Recruiting and Retaining Labour in Agricultural Businesses
- a Multiple Case Study of Employer Branding in Swedish Agriculture

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Abstract

There is an increasing need for competent workforce in the agricultural sector, but a lack of potential candidates on the labour market. In June 2017, the Swedish state adopted a new national food strategy. This strategy points out the direction of the Swedish food policy until 2030. The overall goal of the strategy is to create a competitive food sector that increases food production in Sweden and contributes to sustainable development. With this goal, the strategy also aims to create more jobs and sustainable growth in the Swedish food supply chain.

However, the Federation of Swedish Farmers presented a report in 2018 saying that there is a lack of labour in the Swedish agricultural industry. In fact, 8 out of 10 companies in the sector found it hard to attract and acquire competent labour, according to the report. The problem of not finding the right employees can inhibit the development opportunities for the companies. The companies in the agricultural sector needs to be associated with a positive employment experience and differentiate their identity as employers to become more attractive to potential employees. To create a competitive edge in recruiting and retaining employees, companies can invest time and resources in employer branding practices to become and remain a desired employer in the eyes of the employee.

The aim of this study is to investigate employer branding practices to attract, recruit and retain employees in Swedish agricultural businesses. The goal of this aim is to understand how agricultural businesses work to attract and retain employees with the right competence by using employer branding practices. With a qualitative research approach this study investigates the employer branding practices of eight different cases consisting of farmers in the region of Mälardalen, Sweden. A theoretical framework consisting of theories within employer branding has been created in order to identify different components and give an understanding of how farmers work with employer branding practices in the processes of recruiting and retaining employees.

Key findings are that farmers in Sweden invest in their employer brand and develop employer branding strategies and activities. The companies develop their employee value propositions, consisting of attributes and promises that makes them attractive to the targeted audience of potential employees. The proposition includes both tangible and intangible benefits such as accommodation, flexible working hours and good workplace culture. The companies also do their best to fulfil these promises throughout the employment to motivate and develop the staff, with a goal to increase retention and create value for the organization.

The most important part of the employer brand, according to the respondents, were their reputation as an employer. Thus, to increase the employer attractiveness, there is a great opportunity for improvement by engaging further in employer branding practices that benefits the reputation as an employer.

Sammanfattning

Det finns ett ökande behov av kompetent arbetskraft inom jordbrukssektorn, men brist på potentiella kandidater på arbetsmarknaden. I juni 2017 tog Sveriges riksdag ett beslut om en ny nationell livsmedelsstrategi. Denna strategi anger riktningen för den svenska livsmedelspolitiken fram till 2030. Strategins övergripande mål är att skapa en konkurrenskraftig livsmedelssektor som ökar livsmedelsproduktionen i Sverige och bidrar till hållbar utveckling. Med detta mål syftar strategin också till att skapa fler jobb och hållbar tillväxt i den svenska livsmedelskedjan.

LRF presenterade år 2018 en rapport där de konstaterar att det saknas arbetskraft i den svenska livsmedelssektorn. Enligt rapporten så anser 8 av 10 företag i sektorn att det svårt att attrahera och rekrytera kompetent arbetskraft. Problemet med att inte hitta rätt anställda kan hämma utvecklingsmöjligheterna för företagen. Att vara anställd inom jordbrukssektorn måste associeras med något positivt och företagen behöver differentiera sin identitet som arbetsgivare för att bli mer attraktiva för potentiella anställda. För att skapa en konkurrensfördel i rekrytering och för att behålla anställda kan företag investera tid och resurser i att utveckla sitt arbetsgivarvarumärke. Employer branding involverar alla aktiviteter i att utveckla och marknadsföra arbetsgivarvarumärket för att bli och förbli en attraktiv arbetsgivare.

Syftet med denna studie är att undersöka hur svenska lantbrukare utvecklar och marknadsför deras arbetsgivarvarumärke genom Employer branding för att attrahera, rekrytera och behålla anställda. Målet med detta syfte är att förstå hur jordbruksföretag arbetar för att attrahera och behålla anställda med rätt kompetens. Med en kvalitativ forskningsstrategi undersöker denna studie arbetsgivarvarumärken i åtta olika fall. Fallen består av jordbrukare i regionen Mälardalen, Sverige. Studien använder sig utav ett teoretiskt ramverk uppbyggt av teorier om Employer branding och arbetsgivarvarumärken för att identifiera olika komponenter och ge en förståelse för hur jordbrukare arbetar med processerna för att rekrytera och behålla anställda.

Resultatet av denna studie visar att jordbrukare i Sverige investerar i sitt arbetsgivarvarumärke och utvecklar strategier och aktiviteter vid rekrytering och behållandet av arbetskraft genom. Företagen utvecklar sina värdeerbjudanden (Employee value proposition), bestående av förmåner och löften som gör dem attraktiva för potentiella anställda. Värdeerbjudandet innehåller både konkreta och abstrakta fördelar som boende, flexibel arbetstid och god arbetsplatskultur. Företagen gör också sitt bästa för att uppfylla dessa löften under hela anställningen för att motivera och utveckla personalen, med ett mål att skapa lojalitet och behålla anställda samt skapa värde för organisationen.

Den viktigaste delen av arbetsgivarmärket var enligt respondenterna deras rykte som arbetsgivare. För att öka arbetsgivarnas attraktivitet finns det därför en stor möjlighet till förbättring genom att ytterligare engagera sig i Employer branding och arbetsgivarvarumärket för att bygga ett positivt rykte som arbetsgivare.

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1 Introduction

The introduction describes the background of the study. The chapter also contains the problem statement, the aim, the research questions and the delimitations of the study.

1.1 Background

According to FAO (2009), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nation, the world population is growing and so is the demand for food. FAO predicts that the world population will increase to 9.1 billion by the year of 2050 (FAO 2009). This means that the population will increase by more than 30 %. The global population growth will mostly take place in developed countries and the general income level in these countries will be considerably higher than today (ibid.). As a result of this development, a large part of the world population will require more meat, dairy and other types of processed food products (Godfray *et al.* 2010). To be able to meet this demand, the food production must increase substantially (FAO 2009). In Sweden, a similar population trend can be seen (SCB 2019). Since the beginning of 2000, the population of Sweden has grown by approximately 15 % (ibid).

This highlights the importance of an efficient and effective food production both globally and nationally. Sweden has favourable conditions for growing food as the weather is suitable most years and there are plenty of resources regarding soil and water (KSLA 2019). As seen over time the arable land in Sweden has decreased because it has been taken out of production due to forestation, urbanization or left without any use (ibid.). At the same time, the Royal Swedish Academy of Engineering Sciences (IVA) and the Royal Swedish Academy of Agriculture and Forestry (KSLA) state that Sweden should increase the national production of food (IVA & KSLA 2019). Thus, Swedish agricultural companies needs to be effective and efficient.

According to Elving *et al.* (2013) many previous studies has shown that people are an important and valuable asset for the success and effectiveness of an organization (Cable & Judge 1996; Balmer *et al.* 2001; Backhaus & Tikoo 2004; Berthon *et al.* 2005; Mosley 2007). Competent employees and the influence they have on the organizational reputation are crucial to the organization´s competitive strength (Gotsi & Wilson 2001). In 2018, the Federation of Swedish Farmers (LRF) presented a report stating that there is a lack of labour in the Swedish agricultural and food sector. Further, there is a need for growth and efficiency in these sectors and in order to achieve this, the companies need to be able to find and acquire competent labour (LRF 2018). In a chronicle by Lena-Liisa Tengblad, CEO at the employer organization Gröna Arbetsgivare, she highlights the acute labour shortage in Sweden´s agricultural sector (Tengblad 2020).

> *"Without access to competent labour, Swedish forestry and agriculture will stop".*
> – Lena-Liisa Tengblad (Tengblad 2020).

The topic is occurring more often in Swedish media and the agricultural newspaper ATL posted a chronicle in 2018 that the problem of not finding competent labour is inhibiting Swedish agriculture (Bergman 2018). In an article from the newspaper Lantbrukets Affärer it is proposed that even though this is a big problem, human resources exist in society that can be important for the needs of the agricultural sector (Lovang & Zwörner 2016). In 2019 the unemployment rate in Sweden was 6,8%, which represents people who can work but have no employment (SCB 2020). Several articles in agricultural newspapers are highlighting that the agricultural sector is an important sector for employment and that employers needs to be more attractive to job seekers (Arai 2020a; b).

Competition from other sectors can be one of the reasons for the lack of agricultural labour (LRF 2018). One way to strengthen the competitiveness in terms of attracting labour can be through strategic marketing. Marketing can be defined as the effort to find and stimulate buyers for the product of a specific firm (Kotler & Levy 1969). This involves everything from developing the product and pricing to communication and distribution of the product to the consumer (ibid.). However, the term marketing can be so much more than just promoting a specific product. The concept is applicable towards both the consumer market as well as the labour market through the development of brands. The definition of a brand is the commitments a seller does to identify and differentiate their products or firm from their competitors (Barich & Kotler 1991). Brand knowledge can be both positive or negative and affects how the business is perceived on the market (Keller 1993). The brand marketing can also focus on employees and the benefits of working for a certain organization (Berthon *et al.* 2005). The marketing of the employment supports the concept that an employee is an internal customer and the job is an internal product, making the employees the first market (George *et al.* 1989). The importance of employment advertising and employment branding will grow as companies seek to attract and keep competent employees (Berthon *et al.* 2005). Berthon *et al.* (2005) argues that the competition for employees might be as fierce in the future as the competition for customers.

1.2 Problem

"*In the year of 2030, the Swedish food supply chain is globally competitive, innovative, sustainable and **attractive to work in**"*   – The Swedish Government (2017).

In June 2017, the Swedish state adopted a new national food strategy (The Swedish Government 2017). This strategy points out the direction of the Swedish food policy until 2030. The overall goal of the strategy is to create a competitive food sector that increases food production in Sweden and contributes to sustainable development. With this goal, the strategy also aims to create more jobs and sustainable growth in the Swedish food supply chain (ibid.). According to the Swedish government, there is a belief that the Swedish food sector is in a good place to contribute in form of employments to the society (ibid.). Thus, there is a need for agricultural businesses to increase the attraction towards potential employees to be able to fill these vacancies in the industry. To realise the Swedish national food strategy, the agricultural workforce needs to be strong and competitive.

1.2.1 Empirical Problem
The need for labour and competence is something that is mentioned in the Swedish agricultural media and among politicians and professional organizations. According to the leading business organization in Sweden, Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, seven out of ten companies in Sweden find it difficult to find the right employees (Cale 2018). In the food sector the problem is even bigger, where eight out of ten companies state that they are experiencing problems finding the right employees and that this limits their business operations (LRF 2018). According to a report published by The Swedish Public Employment Service (2019) about the labour market in Sweden, there is a lack of manpower in the agricultural sector. Consequences following the labour shortage are that companies may be forced to reduce their production, avoid investments or settle with manpower that does not meet the qualifications required (LRF 2018). The problem of not finding the right employees therefore inhibits the development opportunities for the companies (ibid.). As the Swedish food sector is facing challenges related to the supply of manpower, there also exists an imminent demographic challenge within the current workforce.

