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AN EXAMINATION OF EMPLOYER BRANDING AND HOW IT INFLUENCES THE EMPLOYMENT CHOICES OF RECENT GRADUATES IN IRELAND

MA in Human Resource Management

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the influence that employer branding has on the employment choices of recent graduates in Ireland. The researchers aim was to find out which elements of an employer's brand are the most and least desirable to University graduates who had completed their studies within the past two years.

The researcher adopted a qualitative approach to this research project. The researcher decided to use focus groups as his research instrument. Two focus groups were held, with five participants in each group. The questions asked were based around several key areas which were identified during literature analysis.

The findings of this project make a number of interesting insights. The most and least desired employers' traits to the population sample are identified. Furthermore, the findings support recommendations as to the most influential platforms from which employers should be promoting their employer brand, if their aim is to attract recent graduates to their organisations. This includes a specific focus on online platforms. This research also offers a comparison of male and female recent graduates in terms of what traits they find most and least desirable from potential employers.

Chapter 1. Introduction

The on-going war for talent in Ireland has made it more important than ever for employers to stand out from the crowd. Employers are aware that in order to attract talented graduates in today's jobs market, they need to meet their expectations and desires in terms of what these graduates expect from their ideal employer. The area of employer branding has been heavily researched, particularly in the past decade (Franca & Pahor, 2012) (Sehgal & Malati, 2013) (Sparrow & Otaye, 2015). Research over the past number of years has indicated that having a strong employer brand gives a company a competitive advantage in the ongoing war for talent (Edwards, 2009) (Elving, Westhoff, Meeusen and Schoonderbeek, 2013). Companies know they need to attract the people who are not only capable of doing the job, but who also have the appropriate skills, knowledge and who show they have the potential for future training (Armstrong, 2008). Employer branding relates to the ways in which organisations promote themselves as a great place to work. This can be done through various methods. Kissel and Buttgen (2015) speak about how organisations can use their online platforms to improve their employer brand image, Chhabra and Sharma (2011) focused on the traits that prospective employees look for from potential employers, Payne and Sumpta (2005) showed how organisations can benefit from attending recruitment events, and Napa, Farsheed and Foster (2014) discuss the importance of aligning an employer brand with the organisation's corporate brand.

This research project offers an investigation into how organisations can effectively and consistently attract recent graduates from Irish universities. In Ireland, many organisations now recruit employees straight from college and more graduate programmes are becoming available every year. Since organisations now understand the importance of attracting new graduates, they now seek to understand which elements of a company's brand it is that attracts them. Employers can then use this information to develop strategies aimed at recruiting new graduates (Wilden, Gudergan and Lings, 2010). Researchers such as Alniacik & Alniacik (2012) and Reis & Braga (2016) have focused on how people's perceptions of an ideal employer brand vary depending on their age/gender/employment status. Robertson & Arachchige (2011) studied the perceptions that final year business students have of what constitutes a strong employer brand, but didn't differentiate students based on what stage of their academic studies they were at. There is limited research on employer branding in Ireland

in general, and the researcher has noted a substantial lack of employer branding research that focuses particularly on recent graduates in Ireland, which is where this research fits in. This dissertation analyses the academic area of employer branding and examines its impact on recent university graduates in Ireland. The findings of this research build upon the findings of the studies mentioned above, but the particular focus on graduates in Ireland differentiates this project from previous studies. This study focuses on graduates in Ireland who are within the first two years of completing their studies. In terms of approach, the researcher focused on topics which frequently arose during the literature analysis stage of this project, in order to ensure that the findings of this research were relevant to the literature that was already available. The researcher investigated employer branding's influence on recent graduates in terms of graduate's overall wants/needs from employers, the influence online platforms can have on graduate's perceptions of an employer brand, the impact that a company's corporate brand can have on graduates' perceptions of them as an employer, and the best practices that employers can implement to ensure they are seen by graduates as a great employer. This project also sought to discover whether a recent graduate's gender influences their perceptions of what constitutes an ideal employer. As the focus is on recent graduates, the main objective of this study was to focus more in depth on the chosen population in particular, and this project sought to identify the elements of an employer brand which are seen as the most and least desirable to these recent graduates, when deciding which companies they want to seek/take employment with.

In the next chapter the researcher outlines the research objectives for this project. Following on from this is an in-depth analysis of the relevant literature in the field of employer branding in the literature review. The research methodology chapter follows, which provides an outline of the research instrument used for this project and the methods of data collection and analysis that were adopted to meet the research objectives. The findings of this research are then outlined in chapter 5 followed by the discussion chapter which relates the findings of this project to previous literature in the field and makes broad recommendations based on the analysis of the combined data. In chapter 7, the researcher makes specific recommendations that can be implemented by employers in order to attract members of the targeted population to their organisations and outlines the costs and timelines associated with implementing these recommendations. The final chapter offers a conclusion of the overall research project.

Chapter 2. Research Question

An examination of employer branding and how it influences the employment choices of recent graduates in Ireland

2.1 Research Objective 1

Discover what employer's traits are seen as most and least desirable to recent graduates in Ireland and examine the impact these traits can have on the graduate's employment choices.

The research undertaken will aim to explore the importance that recent graduates place on a company's employer brand when deciding on what companies they want to apply for in Ireland. Much of the current literature focuses on the company's perspective of what is important for graduates whilst this study will focus on what the graduates themselves perceive as the most important elements of a potential employer's brand. As well as gaining an insight into what it is that the chosen population want from employers, the study will also aim to uncover what they don't want. The research will investigate whether they would reject a job/opportunity to apply for a job based on the employer having the negatively perceived traits.

2.1.2. Research Objective 2

Examine the impact a company's online presence has on recent graduate's perceptions of them as an employer.

The study will aim to uncover how much of an impact an organisation's online presence has on their employer brand. The study will look at mediums such as company websites and careers hubs as well as other online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn and seek to uncover how much of an influence these platforms have on potential employees perceptions of the organisation as an employer.

2.1.3. Research Objective 3

Examine how much of an impact a company's corporate brand has on graduates' perceptions of them as an employer.

This study will aim to discover whether recent graduates associate an organisation having a strong corporate brand with them being a good employer. Another focus of this section will be whether an organisation's corporate brand is associated with a job's prestige.

2.1.4. Research Objective 4

Examine whether recent graduates find graduate/careers fairs a beneficial way to find potential employers.

This research will investigate whether recent graduates find graduate/careers fairs beneficial and if these events have the power to influence a recent graduate's perceptions of an organisations employer brand.

2.1.5. Research Objective 5
Examine whether there are substantial differences among male and female recent graduates in terms of what they want/don't want from an employer.

The research will aim to discover whether a recent graduate's gender has much of an impact of what they perceive to be the ideal employer or if they all generally place importance on the same aspects regardless of gender.

Chapter 3. Literature Review

3.1 Aligning the Employer Brand with the Corporate Brand

Sousa and Ariscado (2016) examined the steps taken by a leading Portuguese business group to create and implement their employer branding strategy. The authors link their analysis to four essential concepts which they claim support their arguments. The four concepts are internal marketing, corporate branding, employer branding, and internal branding. The first concept, internal marketing is explained by the authors as a mechanism which ensures sustained competitive advantage by garnering employee commitment and fulfilment in their roles. Bansal and Mendelson (2001) say that "the people who buy goods and services in the role of the consumer, and the people who buy jobs in the role of the employee, are the same people and the exchange that takes place between employers and employees in no less than the exchange that takes place between consumers and companies" (Sousa and Ariscado, 2016, p.25). The second concept, corporate branding is explained by the authors as a number of combining elements (names, words, symbols) which are conveyed to numerous audiences such as consumers, staff, stakeholders, and the media. The authors say that corporate branding is influenced by internal and external factors and that it is in need of constant management. In terms of the concept of employer branding itself the authors echo the claims of Bejoy and Clemence (2016) by saying that in order to successfully implement an employer branding strategy, an employer must understand what drives their employee's sense of commitment and engagement. Finally, the concept of internal branding is put forward as a means of creating ambassadors within an organisation who represent the company's best interests in the external employment market. Asha and Jyothi (2013) say that internal branding should show the 'human side' of the brand.

