



UNIVERSITEIT TWENTE.

Master thesis

Employer branding as competitive advantage

*Important employer branding elements from
the perspective of young professionals*

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Abstract

An employee pool filled with professionals results in competitive advantage for organizations.. Therefore, organizations invest increasing amounts of time and money to attract the right talents through employer branding. The existing literature has been essentially focused on the organizations and what they perceived as crucial and expect of their employees. In contrast, this research aims to identify the elements perceived as important by graduates themselves. For this purpose, an online questionnaire (N=208) was spread to students close to graduation, which was divided into two parts. The first part focused on what graduates considered as crucial for a potential future employer and how the single characteristics relate to each other. Particularly soft skills attract attention, whereas no significant differences could be identified between the remaining characteristics: (a) 9 elements of employer brand (b) social adjustment concern, (c) value expression concern, (d) tangible benefits, (e) intangible benefits. The second part of the questionnaire included a 2x2 between-subject experimental design, aimed on examining whether the represented organization in form of an advertisement was perceived significantly different whether there was a focus on tangible vs intangible benefits or soft vs hard skills. Using a MANOVA-analysis, no significant different effects could be found. Based on the results, it can be assumed that an organization needs to communicate its practices openly to the outside world as well as to their employees and need to offer an attractive salary and certain intangible benefits as simultaneously.

Keywords: employer branding, social adjustment concern, value expression concern, tangible and intangible benefits, soft and hard skills

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1.Introduction

In the present 21st century, the nature of work is confronted with many challenges for staffing: knowledge-based work places, greater demands on employee competencies, diverse workforce and growing global shortfalls of qualified and talented applicants (Ployhart, 2006). For organizations it becomes more and more important to focus on finding and recruiting talented people with a high educational level. Nowadays, talent is “rare, valuable, difficult to imitate and hard to substitute” (Ployhart, 2006). For nine years, the ManpowerGroup conducts an annual survey on the topic of talent shortage based on the expertise of over 37.000 employers in 42 countries. Around the globe, 36 percent of employers indicated a talent shortage in 2014; the highest rate in the last seven years (ManpowerGroup, 2014). Due to a lack of talented employees, organizations also experience a negative impact on their ability to meet organizational goals and client needs.

At the latest since the economic crisis in 2008, there is a growing need for organizations to create an attractive employer brand to attract talents. Berthon, Ewing and Hah (2005) argue that an attractive employer brand can be seen as an imagined benefit that a potential employee associates with working for a specific organization. In a context where employees with superior skills and knowledge represent a distinct source competitive advantage, employer branding forms an elementary concept. Education, knowledge and skills will become crucial, particularly because entrepreneurial success within Europe will increasingly be determined by two factors: (1) the right people with (2) the proper skillset (Bendaraviciene, Krikstolaitis, & Turauskas, 2013; Nagel, 2011). Throughout the literature, it is found that a well working employer brand leads to a competitive advantage (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Organizations more and more realize the importance of developing a good working employer brand and spend considerable resources on such campaigns. Through a good implemented employer branding strategy, employees internalize the communicated organizational values. In turn, organizational values are carried outside and attract potential applicants (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) (2007) appoint mainly four reasons for the upcoming rise of employer branding: (1) power of branding, (2) increasing focus on employee engagement, (3) the ongoing war of talents and (4) the impact of human resources (HR) on daily business.

Despite all the popularity, academic research is still quite limited to the marketing literature. Although branding itself is a well-developed concept in the literature, there is a lack of research on employer branding (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Originally, the term branding was used to differentiate products through their name, label, logo or design, but nowadays it also describes a broader differentiation of people, places and organizations as whole (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Through employer branding, employees get engaged in the strategy and culture of the organization as a good place to work (Sullivan, 2004). Especially, in knowledge-based economies with skilled employees, employer branding becomes more popular. Though, what all kinds of branding have in common is the ongoing process of communication about image and reputation (Levitt, 1980). Thereby, the communication may either refer to a person (Ugla, 2006), to an organization (Davis, 2008) or to an employer (Ambler & Barrow, 1996).

For organizations it is crucial to classify and retain the most talented people, through a good structured employer branding strategy, in order to be able to respond to upcoming challenges (Schwarkkopf et al., 2004). This creates a high demand of a talented and diverse pool of human capital. However so far, it has not been analyzed which factors constitute an attractive employer brand from the perspective of future employees. As well-educated future employees, they constitute the target group on which organizations needs to focus within the labor market. For this reason, this research focuses on prospective young professionals, which belong to the generation Y (1980-2000), who are close to graduation. Aim of this study is to find out which elements of an organization are really important to them and what they pay attention to during job search. Therefore, the aim of the research will be to identify which information, given by an organization through their employer brand perceives graduates as important to plan and pursue their career?

First, a clear definition of employer branding will be given with subsequently determining the benefits of employer branding; followed by an overview of nine elements that are considered as important employer brand elements. Thereupon, the role of benefits and skills, within the context of creating an attractive employer brand, will be exemplified. Moreover, the importance of a good reputation in form of social adjustment concern and value expression concern with subsequently focusing on the importance of soft skills will be shown. After that, an overview of the used method can be found and the accompanying results. Finally, a discussion section with conclusion will be given.

2.Theoretical framework

2.1 Employer branding – a definition

Employer branding can be described as an integral part of the staffing process within organizations. Through creating a strong employer brand, organizations try to influence the job choices of potential talented and competent applicants (Ployhart, 2006). It is a critical and helpful tool for acquisition, development and retention and also helps the organization to create an own company brand (Gaddam, 2008; Martin, Gollan & Grigg, 2011). Sullivan (2004) defines employer branding as a strategic process of building a unique, identifiable identity which differs from its competitors in the labor market as a long-term strategy “to manage the awareness and perceptions of employees, potential employees and related stakeholders with regards to a particular firm”. Therefore, employer branding is associated with the employment experience, including tangible and intangible benefits (Ruch, 2002).

In literature, employer branding is described as a three-step process. First of all, the “value proposition” of an organization needs to be developed and embodied through the brand (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Therefore, the brands value includes information about the organizational culture, the predominant management style, currently employment image and impressions of quality evidence (Sullivan, 2002). The value proposition facilitates the central message of the organizational employer brand (Eisenberg, Kilduff, Burleigh, & Wilson, 2001) and is based on the perceived attractiveness. The more attractive an employer, the stronger that particular brand equity (Berthon et al., 2005). Employer branding combines the internal and external communication (Jenner & Taylor, 2007). It helps to create a consistent employment experience and communication and can also enhance the employee’s engagement (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Based on this, the second step can be described as the external marketing of the brand and is used to attract the target group through the communicated value proposition (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). For the practical success of the employer brand, it is crucial that the brand is in line with all other branding efforts of the organization (Sullivan, 1999). The internal marketing is the third aspect, in which the internal workforce accepts the brand as part of their organizational culture (Frook, 2001). People talk about it and, thus, unconsciously spread the message.

The idea of employer branding derives from the same concept as corporate branding, but whereas corporate branding focuses on an external audience, employer branding is aimed at both the internal and external audience (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Effective branding is marked by consistent messages about the brand to be noticeable, relevant and unique (Mosley, 2007). Furthermore, the relationship between communication and branding of products and services is marked by an ongoing process about image and reputation (Levitt, 1980). Employees nowadays are seen as representatives of an organization and, therefore, constitute the interface between a brands` internal and external environment and as such they have great impact on individual perceptions of the organization (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). It involves promoting a clear view of the organizational benefits, describing in which points the organization is different and desirable as an employer (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Employer branding manages the awareness and perceptions of employee`s including the work experiences during the process from applying for a job till leaving.

