

# **A progression from employer to employee branding**

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**Abstract**

This paper argues that contemporary employer branding has become increasingly isomorphic, resulting in standardised, homogeneous narratives that undermine organisations' effectiveness in attracting, recruiting, and retaining employees. In response, this paper explores a new conceptualisation that is employee branding, formulated through an extensive theoretical literature review. This emerging concept shifts the focus from employer-centric promises to the branding of socio-collegial dynamics that define the everyday workplace.

The desire to explore and conceptualise a new definition for employee branding is inspired by a combination of academic and practical experiences. First, my interest in the topic emerged through my specialisation in HR and leadership communication at Aalborg University, where various lectures sparked my curiosity to investigate this phenomenon further. Second, my student employment at Randstad has provided valuable practical insight, particularly the growing trend of job seekers inquiring about their potential colleagues when considering job opportunities. Together, the academic curiosity and practical experience revealed a research gap which I deemed as deserving further exploration and development.

Grounded in a social constructivist framework, the paper draws on Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, DiMaggio and Powell's theory of institutional isomorphism, and Kotter's 8-Step Change Management Model. Together, these notions contribute to the conceptualisation and later considerations for the implementation of employee branding. Justification for the conceptualisation is informed by the empirical data of this paper, consisting of a self-conducted survey and an international workmonitor created by Randstad. Together, these data sources reveal a strong emphasis among respondents, especially Generation Z, on the elements that constitute employee branding, reinforcing its relevance and applicability.

By applying Kotter's 8-Step Change Management Model, this paper elevates its contribution from a theoretical exploration to a practical recommendation, presenting a roadmap for organisations aiming to implement employee branding. It is the conviction of this paper that Kotter's model enables a more embedded cultural acceptance in the progression from traditional employer branding. The outcome of this implementation is twofold in the sense that organisations gain more branding uniqueness in an isomorphic labor market, while job seekers are better equipped to navigate an increasingly isomorphic job landscape. Ultimately, this paper delivers a contribution to expanding relevant academic research fields, while it ambitiously bridges theory and practical application. Therefore, this paper presents a nuanced and forward-looking framework for understanding evolving workforce expectations, with the strategic implementation of employee branding as the answer.

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## 1 Introduction

This paper investigates a twofold paradox within contemporary employer branding while proposing a solution to address it. Employer branding currently serves as a strategic tool for organisations, or call it companies, to craft narratives that attract and retain employees. However, this paper argues that employer branding has become catastrophically isomorphic, settling into a stalemate of conformity, as employers replicate and present similar narratives that hold similar sets of positive values, promises, and aesthetics. In other words, it is the proposition that employer brands present appealing work environments in universally similar ways. Promises of flexibility, diversity, career development, and social events like Friday bars are now standardised features, perhaps even taken for granted by employees as inherent expectations of any employer brand. This proposition presents the central twofold question situated within this study: As employer branding increasingly becomes isomorphic, what managerial approach and strategy can organisations adopt to effectively attract and retain employees? Furthermore, from the employee's perspective, how can one navigate the increasingly isomorphic landscape of employer brands, when deciding whether to remain with a current employer or pursue opportunities with a new one?

To address this twofold challenge, this paper aims to explore and conceptualise a new term coined as employee branding, presenting a progression from traditional employer branding. It is important to note that there are many related concepts such as organisational storytelling, employee storytelling, and employee advocacy, among others. These and other concepts/theories will be further explored and elaborated upon in the theoretical literature review (Paragraph 3), serving as inspiration for creating the concept. In this regard, it is the conviction that there still is a significant research gap surrounding the broader field encompassing these concepts. Thus, it is the objective to contribute to the existing body of literature, while also introducing a new theoretical framework for conceptualising and implementing the concept of employee branding. To justify the conceptualisation, this paper draws on a unique empirical dataset, which should reveal tendencies for proposing as a more refined definition. Accordingly, the overarching objective is to understand this progressive development from employer to employee branding. This study is then concerned with understanding the necessity and potential for moving beyond conventional employer-centric branding, instead focusing on the branding of socio-collegial dynamics that exist within organisational structures. In this way, employee branding exists only in coherence with and as an extension of employer branding.

This paper justifies the conceptualisation of employee branding through two primary empirical data sources. The first data source is a constructed survey (Appendix 1) targeting members of Generation Z who are on the verge of entering the workforce. As such, the expectations of Generation Z offer valuable insight into how the workplace will undergo significant transformation in the coming years, as this generation enters the workforce in growing numbers. In other words, it is the proposition that Generation Z will reshape existing workplace norms by influencing the other generations already in the workforce. Their expectations for how the workplace should function act as a catalyst for broader cultural and structural changes within organisations, whereby employee branding should serve as a key tool to meet these evolving demands. The second data source is one of the world's largest workmonitor surveys from 2025, conducted by the recruitment company Randstad (Appendix 2). The findings from this report suggest that changes are already taking place in the workforce, with other generations beginning to adapt to similar values and expectations as generation Z. Therefore, it is insisted that employee branding emerges as a concept that considers the evolving demands of all generations and not just only Generation Z.

The qualitative responses from the self-constructed survey (Appendix 1) will be examined using thematic coding to identify recurring patterns and insights related to employee branding. Subsequently, the quantitative findings from the survey will be examined within a broader international forum by contextualising with the Randstad workmonitor (Appendix 2). By comparing the two quantitative datasets, it is the ambition to establish a more nuanced cross-generational foundation that supports the overall development of employee branding.

It should be said that my current student employment at the recruitment company Randstad has significantly inspired the development of this topic. On this note, I cannot and will not separate the personal and practical insights I bring to this topic, as my real-life experiences are part inspiration and justification in producing this paper. In essence, my role at Randstad involves acting as a mediator between employers and employees. I assist companies in identifying suitable employees based on criteria set by the employer, while also meeting the criteria and preferences set by job seekers. This position places me in a cross-functional, sales-oriented role that requires navigating multiple perspectives, further fuelling my curiosity in how organisations can effectively attract, recruit and retain employees. An interesting trend I have consistently observed during my employment at Randstad, is that job seekers are increasingly interested not only in the responsibilities and nature of a job but also in the people they might work alongside. This recurring pattern has sparked my interest in the role of socio-collegial dynamics regarding job selection and employer branding. In this regard,

I find it surprising that more companies do not talk about the employees which form the organisational structure. From my point of view, it appears that many organisations have yet to fully recognise the potential of what will be conceptualised as employee branding. From a job seekers perspective, it seems entirely natural to want insight into potential future colleagues, yet such information is rarely, if ever, included in job advertisements. A quick glance at platforms such as Jobindex or Randstad's own website confirms this, as the vast majority of advertisements make no mention of the people currently employed within the company. Consequently, after nearly a year of employment at Randstad, I have yet to encounter a partnership with a company that features its existing employees as a central component of its employer branding strategy. This absence feels increasingly odd, as job seekers ask for exactly this notion. In this light, I argue that many organisations, or call it companies, may be missing an opportunity in strengthening their branding and recruitment efforts. Hence, this paper explores how employee branding can be adopted into organisational structures by applying Kotter's 8-Step Change Management Model (Paragraph 4.3).

Ultimately, the ambition to explore and conceptualise employee branding arises from a combination of practical insights gained at Randstad and my specialisation in HR and leadership communication at Aalborg University. Various lectures at Aalborg University have introduced me to different HR and recruitment initiatives related to the workplace, providing a strong theoretical foundation and sparking my curiosity. Meanwhile, my day-to-day responsibilities at Randstad has offered a practical perspective and real-world exposure to the nuances of employee attraction and retention. This interplay between theory and practice has given me thoughts for reflection, inspiring this paper as a direct outcome of that process. As such, this study aims to bridge the gap between academic theory and practical application by proposing employee branding as a genuine and innovative extension of traditional employer branding, which should be integrated into organizational structures by Kotter's model.

Undoubtedly, entering any workplace represents a deeply personal commitment which concerns the decision and agreement to spend a significant portion of one's waking hours there, mostly alongside other people. In Denmark, for example, the standard full-time workweek is 37 hours, totalling approximately 1,924 hours annually. Much of this time is spent interacting with colleagues in various ways. This raises a compelling question if we in fact spend more of our waking life with coworkers than with our own family and friends. If so, it is only natural that one of the most defining factors in job attraction and retention concerns knowledge of the people one will be surrounded by in everyday interaction. Therefore, organizational branding should be fully aware in adoption this notion.

## 2 Philosophy of science framework

This paragraph presents the philosophical foundation that underpins the research design of this paper. By conceptualising employee branding, it requires reflection on how knowledge is constructed, interpreted, and validated. Hence, this paragraph outlines the ontological, epistemological, and methodological considerations that shape the overall construction of the study, providing clarification on the intended research design and ambition.

This paper adopts a social constructivist approach in all aspects in the effort to conceptualise the term. To understand social constructivism, it is necessary to draw on the seminal work of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann in *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967). Their definition of knowledge: “[...] the apprehension of objectivated social reality, and the ongoing production of this reality” (p. 84) provides a central epistemological orientation. Particularly relevant is Berger and Luckmann’s emphasis on language as a central mechanism for maintaining social reality. They describe discourse as: “[...] the most important sign system of human society” (1967, p. 51), underscoring the power of narrative in shaping collective beliefs. In this way, social constructivism positions reality not as an objective, fixed entity but as something co-created through human interaction, discourse, and institutional context. In relation to employee branding, language plays a critical role in how organisations present and reproduce their identity, traditionally through employer branding. This paper then proposes that employee branding is understood as a discursive extension of social reality, which repositions the understanding of the employee in a professional context.

From an ontological perspective, the knowledge for exploring and conceptualising employee branding stems from other related established concepts and theories. Thus, the concrete knowledge of employee branding is waiting to be discovered, as it is a conceptual construct that emerges through other already established constructs (see paragraph 3). At its core, the term “employee” is solely understood as a socially constructed phenomenon set in the context of the professionalism at a workplace. As such, this term is a construct continuously shaped and maintained through shared meanings, language, and institutional context. One could then say that the employee is expected to be professional at all times, as the construct only functions in the context of the workplace, being the very symbol of professionalism. Importantly, this paper challenges this dominant ontological framing and the implicit assumption that life outside work always is subordinate to professionalism. Therefore, it calls for a re-evaluation of the traditional perception that separates life from work, especially in our common understanding of the socio-collegial dynamics at the workplace.

From an epistemological standpoint, this paper aims to understand how the social construct of the workplace is constructed, particularly in the absence of a focus on employee branding. In other words, to justify the conceptualisation of employee branding, it is necessary to explore related theories and concepts (see paragraph 3), established or not, that might resemble a likeness with the tenants of this new concept. Subsequently, it is necessary to select and elaborate upon the most prominent of these in a theoretical framework, which will form the understanding and foundation for acquiring the knowledge that constitutes employee branding. Ultimately, the research design in this study engages with both theoretical considerations and empirical data to better understand and form a proper conceptualisation. The design then reflects the philosophical commitment to social constructivism by emphasising how meaning is generated, shared, and legitimised through collective discourse.

From a methodological viewpoint, measuring the effectiveness of implementing employee branding is challenging, as it remains a new conceptualisation. However, the produced knowledge that this paper delivers contributes to a broadened understanding in various related research fields that is related to the tenants of employee branding. As such, this study construct knowledge for the conceptualisation by drawing on related concepts, hereby interpreting social constructions which can help in acquiring the necessary knowledge. To that end, the paper will also draw on two empirical data sets to which the theoretical framework will be set in perspective. To fully scrutinise the primary data source, being the self-constructed survey, it is necessary to adopt a specific method which can help acquire this knowledge. Therefore, the chosen research method that is thematic data analysis aims to identify and interpret the discursive and social constructs that form the knowledge for employee branding. By uncovering recurring patterns in the data source, this approach aligns with social constructivism's emphasis on meaning-making, language, and interpretation.