In 2016, a third of the Swedish farmers were over 65 years old and only 1 out of 6 farmers were under 45 years old (LRF 2018). The agricultural sector therefore stands before a demographic problem when a big part of the workforce will retire in the near future. The businesses will then have to replace these retiring employees and the competence that they possess. The demographic problem can therefore result in a skill and knowledge loss within the companies and will increase the need for new workforce and competence in the agricultural sector. These demographic problems result in an increasing competition for the decreasing pool of competent workers. This highlights the importance of the employer to be attractive to new potential employees. The best employers will experience almost twice as many job applicants compared to their competitors (Drury 2016). Which means that they get an advantage to recruit from a bigger pool of competent workers and choose the best applicants (ibid.).

The companies in the agricultural sector is also facing structural changes that may affect the need of finding new employees. As demonstrated in figure 1, nearly 39% of the people working in Swedish agriculture are business owners, 46% are employed family members to the business owner and the remaining 15 % are external non-family employees (Swedish Board of Agriculture 2016b). A current structural trend in the agricultural sector is a decrease in the number of businesses due to the evolution of bigger farms (Swedish Board of Agriculture 2016a). The number of agricultural holdings in Sweden declined from 1990 to 2016 (ibid.). These structural changes, which lead to fewer and bigger businesses, will in turn lead to fewer business owners and therefore also fewer family members that can be employed in the sector (Swedish Board of Agriculture 2016b). The need for external workforce, which are not related to the business owner, in the agricultural sector is therefore increasing as the farms still need to produce more food for a growing population.

People Working in Swedish Agriculture
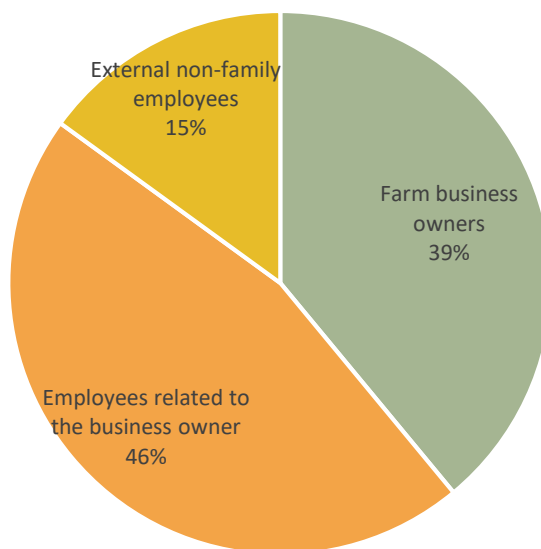
Figure 1: People working in Swedish agriculture (own processing based on Swedish Board of Agriculture 2016b).

1.2.2 Theoretical Problem

As proposed in the previous section there is an increasing need for competent workforce but a lack of manpower on the labour market (The Swedish Government 2017; LRF 2018; The Swedish Public Employment Service 2019). The companies in the agricultural sector need to

be associated with a positive employment experience and differentiate their identity as employers from competitors to become more attractive to potential employees (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004). In other words, the companies have to improve and strengthen their employer identity (ibid). A business´ ability to identify and manage the lack or need of human capital is important for the growth and competitiveness of a company (Barth 2001). The definition of human capital as a resource within an organization includes the relevant experience, skills and knowledge of the workforce (Becker 1975). According to Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), theories about human resource management and marketing converges to support the concept of employer branding, which is an important concept for companies that want to attract human capital and manage their human resources. Employer branding can be defined as the efforts of a company to become attractive as an employer (Ambler & Barrow 1996; Backhaus & Tikoo 2004; Berthon *et al.* 2005).

Several studies conducted in the field of employer branding investigates the components and strategies that are useful for the employer brand and its attractiveness (Berthon *et al.* 2005; Wilden *et al.* 2010; Chhabra & Sharma 2014). There is, however, not a large amount of research that focuses on employer branding in the agricultural sector (Berghäll 2015; Hana *et al.* 2017).

Knowledge on employer branding practices in the agricultural sector is underdeveloped and this gap in knowledge is what this study begins to address. By investigating employer branding in practice, this study produces an understanding about employer branding that can help farmers to improve activities of recruiting and retaining employees. Specifically, the results of this study highlight key employer branding factors identified by farmers as well as the main challenges for developing such practices. Knowledge about recruiting and retaining agricultural labour in general, and employer branding practises in particular can contribute to fulfil a part of the Swedish National Food Strategy.

1.3 Aim and delimitations

The aim of this study is to investigate employer branding practices to attract, recruit and retain employees in Swedish agricultural businesses. The goal of this aim is to provide an understanding of how agricultural businesses work to attract and retain employees with the right competence by using employer branding practices. In order to achieve this aim, the following questions will be answered;

- How do Swedish farmers use employer branding practises in order to recruit and retain employees?

- What are the opportunities for Swedish farmers to improve processes of recruiting and retaining employees via employer branding practices?

This study is examining recruitment processes and practices in the context of Swedish agricultural businesses. This examination is focused on farm level practices and from the employer's perspective. By applying this limitation, the study choses to not view this issue from a macro level perspective. Hence, it is possible to argue that this issue can be connected to labour market polices and regulations. Furthermore, the study is geographically delimitated to the region of Mälardalen, in the middle part of Sweden. This limitation was set with the purpose of collecting data from farms with similar geographic prerequisites. Further limitations will determine the choice of respondents. A limitation in this study is the small number of respondents. However, according to Yin (2003) at least five cases in a multiple case study provides a useful foundation for developing theory. This is appropriate in a field of study and

context that is poorly researched (Maxwell & Knox 2009). The level of consistency in the results of this study argue for the significance it has for practice and theory in the employer branding area.

2 Theory

In this chapter, a literature review and overview are presented followed by the theoretical framework of this study.

2.1 Literature review

The literature review is conducted to find information that is relevant for the study. This is done by going through earlier research in a systematic way. The concept of employer branding is complex and broad as it expands to several different research fields. There is therefore an emphasis and objective on finding relevant information, rather than comprehensive, about the topic. Therefore, the focus was firstly directed towards the broad concept of employer branding to be able to identify and sort out relevant literature. Then the literature review was narrowed down to find research on employer branding that was more relevant in the agricultural context of this study. The literature review serves as a base for the formulation of the interview questions used in this study to answer the research questions.

The literature review was conducted using books and articles found at the SLU University Library, as well as searching electronic databases such as Google Scholar and Primo. The literature review was carried out between January and April in 2020 and the number of hits for fundamental search terms are presented in table 1. Reviewing the literature, based on these fundamental search terms, reveals that there exists prior relevant research on the concept of employer branding. However, when narrowed with the search term "agriculture" the number of hits decreases substantially.

Table 1: Fundamental search terms and number of hits on Google Scholar and Primo

Search term	Google Scholar (hits)	Primo (hits)
"employer brand"OR " employer branding"	17400	1 476
"employee value proposition"	3200	159
"employer attractiveness"	3280	252
"employer branding"AND agriculture	1 370	10

Ambler and Barrow (1996) first discussed the concept of employer branding. Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) conducted a study on the concept and stated that in 2004 the search term "employer branding" generated over 3000 hits using two big search engines on the internet. The same search term on the same search engines in 2020 generate millions of hits. The interest in employer branding as a topic has increased tremendously, not at least in the academic world.

2.1.1 Literature overview

To provide guidance on how theories are used to fulfil the purpose and aim of this study, a set of relevant theories are presented. The most fundamental theories, concepts and references are presented in table 2. In this study the concept of employer branding acts as a theoretical umbrella to the theories presented to define, develop and communicate the employer brand.

Table 2: Fundamental theories, concepts and references.

Theories	Concepts	Key References
Employer Branding	Definition and communication of the employer brand	Ambler & Barrow (1996) Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) Berthon *et al.* (2005)
Employee value proposition (EVP)	Creation of employer brand strength and employer attractiveness	Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) Botha (2011) Rosethorn (2009)

There are many different concepts of employer branding. This is inevitable when it is a broad and complex concept that is applicable in several different fields of research. The theoretical part of the study is therefore broken down to create a comprehensive overview based on the purpose of this study which is illustrated in figure 2.
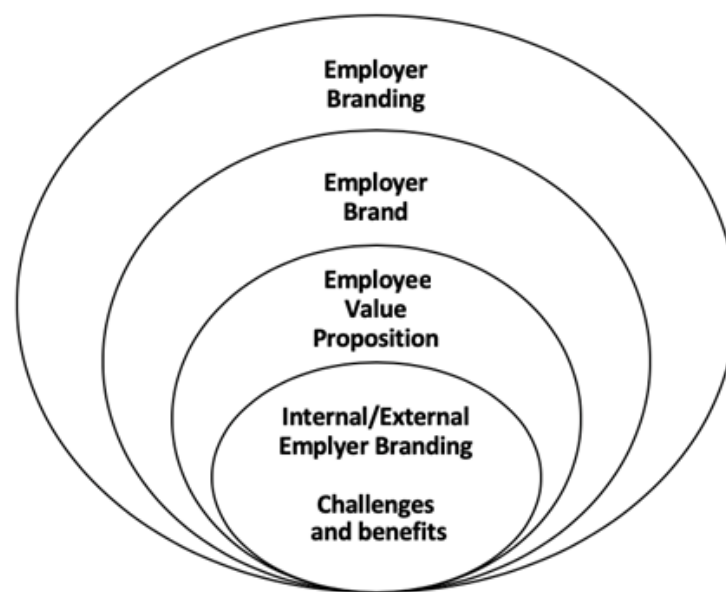
Figure 2: Comprehensive overview of the theories and concept.

The first step when studying the concept of employer branding is to understand the concept of an employer brand. The employer brand is what differentiate the company from competitors and makes it attractive as an employer (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004). When developing and managing the employer brand the company first develop their employee value proposition (EVP). The EVP provides information of what the employment can offer to current and potential employees, which is incorporated into the employer brand (ibid.). The employer brand is communicated through different employer branding processes both externally and internally to build and develop the employer brand strength and employer attractiveness of the company. All of these efforts conducted by the company to develop, manage and communicate the employer brand is in study gathered under the concept of employer branding. The different concepts are further explained in this chapter.

2.2 Recruiting and retaining employees

According to Harris and Brannick (1999) many companies do not invest the time, money or resources needed to find and retain the right employees. They do not focus their efforts on the

right visions and goals in recruitment and therefore inhibit their own possibilities (ibid.). However, some companies regard the recruitment and retaining process as the most important challenge and understand that investing in potential and current employees affect not only *what* is done inside the company but also *how* things are done (ibid.). All the companies within the agricultural sector face the same demographic problems with large retiring generations and low attractiveness on the labour market. Still some companies achieve more success in recruiting and developing their competent workforce.

Barth (2001) identifies several challenges that a firm can experience when recruiting and regarding the ability to keep employees with the organization. Such challenges can include the absence of control methods or routines of processes within the company, such as the inability to identify competence needs in form of work force or skill and knowledge (ibid.). Barth (2001) classified the lack of competence in three different categories based on Green & Ashton (1992). Firstly, a business may experience difficulties in filling vacancies because there is a shortage of manpower on the market of potential employees (Green & Ashton 1992). Secondly, if the business needs a specific knowledge and skill to perform certain tasks, they can experience a "skill gap" with the current employees (ibid.). A common solution to this is that businesses simply accept the lack of skill with their current employees which results in a situation where the business does not perform optimally (Barth 2001). Lastly, a business may experience a challenge of not being able to identify the gap between the existing level of competence and the needed level of competence (Green & Ashton 1992). In order to identify and avoid these challenges regarding gaps in competence and shortage of labour, it is important that businesses analyse and develop the existing internal competence (Barth 2001).

