Towards an Employer Brand

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An Evidence-Based Approach to Develop an Employer Brand: a Case Study of a Berlin-Based Business Incubator in the Online and Mobile Gaming Industry

Ingo Fischer

Julia Kieler

Biographic note:

Prof. Dr. Ingo Fischer is a professor of Management and HR at the Berlin School of Economics and Law. Before joining the university in 2006, he had a career as HR professional and executive in several big companies. He studied economics at the J.W. Goethe University in Frankfurt, where he also earned his PhD while working as an assistant professor.

Badensche Straße 52, 10825 Berlin, ingo.fischer@hwr-berlin.de, + 49 (0) 30 30877 – 1358

Prof. Dr. Ingo Fischer ist Professor für ABWL, insbesondere Personalmanagement, an der Hochschule für Wirtschaft und Recht Berlin. Zuvor war er als Personalmanager in verschiedenen Großunternehmen tätig. Er studierte Volkswirtschaftslehre an der J.W. Goethe Universität in Frankfurt, wo er seinen Doktortitel im Rahmen einer Tätigkeit als wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter erwarb.

Badensche Straße 52, 10825 Berlin, ingo.fischer@hwr-berlin.de, + 49 (0) 30 30877 - 1358

Julia Kieler studied at the Berlin School of Economics and Law and received her Master's degree in International Business and Consulting in 2014. She now works as HR Manager at an e-commerce company in Berlin. Before her master studies she earned her Bachelor's degree in International Business Studies at Hochschule Harz (University of Applied Sciences), Wernigerode and HAAGA-HELIA Ammattikorkeakoulu (University of Applied Sciences), Helsinki.

Julia Kieler hat an der Hochschule für Wirtschaft und Recht Berlin studiert und beendete 2014 ihr Masterstudium in International Business and Consulting. Derzeit arbeitet sie als Personalreferentin in einem E-Commerce Unternehmen in Berlin. Zuvor absolvierte sie ein Bachelorstudium in International Business Studies an der Hochschule Harz, Wernigerode und der HAAGA-HELIA Ammattikorkeakoulu, Helsinki.

Abstract:

This paper analyses and lays the ground for the development of an employer brand that is designed to help a Berlin-based business incubator to attract and retain tech talent. The company case exemplifies which elements are necessary to develop an employer brand and how distinguishing characteristics of an employer brand may look like. It gets clear that an one-size-fits-all approach is not effective.

Zusammenfassung:

Diese Studie analysiert und konzipiert die Entwicklung einer Arbeitgebermarke als Instrument zur Rekrutierung und Bindung von Softwareentwicklern für einen Berliner Inkubator in der Online- und Mobile-Gaming Branche. Die Studie macht anhand eines Praxisfalls deutlich, welche Elemente benötigt werden, um zu einer Arbeitgebermarke zu gelangen, wie diese Elemente evidenzbasiert entwickelt werden können und welche differenzierenden Kernelemente eine Arbeitgebermarke umfassen kann. Es wird deutlich, dass eine One-size-fits-all Lösung nicht zielführend wäre.

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1   Introduction

"The top software developers are more productive than average software developers not by a factor of 10x or 100x or even 1'000x, but by 10'000x," claims Nathan Myhrvold, former Chief Technology Officer (CTO) at Microsoft (in McKeown, 2012). In the light of a shortened half-life period of technology (tech), superior staff with relevant tech skills is the basis for constant innovation and long-term business success (Böttger, 2012, pp. 12f.). This is confirmed by Levinson (2012), who has observed that organizations, which fail to attract the required tech talent, are at risk of not meeting deadlines for product launches and wearing out their current developers. This, in turn, has a negative effect on employee and customer satisfaction, sales figures and the company's overall competitiveness.

Although highly skilled software engineers seem to be crucial for the viability of 21st century tech companies, more and more of these organizations face great difficulties in identifying, hiring and retaining tech talent. As a result of the 2013 LinkedIn & BITKOM survey (Muehlenkord, 2013, p. 5) among more than 1'400 company representatives, 51 % of the respondents observe a lack of qualified employees. According to Hummel (2012, p. 69) and Muehlenkord (2013, p. 11), the demand is highest for qualified employees with knowledge of information and communications technology (ICT). Thus, there is a considerable gap between supply and demand for tech employees with the right skill set. This so-called 'war for (tech) talent' goes along with an irrevocable transition from the industrial to the information era (Malati, Sharma, & Tiwari, 2012, p. 38; Stotz & Wedel-Klein, 2013, p. 43).

Recent developments in the online and mobile area are the main drivers for growth in the Berlin start-up industry and vice versa (Arthur D. Little & eco, 2013, p. 10). At the same time, a shrinking and aging population already presents a substantial threat to the innovation capability of tech-based companies (BITKOM, 2013; Mertens, 2012, p. 35). Another reason for the deep-rooted shortage of skilled ICT employees can be seen in the current education system. Both the European Commission (2013) and Arthur D. Little & eco (2013, p. 27) blame schools and universities for lagging behind with regard to the adaption of teaching content to the economic and technological needs of companies.

In order to cope with these challenges and to remain competitive in an increasingly globalized world, companies need to take a proactive and forward-looking approach in ensuring a constant supply with the right talent. As a comprehensive and strategic practice, which influences and is influenced by every single action a company takes towards its employees, employer branding assumes an important role in making an employer attractive for its target group in the long run. It can help organizations to create a unique and positive employment experience for its current, past and future employees that sets itself apart from its competitors. Although an increasing number of organizations begins to realize the potential of employer branding for the attraction and retention of key talent, it is not common to direct all employer branding efforts towards a single target group.

This paper takes account of this development by presenting the first steps of an evidenced-based employer branding process for the attraction of software engineers using the example of a Berlin-based business incubator (the Company) in the online and mobile games industry.