2.2 Benefits of employer branding

Within the strategic process of building a unique and identifiable employer brand, the following four benefits can be identified:

1. Create distinctiveness and uniqueness
2. Attract talented people and deny the “war of talents” successfully
3. Define the kind of desired applicants
4. Being well managed with having motivated employees who are willing to learn and grow

Nowadays, it becomes even more crucial to create an own strong employer brand with core strengths and uniqueness to position the organizational distinctiveness on the labor market (Bendaraviciene et al., 2013). Being distinctive offers the possibility for winning the war of talents by being authentic and memorable. Moreover, due to the demographic changes and high expectations, as well as a high self-interest attitude of generation Y, it becomes even more necessary for organizations to brand themselves as a good employer (Arachchige & Robertson, 2013). People’s requirements in a job have shifted from high wages to working for organizations with a positive reputation (Bendaraviciene et al., 2013). Through a structured employer branding strategy, organizations have the chance to clearly define the kind of desired applicants clearly (Bendaraviciene et al., 2013). Due to this, high quality candidates with the right abilities and knowledge can be recruited for the job. For organizational success, it is crucial to attract and retain the most talented employees (Hoye van, Bas, Cromheecke, & Lievens, 2013). To create more clarity for the further, table 1 gives an overview of the different concepts used.

Table 1
Definitions of researched concepts

Concept	Definition
<i>Employer branding</i>	“Strategic process of building a unique, identifiable identity which differentiates from its competitors in the labor market as a long-term strategy to manage the awareness and perception of employees, potential employees and related stakeholders with regards to a particular firm” (Sullivan, 2004).
<i>Value expression</i>	Obtaining social status based on the degree an individual places on working for an organization (Highhouse et al., 2007)
<i>Social adjustment</i>	“The awareness of or interest in the degree to which association with a particular employer invokes prestige or impresses others” (Highhouse et al., 2007).
<i>Soft skills</i>	A character trait of interpersonal qualities and personal attributes an individual possesses (Roblés, 2015).
<i>Hard skills</i>	The technical expertise and knowledge needed for a job (Roblés, 2015) They are based on an outcome such as education or work experience.
<i>Tangible benefits</i>	Instrumental rewards for an individual performance (Noe et al., 2009). They are seen as key driver to motivate people to come to work.
<i>Intangible benefits</i>	Symbolic rewards which are subjective and abstract (Lievens et al., 2007) such as a good work-life balance or flexibility.
<i>General attractiveness</i>	Attitudes regarding an organization as a potential place to work (Highhouse et al., 2003) which is passive and without social references.
<i>Intention to apply</i>	Conscious decision to invest time and energy in a forward-looking approach dealing with an organization in future (Highhouse et al., 2003).
<i>Employer image</i>	Characteristics of an organization get valued in a positive or even negative way, influenced by reputation, popularity or status (Highhouse et al., 2003).

2.3 Basic elements of a successful employer brand

2.3.1 Elements of a successful employer brand

The concept of employer attractiveness consists of two perceptions influencing the attitudes of (potential) employees: the job and the organizational characteristics (Cable & Judge, 1997). This, in turn, influences the attitudes, as well as the behaviors of organizational members. According to Hedlund, Andersson and Rosén (2009) an “organization [is] attractive if a person is interested to apply for it, wants to stay and is engaged in it” (p.3). Organizations from all possible sectors are concerned about the right strategy of how to attract the right talents (Rynes and Barber, 1990). The human capital of an organization guarantees viability and generates competitive advantage for business. Although there is no direct link between organizational attractiveness and the recruitment process of an organization, it is assumed that attractiveness impacts an applicant’s intention to apply (Saks et al., 1995), because perceptions of attractiveness forecast the intention of applying for a job within the organization (Robertson et al., 2005). However, in order to be successful, Sullivan (2004) explains that an employer brand must consist of the following eight essential elements:

1. A culture of sharing and continuous improvement
Encourage managers to spread the best practices openly. Public touting has become normal and the management team has to encourage sharing through measures and rewards.
2. A balance between good management and high productivity
The basis of every employer brand is the management practice through maintaining increasing employee productivity. Managers have to take efforts of “looking good”.
3. Obtaining public recognition (great-place-to-work lists)
Being listed on one of the “great places to work” lists (e.g. Fortune, and Working Mother Magazines) increases the credibility of the organization. At the same time, the target audience gets persuaded that the organization is a good place to work.
4. Employees “proactively” telling stories
If an employer brand is implemented well, their employees go out and talk about their experiences to their private and organizational network. Viral marketing is the most influential part of a successful employer brand, because it has a more significant impact than stories told by the organization itself.
5. Getting talked about
Through being “talked about” in publications, it is possible to overcome the risk of being unknown. Thereby, the perceived image of the CEO is tied to the employment brand, whereby negative headlining will have a negative impact.
6. Becoming a benchmark firm
Benchmark firms are those who are pioneering. Other organizations try to learn and imitate their practices.

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| 7. Increasing candidate awareness of your best practices | Organizations need to spread their messages in a way to focus management and business practices, to inform potential applicants that they have to offer a good place to work and create awareness. |
| 8. Branding assessment metrics | To fit changing needs brand assessment measures or metrics should become important criteria. Without measuring and comparing no organization can improve. |

Schmidt Albinger and Freeman (2000) investigate in their research on corporate social performance (CSP) the relationship between CSP and employer attractiveness of organizations. They found that competitive advantage is, amongst other things, provided by CSP, which offers an organization the ability to attract quality employees. This idea dates back to Stigler (1962), who states that organizations which are concerned about employees welfare and communicate this through a good reputation, as well as good working conditions are also able to attract better applicants. What had begun in the 90s as a growing interest in ecological issues, has been evolved over the years to a more holistic idea about responsible business behavior. Society, nowadays, is in advance of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and it can be described as a signal of trust within the respective organization (Bustamante & Brenninger, 2013). Therefore, CSR was added within this research to the list of Sullivan:

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| 9. Corporate Social Responsible behavior | It is the responsibility of organizations for their personal impacts on society and implies regarding the European Commission (2011) the integration of "social, environmental, ethical, human rights and consumer concerns into business operations and core strategy in close collaboration with their stakeholders" |
|--|--|

Beyond this, there does not exist one "best way" of managing employees (Bartram, 2011; Bendaraviciene et al., 2013). An organization needs to act consistent with respect to their employment practices to foster a reliable and accountable identity throughout the organization (Baron, Hannan, & Burton, 2001).

2.3.2 Relevance of offered tangible versus intangible benefits

It is relevant to keep in mind that, although operating in the same industry, providing the same range of profession or conforming to the same labor law, any organization is inimitable in their design and strategy as regards to the employment relationship (Bendaraviciene et al., 2013; Hannan, 2005). As a result, it is only logical that organizations differ in various features: economic and financial reward packages, tangible or intangible benefits provided and valued by employees or the fulfillment of socio-emotional needs (Edwards, 2010). Through the higher demand of highly trained and skilled employees (Rainey, 2002), firms have to fight more for the right talents, for example by providing better salary and tangible benefits or a good work-life balance, support for family issues and exciting career opportunities (Akhter, 2010). Labor shortage can affect the process negatively where organizations

need to be more concerned with attracting candidates and designing good strategies. Organizations require a good employee pool to overcome crisis situations or upcoming technological challenges (Schwarzkopf, Meijja, Jaspersen, Saunders, & Gruenwald, 2004).

Whereas a tangible focus is quite obvious directed to monetary rewards as salary, promotion or fringe benefits, an intangible focus is more abstract (Saqib, Abrar, Sabir, Bashir & Baig, 2015). The benefits of these rewards could for example be found in flexible working hours (Corporaal, 2014) or in a good work-life balance (Hill et al., 2001). Organizations often try to offer a mixture of both, but it is yet not that clear if graduates as future employees prefer tangible or intangible benefits or even a mixture of it.

2.3.3 Relevance of a good reputation

The process of creating a successful employer brand for an organization requires decision making and answering the question “who are we?” (Mosley, 2009). Moreover, it should be clear that every organization is responsible for its own employer brand, either intentionally or not (Bendaraviciene et al., 2013). Regarding to Rosethorn and Mensink (2007) it is necessary to concentrate on specific characteristics: “No organization should be aiming to be all things to all people – different types of people are right for different types of companies” (p.4). Again, distinctiveness is decisive.