There also exist challenges regarding the limitations of the management and leadership in the firm (Barth 2001). The nature of such limitations derives from the company's, specifically the business leader's, inability to exploit and develop immaterial skills, such as knowledge, talent and understanding of tasks (ibid.) Further, Barth (2001) identifies challenges such as regulations and bureaucracy that affects the business. As these factors often include creditors and the state, the small business owner can among other things be overwhelmed by the obligation to stay updated on information that may be important for the business (ibid.). Small business owners can also experience challenges to attract and keep competent labour because of cultural factors and values (ibid.). Such challenges may be that the candidates are unwilling to apply for employment at smaller companies, as these jobs are not considered secure (Keegan *et al.* 1997; Vesalainen *et al.* 1997). This is something that in turn leads to problems with the supply of workforce and competence. Arthur (2005) proposes a list of guidelines for successful recruiting, and it all start with being attractive as an employer. When considering applicants for a job vacancy the impressions goes both ways, the employer seeks to know if the applicants are the right ones for the company and the applicants want to find out if the company is the right workplace for them.

According to Barney *et al.* (2001), the employees play an important role in organisations strive for success. Generally, competition for competence is strong in developed economies (Wilden *et al.* 2010). Further, Wilden *et al.* (2010) argues that organisations should apply recruitment strategies in order to attract and hire competent labour. This is particularly important in labour markets with high competition for skilled and competent employees (ibid.). One useful way of working with recruiting and marketing is employer branding (ibid). When the job vacancy is filled, the recruitment process may be over, but the employer still needs to compete with competitors on the labour market to retain the employee. To create a competitive edge in recruiting and retaining employees, companies can invest time and resources to enhance their employer brand.

2.3 Employer Branding

Ambler and Barrow (1996, p. 187) first defined the concept of employer brand as: "*the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company*". This definition of the employer brand suggests that a company can differentiate itself from its competitors as an employer and thus become the employer of choice. This is similar to the definition by Backhaus and Tikoo (2004, p. 502) who defined the concept of employer brand as: *"a concept of the firm that differentiates it from its competitors"*. There are several benefits that a company can take advantage of by having a strong employer brand. Some examples are improved relations with the employees, improved employee retention and reduced cost both regarding recruitment and the ability to offer lower salaries compared to other employers (Ritson 2002). These benefits are products of the policies, behaviour and values of the company that guide the work to become attractive as an employer along with the ability to retain employees. Employer branding therefore refers to the efforts of a company to develop and influence the employer brand both internally and externally, which make the company desirable as an employer (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004).

According to Lloyd (2002) the process of employer branding can be described as: "*sum of a company's efforts to communicate to existing and prospective staff that it is a desirable place to work*" (cited in Berthon *et al.* 2005 pp. 153). Backhaus and Tikoo (2004, p. 502) define the concept of employer branding as: *"the process of building an identifiable and unique employer identity"*. It is a concept of building an image of the workplace that is appealing to potential and current employees (Ewing *et al.* 2002). This concept allocates the responsibility to the business leader to satisfy the needs of what can be defined as the first customer, the employee (George *et al.* 1989). It involves every step of attracting, hiring, developing, motivating and retaining the potential and current human capital for the benefit of the company. This concept is based on the assumption that human capital brings value to the firm and that investing in the human capital will benefit the performance of the firm (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004). The assumption is important as it provides relevance for the concept of employer branding. Barney (1991) proposes the idea that the possession of a resource, that is unique and difficult to obtain, is beneficial for the competitiveness of a business.

According to Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) employer branding can be described as a three-step process that starts with the value proposition of the employer. The value proposition of a company towards employees is called the employee value proposition (EVP). These propositions consist of particular values a company can offer to their workforce. The concept of the employee value proposition is developed using information about the factors that define the organization, such as the workplace culture, the leadership, qualities of the current employees, impressions of the company's products or services and the current employment image (Sullivan 2002). The value proposition is to be embodied in the employer brand that is marketed to potential employees.

The employer branding process can further be divided in to external and internal marketing of the employer brand (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004). The main focus of the external marketing of the employer brand is to attract the target population of potential candidates. External marketing of the employer brand allows the firm to attract resources in form of human capital (ibid). The internal marketing of the employer brand aims to control that the brand stays true to what is marketed externally. The value propositions are incorporated into the organizational culture due to the internal marketing and the workforce becomes devoted to the collective values and goals of the firm (ibid.) Internal marketing of the employer brand will allow the firm to develop and

maintain a competent workforce (ibid.). The internal marketing is important for employee retention and productivity (Ambler & Barrow 1996: Backhaus & Tikoo 2004).

Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) proposed a conceptual framework of employer branding, an integration of human resource management and marketing concepts. An illustration of this conceptual framework is presented in figure 3. The conceptual framework presented by Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) is based on the definition of employer branding as an umbrella for the firm's human resource strategies and activities. The employer branding practices can be divided into two different branches of principal assets, employer brand associations and employer brand loyalty, which are further described in the following chapters 2.3.2 and 2.3.3 (ibid.). These different branches of the conceptual framework represent the external and internal focus of employer branding practices.

Figure 3: Employer branding conceptual framework (own processing based on Backhaus & Tikoo 2004).

2.3.1 External Employer Branding
Employer branding associations is part of the external focus of employer branding. The efforts devoted to employer branding by the firm provide the stakeholder with different associations of the company. This can be everything that affects the stakeholders mind and together they form the image of the firm (Aaker 1991; Backhaus & Tikoo 2004). Employer image is what builds attraction to the firm in the minds of potential employees and it is the key to attracting new employees (Backhaus 2016). According to Gioia *et al.* (2000) the insiders construct the image which is conveyed to outsider to create a positive reputation of the organization. The employer brand image that is conveyed consists of both symbolic and instrumental elements (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004).

The symbolic elements are the subjective, intangible and abstract attributes of the employment (Lievens *et al.* 2007). Envisioned benefits of working for the specific firms attract potential employees as the image gives a subjective perception of the firm's attributes as an employer (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004). The subjective perceptions are related to organizational prestige and imagined social approval of employment (Backhaus 2016). The instrumental elements of the employer image are the objective, tangible and physical attributes of the employment like compensation, working hours, location and benefits (Lievens *et al.* 2007; Backhaus 2016).

2.3.2 Internal Employer Branding
The other part of the two principal assets in figure 3 is the employer brand loyalty, which is a part of the internal focus of employer branding. Organizational identity and organizational culture contribute to employer brand loyalty (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004). The concept of building loyalty between the employer and the employee is important in retaining competent workforce. Such loyalty can keep employees with the firm even if current conditions favour working for

competitors (ibid.). According to Bass & Avolio (1993) the culture is built by the leadership as well as it affects the leadership.

Internal marketing, such as employer branding, is a tool to accomplish culture changes, which is important to keep the culture productive and supportive (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004). Investing time and resources in the organizational culture affects not only *what* is done by the employees but *how* it is done (Harris and Brannick 1999). The ever-evolving culture acts as a reference for the employee's values and behaviour (ibid.). Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) defines organizational identity as how employees identify with the business. According to Dutton *et al.* (1994) an organizational identity can be more or less attractive to employees.

As employees seek to identify with their current workplace, it is a task of leadership to create and develop the organizational identity (Dutton *et al.* 1994; Backhaus & Tikoo 2004). These are concepts that build the employer brand loyalty, which in turn contributes positively to employee productivity and retention (Ambler & Barrow 1996; Backhaus & Tikoo 2004).

2.4 Employee value proposition

The concept of value proposition originates from the research field of marketing management. Lusch *et al.* (2007 p. 13) defines value proposition as: *"a promise the seller makes that value-in-exchange will be linked to value-in-use".* A similar relationship exists between the employer and the employee. The employee value proposition (EVP) has an important role in communicating how a firm aims to provide value to current and potential employees. According to Goswani (2015 p. 263) the EVP is an effective tool of employer branding as it "*outlines the desired and desirable requisites of employees related to employment"*. The EVP can be defined as the core of everything that the employer branding is meant to be communicating. According to Eisenberg *et al.* (2001) the EVP is the central message of the employer brand which is developed and communicated through employer branding practices. Backhaus & Tikoo (2004, p. 510) defines the relationship between the concept of EVP and employer branding: *"employer branding is an effort by the organization to market its employment value proposition in order to improve recruitment and retention and increase the value of human capital".* The employee value proposition and its role in providing strength to the employer brand is illustrated in figure 4, based on Rosethorn (2009). The illustration proposes that a strong employer brand is based on the EVP and the actual delivery of the proposition promises throughout the employment (ibid.).
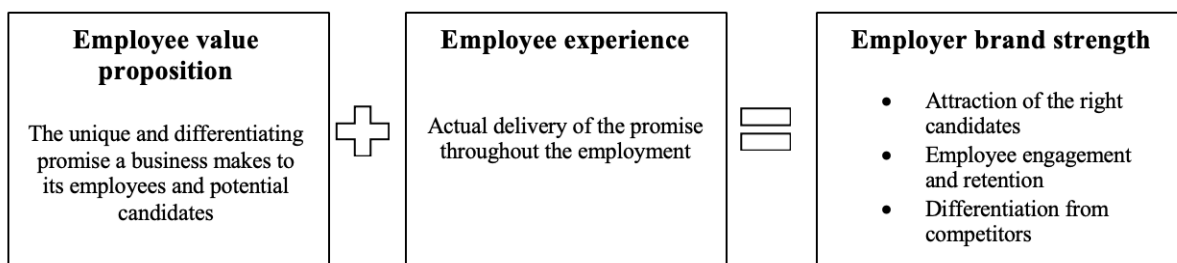

Figure 4: Employee value proposition and the employer brand (own processing based on Rosethorn, 2009).

When attracting competent candidates to the workplace, the employee value proposition should be the most compelling reason or feeling for these potential employees to join the company (Rosethorn 2009). There has to be a strong and sustainable relationship between the needs of

the employer and the employee to create value for both parts. Therefore, it is vital that the communication of the EVP is accurate and true. This will motivate employees to be engaged and productive, instead of being disappointed by empty and false promises (ibid.). According to Rosethorn (2009) an engaging and motivating EVP has to be unique and attractive.

A firm is developing the EVP so that the current and potential employee's expectations and image of the company is correct and attractive. The EVP are the core values and offers that is conveyed by the employer branding process and is what distinguish and differentiate the firm as an employer from competitors. A differentiated EVP provides a concise and fair image of what makes an employer attractive (Botha *et al.* 2011). It is defined as the benefits and attributes of specific employer that will attract potential employees to employment and retain current employees (ibid.). According to Botha *et al.* (2011) the literature on EVP suggest that a differentiated EVP plays an important role for a successful and strong employer brand. In summary, the desired benefits and ambition of a firm when developing an attractive EVP is employer attractiveness.

