success.

Group B introductory question: why have your company not implemented career programs in the strategy?

- introductory question for organizations that do not have a systematic career program. Intend to identify how the employer brand is formed and the reasons behind the decision not to do it. Ultimately, the question was aiming to clarify the root cause behind the decision, which would finally help to answer the research question.

Group C introductory question: why have some companies implemented career programs in their strategy, and some have not?

- intend to identify reasons why some organizations have chosen to implement career programs and some have decided not to. This will ultimately help to form the answer to the main research question.

Through thorough data collection, the researcher expected to identify pitfalls and possibilities that systematic career programs can generate and how they can affect on employer brand. The main purpose was to analyze the data from a critical perspective and also identify potential situations when career development strategies can turn against the company.

The interview guide for each group is presented below. The interview guide was tested in a pilot interview, as suggested by Saunders and Lewis (2012). By starting with a pilot interview, the researcher aimed to identify possible areas for improvement and make sure that the most relevant and important questions were answered during the interview. The main idea behind using the pilot interview was to test that the respondent interpreted the questions correctly and avoid using too specific or too broad questions. During the pilot interview, it was noted that only minor adjustments were needed. These changes were mainly related to the wording. For example, question 2 *"what are the possibilities of systematic career programs"* were reformatted to start with *"what positive effects…"* because it was simply easier to understand. The question was formatted suitable for each group. In addition, during the pilot interview the researcher noted that a brief introduction to the different strategic choices before question 5 *"How would you structure the career program – for all the staff or only for the most talented individuals? Why is that?"* was needed in order to clarify to the respondent what is actually meant by talent management. The introduction was the following (translated into Finnish in the interview situation):

"There are different preferences to implement career programs in the strategy. Some companies have decided to have career programs that cover the whole staff, and some have decided to move forward with talent management programs. Talent management refers to talent pools that are designed only for the most talented/superior individuals and include different motivational measures, such as training and development. The opinions on the "right" strategic decision are divided in the literature and previous studies."

After the introduction, the question 5 was asked. During the final interviews with HR Consultants the introduction was unnecessary, as they work closely with such matters and are familiar with different HR concepts.

The final questions are presented in the table below. The interviews were conducted in Finnish and the questions were translated to the respondents.

Table 4 Interview questions.

	Group A: companies with a career program	Group B: companies without a career program	Group C: HR Consultants
WHY	1. Why have your company implemented career program(s) in the strategy?	1. Why have your company not implemented career program(s) in the strategy?	1. Why have some companies implemented career programs in their strategy, and some have not?
WHAT	2. What positive effects have systematic career program(s) brought to the company? 3. What negative effects have systematic career program(s) brought to the company?	2. What positive effects do you believe you would witness if systematic career program(s) were implemented in the strategy? 3. What negative effects do you believe you would witness if systematic career program(s) were implemented in the strategy?	2. What positive effects can systematic career program(s) bring to the company? 3. What negative effects can systematic career program(s) bring to the company?
HOW	4. How career program(s) affect your company's employer brand? 5. How would you structure the career program – for all the staff or only for the most talented individuals? Why is that?	4. How would implementing career program(s) affect your company's employer brand? 5. How would you structure the career program – for all the staff or only for the most talented individuals? Why is that?	4. How can implementing career program(s) affect company's employer brand? 5. How would you structure the career program – for all the staff or only for the most talented individuals? Why is that?
WHERE AND WHEN	6. How do you see that career programs are evolving in the future?	6. Have you had any discussions on implementing career program(s) in the strategy? If yes, what would they be? 7. How do you see that career programs are evolving in the future?	6. How do you see that career programs are evolving in the future?

3.5   Data analysis process

The collected data were analyzed according to qualitative analysis guidelines by Spiggle (1994). The analysis process started immediately after the first interview in May 2021. The qualitative analysis followed the seven phases proposed by Spiggle (1994), which were categorization, abstraction, comparison, dimensionalization, integration, iteration and refutation. By utilizing different stages of qualitative analysis, the aim was to sort, interpret and reconstitute the collected data.

The data of the three groups, i.e. **group A)** managers from companies that have systematic a career program included in the strategy, **group B)** managers from the companies that do not have a systematic career program included in the strategy, and **group C)** HR Consultants who work with both type of companies, were first analyzed separately. The analysis moved forward systematically and started with categorization different phenomena, continued by abstraction of the data which was followed by comparison, dimensionalization and integration. The final stages were iteration and refutation. However, as suggested by Spiggle (1994), constant iteration of the results was made in order to evaluate if the results answered the research question. These seven steps helped to formulate in-depth understanding of the separate groups and their patterns. The cross-comparison between different groups finalized the analysis process.

As mentioned, the interviews were recorded and later carefully transcribed for data analysis purposes. The transcriptions were conducted word-to-word in Finnish, as it was substantial that the initial choice of wording was preserved. This not only helped to evaluate the emphasis of the themes, but also helped to keep the content invariable while translating the interviews in English.

3.6   Quality of the research

This section discusses and evaluates the quality of the data based on Wallendorf and Belk (1989) techniques and criteria. There are five criteria that are used to evaluate the trustworthiness of the data: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and integrity (ibid). Transferability is discussed in the final chapter in connection to recommendations for further research.

Credibility assesses the validity of the research findings, in other words, how adequately and believably the findings describe the phenomenon that has been studied (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). The methodology chapter carefully represents how the data was

collected and analyzed. When assessing the credibility of the findings, it must be highlighted that the researcher identified the most relevant respondents with the chosen sampling method. The respondents have the needed experience from the field, and they have been working with these topics during their careers. They also have first-hand knowledge as they have personally been involved in such situations. Despite only having six respondents, there were almost 200 minutes of recorded data available for the analysis. The interviews were carefully transcribed word-for-word which increases the credibility of the data.

Dependability measures whether the study would be possible to replicate by other researchers and would the result be the same (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). Dependability was ensured by creating a clear interview guide which was used in the interview situations. Thus, careful documentation enables the research to be replicated in the future. However, it should be noted that the researcher knew all the respondents from the past and had a rapport with them. This may have resulted in more exposed answers.