Organizations have the chance to represent themselves in a good manner and to stand out from the crowd. Through this, there is the possibility to position the organization as a desirable place to work and define an own identity. Even if an organization has defined its identity, the message to the outside world is often unclear (Bendaraviciene et al., 2013). To communicate an attractive image, an organization needs to be authentic, compelling and differentiated (Minchington & Estis, 2009). Employer brands are generally suffering due to a narrow focus on solely recruitment or resourcing, or because of demonstrating a too general picture instead of describing organizational core values (Rosethorn & Mensink, 2007; Mosley, 2009). Ultimately, leading employer brands are those that focus on certainties and where the message is reliable and reflect the reality of employment experience (CIPD, 2008). Therefore, organizations have to make clear decisions and being courageous, to be successful.

Employer branding helps to manage the right talents by creating an organizational culture and organizational identity (Cable & Judge, 1997). The associations with the employer brand affect the image of the employer, which in turn influences the potential applicants measure of their personal identity. People always want to see and describe themselves positively and, therefore, aspire to work for an organization which fits their personal requirements. This phenomenon can be explained by two functions of attraction with regards to a good reputation: value expression and social adjustment. Highhouse et al. (2007) used a scheme (Figure 1) to explain the influential relationship between different market signals and the development of symbolic inferences about organizations.

Market Signal	Symbolic Inference		Function of Attraction
Compensation Leader Fortune Ranking Progressive Technology	Aggressive Dominant Innovative	→ Impressive Company	Social Adjustment
Socially Responsible Family-Friendly Policies Principled Leader	Sincere Empathic Fair & Ethical	→ Respectable Company	Value Expression

Figure1: Relation of symbolic inferences to self-presentation goals and employer attraction (Highhouse et al., 2007, p.137)

To serve a social adjustment need, one should be allowed to “fit in” with important groups. In the context of job-choice, social adjustment refers to the job seekers` awareness and the degree to which working for a particular organization invokes impression to others. Job-seekers want to identify themselves with the high status represented by the organization. A favorable impression about working for a potential organization helps to establish a public identity that allows for social approval. It is expected that social adjustment concern is an important part of finding the right organization to apply for. Moreover, people are disposed to focus on hard skills and tangible benefits.

In contrast, value expression concern deals with projecting an image of consensus (Highhouse et al., 2007). A person high in value expression is anxious of personal positive regard, dependent on ones view of the “collective self” (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). In the context of job-choice, value expression concern describes ones awareness in the degree of dignity or respectability. Value expression has to do with working for an organization that is focused on intangible benefits and evokes pride (Highhouse et al., 2007). Therefore, it is expected that value expression concern is also an important part while seeking for a job and that people are more disposed to focus on required soft skills and intangible benefits.

Both functions play an inherent role while seeking for a job (Highhouse et al., 2007). A good reputation attracts potential employees and conveys a sense of cohesion with the organization itself (Hannon & Milkovich, 1996). Alternatively, a disadvantageous reputation leads to a preference of competitive organizations on the market. If organizations seek to establish and manage a good reputation, current employees feel comfortable working there and potential candidates get addressed (Joo & Mclean, 2006).

2.4 Soft skills

Within Europe, there is a growing awareness of developing a knowledge-based economy and the associated importance of higher education (Andrews & Higson, 2008). To meet the changing and complex needs of today’s contemporary workplace, universities all over the globe are required to educate highly skilled graduates who meet the needs of employers (Possa, 2006). In this context, hard skills can be defined as “the technical expertise and knowledge needed for a job” (Roblés, 2015). In

contrast, soft skills are interpersonal qualities and personal attributes an individual possesses. Particularly soft skills are considered as crucial attributes for potential applicants (Roblés, 2015).

Based on the shift from an industrial economy to an information society and an office economy, employers expect from its (future) employees some kind of emphasis on integrity, communication and flexibility (Zehr, 1998). Previously, the focus only was set on hard skills for career employment, but nowadays soft skills are critical for a current productive performance (Roblés, 2015). Although employability and the accompanying necessary skills is a quite complex concept, it is possible to identify some key soft skills integral for graduate's employability. For this research, the top ten soft skills of Robles (2012) are chosen to be examined (Table 3). Roblés (2015) found that these soft skills are perceived as most important by business executives.

Table 3

Ten soft skill attributes categorized from executive listings (Robles, 2012, p.3)

Soft skill	Examples
Communication	Oral, speaking capability, writing, presenting, listening
Courtesy	Manners, etiquette, business etiquette, gracious, respectful
Flexibility	Adaptability, willing to change, lifelong learner, accepts new things, adjusts, teachable
Integrity (upright)	Honest, ethical, high morals, has personal values, does what's right
Social skills	Nice, personable, sense of humor, friendly, nurturing, empathic, has self-control, patient, sociability
Positive attitude	Optimistic, enthusiastic, encouraging, happy, confident
Professionalism	Businesslike, well-dressed, appearance, poised
Responsibility	Accountable, reliable, gets the job done, resourceful, self-disciplined, wants to do well, conscientious, commonsense
Teamwork	Cooperative, gets along with others, agreeable, supportive, helpful, collaborative
Work ethic	Hard working, willing to work, loyal, initiative, self-motivated, on time, good attendance

2.4.1 Sub-questions

Based on this first overview, the following three sub-questions will be answered:

- Which basic elements of employer branding attract attention in an organization by graduates as future applicants?
- To what extent is it possible to identify significant correlations between the individual elements?

2.5 Incentives compared with necessary skills

Moreover, it is interesting to question whether graduates feel more attracted to an organization if tangible or intangible benefits are offered, but also to what extent soft and hard skills should be required by an organization. Highhouse et al. (2003) found that the general attractiveness of an organization actually is reflected through attitudinal and affective thoughts about a particular organization as a place to work. It is passive in nature, because it does not imply any kind of action. In contrast, intention to apply for a job goes beyond the passivity (Highhouse et al., 2003). Individuals decide consciously to invest time and energy for themselves. Employer image is based on social references (Highhouse et al., 2003). At this stage, the characteristics of an organization get regarded as either positive or negative in the minds of individuals who are confronted with an organization. "General attractiveness" as well as "intention to apply" is closely centered on an individual without any external referent. So, (1) general attraction measures the attitudes regarding an organization as a potential place for employment, (2) intention to apply implies a forward-looking approach to dealing with the organization in future and (3) employer image focuses on social aspects of influence, such as for example reputation, popularity or status of an organization.

2.5.1 Tangible vs. intangible rewards

Employer attractiveness is about some kinds of benefits that determine a potential applicants' attraction to an organization. These benefits can be conceptualized, on the one hand, into instrumental, functional or tangible features and, on the other hand, into symbolic or intangible features (Cable & Turban, 2001; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Especially symbolic features are subjective and abstract by which an incremental variance on organizational attractiveness can be explained (Lievens et al., 2007). Organizations often assume that their employees perform better if the reward system is attractive (Boel, 2012). Financial benefits, thereby, are defined as "a reward for individual performance" (Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart & White, 2009). In the literature about employee motivation, financial benefits are seen as the key driver to motivate people to come to work. Beside tangible incentives (e.g. fix salaries, pay raise, promotion), organizations make also use of intangible benefits, such as praise and recognition, time off or flexible scheduling, to motivate existing employees and being attractive to future employees.

Definitely, money is the primary motivation for employees to come to work, but intangible benefits such as free time or even a simple "Thank You" can result into motivation and increase the organizational performance (Saqib et al., 2015). Organizations following best human resource practices by handling intangible benefits create employee loyalty and therefore organizational commitment. Joo and McLean (2006) stated that due to globalization and the rise of information technology, intangible human assets are important to attract employees and become an employer of choice. A good person-organization fit attracts people and starts from the moment in which the potential applicant sees the respective job-advertisement for the first time (Collins and Han, 2004). Applicants get persuaded by the given organizational information and immediately begin to weigh to what extent they are convinced of fitting into this organization. Moreover, people get attracted by an organization if a good work-life balance is provided. Duxbury and Higgins (2005) identified three possible types of work-life conflicts: work

overload, work to family interference and, vice versa, family to work interference. In the study of Thompson, Beauvais and Lyness (1999) they found that the availability of, both, a work-family benefit and a supportive work-family culture are positively correlated with organizational commitment and, at the same time, negatively with work-family conflicts. The demand of strong corporate values that can be associated with personal values is increased in today's workforce (Buhler, 2007). Beyond this, it is quite obvious that potential applicants are happier and more attracted by the organization if their values match (Cooman, Giet, Pepermans, Hermans, Bois, Caers & Jegers, 2009). So, tangible benefits generate the reason to work and intangible benefits create commitment with the organization and results in more satisfaction.