As a final remark in this paragraph, it is necessary to highlight this paper's alignment with Jonathon Grix's (2002) argument that research methods are inherently neutral tools, acquiring philosophical orientation only through the researcher's interpretive choices. As Grix elaborates, methods are: "[...] free from ontological and epistemological assumptions" (p. 180). Thus, while some might classify thematic analysis as within the realm of functionalist traditions, this paper adapts it within a constructivist paradigm to uncover how discourse and collective meaning shape perceptions of the workplace. Hence, this study is committed to a social constructivist philosophy of science, as it investigates how the workplace and employee branding are discursively and socially constructed, legitimised, and potentially transformed.



### 3 Theoretical Literature Review

This paragraph presents a theoretical literature review encompassing theories, concepts, and considerations relevant to the conceptualisation of employee branding. However, the ideas discussed in this paragraph have not been incorporated into the paper's theoretical framework. This decision is based on the need to maintain a focused and coherent research scope, using a carefully selected set of ideas for the theoretical framework. While the notions explored in this literature review significantly inform and inspire the development of employee branding, they also extend into broader or different directions. As such, the ideas in this paragraph enrich the conceptual background that supports the overall conceptualisation.

David M. Boje is a central influence, particularly through his seminal work *Storytelling Organizations* (2008). Boje contends that organisations are not merely static, hierarchical structures - but are continuously shaped and influenced by the stories told from within them. This perspective aligns strongly with the core tenets of employee branding. Additionally, Boje developed the concept of antenarrative, which captures the evolving, pre-narrative nature of storytelling within organisations. In other words, organisational storytelling contributes to understanding how narratives construct organisational identity and drive change (Boje, 2008, p. 3). This paper builds on Boje's work by extending these ideas into the conceptualisation of employee branding, being a more strategic form of branding narrative and discourse that organisations can integrate into their existing employer branding.

There is a growing academic interest in concepts related to organisational storytelling, many of which have inspired the conceptualisation of employee branding. However, Thelen (2020) highlights how there still remains significant research gaps in understanding the full scope, potential, and implications for these terms. He then advocates for the increasing relevance of employee advocacy and highlights the diverse definitions associated with the term (2020). He references Božac's definition, whereby employee advocacy is framed as "the promotion of an organisation by its employees" (as cited in Thelen, 2020). Thus, employee advocacy is a central term in the development of employee branding.

Another related term to organisational storytelling is the similar concept of employee storytelling. While peer-reviewed literature on this topic remains limited, it is loosely defined as: "[...] the practice of sharing employees' personal and professional experiences to convey a company's values, culture, and mission" (Singh, 2024). This notion bears a strong resemblance to the conceptual foundations of employee branding. Although, due to the lack of theoretical consolidation and conceptual clarity, this paper proposes a new

conceptualisation which is a more structured and managerial concept, aligning more closely with the principles of organisational management. By drawing inspiration from the three aforementioned concepts, it is the ambition to synthesize elements from each to conceptualise a distinct and coherent understanding of employee branding. Thus, one could say that this study also aims to advance the research field within organisational storytelling.

It is also relevant to include the concept of corporate colonisation in this paragraph, first introduced by Stanley Deetz in 1992 but referenced through W. Littlejohn and A. Foss (2009) in this paper. They elaborate upon the thoughts of Deetz in describing corporate colonisation as: “[...] the domination by corporate organizations” (2009). Historically, colonisation might be associated with geographical expansion. However, Deetz, inspired by Jürgen Habermas, investigates how colonisation manifests in everyday life through the spread of corporate ideologies, practices, and discourses that extend beyond the workplace into broader social contexts (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). In relation to employee branding, it is important to consider how corporate colonisation suggests that corporations influence their employees in all aspects. As such, corporations automatically shape employees’ values, behaviours, and identities to align with corporate goals. Darren McCabe (2007) expands on corporate colonisation by examining how employees actively participate in reproducing what he terms “the corporate machine”. He argues that modern workers are often reduced to information processors, unknowingly participating in their own subjugation. In essence, McCabe critiques how modern organisations diminish human potential while maintaining an illusion of empowerment (2007). In relation to employer branding, this highlights the uneven power relationship that seemingly exists between the employer and the employee. In this light, one could present the argument that employee branding is a tool for employees to counter this subjugation that is created by corporate colonisation.

Although employer branding is not examined in detail within the theoretical framework, it remains a foundational concept that significantly informs the development of employee branding. In other words, employer branding serves as the conceptual groundwork upon which employee branding is built and expanded. The choice not to include employer branding in the theoretical framework assumes that readers possess a general understanding of the term. It is important to note that this paper holds a complex perspective on employer branding. On one hand, there is fascination with the term, as it serves as the groundwork for what employee branding seeks to expand upon. On the other hand, there is profound critique, as it is the argument it has become catastrophically isomorphic in nature. Nonetheless, employer branding plays a critical role in the conceptual development of employee branding. This paper

aligns with the definition of employer branding presented by Torrington et al. (2020), who define it as: “[...] the process by which an organisation markets itself in quite sophisticated ways, not to consumers and potential customers, but to employees and potential employees” (p. 15). Torrington elaborate that this includes strategies such as promising flexible working arrangements, a friendly and informal culture, or strong career development opportunities (p. 171). He then highlights how a significant philosophical shift has occurred in the later years, regarding the development in human resource management from managing jobs to managing people. He illustrates how employees today often feel: “[...] emotionally engaged in their work, with their customers, with their colleagues and hence (if to a lesser extent) with their organisations” (p. 15). This perspective is particularly relevant to employee branding, as it emphasises the social aspects of employee identity. When Torrington discusses emotional engagement at work, employee branding builds on this by highlighting the value of socio-collegiality in organisational branding efforts.

The conceptualisation of employee branding is partly rooted in the growing presence of Generation Z in the workforce. In this context, the concepts of work-life and well-being are especially prominent in discussions concerning Generation Z and employee health. Torrington et al. (2020) define well-being as: “[...] a combination of employee happiness, health, and relationships” (p. 643). In this sense, it can be said that these two aspects inspire employee branding in how the socio-collegial aspect is central to employee health. However, this paper also views work-life balance as somewhat in contrast, as it portrays work and life as opposing domains requiring separation or compromise. In contrast, employee branding aims not to merely strike a balance but to integrate and brand life in coherence with the workplace.

It is the conviction that Generation Z will introduce new values and expectations upon entering the workforce, just as previous generations have, resembling the generational cohort theory (Okros, 2020). Similarly, generational theory posits that: “[...] people born in the same generation share similar characteristics and basic behavioural profiles” (Barhate & Dirani, 2021, p. 139). These two notions inform the development of employee branding in the sense that organisations must continuously adapt to new factors as new generations enter the workforce. Employee branding is then a tool for meeting this continuously generational transformation. Although, it is important to note that employee branding is not solely focused on meeting the expectations of Generation Z. Rather, it responds to a broader cultural shift that Generation Z is helping to accelerate, which consequently is influencing the values and dynamics across all generations. Other theories such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour and Social Capital Theory could provide valuable insights into Generation Z, however this paper

deliberately avoids limiting its scope to that generation alone. Even if one of the primary data sources focuses exclusively on Generation Z, this should be understood within a broader context. The argument is that Generation Z will bring these new values and expectations into the workplace, thereby influencing existing generational cohorts. Consequently, employee branding is conceptualised not as a generation-specific strategy but as one relevant and applicable across all generational contexts.

Finally, Maslow's hierarchy of needs (as cited in Torrington, 2020) deserves recognition, as it is a foundational framework underpinning many ideas explored in this literature review and throughout the paper. Maslow's importantly asserts that employees are driven by more than economic compensation, emphasising that social needs such as belonging, connection, and interpersonal relationships are key motivational factors (p. 145). Building on this premise, employee branding acknowledges the significance of the socio-collegial dynamics as a branding factor in attracting and retaining employees.

#### **4 Theoretical Framework**

This paragraph establishes the theoretical framework for understanding and conceptualising employee branding. The framework then presents three key ideas that serve as building stones in justifying, creating and implementing the concept: Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory of Motivation (1993), DiMaggio and Powell's concept of Institutional Isomorphism (2000), and Kotter's 8-Step Change Management Model (2012). First, Herzberg's theory distinguishes between hygiene factors, which prevent dissatisfaction, and motivational factors, which actively enhance job satisfaction. This paper explores how socio-collegial dynamics in the workplace contrast with Herzberg's classification, central to the justification for establishing employee branding. Second, DiMaggio and Powell's theory provides insight into how organisations automatically adopt similar structures and practices in response to institutional pressure and context. Building on this notion, it is the argument that organisations in the institutional context have adopted increasingly similar employer branding strategies, contributing to an isomorphic employer brand landscape. This growing uniformity highlights the need for creating a more differentiated and employee-centered approach, which employee branding seeks to fulfil. Third, Kotter's model provides a structured and systematic framework for guiding organisations through a transformative process. It functions as a recommendation made by this paper in how organisations can implement the transformation that employee

branding suggests. Together, these three ideas form the foundation through which employee branding is developed as a theoretical and practical concept. This conceptualisation is visually presented in paragraph 4.4 as Model I.

#### 4.1 Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory of Motivation

Frederick Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory of Motivation, also known as the motivation-hygiene theory, was originally introduced in *The Motivation to Work* (1959). However, this paper references the 1993 republication. Herzberg presented a groundbreaking perspective on workplace motivation by investigating the complex underlying causes of job satisfaction and dissatisfaction. He posed the fundamental question: "What do workers want from their jobs?" (1993, p. xiii), a notion that aligns closely with the central curiosity of this study.

Dissatisfied with previous studies, Herzberg and his research team conducted interviews to identify specific instances when employees felt exceptionally satisfied or dissatisfied at work. As Herzberg elaborates: "We decided to ask people to tell us stories about times when they felt exceptionally good or bad about their jobs... from these stories we could discover the kinds of situations leading to negative or positive attitudes" (1993, p. 17). This methodology became the foundation for his theory, which distinguishes between two categories of factors: intrinsic motivational factors, which enhance job satisfaction, and extrinsic hygiene factors, which prevent dissatisfaction (1993, p. xiii–xiv). Throughout this paragraph, they will be referred to as 1) motivational factors and 2) hygiene factors.

Motivational factors are inherent to the work itself, as elements that employees find personally meaningful. Herzberg identified these values such as achievement, recognition, the work itself, responsibility, advancement, and personal growth (1993, p. xiv). These factors foster deeper fulfilment by allowing employees to engage in work aligned with their personal values, thereby enhancing motivation. For example, Herzberg noted that engineers found satisfaction in completing challenging tasks, in turn being recognised for innovative contributions, or assuming responsibilities that pushed their skill sets (1993, p. xiv). As he put it: "People are made satisfied by the intrinsics of what they do" (1993, p. xiv), arguing that improving motivational factors is key to increasing job satisfaction.

Hygiene factors are extrinsic to the work itself and relate to the conditions surrounding the job, such as salary, workplace environment, company policies, and relationships with colleagues. These elements, while essential to avoid dissatisfaction, do not actively contribute to increased satisfaction when improved. As Herzberg elaborates: "People are made

dissatisfied by a bad environment, the extrinsics of the job. But they are seldom made satisfied by a good environment” (1993, p. xiii). In essence, hygiene factors maintain a baseline of acceptability but do not drive engagement or fulfilment, contrasting motivational factors.