Verma and Ahmad (2016) speak about the 'war for talent' and its impact on the employer branding efforts of employers. Like Sousa and Ariscado (2016) they liken employer branding to product branding. The authors point out that while the main goal of product branding is to leave a lasting image in the mind of the consumer, employer branding does the same in that it creates an image that makes people want to work for an organisation.The relationship between corporate and employer branding is also explored by Barrow and Moseley (2005) who speak about the importance of new and growing organisations having a clear and effective employer branding strategy. The authors point out that regardless of how ambitious the company's growth plan is, having a low profile can often work against them, particularly when trying to attract young, ambitious talent to the organisation. Barrow and Mosely say that in order to

attract the best young talent, an organisation should develop an employer branding proposition which captures the spirit and the values of the company. Like Bansal and Mendelson (2001) Barrow and Mosely (2005) also compare employer branding to product branding and find similarities in how a marketing professional targets consumers and how a HR professional should target employees. The authors advise that marketing professionals understand that rather than simply giving the customers what they say they want, companies must also meet their implicit needs/wants which they may not able to express to the through market research. In the same way, the authors advise that organisations must build their employer brand not just based on what the target market of employees say that they want from an organisation, the company must also develop an understanding of their potential employees wants and needs, both explicit and implicit. The researchers advise that doing this provides an organisation with a much stronger employer brand which will consistently attract the desired talent.

Napa, Farsheed, and Foster (2014) aimed to better understand the relationship between corporate branding and employer branding with a particular focus on the financial services sector. The research is based on interviews which were conducted with Swedish employees. The study supports Barrow's and Moseley's (2005) study in that the data which was collected further supports an increase in positive notions towards an employer when the employer brand is based on the corporate brand. However, the author warns that for this to be the case the corporate brand needs to have been built based on the organisation's core values. The authors say that these core values should be evident and clear to see at all levels of the organisation. The authors speak about the importance of each employee understanding the company's core values and using them as pillars to guide them in how they go about their day to day work. They say that an awareness of these core values is fundamental to the success of the organisation's employer brand. By basing the employer brand on these values an organisation allows hiring managers to hire people based on how they feel they will fit in with these values. Likewise, a well communicated employer brand based on the company's core values allows prospective employees reflect on how they feel they would fit into the company based on these values. The authors quote a HR manager as saying "the employer brand / employee brand 'matchmaking' must take centre stage in the hiring process." This according to the authors is the key to attracting talent to the organisation. Similarly, Biswas and Suar and Suar (2013) don't place as much importance on a prospective employee's age or gender and instead argue that potential employees are mostly concerned with whether or not an organisation's values are in line with theirs.

3.2 The Influence of Online Platforms on Perceptions of Organisations as Employers

Prabhjot, Shikha, Japneet and Sanjeev Kumar (2015) look at employer branding with a particular focus on small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The authors point out that the lack of access to talent is a major hurdle for SMEs and acquiring talent is made even more difficult due to the aggressive recruitment tactics of large organisations. Prabhjot et al (2015) also speak about the impact that social media has on external perceptions of an employer's attractiveness. They say that SMEs no longer see employer branding as a 'preserve' of large enterprises and now rightly see it as a necessity to survive in the ongoing 'war for talent'. The authors claim that social media has presented itself as the best platform for SMEs to 'sell themselves' to prospective employees. The researchers advise SMEs that they should be active on platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn to keep up with competitors in terms of acquiring talent.

The advice given by Prabhjot et al (2015) is supported by Kissel and Buttgen (2015) whose study aimed to demonstrate the importance of social media when it comes to modern employer branding. The data collected shows that having more information and having accurate information directly correlate with positive perceptions of a potential employer's attractiveness to prospective employees. The researchers advise organisations that it is highly important to use their social media platforms to develop a relationship with their prospective employees and use them to communicate information regarding brand value and brand elements which make the organisation a great place to work. Kissel and Buttgen say that doing this helps an organisation to build a talent network. Their findings suggest that there are only marginal differences in perceptions whether the social media site used is company run or not. They advise that a careers page can have just as much impact as a Facebook or Twitter page. This is supported by research conducted by Agri Marketing (2017) who found that rather than spending money on recruitment advertising, it is more effective for a company to use their money to enhance the careers section of their website to ensure it provides potential candidates with the all the information they need. The researchers also advise that the website should emphasise the benefits of working for the organisation so as to help the potential candidates to perceive your company as one with a strong employer brand.

Whilst Prabhjot et al (2015), Kissel and Buttgen (2015) and Agri Marketing (2017) all focused on the importance of using social media, Crisen and Bortun (2017) focus on the best way to use it. Their research focuses on digital storytelling and how it can be used within organisations to influence perceptions of their employer brand. The researchers conducted a study which

asked groups of participants to rate their interest in working for an organisation after solely viewing the company's online platforms (in this case the company's website and Facebook page). The organisation's online platforms used digital storytelling where current employees broke down their day to day jobs and experiences working for the organisation. Although the researchers admit that a larger sample is required to draw any definitive conclusions, the data collected suggests that prospective employees show positive attitudes towards an organisation after viewing their digital storytelling and that it can be a useful tool in developing the online aspect of an employer brand.

3.3 Desired Employer Attributes

Biswas and Suar (2016) conducted a broad analysis of employer branding and then developed a framework which depicts employer branding's antecedents and its impact on organisational performance. Biswas and Suar surveyed 347 top-level executives for the study. The data they collected revealed a number of re-occurring factors which the executives said influenced perceptions of their employer brand. These results included: realistic job descriptions, perceived organisational prestige, perceived organisational support, perceived organisational trust, rewards and benefits, psychological contractual obligations and corporate social responsibility. Biswas and Suar add that leaders in employer branding take a proactive approach because they understand that effective employer branding is a major source of competitive advantage. Verma and Ahmed (2016) conducted a survey among 200 professionals which identified six factors which the researchers say represent the key dimensions of employer attractiveness. Similarly to Biswas and Suar's (2016) study, these factors were found to be social value, interested value, economic value, holistic value, co-operation value and working environment. The study found social value to be the most important of the six factors. Chhabra and Sharma (2014) investigated the preferred employer branding attributes of final year management students. The researchers collected their data by conducting semi structured interviews and distributing surveys to final year students in private business schools. The data collected identified a number of elements which the final year students indicated were the most attractive to them as a prospective employee. The most important employer brand attributes were found to be salary and benefits, opportunities to grow and progress within the organisation, job profile, company brand, training and development, support, recognition and appreciation, good relationships with colleagues and managers and customer orientation. The authors point out the importance of organisations communicating the advantages of working

for them to their employees and add that the most effective way to do this, based on their research is on jobs portals.

Kucherov and Zamulin (2016) looked at how Russian IT companies are currently looking to improve and develop their employer branding practices in order to attract and retain the best young talent to their organisations. This study is one which focuses on the best employer branding practices used that are specifically aimed at attracting generation Y or millennial generation 'talents'. The authors argue that employers need to be accurate when identifying the appropriate employer branding strategy. They say an employer can do this by analysing the key benefits of employment with their company. The authors say these benefits should be broken down into three categories, functional, economic, and psychological. The authors found that the most successful IT companies in Russia are the ones who have long-term technical training programmes at the heart of their employer branding strategies. Mihakea (2017) also argues the importance of employer branding in attracting and retaining highly talented employees. Like Kucherov and Zamulin (2016), Mihakea found training and development opportunities to be of high importance to prospective employees. She says that the most effective employer brands are those which focus on learning and development, mobility, rewards and competency systems. The author argues that whilst generation Y members are professionally well equipped, they tend to lack the attributes required to become problem solvers who can generate real profit for their organisations. By focusing on learning and development Mihakea says that organisations can overcome this issue whilst simultaneously improving perceptions of their overall employer brand due to their focus on continued employee development. This is similar to the findings of Kucherov and Zamulin (2016) who as mentioned earlier, argue that long-term technical training initiatives are among the most attractive employer brand attributes to talented members of generation Y and the millennial generation.

A quantitative study by Bonaiuto (2013) in Italy found that in order to attract potential future leaders the most important EB factors to focus on are innovation, diversity, values, offering different careers and to ensure to embed a culture where there is freedom of opinion. The authors advise of the importance of differentiating between real and ideal employers. The data indicated that highly talented and low-talent candidates have different perceptions of their ideal employers and the authors emphasise the importance of company's modifying how they present their employer branding attributes based on the candidates they are aiming to attract to the organisation. This approach is also recommended by Robertson & Arachchige (2011) who

also found that companies can gain a competitive advantage in the war for talent by tailoring the presentation of their employer branding attributes based on the type of employee they need to attract. The authors advise that a one-fits-all approach is far less effective. In terms of the most important attributes of an employer brand to students/new graduates this study found that gaining self-confidence from working for the company, gaining experience that will help employees progress in their careers, having good relationships with supervisors and colleagues, and receiving recognition when deserved are high on most talented candidate's lists.