H1: *Intangible benefits in advertisements result in higher levels of (a) general attractiveness, (b) intention to apply and (c) employer image than tangible benefits.*

2.5.2 Hard vs. soft skills

One should always keep in mind that a reward, in every conceivable form, does not impact employees' abilities (Boel, 2012). Abilities will not simply improve by giving rewards. It could only be possible that the motivation increases by an attractive reward, but skills will stay on the same level. In general, two significant groups of skills can be identified; hard and soft skills. Hard skills are those achievements based on an outcome, such as education, work experience and level of expertise (Roblés, 2015). Soft skills can not be based on facts; it can be more seen as a character trait, an attitude or behavior which enhances an individual's interactions, job performance and career prospects (Parson, 2008). In the 21st century, soft skills gain more and more importance (Mitchell, Skinner & White, 2010), they are as important as cognitive skills (John, 2009). While owning soft skills could make the differences in the chance to get hired for a job, the lack of the same skills is often responsible to block individual's career opportunities (Roblés, 2015; Klaus, 2010).

H2: *Soft skills in advertisements result in higher levels of (a) general attractiveness, (b) intention to apply and (c) employer image than hard skills.*

3. Method

3.1 Research design

The study aimed to identify elements of an organization which are seen as most important by graduates. Therefore, a quantitative research design in form of an online self-administered questionnaire, including an experimental setting, was employed. An advantage of handling an online survey is the possibility to combine different issues through a diversity of questions (Evans & Mathur, 2005). However, internet-mediated questionnaires normally have a low response rate, which can be prevented through an active stimulation of graduates and the use of different kinds of media channels such as (1) Facebook, (2) Twitter and (3) E-mail. Graduates received a link which takes them directly to the survey manager system. One advantage resulting from this is the large and geographically spread sample size (Saunders et al., 2009).

In correspondence with the research question, the content of the questionnaire was divided into two successive parts. First, the focus was set on examining which elements of an organization were experienced by respondents as crucial and focused on what graduates believe they can offer to potential future employers. This was measured by asking pointed questions in which respondents were confronted with questions focused on their general opinion regarding themselves and what respondents believed to be crucial for a potential future employer.

The second part consisted of a 2x2 between-subject experimental design, in which the dependent variables were *general attractiveness*, *intention to apply* and *employer brand image*. Respondents were confronted with one out of four possible conditions in form of fictive job advertisements, respectively. Aim of this manipulation was to find out if respondents experienced the same organization significantly different whether the focus of the advertisement was set on tangible vs. intangible and soft skills vs. hard skills. Moreover, respondents were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions, which are summarized in Figure 2.

2x2 experimental design	Hard skills	Soft skills
Tangible incentives	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Condition 1</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>An attractive salary</i> • <i>A good promotion</i> • <i>Working for a reputed organization</i> 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Condition 2</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>good written and communication skills</i> • <i>the ability to work under pressure</i> • <i>motivation</i> • <i>professionalism</i>
Intangible incentives	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Condition 3</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Excellent grades</i> • <i>Technical and communicative skills</i> • <i>Motivation</i> • <i>professionalism</i> 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Condition 4</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Flexible working hours</i> • <i>A good work-life balance</i> • <i>Working for a reputed organization</i>

Figure 2: experimental design

The focus in condition one and two was set on tangible reward systems with a requirement of hard skills in the first condition and soft skills in the second. Condition three and four focused on intangible rewards, but were also divided into requirements of hard skills in the third condition and soft skills in condition four. The organization devised for this study was fictitious, to guarantee that respondents would have had no prior knowledge and connotations. It was chosen to “create” a random organization without any focus on a particular sector and with the corporate name “dazzling_aRRay” which includes the randomization.

3.2 Instrumentation and scale development

This study made use of rating scales where all constructs are measured based on a five-point-likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree). In order to answer the sub-questions, the first part of the questionnaire was composed of six independent constructs, measuring what respondents expect to be crucial aspects of an organization and one construct asking which skills respondents believe they had to offer for an employer. Each of the constructs was taken from an already existing and successfully applied research. Through this it was possible to ensure the reliability and validity of the used questions in this survey and to avoid biases (Schrauf & Navarro, 2005; Saunders et al., 2009).

- *9 elements of a successful employer brand*

For measuring which of the nine elements were experienced as really important by respondents, the scale was based on a total of nine items. Eight out of the nine items could be attributed to Sullivan (2004). The ninth element, the one of *corporate social responsibility*, was additionally incorporated and was based on the assumption that it can be seen as signal of trust within the respective organization (Bustamante & Brenninger, 2013).

- *Organizational reputation*

The perceived importance of a good reputation of the potential future employer was measured by two factors: *social adjustment concern* and *value expression concern*. The items were based on the scales of Highhouse et al. (2006) and Lemmink et al. (2003), measuring with respectively five items if respondents experienced it as crucial that the own employer is impressive, for example “I want to work for a company that is perceived to be impressive”, or even respectable, for example measured with “I want to be proud of the company I work for”.

- *Intangible benefits*

The importance of intangible benefits was measured by using three items of the work-life balance scale of Hill et al. (2001) and four items of the flexibility of working hour’s scale of Corporaal (2014). One sample item is “It’s important to balance the demands of your work and your personal/family life”

- *Tangible benefits*

The extent to which tangible benefits were perceived as crucial was measured by the already existing scale of Goldberg et al. (2003). This scale measured with a total of eight items the materialism of respondents, for example “I would put up with a job that was less interesting if I was paid more money”.

- *Soft skills*

To measure which soft skills respondents believed to own, this research made use of the top ten soft skills of Roblés (2012). At this point of the questionnaire, the respondents needed to estimate themselves. One sample item is “I would describe myself as responsible”.

Similarly, in order to give an answer on the formulated hypotheses, the three dependent constructs *general attractiveness*, *intention to apply* and *employer brand image* were also taken from already existing and successfully applied research scales. In all four possible conditions respondents were confronted with the same items. The manipulation was only taken with regards to content of the job advertisement. The aim was to highlight whether respondents answered significantly different whether they were confronted with offered tangible or intangible benefits or expected hard skills or soft skills.

- *General attractiveness*

Perceived general attractiveness was measured by the already existing scale of Highhouse et al. (2003). This scale included five items, which focused on the extent to which respondents experienced the represented organization as an attractive place to work.

- *Intention to apply*

This scale was also based on the one of Highhouse et al. (2003) and included a total of five items measuring the willingness to work for the shown fictive organization.

- *Employer brand image*

At this point of the questionnaire, five items based on the employer brand image scale of Highhouse et al. (2003), were retroactively asked regarding the experienced image of the represented organization.

Through a pre-test, it was possible to check if the items were interpreted in the intended way. Before starting any kind of statistical analysis, reversed scored items, such as “*I do not expect to change organizations often during my career*”, were recoded into new variables.

3.2.1 Reliability

Cronbach’s Alpha was used to test whether the questions form a reliable scale or not. Table 3 gives an overview of the scale source and the respectively Cronbach’s Alpha, ranging from $\alpha=.61$ to $\alpha=.89$. Besides the three scales of “work-life balance”, “soft skills” and “value expression concern”, all scales are seen as reliable. By dividing individual items, Cronbach’s Alpha increased above 0.7, except by “value expression concern” scale. Due to this, an additional factor analysis was examined according to several criteria for the factorability of a correlation. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure is with 0,713 well above the acceptable limit of 0,60 (Field, 2009). The measure of adequacy shows that all items have a value between 0,697 and 0,756 and, thus, can be accepted. Bartlett’s test of sphericity $\chi^2=93,665, p<,001$ was significant, which implicates that correlations between items were sufficiently large for factor analysis. To obtain eigenvalues for each component an initial analysis was run through the data. Through this analysis, it was shown that only one factor has an eigenvalue above one and explained 38,84% of the total variance. After this additional analysis, it should be noted that, although the Cronbach’s alpha lies below $\alpha \geq 0,7$ it still can be assumed that the variable gives reliable outcomes.