Herzberg’s core argument is that satisfaction and dissatisfaction are not opposite ends of the same continuum but are influenced by two separate sets of factors. This dual-factor distinction challenges the traditional view that job satisfaction and dissatisfaction are directly related. Thus, Herzberg’s theory posits that motivational factors aim to increase satisfaction, while hygiene factors exist to reduce dissatisfaction. This paper acknowledges the significance of Herzberg’s theory and recognises it as a valuable inspiration for understanding workplace complexities. However, it also offers a critical perspective, particularly by challenging Herzberg’s classification of employee relationships and workplace environment as merely hygiene factors. It is the argument that such a view underestimates the transformative role of the socio-collegial dynamics in contemporary workplaces. Employee branding then holds that the socio-collegial dynamics should be reclassified as motivational factors, as it plays a vital role in contemporary time in motivating existing employees and attracting new ones. In other words, employee branding is a strategic managerial tool that utilises the socio-collegial dynamics as a direct motivator for increasing job satisfaction, contrasting Herzberg’s classification that it is merely a hygiene factor for a functional workplace. This view is then a central pillar in the development of conceptualisation.

Notably, this paper is not alone in critiquing Herzberg, as his theory has faced various criticisms over the years. One common concern is that people tend to attribute satisfaction to internal factors like achievement, while attributing dissatisfaction to external factors such as salary or supervision. This raises doubts about whether satisfaction and dissatisfaction can truly be separated, as Herzberg proposes, or if they coexist (Pilat, n.d.). Another critique is that Herzberg’s research focused solely on subjective job satisfaction without measuring objective job performance. Thus, while an employee may feel satisfied, this may not translate to increased productivity or output. Finally, some argue that categorising salary as a hygiene factor may be overly simplistic, as financial compensation can, in certain contexts, also serve as a powerful motivator (Pilat, n.d.). Despite these criticisms, one should acknowledge the enduring influence of Herzberg’s theory as a foundational framework for understanding workplace motivation. Accordingly, the critique of his theory is used as a starting point for arguing how the aspect of socio-collegiality has become a motivational factor in the contemporary workplace. This shift reflects the evolving values of today’s workforce, which will be explored later in the paper.

## 4.2 Institutional Isomorphism

Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell first explored institutional isomorphism in their research article *The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields*, originally published in 1983. This paper draws on the republished edition from 2000. The article offers a foundational exploration of institutional isomorphism, examining how institutional environments shape organisational structures and behaviours, leading organisations within a given field to become increasingly similar over time (2000, p. 143). As such, external and internal pressures from the institutional environment compel organisations to conform to prevailing norms, expectations, and regulatory frameworks.

DiMaggio and Powell begin by raising a central question that aligns closely with central inquiry of this study and the author's general curiosity in the subject: "Why do organisations become so similar?" (p. 143). Institutional isomorphism explains the process by which societal expectations, regulatory pressures, and professional norms drive organisations to resemble one another automatically over time. The authors highlight Hawley's definition of isomorphism, which this paper agrees with, being the definition: "Isomorphism is a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions" (as cited in DiMaggio & Powell, 2000, p. 146). From this foundation, DiMaggio and Powell identify three mechanisms driving institutional isomorphism: 1) Coercive isomorphism, which stems from pressures exerted by powerful entities, such as state regulations, competing organisations, or societal expectations (2000, p. 148–149). 2) Mimetic isomorphism, which occurs when organisations are intimidated by uncertainty, thus mimicking peers perceived as legitimate (2000, p. 149). 3) Normative isomorphism, which arises from professionalisation, as education and credentials create uniform norms across organisations. In other words, employees carry forward orientations and practices learned through prior socialisation and professionalisation, such as at universities or previous workplaces, fostering similar behaviours in new employments (2000, p. 151).

It is then essential to further investigate the role of the formal and informal rules in the institutional environment, shaping organisational behaviour. Meyer and Rowan elaborate upon this notion quite well in their seminal work *Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony* (1977). The article expands on institutional isomorphism by emphasising how organisations conform not only to formal regulations set by the institutional environment, but also to informal expectations, termed myths, sensed in the institutional environment. According to Meyer and Rowan, formal rules serve as a "blueprint" for

organisational behaviour, presenting a regulatory framework imposed by the institutional environment within which organisations must operate (1977, p. 341–342). However, these formal rules coexist with informal rules, or myths, which are cultural norms and values deeply embedded in the institutional environment (1977, p. 342–343). These informal rules represent widely accepted beliefs in an institutionalised context, which consequently grant legitimacy to organisations adhering to these informal rules, being the argument of Meyer and Rowan:

“Formal organizational structures arise as reflections of rationalized institutional rules [...] Institutional rules function as myths which organizations incorporate, gaining legitimacy, resources, stability, and enhanced survival prospects” (1977, p. 340).

Therefore, organisations adapt to the regulatory framework and an informal framework in the institutional environment in which they operate. Consequently, organisations tend to adopt similar formal and informal rules, contributing to institutional isomorphism. The influence of these rules then leads to the adoption of what Meyer and Rowan refer to as an isomorphic vocabulary (1977, p. 349). This reflects how organisations in an institutional environment adopt similar ways of communicating to abide by formal and informal rules.

In regard to employee branding, the above presents the argument that organisations are increasingly adopting similar employer branding strategies. A clear example of this is the overuse of slogans like “work-life balance”, through which organisations conform to an isomorphic vocabulary in hopes of gaining legitimacy within the institutional environment. While these terms may genuinely reflect organisational values, their widespread use illustrates how institutional norms guide organisational discourse. Another example of how informal rules shape organisational behaviour is the tradition of offering a Christmas dinner in Danish companies. While there is no legal requirement, it has become a cultural norm and therefore an informal rule embedded in the Danish institutional environment. As such, employees expect this tradition as part of workplace culture, and a company’s failure to uphold it could diminish its legitimacy. While convergence to informal and formal rules may help organisations gain legitimacy, it also limits their capacity to differentiate themselves. As organisations follow the formal and informal rules of the institutional environment, their organisational behaviour becomes isomorphic. On this note, the concept of institutional isomorphism justifies the need to conceptualise employee branding as a method for breaking away from uniform branding patterns. It invites employers to focus branding on the socio-collegial dynamics within their organisations, as branding these unique aspects offers a more meaningful way to differentiate between employers in an otherwise isomorphic employer branding landscape.



### 4.3 Kotter's 8-Step Change Management Model

John P. Kotter presented his 8-Step Change Management Model in *Leading Change*, originally published in 1996, though this paper cites the 2012 version. Kotter offers a robust framework for managing to implement organisational transformation through eight steps, providing a structured and strategic approach that begins with establishing a sense of urgency. This paper adapts and recommends this framework in the analysis when considering the implementation of employee branding. This decision is based on the conviction that Kotter's model offers a well-thought-out managerial approach to guiding organisational transformation in an effective and sustainable manner. That said, it should be acknowledged that other models for organisational transformation also exist and plausibly could serve a similar purpose (see paragraph 7.3). This paragraph now explains Kotter's 8-Step Change Management Model, investigating how it offers valuable tools for embracing organisational transformation:

Kotter's model is rooted in his observation that organisational transformation often fails due to eight common errors (Kotter, 2012, p. 4). These failures are exacerbated by the accelerating pace of change, particularly due to globalisation (2012, p. 20 & 169). His model responds with a sequential process that enables organisations to directly respond to these errors and embrace transformation more effectively. Noteworthy, a key principle in Kotter's framework is then the emphasis on leadership over management. While management ensures operational stability, the right leadership is required to steer organisations through complex transformation (2012, p. vii). The following will outline an interpretation of Kotter's model:

1) 'Establishing a Sense of Urgency' focuses on disrupting complacency by presenting a compelling reason for change. Leadership must identify and communicate a sense of urgency, whereby examples could be the potential of crisis, missed opportunities, or emerging market demands. As such, this step is concerned with communicating in a way that resonates with employees and convinces them in embracing transformation. This communication must be honest, direct, and emotionally engaging to inspire immediate action, as urgency must be made visible through leadership discourse and behaviour. (2012, pp. 37–38).

2) 'Creating the Guiding Coalition' addresses the error of relying on a single leader or weak management. Kotter advocates forming a coalition of influential stakeholders with the credibility, expertise, and authority to drive change. This coalition serves as the engine of the transformation effort, collectively building momentum and protecting the change process from internal resistance or lack of commitment (2012, p. 53–54). The wording 'leadership' will be used throughout the paper when referencing the guiding coalition.

3) 'Developing a Vision and Strategy' involves creating a clear, inspiring vision that outlines the future post-transformation. The vision should be imaginable, desirable, and realistic, giving employees a concrete sense of purpose and motivation. Complementary internal strategies must be developed to guide how this vision will be realised (2012, p. 70–72). Together, the vision and strategy ensure a consistent plan in embracing transformation.

4) 'Communicating the Change Vision' addresses ineffective communication whereby leadership must communicate the vision frequently through diverse channels, tailoring the message to resonate across organisational levels. Communication should be embedded in daily discourse, decisions, and interactions, ensuring a well-considered delivery. Repetition, clarity, and consistency are then crucial to overcoming resistance (2012, p. 88–91).

5) 'Empowering Employees for Broad-Based Action' is concerned with directly engaging employees in the transformation. Leadership should provide training to equip employees, designate employee advocates to motivate others, and realign employees who resist (2012, p. 106–109). Thus, empowering employees fosters a greater ownership and inclusion, enabling a broader employee participation in accelerating the transformation.

6) 'Generating Short-Term Wins' emphasises the importance of celebrating early successes to build credibility and maintain momentum. These wins validate progress, boost morale, reduce resistance, and provide tangible justification for the transformation. At this stage, leadership should begin realising the planned milestones in the internal strategy, showcasing the first short-term wins while recognising the key employees who have significantly contributed to the transformation (2012, p. 122–125). This step is then concerned with preventing burnout by demonstrating the vision is actively moving forward.

7) 'Consolidating Gains and Producing More Change' builds upon the previously achieved short-term wins, enabling leaders to use this newfound credibility to address larger, more complex challenges. At this stage, it is crucial to reinforce progress by promoting key contributors or highlighting additional positive outcomes, which in turn facilitates for more transformation. This step is then concerned with preventing complacency by maintaining momentum and actively engaging all relevant parameters of change, even though full celebration and adoption are still forthcoming (2012, p. 138–140).

8) 'Anchoring New Approaches in the Culture' is the full integration of the transformational practices into the organisation's culture, while ensuring that these changes are sustained. Leadership must demonstrate how the implemented changes have improved the organisation, showing that the positive outcomes align with the goals outlined in the original vision and strategy. In other words, cultural anchoring helps prevent a return to old habits by

making the transformation an inherent part of the organisational culture. Kotter importantly stresses that cultural change can only be sustained once the new approaches have clearly demonstrated their value and produced visible positive improvements (2012, p. 154–158). In this way, the transformation becomes embedded in the organisation's identity and culture.