As a business incubator, the Company[1] strives to found or acquire one to two new businesses each year. As of November 2013, the Company has founded and acquired four portfolio companies

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[1] Due to a non-disclosure agreement the company name must not be revealed.

and employs a total of 150 people from more than 20 different countries with an average age of 28 years. A world-class team of committed employees has always been crucial to the Company's success. Especially software developers play a key role in the Company's business model. As such, they are the main target group with regard to recruitment and retention measures. Based on current and future product features, the required skill set varies across object-oriented programming languages (e.g. Ruby, PHP, Java), platforms (e.g. iOS, Android) and years of professional experience. In order to avoid conflicts between generations, the Company aims to maintain a homogeneous age structure within its tech team. Hence, the Company's current search profile includes Ruby, Java, PHP, Android, and iOS developers between the age of 20 and 40 years. As an international business incubator, with English as its company language, the Company does not only look for software engineers from German-speaking countries. It rather sources software engineers with an excellent command of the English language from around the world, with a particular focus on European countries and the U.S. On the one hand, this increases the pool of potential candidates. On the other hand, the number of companies that compete for the same talent is considerably higher. Overall, the Company faces major difficulties filling its tech vacancies in a timely manner.

2 Literature Review: Concepts and Theoretical Principles

2.1 Employer Brand, Employer Value Proposition, Employer Brand Image

The brand concept has its origins in the marketing discipline. According to Aaker (1996, p. 68) and Daye (2008), a brand consists of of two elements, namely the brand essence or core identity and the extended brand identity. These concepts can be readily applied to the employer brand, which is defined by Ambler & Barrow (1996, p. 187) as "the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company." This definition shows that there is more to an attractive employment experience than tangible benefits, namely emotional elements such as recognition, team spirit and a strong company culture. In line with Aaker's definition of brand identity, Kriegler (2012, p. 126) claims that the employer brand captures the identity of an employer and makes it tangible for future and current employees. As such, it acts as a keystone for their identification with this very employer. In addition, Backhaus & Tikoo (2004, p. 502) point out that an employer brand is highly distinctive as it "highlights the unique aspects of the firm's employment offerings or environment." Thus, an employer brand can also be described as a unique image which is deeply rooted in the perceptions of a company's target group (Graf & Pett, 2008, p. 33).

In the course of this working paper an employer brand is characterized as a comprehensive and distinctive bundle of tangible and intangible employment benefits which are based on the company's identity (and internal self-image) as an employer and make a lasting impression on its target group. Ideally, an employer brand creates an image in the eyes of its target group which is a realistic picture of the employment benefits offered by this employer. To this end, employer identity and employer image need to be fully aligned. The relation between these two concepts is described in the following.

In line with Aaker's and Daye's definition of the brand's core identity, an employer value proposition (EVP) can be described as the essence of a company as an employer (Beck, 2008, p. 33; Böttger, 2012, p. 24; Keim & Trost, 2007, p. 5; Trost, 2009, p. 16) that materializes itself in a distinctive employment experience (Edwards, 2010, p. 6). Based on the company's values, its attractiveness

factors and its employer branding objectives, the EVP defines the strategic positioning of this employer in the labor market (Stotz & Wedel-Klein, 2013, p. 91). It can thus be defined as "the central, enduring and distinctive character of an [employer]" (Edwards, 2010, p. 10f.). As a result, the EVP can be considered a crucial part of a company's competitive advantage (Parment, 2009, p. 152).

In contrast to the self-directed EVP, the external employer brand image is the outcome of a company's intentional and unintentional employer (branding) activities. It is described as the consistent perception of and the associations with a company as an employer by its target groups, stakeholders and within the society (Beck, 2008, p. 33; Böttger, 2012, p. 24; Stritzke, 2010, p. 217; Trost, 2009, p. 16). As such, it is part of and influenced by the overall corporate image of a company. This becomes obvious when taking a look at companies which operate in a business-to-consumer (B2C) setting compared to a business-to-business (B2B) environment. In contrast to B2C companies, which are often perceived through the quality of their products or services, B2B companies are often less known by consumers and thus find it more difficult to attract talent (Sponheuer, 2010, p. 282). As the employer (brand) image emerges automatically with every point of contact between the employer and its current, past and future employees, "all organizations have an employer brand, regardless of whether they have consciously sought to develop one" (Sokro, 2012, p. 166).

2.2   Employer Branding

Employer branding can be described as a long-term, future-oriented, and cross-functional discipline. As such, it influences and is influenced by other HR functions such as HR planning, recruitment, development or deployment (Thom, 2001, pp. 118f.). That is to say, employer branding constitutes a comprehensive change process that affects all aspects of the employment relationship. DEBA (2006) describes employer branding as "the identity-based, internally and externally effective development and positioning of a company as a trustworthy and attractive employer"[2] This comprehensive definition is used as the basis of this working paper, because it illustrates the strategic, in- and outward directed focus of employer branding as a process for developing and managing an authentic employer brand that differs from those of other companies in the labor market. This in- and outward directed focus becomes clear when taking a look at the concepts of internal and external employer branding.

Internal employer branding focuses on current employees as a company's primary target group. Through establishing the employer brand first internally, in the minds and behavior of current employees (Sponheuer, 2010, p. 284), internal employer branding forms the basis for ongoing employer attractiveness and a successful employer brand (Stotz & Wedel-Klein, 2013, pp. 9, 117). Berthon, Ewing & Lian Hah (2005, pp. 151ff.) argue that "employees are internal customers and jobs are internal products." Therefore, all employee-related measures should be aligned in order to increase the attractiveness of these products. That is creating a positive employment experience (Parment, 2009, p. 166) for those employees whose mindsets present the best fit with the intended employer brand.

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[2] „….die identitätsbasierte, intern wie extern wirksame Entwicklung und Positionierung eines Unternehmens als glaubwürdiger und attraktiver Arbeitgeber".

In contrast to internal employer branding, external employer branding focuses on a company's past and primarily future employees. It is the basis for the establishment of a positive employer image in the mind of this external target group (Stotz & Wedel-Klein, 2013, p. 9). An attractive employer brand image, in turn, is expected to positively influence the intention of potential employees to apply with a particular company, and of past employees to recommend their former employer.

Employer branding serves a number of purposes with regard to employee recruitment and retention as well as corporate brand, culture and performance (Stotz & Wedel-Klein, 2013, p. 27). Divided into primary and secondary goals, these objectives are described in the following.