2.5 Employer Branding opportunities

Berthon *et al.* (2005) suggest that employer branding and the desired goal of employer attractiveness are underdeveloped concepts, especially the latter. However, according to Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) the concepts has the potential to be valuable for business leaders. The employer brand as an asset provides a useful tool for the employer to be competitive on the labour market. When addressing the targeted population in advertising activities, the job as the marketed product, should attract, motivate and develop current and potential employees (Berthon *et al.* 2005). It is important that the behaviour and identity of the employees align with the employer brand to reinforce and not undermine the brand itself (ibid.). This supports the idea that the employees are the company's first customers and that the external marketing of the employer brand is based on the associations and images that are created within the organization. If the employer brand is attractive, the organization will be regarded as an attractive place to work and will more likely become the employer of choice (Figurska & Matuska 2013). An attractive employer brand helps the company attract the right competence which leads to higher productivity and competitiveness (ibid.). Figurska and Matuska (2013) propose several benefits of creating an attractive employer brand through employer branding, see figure 5.
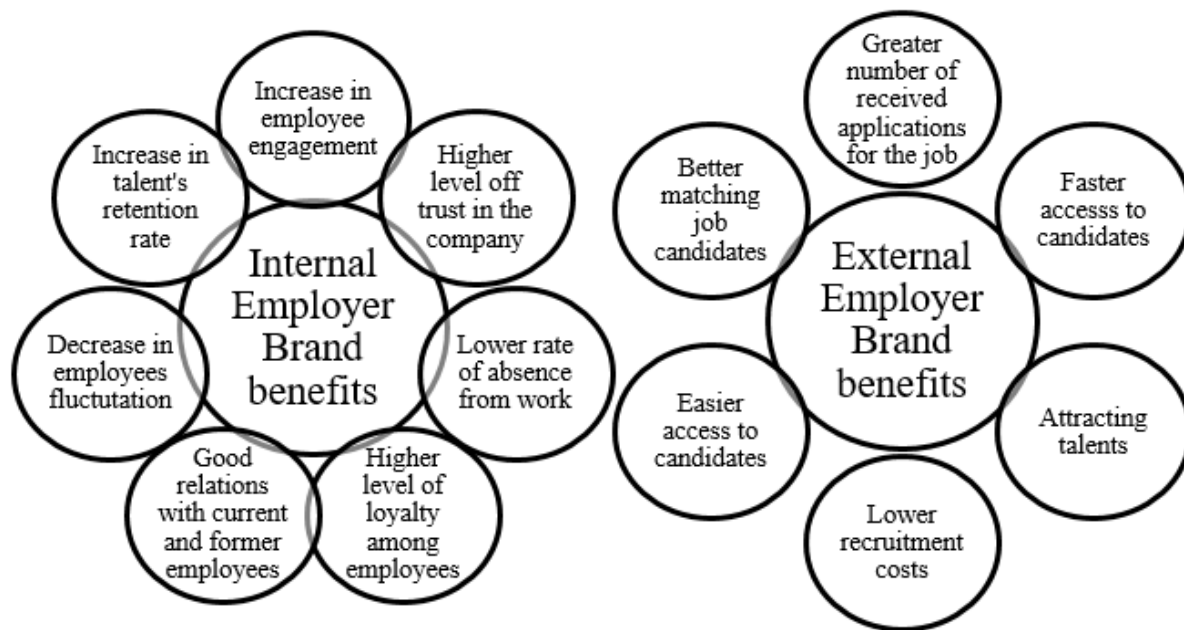
Figure 5: External and internal benefits of an attractive employer brand (own process based on Figurska & Matuska 2013).

To be able to benefit from the employer brand effectively the organization need to understand the factors of employer attractiveness in their specific context (Berthon *et al.* 2005). The success of these factors relies on the organizations ability to communicate the employer brand externally. Wilden *et al.* (2010) found that investments to create and develop the employer brand, creates a perception that the employers care about the employees. Further, Wilden *et al.* (2010) found that important investments in the employer brand are investments in employee development, participation in career fairs, career websites, advertising in magazines, internships, networks and participating in employer of choice awards. The perception of the communication is subjective and Wilden *et al.* (2010) proposes that word-of-mouth is the most effective channel for the employer brand as it provides credibility.

2.6 Communicating the employer brand

The concept word-of-mouth can be defined as an informal way of oral communication between at least two persons regarding reflections, experiences and opinions about a company, a brand, a product or a service (Iuliana-Raluca 2012). Since word-of-mouth is considered to be an informal type of communication, it is also not seen as bias of any organization or company (ibid.).

In general, recruitment through word-of-mouth is considered the cheapest and most efficient way of recruitment (Nelson 2006). The cost of recruiting new employees through word-of-mouth is practically zero since it does not require any assets or resources. Thus, Nelson (2005) argues that this type of recruitment is the most effective and efficient recruitment strategy from an employer's perspective. The employees of an organization, who are often seen by themselves and other as ambassadors of the employer brand, determine if the reputation of the employer is positive (Charbonnier-Voirin *et al.* 2017). Through word-of-mouth, potential new employees are more likely to get a transparent and more trustworthy description of the employment (ibid). Referrals from current or previous employees compared to job advertisements are therefore considered more credible (Nelson 2005). Thus, word-of-mouth recruitment can be

advantageous as a recruitment method, both from an employer and a job-seeker perspective (ibid). Additionally, current employees are not likely to recommend people who does not fit into the corporate culture of the company. A failed recommendation will probably put the current employee in a bad position (ibid).

Ambler & Barrow (1996) proposed that the best organizations, with the best employees, are getting the best reputation through word-of-mouth. These organizations will get the best applicants and the best employees. By having the best employees, the company's chances to succeed on a competitive labour market will be higher (ibid). This cycle is illustrated in figure 6.
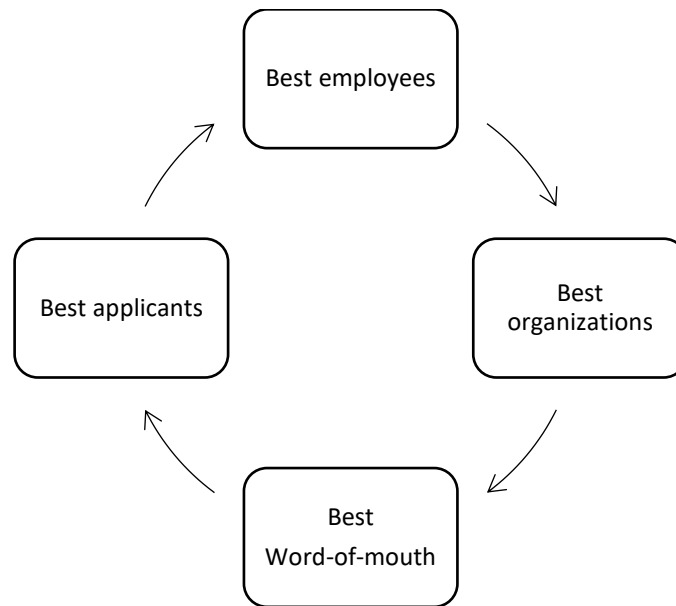
Figure 6: Link between quality of employees and organization (own processing based on Ambler & Barrow 1996).

2.7 Theoretical framework

In this study the concept of employer branding acts as an umbrella under which all the practices of recruiting and retaining employees are gathered. The concept includes all the efforts of a company to become and remain a desired employer in the eyes of the employee (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004). Employer branding is an approach towards recruiting and retaining the best possible employees in an increasingly competitive labour market (ibid.). It is, however, difficult to determine if and how employer branding improves the performance of a firm (Ambler & Barrow 1996). Backhaus & Tikoo (2004, p. 513) proposes that; "*managers can use employer branding as an umbrella under which they can channel different employee recruitment and retention activities into a coordinated human resource strategy*". The coordination of recruiting and retaining practices under one strategy will have a different effect than each of the practices would have alone (ibid.). According to Ambler & Barrow (1996), firms that actively work with employer branding are able to attract the best candidates and seems to have a higher retention rate. Therefore, the base for this study is the three-step process of employer branding that is proposed by Backhaus & Tikoo (2004). By understanding the processes of how to create and develop an employer brand through the EVP, then market this internally and externally to potential and current employees, the theoretical framework presented in figure 7 can help in identifying and analysing the employer branding practices deployed in the studied cases.
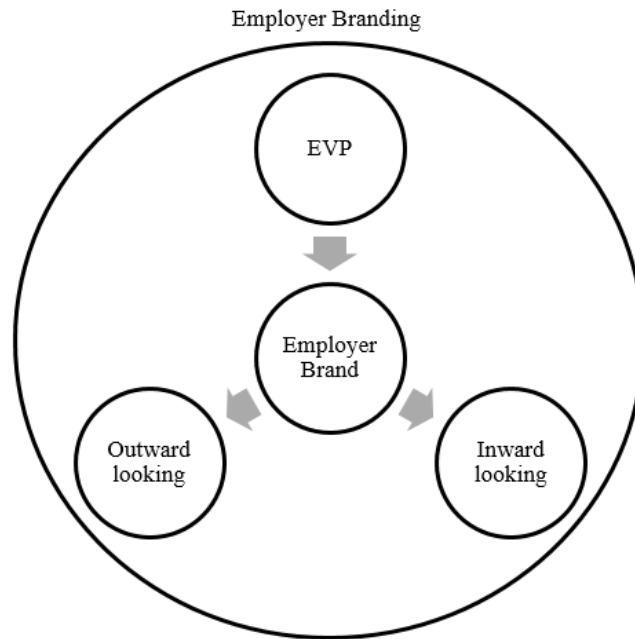
Figure 7: Theoretical framework based on the presented concepts and theories (own processing).

The theoretical framework illustrated in figure 7 is composed to help fulfil the aim of this study, which is to investigate employer branding practices in an agricultural context. The conceptual framework presented by Backhaus & Tikoo (2004), see figure 3, servers as a base for the theoretical framework of this study regarding the internal and external principles. The different concepts gathered under the employer branding umbrella, that are presented in this chapter, are linked together to form this theoretical framework. The framework follows the three-step process of employer branding that begin with the development of the EVP, creating the core message of the employer brand (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004). The efforts of the firm to market the employer brand are then divided into two main channels, externally and internally. The external focus of employer branding, with the goal of improved employer attractiveness by building associations and images of the employer and the employer brand, refers to the outward looking practices of this theoretical framework. The internal focus of employer branding, with the goal of improved employee productivity and retention, refers to the inward looking practices. This includes the culture and identity of the business and the employees. The theoretical framework can help identifying different components and give an understanding of how farmers work with employer branding practices in the processes of recruiting and retaining employees by categorising and structuring the processes. By doing so the framework will also help in identifying and analysing different challenges and opportunities connected to employer branding practices.

3 Method

This chapter presents the methodological approach and design of the research, which was chosen to achieve the purpose of the study and answer the research questions. This chapter then explains the course of action of collecting and analysing data. Advantages and disadvantages of the chosen method are highlighted in this chapter, as well as issues regarding scientific credibility.

3.1 Qualitative Research approach

The qualitative approach allows for a deeper understanding of the underlying reasons and contexts of the studied phenomenon (Bryman & Bell 2017). Furthermore, this study focuses on understanding and not measuring and generalizing. If the aim of the study were to measure numerical data or generalizing a result for a large population, a quantitative research approach would have been more suitable (Bryman & Bell, 2017). To be able to achieve a deeper understanding regarding the area of recruiting and retaining agricultural labour in Swedish agricultural contexts, a qualitative approach is more suitable compared to a survey or any other example of quantitative approach.

This study aims to investigate employer branding practices when it comes to attract, recruit and retain employees in Swedish agricultural businesses. In order to achieve this aim, an understanding of Swedish farmers' perception of the studied phenomena is essential. When the focus of the study is to provide a deep understanding of the studied subject, rather than generalising statistics and numbers, a qualitative approach is preferable (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Therefore, this study will answer the research questions by using a qualitative research approach.