Confirmability means the degree of unbiasedness of the study and if the findings are shaped by the respondents and not shaped by the researcher (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). The interpretations were made from the collected data which was carefully transcribed. Video recording made it easy to return to the interviews and assess the researcher's tone of voice, questioning and reactions to the respondents' answers.

Integrity refers to the extent to which the collected data includes misinformation, lies or misrepresentations (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). The integrity of the data was intended to assure by informing all the respondents about the study and its purpose before the interviews took place. Before the respondents confirmed their participation in the study, they were informed that their responses are anonymous and the interview setting private, in order to protect their privacy. It was also verified that the interview data is destroyed after the finalization of the study. These measures were executed in order to ensure respondents' comfortability and willingness to share honest opinions and thoughts.

4   EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The empirical findings are presented in this chapter. The chapter presents the findings of the research based on concluded analysis and interpretation of the data.

The chapter starts by covering the introductory question for each group. This means that the reasons for having, or not having, career programs included in the strategy, are discussed first. Second, the findings of the pitfalls and possibilities of career programs and its effectiveness on employer branding are discussed. Finally, the future of career programs and its effect on employer brand are presented.

All three interview groups are covered, and the respondent's group is clearly stated. The quotes of respondents were translated from Finnish to English by the researcher.

4.1   The chosen career program strategies

Respondents from group A stated reasons why the company has a systematic career program, respondents from group B explained why the company does not have a systematic career program, and respondents from group C analyzed their own learnings and observations from working with both types of companies and their management.

4.1.1   Reasons to have systematic career programs

Three main themes became dominant in the data when analyzing reasons for having career programs included in the strategy. These themes were *efficiency of a company, motivation of employees and growing expectations of employees*.

Both respondents, Yes-A1 and Yes-A2, work for companies that are operating in extremely competitive business field and the phase of business is rapid. In the interviews, the demanding industry and high requirements towards employees were constantly emphasized. Yes-A1 highlighted that the business and the efficiency of a company is based on employees' capability to adapt, learn fast and respond to any given challenges, and career program is a simple way to support and follow individual's professional development.

Therefore, the steep learning curve of individuals was the most highlighted motivator for career programs according to Yes-A1 and Yes-A2. Career programs support the development of employees, which improves the efficiency and performance of a company.

Yes-A1: "We want individuals who continuously want to move forward in their careers. It is an integral part of our image and brand as an employer, and our way of working. It obviously also reflects on the structure of our career program."

Yes-A1: "...We want to challenge our people and make sure that they move forward, learn new things and develop, constantly. It benefits the company."

Yes-A2: "Why we have a clear career program at all, is because we want to train the right types of future leaders and employees for our company. We are an apprenticeship based expert company, and people learn on the job."

In addition, Yes-A2, Consultant-C1 and Consultant-C2 mentioned that career programs enable more standardized careers, training and wage developments. This on the other hand, minimizes the time and resources used for such matters and leaves employees more time to focus on main business.

Consultant-C1: "It's really easy to build training around it. And when it is working, you don't have to think about it all the time. Sure, the world changes and company goals may change, and the program needs to be modified every now and then, but it has a positive stability and does not require constant renewal."

Yes-A2: "While the root cause [of a career program] is functional and it ensures that we have the right kind of employees on right levels in the organization to be able to operate, the finest benefit comes from the fact that a person does not need to focus on the progress of his or her own career path."

HR Consultants, as well as No-B1, saw career programs as a perfect tool for motivation and commitment. According to Consultant-C1, nowadays organizations are expected to motivate their employees, and a career program is one tool for it. In addition, No-B1 and Consultant-C2 highlighted the result-oriented individuals, especially younger people, who are often motivated by challenges and continuous learning.

Consultant-C1: "In my experience, companies have career programs to sustain motivation and commitment. When people know that the company has career tracks and offers interesting possibilities for their employees, including wage development, it is an easy way to motivate people."

Consultant-C2: "It appeals especially to students and recent graduates, as many of them have a great hunger to advance in their careers. It [career program] brings clarity to it."

No-B1: "Everyone wants to keep the good ones, and this [career program] is one way to ensure it. It's no longer enough to be a good and stable employer."

In connection with the motivation of employees, many of the respondents mentioned that career programs are a way to meet the continually rising standards of employees towards their employers. Growing expectations were something that all respondents had noticed and what was mentioned to be a stimulus to have a career program or start one. Few of the respondents also underlined the differences in expectations of generation Z, Millennials, generation X and baby boomers.

> Consultant-C1: "These days, employees expect employers to train them. The question is 'what I get from you, if I give my expertise to you'. This demand can easily be fulfilled with career programs."
>
> Consultant-C2: The awareness of self-worth is growing. Today, clear career programs respond to employees' own aspirations. Even better, if the career program enables different tracks and opportunities to choose from."
>
> Consultant-C1: "the younger the employee, the higher the expectations. If I think about my parents, or even myself, earlier you were just happy to have a job and people often stayed for decades within the same company. That has changed."

However, the attitude of respondents towards the growing expectations of employees was divided. Some of the respondents saw it to be a positive matter, but few respondents did not find it beneficial for organizations nor employees themselves.

> No-B2: I don't like the current trend. I would like our employees to be able to take the initiative and have the ability to take control over their own careers, also when it concerns their self-development and maintaining their own skills.

4.1.2 Reasons not to have systematic career programs

Respondents from the group B was asked why the company does not have systematic career programs. Both respondents commented that even though the company does not have a systematic career program, the company has some level of career development practices, they are just invisible or not systematic in nature. Consultant-C1 and Consultant-C2 also answered the question of why some companies do not have career programs included in the strategy.

Again, three main themes became dominant when analyzing the data. These themes were *the company size, inability to forecast the future* and *the priorities of a company*.

When asked reasons for not having career programs, No-B1, Consultant-C1 and Consultant-C2 all mentioned *the size of a company*. For a small company, or a startup, having a career program may be unnecessary because of a lack of roles within the company. In small businesses, singular roles are broader and having a career program would not support company's current goals or needs. Furthermore, if the company is small, the perspectives and possibilities within a company are more tangible.

> No-B1: "It all starts from the company's history and the fact that we have grown rapidly. If we look back ten years, the company was still very small and back then, discussions with the employees were very different. The perspectives were very tangible, because there were only few people and career paths were traditional. I see that the organization's rapid development and strong growth are the bottom reasons of why we don't have career programs.