One goal of overriding importance is the development of an effective employer brand (Kriegler, 2012, p. 27). This involves the alignment of the employer brand image and the employer brand identity (Graf & Pett, 2008, p. 10; Nawrocki, 1993, p. 273; Sponheuer, 2010a, p. 275). Aligning these two elements is a delicate endeavor, because a sudden and drastic deviation from the original employer brand image may be perceived as inconsistent (Stritzke, 2010, p. 217). This could damage the employer brand in the long run instead of positively reinforcing it.

From these primary goals, a range of secondary objectives in the areas of recruitment and selection, employee retention and performance, corporate profitability and competitiveness can be derived. Employer branding pursues the following objectives in the area of recruitment and selection: increasing the quality and number of active applications, reducing the time-to-hire as well as the cost for recruitment advertising (Reich, 1993, p. 166). This means that employer branding may help companies to attract and retain better candidates for less money (Vollmer, 1993, p. 181f.). With regard to employee retention, employer branding aims at increasing the identification, motivation, and engagement of current employees with their employer in order to reduce absenteeism and labor turnover, and to increase employee satisfaction and performance (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, p. 501; Beck, 2008, p. 23; Graf & Pett, 2008, pp. 10f.; Kriegler, 2012, p. 125; Stotz & Wedel-Klein, 2013, pp. 29f.).

According to Stotz & Wedel-Klein (2013, p. 205), a strong employer brand helps companies to differentiate themselves in the competition for the right talent. The right talent, in turn, helps companies to differentiate themselves from other employers. Thus, it is another objective of employer branding to gain ascendency in the labor market by achieving a clear distinction of a company as an attractive employer from its competitors (Beck, 2008, p. 28; Greven, 2008, p. 159; Stotz & Wedel-Klein, 2013, p. 29; Trost, 2009, pp. 13, 21).

3   Research Objectives

For a business incubator with ambitious growth plans and portfolio companies with highly technical products, software developers play a key role in ensuring the business success of the Company's current and future ventures. In order to guarantee an adequate supply with the right talent in the light of a shrinking labor force, this working paper aims at answering the question of how a Berlin-based business incubator in the online and mobile gaming industry should design its employer brand in order to become the employer of choice for software engineers.

After having reviewed the literature thoroughly a successful employer brand should be based on a thorough analysis of both company-internal and -external factors, namely:

1.   The employer preferences of software developers

2.   The Company's internal strengths and weaknesses as an employer

3.   The Company's current employer brand image

4.   The positioning of other companies in the labor market

These four objectives guide the case study analysis.

4   Research Methodology

The literature review in chapter 2 with a focus on the topic of employer branding has been conducted in order to establish the theoretical foundation for all subsequent research steps. It was the purpose of the literature review to gain a comprehensive picture of what it takes to successfully create an employer brand. As employer branding is still a relatively new concept, only little empirical research is currently available on this topic. Thus, the main sources of information about employer branding are articles in specialized journals (Stotz & Wedel-Klein, 2013, p. 24). As a consequence, the quality of sources and the information they contain varies widely.

The case study method is appropriate to answer research questions of *how* and *why*. It gets relevant the more a research objective requires an extensive and *in-depth* description and analysis of a contemporary social phenomenon where the boundaries between phenomemon and context may not be clearly evident. Another reason to apply the case study method (in contrast to other methods) is given when there is no control of the behavorial events by the researcher (Yin 2014, pp. 3-23).

As an important element of the research design the unit of analysis has to be defined. In this research it is not only the Company itself but moreover different target groups which are of relevance in this context. Yin characterizes such an approach as an embedded case study with embedded units of analysis applying mixed methods (Yin 2014, pp. 49-56). This will be described below.

To tackle the first research objective a standardized, anonymized online survey targeted at software engineers makes up the first part of the empirical research. As suggested by Berthon et al. (2005, p. 157), a survey among members of the target group aims at identifying those attributes, which software developers deem most important when choosing an employer as well as the companies they consider to be their employers of choice. Although, there are numerous quantitative studies concerned with employer preferences and employer attractiveness (Kötter & Kurz, 2013; trendence Institut, 2013; Universum Group, 2013), none has been found that is comprehensive enough to factor in software engineers from different countries, industries and career levels.

To gain a holistic picture, it has become necessary to develop a more extensive survey. In this context, a questionnaire consisting of five consecutive parts has been developed. The survey has been developed with the help of SurveyMonkey and the link has been distributed via e-mail and Facebook in the authors personal network. In addition, the link to the survey has been published in LinkedIn and Xing groups as well as in online forums related to software development. The survey was online for five weeks between October 17, 2013 and November 21, 2013. In this period of time, 222 people have started the survey. Thereof, more than 57 %, that is 127 respondents, have completed the questionnaire. The analysis has shown that, in the aggregate, this sample size allows initial conclusions about the employer preferences of software engineers. Nevertheless, the number of respondents with certain characteristics is sometimes too small to obtain valid answers.

The online survey among members of the external target group is complemented by interviews with members of the internal target group, namely software developers who already work at the Company, in order to address the second research objective. It is the primary goal of these expert interviews to learn about the Company's potential for becoming the employer of choice for software engineers. For this purpose, an interview guide has been developed that comprises four sections.

The selection of experts is crucial for the outcome of the interviews (Mieg & Näf, 2005, pp. 6f.). In order to ensure a profound knowledge of the organizational environment, the experts have been chosen based on their lenght of employment with the Company and their experience with working as software developers for other employers or as freelancers. This has resulted in the selection of four interviewees from two different portfolio companies, two of them being the Head of Technology of their respective company, the other two being Senior Developers. All interviewees are males and originally come from Germany and Israel.

Another important element of the employer branding process is the identification of a company's current employer image in the labor market (third research objective). In this context, Trost (2009, pp. 33, 35) suggests to ask new employees about their most important reasons for choosing to work for this particular employer with the help of a written survey. In addition, Graf & Pett (2008, p. 15) propose to ask new hires which initial associations they have had with their new employer before joining the company. This is important for determining whether the target group already has certain ideas in mind with regard to a particular employer (Kirchgeorg & Müller, 2011, p. 71). To this end, an online survey with three items has been developed and published via Typeform. In order to ensure that the answers are not too much biased by an increasing affiliation to the Company, only those software engineers have been asked to participate who have joined the Company recently; that is between September and December 2013. As a result, the sample is composed of four software engineers from three different portfolio companies. All participants are male and originally come from Ukraine, Spain and Germany.