The choice of research design is affected by the way the researcher interprets the world. The interpretative paradigm is based on the assumption of a difference between people and the studied object and the researcher often rely on the "*participants view of the situation being studied*" (Creswell 2003 p. 8; Mackenzie & Knipe 2006; Bryman & Bell 2017). The interpretive paradigm is linked to the constructive paradigm (Mackenize & Knipe 2006). Constructivism is an ontological standpoint that emphasises the importance of social context and culture in the studied reality (Bryman & Bell 2017). As the findings and results of this study is dependent on the social context of each studied case and respondent, the constructivist paradigm is a suitable standpoint. According to Mackenzie & Knipe (2006), the constructivist researcher often generates a theory inductively and rely on a qualitative research approach.

3.2 Multiple case study

According to Bryman & Bell (2017) the choice of method can be based on the focus of the study. This study focuses on the employer branding practices in each specific case and their unique contexts. Case study methodology in qualitative research provides the researcher with tools to study complex phenomena within their context (Baxter & Jack 2008). The case study design is a very popular and frequently used research design in qualitative research as well as business economic research (Bryman & Bell 2017). The suitable method for this study was the multiple case study, which is an extension of the case study approach (ibid.).

By using a multiple case study method, where the study intends to interview several farmers on how they engage in recruitment and employer branding practises, the study focuses on

achieving a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of employer branding practices in each case (ibid.). The emphasis of the multiple case study is on the individual case but provides the possibility for the researcher to compare the results against each other. This allows the researcher to decide on what is common and what is unique in the various cases. The goal with comparing is not to generalize but to give a deeper understanding of the studied subject (Baxter & Jack 2008). The comparing can promote theoretical reflection on the results (Bryman & Bell 2017). By searching for similarities and differences among the different cases, the study can identify employer branding practises that leads to success in recruiting and retaining labour in the context of the study.

3.3 Semi-structured interviews

The interviews used to gather empirical data in this study were structured as semi-structured interviews. Taking into consideration that the study aims to answer the research questions in the specific context of each respondent, both the structured and the un-structured interview methods would be ineffective. A structured interview format is useful when the interviews and results are supposed to be standardized and generalized and is mostly used in quantitative research (Bryman & Bell 2017). The un-structured interview format can almost resemble having a normal conversation (Burgess 1984). These two methods would most likely cause the data gathering to the too inaccurate or to standardized to reach the desirable depth of the studied phenomenon.

The semi-structured interview is based on a set of relatively specific theme of questions that functions more like a guide for the interviewer. This format gives the opportunity to divert from the questions to gain deeper understanding of subjects that are discussed (Bryman & Bell 2017). The formulated questions only help to divert the conversation in a certain direction, thus providing flexibility to the interviews (ibid.). Based on the research questions and the theoretical framework of this study, an interview guide was created (see appendix 1). The interview guide steered the interview through different pre-determined themes, but still allowed the flexibility to investigate the social context of each respondent. The quality of the interviews and the collected data are dependent on the interviewing technique and skills of the interviewer (ibid.). The interviews were therefore constructed using open-ended trigger questions instead of leading questions in order to reduce the impact of such factors.

The interview guide is structured around four themes consisting of four to seven trigger question. The questions are meant to initiate an answer from the respondent which could lead to follow-up questions if needed to provide a deeper understanding. The first theme of the interview guide consists of background questions about the respondent. These were meant to be the foundation of the analysis. Base information about the respondent, such as the size of the farm (in acres), production and number of employees allowed for drawing conclusions based on differences and similarities. The second and main theme of the interview guide consisted of questions about the processes of recruiting and retaining. The questions were formulated so that the respondent would talk about their inward and outward looking employer branding practices as well as factors that can be linked to the employee value proposition. The third theme of the interview guide focused on the respondent´s perceived challenges regarding recruiting and retaining employees. The fourth and final theme of the interview guide were similar to the third but focused on the respondent´s perceived opportunities and potential for improvement regarding recruiting and retaining of employees.

A pilot version of the interview guide was first tested on the author's family members who got to answer the questions. The family members were all farmers and had experiences in the

processes of recruiting and retaining employees in the Swedish agricultural context. The interview guide was further tested on a respondent that matched the delimitations of this study. The pilot version of the interview guide provided a first impression of the quality and effectiveness of the interview guide and allowed for development and reformulation of the questions and themes. The interview guide was created based on a model presented by Bryman and Bell (2017), see figure 8. As the data gathering were conducted at the same time as the respondents were occupied with spring tillage, the goal was to keep the interviews at around 30 minutes long. All the eight interviews were conducted in a single week.
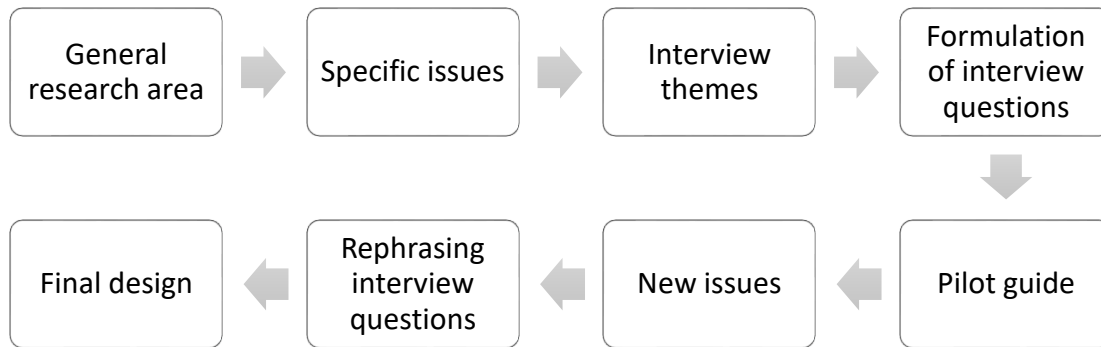

Figure 8: Creation of the interview guide (own processing, based on Bryman & Bell 2017).

The interviews of this study were conducted by telephone. The reasons for using interviews by telephone were several. This thesis was written during the spring of 2020 when the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) spread globally and developed into a pandemic. In order to minimize the spread of the COVID-19, face-to-face interviews were not an option. Telephone interviews became a more viable option when the Public Health Agency of Sweden in March 2020 recommended distance education for all Swedish universities (Public Health Agency of Sweden 2020). Face-to-face interview are preferable as they provide an extra dimension of context (Bryman & Bell 2017). Although, is it arguable if the short amount of time dedicated to conducting each interview would have given any important contextual impact to the results. The implications of conducting telephone interviews are further discussed in 3.7.

3.5 Choice of respondents

As mentioned in section 1.3, this study has several delimitations. When searching for respondents to interview for the study, several requirements and criteria were set. Since this study aims to investigate how employer branding practices can help to improve the recruiting and retaining processes in agricultural businesses it is crucial that the respondents are farmers and employers. In Sweden, the trend regarding number of farms and farm size is clear. The number of farms has decreased by 50 % since 1970 and the average farm size has grown by 100 % (Swedish Board of Agriculture 2017). It is possible to argue that this trend is likely to continue in the same pattern in the future. Since these larger agricultural businesses are likely to become more common in the future, it can be argued that a study of these types of farming businesses can be useful and of interest in the future. Therefore, this study focuses on larger farming businesses with a minimum of three employees, full time or part time. This criterion was also set to focus on farmers who have experience in the process of recruiting and retaining employees. The study was delimited to focus on the geographical area of Mälardalen, Sweden. The reason for this was to focus on farms with common geographical conditions and proximity to larger cities.

There were no limitations regarding the productions of the cases participating. In this study, farms with crop, beef, dairy and pig production are all represented. The number of cases for this study was set to eight. The benefits of conducting a multiple case study can be limited if choosing too few or too many cases (Stake 2006). According to Stake (2006), the number of cases in a multiple case study should be 4-10 cases. A higher number of cases can provide more uniqueness of interactivity, which can be difficult for the researcher and the reader to understand (ibid.). Theoretical saturation is a common principle that is used to assess the size of the sample (Bryman & Bell 2017). However, according to Bryman & Bell (2017) there are no general criteria for theoretical saturation. Regarding the data collection in this study, similarities started to emerge and barely any new insight in the subject was given in the last interviews. Therefore, eight interviews were conducted with indications that theoretical saturation were achieved.

Based on the criteria above, the job sites of Swedish agricultural newspapers were used to find potential respondents. The job sites at ATL and Jordbruksaktuellt were useful sources for employers with farming businesses. Another useful source for potential respondent was the agricultural job site Gröna Jobb that was founded by the Federation of Swedish Farmers and the Swedish Federation of Green Employers. Farmers that were looking for employees through these channels were contacted if they met the respondent criteria of the study. The contact with the farmers were initiated with an email, containing brief information about the study and a request to participate as a respondent (see appendix 2). After each performed interview, the respondents were asked to recommend a colleague or neighbour who also met the criteria. This is called the snowball technique and provides the opportunity for the searcher to get in contact with even more respondents that are relevant for the study (Bryman & Bell 2017).

3.6 Analysis of collected data

The unit of analysis in this study was the respondent's recruitment and retaining processes. The respondent's description of their employer branding practices, such as recruiting and retaining processes were included in the analysis. The analysis process started by inductively developing a set of structuring themes and categories based on the interview guide and the theoretical framework.

One of the biggest challenges with qualitative research is that the data gathering through interviews can quickly generate a comprehensive and unstructured set of data (Bryman & Bell 2017). Therefore, the qualitative data gathered from interviews can be difficult to analyse and unlike a quantitative data analysis, there are no clear rules for how to analyse qualitative data (ibid). Although, there are some general approaches to qualitative data analysis. Bryman & Bell (2017) describes the method of thematic coding as one of the most common ways to analyse qualitative data. Thematic coding was used in this study to structure the collected data by creating themes and categories. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic coding method of data analysis can be useful to summarise key features when dealing with a large amount of data. With approval from the respondent, each of the interviews conducted in this study were recorded as they generated a lot of information in a short period of time, which quickly became unstructured. Based on the interview guide used in the semi-structured interviews and the theoretical framework of this study, the following themes and categories were created; *EVP, outward looking (recruiting), inward looking (retaining), opportunities* and *challenges*. When reviewing the data from the conducted interviews, the respondent's answers could be associated with the different themes. The coded data was then analysed with the help of the developed

theoretical framework to identify the employer branding practices that is linked to success in recruiting and retaining employees in the context of the studied employers.

This chosen method of data analysis can help in highlighting differences and similarities across the set of individual cases (Braun & Clarke 2006). The conducted analysis of the data facilitated in finding patterns and trends. According to Bryman & Bell (2017) the researcher draws conclusions from finding patterns and contrasts from the material.