> Consultant-C2: ”The first thing that comes to my mind is the size of the company and the spectrum of roles.”

> Consultant-C1: “If you are a growth company, or a startup, career programs can be difficult to execute, or simply does not serve that particular company.

Inability to forecast the future was also a dominant theme when discussing reasons for not having a systematic career program. No-B1 explained that the company has been growing fast during the last ten years, and due to the rapid development of business, new roles and needs have emerged yearly. However, it has been difficult to predict where the company is in five years and how the company and the tasks are evolving. Consultant-C1 mentioned that many fast-growing companies are facing the same dilemma. Sometimes organizations are incapable of forecasting where they are in five years or even in a year. Without the stability of business, the management is sometimes incapable or unwilling to make any career related business decisions.

> No-B1: “The organization has grown greatly, and we get a lot of new tasks every year. For example, it has been difficult to forecast what the support functions, such as IT, will look like in five years' time and how will you be able to move from one task to another within the house.”

> Consultant-C1: ”Sometimes companies do not do it because they don't have the ability to anticipate where the company is going. If you are lost or unable to predict where you will be in five years, or even a year from now, the implementation of a career program is challenging. Sometimes the company management does not have the courage or know-how.”

The third theme that emerged was *the priorities of a company*. Respondents noted that an organization's first goal is to succeed and perform well financially, and there are times and situations when company management decides to put the efforts and company resources somewhere else. Furthermore, many times the world and even the company, have developed and grown, but the management has not taken the time to have the discussion to evaluate the current situation.

> No-B1: ”…also, the determination of whether it [career program] is necessary, perhaps we have not discussed it enough, because earlier it was clear for all. There have been some level career paths inside the house, people have known that there are possibilities to move forward, they have seen their colleagues move from one position to another. Now that's not the case anymore, and we have not really stopped at what it means, what are the current needs of our employees, should we have career programs, and why it should be done company wide, or should it.”

> No-B1: “So far, we have not seen it so critical and essential so that we would have included it in the strategy papers.”

In addition, Consultant-C1 also noted and sometimes companies see that it is easier not to have career programs. For this, the respondent gave two reasons; first, the company does not make any promises that they would need to keep, and second, the company does not need to put any resources in it.

Consultant-C1: "It's easier not to build a career program because then you don't commit to anything in the same way or promise employees anything."

Consultant-C1: "...it is extremely challenging to implement a static career program, and can the organization handle the change, but on the other hand if it doesn't exist at all... Yes, I would say that having some kind of career program is always a positive idea. However, you need to think about what suits that particular company and its culture."

4.2 Pitfalls and possibilities of career programs within employer branding

After the respondents had explained their own views on why organizations have or do not have career programs included in company strategy, they were asked to think about pitfalls and possibilities of such programs. Simultaneously, they were asked to reflect the effectiveness of career programs on employer branding.

4.2.1 The pitfalls of career programs

In the data analyses, two main elements were identified as pitfalls of career programs. These elements are *dogmatic processes* and *the lack of commitment of employer.* Overly structured and dogmatic processes can have negative effects such as *employee's challenges to adapt* and *processes, that do not suit for company's operating model.* The lack of commitment of employer may result in having *employees with a lack of knowledge* and *the wrong level of competence,* as well as *negatively affect employees' motivation and commitment.*

Depending on the company, career programs may raise development expectations towards individuals, and organizations set the minimum bar that employees are expected to fulfill in order to move forward in their careers. This may result in challenges with the adaptability of an employee. If an employee faces challenges to follow the career path as expected, it may lead to negative effects such as stress and pressure. This on the other hand, may influence the employee's overall performance. Yes-A1 and Yes-A2 felt that sometimes career programs are too inflexible, and individuals are expected to adapt to company's expectations and one's background or personality are not considered. Yes-A1 also noted that, for example, too aggressive career programs do not suit everyone. This, may weaken otherwise suitable individual's performance.

Yes-A1: "From an individual's perspective, it may put a lot of pressure on you. It sets expectations on your development, and you may actually put more pressure on yourself than the company does."

Yes-A1: "We have noticed that a fast-moving career program is not for everyone."

Yes-A2: "There are situations where a person would have a really good [professional] profile, but he/she doesn't fit in the model. We've created different tracks in recent years and have recruited people into them, but the basic formula is still to look for recently graduated and talented people and put them through the wringer, and the expectation is that you adapt."

The data also showed that there are situations in which organizations have built a career program but, in the end, it does not fit in company's culture or operations nor the industry. In such situations, career programs usually turn against the company and may have drastic negative effects.

No-B2: "If and when it [career program] is not always successfully executed, it may set the bar too high for the employees and they get disappointed."

Consultant-C1: "Forced career programs – 'because everyone else is doing it' - do not work, and if it is not implemented properly, it can turn against you."

The lack of commitment of an employer may result in having employees with a lack of knowledge and the wrong level of competence. As explained by Yes-A1, Yes-A2 and Consultant-C1, traditionally the steps of career programs are predefined, and they progress in the same way despite of the individual. A program like this, does not take into account the differences of individuals, and sometimes individuals may not be ready to take the next step when expected. This can be a repercussion of a poorly designed and executed career program. As Consultant-C1 explained, career programs can only work if goals, tasks, level of competence, and trainings are carefully planned, and the execution is done as the program requires. Yes-A1 explained that he has faced a situation in which the employee should get a promotion according to the career program, but one's skills does not meet the requirements. Yes-A1 added that these situations are difficult for the employer and the employee; if the employer does not promote the employee, it may have negative effects on the motivation of employee. On the other hand, if the employer decides to promote the employee anyway, that may lead to serious quality issues.

Yes-A1: "Individuals are not given enough space to grow step-by-step, but rather should move on as fast as possible. The same [challenge] occurs from management's perspective, because when you move fast, you may get too big for your boots... [pause] And nothing goes exactly as in Strömsö. And, of course, there will be practical issues when young people move forward quickly, it can be challenging to act in a demanding situation because of your age and experience.