In addition to a profound knowledge of the Company's internal capabilities and its current employer image, it is important to be aware of how competitors position themselves in the labor market for software engineers. To this end, a competitor analysis has been conducted to address the fourth research objective. It is the purpose of this analysis to compare the employment package that the Company currently offers to software engineers with those of its competitors. The results can be used as the basis for a clear and long-term differentiation of the Company's employer brand in the labor market (Trost, 2009, p. 22).

5   Development of an Employer Branding Strategy for the Company

5.1   Analysis of the Status Quo

As mentioned in chapter 4 several data sets were generated to determine the status quo of the Company.

5.1.1 The Employer Preferences of Software Engineers

It was the goal of the external online survey to learn about the aspects software engineers consider most important when choosing an employer. In order to facilitate the evaluation and to draw reliable conclusions, only complete questionnaires were included in the following analysis. The sample comprised of 87 % male and 13 % female respondents with an average age of 38.1 years (arithmetic mean) and the median being 35 years. The majority of respondents were from North America and Europe. Sixty-three per cent of the respondents worked in tech-related industries, for example the software and internet, computer and electronics sector. Other popular industries were the health, pharmaceuticals, and biotech (5 %) as well as the education (6 %) sector. Most participants worked in small and medium-sized enterprises (38 %), followed by multinational enterprises (23 %), freelance work (12 %) and start-ups (10 %). The vast majority of respondents, namely 70 %, had the focus of their work in the online area. Another 14 % had a mobile focus. The remaining 16 % of all respondents had a different focus in their daily work. In this survey, the most popular programming languages were Java (21 %), C# (19 %), Ruby (18 %), and C++ (11 %).

In addition to the ranking of eight base categories, respondents were asked to evaluate the importance of specific employment characteristics for their choice of an employer. Contrary to the results from the base category ranking, none of the sub-items belonging to the compensation and benefits category were among the fifteen features that were perceived as most important by the respondents. Figures 1 and 2 show the ten most important and the ten least important employer features.
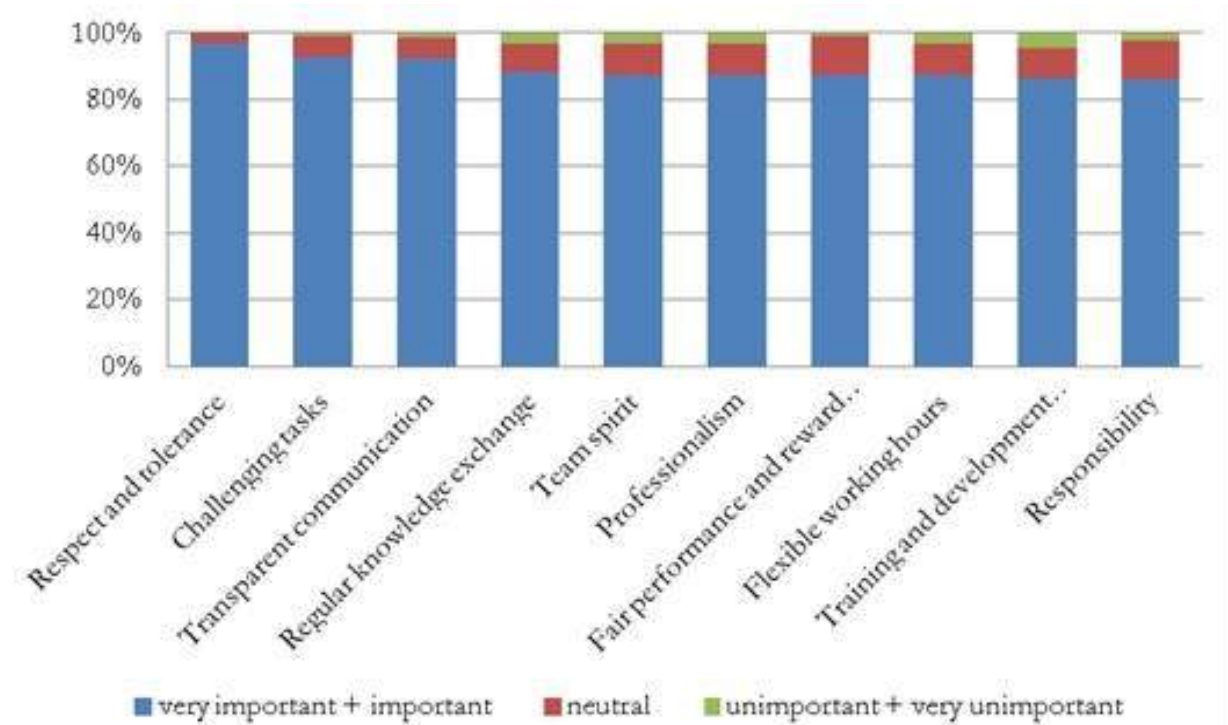