3.7 Method discussion

Common criticism towards qualitative research is that it is too subjective (Bryman & Bell 2017). The arguments are that the results of qualitative research are too much based on the researcher's subjective assumptions of what is important and meaningful (ibid.). Alversson & Sköldberg (2009 p. 9) argues that all data, both empirical and secondary are "*results of interpretation*". The research is therefore not a presentation of reality but rather an interpretation of the data (Sköldberg & Alvesson 2009). Reflection of the interpretation can provide quality and give value to the research. Alvesson & Sköldberg (2009 p. 9) defines reflection as "*interpretation of interpretation*" where the researcher is aware of how he or she interprets the data. In simple terms, this can be explained as the researchers influence on the interpretation and the understanding of why the researcher interpret something in a certain way. The results of this study are presented as a representation of the researcher's interpretation of data and the subjective opinion of what is important. The result can be affected by the skills of the researcher when interviewing and analysing, which means that the results can be influenced by factors such as feelings and prejudices (Bryman & Bell 2017). In a similar way, criticism towards the relationship between the researcher and the respondent in qualitative research argues that it can be too personal and the researcher can affect the respondents and their answers in the interviews (ibid.).

Further criticism is that the result of a qualitative study is difficult to replicate as the interviewer is the most important tool when collecting the data (Bryman & Bell 2017). There is a challenge in choosing a unit of analysis and collecting data without any assumption or expectations. What is observed and collected and what the researcher chooses to focus on is largely dependent of the interests of the researcher (ibid.). A case study, or a multiple case study, does not constitute a sample drawn from a known population (ibid.). The context of the qualitative study is important and the results are difficult to generalize to another case (Kvale & Brinkmann 2014). The collected data in this study are subjective and affected by the social context of each specific case. Therefore, the qualitative method was the suitable choice for this study as the aim is to draw conclusions based on a deeper understanding of each case.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, due to the pandemic of Covid-19, the semi-structured interviews of this study were conducted by telephone. The majority of interviews in qualitative research are made face-to-face (Vogl 2013). According to Vogl (2013), interviews by telephone are often avoided due to the lack of personal interaction. However, Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) argues that there is no significant difference in the quality of data when comparing face-to-face interviews with telephone interviews. Thus, Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) suggest that interviews by telephone can be a successful way of collecting data in qualitative research. The extra dimension of context provided by conducting face-to-face interviews is not regarded to have any major implications on the data gathering and results of this study. As the focus of this study is on employer branding practices, the telephone interviews did not limit the data gathering. The interview method used in this study still allows for enough social cues, such as voice and intonation, to conduct the data gathering and analyse the collected data without any

complications (Opdenakker 2006). The relatively short telephone interviews with open-ended questions provides an un-biased data gathering and limits the researchers influence on the respondent.

In qualitative research as well as in quantitative research, it is important to validate and control the quality of the collected data, and the reasons for this are several (Bryman & Bell 2017). One reason is that validation brings greater credibility to the findings of the study, but also to the study itself (ibid). In this study, this aspect was considered throughout the entire process. In order to minimize the risk for any kind of misunderstandings between the researchers and the respondents, the interviews were, after approval from the respondents, audio recorded. By listening to the recorded interviews again, it was possible to use the expressions of the respondents to minimize the researchers influence on the analysis of the data. This increases the credibility and confirmability of the results.

3.8 Ethical principles

In any type of research, the researcher has great responsibility when it comes to ethical assurance (Bryman & Bell 2017). In most existing literature, there is a focus on the researcher when it comes to qualitative interviews. Although, the respondent's context is also important to consider (Oltmann 2016). The research should not harm any respondent or their confidentiality or lack any sort of consent from the respondent (Diener & Crandall 1978; Bryman & Bell 2017). The research should also not intrude on the respondent's personal life, give any false illusions or withhold important information (ibid.). To avoid compromising these ethical principles the aim and purpose of the study was clearly presented to the respondent so that the respondent understood what the participation meant.

All respondents were told that participation in the study is voluntary and that all respondents will be kept anonymous. This was meant to protect the personal information of the respondents which can make it easier for the respondents to answer the questions honestly (Bryman & Bell 2017). Before the interviews started, the respondents were asked to approve that the interview was recorded. After the interviews, all personal information of the respondents was deleted in the data.

4 Empirical results

This chapter presents the empirical data that was collected through semi-structured interviews. In the beginning of the chapter, background information about the cases is presented. Furthermore, the chapter presents the analysed data structured on the five main themes that the thematic coding was based on. These themes are EVP, Outward looking (recruiting), Inward looking (retaining), Challenges and Opportunities. The chapter ends with a table containing a summary of the respondents' answers from the interviews.

4.1 Background information

For this study, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted. The cases in this study were farm owners or tenants in Swedish agriculture. All respondents were CEOs or managers in their businesses. The respondents were all also employers, with at least three, full time or part time, employees. All respondents had their farming businesses located in the region of Mälardalen, which is the area around Lake Mälaren, in the middle part of Sweden. The region of Mälardalen is presented in figure 9.

Figure 9: Region of Mälardalen, Sweden (own processing).

The average number of employees among the respondents were 8.5 and the standard deviation was 6.8. The average farm size, in terms of arable land, was 1214 hectares and the standard deviation was 452 hectares. All respondents had crop production as a part of their businesses. Three of the respondents also had cattle, one had dairy production and one had both pig production and cattle. Several of the respondents also had machine contracting in their organisation. Around half of the respondents considered their business to be in a growth phase of the life cycle. The other half considered the business to be in the mature phase. Several of the cases had been growing in farm size over the last couple of years, which had quickly increased the need for more employees.

Table 3 at the end of this chapter sums up the thematic coded interview results. In the table, the respondents have been coded from Farmer 1 (F1) to Farmer 8 (F8). In order to keep the respondents as anonymous as possible, no more background information about each respondent will be given. As the table shows, the respondents share the same opinions on several themes. However, there are also some differences among the answers. These results are presented more in detail under each theme-heading in the chapter.

4.2 Employee Value Proposition

The employee value proposition (EVP) can be defined as the core of everything communicated by employer branding, as it is the promise that the business conveys to current and potential employees of what makes it desirable as an employer (Rosethorn 2009). When performing the interviews, the farmers were asked about their perception of EVP and in what way they were working actively with these attributes.

Two of the farmers were not working actively with developing their EVP, even though they experienced a need for an improved EVP in their businesses. These respondents had the smallest number of employees among the interviewed farmers, which can be connected to a reason for not working actively with EVP. Tangible benefits offered by the several respondents were promises such as modern technology and machines, hunting possibilities and five out of eight farmers mentioned accommodation as a success factor connected to the EVP. Several respondents also mentioned the flexibility in tasks, working hours and workload as important tangible parts of the EVP.

"I believe that it is important to be able to include good accommodation in the EVP. In the countryside, close to work and a relatively advantageous rent. I think this is a factor that will be even more important in the future".

Some of the farmers mentioned the importance of intangible attributes and promises, such as viewing and presenting the farming business as a workplace rather than a family farm. According to the respondents, this can be connected to the culture of the business and by offering benefits and promises that suits the specific employee they aim to create a good and enjoyable working environment.

Another intangible factor that was mentioned during the interviews was freedom with responsibility. This was said by two respondents. Both respondents considered this factor as an important part of their EVP as it gives the employees opportunities to develop.

4.3 Outward looking (recruitment)

The respondents were asked about their typical recruitment processes, from a discovered need for a new employee all the way to a signed employment contract. Most of the respondents mentioned that they were advertising at the job-sites of several different Swedish agricultural newspapers. However, many experienced that these job ads did not provide much response, nor did they attract the right candidates. The majority of the farmers also mentioned that they use social media to advertise their need for new employees. According to the majority of the interviewed farmers, using social media works just as good or better compared to advertising in newspapers or job-sites.

"If the employees possess a positive experience regarding their employer and workplace, they are the best marketers of this business as a workplace. The reputation of who we are and what we do is the most important factor to attract employees".

The respondents were also asked about their perception of communication and reputation. All the respondents perceived the reputation of their business as one of the most important factors in terms of success when recruiting and retaining competent employees. Most of the respondents found it advantageous to recruit through contacts or word-of-mouth.

Some respondents considered the reputation to become more and more important in the industry. The respondents mentioned that the competition over employees is tough in this business and to have a good reputation as an employer is crucial. Without a good reputation, or with a bad reputation, the chances of attracting competent employees are low, according to several respondents.

"To achieve and maintain a good reputation is becoming more and more important. Especially today, in the context of social media. A bad reputation can spread fast and quickly become deterrent".

Some respondents have been receiving trainees from upper secondary agricultural schools as a part of their recruitment work. Most of these respondents found this strategy useful as they get to evaluate the individual trainee during the trainee period, and the trainee gets to evaluate the workplace for a potential future employment.

4.4 Inward looking (retaining)

The respondents were asked how they work with employer branding practices to retain the current employees with the employment. All of the respondent answered that they work actively to retain current employees. A common theme was that they want the employees to feel involved in the organization.

"Employees has to feel seen and be willing to develop in the workplace".

The majority of the respondents feel that further training and development is important for the employees and works as an encouragement for them to stay. Several respondents want to send their employees to further training as much as possible and as much as the employees want, so that the employees feel that they can develop through the employment. The employers continuously send employees to courses that are relevant for the workplace to broaden the competence of the staff.

Two of the respondents also point out that it is important to work with the workplace culture and have a good dialogue with the employees. One of the respondents only seek to hire people with the right priorities and the right image of what the company should stand for, or else they would not fit in at the workplace and with other employees.

"You have to work with your organizational culture, the staff and the management need to have the same view of what is important".

Several of the respondents offer benefits with employment, not only to attract employees but also to keep them with the business. These benefits could be flexible working hours, accommodation or corporate events such as dinners or sport events. The respondents work

actively to maintain a good working environment. One of the respondents feels that the employees they manage to find, often remain.

"Poor work ethic and lack of drive affects everyone on the team".

As shown in table 3, several respondents value the organisation culture as an important factor in retaining employees. An enjoyable working atmosphere is also important, and this relies heavily on constant communication between the employer and the employees according to several respondents. Furthermore, one respondent describes the importance of being responsive towards the employees and also to involve them in the development of the business.

4.5 Challenges

The respondents were also asked about the most challenging factors in terms of recruiting and retaining agricultural labour. In all cases, the respondents reported a lack of competent labour in the labour market as the most challenging factor. More specifically, most of the respondents found it hard to attract the needed competence.

"The biggest challenge is to find competent and motivated employees".

In the region of Mälardalen, the farms are often located close to cities. According to some respondents, this is a problem in terms of competition from other sectors and industries. One mentioned sector that is competing with the labour is contracting. Contracting companies can generally offer higher wages and more reasonable working hours according to the respondents.

"There is lack of knowledge about what working in agriculture means, and this inhibits the attractiveness of the industry".

One respondent experienced a failure in communication between the schools and the agricultural industry. The respondent felt that the schools and young people have not followed the development in agriculture. To work at a farm today is quite different compared to twenty years ago. According to the respondent, agriculture have historically failed in communicating the benefits of the industry as a working place.

4.6 Opportunities

Finally, the respondents were asked about their view on opportunities and potential for improvements regarding attracting, recruiting and retaining employees. In this section, the answers among the respondents was relatively variable.

"Providing training for your employees is an investment, not a cost".

One respondent argued that many employers in the agricultural industry need to improve their view on investing in their employees. One example that the respondent brought up was training. According to the respondent, many employers see training for the employees as an unnecessary cost, while it should be seen as an investment for the future.

Some of the respondents saw potential in continuing to improve their work with social media as a way of making their business more attractive as a workplace. Two respondents saw social media as an important tool for improving the reputation of their business. These respondents also thought social media could help in communicating the benefits of working with farming

in general. Two respondents believed that agricultural businesses have great potential in terms of increasing the status of the job.