Consultant-C1: There are companies that have career programs but have not invested in good implementation, and trainings are not done properly, which means that the level of competence [of individual] does not improve. It can create situations where company wants to keep the employee and the person is promoted even if the level of competence is not right...[pause] Yes, I think that building a career program requires a lot of commitment from the employer."

No-B2 noted that employer and employee may also disagree on the professional development of an employee, which may also negatively affect the motivation of employee.

> No-B1: "The challenge is that an individual can misunderstand it [the career program] and thinks that now he/she is an employee, in two years a Manager and in four years a Director. And if he/she doesn't move on as he/she planned, it can start to impact on work motivation."

The lack of commitment of employer can deteriorate employees' own motivation and commitment. As explained by No-B1 and Consultant-C2, employees expect the employer to do what is promised. A systematic career program requires commitment from the employer, and it needs to, not only fit to the business model of a company, but also be able to keep pace with the development of a company. As explained by the respondents, this requires investments and resources.

> No-B1: "Well, of course it requires certain investments and commitment to actually do what was promised. After all, promises must be kept. The career program must be taken forward systematically. Sure, they change and evolve all the time, but it cannot be just empty words."

> No-B1: "It is not just the HR that drives it [career program], but the entire organization, and the whole management should be committed. It requires a lot of work…"

> Consultant-C2: "If a company has had a career program for a long time, and it has work well in the past, it doesn't mean that it will always work. It requires regular updating, maintaining, and resourcing."

4.2.2 *The negative effects of career programs on employer brand*

The collected data suggest that systematic career programs can have negative effects on employer branding. All the respondents thought that having a career program gives positive signals for employees, but if it is poorly implemented and executed, it may have serious consequences for a company. First, the respondents felt that if the program does not fit in company's ways of doing, it can drive away employees that would otherwise be a match for the company. In addition, misleading employer brand may attract people with wrong drivers or mismatch profiles. Yes-A1 explained that their company has a strong employer brand among students being a fast-phased, agile and demanding employer, and it can sometimes attract people that are not that committed to work for the company, but are rather looking for work experience that would speed up their personal careers. Yes-A2 mentioned that sometimes the employees make their choices based on external factors, which may mean that people with wrong profiles are hired.

> Yes-A1: "…On the other hand, some just want the title, and then leave the company. They get a good resume entry, get to lead teams, are challenged, and through those experiences, get quickly on with their careers outside the company. Vice versa, some talented people are intimidated by that and choose to go somewhere else."

> Yes-A2: "The downside is that sometimes applicants' decisions in this industry are based on external motivators, such as short-term pay, instead of choosing the team and company that would be the best fit for you."

Poorly implemented and executed career programs can have a big impact on employer brand by sending a message to the internals and externals, that the company is not able to keep its promises. This has an influence on employees' motivation and commitment, which reflects the performance of a company. Consultant-C1 highlighted that companies should always carefully consider why they are having career programs and what they want to communicate with it.

> Consultant-C1: if the career program exists but the company is not committed to it, and have not thought about what it really means for the company, and how it should be promoted, it can end in a situation where people's skills are not at the desired level or they are not committed to develop."

Consultant-C2 pointed out the need for reformation and its importance for employer branding. If the career programs are not able to keep pace with the development of a company, it can create an image of a company, that is not able to stay in the competition, or have an undynamic or passive organizational culture. This, on the other hand, may lead to situations that the best talents choose to go with the competitor who is able to offer modern career programs and future prospects.

> Consultant-C2: "Career programs should be built to meet the future need as well, and if this is not done, it can have negative consequences to the company and its performance."

> Consultant-C2: "…Thus, the old-fashioned career program can turn negative in terms of employer branding."

The identified negative effects of career programs and its effect to employer brand is summarized in the table below.

Table 5 Identified pitfalls of a career program.

Challenge	Effect on performance	Effect on employer brand
Dogmatic processes	Employees face challenges to adapt Processes that do not suit for company's operating model	False company image, e.g., company not able to keep promises → attract and retain wrong people type Passive or undynamic company culture → best employees leave
Employer's lack of commitment	Employees with lack of knowledge Employees with wrong level of competence Challenges with employees' motivation and commitment	

4.2.3 The possibilities of career programs

The main and dominant positive effect that stands out in the discussions is a *transparent and straightforward approach.* Subsequently, transparent and straightforward processes influence *the professional development of employees, the commitment of employees* and *competitiveness against rivals.* All of these elements are in connection with each other and one thing may affect another. For example, when Yes-A1 were talking about transparency, he also mentioned that a career program may help an applicant to decide between two different jobs, or clear goals of career program can have a positive effect on employee's motivation and commitment.

All the respondents mentioned that a career program is an element that makes operations more *transparent and straightforward.* Yes-A1 and Yes-A2 explained that by having a career program, their employees know where they stand career-wise, they know how they are measured, and, approximately know when they could expect a promotion. This removes unnecessary frustration and insecurity that may appear especially among ambitious employers.

> Yes-A2: "It [career program] makes everything more straightforward [....] The promise is clear, as long as you do your own job well, good things happen to you. And in a way, everyone knows that the next step will be in +/- 2 years. No one needs to stress about should they be flattering certain parties this to happen."

> Yes-A1: "Without a transparent career program, ambitious employees may get frustrated. You would never know when and how you will be evaluated, and how you are performing. In some companies, it can look like a small club in which promotions are given. But if you have a transparent career program, and the company is keeping track of your development and you are measured with same indicators as everyone else, it motivates you in a whole different way."

No-B1 also pointed out that nowadays employees expect to know where they could be in few years, and having a systematic career program would help to make the direction clearer. Also, Consultant-C1 expressed the need of clarity and transparency already in the beginning of the career.

> No-B1: "Nowadays when you come to a new role, you immediately want to know what you could be doing in two years. Sure, the management knows that there are always possibilities for the good ones, but it's not always clear for them. [Career program] would make it visible – how you can develop and where you are going career-wise.

> Consultant-C1: "People want to move forward, learn new things and get salary increases. If employer has nothing to give, it's not rewarding for most of the people. Often already when you are recruiting a new person, you get asked "what then"."