Wilden, et al (2010) found that potential candidates don't just rely on what a company promotes as positive aspects of their company culture. Where possible the authors argue that a candidate will form/use personal relationships with an organisation's current employees in order to garner information about what it is like to work for said organisation. The authors say that candidates do this in order to reduce the level of risk they perceive they would be taking by joining the company. Gomes and Neves (2010) agree that if a potential candidate perceives a company as having a poor employer brand it will not only stop them from taking a position in the organisation, it can and does stop them from applying in the first place. They ago on to say that if a candidate perceives a company as having a strong employer brand it not only encourages them to apply for the company, it also speeds up the candidate's decision making process if offered a position within said organisation.

Sparrow and Otaye (2015) present similar findings to Arachchige and Robertson (2011). The authors advise that there are three main factors that potential talented employees take into consideration when analysing which company's they want to work for. The first factor presented is the prospective employee's expected level of self-gratification by having an association with the company. Secondly the researchers argue that an employee will seek to work at a company with core beliefs and values that are in line with their own. The final factor identified by the report as important is the candidate's perception of how a company treats their employees. Franca and Pahor (2012) warn companies that they will fall behind competitors who have a strong employer brand if they fail to enhance their own and instead focus on increasing the amount that they spend on recruitment advertising in the hope that this will help them to attract more talented candidates. The authors also claim that an employer brand will only impact a potential candidate's decision making process if the company is significantly different to competitors and can offer something that the candidate perceives to be unique. Wilden, et al (2010) found that potential candidates don't just rely on what a company promotes as positive aspects of their company culture. Where possible the authors argue that a candidate

will form/use personal relationships with an organisations current employees in order to garner information about what it is like to work for said organisation. The authors say that candidates do this in order to reduce the level of risk they perceive they would be taking by joining the company.

3.4 Targeted Employer Branding

A study by Reis and Braga (2016) identified the brand attributes seen as most important to different generations. The authors looked at the differences between what elements of an employer brand are seen as important by baby boomers, generation X and generation Y. For baby boomers, the authors identified a positive working environment and opportunities for personal development among the most important. As well as this baby boomers were found to place importance on how innovative and creative a company is. For generation Y there was more importance placed on compensation packages and how stimulating a job is perceived to be. As with the baby boomers the research also identified personal and career development opportunities as an important aspect. It was found that the rewards package on offer was of more importance to generation X than the previous two generations but it was also found that they too place a lot of importance on opportunities for personal development and working in a positive environment. The authors concluded that a company should differentiate between different generations when analysing their perceived levels of attractiveness. Another study which differentiates perceptions based on one's generation is by Starineca (2015). She points out that generation Y have very specific and unique characteristics that older generations don't. These include having more ambition due to increased expectations as well as being fluent in the use of new and emerging technologies. She advises that generation Y are more attracted to trends than the older generations and for this reason they are more likely to seek employment with the biggest brands. She argues that generation Y associate market leaders with being a more ideal place to work. A study conducted by Aniaclik and Aniaclik (2012) came to the same conclusion and noted that as well as age a company should take into account other factors such as gender and current employment status.

Tuzuner and Yuksel (2009) argue that a company should sub categorise potential employees into two clusters. The first cluster which is male dominated are people who want to work in a competitive environment and who place more importance on a company offering a competitive salary and benefits. The second cluster which more evenly contains males and females want to work in a non-competitive working environment but the authors say that this cluster want to see a direct relation between employer brand and the communicated brand identity. Bellou,

Rigopoulou and Kehagias (2015) argue that a company should differentiate their approaches to attracting males or females if they are seeking to attract members of a certain gender. The study advises that if a company needs to attract more female employees they should focus on implementing flexible work practices immediately and that the marketing department can also help to promote the factors perceived as important to females by advertising in women's magazines or female targeted websites/ TV shows. Likewise the study suggests that in more male dominated organisations such as the military, the focus should be on promoting organisational success and promoting it in the right places such as male magazines and male targeted websites/ TV shows.

In terms of attracting graduates and soon to be graduates researchers such as Payne and Sumpta (2005) speak about the benefits of careers of graduate fairs where numerous employers set up stands in a predetermined location for graduates and final year students to attend and speak with company representatives about the possibility of working for their organisation. The majority of participants in their study had positive experiences at these fairs. The authors' make a number of suggestions about how employers and students can get the most out of these fairs. These suggestions included having discipline-specific fairs to avoid students feeling swallowed up by employers who aren't hiring in their field and including students and employers in the design of the fairs in order to maximise their efficiency.

3.5 Building an Employer Brand

Sehgal and Malati (2013) make the point that an effective employer brand must be promoted within the organisation as well as externally. The authors researched the hotel industry in particular and found that talented employees consistently sought the same employer attributes. They say that the most important attributes are the practices of good leadership, emphasis on teamwork and collaboration, providing challenging and diverse work, providing effective and continuous training and development, providing opportunities for personal and career development, and offering flexible working conditions. In an earlier study by Moroko and Uncles (2008) the researchers argue that one of the most important aspects of a successful employer brand is for a company to be able to follow through on the brand attributes that they present themselves as having. Having an effective employer brand is not only about attracting employees, it is also aimed at retaining them once they arrive. The authors advise that in order to do this it is important to not only include prospective employees in analysing the company's brand attributes but also to include current employees in the process. By doing this the authors argue that employers can ensure to follow through on the attributes that make their organisation

attractive to prospective employees thus reducing turnover and improving engagement. Rampl (2014) also found that current employees can be highly useful in consulting when a company is trying to develop their brand rather than just focusing on the perceptions potential candidates currently hold of the organisation. She says that talented employees consistently seek companies with positive working environments and that they place more importance on job content than low-talent candidates. For this reason the author recommends that if a company has a negative working environment or culture, current employees should be interviewed in order to find out why such a culture exists. The information gathered can then be used to help implement a strategy aimed at developing a positive brand.

Vatsa and Ahmed (2016) looked at how an organisation can leverage both internal and external employer branding for both current and prospective employees in order to give themselves an advantage over their competitors. The research suggests that for an organisation to see real benefits of strong employer branding their employees must be willing to go above and beyond their 'call of duty'. The authors advise that an organisation can achieve this by building a culture of trust. Bejoy and Clemence (2016, p. 72) developed a measurement model of employee brand personality in order to help organisations (particularly in the IT sector) to understand how to meet the demands of their increasingly competitive employees. They found that the main source of competitive advantage is "to have a personality that provides employees with a perceived value that is higher than their competitors." The authors focus on the perceptions that employees have of what constitutes an 'ideal employer'. By understanding what their employees perceive to be of importance, the authors say that organisations will have a platform upon which to build and develop their employer branding strategy. Gomes and Neves (2010) agree that if a potential candidate perceives a company as having a poor employer brand it will not only stop them from taking a position in the organisation, it can and does stop them from applying in the first place. They ago on to say that if a candidate perceives a company as having a strong employer brand it not only encourages them to apply for the company, it also speeds up the candidate's decision making process if offered a position within said organisation.

Wilska (2014) conducted a study to demonstrate the importance of employer branding when attracting talent in the ongoing 'war for talent'. The author argues the case that organisations need to view acquiring talent as an ongoing, consistent, long-term objective. Wilska says there are a number of practices employers can implement in order to ensure they are a popular choice of employer among their target employment market section. The author advises organisations

to do the following: 1) Develop an informative company profile for prospective employees which includes plans for the development of the overall organisation, 2) care for and manage the company's reputation in the market in comparison to their competitors, 3)create a culture of high standards, trust, openness and teamwork within the organisation, 4) encourage fun during and after work (e.g. company BBQ), 5) provide support, generally and technically, 6) build a success culture, and 7) ensure effective leadership. By doing these things Wilska says organisations can gain a competitive advantage by becoming an employer of choice.

Like Wilska, Vokic and Mostarac (2018)offers their advice to organisations as to what they can do to become an employer of choice. They conducted a study in Croatia which examined the shift in employer attractiveness attributes in the past ten years. The authors point out that the modern business world is constantly changing and adapting and argues that because of this employee preferences are constantly changing and having to be adapted to as well. The researchers found that preferences varied depending on demographics and said that for this reason alone employer branding strategies should not be standardised. She says that employer branding strategies should be customised depending on the organisation's target market of employees. Importantly, this study claims that there is a significant difference between graduating students and experienced employees in terms of what attributes attract them to a potential employer. The importance of ensuring that an employer brand is built based on who the organisation is targeting is also put forward by Saini, Rae and Chaudhary (2014) who surprisingly make the argument that employer branding will only give organisations a competitive advantage in the short term and say that they expect its impact to decline in the long term. They put this down to organisations taking the one-fits-all approach that Robertson & Arachchige (2011) speak about. In order to overcome the decline of employer branding's effectiveness the authors, like Vokic and Mostarac (2018) advise that companies will need to take a more targeted approach based on what type of individuals they are looking to recruit.