Figure 1: Ten Most Important Employer Attributes (Source: own illustration, 2013)
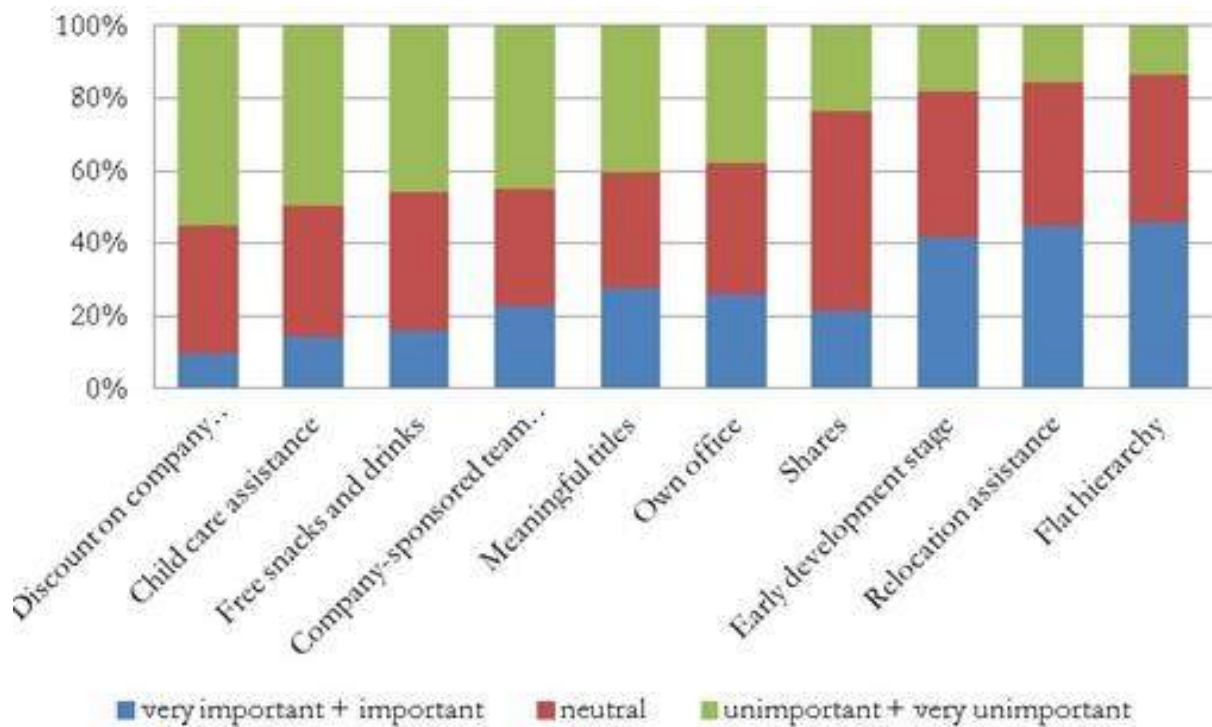
Figure 2: Ten Least Important Employer Attributes (Source: own illustration, 2013)

The results from the open-ended question at the end of the survey showed a slightly different picture. When asked for the reasons why they considered a certain company to be their employer of choice, one third of the respondents specified the attractiveness of the product, the membership in a high-class team, and constant innovation as the most important factors. Freedom and impact were mentioned by 7.1 % of the respondents. In addition, 6.3 % of the participants considered challenging tasks to be most important when choosing an employer. The same held true for the use of cutting-edge technology. Based on these findings it becomes clear that, when selecting an employer, the participating software engineers prefer emotional elements and the scope of work over rational aspects of an employment relationship. In addition, the results show that it is easier for an innovative company with an attractive product and a team of high-class software engineers to attract even more highly-skilled developers. As emotional attributes like respect and tolerance, team spirit, or a high level of professionalism result from a healthy company culture. They cannot be accomplished with the help of financial means. Instead, such values need to be embedded in a company's identity and the mindset of its employees. Rational aspects of the employment relationship, on the other hand, can be considered so-called hygiene factors (Kriegler, 2012, pp. 128ff.). This means that they contribute to the overall quality of the employment experience, and thus to a general satisfaction of the employees. However, employees get easily used to things like free snacks and drinks, frequent team events, flexible working hours, or training opportunities. What is more, these elements can be easily imitated by competitors. Thus, building the employer brand upon rational attributes alone is not likely to achieve the intended differentiation in the labor market or an identification of the current staff with their employer.

5.1.2   The Company's Internal Strengths and Weaknesses as an Employer

It was the purpose of the expert interviews to identify the Company's strengths and weaknesses as an employer from the perspective of its key target group. A summary of the results can be found in Figure 3.

Strenghts	Weaknesses

• the small and professional tech team
• personality and previous success of the Company's founder
• financial incentives, the industry, and a positive experience during the recruitment process
• clear vision, mission and values, which becomes apparent through the positive 'work hard - play hard' attitude
• team is fun, but ambitious with a strong entrepreneurial spirit
• high technological standard present in their work
• experience and professionalism of the tech team, visible in the high-quality code
• work independently without being continuously micromanaged
• opportunity to make a contribution that really matters
• location of the Company's office in the center of Berlin
• fast and continuous company growth as well as the profitability of the business
• possibility to become a founder oneself and to start a business from scratch; opportunity to learn about entrepreneurship based on synergies and the know-how of the existing founders
• work environment at the Company is highly dynamic, where decisions are quickly implemented
• flat hierarchy allows a close collaboration with the managing directors
 	
⇨ **Strengths in the areas of:**
  job design, company specifics and working conditions
	• absence of a CTO or co-founder with a technical background
	• unattractive working hours and the encouragement of regular and continuous overtime by supervisors
	• excessive economization with regard to the technical equipment or workplace layout
	• most interviewees feel hindered in their career progression due to a lack of training and development opportunities, specified career paths or the encouragement of continuous learning on and off the job.
	• lack of transparency regarding the communication within the respective portfolio companies
	• general lack of leadership skills, which becomes clear from the way how tasks are delegated or feedback sessions conducted
	• management seems not to trust its staff
	
	⇨ **Weaknesses in the areas of:**
	  career development, leadership, and communication

Figure 3: Strengths and Weaknesses of the Company as an Employer (Source: own tabulation based on interview data, 2013)

5.1.3   The Company's Current Employer Brand Image

In addition, the Company's current employer image was analysed in order to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the status quo. A survey among four newly-hired software engineers at the Company revealed that a broad range of attributes was initially associated with the Company. This diffuse range of initial associations shows that the Company currently neither had a distinct image in the labor market nor a reputation as a great place to work for software engineers. At this point,

employer branding could have helped the Company to establish a clearer and more attractive picture in the minds of its target group.

5.1.4   The Positioning of Other Companies in the Labor Market

To complement the picture of the Company's external environment, a competitor analysis was conducted. Based on the interviews, the preference analysis, and the image study, Google (2014a), GitHub (2014) and SoundCloud (2014a) were identified as the Company's main competitors in the labor market. The following analysis was based on an examination of those companies' career websites.