The professional development of employee is crucial for company's performance. Especially in organizations where people are the most valuable asset, and the company's success depends on their employee's expertise and knowledge, the ongoing development

of the workforce can be ensured and improved by having a career program. All respondents saw that career programs can act as an enabler of constant development of employees and consequently, improve the performance of a company. However, in order this to work, the goals, tasks and levels of performance need to be clearly defined.

> No-B2: "It [career program] would bring the systematics and ensure that it reaches the entire organization. It would also be easier to maintain and develop further."
>
> Consultant-C1: "When you have a career program, assuming that the goals, tasks and levels of performance are defined, the skills and expertise are constantly growing."
>
> Yes-A1: "From a management perspective, the team develops rapidly and learns all the time. If the performance is good or better than expected, the company grows."
>
> No-B1: "Employee is much more motivated when the job is meaningful, and the company is meaningful. It reflects directly to company's performance."

Collected data suggests that straightforward processes also have an impact on the *commitment of employees*. As explained previously, careers have changed and nowadays mobility between different jobs and industries is easier. These days, the younger generations seldom are employed by the same company for years, and many people change careers and companies more frequently than before. For example, Yes-A2 and Consultant-C1 felt that systematic career programs commit employees and a person with long-term planning. This may also influence company's performance by improving retention and generating savings in recruitment.

> Yes-A2: "…And on the other hand, the system commits. Often people are bad at setting themselves long- or even medium-term goals, and the program kind of forces you to ask those questions from yourself."
>
> Consultant-C1: "It also commits the people, which means longer employments and stability. It reduces the needs of recruitment which is surprisingly difficult and expensive."

In some industries, the competition between the best employees can be tough. By having committing career programs, organizations can *compete against their rivals*. This can be important in the recruiting phase, but also when employee may be weighing the future of their career within the same company. For example, No-B1 explained that they have noticed incremental competition especially in the tasks that require some level of expertise. If the company cannot give any future prospects to the employee, or simply does not have anything to offer career-wise, the expert may choose to go work for the competitor who has career programs implemented.

No-B1: "...But for example, if we talk about administrative roles and experts who have been working for the company for two to three years and have grown their own knowledge and our knowledge and in the meantime build a new function for us – the question is, how we can keep these talents in the house in the future as well. We should be able to tell them "hey, if you stay with us, your career could be developed in this and this direction"... Currently, young people go somewhere else because we do not have anything to offer, and our competitors have. They [young people] are eager to grow their skills."

As explained by Consultant-C1, nowadays employer branding is strongly in the hands of employees, rather than the employer. Also, the potential employees may have a huge influence on the employer brand. Therefore, it is important to have processes, such as career programs, that respond to the expectations of employees.

Consultant-C1: "Sometimes in the past, employer branding was in the hands of employers. Nowadays it's not, and even people who do not work for you can have a huge impact on it. Recruiting process is a good example of a process that should always be handled well and professionally. Career program, and many other HR related element, are a big part of creating a strong employer brand and it [HR] offers a lot of opportunities for employers."

4.2.4 *The positive effects of career programs on employer brand*

The collected data suggest that there exist several positive effects on employer branding when a systematic career program is included in the strategy. When employees are able to move forward in their careers, it indicates that the employer is a competitive, agile and supportive company. These characteristics make the organization interesting and dynamic in the eyes of employees, and attracts and retains the best talents. In addition, the motivation of ambitious employees improves when they move systematically forward in their career paths. Moreover, if people see that colleagues move forward in their career, it can positively effect on one's motivation as well. It may also generate positive competition between employers.

Consultant-C1: "Career program creates an image of a forward-looking, evolving and agile company and it should be utilized in internal and external marketing. Why would someone want to work for a company that seems boring and is not moving forward when the alternative is an evolving and dynamic organization?

Yes-A2: Especially in the industry, where companies are familiar, it [career program] is tempting. You can find out from your friends what types of jobs there are and how they are paying. It gives an incentive for ambitious people, and every organization wants ambitious workforce. One of the most interesting factors is definitely the learning experience."

Clear career programs can enhance the employer brand and act as a visible promise. As explained by Consultant-C2, there is usually one or two companies that have mastered this, and their career programs often act as flagships when trying to attract and keep the best talent.

> Consultant-C2: "They [career programs] can act as the company's flagships and create a lot of positive images. When it comes to career programs, at least young people expect the best companies to have a strong employer brand and some kind of visible promise."

The identified positive effects of career programs and its effect to employer brand is summarized in the table below.

Table 6 Identified possibilities of a career program.

Possibility	Effect on performance	Effect on employer brand
Transparency and straightforward approach	Rapid professional development of employees Strong commitment of employees Enhanced competitiveness against rivals	Competitive and agile employer → *attract and retain the best talent* Strong, compelling company image → *attract and retain the best talent* Visible promise → *enhance the retention*

4.2.5 Talent management as a strategic decision – pitfall or possibility?

Respondents were also asked to consider different ways to execute career programs and their effects on employer brand. In the interview, the respondents were asked to contemplate which approach would be more effective – career program involving entire the staff or talent management approach that would only include the best and most promising employees of the organization.

The opinions of respondents were mainly in-line when it comes to the most effective way to execute career development practices. All the respondents mentioned that some level mixture or fusion would probably be the best way to carry out a systematic career program. However, when the discussion moved forward and respondents started to, independently, weigh plusses and minuses of different approaches, the outcomes concerning the effect on employer brand were varied.

Yes-A1 and Yes-A2 felt that companies should have a combination of both approaches but especially for experts and C-level executives the talent management approach suits best.

Yes-A1: "Talent pool can be challenging to get to work because individuals need to be selected objectively for it. This can be a vague process. Some kind of combination of the two would be good, and actually that is what we are doing, and what we have found to work quite well. The career program looks different depending on the cohort. Some cohorts have more aggressive career paths and others less so."

Yes-A2: "For younger employees, who do not yet have clear career plans, a so-called generic career program can provide opportunities. These career programs are especially useful when a company is large enough and able to offer various opportunities. I believe almost all [large] companies have talent management practices especially for senior level people. Leading companies have to think how they do talent management and introduce opportunities for rare talents."

In addition, No-B1 and No-B2 claimed that a fusion of these two approaches would most likely be the most efficient way to execute a career program in the organization. Further, No-B1 pointed out that it is important to communicate in the organization that every employee is important, however, there is only a handful of employees that meet the criteria of "talented person" and should be invested in.