As such, this paper holds the conviction that Kotter's 8-Step Change Management Model provides a strategically well-considered foundation for implementing employee branding. By addressing the common challenges associated with organisational change, the model equips management / leadership with a tool not only for implementation but also for sustaining the transformation that employee branding represents. In this way, adopting Kotter's model illustrates how organisations can become more agile, resilient, and aligned with transformational change, should they choose to pursue employee branding. The applying of Kotter's model will be revised in paragraph 7.3, whereas the visual effects of applying Kotter's approach can be seen by Model II in the same paragraph

#### 4.4 Conceptualisation of Employee Branding

Having explored Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory of Motivation, DiMaggio and Powell's Institutional Isomorphism, and Kotter's 8-Step Change Management Model, it is now possible to conceptualise employee branding, followed later in the analysis by a practical recommendation for its implementation. This concept overall represents a transformative progression and addition to traditional employer branding. It diverges from corporate narratives by incorporating and promoting the uniqueness of the socio-collegial dynamics of the workplace. Employee branding reinterprets Herzberg's theory by positioning coworker relationships as a core motivational factor, rather than a contextual or hygiene element. Simultaneously, the concept stands as a response toward the tendencies of isomorphic employer branding, drawing on DiMaggio and Powell's theory.

In essence, employee branding serves as a key motivational factor in two senses. Attraction, 1) Potential employees are drawn to organisations that emphasise the socio-collegial dynamics. By branding the actual people who comprise the workplace, organisations differentiate themselves in a unique and meaningful way, motivating individuals to join. Retention, 2) Current employees are more likely to remain with organisations that publicly brand socio-collegial dynamics as the organisational identity. This recognition fosters a greater sense of belonging, motivating retention at all organisational levels.

This paper then posits that employee branding, in many ways, represents the value that the socio-collegial dynamics transcends the objectives of work itself. In contrast to Herzberg, the concept is a motivational factor that portrays a workplace through the people who constitute it. Thus, employee branding prioritises the socio-collegial dynamics of the workplace over the work itself, as the branding of people becomes the central source of meaning. From a strategic perspective, the concept then offers a compelling response to the growing homogeneity in employer branding. In an institutional environment where organisations increasingly replicate the same motivational and hygiene factor narratives, employee branding highlights that people cannot be copied. They are unique to each organisation, and by elevating their presence, stories, personalities, humour, and life experiences, organisations create a brand identity that is inherently unreplicable.

As stated in the introduction, a quick glance at Jobindex or Randstad's website illustrates that the vast majority of job advertisements make no mention of the people currently employed at the company. However, there are already signs that some organisations are beginning to explore initiatives in relation to the tenets of employee branding:

### Illustration I

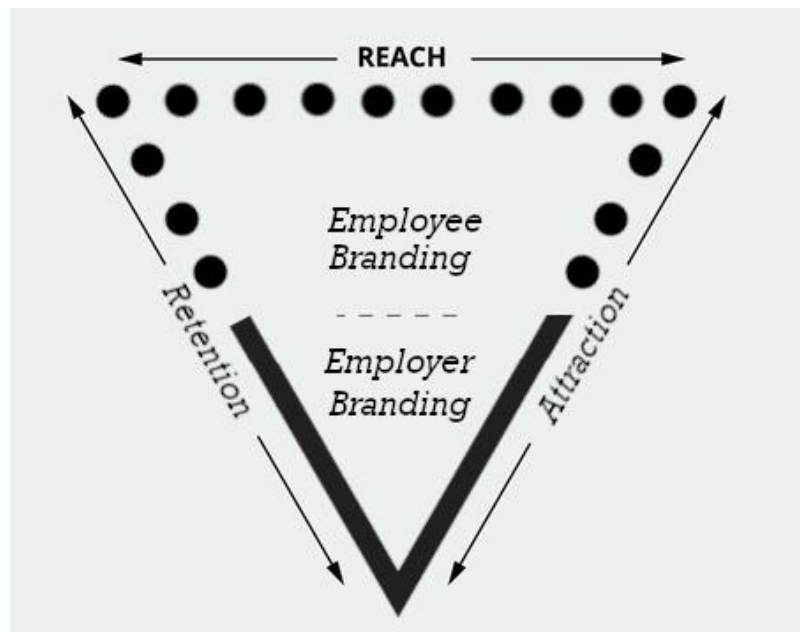


In the illustration above, the company Port of Aalborg effectively utilises employee branding in the visual representation of showcasing potential colleagues from a specific department where a new hire is sought. While no detailed information is provided about the individuals themselves, the method of showing potential colleagues already give a compelling and welcoming impression. This approach aligns with employee branding by humanising the workplace through its socio-collegial dynamics, fostering a motivational sense of belonging even before a candidate joins the organisation. In this way, the imagery subtly conveys a

collaborative and supportive team environment, which will resonate with many job seekers. Moreover, this approach supports employee retention at Port of Aalborg, as the company recognises the value of the socio-collegial dynamics it fosters. Thus, it reflects Port of Aalborg's acknowledgment of the contributions made by existing colleagues, thereby reinforcing their motivation in the workplace. In this advertisement from Port of Aalborg, there is also notably little information about the actual job role. While more detailed content becomes available upon following the included link, the initial focus is clearly on the socio-collegial environment rather than job responsibilities or qualifications. This technique also aligns with the principles of employee branding, where organisations deliberately highlight the socio-collegial elements at the workplace before emphasising job specifics.

However, the full adoption of employee branding would extend beyond a visual advertisement. Ideally, all employees would have personalised portraits that showcase their personalities and life stories. One consideration could be for all employees to complete a personality test, the results of which will be incorporated into their profiles. Ultimately, employee branding should cultivate a stronger sense of motivation and belonging by exploring each individuality at the workplace. This will enable potential candidates to envision themselves not just in a role, but within a distinct socio-collegial culture. As such, Port of Aalborg's post is an initial step toward the broader adoption of employee branding. In regard to employee retention, it is then necessary to continuously provide and update employee portraits, as to continuously acknowledge the socio-collegial dynamics of the workplace. These portraits should also include more about the department-specifics, highlighting how the socio-collegial environment fosters shared memories and social experiences among coworkers, facilitated by the organisation. Employee branding then embodies the vision that organisations allow employees to express themselves socially, even informally, within a professional environment. In this way, the concept may represent the most significant motivational factor in contemporary employer branding, precisely because it extends beyond the job itself. The objective of employee branding is then for organisations to demonstrate that they invest time and resources in fostering social connections among employees, not solely for work-related purposes, but within the workplace itself. However, this does not automatically mean that employee branding improves the socio-collegial environment. Rather, it is a managerial tool for organisations to promote it. That said, for employee branding to be perceived as authentic and effective, it must surely become increasingly necessary for the organisation to genuinely enhance the socio-collegial dynamics it promotes. The following model illustrates the principles of employee branding:

Model I



The model is illustrated as an extension of traditional employer branding, whereby the addition of employee branding onto employer branding increases the reach, or chance of success, in both attracting and retaining employees. Presented as a triangle, the model features two distinct axes on each side, illustrating how the likelihood of retention and attraction increases, first through employer branding, then further through employee branding. The third axis located at the top represents the increased potential for retaining and attracting employees.

At the base, employer branding is the foundational pillar for employee branding. While employer branding seemingly can operate independently, this paper argues that its effectiveness is increasingly limited, as it does not achieve its full potential alone. By incorporating employee branding on top of employer branding, organisations gain a tool for expanding their chances of retention and attraction. Thus, it is the argument that employer branding and employee branding cannot function to its full potential without the other.

Employee branding then acts as a differentiating force, contrasting the isomorphic employer branding tendencies and promises. The uniqueness that it offers, rooted in socio-collegial dynamics, cannot be replicated. The integration of employee branding amplifies the effects of employer branding, although the precise potential is difficult to measure. This interplay suggests a symbiotic relationship, where employer branding provides the framework that enables employee branding to focus on the socio-collegial dynamics of the workplace. Together, they can then create a more holistic and human-centered narrative.

## 5 Empirical data

This paragraph presents the empirical data on which the analysis is based. As outlined in the introduction, the primary data source for this paper is a self-designed survey (Appendix 1), developed specifically to explore and reveal key aspects of employee branding. The qualitative responses from this survey will be analysed using the thematic data analysis method described in the following paragraph 6, allowing for an in-depth investigation of recurring themes and patterns. To complement and enrich these findings, the quantitative results from the survey will be contextualised with secondary data from the internationally recognised 2025 Randstad workmonitor report (Appendix 2). This report provides a broad, global perspective on workforce trends, enabling a more cross-generational understanding of workplace expectations. This contextualisation does not serve as the main data of this paper, but rather as complementary data which supports the conceptualising for employee branding.

The self-designed survey holds the title “Spørgeskema/Kandidat speciale” (Appendix 1), with respondents being individuals from generation Z (Eldrige 2025), most on the verge of entering the workforce in the coming years. A total of 28 students completed the survey, most aged between 16 and 25. The survey was delivered in person to three independent classes at Brønderslev Gymnasium, made possible through my part-time student job as an AAU on Demand lecturer affiliated with Aalborg University. In this role, I have visited high schools across Denmark to introduce students to Aalborg University, while delivering lectures related to my studies and academic interests. During my most recent lectures on crisis communication, I used a break to ask students to complete a survey, despite its unrelated topic. This was a clever method for data collection, if I may say so myself. The survey was online, distributed via Google Forms, and accessed by students using a mobile QR code.

The survey is structured into two sections. The first section includes four like-scale questions, while the second contains three like-scale questions, with all items rated on a scale from 1 (“less important”) to 5 (“very important”). Each section concludes with an open-ended text question that invites participants to elaborate on their responses, specifically reflecting on the previous question 4 and 7. A detailed overview of the survey questions will be provided at the beginning of the analysis (Paragraph 7.1.1). By combining quantitative metrics and qualitative insights, the survey employs a mixed-methods design. Beyond collecting valuable quantitative data for the analysis, the choice to use this mixed-methods approach is also driven by the intention to encourage deeper reflection from participants, which in turn hopefully would foster more nuanced and meaningful qualitative responses.

To complement the survey findings, this paper contextualises the quantitative data from the survey with that of the 2025 Randstad workmonitor, titled “A New Workplace Baseline” (Appendix 2). Launched in 2003, the workmonitor is one of the world’s largest studies on work and employment trends, encompassing responses from over 34 markets (Workmonitor Info Randstad, 2025). The 2025 report captures significant shifts in what employees globally expect from their workplaces, particularly regarding socio-collegial dynamics. Its findings reveal many similarities with the survey results, which are then analysed in context. By utilising the workmonitor as a data source, this paper incorporates a more widely recognised dataset, providing greater validation alongside the survey data.

It is also important to highlight that the Randstad workmonitor offers a broader cross-generational and international perspective, whereas the survey primarily includes participants from Generation Z and Denmark. Thus, contextualising the quantitative survey results with the workmonitor strengthens the argument that employee branding is a cross-generational concept with global relevance. In this regard, it is also important to mention that, as a researcher, I am a member of Generation Z. I have engaged in numerous conversations with peers and noticed that the socio-collegial dynamics holds immense weight in how we envision meaningful employment. This observation inspired me to design a survey targeting Generation Z, to be contextualized with the workmonitor data, with the ambition of exploring and positioning employee branding as more than just a generational trend, but rather as an emerging phenomenon. While the survey responses may reflect pre-employment optimism, Generation Z represents a unique force with the potential to reshape workplace norms. Not only by demanding change but also by influencing other generations already in the labor market with their new values and expectations.

One could then say that my own age, reflections and lived experiences function as supplementary empirical data. Throughout my time at university and in various student jobs, I have become increasingly convinced that the socio-collegial dynamics is the most important and differentiating factor for me personally when choosing a job. Observing similar sentiments among my peers and among candidates at Randstad confirm that others have the same conviction. Thus, it is necessary to investigate various different empirical data to evaluate and present employee branding not only as a tool for embracing the expectations of Generation Z - but for validating it as a cross-generational paradigm shift in how workplaces should focus more on branding its socio-collegial dynamics. This shift then presents the discussion of how organisational structures should redefine themselves in attracting and retaining employees across all generations.