"The status of working at a farm have historically been relatively low, as well as the wages. I think this is connected to the relatively low profitability of farming. But I believe that farmers can do a lot more to increase the attractiveness of farming as a job."

Most of the respondents mentioned that there are always ways to improve and develop the business as a workplace. Some of them see it as an ongoing process, which is never really finished.

Table 3: Summary of the interview answers.

	EVP	*Outward Looking (Recruiting)*	*Inward Looking (Retaining)*	*Challenges*	*Opportunities*
F1	Accommodation, training. Wants to develop the EVP.	Advertising in social media & job sites. Good reputation is important, becomes more & more important.	Training.	Finding the right competence.	Improve reputation by working more with social media
F2	Accommodation. Feels a need to develop the EVP.	Advertising in social media, job sites & word-of-mouth. Good reputation is important, becomes more & more important.	Flexible working hours when possible.	Finding the right competence.	Increase profitability in order to raise the wages and increase the competitiveness.
F3	Create a workplace & a good working environment.	Advertising in social media & job sites. Reputation is the most important factor when attracting employees.	HR manager.	Finding the right competence & commitment.	Improve reputation by ensuring the well-being of current employees.
F4	Flexibility.	Word-of-mouth & job sites. Good reputation is important.	Culture. Constant communication between employer & employees.	Finding the right competence.	Maintain a good working environment by updating machines.
F5	Flexibility. Modern technology & machines. Freedom with responsibility.	Word-of-mouth & trainees. Good reputation is important. Working to improve the reputation.	Surveys among the staff, follow up, develop the working environment.	Finding employees with the right competence & commitment.	Maintain a good reputation through social media.
F6	Varying job assignments. Modern machines & accommodation. Hunting possibilities.	Word-of-mouth, job sites & trainees. Good reputation is important.	Training & team building activities. Communication between employer & employees.	Finding motivated employees.	Improve the EVP by offering more training to the employees.
F7	Flexibility & accommodation. Freedom with responsibility. Good working environment & modern machines.	Word-of-mouth. Reputation is the most important factor when attracting employees.	Responsive & involve the employees in the business. Training.	Finding the right competence. Lack of communication between schools & industry.	Improve communication & reputation. Offer more training to the employees.
F8	Good working environment, culture & accommodation. An enjoyable workplace.	Advertising in social media & job sites. Good reputation is important.	Culture. Communication & clarity between employer & employees.	Lack of competence & labour in the industry.	Improve communication between employer & employees. More training.

5 Analysis and discussion

In this chapter, the empirical result will be analysed and discussed. The research questions from 1.3 servers as a base for the structure of this chapter. The theoretical framework, described in 2.7, is used to analyse and discuss the empirical results as the collected data is put in relation to the presented theories in chapter 2. Lastly, a critical reflection is given.

The agricultural industry of Sweden is facing an increasing need for competent workforce but there is a lack of potential candidates on the labour market (The Swedish Government 2017; LRF 2018; The Swedish Public Employment Service 2019). The companies in the agricultural sector need to be associated with a positive employment experience and differentiate their identity as employers to become more attractive to potential employees (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004). It is therefore interesting and important to examine how farmers in the Swedish agricultural sector work with employer branding practices in the processes of recruiting and retaining employees and how these processes can be developed. A qualitative multiple case study consisting of eight cases from the Swedish region of Mälardalen has been conducted to fulfil the aim of this study. Each case represents the employer branding practices of a farming business and the unit of analysis was the individual farmer in each case and their experiences from recruiting and retaining employees. When examining these cases, insights of recruiting and retaining employees through employer branding practices was discovered. By providing analysis and discussions of the empirical data in relation to the theoretical framework, this chapter serves to provide the knowledge to answer the research questions of this study.
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The empirical result of this study shows that the case companies are aware of their employer brand and the value it can provide in the processes of recruiting and retaining employees. The two research questions below were formulated in 1.3 to fulfil the following aim of this study; *investigate employer branding practices to attract, recruit and retain employees in Swedish agricultural businesses. The goal of this aim is to understand how agricultural businesses work to attract and retain employees with the right competence by using employer branding practices.*

- How do Swedish farmers use employer branding practises in order to recruit and retain employees?
- What are the opportunities for Swedish farmers to improve processes of recruiting and retaining employees via employer branding practices?

5.1 How do Swedish farmers use employer branding practises in order to recruit and retain employees?

5.1.1 Employee Value Proposition

Rosethorn (2009) proposes that the EVP should be the most compelling reason or feeling for potential employees to join the company. When addressing the targeted group of competent candidates for the employment, the business has to convey a unique and attractive promise that distinguish the employer (ibid.). Although two of the respondents were not actively working with developing their EVP, they still experienced a need for it as a tool. Interestingly, the two respondents expressing this opinon were those with the smallest number of employees. The number of employees might be a contributing factor to how the respondents prioritize the importance of EVP, as they did not recruit as many nor as often as the other respondents did. However, these two respondents did mention important attributes that they offered when

recruiting and retaining employees. Promises from the employer, regarding attributes such as accommodation, good working hours, varying work tasks and good workplace culture were also important in the recruiting and retaining processes for these respondents. This indicates that they are working with a developed EVP, but perhaps not as consciously as the other respondents who did have more experience and routines with the processes.

The empirical data of this study imply that the promises of the EVP play an important role in recruiting and retaining competent workforce. The EVP is also an important part of the employer brand strength of the studied businesses. The farmers do prioritise working with the EVP as a tool, as suggested by Goswami (2015), and developing it to attract the relevant candidates for the employment. From experiences they are learning which promises to offer in their social context. Also, as several of the respondents view the work of achieving a good working environment as a part of their EVP, they are delivering the promises made by their EVP throughout the employment. By doing so, they can increase their attraction to the right candidates, the employee engagement and retention within the company and their differentiation from competitors, in accordance to Rosethorn (2009).

5.1.2 Outward looking (recruiting)

According to Nelson (2005), word-of-mouth is the best way of recruiting in terms of efficiency and costs. A word-of-mouth recruitment can therefore be beneficial for an employer (ibid). This assumption is confirmed by the empirical results of this study. Most of the respondents in this study considered recruitment through referrals or word-of-mouth to be advantageous. Furthermore, the majority of the farmers also mentioned social media as a successful way to communicate the need for recruitment. Social media was seen by the respondents as a simple, cheap and quick way of reaching out to potential employees. Social media was also mentioned by several respondents when talking about reputation. According to the respondents, social media can be a successful way of creating, improving and maintaining a good reputation.

Employees hired through reputation and referrals seems to have a more accurate image of the workplace and the employment according to the respondents. According to Backhaus (2016), employer image involves every aspect that stakeholders associate with a firm in terms of employment. A strong employer image is the key to attract new employees since it builds attraction to the business in the minds of potential employees (Backhaus 2016). Ambler and Barrow (1996) emphasizes the importance of a good reputation in terms of attracting and retaining competent employees. According to Ambler & Barrow (1996), the best employees will help an organisation to become the best business and by being the best business, with the best employees, they will have the best reputation. Because of this, they will receive the best applicants (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). By receiving the best applicants, the business will continue to attract and recruit the best employees (ibid). This assumption correlates to the empirical results of this study. All respondents were convinced that the reputation about the workplace is crucial when it comes to recruiting competent employees. In fact, several respondents considered the reputation to be the single most important factor in attracting and retaining competent employees, which correlates with the assumptions of Ambler & Barrow (1996). Further, the respondents believed that this aspect will become even more important in the future. As the competition for labour increases, so does the importance of working actively with the employer image, according to the respondents of this study.

Nelson (2005) proposed that a failed recommendation through referral can put the current employee in a bad position. The empirical result of this study indicates that this can be applied to the employer as well. If an employee recommends the employer to a potential candidate but the employer does not live up to the recommendation, it can negatively affect the reputation of

the workplace. According to one respondent a bad reputation of the workplace can spread quickly, especially through modern channels like social media, which will negatively affect the attractiveness of the employer brand.

5.1.3 Inward looking (retaining)

Berthon *et al.* (2005) emphasizes the importance of having employees that align with the employer brand in terms of behaviour and identity. The employer brand should attract, motivate and develop existing and potential employees (Berthon *et al.*, 2005). These assumptions are similar to the empirical results of this study. A couple of the respondents mentioned the importance of educating and investing in the employees. According to the respondents, this is advantageous in several ways. Firstly, educating the employees will increase the level of competence in the business. Secondly, it will prove that the employer cares about the employees and their development. This result correlates with the findings of Wilden *et al.* (2010). According to Wilden *et al.* (2010), it is important to invest in the development of the employees since this improves the credibility of the employer. Even though several respondents are aware of these aspects, most respondents also see great potential for improvement in this area. Some of the respondents emphasize the importance of viewing employee education as an investment rather than a cost. Investing in the employees through education and benefits seems to build a loyalty toward between the employer and the employee. In one of the studied cases the respondent claimed that the employees they find tend to stay with the company, which is the ultimate goal of employer brand loyalty (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004).

It is a part of the internal employer branding to create and develop the organizational identity to enable the employees to identify with their workplace (Dutton *et al.* 1994; Backhaus & Tikoo 2004). The empirical results show that the farmers engage in their workplace culture and want to keep a good dialogue with their employees. They seek to find people that would fit into, and help develop, the organizational identity and the workplace culture. According to Ambler & Barrow (1996) and Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) this builds the employer brand loyalty, which contributes positively to employee productivity and retention.

5.2 What are the opportunities for Swedish farmers to improve processes of recruiting and retaining employees via employer branding practices?

The respondents confirm the Swedish agricultural industry´s recruitment challenges. Barth (2001) classified the lack of competence in three different categories, based on Green & Ashton (1992). The first category included the difficulties of filling vacancies due to a shortage of potential candidates on the labour market (Green & Ashton 1992). All of the respondents experienced a lack of competent candidates when recruiting. The second category presented by Barth (2001) also correlated to the empirical data. The respondents find it important but difficult to find the right employees with the right competence, which indicates that they can identify a certain "skill gap" in the business that the candidate needs to fill (Barth 2001). Thus, they do not experience the last category, which is the challenge of not even being able to identify the gap between the existing level of competence and the needed level of competence (Green & Ashton 1992). In order to avoid the challenges that they are experiencing, that are included in the categories above, the respondents need to analyse and develop the existing internal competence (Barth 2001). In a similar way, a couple of the respondents identified further education and training as important employer branding practices in order to improve their recruiting and retaining processes. This indicates that further development of internal

competence is important and that it is an opportunity to improve recruiting and retaining processes when experiencing the challenges presented by Barth (2001).

The empirical evidence indicates that in each of the studied cases, the farmers feel affected by their geographical location. The studied cases are located in rural locations near smaller towns. This is problematic from a recruitment perspective as the selection of requested competence is limited. Paradoxically, the problem becomes even more complicated as the relatively short distance to larger cities increases the competition for competent labour. One challenge identified from the empirical data is the fact that it is difficult to attract individuals to relocate to these rural areas. It is also challenging to compete with other sectors and industries that can offer higher wages and more reasonable working hours. According to Figurska & Matuska (2013) an organization will be regarded as an attractive place to work and will more likely become the employer of choice with an attractive and strong employer brand. A strong employer brand can improve the relations with potential and current employees and provide the ability to offer lower salaries compared to other employers (Ritson 2002). Thus, an important opportunity for improvement in the processes of recruiting and retaining for the studied cases are to invest in the employer brand. Previous research suggests that important investments in the employer brand are participation in career fairs, career websites, advertising in magazines, internships, networks and participating in employer of choice awards (Wilden et al. 2010). The empirical results show that the respondents invest in different variations of such employer branding practices. A couple respondents have been receiving trainees as a part of their recruitment work. Both these respondents found this strategy useful as they get to evaluate the individual trainee during the trainee period and communicate their attractiveness as an employer. According to one of the respondents an opportunity to overcome the challenge of competition for labour is to increase the profitability of the company in order to offer higher wages, and by doing so, increase their employer brand competitiveness.