No-B1: "Organizations need to show that they want to develop and invest in everyone's skills. It creates a certain image of the company [....] But yet, I still lean towards talent management. And why... Because there are only certain people within an organization that can be called *talented* and who you want to take forward. Brutally scrutinized, there are only certain people that meet the criteria. So it is that selected group that stands out and who companies should truly invest and offer opportunities to advance [in their career]."

Consultant-C1 agreed with other respondents that everyone in the organization should have an opportunity to develop their skills and move forward in their career, but it does not necessarily require a career program. Consultant-C1 also noted that many organizations use talent management in the wrong way. She felt that organizations often start looking for new talents outside of the organization when they should keep track on their current employees' levels of competence, interests and motivational factors. Talent management works best when the company sees its workforce as an entity and monitors, foreshadows and takes time to build up a system that supports career development within an organization. Consultant-C1 noted that companies need to put more resources in managing such programs.

Consultant-C1: "...in all positions, in my opinion, employees need to have an opportunity to develop but it does not necessarily require a career program."

Consultant-C1: "In many organizations, talent management is misused. Companies go and recruit people outside of the organization, when it would be more important to first think about the big picture and find out whether the expertise could be found inside the company. Or teach someone, give a chance to learn. It would also be cheaper to train someone than always recruits outside. Leveraging the existing team while enabling personal development and motivation..."

Consultant-C2 saw that optimal situation is when all employees bring something to the company and "enhance the average of a company". However, also Consultant-B2 noted

that there is a limited amount of expert and management roles in a company, so it is natural that the recourses are directed in these roles.

> Consultant-C2: "Personally, I would like every recently hired employee to bring something new and improve the company average. This is the reason why I believe that opportunities for development should be available for everyone. But if you think about, for example, manager or specialist / expert roles, there are usually fewer jobs available. So, it's pretty natural to focus recourses on those superstars."

As mentioned, the views on how talent management affects company's employer brand were divided. For example, No-B2 and Consultant-C2 noted that dividing employees in different silos can have a negative effect on employer brand and cause negative competition between employees.

> No-B1: "In the big picture, it can have downsides if you divide employees into promising and potential ones, and into a group that is something completely different."

> Consultant-C2: "...but if it [career program] is only for a specific group of people, then I think it is worth doing a little more secret, because it is dangerous to say to an employee that 'you do not belong to this talented group of people'."

On the other hand, No-B1 and Consultant-C1 saw this also as an opportunity to show employees that there are possibilities available and good work is rewarded. No-B1 saw this as a chance to cause positive competition between employees.

> No-B1: "...And on the other hand, I see a motivational perspective when people know that we have this kind of group of talents. It does create a certain positive competition like 'hey, I want to get in as well!' and once again, it may get people to work a little more towards company goals. This happens if a person is really committed and wants to move forward – then you also want to join the best ones."

> Consultant-C1: "Talent management is optimal for developing your own, current employees. It is a perfect way to provide opportunities. It's beneficial to try to understand employees' skills and listen to them – what skills they want to develop and what motivates them."

In summary, the respondents saw talent management as an effective tool but felt that companies should be prudent when implementing such practices in their strategy and find ways that meet the needs of a company. Consultant-C1 also mentioned that talent management can work as an effective tool in answering the future needs of employees.

4.3 Future of career programs and the effect on employer brand

All respondents were unanimous when they were asked about the future of career programs and the influence on employer brand. Everyone saw that the need for employees' self-improvement is growing, and the organization plays an essential role in motivating its employees and meeting their expectations in the future. By responding to the employees' expectations, companies can enhance their employer brand in a positive

manner. Therefore, the importance of career programs is increasing, and companies can respond to the growing expectations of employees by offering different channels to move forward and support their professional development and learning.

> No-B1: "I see that its [career program] role will be bigger [in the future]. That's what I predict will happen. Nowadays, you learn at a young age to a culture of self-development and individual learning plans are made already at primary school. How could it stop when you make a transition from school to working life? Well, it can't and that is obvious."

> Consultant-C1: "I've noticed that young people expect more from their employer."

> Yes-A2: "I think that the further we go from the industrial society to information society, and the work we do is knowledge-based, the expectations and demands of employees will grow. Employees are more aware of things."

The collected data suggest that employers can answer the growing expectations of employees by taking career programs into a more individual and versatile direction. It was also noted that younger people do not necessarily focus solely on climbing the corporate ladders and have an aspiration to be top executives, but rather appreciate as diverse learning opportunities as possible.

> Consultant-C2: "I do not believe that it will be possible to put everyone in the same mold in the future. Companies need to be able to offer as diverse tasks as possible."

> Yes-A2: "In order to handle the expectation palette of employees, career program and its clarification can be an important tool. Especially, if a company operates in a people-driven industry, without any physical product, the motivation of employees is even more important. Every company should focus on having a palette of different tools to enhance the well-being and motivation of employee."

From an employer branding perspective, this requires from career programs qualities such as flexibility, transparency, diversity and clarity.

> Yes-A1: "For sure, we will modify the career programs for different cohorts so that in the future they do not go hand-in-hand. This current career program is not the most developing and motivating for recently hired new talents. Another thing that we are putting our focus is improving the transparency of goal setting."

> Yes-A2: "Company has two main priorities. First, we want people with more diverse backgrounds, and this requires more flexible career program. We need to focus on attracting and retaining the best talents. Currently, we are losing talents because, for example, the candidate's background does not fit in the criteria. Second, we need to work on the expertise aspect. I believe we will be hiring people for more targeted roles in the future."

> Consultant-C2: "If company's career program has different paths to follow, and flexibility, and the opportunities are communicated in a clear manner, it is an extremely efficient way to commit people."

In order for companies to succeed in building a strong employer brand, the respondents highlighted activities such as apprenticeship, coaching and communication. Yes-A2 emphasized the importance of apprenticeship for the company and its employees now

and in the future. The respondent also stressed that apprenticeship brings the biggest benefits for the employee and adds company value.

> Yes-A2: "The idea of apprenticeship is an important part of company's culture and reputation. It is the driving force of our career program. It is tremendously valuable to the company and the aim is to develop it even further."