App, Merk and Buttgen (2012) demonstrate how sustainable human resource management can help promote an organisation as an attractive brand whilst meeting the variable needs and wants of the jobs market without compromising the brand's consistent corporate image. In this way, the authors say human resource management can be a major source of competitive advantage for an organisation. The authors mention signalling theory when linking sustainable HRM and employer branding. Signalling theory states that the employer brand can signal the benefits and advantages of a company's employment offer. The researchers say that having a positive image

of a 'substance orientated' employer will improve the organisation's appeal to prospective talent.

Chapter 4. Methodology

This chapter will offer an outline and examination of the research methods used by the researcher in order to obtain the data required to address the research objectives put forward. Quinlan (2011) advises that the research methodology used by the researcher needs to be able to support the chosen research and help facilitate and enable its completion. The author adds that it is highly important that the chosen research methodology fits with the research project. Adams, Raeside and Khan (2014, p 5) say that research methodology is the "science and philosophy behind all research." The authors also claim that research methodology is the tool that enables researchers to create knowledge. Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2009) say that research methodology is the systematic approach the researcher takes to find things out and that it should have a clear purpose.

The intention of this study is to use the knowledge learned to gain a better understanding of the impact employer branding has on the employment choices of recent graduates. In order to do this the researcher required feedback from recent graduates on what they perceived to be the most important traits of the companies they wished to work for. There were many options available to the researcher to gather information to enable an examination of the impact that employer branding has on the career and employment choices of recent graduates. In this case the researcher chose to adopt an exploratory qualitative approach by holding two focus groups in order to collect the data required to meet the research objectives.

This qualitative approach was applied because this perspective is more concerned with understanding people's perception of the world (Bell, 2010). Adams et al (2014) say that qualitative research methods describe reality as something that is experienced by respondents. This research approach was preferred to a quantitative approach such as surveys due to being more flexible and allowing for a more in depth examination. Taylor, Bogdan and DeVault (2015) advise that qualitative research is the best way to gather descriptive data through speaking with people and observation. This study will aim to gain in depth insights into the chosen demographics' opinions on employer branding and since a qualitative approach allows the researcher to follow a flexible research design, it is deemed the most suitable for this study (Marshall and Rossman, 2014). Qualitative research allows for the researcher to act naturally and have a normal conversation with the research subjects. The researcher deems this more suitable than a quantitative approach due to the nature of the information that they seek to gather (Horn, 2012).

Vasilachis de Gialdino (2009) advises that what is known as science or research is dependent on the scientist or researcher's beliefs, values, and attachment to methods and measures. According to Quinlan (2011) there are many different paradigms which underpin the way researchers approach their research. Examples of these paradigms are interpretivism, positivism, realism, and pragmatism.

For this research project the researcher took an interpretivist approach. Roberts-Holmes (2005) says that interpretivism is generally associated with qualitative research and Myers (2009) advises that interpretivism is based on the critique of positivism which is generally associated with quantitative research. Myers (2009) goes on to speaks about how interpretive researchers make the assumption that access to reality (given or socially constructed) is solely through social constructions like language, consciousness, shared meanings and instruments. Interpretivism rejects the objectionist philosophy that the world has meaning without consciousness.

4.1 Research Methods

When designing the research methods to be used for this study the researcher considered both qualitative and quantitative approaches in relation to the desired type of data to be collected. The first part of this section will compare the two methodological approaches and provide the rationale behind using a qualitative approach for this research.

4.1.2 Quantitative Vs Qualitative

According to Bryman and Bell (2015, p160) quantitative research involves "the collection of numerical data and as exhibiting a view of the relationship between theory and research as deductive, and an objectivist conception of social reality." Quantitative research is based on numbers and statistics and researchers tend to ask closed questions often with pre-determined multiple choice answers. Wienclaw (2018) says that quantitative research comprises of studies which observe, measure, and express data in numerical terms. The author adds that these studies are usually analysed using inferential statistics. Wienclaw advises that quantitative researchers have a certain amount of control over the research situation but warns that with this control comes the risk of restricting the study.

Wienclaw advises that qualitative research allows the researcher to gain a deeper insight into the data they are collecting as they have the freedom to use exploratory methods and are less confined to the answers which they expect to receive. She says that qualitative research involves studies which are not or cannot be communicated in numerical terms. Qualitative researchers are able to delve deeper into their data and often have the freedom to follow topics

of interest which arise as the study progresses. However Wienclaw warns that whilst qualitative researchers have this extra freedom they don't have as much control over the research situation as a quantitative researcher has.

The researcher in this case has analysed numerous employer branding studies which were undertaken using quantitative methods, many of which are included in the above literature review chapter. The researcher noted a substantial lack of studies which give a more in depth insight into graduate's attitudes towards what they want and don't want from potential employers. Many asked participants how they felt about employer branding traits which were already determined by the researchers. The opportunity to delve more in depth into what it is graduates seek from employers and allow participants the freedom to give information unique to themselves and their own preferences contributed towards this researchers decision to use qualitative focus groups rather than quantitative surveys even at the cost of having fewer participants.

4.1.3 Research Philosophy

Ontology in research is described as "the study or science of being" and it deals with the nature of reality (Bryman, 2008). Ontology essentially refers to whether social entities ought to be perceived as objective or subjective. Objectivism is the belief that the world contains facts and meaning regardless of people's experience or perceptions of it. Subjectivism is the belief that meaning is derived solely from people's experience of the world around them and their perceptions of phenomenon (Dudovskiy, 2018).

This research project was undertaken with the ontological perspective of subjectivism. Jahedi and Mendez (2014) found that subjective research methods correspond highly to the variables which they set out to capture. Whilst the authors say that subjective research methods can often compliment objective research methods, they argue that where both methods cannot be used, the use of subjective methods is often preferable to the use of objective research methods.

4.2 Sampling

Lammers and Badia (2007, ch7, p2) say that a critical part of research is the way in which a researcher chooses their sample of participants. The authors warn that making the wrong decisions at the sampling stage can put the integrity of the entire research project at risk. They advise that a sample "is when only some elements are selected from a population."

Heir, Wolfinberger, Ortinau, and Bush (2009, p130) say that sampling involves "selecting a relatively small number of elements from a larger defined group of elements and expecting that

the information gathered from the small group will enable accurate judgements about the larger group."

In order to answer the research objectives set out in for this research, the researcher used a sample size of ten participants broken into two focus groups containing five participants in each. As one of the research objectives was to discover whether answers varied based on the participant's gender, the first focus group contained five male participants and the second focus group contained five female participants. Forsyth (2014) advises that males and females typically behave differently to each other in group settings. Stewart, Shamdasani and Rock (2014) point to research by Swim and Campbell (2003) which shows that males are usually more aggressive and more likely to express displays of non-verbal dominance in a group setting whilst females are more likely to conform to peer pressure within the group. Stewart, Shandasani and Rock (2014, p20) advise that in mixed gender focus groups it can be more difficult for the moderator to build the rapport required to "maximise the scope and depth of the focus group discussion," particularly when discussing gender sensitive topics. In terms of this research project, this information strongly influenced the researcher's decision to place all female participants in one group and all male participants in another group.

Another benefit of breaking the participants into two groups based on their gender as opposed to mixing both focus groups was to allow the researcher more freedom to pursue any gender specific topics which arose. Furthermore this method assisted the researcher in particular with this objective as any differences in answers could easily be highlighted by comparing one group's answers to the other as opposed to comparing each individual's answers to one another.

Before selecting a research instrument the researcher must decide on a sampling frame. In order to decide on a sampling frame the researcher must first identify the target population for their study. To do this the researcher must look to their research objectives. Once the target population has been established the researcher must take from it sampling units which are participants that are available and willing to take part in the study.

As mentioned above, the target population for this study is university graduates who are within two years of completing their respective courses. From this target population the researcher used a sampling frame which aimed to take ten participants in total with five of the participants being female and the other five being male.

The researcher had two options in terms of sampling, probability sampling and non-probability sampling. Setia (2016) advises that probability sampling is chance events such as selecting

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random numbers whilst non-probability sampling refers to the researcher purposely choosing participants that are accessible, able, and willing to participate in the study.