## 6 Methodes

This paragraph presents the method of thematic data analysis, drawing on the work of Christine Daymon and Immy Holloway as outlined in their book *Qualitative Research Methods in Public Relations and Marketing Communications* (2011). While the original foundation of this method was developed by Colaizzi, it is Daymon and Holloway's interpretation that informs the specific structure and application presented in this paper. The thematic data analysis method is particularly well-suited for exploring subjective perspectives, identifying recurring patterns, and uncovering meaningful themes within qualitative data. Consequently, this method will be applied to the qualitative findings from the survey (Appendix 1), in the hope of identifying key themes and patterns related to the concept of employee branding. As such, the method serves as a central methodological tool for gathering insights that justify and support the conceptual development of employee branding. It is important to clarify that the thematic data analysis method is applied exclusively to the qualitative survey data.

### 6.1 Thematic Data Analysis

Thematic data analysis is a qualitative method designed to identify and interpret recurring themes within data, making it ideal for capturing participants' subjective experiences and perspectives. This approach is rooted in phenomenological research, which aims to explore "[...] the experiences of people regarding a particular phenomenon" (Daymon, 2011, p. 185). In this context, the purpose of applying thematic data analysis is to generate a nuanced understanding and academic justification of the phenomenon that is employee branding, based on the qualitative findings from the survey. The analysis in this paper adopts Colaizzi's seven-step thematic analysis process, as described by Daymon (2011), but omits the seventh step which concerns validating the results with participants. This decision was taken on the basis that the step was unnecessary, and it would be very difficult to locate the participants again.

Daymon (2011) emphasises that the thematic data analysis method centres on identifying patterns within data through overarching themes (p. 185). Therefore, the survey responses will be analysed to uncover themes related to employee branding, even though the participants have no prior knowledge of the concept itself. The following paragraph provides a detailed guide on how this paper utilises the six steps of Colaizzi's process, as adapted from Daymon (2011, p. 185–186):

### 1. Familiarisation with the Data

This first step focuses on deeply engaging with the survey data to understand the participants' experiences. The objective is to grasp the essence of the text, developing a holistic sense of the phenomenon it represents and capturing the core messages conveyed by the participants.

### 2. Identifying Significant Statements

The second step is concerned with pinpointing specific statements that directly relate to the phenomenon under study, termed 'significant statements'. These statements are extracted and categorised individually, preserving their original context to serve as the foundation for further analysis.

### 3. Formulating Meanings

The third step scrutinise each significant statement to uncover its deeper meaning. The hope is to interpret these statements in a way that reflects the participants' perspectives, revealing underlying or implicit insights that can contribute to the analysis.

### 4. Clustering Themes

The fourth step is the beginning for identifying the overall themes derived from the significant statements, where each statement is organised into clusters based on shared characteristics. Hence, each thematic cluster represents the broader patterns that is identified from the survey, shifting the focus from individual details to overarching themes, which should direct the analysis more towards the overarching phenomenon.

### 5. Exhaustive Description

The fifth step is concerned with providing a detailed narrative of each thematic cluster, which Colaizzi elaborates upon as an exhaustive description, that should articulate the participants' feelings and perspectives on the identified themes. These exhaustive descriptions provide a foundation for understanding the following identification of the overall phenomenon.

### 6. Identifying the Phenomenon

The sixth step will then build upon the exhaustive description, as this step summarises and in turn presents the core phenomenon of employee branding. Hence, the step function to provide an overall understanding of the phenomenon by drawing upon the findings from the survey.

## 7 Analysis

This analysis begins by applying Colaizzi's six-step thematic data analysis method. The method is applied to the qualitative selected parts of the constructed survey (Paragraph 7.1), which will present the main data analysis of this paper, as previously discussed in paragraph 5. Hereafter, the quantitative findings from the survey will be contextualised with the 2025 Randstad workmonitor (Paragraph 7.2), as to provide a broader international and cross-generational perspective. This quantitative comparative approach should then complement and expand the understanding for the qualitative results from the survey, while helping in constructing employee branding. Finally, the analysis will engage in the recommendation of implementing the concept (Paragraph 7.3) by the framework presented earlier in the paper abiding Kotter's structure.

### 7.1 Qualitative Data Survey

#### 7.1.1 Familiarisation with the Data

The survey was conducted in person on April 4th at Brønderslev Gymnasium. I allocated approximately 15 minutes for participants to complete the survey, ensuring that no one felt rushed or under pressure during the process. The survey was distributed across three different classes, held in separate rooms, each consisting of a varying number of participants. Before initiating the survey, I gave a short introduction in which I explained that I was conducting research for my master's thesis and kindly requested their participation. Importantly, I deliberately avoided mentioning the concept of "employee branding" to prevent influencing their responses. However, I did inform them that the survey aimed to explore how companies might increasingly focus on branding the social and collegial aspects of the workplace, therefore indirectly referring to the overarching phenomenon under investigation.

Although it was my intention at avoiding bias, I still found it necessary to include brief factual statements at the beginning of each section to provide participants with relevant context. The survey is structured into two thematic sections, with the first focusing on the general importance of social and collegial environments in the workplace, and the second delving into how companies might actively acknowledge importance in their branding and internal practices. The overarching objective was then to formulate questions that were as neutral and unbiased as possible, with the hope that participants would naturally express insights relevant to the phenomenon being explored.

The survey is designed using a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative components. The quantitative like-scale questions were purposefully integrated not only to collect measurable data but also to help participants structure their thoughts and reflections in preparation for the open-ended qualitative questions. The constructed survey consists of seven like-scale questions (Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4, Q6, Q7, Q8), each rated on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 corresponds to "i mindre grad" (to a lesser extent) and 5 to "i høj grad" (to a great extent). Additionally, there are two open-ended text questions (Q5 and Q9) at the end of each paragraph. These qualitative text questions serve as reflective follow-up questions to the immediate preceding scale-based questions (Q4 and Q8). To preserve the original intent, all survey questions are presented in their original Danish wording in the analysis that now follows. Here is a full structure overview of the survey (Appendix 1):

Title page: Spørgeskema / Kandidat Speciale

Det sociale miljø på arbejdspladsen - Hvem er dine kolleger?

#### Section 1:

1 Del: Du vil i gennemsnit bruge 1924 timer om året på din arbejdsplads sammen med dine kolleger.

Q1: Hvor vigtigt er det sociale miljø på en arbejdsplads for dig?

Q2: I hvor høj grad er et godt socialt miljø med til at fastholde dig som medarbejder?

Q3: Er et godt socialt miljø med til at holde dig motiveret på arbejdspladsen?

Q4: Hvor vigtigt er det for dig at kende til det sociale miljø på arbejdspladsen ved valg af et job?

Q5: Hvorfor?

#### Section 2:

2 Del: Du skal gennemsnitlig arbejde sammen med andre kolleger indtil du er 68 år gammel.

Q6: Tror du at virksomheder vil have lettere ved at tiltrække medarbejdere hvis de fortæller om de kolleger der er på arbejdspladsen?

Q7: Er generation Z mere tilbøjelig til at tænke på det sociale miljø ved valg af arbejdsplads?

Q8: I hvor høj grad tror du at virksomheder specielt vil kunne tiltrække generation Z ved at fortællere mere om det sociale miljø?

Q9: Hvorfor?

### 7.1.2 Identifying Significant Statements

Significant statements are now directly extracted from the qualitative responses provided in Q5 and Q9 of the survey. These statements are chosen as they all seemingly represent different aspects of the phenomenon under investigation, while these present the most clear and concise answers among a broader set of similar comments. This paper has deliberately excluded certain responses based on the criteria that either the content was redundant (already expressed elsewhere in similar terms), deemed unserious and or unreadable. It is important to stress that this exclusion does not imply a disregard for opposing views. On the contrary, this paper fully acknowledges that some participants may hold perspectives that challenge or diverge from the phenomenon being explored. Such perspectives will be addressed later in the analysis. It should also be noted that some significant statements containing minor grammatical or syntactical errors have been corrected for clarity without altering their intended meaning.

The primary objective at this stage is to highlight the dominant patterns that emerged. In this regard, the qualitative data clearly indicate that a substantial majority of participants expresses a strong agreement in the importance for the social and collegial aspects of the workplace. The following paragraph presents the most prominent and thematically representative statements, categorised according to the two sections of the survey. To easily reference these in the later stages of the analysis, each significant statement is assigned a numerical label:

Section 1: (Following Q4: “Hvor vigtigt er det for dig at kende til det sociale miljø på arbejdspladsen ved valg af job”)

1. “Ellers magter jeg ikke at tage på arbejde”
2. “Det er rart at have relationer når man skal bruge hele livet der”
3. “Fordi hvis man ikke har nogle at snakke med på et arbejde, bliver det meget kedeligt”
4. “Det styrker arbejdsmoralen og gør en mere motiveret til at komme på arbejde”
5. ”Det er vigtigt med et godt miljø for at være glad og motiveret for sit arbejde
6. ”Fordi fællesskaber skaber god dynamik på arbejdsmarkedet”
7. ”Sådan man har noget at se frem til når man møder på sit arbejde”
8. ”Syntes man kan lave alt hvis man er omringet af personer man kan lide”
9. ”Fordi det sociale skal være godt når det er noget jeg skal gøre i længere tid”
10. ”Ellers er det jo ikke sjovt”
11. ”Fordi ellers har du det ikke godt på dit arbejde”

Section 2: (Following Q8: I hvor høj grad tror du at virksomheder specielt vil kunne tiltrække generation Z ved at fortællere mere om det sociale miljø?)

12. "Det er motiverende"
13. "Fordi vi gerne vil være mere sociale"
14. "Fordi, så er det en mere spændende arbejdsplads"
15. "Fordi det er vigtigt at være social"
16. "Det gør en mere motiveret hvis man hygger sig med kollegaerne"
17. "Det er rart at vide hvilket miljø man kommer ind i for også at kunne fornemme om man passer ind"
18. "En social arbejdsplads er vigtig for de nye generationer"
19. "Tror bare generelt det tiltrækker folk fordi folk gerne vil være en del af noget"

### 7.1.3 Formulating Meanings

Each numbered significant statement will now be analysed to formulate its underlying meaning, reflecting the perspectives that form the basis for further analysis. The aim is to examine the respondents' viewpoints closely in order to reveal implicit meanings that can help guide the analysis forward.

1. This comment reflects that a poor social environment is indeed a significant factor, affirming that the workplace is defined just as much by its social dynamics as by its professional functions.
2. The comment illustrates a strong sense of commitment to the workplace by emphasising the importance of forming social bonds, especially considering the significant portion of one's life spent at work.
3. This and many other comments reference how the workplace can become monotonous without social interaction. However, this particular comment captures the essence by highlighting social engagement as a key motivational factor that makes the work environment stimulating.
4. This comment explicitly identifies social interaction as a motivational factor that supports one's ability to function effectively at work.