Further, Yes-A1 saw that transparency enables continuous coaching and development of employees. Employees, as well as employer, know where people are in their careers and what is required from them to move forward. Also, Consultant-C1 highlighted the importance of communication regarding career programs and talent management, in order to build up a transparent and strong employer brand.

> Yes-A1: "we want it to be transparent and measurable so that employees know where they are going, get constant feedback and know their own areas of development. Of course, as objectively as possible. Therefore, the transparency of the program and coaching is important. It's not a school where you fail if you do not get good enough grades on the test. We want to support our employees to learn and move forward - coach them."

> Consultant-C1: "At the very least, writing down what talent management means for a company, is a must-have in the future. What opportunities do we have in this organization, where are we heading, what kind of talents do we want to hire... To understand the expertise this company needs and how to clearly communicate it to current and potential employees. These things get more and more important all the time."

As mentioned, all respondents saw career programs and talent management as an important tool in the future for building a strong employer brand. No-B1 summarized that organizations can miss out a lot and lose good employees to competitors if a company is not able to promise their employees any career development steps.

> No-B1: "If a company does not do it [have career programs], or do not communicate it to its current or potential employees, then it loses a lot as an employer. There are always those employees – good, talented employees – who, if they need to choose between two employees, will choose the one who is able to provide career prospects. I see that the role of career programs is only getting more and more important."

The recognized future trends of career programs and what it means for companies from the employer brand perspective are summarized **in table 7.**

Table 7 Identified future needs, key qualities and tools for career programs.

Future trends	Key qualities	Tools for career programs
the need for employees' self-improvement is growing The importance of career programs is growing The expectations of employees towards employer are growing	Flexibility Diversity Transparency Clarity	Apprenticeship and coaching Communication

5   CONCLUSIONS

The chapter presents and discusses the main findings of the study and relates them to previous research.

This chapter is divided into three sections. First, the theoretical contribution of the study is discussed. Second, the managerial implications based on the results are presented. Third, suggestions for future research are introduced.

5.1   Theoretical contributions

As mentioned in chapter 1, there is a lack of literature that aims to identify the negative and positive outcomes of systematic career programs and how these programs affect employer brand. Therefore, the aim of the study was by critically reviewing both the strengths and weaknesses of such strategic decisions, to understand the value of career programs for the company's performance. In this light, the study provides additional information on challenges and possibilities that career programs generate and how such programs influence a company's performance and employer brand.

Two main challenges of systematic career programs were identified in the empirical findings. First, if the implemented career program is not flexible enough, employees may face challenges adapting to the company culture and the program may not suit the company's operating model. Second, if the company is not committed to implementing, executing and updating the program, employees' level of knowledge and competence may be negatively affected. In addition, it may generate challenges with the motivation and commitment of the employees. It was identified that the abovementioned negative effects on performance may lead to false company image and passive or undynamic company culture which attracts unsuitable employees as well as increases employee turnover.

On the contrary, the empirical findings of the study show that having a systematic career program may lead to a more transparent and straightforward approach. The results suggest that a transparent and straightforward process may accelerate the development of employees, enhance the commitment of employees and improve the competitiveness against rivals. This has positive effects on employer brand and can make the company competitive and agile, build a strong and compelling company image and act as a visible promise towards employees. The study results suggest that these factors attract the best employees, help to retain the talents and enhance retention.

The findings are partly supported by Kraimer et al. (2010), as they identified similar effects when studying the outcomes of organizational support for development. Their study found a strong link between offered career opportunities and employee commitment and its influence on performance, similar factors that were also identified in this study. However, findings of this research highlight that in order for career programs to have a positive impact on performance, they need to be effectively managed and fit in the organization's operating model and company culture. These findings support the researches of Vomberg et al. (2014) and Smith and Bititci (2016) which claim that human capital influences company performance only if employees are contributing to achieving the company goals, and measures and targets are properly used and defined.

Another critical finding based on research data was the impact of career programs on employee's level of knowledge and competence. The data shows, that career programs enhance the professional development of employees which leads to better performance. However, if the organization has a career program and it is not properly running or maintained, it may have a negative effect on employees' level of competence and knowledge due to the lack of employer's commitment. The study of Kraimer et al. (2010) claims that training and development programs support employees' skills and competence development and conduct higher job performance, however, their study did not examine the significance of proper execution of such programs.

The findings regarding employer branding and its effect on employee attraction, retention, and commitment support the existing literature and identified similar benefits to an employer brand. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) claimed that strong brand equity motivates the existing employees to stay which was also identified in the empirical findings of this study. Furthermore, Biswas and Suar (2014), as well as Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), found a correlation between efficient employer branding and financial performance of a company and this study contributes to the existing literature. This study shows that a false company image or a weak employer brand may have serious consequences on attracting and retaining the best employees, which, consequently, raises recruiting costs and causes resource shortages.

Based on the findings of the research, companies should invest in professional development on all levels of the company but focus the most extensive investment efforts on the most talented employees. In addition, the results show that talent management can work as an effective tool for enhancing employee commitment and performance as well as answering to the future needs of employees but only if it suits an organization's

way of working and culture. These findings are supported by Son et al. (2018) that indicated in their study that if talent management practices are implemented in a culture that it does not fit, it may result in high employee turnover. Furthermore, the data suggests that companies should be considerate on communication the talent management practices within an organization in order to avoid the negative effects on employer brand. In their study Maurya and Agarwal (2018) highlight the inconsistency in academicians' opinions on talent management practices. There are studies that support the use of talent management as part of career programs, however, also studies that contest the benefits are found in the literature (e.g. Crook et al., 2011; Son et al., 2018). This study's results were also divided in terms of the most profitable strategy, however, some type of fusion was suggested by the respondents.

The identified future trends concerning career programs and required key qualities and tools were predominantly aligned with existing literature. The data shows that the need for self-improvement is growing, hence the role of career programs is also enhancing. When it comes to developing professional skills and possibilities to grow and learn, the expectations of employees towards employers are multiplied. This was also supported by existing literature. For example, Hoekstra (2011) claimed that traditional career ladders are replaced by more complex and dynamic career outlooks which companies should be prepared for. When the findings are compared to existing literature, it can be observed that the future talents are more career driven and expect companies to present opportunities to grow and developed, as for example, was identified in the study of Kontoghiorghes (2015).