The empirical data indicates that the respondents perceive that the main opportunities when recruiting and retaining lies in improving their existing employer branding practices. Continuously improving their EVP and internal communication are important improvements to the respondents. Also, the respondents see a great potential in the ability to improve their reputation as an employer through social media. It is interesting to note that the several respondents felt that job advertising through traditional channels such as agriculture magazines and their respective job sites did not provide the desired results. Therefore, they perceived social media as a more effective channel to market their employer brand. This indicates that social media is an important part to include in employer branding practices for the improvement of the recruiting and retaining processes.

Further, the empirical results suggest that there is lack of knowledge about agricultural work in general, which inhibits the attractiveness of the sector. The common perception of working at a farm is outdated. This is the experiences of one farmer in one of the studied cases and no similar patterns can be identified in any of the other cases. However, most of the respondents felt that the attractiveness to the sector was low. A prerequisite to benefit from working with employer branding is to understand the factors of employer attractiveness in the specific context (Berthon *et al.*, 2005). Most of the respondents are aware of these factors in the context of an agricultural business. Thus, the majority of the respondents believe that they can and need to improve the communication of these factors and benefits. This assumption correlates with Berthon *et al.* (2005) who suggests that the organisation needs to be able to communicate the employer brand externally in order to succeed.

5.3 Critical reflection

The empirical data of this study serve as a base in the understanding of how Swedish farmers are working with employer branding practises when recruiting and retaining employees. As mentioned in chapter 3, this study is relatively characterized by the methodological research approach. The study followed a qualitative research approach and the empirical data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Thanks to this data collecting method, the respondents got the chance to speak openly and freely about the studied area. If this study were to be performed through a quantitative research approach, the possibility to study a larger population would have been higher. Because of this, it is possible that the results would have been generalizable. However, a quantitative research approach would probably have made it more problematic to reach a deeper understanding of the studied phenomena of employer branding practices in each case and their opportunities.

As mentioned in 1.3 the findings in this study are limited by the micro-context of the studied cases. The results of this study are based on inputs from farms and does not account for other potentially important voices, practices or organizations and the work of these in relation to employer branding. The identified employer branding practices are framed around the work and distinct practices of the individual organizations.

As mentioned in 3.3, the empirical data of this study was collected through interviews by telephone. Vogl (2013), argues that interviews by telephone often are avoided due to the lack of personal interaction. This aspect was not considered to be problematic in this study. Before starting the interviews, the authors presented themselves and the purpose of the study in order to make the respondents feel safe and secure to express themselves. Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) suggests that there is no significant difference in terms of data quality when comparing telephone interviews with face-to-face interviews. This assumption can be confirmed by the authors of this study. The quality of the data was not affected by the lack of personal interaction, in the context of this study. The amount and extent of the given data was according to the expectations of the authors.

The results of this study can contribute to a deeper understanding regarding Swedish farmers' approach to human resource strategies in general and employer branding practices in particular. The results can also help to improve strategies in terms of attracting, recruiting and retaining competent employees in Swedish agricultural businesses.

6 Conclusions

In this chapter, the authors' conclusions are presented. The conclusions respond to the aim of the study. Finally, suggestions for further research are given.

6.1 Findings and contributions

This report was created by studying the theoretical field of employer branding and the empirical data from eight different cases. The concept of employer branding involves attracting, hiring, developing, motivating and retaining the potential and current human capital for the benefit of the company. The foundation for this concept is the assumption that human capital brings value to the firm and that investing in the human capital will benefit the performance and competitiveness of the firm (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004; Berthon *et al.* 2005). According to previous research a strong employer brand together with developed employer branding strategies and activities can bring value to the firm by improving employer attractiveness, employee productivity and employee retention (Ambler & Barrow 1996; Backhaus & Tikoo 2004; Rosethorn 2009).

Based on the analysis and discussion, one conclusion is that the studied companies in the different cases both invest in their employer brand and develop employer branding strategies and activities. The companies develop their EVP, consisting of attributes and promises that makes them attractive to the targeted audience of potential employees. The proposition includes both tangible and intangible benefits such as accommodation, flexible working hours and good workplace culture. The companies also did their best to fulfil these promises throughout the employment to motivate and develop the staff, with a goal to increase retention and create value for their businesses. With an inward focus of employer branding practices on the current employees, the companies offer education and emphasize good communication. The results of this study show that the companies want to build a loyalty between the employer and the employee and several of the studied companies wanted the employees to be able to identify with the firm. By constant work to keep the staff happy and enjoying their workplace, the companies aim to create a good reputation to their employer brand. Most of the studied cases have experienced that good reputation is the key to employer attractiveness and is the best way to attract competent workforce. The companies engage in external employer branding practices in order to build a positive reputation and attractiveness as an employer. They also engage in internal employer branding practices to motivate employees and increase retention, which also affect the reputation. By working with employer branding practices, the studied companies aim to achieve benefits which correlates well with those proposed by Figurska and Matuska (2013) in figure 5.

As abovementioned, one of the most important factors when recruiting and retaining employees according to the empirical results of this study is the reputation of the employer. Even though this factor is seen as one of the most important in terms of employer branding practices, it can also be seen as the one factor with the most potential for improvement. This can be seen as a short-term potential for improvement for agricultural businesses. In a more long-term perspective, Swedish agriculture as an industry of employment holds great potential for improvement in terms of communication and reputation. There are considerably many opportunities for employment in Swedish agriculture and there are a lot of benefits that comes with an employment in agriculture. These benefits need to be communicated in greater extent. This long-term perspective can also be connected to the aim of the Swedish National Food Strategy. Improved practices in communication and reputation regarding the Swedish agricultural sector as an attractive workplace can contribute to the aim of achieving sustainable

growth in the food supply chain of Sweden, which is a part of the Swedish National Food Strategy.

The empirical results show that employer branding practices from previous research correlates well to the studied agricultural contexts. Therefore, theories and concepts can be applicable to develop employer branding strategies and activities to bring value to the firm. The empirical and analytical results of this study are important as it provides an understanding of the application of employer branding practices in the Swedish agricultural context. This can contribute with knowledge to business managers and other decision makers in the Swedish agricultural sector as well as to further research in the area of human resource management and marketing. A final conclusion is that people who seek to work with agriculture in Sweden, with the right competence, can expect good opportunities for employment. The agricultural companies need to improve through employer branding practices to become more attractive to these candidates as employers.

6.2 Further research

The empirical results and the discussion of this study highlights ideas for further research regarding employer branding in the Swedish agricultural sector. To provide an answer regarding the effectiveness of the different employer branding practices, a suggestion for further research would be a long-term project investigating and evaluating specific employer branding activities in the Swedish agricultural context. To get a more complete answer of what builds employer attractiveness, further research could focus on which attributes related to the employment are the most desired and valued by job seekers in the agricultural sector.

During the empirical gathering, one of the respondents proposed that the common perception of working at a farm is outdated. This raised an important question about the reputation of the agricultural sector. The result of this study highlights that the reputation is one of the most important factors when recruiting and retaining employees. This study focuses only on the specific companies in each case and their social context. Suggestions for further research would be to study the Swedish agricultural sector as a single case and investigate the common perception of farm work in Sweden and if it is inhibiting the attractiveness of employment in the sector.

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Appendix 1: Interview guide

The purpose of this study is to create an understanding of how Swedish farmers are working with their employer brand to recruit and retain employees. The goal of the study is to contribute with knowledge about how agricultural businesses more successfully can attract and retain employees with the right competence.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You and your business will be anonymous in the study. Do you allow us to record the interview? We, Marcus and Olof, will be the only ones with access to the recording.

Part 1: Background information about the farm and the business
- Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and your farm?
  - What is your role in the business?
- What type of production is taking place at the farm?
- How big is the farm in hectares?
- How many employees is in the business today?
  - How many fulltime, part time?
- In what part of the lifecycle is the business?
  - Introduction phase, growth phase, maturing phase, decline phase?
- What are the future plans for the business?

Part 2: Recruiting and retaining employees
- Can you tell us about your typical recruitment process? From a discovered need for a new employee all the way to an employment contract.
  - Is it always the same procedure or does it differ depending on the type of employment?
- Why do you think that employees choses you as their employer?
- Do you work actively with your employer brand?
  - If yes, how? If no, why not?
- As an employer, what do you want that your business should represent?
- How do you work in order to keep your employees in the business?
  - How do you make sure that the employees are happy at work?
  - Do you consider the organisation culture?
- Do you market yourselves as an employer?
  - If yes, how?
  - Do you do it consciously?
  - Do you receive trainees from agricultural upper secondary schools?
- What do you think about your reputation as an employer and as a workplace?
  - Do you think that reputation or Word-of-mouth is an efficient way of recruiting?

Part 3: Challenges when recruiting and retaining employees
- What are the biggest challenges, according to you, when recruiting new employees?
    - Difficult to reach out to the right applicants?
    - Difficult to get applications?
- Do you experience a lack of competence and labour in the industry?
    - How does this affect your business?
    - Does it affect your will to invest?
- Do you experience a strong competition over employees in the industry?
    - Competition from other agricultural businesses or other industries?
    - If yes, how do you work to strengthen your competitiveness?
- What type of benefits do you offer to your employees that makes you competitive?
    - Bonuses, accommodation, training etc.?
- What are the most common reason why employees quit their employment in your business?

Part 4: Potential for improvement when recruiting and retaining employees
- What are the most important factors of success when recruiting new employees?
    - Recommendations?
- How can your business improve in terms of attracting competent employees?
    - Where is the biggest potential for improvement?
- How can your business improve in terms of retaining employees?

Appendix 2: Cover letter sent to respondents

Hello!
We are two students who are right now doing our last semester at the Agricultural Programme, Economics and Management at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Uppsala. During the spring of 2020, we are writing our master's thesis in business administration. In order to perform this study, we are in need of getting in contact with farmers for our cases.

The purpose and arrangement of the study
The purpose of the study is to create understanding about the strategies of Swedish farmers in terms of recruiting and retaining competent labour.
The study also aims to investigate the potential of working more actively with employer branding in Swedish agriculture.
The aim is to investigate how farmers attract and retain competent labour and identify opportunities for improvement. By doing so, this can contribute to increased competitiveness and economic sustainability in Swedish agriculture.

As a result of this, we are wondering if you would be interested to participate in the study? In that case, we would like to interview you by telephone at a time that suits you. The interview will take approximately 15-30 minutes. You and your company will be totally anonymous.

The interview is divided into four themes:
1. Background information about the farm and the organisation.
2. Recruitment and retainment of competent labour within the organisation.
3. Challenges that farmers experiences when recruiting and retaining competent labour.
4. Potential for improvement, from the farmer's perspective, to more easily be able to attract and retain competent labour.

We hope that you find this study interesting. Do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions about the study.

Sincerely,

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