Table 3
Origin of scales and Cronbach's alpha

Construct	Scale	Author	Number of items	Example	Cronbach's alpha	Items deleted	New cronbach's alpha
	9 Elements of a successful employer brand	Sullivan (2004)	9	"For me, it's important that a potential employer has a culture of sharing and continuous improvement"	0,702		
Organizational reputation	Social adjustment concern	Highhouse et al. (2006)	5	"I want to work for a company that is perceived to be impressive"	0,798		
	Value expression concern	Highhouse et al. (2006); Lemmink et al. (2003)	5	"I want to be proud of the company I work for"	0,593	1 Proud	0,607
Intangible benefits	Work-life balance	Hill et al. (2001)	3	"It's important to balance the demands of your work and your personal/family life"	0,653	1 Combine work and family life	0,773
	Flexibility in working hours	Corporaal (2014)	4	"For me, it's important to find a job in which I have a lot of flexibility for inclusion of free hours"	0,782		
Tangible benefits	Materialism	Goldberg et al. (2003)	8	"I would put up with a job that was less interesting if I was paid more money"	0,746		
	Soft skills	Roblés (2012)	10	"I would describe myself as responsible"	0,463	2 communicative courteous	0,728
	General Attractiveness	Highhouse et al. (2003)	5	"This company is attractive to me as a place for employment"	0,850		
	Intention to apply	Highhouse et al. (2003)	5	"I would make this company one of my first choices as an employer"	0,779		
	Employer brand image	Highhouse et al. (2003)	5	"This company probably has a reputation as being an excellent employer"	0,894		

3.3 Participants

The target group of this research consisted of prospective young professionals in higher education close to graduation. Regarding this study, it was not necessary to differentiate between students who achieve their Bachelor or Master degree. Moreover, the field of studies was also not an important factor. Students of all study programs were allowed to participate. There was a distribution of 102 students with a Bachelor's degree and 105 with a Master's degree. Furthermore, it was ensured that only respondents are taken into account belonging to the Generation Y. This includes all birth cohorts between 1980 and 2000. Here, all respondents were between 19 and 31 years old with an average of 23,29 (SD=1,85).

Of the 270 respondents who began with the questionnaire, 77,04% (n=208) filled in the entire questionnaire and 22,96% (n=62) dropped off before they even read the advertisement and were thus excluded. Besides this, 63,9% (n=133) of the respondents were female and 36,1% (n=75) were male. Attention was also paid on the country of origin. 89 respondents were Dutch, 106 German and 13 had a different origin, such as for example Hungarian (n=3) or British (n=2).

Table 4
Distribution of participants

	Gender		Level of education		Nationality		
	Male	Female	Bachelor's degree	Master's degree	Dutch	German	Other
Condition 1 (total n=56)	23 41,1%	33 58,9%	25 44,6%	30 53,6%	21 37,5%	33 58,9%	2 3,6%
Condition 2 (total n=49)	17 34,7%	32 65,3%	27 55,1%	22 44,9%	21 42,9%	24 49,0%	4 8,2%
Condition 3 (total n=44)	13 29,5%	31 70,5%	25 56,8%	19 43,2%	19 43,2%	23 52,3%	2 4,5%
Condition 4 (total n=59)	22 37,3%	37 62,7%	25 42,4%	34 57,6%	28 47,5%	26 44,1%	5 8,5%
Cumulative N (total n=208)	75 36,1%	133 63,9%	102 49,0%	105 50,5%	89 42,8%	106 51,0%	13 6,3%

3.4 Procedure

The online questionnaire including a 2x2 experimental design was conducted within a time frame of four week in April and May 2015. Participants were recruited via the personal networking in both ways, online and face-to-face. The link to the questionnaire was spread online via numerous platforms where students are active. On the one hand, in a more general request to all members of the respective platform and, on the other hand, through direct addressing of the target group by personal

correspondence. An advantage of this method is the higher chance of response and that a person of the target group will actually complete the questionnaire. Furthermore, there was a great support of friends and students who were willing to share the questionnaire and motivate others who are studying to participate in the survey.

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of the four possible conditions, but were exposed to the same list of questions, only the shown advertisement differed with regards to content. Once respondents opened the questionnaire, a confirmation form was shown to inform about the research itself and how the personal data will be used (see appendix A). After reading the instructions, participants gave their consent to voluntarily take part in the anonymous research. First, some basic information on demographics, age, gender and education have been asked.

The first part of the questionnaire aimed at identifying the preferred elements while searching for an employer, such as the interesting, emphasizing and significant characteristics of a potential employer. Furthermore, the social adjustment concern and value expression concern was examined, as well as the value importance of tangible benefits as income and intangible benefits as a good work-life balance. In the final set of questions in the first part, the respondents had to reflect on their soft skills (for all questions, see appendix B).

For the second part of the questionnaire, first, the respondents were confronted with one out of four manipulated job advertisements, which were based on a fictive organization called “daZZling_aRRay” to prevent interference from previous knowledge. The design used was sober and grey, with only a more striking colorful logo of the organization (see appendix C). 92,8% of the participants stated that they never heard of the organization. The remaining 7,2% neither agree nor disagree. The manipulation was only made with regards to content. In all conditions, the same brief overview of the organization and the job offered was given, but with respectively different focuses within the enumeration on what the organization had to offer and what was expected from a potential applicant. In two conditions of the manipulation, the focus was set on offered tangible benefits such as “an attractive salary” and “a good promotion”, and the other two focused on offered intangible benefits such as “flexible working hours” and “a good work-life balance”. Respectively, within two conditions of the manipulation the expected skills had a focus on hard skills like “excellent grades” and “technical and communicative knowledge and skills required for the job” and in the other two a focus on soft skills like “good written and communication skills” and “the ability to work under pressure”. So, due to the four conditions of the manipulation, a 2x2 experimental design could be employed.

4.Results

4.1 Characteristics of interest

To answer the questions – “Which basic elements of employer branding attract attention in an organization by graduates as future applicants?” and “To what extent is it possible to identify significant correlations between the individual elements?” descriptive statistics as well as a Spearman rank correlation analysis were performed.

Using different descriptive statistical tests, no significant differences between the questioned characteristics could be found. The mean scores and standard deviation of each of the variables is shown in Table 5. Due to the small differences, it is difficult to conclude that graduates experienced one element as more crucial while searching for a job.

4.1.2 Relationship between characteristics

Social adjustment and value expression concern were strongly positively correlated, $r(206)=0,22$, $p=0,00$. Also social adjustment concern and tangible benefits were strongly positively correlated, $r(206)=0,49$, $p=0,00$. Value expression concern and tangible benefits were moderately positively correlated, $r(206)=0,17$, $p=0,01$. Neither a significant correlation between social adjustment concern and intangible benefits, nor between value expression concern and intangible benefits could be found. However, for both variables a moderately positive correlation with Soft skills could be found with $r(207)=0,15$, $p=0,00$ for social adjustment concern and $r(207)=0,15$, $p=0,03$ for value expression. We could also identify a moderately positive correlation between soft skills and intangible benefits, $r(208)=0,16$, $p=0,02$. The nine elements of a good employer brand correlates positively with social adjustment with $r(206)=0,46$, $p=0,00$, value expression $r(206)=0,22$, $p=0,00$, tangible benefits with $r(206)=0,15$, $p=0,03$, intangible benefits $r(207)=0,16$, $p=0,02$ and soft skills with $r(207)=0,31$, $p=0,02$.

However, neither a significant correlation between tangible and intangible benefits, nor between social adjustment and value expression concern could be identified. Moreover, there is no significant correlation between soft skills and tangible benefits. All of the three dependent variables correlate positively with soft skills, general attractiveness with $r(208)=0,25$, $p=0,00$, intention to apply $r(208)=0,27$, $p=0,00$ and employer image $r(208)=0,24$, $p=0,00$. However, also among themselves the three correlates with each other. General attractiveness correlates positively with intention to apply $r(208)=0,72$, $p=0,00$ and employer image $r(208)=0,53$, $p=0,00$. Intention to apply correlates positively with employer image with $r(208)=0,61$, $p=0,00$.