Google seemed to aim at creating a positive employment experience right from the start by offering applicants comprehensive information on the recruitment and selection process. In addition, Google (2014b) argued that its software engineers are able to "tackle some of technology's greatest challenges and make an impact on millions, if not billions, of users." At the core of Google's employer brand promise was a company culture based on diversity, transparency, curiosity, and data-driven decisions that "encourages innovation and a healthy disregard for the impossible" (Google, 2014c). This package of rational and emotional benefits and the chance to "do things that matter" seemed to make Google (2014a) an attractive employer for software engineers, irrespective of their age, country of origin, focus of their work, or other characteristics.

As the youngest company with its headquarters in the US, GitHub also offered an extensive benefits scheme to its employees. It comprised flexible vacation and working hours, stock options, the company-sponsored participation in conferences, a budget to purchase literature, and the freedom for employees to choose their technical equipment and the projects they work on. According to their website, GitHub's company culture was characterized by diversity, family-friendliness and a casual working atmosphere. Moreover, GitHub (2014) stated on its website that its employees enjoy transparent communication, job safety, and the opportunity to make an impact by "build[ing] the tools that make collaborating and writing software easier."

SoundCloud, as the only company headquartered in Germany, did not make any information on the compensation package it offered to its employees available on its career website. However, it provided insight into the learning opportunities its employees might benefit from. This included regular information sharing through blogs, tech talks or so-called "Masterclasses", a mentorship program, language courses, and the "Hacker Time" for its team of software engineers (SoundCloud , 2014a). In addition, SoundCloud (2014b) advertised its jobs for software developers with varying tasks, a comprehensive set of responsibilities, and the opportunity to be part of an ambitious team that shapes "the future of audio on the web." As an equal opportunity employer, that valued open communication, SoundCloud published information on its recruitment process on the career website. SoundCloud's company culture was further self-characterized by a clear purpose, diversity, the urge to constantly improve things and challenge one another as well as the drive to achieve and celebrate the remarkable. This was summarized in their credos: "We work harder", "We hack harder" and "We study harder" (SoundCloud, 2014a).

Although having completely different business models, all three companies had a significant demand for software engineers with certain skill sets and backgrounds. Furthermore, these companies

seemed to be attractive for software developers despite differing employer brand promises. What seemed to be common to all three companies was an innovative product, a diverse team, and a great appreciation for their employees, particularly, their software developers.

In sum, the status quo analysis showed that the Company was not capitalizing on its strengths as an employer, had no distinct or well-known image in the labor market, and offered an employment package that only partially coincided with the preferences of software engineers.

5.2   Root Cause Analysis for the Gap Between Status Quo and Target State

The identification of gaps between a target state and status quo may not reveal underlying causes for a gap. This chapter presents possible reasons for the gap . The target state of the Company was characterized as being the employer of choice for software developers in Berlin which offers a unique employment experience thus yielding highly satisfied, committed and motivated employees and ensuring a continous supply with a sufficient number of software engineers.

Like for other start-ups, it was the Company's primary goal to break even by establishing a profitable business model. Especially in the early days of a company, financial resources are often scarce and need to be allocated carefully in order to achieve the desired growth. This, however, may pose a significant strain to the staff, which often needs to work long hours, accept a smaller salary, and forgo other benefits associated with a job in an established organization. As a company grows and becomes profitable, it can be expected that the employment package is gradually enlarged. Almost three years after its incorporation, it was about time for the Company to focus not only on growing new companies but also on growing the people within these companies by offering them a unique and attractive employment experience.

Based on the expert interviews, three root causes have been identified which prevented the Company from being characterized as an attractive employer by its existing team of developers. The first and most critical factor in this context was a perceived lack of appreciation from the top management for its employees. This, however, is said to be a crucial prerequisite for the success of any employer branding effort (Hochegger & Terlutter, 2012, p. 403; Holbeche, 2005, p. 301; Stotz & Wedel-Klein, 2013, p. 79). Another related factor was the prevalence of ad hoc decision within the portfolio companies, which favored a quick exit that mainly benefited the shareholders but not necessarily the employees. Employer branding, however, is a long-term and strategic process that, if done wholeheartedly, requires a significant amount of time, money, and manpower to yield the expected results. As the expert interviews have shown, there was no sustainable commitment of the Company's management with regard to the well-being of its staff. Whereas the two previous aspects affected all employees working at the Company, a lack of understanding for tech topics on the management level was particularly severe for the interviewed experts. From the perspective of the Company's software developers, these three factors significantly impeded their motivation, engagement, and overall job satisfaction.

Further root causes have been identified with regard to a lack of recognition for the Company as an attractive employer in the labor market. Job interviews revealed that the majority of applicants had only little knowledge of the different business models within the Company. As the Company and its portfolio companies operated in a B2B context within the online and mobile gaming industry, the

products they offered were intangible and primarily known to their business clients, but not to the average consumer. Compared to online and mobile game developers, which create games that are played by millions of users on a daily basis, the Company had fewer direct contact points with potential employees, resulting in a weaker position in the competitive labor market for tech talent. Thus, the Company needed to find other ways to reach and convince its target audience. However, a limited recruiting budget and a lack of awareness of the own employer identity had so far prevented the Company from engaging in comprehensive recruitment advertising. Instead, the career website or job descriptions provided only little information on how it was like to be part of the Company's tech team. Such details were presented by the Company's software developers, who occassionally attended tech recruiting events. However, the effectiveness of such random measures must be questioned. This means that without a sophisticated communication plan on the basis of an authentic employer brand promise, the Company was neither likely to create a distinct image in the labor market nor to become the employer of choice for software engineers.

5.3   Recommendation of Measures to Address the Root Causes

As an inevitable precondition for the successful implementation of any internal or external employer branding measure, the Company's management needs to start perceiving its employees as the Company's most valuable assets and treat them accordingly. Both the expert interviews and the survey among software engineers have revealed that appreciation and respect are the most critical factors contributing to job satisfaction. Involving employees in the decision-making process rather than presenting them with a fait accompli is one way to show them respect. In this context, regular employee surveys and an open, two-way communication within and across the portfolio companies have been considered important or very important by the great majority of respondents from the online survey and the expert interviews. Actively encouraging mutual feedback and constructive criticism may further lead to noticeable improvements in the working atmosphere and to sustainable decisions, which take into consideration the interest of and are thus increasingly backed by the staff. Although not being the most important factor for the respondents from the external online survey, such a participatory leadership style seems to be crucial for the job satisfaction of the software engineers who currently work at the Company. Leadership training and team building measures, which focus on increasing the respect and trust between management and employees, are expected to bring about the indispensable change in the way how the Company's current managers perceive their staff.