After analysing the available options the researcher decided to use convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling technique. This sampling technique was chosen because the researcher had unique access to the targeted population due to falling into the criteria for participants himself. Setia (2016) advises that using convenience sampling has the potential to overestimate or underestimate the population thus biasing the estimates of the study. The chosen sample may not accurately represent the general population. The researcher acknowledges that this is a limitation of this research.

4.2.1 Convenience Sampling

In order to gather participants for this study the researcher made use of his access to the desired population. A soon to be graduate himself, the researcher personally knows a lot of people who have graduated within the last two years. However in order to maintain the integrity of the research project the researcher decided it was best not to use participants with whom they were already personally acquainted. For this reason the researcher contacted friends and former colleagues who are recent graduates but rather than asking them to participate themselves, the researcher requested to be put in touch with people who they know who meet the criteria and may be willing to participate in the study. In total the researcher contacted twenty five people, fourteen males and eleven females via email and text messaging depending on the contact details given. The researcher received thirteen responses in total with eleven people willing to participate. Luckily for the researcher the responses consisted of five females and six males so the desired number and gender balance had been met without the need to attempt contacting more potential participants. From the outset the researcher had decided to have the same number of males in group one as females in group two. For this reason one male was thanked for their response but placed on standby.

This method was convenience sampling as the researcher told the former colleagues and friends the criteria he needed to be met before asking to put him in contact with potential participants. Sekaran and Bougie (2010) and Setia (2016) both advise that one of the main benefits of convenience sampling is that it is a highly efficient way to gather basic information in a way that is both quick and easy for the researcher. As well as ease of access this method was mainly selected due to the time restraints for the overall project. With more time or without such access available to him the researcher would likely choose a form of probability sampling so to reduce the risk of bias entering the research project as much as possible.

4.3 Pilot Study

According to Given (2008) pilot studies are the small-scale implementation of a larger research project. The author advises that pilot studies are shorter in duration and involve a smaller sample of participants. For this project the researcher conducted a pilot study of which the main aim was to establish whether the questions he was planning to ask in the actual focus groups were suitable in terms of stimulating conversation among participants and gathering the required amount of data. The researcher also wanted to ensure that the data collected had substance to it and felt that a pilot study was a good way of testing whether participants would be fully engaged from the questions being asked.

One of the researcher's neighbours is a final year college student who agreed to take part in the pilot study along with two of her peers. Not all the questions that were in the actual focus groups were asked. The pilot study focused on the leading questions from each section. The pilot study lasted approximately twenty-five minutes before the participants were asked if they had any suggestions as to how the questions or style of moderating could be improved for the main study.

The participants' feedback was mainly positive. One participant said that the questions were well written and specific enough to get a lot of information from quite specific topics by focusing on different aspects of the same topic. The leading questions in each section were left almost the exact same due to this positive feedback.

One critique of the pilot study was brought up by one participant who said that she felt "put on the spot" a couple of times when the topic switched from one area of focus to another. For this reason, the researcher decided to let participants of the main focus group know when we were switching from one topic to the next which isn't something he had initially thought of. For example, when switching focus from graduates desired traits to graduates' perceptions of the influence of online material, the researcher advised the group "we are now moving onto the next section of the focus group which is focused on employers' online presence and its influence on your perceptions of them as an employer." This gave the participants a few seconds to think about the topic before the first question was asked which the researcher hoped would decrease the possibility of participants feeling "put on the spot." The researcher felt that if the participants weren't worrying about what the next question would be, they would feel more

comfortable and therefore be in a better position to give substantial and valid information throughout the focus groups.

4.4 Research Instrument

Krueger and Casey (2013, p2) define focus groups as "a special type of group in terms of purpose, size, composition, and procedures." The authors say that focus groups are ideal for gathering opinions and perceptions as each participant has certain characteristics in common with each other and are encouraged to share their opinions and perceptions without the researcher applying pressure on them to reach consensus. Rather, the researcher takes on the role of moderator and facilitates discussion among the group. The authors advise that focus groups are a relaxed form of discussion usually containing between five and ten participants. Eaton (2017, p.8) defines a focus group as "a group of people who engage in a discussion guided by a set of questions and moderated by a facilitator. The author says that in order to make a group discussion focused it should have a clearly defined topic and those participating in the study should have certain characteristics in common with one another.

Stewart and Shandasani (2014) speak about how personality characteristics affect an individual's input in a focus group setting. Forsyth (2014) advises that there are five personality traits in particular which will impact the progress of a focus group. These traits are extroversion, agreeableness, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and neuroticism. Stewart and Shamdasani (2014) recommend that a moderator should try to characterise each of their participants during the first few minutes of the focus group and make adjustments accordingly. The researcher for this research project noted quite quickly in the first focus group that one of the participants seemed rather nervous and wasn't contributing much to the discussion without being directly prompted to do so. Even when prompted on the first couple of occasions the participant was clearly lacking confidence, possibly because the other four participants were able to articulate their points particularly well. The researcher remained mindful of this for the duration of the focus group and tried to gently encourage this participant without putting him on the spot which the researcher felt may have escalated his insecurities.

Another challenge faced by the researcher was the groupthink phenomenon which is discussed by Hair et al (2014). According to the authors groupthink occurs more than one of a focus group's participants give their opinions on a topic which then influences the rest of the group to follow suit as they don't want to go against what they deem to be the consensus of the group, be it consciously or subconsciously. The researcher for this research project noticed quite

similar answers from participants at the beginning of each focus group but this became less and less apparent as the discussion progressed and the participants grew in confidence.

Eaton (2017) advises that focus groups are usually held at a location which allows participants and the researcher to feel comfortable. The author suggests that the location should also be group discussion friendly, i.e. providing a space where participants can hear one another and the moderator and where recording equipment can easily pick up the voice of each participant without them needing to shout. The researcher conducted both focus groups in a private meeting room in the local parish centre in Leixlip. This meeting room is available to anyone in the community at specific times once they have an advance booking. This venue was selected as it was accessible on the required dates and convenient for the participants and researcher alike. The room contains a large round table ideal for a focus group discussion and USB ports which allowed the researcher to charge recording and video equipment which were required for each of the focus groups. The first focus group was conducted on July 26th and the second focus group was conducted on July 28th.

4.5 Data Analysis

According to Graue (2015, p.8) "qualitative data analysis is a process of the description, classification and interconnection of phenomena with the researchers concepts." The author advises that in order to allow for the researcher to interpret and analyse their data it must first be precisely described. Flick (2013) says that the aims of qualitative data analysis are to describe the study topic in more detail than previous studies, to compare multiple cases on differences of likenesses between them, or to establish a theory of a phenomenon based on research.

The first stage of data analysis for this project began during the focus group discussions when the researcher took brief notes of his observations. This was somewhat of a challenge as the researcher had to be careful not to disrupt the flow of the conversation since he was also acting as moderator. The researcher is familiar with interviewing techniques theory from his undergraduate degree and so was also aware that excessive note taking can be distracting and off-putting for participants. For these reasons note taking was minimised during the discussions and reserved mainly for observations that couldn't be made from listening back to the audio files such as changes to participant's body language at certain stages throughout the process. Rosenthal (2016, p.512) advises that "note taking during in-depth interviews should be kept to a minimum, as it is often distracting to the interviewee."

Once each focus group concluded the second stage of data analysis for this research project began. Immediately after each focus group concluded and the participants left, the researcher made notes, listened back to the audio files and transcribed the discussions. Whilst Rosenthal (2016, p.513) acknowledges that transcription is a lengthy process, she advises that it is "necessary for the analytic process and to maintain the confidentiality of participants." Kvale (1996) speaks about the importance of analysing qualitative data during and immediately after it is collected while it is fresh in the mind of the researcher. Full transcriptions of both focus groups undertaken for this research project can be found in the appendices section.

4.5.1 Thematic Analysis

The third stage of data analysis for this research project involved the researcher thoroughly analysing and breaking down the collected data in order to try to address each research objective which had been set out in advance of the focus groups. This was done through the process of thematic analysis. According to Braun, Clarke, and Terry (2014, p.95) thematic analysis "is a method for identifying, analysing and interpreting patterned meaning or 'themes' in qualitative data." Thematic analysis stems from content analysis which according to Haggarty (2009, p.99) is "a research method which allows the qualitative data collected in research to be analysed systematically and reliably so that generalizations can be made from them in relation to the categories of interest to the researcher."