Table 5

Means and correlations

	M	SD	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
(1) 9 elements of employer branding	3,51	0,501									
(2) Social adjustment	2,85	0,744	0,46**								
(3) Value expression	3,52	0,370	0,22**	0,22**							
(4) Tangible	2,84	0,564	0,15*	0,49**	0,17*						
(5) Intangible	4,06	0,458	0,16*	0,09	0,07	-0,07					
(6) Soft Skills	4,04	0,420	0,31*	0,15*	0,15*	-0,00	0,16*				
(7) General attractiveness	3,15	0,774	0,1	-0,00	-0,07	-0,04	-0,03	0,25**			
(8) Intention to apply	3,22	0,581	0,09	-0,03	0,00	-0,07	-0,06	0,27**	0,72**		
(9) Employer brand image	3,20	0,622	0,11	-0,03	0,00	-0,09	0,04	0,24**	0,53**	0,61**	

Note 1: ** indicates a correlation with a significance level: $p < 0,01$

Note 2: * indicates a correlation with a significance level: $p < 0,05$

4.2 Soft skills

Figure 3 gives an overview of the results regarding the second sub-question “To what extent do graduates appreciate their own skills?” In general, respondents were of the opinion that they own all of the provided skills with a total mean of $M=4,04$, $SD=0,420$. Most of all,

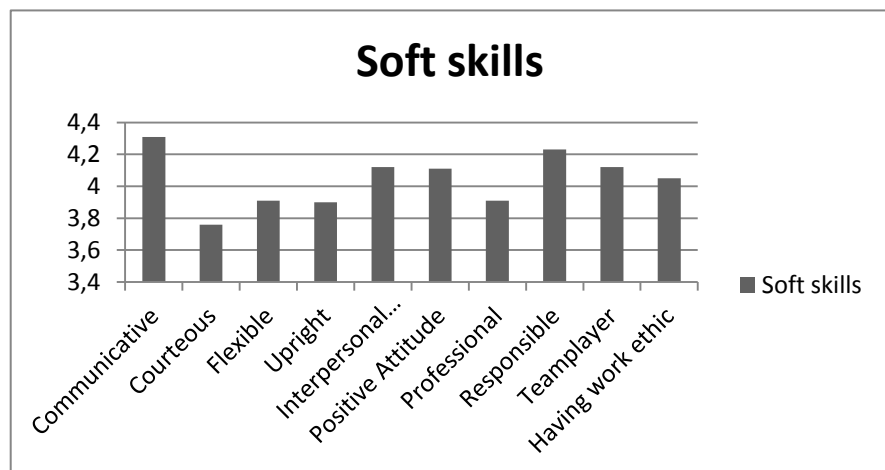


Figure 3: Owning soft skills

graduates described themselves as communicative ($M=4,31$, $SD=3,601$)

and responsible ($M=4,23$, $SD=0,719$). The average value of being courteous was in comparison with the other the lowest ($M=3,76$, $SD=0,748$). All in all, also here no significant differences could be noted.

4.3 Main effects tangible vs intangible incentives and soft vs hard skills

First of all, independent sample t-tests were performed to control the manipulation. No significant different answers were given regarding general attractiveness ($t(203,616)=-1,851$, $p=0,066$, $M=-0,198$), intention to apply ($t(195,25)=-0,547$, $p=0,585$, $M=-0,044$) nor employer image ($t(204,505)=-1,687$, $p=0,093$, $M=-0,145$).

Anyway, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to test whether there would be a difference in effect in the dependent variables when exposed to skills in comparison to benefits. Due to Levene’s test a significant outcome of $p=0,043$ for *Employer Image* was shown, indicating that there exist differences in variance between dependent variables resulting in a violation of the assumption of equal variance. Based on this, the interpretation of the results regarding employer image has to be done with reservations. Moreover, Box’s M (38,914) was not significant, $p(0,163) > \alpha(0,05)$. This indicates that there is no significant difference between covariance metrics. Therefore, the hypothesis of equality among variance-covariance matrix is not rejected, through which the conditions of a MANOVA are met. Using Wilk’s Lamda, no statistically main effect of the manipulation on the dependent variables could be found, $F(12,532,088)=1,365$ with $p=0,179$, Wilks $\Lambda=0,923$ and partial $\eta^2=0,026$. Also separate univariate ANOVAs on the outcome variables displayed no significant effects (table 6). Due to the lack of significance of main effect both hypotheses can be rejected.

Table 6

Multivariate MANOVAs for each dependent variable of the manipulation

	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
General attractiveness	2,138	0,097	0,030
Intention to apply	1,590	0,193	0,023
Employer Image	2,020	0,112	0,029

4.4 Stepwise linear regression analysis

In addition to the already performed tests, stepwise regression analyses were used. Therefore, all found correlations were also examined in an individual regression analysis to carry out possible dependencies. Only soft skills was a significant independent determinant of all of the three dependent variables. The clear supremacy of soft skills results in second regression analysis. Showing that being a teamplayer was most influential for all of the four dependent variables and professionalism was on influence on employer image. For all other independent variables, no significant effect could be identified.

Table 7

Stepwise regression analysis per item of the variable soft skill

		B	T	P	R	R ² - Change
General attractiveness						
	Step 1				0,28	0,07
	Teamplayer	0,27	4,15	0,00		
Intention to apply						
	Step 1				0,31	0,09
	Teamplayer	0,23	4,65	0,00		
Employer image						
	Step 1				0,30	0,09
	Teamplayer	0,24	4,54	0,00		
	Step 2				0,34	0,11
	Teamplayer	0,24	4,27	0,00		
	Professionalism	0,13	2,19	0,03		

4.5 Differences between groups

Using the independent t-test, some significant differences could be identified between bachelor and master graduates as well as between Dutch and German students. There were differences in means between bachelor and master students on *social adjustment* ($F=2,830$; $p=0,017<0,05$) identified. Seen the means for Master graduates was greater than the means of the Bachelor graduates, we can conclude that participants belonging to the Master graduates perceive social adjustment concern as more important. Regarding the manipulation, no significant differences between these two groups could be found.

There are also found some differences between Dutch and German students on *social adjustment* concern ($F=4,084$, $p=0,004<0,05$), *value expression concern* ($F=2,003$, $p=0,000<0,01$), *Work-Life* ($F=6,416$, $p=0,029<0,05$) and *materialism* ($F=0,983$, $p=0,008<0,01$). Considering the means for Dutch students were greater than the ones of German students, we can conclude that participants belonging to the Dutch students perceive social adjustment concern and value expression concern as more important are more materialistic. In contrast, the means of German students were greater regarding work-life balance, indicating that these students had a greater value on good work-life balance.

5. Discussion

The aim of this research is to explore which information given by an organization through their employer brand, were perceived as important by graduates for planning and pursuing their career. Following different propositions that individual elements are expected to be more important than others, several issues arise. In general, no significant differences between the tested elements can be identified. None of them really stands out of others. Respondents perceive them all as a more or less crucial part of a future employer. Sullivan (2004) stated that an organization has to offer all of the mentioned eight elements to increase the number and quality of applicants through a successful employer brand. Merely the ones which give respondents the feeling of being an active part creates attention, for example the elements of taking effort and handling a culture of sharing. This research added a ninth element, corporate social responsibility. Consistent with the study of Schmidt et al. (2000) who investigated that acting in a responsible way increases the attractiveness of an organization and attracts qualified employees. Additionally, the results of this study emphasized the importance of corporate social responsibility. Graduates perceive it as important that their future employer acts responsible with respect to their personal impacts on society. Again, it becomes clear that a sincere interest in the human resource results in attracting potential applicants. This assumption is supported by the scientific literature (Galbreath, 2010; Kim & Park, 2011; Brammer, Millington & Rayton, 2007). Moreover, it is noticeable that a clear distinction between social adjustment concern and value expression concern has to be made. It is possible to confirm the assumption of Highhouse et al. (2007) that social adjustment concern as well as value expression concern plays an inherent role while seeking for a job. Graduates want to be proud of the organization they work for. Potential employers should have a good reputation and needs to be free of scandals, because ultimately the graduates see their future work place as an integral part of their life and self perception (Cable & Judge, 1997).