5. Like the previous point, this comment emphasises how a positive (social) work environment enhances motivation. Although similar, both comments are significant as they each capture essential aspects of workplace dynamics.
  6. This comment recognises the value of community within the workplace, portraying it as a force that fosters a lively and dynamic environment. In this sense, social interaction is seen as enhancing overall well-being at work.
  7. The respondent here acknowledges that social interaction is a primary reason for physically showing up at work and performing assigned tasks. In other words, the motivation stems more from the people than from the tasks themselves.
  8. This comment introduces the idea that the respondent would be willing to perform any type of work, provided the right colleagues were present. It suggests that coworkers may, in some cases, outweigh the nature of the work in terms of importance.
  9. This response highlights the importance of maintaining consistent and ongoing social interaction in order for the respondent to remain committed to their current workplace.
  10. It is noteworthy that a respondent expresses a desire for their workplace to be perceived as “fun”. In other words, the notion of linking fun with functional social interaction is a quite fascinating generational expectation.
  11. This comment underscores the universal need for social interaction in the workplace as a precondition for well-being. This insight certainly warrants further discussion, as this is not necessarily the case.
- 

12. The respondent directly acknowledges that awareness of the social environment plays a motivational role in the process of choosing a job.
13. This comment echoes the previous sentiment, as the respondent emphasises that Generation Z desires more social engagement in all facets of life, including the workplace.
14. The knowledge of social interaction is more than just motivational, as the respondent highlights how social interaction is a primary driver in making a workplace exciting.
15. This respondent suggests that being social is particularly important for Generation Z. Similar to the earlier significant statement (11), this perspective stands out and invites further reflection. Does everyone truly need or desire social interaction in the workplace? And is this perspective generational or a more cross-generational trend?

16. The respondent affirms that motivation arises when one has a positive relationship with colleagues.
17. This comment is particularly noteworthy, as the respondent emphasises the importance of understanding a workplace's social dynamics before accepting a position. They go on to explain that this insight allows an individual to assess whether one align with the job and its environment.
18. The respondent here highlights how the social environment is truly important for especially the younger generations entering the labor market. Again, the comment reflects a generational shift in what is considered essential for job satisfaction.
19. Here it is highlighted how a sense of community within the workplace plays a central role in attracting employees.

#### 7.1.4 Clustering Themes

This paragraph organises the abovementioned formulated meanings into clear themes, grouping similar ideas together to make sense of the data more effectively. By clustering statements, this paragraph highlights key patterns and helps to organise an overview of the overall phenomenon under investigation. This thematic grouping then provides the standpoint for further analysis.

- Theme 1: Socially Motivated: 1, 4, 12, 14
- Theme 2: The Business of Business is Collegiality: 7, 8
- Theme 3: Social Well-being: 3, 5, 6, 11, 15
- Theme 4: Commitment to the Workplace: 2, 9, 17, 19
- Theme 5: Gen Z are different: 10, 13, 16, 18

#### 7.1.5 Exhaustive Description

This paragraph will now deliver a detailed account of the five different themes. It is the aim to capture the complexity of the themes, in turn revealing more about the overall phenomenon under investigation. Theme 1: Socially Motivated, captures the pivotal role of social relationships as key drivers of workplace motivation, influencing both retention and attraction. Statement 1 illustrates how a poor social environment can deter individuals from even showing up to work, framing the workplace as equally a social and a professional space. This sentiment is echoed in statement 4, which explicitly links social interaction to workplace



motivation, emphasising that morale increases when social dynamics are thriving. Statements 12 and 14 extend these views specifically in relation to Generation Z. Statement 12 directly acknowledges that companies will attract more Gen Z employees when the workplace offers opportunities to explore and engage with its social environment. Statement 14 suggests that a vibrant social atmosphere is not only motivating but also makes the workplace inherently more exciting. Together, these and several other statements challenge Herzberg's classification of the social environment as merely a hygiene factor. Instead, the data from the survey indicates that the socio-collegial dynamics of the workplace function as genuine, active sources of motivation particularly for Generation Z. These insights call for a reconsideration of how workplaces are branded, especially since traditional employer branding often avoids elaborating on the socio-collegial aspects. These comments also reflect a desire to challenge the increasingly isomorphic nature of employer branding. In this regard, by stretching the argument, the respondents indirectly suggest that organizations begin mimicking one another ideally, in adopting and implementing the tenets of employee branding. The responses point to a consistent demand for workplaces to offer a branding strategy that is more focused on the social dynamics of the workplace. In short, it is the day-to-day interpersonal social dynamics that define workplace motivation for these respondents. This theme therefore emphasises the importance of providing a credible glimpse into the social fabric of the organisation as a factor for attracting new talent and retaining existing employees.

Theme 2: The Business of Business Is Collegiality, is intentionally a play on words, directly challenging Milton Friedman's famous assertion that 'the business of business is business' (Friedman, 1970, as cited in Schwartz, 2009). This theme foregrounds the extraordinary importance placed on colleague relationships, with respondents indicating that this is prioritised over the work itself. Statement 7 explicitly states that the primary reason for showing up to work is the people, not the tasks, implying that the job role holds less motivational value than the socio-collegial aspect. Statement 8 takes this further by suggesting that the specific job role is, in fact, interchangeable, as long as collegiality and the social atmosphere is strong. These comments align with the principles of employee branding, in the sense that organisations should focus less on the nature of the work and more on branding the socio-collegial fabric of the workplace. This marks the fundamental shift that employee branding attempts to capture, as employees themselves, more or less, become the brand of the organisation. These two statements also reflect a clear awareness of employer branding isomorphism, as both respondents express a lack of interest in the organisation itself. In other words, these respondents are more concerned with the unique and non-replicable dimension

of any workplace that is the colleagues. Ultimately, this theme suggests that employers should move away from Friedman's perspective. Rather than branding what the work is, employers should focus on branding who the work is with.

Theme 3: Social Well-being, explores how the socio-collegial dynamics is deeply intertwined with overall well-being and good health in the workplace. Statement 3 directly addresses this by framing a non-functioning social environment as inherently boring. Statements 5 and 6 build on this, asserting that a positive social environment is foundational for happiness at work. Specifically, Statement 6 emphasises community as the bedrock of workplace vitality. Statements 11 and 15 deliver the view that social interaction is essential to the overall well-being at work for generation Z. All statements, more or less, indicate that without a functioning social environment, these respondents simply do not feel good at their workplace. That said, individual preferences vary, as it is important to acknowledge that it is not everyone who places the same value on social interaction as a necessary factor for well-being. From a critical standpoint, one could argue that employee branding may not resonate equally with all employees or job seekers, as some individuals may prefer work environments where the socio-collegial dynamics is less emphasised. Supporting this view, one comment from the survey also indicated that the social environment was of little to no significance for that respondent. This serves as a useful reminder that while employee branding strongly aligns with the majority, it should not be assumed to appeal to all. In this light, one could raise the question of whether the COVID-19 pandemic have accelerated or slowed expectations for a social workspace. What can be agreed upon, is that the pandemic has intensified the focus on hybrid versus physical work environments. Returning to the theme, the statements and overall survey data illustrate that the vast majority perceive social interaction as central to their workplace well-being, health, and overall satisfaction. From an employee branding perspective, this presents an opportunity for organisations to position themselves as healthy well-being work environments by emphasising their focus on socio-collegial aspects.

Theme 4: Commitment to a Workplace, concerns how socio-collegial aspects shape employees' sense of loyalty and attachment to their workplace. Statements 2 and 9 highlight the significant amount of time individuals spend at work and argue that a well-functioning social environment is essential for fostering commitment and loyalty. Building on this, Statement 17 emphasises that understanding a workplace's social atmosphere is a crucial factor before accepting a job, suggesting that job-selection increasingly involves evaluating social compatibility. These statements closely align with the core argument of employee branding in how organisations must acknowledge that retention also is determined on socio-

collegial aspects. With these statements, it can be argued that employee retention is positively influenced by the organisation's ability to attract new talent. When current employees observe that their workplace is appealing and successful in attracting new employees, it reinforces the perception of the organisation as socially thriving and reputable. Consequently, this success fosters a stronger sense of loyalty and commitment among existing employees, as they take pride in the acknowledgment of a good socio-collegial environment. In other words, the visible success in attraction, driven by employee branding, serves as proof to current employees that their employer invests in its workforce, thereby increasing their confidence and commitment to remain with the organisation. Statement 18 further deepens this insight by emphasising that employees seek to be part of something greater than just an organisation. As such, modern workplace commitment extends beyond professional responsibilities to encompass a deeper sense of belonging and social connection. Thus, this theme suggests that respondents become more loyal to the organisation based on its ability to brand the socio-collegial aspects. Hypothetically, one could then engage in a debate whether a social organisation exists within the professional organisation. To effectively promote the professional organisation, it would first be necessary first to brand the social organisation, as it resonates more profoundly with the respondents.

Theme 5: Gen Z are Different, centres on how Generation Z differs markedly from previous generations. Recognising this generational shift is crucial, as Gen Z is poised to reshape workplace culture, while influencing other generations already in the labor market. Statement 10 illustrates a respondent's view that collegiality is what makes a workplace "fun". This sentiment is echoed in Statement 16, where collegiality is described as "hygge", being a Danish term conveying a sense of togetherness in the workplace. While these expressions might initially seem like naive pre-optimism for Generation Z entering the workforce, this paper believe that these statements reveal something more fundamental. It will be argued that Generation Z does not separate professionalism from social well-being at work. In fact, these responses suggest that social dynamics are often prioritised over the professional environment itself. The workplace is then increasingly seen not just as a site of labor, but as an extension of the respondent's social life outside work. This mixture of personal and professional spheres is a core philosophy of employee branding. Statements 13 and 18 further reinforce this generational perspective by highlighting Gen Z's strong desire for deeper social engagement in the workplace. Taken together, this theme and statements suggest that employee branding is not only relevant but essential for addressing the evolving expectations of Generation Z.

### 7.1.6 Identifying the Phenomenon

Across the five themes identified in this analysis, it will be concluded that employee branding can be sensed throughout all themes, therefore being the overarching phenomenon. Although the term is not explicitly known nor mentioned by survey respondents, their insights consistently emphasise the growing importance of the socio-collegial dynamics in the workspace. Thus, the statements call for organisations to align with the principles of employee branding in their recruitment strategies for attracting and retaining employees. The survey data is proof that the concept represents a natural evolution beyond traditional employer branding. Respondents consistently express a desire to experience work differently from what traditional employer branding offers, whereby the data showcase the shift away from the isomorphic tendencies of conventional employer branding.

It should be argued that the phenomenon of employee branding is cross-generational, although it definitely responds to the direct demands of Generation Z. The responses from the survey illustrate an ambition to experience the workplace as a genuine extension of social life, therefore rejecting the aspect that a workplace first and foremost is professional. In this regard, emotional well-being is an interesting notion that deserves a reference in this context, serving as an umbrella concept that encompasses various workplace factors contributing to a sense of fulfilment and well-being (Carvalho, 2023). As such, the boundaries between work and personal life become increasingly blurred, as employee branding suggests that the workplace should redefine itself as something more integrated with life outside work.

It is clear that socio-collegiality is a complementary phenomenon to the core phenomenon that is employee branding. The collective voice of the respondents suggests that socio-collegial dynamics are, and will continue to be, central to how workplaces are valued. Over time, as previously discussed, Generation Z will influence the attitudes and expectations of other generations within the workforce. As a phenomenon, employee branding then emerges indirectly from the respondents' answers and insights. It directly addresses this shift by emphasising that organisations should focus more on branding who the people are in the workplace and what it feels like to belong there. In other words, it serves as a strategic tool, on the demand of the employee, through which organisations craft and present a social reality of work. Consequently, organisations aiming to attract and retain employees must recognise the central findings of this analysis, which present the aligned phenomenon and conceptualisation that is employee branding.