In order to further increase the satisfaction of the Company's existing team of developers, it is necessary that their work on the product is regarded as being of equal importance compared to other business functions. Although the portfolio companies currently have a dedicated team of product managers, who strive to align the technical specifications with business requirements, it is perceived that the management body fails to recognize the product as an essential contributor to the overall business success. Thus, it can be considered beneficial for the satisfaction of the Company's software engineers if they have an advocate in the C-suite. This means that the existing portfolio companies should consider introducing the role of a CTO, who has equal decision rights as the present managers, in order to compensate the perceived limited technical understanding on the senior management

level. For future business formations, it is further recommended to engage a founder or co-founder with a background in software engineering or a related field of technology.

When these basic conditions are fulfilled, the Company can start to capitalize on its existing strengths as an employer. Based on a comparison of the findings from the expert interviews, the preference analysis, the image study, and the competitor analysis three strong points have been identified.

The first strength is part of the job design and work environment. At the Company, software developers assume a great responsibility for the functioning of the product. By solving demanding technological challenges, each engineer makes a valuable contribution to the business success. Instead of being just a small cog in a big wheel, a software developer at the Company is part of a small team that faces a broad range of tech tasks. What is more, a dedicated product management team ensures a smooth and efficient development process. For the target group, a high degree of responsibility as well as efficient systems and processes are among the eleven most important aspects in an employment relationship. For the Company's main target group, that is software developers between 20 and 40 years of age who have an online or mobile focus and prefer to work with Java, PHP or Ruby, these two aspects are among the eight most decisive factors in their job choice. The three competitors analyzed as part of this working paper allow their software developers to work on products that are used by millions or billions of people. Nevertheless, they all have comparatively large tech teams. Thus, each engineer makes only a small contribution to the overall product or the success of the business as a whole. For the Company it is the other way around. This makes it an ideal element of a unique employer brand promise, which shall help the Company to distinguish itself from other companies in the labor market. As a great degree of responsibility does not seem to be part of the Company's current employer image, the company needs to be careful when communicating this fact externally. Therefore, the Company should try to bring about a gradual instead of a radical shift from the current to the intended employer image.

A second strength has been identified with regard to the company culture. At the Company, software engineers are part of a small, professional and highly-experienced tech team, which allows them to regularly challenge themselves and continuously grow their skills. This is complemented by a supportive attitude and a strong team spirit within the tech team. The importance of these aspects for the target group is reflected in the results of the online survey. Respectively 87.4 % of the surveyed software engineers perceive team spirit and a high degree of professionalism as important or very important. This makes both elements the fifth most decisive factors in the job choice of software developers. With regard to the Company's main target group, 90.0 % and 86.7 % of those software engineers with an online focus consider these two elements to be important or very important for their job choice. On their websites, none of the analyzed competitors highlights team spirit or a high degree of professionalism as part of their employment package. This qualifies these attributes as further distinctive elements of the Company's future EVP. As a result of the image study and the expert interviews, a small and professional tech team has already been mentioned as one of the main factors for joining the company. This means that applicants are currently successfully informed about the capabilities of the Company's tech team and its high degree of professionalism during their on-site interviews. In order to appear more attractive not only for actual but also for potential applicants, it is recommended

to convey this fact even earlier in the recruitment process, for example as part of future job descriptions, on the career website, or in recruitment brochures that are distributed during job fairs.

Thirdly, certain company specifics qualify as potential elements of the Company's EVP. In addition to an attractive location in the heart of Berlin, the Company's incubator structure offers current employees the opportunity to become founders themselves. At the Company, software engineers can complement their tech skills by learning about entrepreneurship through a regular knowledge exchange with the existing founders and co-founders. Employees who have a promising business idea may start their own company with the help of an initial funding and the support of a strong marketing, finance, and HR infrastructure. What is more, the Company strives to found or acquire one to two new businesses each year. As a consequence, it can be expected that its portfolio will always comprise companies at different maturity stages. This, in turn, offers current employees myriad opportunities, from joining a newly-founded company to becoming part of a thriving organization that is about to be sold. The impact of this particular form of organization on the employer choice of software engineers has, however, not been tested with the help of the online survey. Thus, it is not possible to make a data-driven prediction about whether software developers consider this fact in their job choice or not. Nevertheless, the regular knowledge exchange that comes along with the incubator structure is ranked fourth by the respondents from the online survey. From the surveyed software engineers who belong to the Company's main target group, 96.7 % perceive this attribute as an important or very important element of a positive employment experience. At the same time, the image study reveals that the incubator structure is currently not directly associated with the Company and has not influenced the respondents' decision to join the company. However, the surveyed software developers have established a connection between the Company and its experienced founders as well as a pronounced start-up philosophy. These two factors might be considered as indirect indicators for the benefits that are already associated with the Company as an employer and business incubator. As none of analyzed competitors has an organizational form similar to the Company, the incubator structure and the related opportunity to become a successful co-founder may serve as another distinctive element of the Company's employer brand promise.

In addition to these strengths, the expert interviews have revealed potential for improvement. Contrary to the prerequisites presented at the beginning of this paragraph, an optimization of those aspects can be considered optional. Nevertheless, amendments in the following three areas are expected to help the Company significantly enhance the employment experience for its software developers, thereby increasing employee satisfaction and its own attractiveness as an employer:

1. Career development is the first area that requires improvement. Currently, there are no processes in place, which actively encourage employees to share their knowledge, allow them to get promoted, or increase their employability. At the same time, career development is perceived as a crucial element of an attractive employment relationship both by the software developers who already work at the Company and the respondents from the online survey.