The first stage of thematic analysis undertaken by this researcher is known as coding. Coding is the process of reading and re-reading the transcriptions in order to identify and make note of recurring ideas or opinions and also omissions (Rosenthal, 2016). Once the focus groups had been transcribed the researcher went over them multiple times and highlighted answers whilst linking answers with similar intent together in order to tie together the overlapping codes from which the themes could be extracted.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

The researcher ensured that each individual who participated in this research project clearly and fully understood the purpose for which their data was being collected. Each participant was informed that the research was being conducted for the researcher's masters in human resource management dissertation and that the information and responses they gave would be used only for this purpose. The researcher assured participants that their identities would remain anonymous apart from to the researcher and if required the supervisor of this dissertation and/or its examiner.

The researcher also informed each participant that they could decline to participate at any time and had the right to withdraw their consent to use the data they provided at any time up until the due date of the dissertation. Participants were also advised that they could refuse to answer any individual questions they didn't feel comfortable answering without being removed from the study.

In terms of data protection the researcher ensured to follow the guidelines of GDPR and took full responsibility as the data controller. The audio files that were recorded were stored only on the researcher's laptop and one external drive. The laptop is password protected and was kept in a secure location in the researcher's home whilst the portable drive was stored away as a backup in a locked filing cabinet. Participants were advised that they are entitled to a copy of the transcript, a copy of the completed dissertation, and a copy of the audio files of the recorded discussion they took part in.

4.7 Limitations

The researcher acknowledges that there were some limitations to the methodology of this research project. These limitations are outlined below.

Whilst the researcher specifically chose to take a qualitative approach to this research for the purpose of getting a deeper insight into his sample's opinions in comparison to previous studies in the area, it became apparent that a mixed methods approach may have been more beneficial. The reason for this is that a larger sample could have been used. The research project may have been better informed had the researcher conducted a quantitative method such as surveys prior to developing his focus group topics and questions, as the data collected from those surveys could be used to better develop them and ensure that the right questions were being asked.

Another potential mixed methods approach which could have been adopted would have been to interview the same participants from the focus groups on a one to one basis prior to the focus groups. It may have benefited the study to see if participants' answers were different when interviewed one-to-one, in comparison with the group setting. This may have been difficult to arrange given the time restraints since it would've have been much more time consuming for both the researcher and his participants, but the researcher acknowledges that it could have added an interesting aspect to the study.

In terms of sampling, one limitation of the researchers chosen methodology is that he used a non-probability sampling method. Whilst this sampling method worked in terms of ensuring

the researcher recruited candidates who fit the criteria of the project, the researcher acknowledges that this sampling unit is potentially not representative of the defined target population - i.e. the sample population unit that participated may not represent the views of the majority of recent graduate's.

Another limitation of this study relating to sampling is the sample size. Due to time restraints and the depth of detail into which the researcher sought to go with each focus group, he decided that ten participants were sufficient to answer the research objectives. With more time the researcher would have held more focus groups in order to get more opinions which would have made the data collected more likely to represent recent graduates as a whole and generalise the results to the Irish population as a whole.

Chapter 5. Data Findings

In this chapter the researcher will present the findings of the research groups conducted in Leixlip Parish centre on July 26th and 28th 2018. As discussed in chapter three the data was analysed using a thematic analysis method whereby transcriptions of the focus groups were repeatedly analysed in a process known as coding in order to pull themes from the data collected. In terms of format, this chapter will repeat each research objective and discuss the themes which emerged relevant to each objective.

5.1 Research objective 1 **- Discover what employer's traits are seen as most and least desirable to recent graduates in Ireland and examine the impact these traits can have on the graduate's employment choices.**

Themes:

Salary and training and development opportunities lead the way in terms of desired attributes.

Bad reputation/ autocratic management styles are the biggest "put offs" to recent graduates.

Graduates less picky about finding/avoiding these traits when first leaving college.

Salary and training and development opportunities lead the way in terms of desired attributes

The first section of each focus group focused on the traits that participant's found the most and least desirable from a potential employer. The aim of this focus was to provide data which could be used by an organisation to tailor their approach to attracting recent graduates based on what they want to see and don't want to see from an organisation.

The first question simply asked participants to state some of the attributes that they would see in their ideal employer. Of the ten participants, eight mentioned salary as the most important aspect in terms of what attracts them to a potential employer. No participant answered with salary alone, with each of them also stating other traits they look for which varied from work-life balance to additional annual leave entitlements. However, salary was the most frequent answer and the other traits mentioned were secondary to this.

The second most important aspect to participants was found to be training and development opportunities on offer from an organisation. Again some participants linked this back to the monetary aspect with one participant 4 from group one stating "there has to be opportunity for growth within a company to help you with [a mortgage] or if you plateau you will be looking elsewhere."

The monetary aspect of training and development wasn't the only reason it was desired with multiple participants agreeing that on a psychological level it is important to know that you have the opportunity to grow and develop new skills in order to better yourself. Participant 4 from group two said that the company she is currently in offers very little opportunity to learn new skills to enable you to progress in the organisation. For that reason she said there is a high turnover of staff as "nobody wants to work in the same job for years on end, knowing there is no room to grow."

Bad reputation/ autocratic management styles are the biggest "put offs" to recent graduates

The second section of the focus groups focused on traits that participants do not want see from a potential employer. The aim of this particular focus was to provide data which could be used by organisation's aiming to attract graduates. The data provided can give such organisations an insight into what they need to avoid doing if they want to be seen as an ideal employer among recent graduates.

The most common traits mentioned by participants here were more to do with life once inside the organisation than anything they might see on an employment offer. Most agreed that an organisation having a bad reputation was the biggest put off in terms of applying to work for an organisation. Whilst both groups participant's acknowledged that it can be difficult to know who the "bad employers" from any industry are until you're actually already working in that industry, all participants agreed that once you get your foot in the door of an industry, it is easy to find out how the different companies treat their employees. Participant 5 from group one

mentioned that in a relatively small city like Dublin word of mouth spreads very quickly, particularly within an industry. He went on to say that if he hears negative testimonies of experiences from previous employees or clients of a certain company that this has the power to negatively impact his perceptions of said company as a potential employer.

Some participants broke down the negative word of mouth aspect further by advising that for them, the impact this can have on them is very much dependant on where the information is coming from. Participant 2 from group two pointed to certain websites which rate companies as employers and said that if the majority of reviews were bad that she would be inclined to believe them. However, the same participant said that she would be much less inclined to be influenced by a one off story of someone having a poor experience and said she would be very careful regarding who she would listen to.

Autocratic management practices was found to be the second biggest "put off" to these graduates. Both groups took highly negative views on such leadership styles. Participant 5 from group two stated "I want to work somewhere that my voice is heard. I don't want to work for a company where the boss just shouts orders down and everyone follows suit." Multiple other participants made similar comments and all participants body language suggested they agreed with the statement.

Graduates less picky about finding/avoiding these traits when first leaving college

At the end of each of the above sections participants were asked if they feel they would be more or less picky about finding/avoiding companies with the aforementioned traits when they first left college or with some work experience behind them after leaving college. The aim of these questions was to establish whether brand new graduates need to be targeted differently than graduates who have left college within the last two years but are already employed. Organisations could use this information to tailor the brand attributes that they 'push' depending on their target market.

The findings suggest that brand new graduates are much less likely to turn down an employment opportunity from a company based on not having the traits they desire, or having the traits they ideally want to avoid. Nine of the ten participants agreed that they feel they would be less picky about finding an employer with the positive/without the negative traits upon first leaving college. The majority of participants agreed that this was due to their eagerness to start working and said they were willing to take what they could get. Participant 1 from group two stated "when I first left college I probably would have taken anything just to

get my foot on the ladder." Multiple other participants made similar comments. The general consensus of both groups was that they would become pickier once they had some experience behind them.

5.2 Research Objective 2 **- Examine the impact a company's online presence has on recent graduate's perceptions of them as an employer.**

Themes:

A company's online presence can majorly influence graduate's perceptions of them as an employer.

A company's website is still the go-to research tool over social media.

Recent graduates find extensive online applications a major put off.

Recent graduates react positively to promotional employment videos.

A company's online presence can majorly influence graduate's perceptions of them as an employer

This section was focused on a company's online platforms such as their official website and social media platforms. The aim of this focus was to establish how much attention an organisation should pay to their online activity/platforms when trying to attract new and recent graduates in Ireland.

The first question in this section simply asked participants if they thought that a company's online presence could influence their perceptions of that company as an employer. All participants apart from one agreed that it definitely could in some capacity. The only participant who said that a company's online presence would not influence their perceptions of them as an employer was participant 1 from group two who was the most mature of the participants interviewed. When asked about her views she stated that "being older, I don't think it would have as much influence on me as it might the younger generation. For me I would be more dependent on word of mouth."