## 7.2 Quantitative Data Survey – Contextualised with Randstad Workmonitor

This paragraph of the analysis investigates the quantitative results from the survey (Appendix 1, questions Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4, Q6, Q7, Q8) in comparison with the findings from the Randstad workmonitor (Appendix 2). This comparative analysis aims to support the conceptual justification for introducing employee branding. As elaborated upon in the empirical data paragraph, the survey employs a like scale from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates "to a lesser extent" and 5 indicates "to a greater extent". The following is an overview of the quantitative results from the survey:

- Question 1 (Q1: "Hvor vigtigt er det sociale miljø på en arbejdsplads for dig?") reveals that 92,9% of respondents rated this question as 4 or 5, showing a strong majority in favour of importance.
- Question 2 (Q2: "I hvor høj grad er et godt socialt miljø med til at fastholde dig som medarbejder?") reveals that 89,3% of respondents rated this question as 4 or 5, showing a strong majority in favor of importance.
- Question 3 (Q3: "Er et godt socialt miljø med til at holde dig motiveret på arbejdspladsen?") reveals that 96.5% of respondents rated this question as 4 or 5, showing a strong majority in favour of importance.
- Question 4 (Q4: "Hvor vigtigt er det for dig at kende til det sociale miljø på arbejdspladsen ved valg af et job?") reveals that 32,1% of respondents gave a neutral rating of 3, while 60,8% rated it as 4 or 5, showing a moderate but still noticeable majority in favour of importance.
- Question 6 (Q6: "Tror du at virksomheder vil have lettere ved at tiltrække medarbejdere, hvis de fortæller om de kolleger der er på arbejdspladsen?") reveals that 39,3% of respondents gave a neutral rating of 3, while 50% of respondents rated this question as 4 or 5, showing a moderate but still noticeable majority in favour of importance.
- Question 7 (Q7: "Er Generation Z mere tilbøjelig til at tænke på det sociale miljø ved valg af arbejdsplads?") reveals that 32,1% of respondents gave a neutral rating of 3, while 64,3% of respondents rated this question as 4 or 5, showing a moderate but still noticeable majority in favour of importance.
- Question 8 (Q8: "I hvor høj grad tror du at virksomheder specielt vil kunne tiltrække Generation Z ved at fortælle mere om det sociale miljø?") reveals that 28,6% of respondents gave a neutral rating of 3, while 67,9% of respondents rated this question as 4 or 5, showing a moderate but still noticeable majority in favour of importance.

Overall, the survey responses demonstrate a strong indirect support for the central elements of employee branding. The first section (Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4) reveals high levels of agreement on the importance of social dynamics and collegiality in the workplace, while the second section (Q6, Q7, and Q8) shows active engagement and a belief that companies should actively promote these aspects as part of their branding efforts. These insights further suggest a generational shift toward a more human-centric view of the workplace, as discussed previously in the analysis, where professionalism and social life become increasingly integrated. As elaborated upon in section 7.1 of the analysis, Generation Z will in the coming years reshape and influence existing workplace dynamics, prompting shifts in organisational structures. In this regard, with the overall agreement in the quantitative results, this paper would argue that Generation Z can be conceptualised as “generational advocates”, a term seemingly with little to no presence in existing academic literature. As generational advocates, members of Generation Z will champion and promote the broader values and workplace expectations held by the majority of their generation. Hence, by entering the labor market they bring a collective voice that is likely to drive both cultural and structural change.

To broaden the quantitative results from the survey, it is interesting to see similar data retrieved from the 2025 Randstad workmonitor (Appendix 2). This comparison brings the aspect of a more international and cross-generational benchmark. While the survey captures the anticipatory views of Generation Z, the Randstad workmonitor presents the lived experiences and current values of employees already embedded in organisational structures. The following will present the key findings from the Randstad workmonitor (p. 6-7), which then will be set in overall comparison with the results from the survey:

- **80%** link a sense of community to performance and mental health.
- **55%** would leave a job if they did not feel a sense of belonging.
- **44%** have left a job due to a toxic work culture.
- **62%** hide aspects of themselves at work.
- **48%** would not accept a job if company values did not align with their own.
- **49%** trust their employer to foster an inclusive workplace.

80% of workmonitor respondents link a strong sense of community directly to improved mental health and job performance. This figure closely parallels the 89–96% agreement rate observed in Q1-Q3 of the survey, suggesting comparable metrics in how different generations

value socio-collegial dynamics. Notably, Generation Z appears to place an even greater emphasis on the matter, reflecting a generational shift that increasingly see socio-collegial dynamics as an extension of good health. Another interesting insight from the workmonitor is then that 55% of respondents would consider leaving a job due to a lack of belonging, and 44% have already left toxic workplaces because of poor social environments. These prospects align with a majority of the survey responses, in which respondents emphasise that cultural and social fit are decisive factors in job selection and retention.

One of the most concerning statistics from the workmonitor is that 62% of respondents admit to hiding aspects of their true selves at work. This suggests that many employees feel unable to fully express their identities or values within their professional environments. Addressing this challenge is a focus of employee branding, as it advocates for encouraging employees to bring more of their life into work. In other words, while maintaining a certain level of professionalism remains important, the concept promotes a more human-centric approach, integrating aspects of employees' lives outside of work with their work experience. The quantitative survey responses reinforce this, indicating that the socio-collegial dynamics are not just desirable but central to motivation and well-being at work.

There is only 49% of respondents in the workmonitor who trust their employers to create genuinely inclusive environments, and 48% say they would reject a job offer if the company's values do not align with their own. These figures resonate strongly with themes emerging from the survey, where expectations for inclusivity and belonging appear even more pronounced. This growing demand for belonging inform organisations that their current employer branding efforts are insufficient. As such, organisations have a clear incentive to adopt employee branding strategies as a way to authentically communicate their culture and values, thereby attracting and retaining talent who feel a true sense of belonging.

The workmonitor concludes that employees and especially talent increasingly prioritises personal values over material factors like pay, thus seeking workplaces that align with their personal expectations for a community (2025, p. 39). For the first time in its history, the workmonitor notes that work-life balance has overtaken pay as the primary driver of job choice and motivation. Moreover, the results also highlight that employees would be willing to forgo higher pay to achieve this (2025, p. 4). Both findings closely relate to the concept of employee branding, consequently, the adoption of the concept signals alignment with the broader value set reflected in the workmonitor, empowering organizations to communicate the demand for the socio-collegial aspect.

### 7.3 Applying Kotter's 8-Step Change Management Model

This paragraph outlines a recommendation for how the management of organisations, or call it companies, can integrate employee branding into their existing employer branding strategies. By applying Kotter's 8-Step Change Management Model, this paper offers not only a theoretical foundation for employee branding but also a practical suggestion for its implementation. As elaborated upon in the theoretical framework paragraph 4.3, Kotter's model provides a structured framework that emphasises the necessity of urgency for establishing transformation, while ensuring that this transformation becomes and remains embedded in organisational culture. The direct application of Kotter's model, in context with implementing employee branding, will be illustrated at the end of this paragraph in Model II.

It should be noted that there exist numerous change management frameworks to guide organisational transformation. However, this study identifies Kotter's Model as the most suitable for the context at hand. This because redefining an established employer brand, perhaps perceived as already functional and effective, requires the creation of a compelling narrative of urgency driven by strong leadership that is capable of guiding the organisation through a structured change process. That said, the methods Kotter proposes are not without critique. Some may argue that his emphasis on urgency aligns with the burning platform theory, in resemblance of insisting that change is necessary to avoid imminent failure, being a perspective that may not resonate with all organisational contexts.

As a brief example, an alternative to Kotter's model is that of Kurt Lewin's Change Management Model, which offers a more gradual and arguably less urgent approach. Lewin's model consists of three stages: 1) Unfreezing, where existing behaviours and processes are questioned and the need for change is established. 2) Change, where new practices are introduced and adopted. 3) Refreezing, where the changes are institutionalised and integrated into the organisation's culture (Hussain et al., 2018). This model could be valued for its simplicity and clarity, presenting a contrast to Kotter's more urgency-driven approach. Many other change management models could be considered and debated, however, this paper will not engage further in that discussion. The sole focus here is to suggest and recommend, on behalf of the analysis, that Kotter's model is sufficient for the implementation of employee branding. The following paragraph will now present the 8-steps required for transformation:

1) The adoption of employee branding must be driven by a transformational approach initiated by organisational leadership. Modifying established employer branding strategies is inherently complex and costly in both time and resources. Given that current employer



branding practices already are established and in function, it is necessary for leadership to develop a compelling narrative that clearly communicates the urgency of this transformation. This narrative should frame the transition from traditional employer branding to employee branding by emphasising its essential role in retaining current employees and attracting new in an evolving and competitive labor market. To support this sense of urgency, leadership should present credible and relevant data, such as insights from the survey (Appendix 1) and the Randstad workmonitor (Appendix 2), both of which highlight employees' increasing demand for socio-collegiality in the workplace. Referencing data from a widely respected international source like the Randstad Workmonitor will indeed be effective in strengthening the case for urgency. It is then recommended that leadership communicate the potential benefits of employee branding alongside the risks of failing to adapt, such as a decline in the ability to retain and attract talent, especially compared to competitors who might consider embracing employee branding. This dual messaging, highlighting both opportunity and risk, helps to counter complacency and build the urgency needed to drive momentum for transformation.

2) Driving this transformation should not rest on the shoulders of a single leader or department. Rather, it requires the formation of a guiding coalition that includes both leadership and employees working together in a strategic and collaborative manner. This coalition should initially comprise influential department heads and HR leaders, with HR playing a central role due to its affairs in recruitment and being the frontrunner in changing this. In addition, it is important to include influential employees from across the organisation, employees with informal authority and internal respect, in a leader position or not, who can advocate for change from the ground up. By involving representatives from different roles, departments, and seniority levels, the coalition ensures that the transformation effort is inclusive, representative, and able to resonate with the broader workforce on all organizational levels.

3) To build alignment and direction, the guiding coalition must formulate a clear and concise vision of employee branding, which can be shared with all employees. Furthermore, it is necessary to create a well-defined internal strategy for implementing it. The vision should paint a compelling picture of the desired future, highlighting how employee branding moves beyond conventional employer branding by placing greater value on the socio-collegial aspects. This vision acts as both a motivational tool and a unifying purpose, helping employees understand not only why the initiative matters, but also how their individual contributions can make a meaningful difference in the long run. The strategy accompanying this vision should serve as an internal roadmap, detailing the sequence of actions and milestones to be pursued in the implementation of employee branding. This should begin with low-risk initiatives, such as

creating and sharing pilot employee portraits, while simultaneously announcing the new strategy externally outwards to all. The initial creation of these portraits marks the beginning of the vision, therefore branding the company, both internally and externally, as one that fosters a stronger sense of community and emphasis on socio-collegial values. The vision and strategy should then outline that, over time, all employees will be included in the production of employee portraits for both internal and external use. The vision should then gradually evolve into a broader practice, where representation of employees becomes a defining feature in organisational culture. Hence, by proposing a vision and strategy that introduce initiatives progressing from simple to more complex, the guiding coalition can build momentum, reduce resistance, and support a sustainable, long-term transformation.

4) To effectively communicate this vision and strategy across all levels of the organisation, the guiding coalition must develop and use strategic discourse that make the vision tangible. It is recommended that leadership employ visual storytelling in the form of pilot-projects that showcase the structure of employee portraits, which effectively will bring the abstract concept of employee branding to life. Supplementary materials such as brochures, pamphlets, and meeting presentations will further visualise the principles of employee branding, while communicating to employees how this transformation positively affects the organisation's everyday culture. Most importantly, consistent repetition and reinforcement of the vision is essential. Leadership should use every opportunity and communication channel to embed the vision into daily routines, including regular updates on the progress of ongoing pilot projects concerning the construction of employee portraits. These visible, continuous efforts will help foster support and reduce resistance by making the transformation feel real, meaningful, and relatable.