2. In terms of working hours, managers should assume a role model function in developing a healthier attitude towards overtime. Instead of expecting employees to be frequently available beyond regular working hours, it is recommended to acknowledge and actively encourage recreation as a means of maintaining a high level of mental and physical performance.

3.   Another factor that is expected to contribute to an improvement of the working conditions is the layout of the workplace. This comprises reasonable investments in state-of-the-art equipment and ergonomic workplaces, which allow developers to perform at their best.

The Company should take the following steps to put the results of this working paper into practice and to implement the recommended measures. First and foremost, it is important to obtain the management's consent on the employer branding strategy and the implementation of selected measures. For this purpose, it is recommended to appoint one or several employer brand managers, who are responsible for the group- or company-wide implementation of the employer branding strategy. This employer brand manager should break down the target state into specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely goals. A KPI report, that includes figures prior to the implementation, may help to prioritize and later evaluate the effectiveness of the recommended measures. It is further recommended to create a budget estimate and a rough time-frame for the implementation of single employer branding activities. A cross-functional team with members from the target group, the management, and the marketing department, which is led by the employer brand manager, should formulate the Company's EVP based on the identified strengths. A detailed communication plan may ensure the establishment of the new employer image in the minds of current, future, and past employees from the Company's target group.

6   Limitations of the Formulated Strategy and This Working Paper

This working paper and the outlined employer branding strategy presented in the previous chapter are subject to a number of restrictions. First and foremost, the empirical basis for the strategy formation is rather weak. This limits the generalizability and validity of the findings.

What is more, the analysis of the Company's competitive environment only took into consideration three potential competitors. Due to this small sample, it cannot be fully ensured that an EVP on the basis of the identified strengths is truly distinct from those of other companies looking for software developers with the same skills and mindset as the Company. The recommendations regarding the Company's positioning in the labor market are solely based on a self-portrayal of those competitors on their websites and in their job advertisements.

Furthermore, a lack of access to strategic data regarding the future development of the Company made it difficult to recommend more specific and long-term oriented measures for the development of an authentic and distinct employer brand. Although the identified strengths represent the Company's identity as an employer and are thus independent of strategic changes, it is recommended to continuously reconcile the internal conditions with the aspects the Company communicates towards its internal and external target group.

Additionally, the online and mobile gaming industry has been found to have only a limited influence on the development of an employer branding strategy for the Company. This means that neither during the interviews nor the image study, respondents have referred to this industry as a reason for joining the Company. One expert even conceded that, from the tech side, it makes no difference whether the Company's portfolio companies advertise online and mobile games or any other product.

Furthermore, this working paper approached the topic of employer branding only from an HR point of view. Other perspectives, like the corporate brand management, have not been considered

when formulating an employer branding strategy for the Company. However, in order to avoid mistakes which may later negatively influence the outcome of the entire employer branding process, Stotz & Wedel-Klein (2013, pp. 24, 81) suggest that employer branding is carried out, right from the start, by an interdisciplinary project team comprising both internal and external members. As this was not the case with regard to this paper, important aspects may have been missed out, thereby reducing the viability of the formulated employer branding strategy.

What is more, this working paper only comprises the analysis and strategy phase of the employer branding process. To succeed in doing this in praxis it is necessary to obtain the support of the top management, setting realistic expectations, and assigning responsibilities early on. The analysis of such a so-called preparation phase is missing in the working paper.

Finally, there was only little empirical evidence available that proves the effectiveness of employer branding in increasing the satisfaction of current employees and attracting a greater number of potential employees from a certain target group. This might be due to the fact that employer branding cannot be considered an isolated activity. Instead, every measure that affects a company's employees directly influences the level of employee satisfaction as well as the attractiveness of the employer in the eyes of its target group. Thus, it cannot be stated with complete certainty to which extent the recommended measures will help the Company to meet its demand for software engineers and in the future.

7   Conclusions

With the help of this working paper it has been shown how a Berlin-based business incubator in the online and mobile gaming industry may design its employer brand in order to ensure the long-term supply with software engineers in the face of a shrinking labor force and a highly competitive labor market, which is more and more dominated by applicants. It has been made clear that the creation of a positive employment experience for current employees from the target group must precede the formulation and communication of a realistic employer brand promise. Hence, employer branding is a long-term and strategic process.

In the course of this case study, three strengths (high degree of professionalism, great responsibility of developers, incubator structure) have been identified, which may serve as the basis for the development of the Company's EVP. Based on the individual experiences of software developers who already work for the Company, these strengths constitute the Company's identity as an employer. As the online survey has shown, such intangible aspects are considered most important by the Company's target group. Hard facts such as company shares, an own office, meaningful titles, or free snacks and drinks play only a minor role for software engineers in their choice of an employer. In addition, such rational attributes have been found to constitute a rather weak basis for a sustainable employer brand because they are imitable and employees quickly take them for granted. A competitor analysis has further shown that the identified strengths of the Company do not overlap with the employer brand promises made by its competitors in the labor market. This means that these benefits can be considered unique to the employment package offered by the Company. As part of its EVP, these strengths can thus help the Company to achieve a clear distinction of its employer brand from those of other companies. Furthermore, the image study has revealed that its target group currently has rather vague

associations with the Company as an employer. In order to avoid an inconsistent employer image that might damage its employer brand in the long run, the Company should be careful when communicating its new employer brand promise externally.

Beyond helping the Company to identify its potential for becoming the employer of choice for its main target group, the empirical research has shown that there is still room for improvement regarding the creation of an attractive employment experience for software engineers. Two crucial requirements have been identified in the course of this working paper which the Company needs to comply with before fully capitalizing on its strengths. First, it needs to achieve a shift in the mindsets of its current managers from a cost- towards a resource-based perception of its staff. Second, it must ensure an adequate representation of the tech function on the senior management level. Both aspects are a sign of appreciation of the Company's senior managers for their tech teams. This is vital because, in the end, only those companies that regard their employees as key assets to prosper in a dynamic, complex and global environment (Hochegger & Terlutter, 2012, p. 403) and that are willing to invest a great deal of time, money and energy in this valuable resource will be successful with their attempts to create a positive employment experience as the basis for an authentic, distinctive, and attractive employer brand.

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