When the researcher asked if anyone had ever been considering applying to an organisation only to decide against it solely for the reason of having viewed the company's online material and being put off, participant 5 from group two said that she had an experience like this very recently. She said she had been offered an interview for a company and in preparation for said interview went to their company website. The participant said that the information on the website was confusing and not very user friendly. She also said that "they didn't really sell themselves to me as a company." The participant advised that because of this experience she decided against interviewing for the company.

A company's website is still the go-to research tool over social media

In today's society there are more online platforms available to organisations than ever before. For this reason the researcher saw it as important to establish the platform of choice for recent graduates if they researching a potential employer. This data can be used by organisations who are active on multiple online platforms, who are looking to attract recent graduates, to narrow their focus and ensure the most important platform/s receives the most attention.

All of the participants from both focus groups agreed that a company's official website is the first online resource that they would visit in order to research a company as a potential employer. Participants were in agreement that social media platforms would more likely be looked at upon being offered a job at a company but that in terms of researching the company as a potential employer, the company website is the first and in multiple cases last place they would look.

Recent graduates find extensive online applications a major put off

One theme which emerged from the first focus group was one which wasn't considered by the researcher prior to the discussion. One participant brought up the fact that extensive online application processes were a major deterrent to a lot of people he that he knew. This led to the rest of the group strongly agreeing with him. This information could be used by organisations who wish to attract recent graduates and are designing the application process for their company.

Participant 4 from group one stated that "I think companies could definitely negatively influence people's perceptions of them by having excessive applications before you've even gotten to the interview stage." Participant 3 from the same group immediately agreed and pointed out that in his opinion "the less clicks, the better." He said that he feels companies

should make the initial application as easy as possible if they want to receive a large volume of applications. It was acknowledged by participants in group one that some organisations may purposely have difficult application processes so as to filter out unfit candidates. When asked about this topic group two were less informative but agreed that extensive online applications could definitely be a deterrent for them in terms of applying to a company.

Recent graduates react positively to promotional employment videos

The final part of this section of the research groups consisted of the researcher showing the participants a two minute video from an Irish company which promotes the benefits of working for their organisation. The video was produced by the company themselves with the aim of using it to attract people to their organisation. The data collected from these focus groups can help give organisations an idea of whether these types of videos are worth creating when trying to attract recent graduates in Ireland. The video shown in the focus groups can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HCrqcWYgsII.

Both groups reacted very positively to the video. It was immediately pointed out in both focus groups that the fact that the video doesn't focus on the monetary aspects of working for the company make it much more appealing. Participant 5 from group one stated "...they didn't mention salary, they spoke about seeing potential in people, the fact that they're committed to you, the benefits on offer …and essentially make themselves out more to be a lot more fun than the public would normally perceive Company X who are basically an accountancy firm to be." The majority of participants focused on the same aspects of the video and spoke about it positively.

It was also agreed by everyone that having current employees speaking in the video telling their stories of their experiences at the organisation helped to make it believable and more appealing than if they had just had a voice over speaking about life at the company. It was noted by the majority that they would be somewhat sceptical about videos like these since the company produced it themselves and are only going to say good things so the video may not tell the full story. However, overall the video got a very positive reaction. When asked if they thought this type of video would have more of an influence on them when they first left college or after getting some experience working in a company, participant's answers varied. Whilst some said the would've been more gullible and therefore more likely to fully believe the content of the video when they first left college, participant 4 from group two made the point

that this would depend on the aspects focused on in the video. The researcher then asked if the participants thought that videos like this could be tailored depending on the target market in order to maximise their influence and all of the participants in that group agreed that it could

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5.3 Research objective 3 **- Examine how much of an impact a company's corporate brand has on how recent graduates perceive them as an employer.**

Themes:

Substantial link between a company's corporate brand and recent graduate's perceptions of them as an employer.

Substantial link between an employer's corporate brand and recent graduate's perceptions of the prestige associated with being employed by the company.

Innovation matters more in terms of working practices than in terms of products and services.

Substantial link between a company's corporate brand and recent graduate's perceptions of them as an employer

This section of the focus groups focused on how much influence an organisation's corporate brand has on recent graduate's perceptions of them as an employer. Organisations with strong corporate brands could use this data when deciding whether to use their corporate brand as a tool to attract recent graduates to their organisations.

Of the ten participants, eight agreed that their perceptions of an employer would be someway shaped by the strength and appeal of that organisation's corporate brand. In the second group the most commonly agreed reason for this was the perceived added job security associated with working at an organisation with a strong corporate brand. Participant 4 from this group stated "at this point I would be attracted to a strong corporate brand because at my age (27) you have to start thinking about job security and your future. You hear stories about people in smaller organisations being let go all the time." The majority of the first group also said that their perceptions of an employer may be influenced by the strength of that organisation's corporate brand. However, this group gave different reasons than the first group. Participant 1 from this group advised that he associates a strong corporate brand which is renowned for quality products or services with an employer who a prospective employee can expect highly professional standards from.

A strong corporate brand was not seen as a positive aspect by all participants. Participant 2 from group two said that often the larger corporations with big brand names pay their employees less as they attract employees through name alone. She went on to claim that "you hear of people going to these organisations for the experience and then leaving after a few years for a job with double the salary in a smaller company, doing the same job.

This section aimed to uncover whether an organisation having a big brand name immediately gave them an advantage when attracting graduates due to whether the graduates perceived a job with them as more prestigious due to the brand name alone. Multiple participants said that they would associate a job's prestige with the strength of the company's corporate brand. Participant 3 from group one said that working for a company with a strong brand would be an ego-boost and said that in his opinion most people want to be able to say "look at me I work for such and such a company." Participant 1 from group two shared a similar insight. She said that this wasn't just a feature among graduates but in people in general. She gave the example of her colleague's husband who is a marketing professional that had recently moved jobs. He had been working for a high end department store chain but left that company for a job with another well-known brand that didn't have the same upmarket connotations associated with it. The actual job he was doing was the same level as the previous one and he even got a pay increase however the participants colleague told her that almost immediately when he announced the change it was viewed negatively even within their family. They were clearly associating the company's brand image with the job's prestige.

Innovation matters more in terms of working practices than in terms of products and services

At the end of this section participants were asked whether they would be more attracted to an organisation who are known for being innovators, either in terms of their products and services or in terms of their working practices. This data can help give organisations an insight into which appeals more to recent graduates thus showing them what to focus on when tailoring advertisements aimed at attracting them.

In group one participant 1 said that he finds it highly appealing to work for an innovative company. This participant is a very recent college leaver and is a software engineer. He said that he and a college friend started in the same company a few weeks before the focus group. This participant and his friend from college work indifferent divisions of this company. The participant's branch is particularly innovative whilst his friends isn't. The participant advised that they are having completely different experiences, his being much better. He puts this down

to the excitement he gets from being part of a forward thinking team whilst his friend already "feels like just another clog in the machine." The participant felt that this illustrates the fact that for some people working for an innovative company can be highly desirable, particularly in their line of work.

The other participants placed more importance on an organisation having innovative working practices. Participant 4 from group two said she finds it frustrating when companies use old, out-dated systems and ways of doing things. She said "I'd definitely be more attracted to a company who is always trying to improve the way they work and get with the times." Participant 3 from the same group spoke about the competitive jobs market and said that she feels the pressure is now on companies to keep up with the leaders and change the "monotonous, old fashioned" way that they work. Participants agreed that as more and more companies adopt modern and less restrictive working practices, people (particularly graduates) will be less inclined to accept a job at a company who by comparison are stuck in the past.

5.4 Research objective 4 – **Examine whether recent graduates find graduate/careers fairs a beneficial way to find potential employers.**

Themes:

Recent graduates generally find graduate/careers fairs can be beneficial.

Face to face conversations found to be the most influential means of getting information about a company.

Recent graduates generally find graduate/careers fairs beneficial

This aim of this section was to discover whether the participants had attended graduate or careers fairs before, during or after college and whether they found these fairs to be beneficial in terms of helping them to find an employer. This data could be used by organisations who are considering whether it is worth their time and investment attending these fairs to attract recent graduates.