5) It is essential that the organisation empowers employees to actively participate in and shape the transformation toward employee branding. After all, gaining employee consent is crucial, as they are being positioned as the face of the company's brand. In other words, employees must understand the principles of employee branding in order to accept and embrace it. It is recommended that this be achieved through accessible training tools, such as digital learning programs and in-person workshops, along with structured feedback mechanisms that allow employees to voice concerns, share experiences, and contribute valuable input toward shaping effective employee portraits. At this stage, it should also be considered that pilot projects begin incorporating personality tests into the creation of employee portraits, further empowering employees in attending the transformation of employee branding. Resistance at this stage should still be expected and welcomed as a natural part of the change process. For

many employees, traditional employer branding has been in place and functioning for as long as they have been with the organisation. Attempting to ignore or suppress this resistance would be counterproductive. Instead, it is recommended that the guiding coalition acknowledge and validate employee concerns through the selected employee advocates within the coalition. By addressing resistance at this stage, employees are more likely to feel included and empowered in the transformation process.

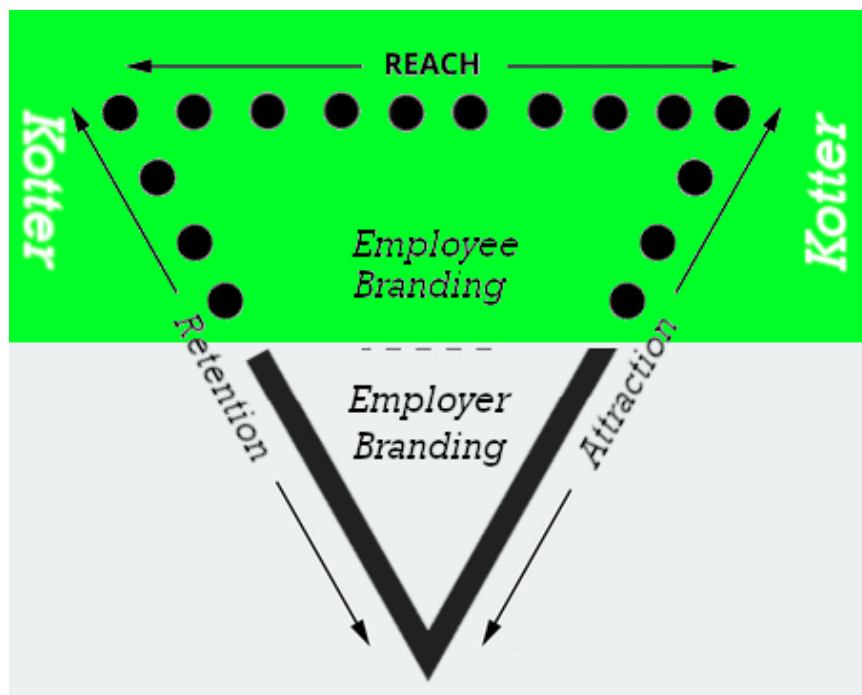
6) To sustain enthusiasm and momentum, leadership must present the first short-term wins planned as part of the strategy, thereby demonstrating tangible progress toward the vision. Celebrating these early successes is essential for reinforcing the message that the implementation of employee branding already is delivering positive results. It is recommended that leadership celebrate and showcase the completion of the first fully constructed employee portraits. As such, it is important to emphasise the impact of these employee portraits, plausibly by testimonials from recently hired employees, being influenced by the organisation's new employee branding approach. Additionally, leadership should share selected insights from feedback channels to demonstrate that employee input is valued and has a meaningful impact on the process. This directly supports employee retention by acknowledging their contributions in shaping the transformation, fostering a sense of ownership and commitment to the evolving brand. These small but visible achievements help build confidence in the initiative and maintain momentum throughout the organisation.

7) Building on the credibility established through short-term wins, leadership must now scale up the implementation of employee branding by fully integrating it into all HR processes. It should be consolidated as the central component in both talent attraction and employee retention strategies, signalling its role as a defining element of the organisation's culture. All recruitment, onboarding, and offboarding materials should reflect the human-centric aspect of employee branding, showcasing a comprehensive range of employee portraits across the organisation. With this broader integration, leadership should formally recognise and promote employees who have played key roles in advocating this transformation. The consolidation of these individuals then motivates further change by encouraging more employees to participate in and align with the transformation process, fostering continued momentum. At this stage, any resistance to the transformation should be actively addressed and resolved. Alignment is then crucial, as employee branding is no longer optional but an integral part of the organisation's evolving identity and culture. Thus, consolidating gains allows leadership to eliminate remaining complacency, paving the way for full adoption of employee branding into the organisational structure and culture.

8) It is now essential to solidify employee branding to ensure it evolves into a long-term vision embedded both in the organisational culture and in the mindset of employees. In other words, leadership must clearly showcase the overall positive effects of the transformation to demonstrate that it has fulfilled the expectations outlined in the previously presented vision. Leadership should actively and continuously celebrate these outcomes, reinforcing employee branding as a cultural norm. By doing so, it becomes an integrated part of daily operations and core organisational values, helping to prevent regression and sustain the transformation over time.

The following model presents a visual representation of how Kotter's 8-Step Change Management Model then can be strategically applied to extend traditional employer branding by embedding employee branding onto existing foundations. This paper recommends adopting Kotter's framework, recognising that while employer branding has achieved some success, its limitations necessitate a progression towards adopting employee branding. As emphasised in the analysis (Paragraph 7.1.5), this study finds it important to note that the potentially increasing employee attraction and retention should be considered as mutually reinforcing dynamics as well. Finally, to be concise, the green area in Model II illustrates the potential for both immediate and long-term outcomes, showing how the integration of employee branding can expand an organisation's capacity to attract and retain.

Model II



## 8 Conclusion

This paper finds that contemporary employer branding has increasingly become isomorphic in nature, characterised by standardised narratives and promises that have reached a stalemate in effectively attracting and retaining employees. Traditional employer branding now relies on uniform practices and vocabulary shaped by the formal and informal rules of the institutional environments in which organisations operate. Overall, organisational isomorphism has significantly restricted innovation in recruitment practices, leading to a stagnation in following the rapidly evolving demands of the global competitive labor market.

In response, this study proposes a transformative and revitalised shift, introducing employee branding as an established concept built upon a detailed theoretical framework and expanded theoretical literature review. The concept reorients focus away from employer-centric narratives and toward the socio-collegial dynamics of the workplace, emphasising that organisations must reinvent themselves in adopting the idea of branding its employees. Consequently, employee branding becomes a strategic tool that enables organisations to differentiate themselves in the labor market, establishing a more unique recruitment approach that simultaneously strengthens retention and attraction. At the same time, the concept provides job seekers with a clearer way to navigate a landscape dominated by isomorphic employer branding in offering deeper insights into the social fit within workplaces.

Employee branding coexists with employer branding, as it is not a replacement but an extension. It consciously moves beyond the formalities of corporate identity to highlight the individuals who constitute the workplace. In this regard, it is central to employee branding that organisations should brand socio-collegial aspects over the work itself. To guide organisations through adopting this transformation and its implications, this paper presents a comprehensive analytical framework for applying Kotter's 8-Step Change Management Model. This model facilitates a carefully guided transformation, ensuring employee branding becomes a sustainable cultural shift. The effects of the transformation present detailed employee and departmental portraits that will be integrated into recruitment strategies, showcasing personal lives, shared hobbies, family connections, friendships, and everyday interactions. These portraits humanise the organisational brand and positively influence employee attraction and retention. Ultimately, by applying Kotter's model, employee branding emerges as a direct extension of traditional employer branding. While this study critiques traditional employer branding for its isomorphic nature, it is important to acknowledge that employee branding depends on employer branding as its foundational base.

Findings from the analysis reveal that socio-collegial dynamics are highly valued by Generation Z and are increasingly resonating with other generations already present in the workforce. As Generation Z enters the labor market in growing numbers, this emphasis will drive a re-evaluation of workplace structures and organisational practices. In this context, it is the argument that Generation Z will act as generational advocates, serving as spokespeople for their generational cohort in influencing other generations present in the workforce. In this regard, employee branding stands a cross-generational concept.

It becomes clear that this paper stands in deliberate contrast to Milton Friedman's well-known assertion that 'the business of business is business' (Friedman 1970, as cited in Schwartz, 2009). Instead, this study proposes a reframing of that idea in the context of organisational branding, by arguing that the business of business is socio-collegiality. As employee attraction and retention grow increasingly challenging, organisations must fundamentally redefine their branding efforts by recognising that a workplace is defined not merely by tasks and responsibilities, but by the people who inhabit and co-create it. By repositioning socio-collegiality as the core of the business, organisations embrace the concept best by admitting it as a transformational urgency, illustrated by Kotter's model.

Overall, the paper challenges the traditional separation of work and life, arguing that the conventional concept of "work-life balance" no longer sufficiently captures the realities and expectations of modern employees. Rather than treating work and personal life as separate spheres, employee branding advocates for a more integrated approach, where meaningful aspects of employees' social lives are incorporated into organisational branding and culture. This integration not only fosters authenticity but also strengthens employee engagement, loyalty, and ultimately enhances the organisation's ability to attract and retain employees.

To be fully transparent, it is important to note that employee branding is not necessarily about creating genuine well-being, social connection, or employee health. Rather, it is about organisations branding such concepts, in many ways collectively referred to as socio-collegiality, to effectively attract and retain employees, regardless of whether that branding fully reflects reality. That said, it is difficult to brand socio-collegiality convincingly if it does not actually exist. As a concluding remark, this paper contributes to multiple research fields by bridging theoretical insights with practical recommendations for implementing employee branding within organisational structures. It is a proud accomplishment of both this paper and its author to have presented a new conceptualisation that is employee branding.

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## **10 Appendices**

**Appendix 1 – Survey (PDF)**

**Appendix 2 – Randstad Workmonitor (PDF)**

## **11 Reflection**

### **Problem-oriented competencies**

I have always been curious about why people choose certain workplaces and how organizations can most effectively attract employees. This curiosity has driven me to conduct extensive research on the subject, both through my university specialization and my employment at Randstad. Through many different university lectures, I have gained a strong foundation in HR and management theories, while my hands-on experience with job selection at Randstad has provided practical insights. These combined academic and professional experiences have helped me to concretize the concept of employee branding and deeper interest in exploring this phenomenon further, particularly in analysing how it can be applied by organisations.

### **Interpersonal competencies**

My employment and internship experience with Randstad have definitely equipped me with valuable tools and insights that shaped the direction of my research. More specifically, working at Randstad has developed my competencies in understanding job selection. In this context, I have actively attempted to apply theories learned at university directly in my student job, creating a meaningful connection between academic knowledge and practical experience. This interplay between theory and practice has been incredibly valuable in fuelling my desire to conceptualize and explore employee branding more deeply.

### **Structural competencies**

Throughout my time at university, I have consistently approached assignments by producing as much material as possible early on and correcting it later in the process. I work in momentum rather than following a strict plan, as I thrive by working dynamically and adapting as I go. This approach is what works best for me when producing papers but is also a central trait of my personality. I have always been very honest about this working method in group settings, working quite well when paired with a different working style or personality.

### **Metacognitive competencies**

I have always enjoyed working with theories, however, the most satisfying aspect for me is presenting something like this paper, being an academic contribution with practical relevance that can be applied in the real world. Ultimately, it is this potential for real-world impact that brings me the greatest sense of fulfillment. As a final remark, it has also been my ambition to deepen my understanding in the philosophy of science during this semester, which is reflected in the expanded paragraph dedicated to the topic in this paper.