In line with the results of Rainey (2002), it is crucial for organizations to provide tangible as well as intangible benefits to be attractive. Here, respondents place a great value on benefits regarding a good work-life balance and flexibility within their job; foremost, the possibility to come up with the demands of private- and work-life and maintaining a good balance between these two. Whether organizations support family issues and offers exciting opportunities, it becomes easier for them to acquire a talented work pool (Akhter, 2010). Tangible benefits are often taken for granted, while intangible benefits are some kind of "goody". Due to the graduates expecting their future employers being above average, there is a greater competition for talented employees between individual organizations. Organizational attractiveness depends on the offered benefits, which, in turn, determines potential applicants interests in the corresponding job aspects (Hedlund et al., 2009). Ruch (2002) stated that these benefits influence the process of employer branding. Results show a significant relationship between a tangible focus and social adjustment concern as well as value expression. Highhouse et al., (2007) stated that value expression concern deals with working for an organization focused on intangible benefits and evokes pride. This survey assisted the latter assumption, but no relationship between intangible benefits and any of the two forms of reputation can be identified. This in turn, agrees with the statement of Lievens et al. (2007) that symbolic attributes

have a steady variance regarding organizational attractiveness. Interestingly, and independent of any theory mentioned beforehand, a significant relationship between soft skills and value expression is identified. Graduates indicate that they want to be proud of the organization they work for and that this organization should be scandal free and have a good image. An exact explanation for this relationship is difficult to formulate, but it can be assumed that the correlation is mainly based on "Identity". Moreover, the relationship between intangible attributes and soft skills is probably related to the fact that both concepts deal with a more abstract desire to handle work and private live. Beside the own career, graduates also want to fulfill their personal interests. During this research graduates answered in a self-confident way regarding questions about the skills they own. This can be traced back to social desirability. Graduates do not want to answer in "bad" way, because they won't be admit if they do not own one of the skills. However, owning such soft skills becomes even more crucial today (Mitchell et al., 2010) and graduates seem to internalize that fact. All of the skills asked scored high, indicating that respondents want to meet the demands of today's labor market. Mainly, being communicative and responsible are striking skills, given that almost everyone describes themselves as owning the two skills.

Within the second part of the study, a 2x2 experimental design was used to examine to what extent a difference between offered tangible vs. intangible benefits and soft skills versus hard skills and with respect to general attractiveness, intention to apply and employer image exists. Contrary to the assumptions of Joo and McLean (2006), Lyness (1999) and Duxbury and Higgins (2005), that intangible benefits are crucial to attract potential applicants and become an employer of choice, this survey can rarely identify implications that neither the type of offered benefits nor the required skills have any impact on general attractiveness and thus, finally, intention to apply. One reason can be attributed to the subjectivity of each respondent what seems to be important and in fact that intangible benefits, and amongst other things, also work-life balance, is a relatively abstract term by which an incremental variance can be explained (Lievns et al., 2007). However, tangible benefits are concrete in the forms of for example salary, where no significant relationship can be identified. At the present time, principal attention is paid on soft skills (Mitchell et al., 2010). Graduates need to own some of these skills to get employed (Andrews & Higson, 2010). Although respondents were confident to own a range of soft skills, ultimately it does not matter if an organization requires soft or hard skills; the level of attractiveness stays the same. It can be assumed that this is related to the already mentioned fact that messages must meet expectations of self-confident and emancipated people (Nagel, 2011). Graduates might automatically assume that certain hard skills are required anyway and therefore it does not seem necessary to name these explicitly.

Due to the fact that by all accounts no significant difference between the conditions could be identified, in addition a stepwise regression analysis was performed to determine possible relationships between personal characteristics and the three dependent variables; (1) general attractiveness, (2) employer image and (3) intention to apply. In all cases, soft skills turn out to be the most influential on the three dependent variables. The outcome of the regression analysis stands in contrast with the results mentioned beforehand, but to understand this difference you have to pay attention to detail. If organizations require soft skills, it did not become more attractive, but owning soft skills affects the

perception of an organization. With a second more detailed regression analysis it became clear that foremost, being a teamplayer and professionalism is most important.. Working within a team is decisive and graduates experience this as more attractive as working on their own. As defined by Robles (2012), being capable of working in a team goes along with being supportive, helpful, collaborative etc.. During school and university career, people often experience some situations where tasks need to be fulfilled in a team. Due to this, being a teamplayer is already often an integral part in many life situations. Besides being a teamplayer, professionalism has an effect on employer image. This outcome can be attributed to the fact that people try to align their self-image with the organizational one. At the same time organizations try to communicate an image of being professional to attract potential applicants. Another reason for this result can be the fact that being professional goes along with being businesslike and poised (Robles, 2012). If people experience themselves as being professional, they also expect professionalism from their employer.

Regardless of the research questions and assumptions, results showed some interesting differences between individual groups; between Bachelor and Master graduates and between Dutch and German students. Master graduates scored significantly higher with respect to social adjustment concern than Bachelor graduates did. For the latter, it seems to be more important to work for an impressive employer. They care more about what others might think about their employment. This is connected to the fact that a higher graduation results in even higher claims for them. They are more focused and expect some reward in return for their Master`s degree. Result also indicated that Dutch students are more concerned about an impressive and respectable employer than German students. For this group it turned out that the reputation of an organization has more influence on their decision to apply for job compared to German students. Furthermore, they are more focused on tangible benefits. It is supposed that this results are connected to the fact that the Netherlands, unlike Germany, have almost no problems filling jobs with talented people. So, applicants expect even more from organizations. Only with respect on a good work-life balanced, German graduates score significantly higher. In Germany the workload is high and, in return, time for family and friends is limited. Due to this, is assumed that a good balance is appreciated.

5.1 Limitations and recommendations for future research

Although several steps were taken to assure the reliability and validity of this research, we also should take some limitations into account.

First of all, the organization daZZling_aRRay was fictitious. This was to ensure that none of the respondents had any prior knowledge that could influence their answers and, thus, also the results. However, this was a crucial step to ensure the validity of the experiment, but it is in some way obvious that at least a part of the participants was realizing that they were answering question about a fictitious organization. This may have resulted in some skepticism or a more critical attitude while answering the questions. The chosen common organizational name should address as many people as possible without giving accurate information about the branches it is operating in. A recommendation one can give for future research is to make use of a existing organization somewhere outside the home country. Whether or not there is prior knowledge can be tested based on a pretest.

In connection with the first limitation, the second takes the different courses of study into consideration. For this research it did not matter from which field of study a participant was specialized as long as this person was near to graduation. However, it is in some way quite logical that technical students are looking for a different kind of job than for example a respondent studying communication science. Therefore, it is recommended to choose one or two student groups to minimize the variety of interests and values regarding a job.

Last but not least, and resulting out of the already mentioned limitations, it appeared that the manipulation of the four advertisements did not succeed the way it has been intended. Results showed rarely significant differences, neither between the conditions nor between different groups. One possible declaration could be the desinterest of participants and/or missing motivation to read the text within the advertisements carefully. Therefore, a recommendation for future research could be to design and make use of a pretest only tailored to concretize the advertisement. Preferably, addressed directly to the appropriate audience.

6.Conclusion

The aim of this study was to identify elements which are really important for potential future employees while searching for a job. Based on the theoretical framework, it was expected that some characteristics of a successful employer brand are more prominent than others and that intangible benefits are more important than tangible ones. Results revealed that no appreciable differences could be designated. A good reputation of a potential future employer is perceived as an important component, but there was no difference between social adjustment concern and value expression concern. Therefore, for creating a well working employer brand, it is crucial to combine these two components. Moreover, no significant differences could be identified on general attractiveness, intention to apply and employer image if tangible or intangible were, nor between expected hard versus soft skills. However, an interesting result turned out to be the special position of owning soft skills. Respondents were quite self-confident regarding their own social properties which had any effect on general attractiveness, intention to apply and employer brand image.