5.2 Managerial implications

This research was aiming to identify managerial implications that compare the results to actions and indicate what actions – or non-actions – companies should be taking in terms of career programs. Based on the findings, the expectations of employees are changing, and future business success requires employers to engage in the development of employees. This means that companies that focus on career development and ensure that employees have the tools and framework to advance and succeed in their careers, will also get the biggest earnings from their investments in HR practices. The data shows that by offering growth and development opportunities, not only company responds to the employees' needs, but enhances the professional development and commitment of employees, and the competitiveness of a company.

However, even though the results indicate that companies should offer their employees more tools and channels for professional development, it is not a necessity to have a systematic career program to do so. There are different ways to respond to the career expectations of employees, and every company should start by understanding and reflecting their own operating model, company culture, company size, industry and business characteristics. The results show that the competitive advantage of a company is only leveraged if the chosen HR strategy fits in the company's business.

The empirical data suggests that in order for career programs to be as effective as possible, they need to have qualities such as flexibility, diversity, transparency and clarity.

Flexibility means that a career program matches with the business model of a company, as well as values, goals, and company culture. Therefore, before implementing any career program practices, management should understand their company culture and organizational characteristics, and only then create a structure that fits the company's operating model. In addition, a flexible program design enables the continuous development of a program. Resilient career programs adapt to the needs of a company and individual.

Diversity complements flexibility and means that companies are able to create programs that support the needs of different functions, cohorts or experts in the company. Organizations that have career development practices that take into account, not only differences between functions, but also the differences between individuals, are winning their rivals in the competition of employees.

Transparency and clarity of career programs are highly linked to each other. Transparency supports continuous coaching and development of employees. Employees know where they are in their careers and what is expected and required from them. And vice versa, employers are aware of their employees' competence levels and can support their professional development. Transparency is ensured by efficient communication, continuous feedback, straightforward goal setting, efficient monitoring and by listening to employees' needs.

Tools that can be used to enhance the company brand and should be utilized when implementing and executing career programs are apprenticeship, coaching and the role of communication. In this context, apprenticeship means that employees' skills are

trained and developed continuously, and coaching is part of company culture. This can be achieved by utilizing various techniques, such as a comprehensive training curriculum on each competence level, career development advisors, structured feedback model, job rotation, mentoring programs and other on-the-job training tools.

Further, it is essential to understand the differences between personalities. As the literature and collected data show, systematic career programs most likely attract ambitious people with career- and business-oriented mindsets. Vice versa, it may drive away individuals that do not feel comfortable working in a high-intense or result-oriented organization, fear of having too aggressive career path or, for example, the current life situation does not suit the model created by the company. The importance of communication is highlighted throughout the study and it plays a vital role also in attracting and keeping the right employees. One way to evade major risks and pitfalls caused by career programs is making sure that the communication is efficient, truthful, professional and follows the strategy chosen by the company. Efficiently managed communication not only supports the implementation of career development practices but is also a powerful tool for employer brand building.

5.3 Suggestions for the future research

Even though the sample in this study was only management level people working in the private sector, it is likely that the results, at least to some extent, are transferable to other contexts (Wallendorf & Berg, 1989). For example, it would be possible to selectively apply the results to companies that operate in the public sector. This could be tested by replicating the study.

Further studies could be targeted to review the insights of employees and people who are involved or influenced by career programs. This would improve the understanding of employees' needs and expectations towards employers and how, for example, the position within a company or employee's personality affects opinions and views regarding career programs and professional development in general.

This study could also be complemented by studying the views of externals and generating a broader understanding from the recruitment point-of-view. This would be beneficial for practitioners that work with recruitment and want to leverage their understanding concerning the impact of career program practices.

In addition, it would be beneficial to study further the views and experiences of employees concerning talent management practices. This study's contribution to understanding the talent management practices remained limited. Talent management and its influence on company performance and employees' commitment remain quite an untouched field and should be studied further.

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APPENDIX 1

Consent of data management in master's thesis by Essi Halonen at Hanken School of Economics

I hereby give my consent to processing my personal data, as obtained from the master's thesis of Essi Halonen I am about to respond to, for the purpose of scientific research.

My personal data will be processed securely according to the data protection policy and ethical guidelines of Hanken School of Economics. The legal ground for processing my data is my consent and the Finnish Data Protection Act.

Moreover, I understand and consent to that

1. data that directly identifies me personally will not be visible in any results or publica-tions based on the data;
2. such part of the data that directly identifies me personally (e.g., name and email address) will be erased within *four weeks* of my response, before any analysis of the data is conducted;
3. data that do *not* directly identify me personally (e.g., answers to survey/interview questions without identifying information) will be stored maximum for **six months** for the purpose of conducting scientific research analyses;
4. up until **four** weeks after my response, I can withdraw my consent and have the research team erase my personal data, or request the research team to show, disclose, or correct my data;
5. after the period of **four** weeks after my response, I will *not* be able to ask the research team to show, correct, or erase my personal data, or withdraw my consent to participate in the research. This is because after the research team has erased the data variables that directly identify me personally, they cannot identify and extract my data from the overall dataset anymore;
6. as an exception to 2) above, such verbal/textual descriptions which I give as responses in this study (e.g., by typing in, or speaking on video recording) and in which I may myself express my name or other information that may directly identify myself, will *not* be erased from the collected data after the period of **four** weeks after my response. You may therefore want to avoid expressing your own name or identity in your responses;
7. as an exception to 2), such part of the data that directly identifies an organization I may work for or represent (e.g. an organization's name) will *not* be erased after the period of **four** weeks after my response. However, these data will also not be visible in any results or publications based on the data;
8. Your contact information was received/sampled for this study from publicly available information or through a member of your organization.

A description record of the data processing activities of this research is available on request at essi.halonen@student.hanken.fi. If you have further questions regarding the research or if you want that your personal data are to be erased or corrected, please contact essi.halonen@student.hanken.fi. If you have complaints or other questions related to the processing of your personal data for this purpose, contact the data processing officer of Hanken School of Economics, dpo@hanken.fi.