Altogether, the results of this study implicate that it seems not that important how beneficial a job is, but how satisfied oneself is. Moreover, it is still important to offer a good and fair tangible compensation in form of salary to attract talents. When an organization communicates its practices openly to the outside world as well as to their employees, they automatically increase their attractiveness.

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Appendix A

Dear respondent,

Thank you for taking time to participate in my online survey about employer branding. The following questions will focus on your own perceptions regarding your future employer and what you think are important elements. I am interested in **your** honest opinion! So, there do not exist right or wrong answers.

The survey will take about 10-15 minutes to complete. It is important that you finish the survey once you started it. All captured data will be treated anonymous, so please answer openly and truthfully. It is not possible to attribute the answers of this survey to any participant.

If you have any questions regarding this survey or the results of this research, do not hesitate to contact me via m.uebbing@student.utwente.nl

Thank you very much for your participation!

Hereby, I confirm to participate voluntarily in this research. I am aware of the fact that my data will remain anonymous and that I can stop to fill in the questionnaire at any time, without giving reasons.

- I accept and continue with the questionnaire
- I do not want to participate in this research

Appendix B

General information

1. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female

2. What is your age?

3. Which nationality do you have?

- Dutch
- German
- Other: _____

4. What is your next achieved educational degree?

- Bachelor`s degree
- Master degree

5. What is your course of study?

- Engineering
- Technical studies
- Financial studies
- Managerial studies
- Communication studies
- Other: _____

General expectations

The questions within this section will focus on your own perceptions regarding your future employer. Aim of this questionnaire is to answer what you, personally, experience as important elements. There are no wrong answers. Simply select to what extent you agree with the statements below: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree.

For me, it is important that a potential employer...	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
...has a culture of sharing and continuous improvement	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...has a balance between good management and high productivity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...obtains public recognition (listed in a great-place-to-work list)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...motivates its employees to proactively tell about working there	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...is getting talked about	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...becomes a benchmark firm	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...increases the candidates potential applicants awareness of their best practices	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...takes efforts to meet changing needs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...is attaching importance on social responsibility	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
It is important that the company be popular and prestigious	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Working for an impressive company would make me seem impressive to others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I want to work for a company that is perceived to be impressive	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would consider how impressive my family thinks working for the company would be	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I wonder if strangers would be impressed by where I work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
I want to be proud of the company I work for	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would not work for a company with a bad image	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would hope that the company has an honorable reputation in the community	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It is important to work for a company that is scandal-free	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I believe where you work is an important part of who you are	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
It's important to balance the demands of your work and your personal/family life	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It's important to maintain adequate work and personal/family life balance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It's important to have the ability to easily combine work and private/family life	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

For me, it's important to find a job in which I...

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
...can determine the start and end times of my working day itself	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...have the freedom to switch working days with colleagues	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...can decide when I take breaks	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...have a lot of flexibility for the inclusion of free hours	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The more money you have, the happier you are	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I admire people who dress well	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would love to be able to afford to buy more things	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would put up with a job that was less interesting if I was paid more money	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The things I own really make me happy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would rather spend time shopping than doing anything else	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I enjoy just thinking about all the things I own	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would be much happier if I had more money to buy more things for myself	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
I would describe myself as:					
communicative	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
courteous	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
flexible	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
upright	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
having interpersonal skills	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Having a positive attitude	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Professional	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Responsible	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A good team player	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Having work ethic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**MANIPULATION:
ONE OF THE FOUR ADVERTISEMENTS WHERE SHOWN**

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
I already heard about the organization	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The company is well known					
For me, this company would be a good place to work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would not be interested in this company except as a last resort	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
This company is attractive to me as a place for employment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am interested in learning more about this company	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A job at this company is very appealing to me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
I would accept a job offer from this company	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would make this company one of my first choices as an employer	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
If this company invited me for a job interview, I would go	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would exert a great deal of effort to work for this company	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would recommend this company to a friend looking for a job	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Employees are probably proud to say they work at this company	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
This is a reputable company to work for	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
This company probably has a reputation as being an excellent employer	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would find this company a prestigious place to work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
There are probably many who would like to work at this company	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

For me, the company dazzling_aRRay seems to be...

	Strongly uncharacteristic	Uncharacteristic	Neutral	Characteristic	Strongly characteristic
... an activist	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...the best	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...fair	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...innovative	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...compassionate	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...sincere	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...sensitive	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...a leader	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...of high quality	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

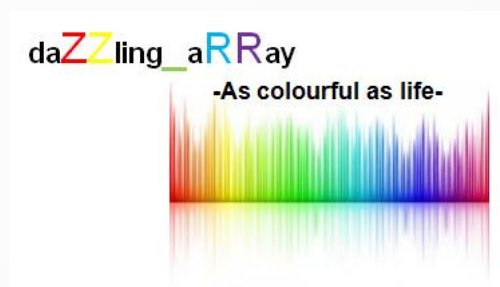
With the next click, the survey will be finished and saved.

Thank you for participating!

Appendix C

First organizational description

Condition 1: Focus on tangible rewards and hard skills



Working by daZZling_aRRay means working with one of the leading companies within Europe. We understand ourselves as an innovative and international place to work, where our employees form the key to business success. With our experience and the latest standards, we offer talented people the opportunity to grapple themselves with exciting projects. Therefore, we are constantly searching for motivated young professionals who are willing to be part of our team.

Working for dazzling_aRRay offers you:

- **An attractive salary**
- **A good promotion**
- **Working for a reputed organization**

What we expect from you

- **Excellent grades**
- **Technical and communicative knowledge and skills required for the job**
- **Motivation**
- **Professionalism**

Interested? Look at our [career page](#) for more information and current job offers. Take the first step and start your own career right now.

Second organizational description

Condition 2: Focus on tangible rewards and soft skills



Working by daZZling_aRRay means working with one of the leading companies within Europe. We understand ourselves as an innovative and international place to work, where our employees form the key to business success. With our experience and the latest standards, we offer talented people the opportunity to grapple themselves with exciting projects. Therefore, we are constantly searching for motivated young professionals who are willing to be part of our team.

Working for dazzling_aRRay offers you:

- **An attractive salary**
- **A good promotion**
- **Working for a reputed organization**

What we expect from you

- **Good written and communication skills**
- **The ability to work under pressure**
- **Motivation**
- **Professionalism**

Interested? Look at our [career page](#) for more information and current job offers. Take the first step and start your own career right now.

Third organizational description

Condition 3: Focus on intangible rewards and hard skills



Working by daZZling_aRRay means working with one of the leading companies within Europe. We understand ourselves as an innovative and international place to work, where our employees form the key to business success. With our experience and the latest standards, we offer talented people the opportunity to grapple themselves with exciting projects. Therefore, we are constantly searching for motivated young professionals who are willing to be part of our team.

Working for dazzling_aRRay offers you:

- **Flexible working hours**
- **A good Work-Life balance**
- **Working for a reputed organization**

What we expect from you

- **Excellent grades**
- **Technical and communicative knowledge and skills required for the job**
- **Motivation**
- **Professionalism**

Interested? Look at our [career page](#) for more information and current job offers. Take the first step and start your own career right now.

Fourth organizational description

Condition 4: Focus on intangible rewards and soft skills



Working by daZZling_aRRay means working with one of the leading companies within Europe. We understand ourselves as an innovative and international place to work, where our employees form the key to business success. With our experience and the latest standards, we offer talented people the opportunity to grapple themselves with exciting projects. Therefore, we are constantly searching for motivated young professionals who are willing to be part of our team.

Working for dazzling_aRRay offers you:

- **Flexible working hours**
- **A good Work-Life balance**
- **Working for a reputed organization**

What we expect from you

- **Good written and communication skills**
- **The ability to work under pressure**
- **Motivation**
- **Professionalism**

Interested? Look at our [career page](#) for more information and current job offers. Take the first step and start your own career right now.