The overall feedback from both focus groups suggested that participants found that graduate and careers fairs can be beneficial. Every participant had attended at least one fair. In group one the majority of participants said that they had positive experiences. Participant 4 in particular had a career changing experience. He explained how he was nearly finished his science degree from Trinity College Dublin when he attended a fair. He said before going he

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had begun to realise that jobs in the space he had studied were very limited and that there was little or no room to progress even if he could get one. The participant said that it was by going to this fair and speaking to employers from a wide variety of industries that he realised that he had learned many transferable skills which were high in demand. He said "the fairs helped me broaden my horizons…they opened me up to possibilities that I hadn't ever considered previously so they helped me greatly." This participant has been working happily in an accountancy firm for the past year.

Group two had more mixed views on their experiences at these fairs with participant 4 from this group speaking about how she wandered around one fair which didn't seem to have any structure to it in terms of segregating stalls based on what industry the companies were hiring in. This led to a discussion among the group where participants were all in agreement that if these fairs were industry specific they would be much more beneficial. Participant 2 from this group said "I think if the grad fair is tailored towards a specific industry it may be more beneficial. I remember going to a couple where the majority of the stands had nothing to do with what I was studying."

Face to face conversations found to be the most influential means of getting information about a company

Part of the careers and graduate fair section of the focus groups aimed to find out whether recent graduates felt they were/would be more or less influenced by having face to face conversations with potential employers as opposed to other methods or researching companies such as online. Again, this information could be used by organisations who are considering attending graduate or careers fairs in order to attract recent graduates.

The majority of participants were in agreement that face to face conversations are the most influential way employers can attract potential employees to their organisations. The first reason given for this being the case was that a conversation with a real person is much more memorable than reading something off the internet. Participants from both groups acknowledged the importance of organisations sending the right people to fairs like this in order for this to be the case but both groups said that when the right people are sent, there is no better way to attract a recent graduate to a company. Participant 2 from group two said "I agree it sort of stays in the mind when you've met someone. You can think back and say "yes I met him he was very friendly" and it would make you more inclined to apply to that company."

The majority of participants were also in agreement that a company who they had met with at these fairs would give have a distinct advantage over a company who did not attend the fairs if it came down to applying for similar jobs on similar pay scales, in these companies. Participant 4 from group one stated "if there were two companies offering a similar job, with a similar salary, in the same location and I've spoken to one of them at a careers fair and I haven't spoken to one of them in the same sort of setting then I think the company I spoke to would definitely appeal more to me than the other one."

5.5 Research objective 5 **- Examine whether there are substantial differences among male and female recent graduates in terms of what they want/don't want from an employer.**

Themes:

Only minor differences apparent between the standout traits that each group found desirable/undesirable from potential employers.

This research objective was analysed by making a comparison between the answers given by each focus group. As mentioned previously all male participants were in put the first focus group and all female participants were put in the second focus group. This data may be useful to an organisation who are trying to bring greater diversity to their workplace by balancing the amount of males and females that they employ.

<u>Only minor differences apparent between the standout traits that each group found desirable/undesirable from potential employers</u>

Whilst there were some differences in the answers given by the male group compared to the female group in every section of the focus group, the differences in opinion tended to be on the aspects that were deemed to be of secondary importance to both groups.

In terms of the traits that the recent graduates find most attractive in potential employers both groups gave very similar answers. Salary was named as the most important aspect of an employment offer by four out of the five members of each group. Secondary to this both groups mentioned benefits, work-life balance and the social aspect of working for an organisation. The

only differences in what they wanted to see from an employer that was noted was that the female group place more importance on feeling valued in the workplace and the male group placed more importance on the opportunity to travel for work and extra annual leave entitlements. As these answers were only secondary to the main traits mentioned the researcher acknowledges that there is nothing to say it had anything to do with the participants' gender. Had a male been put in the group two he may have agreed to the importance of feeling valued in the workplace when it was brought up by one of the females. Likewise if a female had been placed in group one she may have agreed to placing importance on having the opportunity to travel when that was brought up by one of the males.

In terms of what they don't want to see from an employer both groups focused on aspects revolving around management style and negative word of mouth. Autocratic leadership styles were frowned upon by both groups and both named negative word of mouth and bad reputation as something that would stop them applying to an organisation. The standout difference in answers between groups here was that the female group were much more particular about who they would listen to in terms of accepting that a company was a 'bad employer.' Again the researcher acknowledges that this may have had nothing to do with gender.

The similarity in opinions from each group was clear throughout. With strong similarities between groups about what they actually thought about each topic, the only real differences came up in why they felt the way they did. As mentioned above the researcher cannot put this down to the gender of the participants as had they been in mixed groups, they may have agreed to the reasons that happened to be brought up in the group they were not in.

Chapter 6. Discussion

This chapter will take a look at how the main themes identified in the previous chapter fit into previous research in the field of employer branding, where they fit in, and their possible implications. As in the previous chapter the themes are discussed in relation to the research objective that facilitated the researcher in getting the data which led to those themes developing. The findings were analysed in relation to the literature analysis section of this project to provide the researcher with an idea of where this research has expanded on, clashed with, or fallen in line with previous research.

6.1 The Importance of Online Branding

The findings of this research project suggest that an organisation's online resources have the potential to play a major role in impacting the perceptions that potential employees have of their company. Nine out of ten participants agreed that their perceptions of a company could be altered, either positively or negatively, after viewing the organisation's online content. This suggests that in order for an organisation to have a strong employer brand, they should put a lot of focus into developing and maintaining their online platforms and, as discussed by Barrow and Moseley (2005), they should ensure that their online brand reflects the core values and beliefs of their organisation. The importance of a company's promoted brand being followed through with in terms of what they say they do and what they actually do, is vitally important to the company sustaining a strong employer brand, as discussed by Moroko and Uncles (2008).

In terms of the best online platform for companies to use to 'sell themselves' as an employer to prospective employees, the findings of this study conflict with the claims of Prabhjot et al (2015) who advise organisations that social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn are now the best platforms to focus on in order to attract talent. In contrast to this, the findings of this research project suggest in the case of recent graduates, they still see the company's official website as the go-to place for information about the organisation. In fact, the majority of participants in this research project said that they would not think to look at a company's social media platforms at all. If organisations want to 'sell themselves' to recent graduates online they will need to focus on the platforms that the recent graduates are going to for information. This suggests to the researcher that company websites should be an organisation's main area of focus rather than Prabhjot et al (2015) suggestion of focusing on social media platforms. The researcher acknowledges the need for a greater sample in order to

draw any definitive conclusions but with every 100% of participants agreeing that a company's official website would be there go-to online resource the findings are worth noting in comparison to Prabhjot's. Based on the findings of this project alone, the researcher would recommend that the first point of call for an organisation looking to develop their online platforms to help attract potential employees, particularly recent graduates, should in fact be the company website.

The findings of this research project are more in line with those of Kissel and Buttgen (2015) and Agri Marketing (2017). Kissel and Buttgen (2015) argue that a company's online careers resources can have more of an impact than social media platforms on prospective employees and Agri Marketing (2017) argue that companies should invest in developing their online careers section as this is the optimum space to use when attracting potential employees.

As discussed in the previous chapter part of the 'Online Influences' section of the focus groups which were conducted for this research project involved the researcher showing participants a short promotional video produced by a Dublin based accountancy firm as a means of attracting potential employees to their organisation. All ten participants reacted quite positively to the video and they reacted particularly well to the digital storytelling aspect of it which involved current employees of the organisation speaking in the video about their positive experiences working at the company. The focus group participants said that this method of relaying information was particularly influential as it helped to "paint a picture" of what it is like to work at the company and it also made the video's story more believable. This is consistent with the findings of Crisan and Bortun (2017) whose research found that prospective employees react very positively and develop positive attitudes towards a company after viewing their online material that included digital storytelling. The researchers added that further research and a larger sample would be required to draw any absolute conclusions. This researcher acknowledges the limitations of the meaning of the findings of this project but such similar findings to Crisan and Bortun (2017) suggests that digital storytelling may be a key tool for organisations to use when developing their employer branding strategies.

The other key theme which arose from this section was the highly negative reaction participants in the focus groups said they had to companies whose online application processes are overly extensive. The findings laid out in the previous chapter suggest to the researcher that companies who want to attract a large quantity of applications should make the initial application process as simple as possible. Participants suggested that once through the initial application stage,

having had some form of contact from the company, they would be more likely to invest the time in a lengthy online application. However, if the companies want to reduce the possibility of receiving a high number of applications from candidates who don't meet the job's criteria, then having a longer online application may be an effective way of doing so. One participant suggested that an unworthy candidate is less likely to "chance their luck" in applying to a job that they know they don't meet the criteria for, if the initial application is long and focused, rather than simply attaching their cv to an email.

6.2 Graduate Fairs

In relation to graduate and careers fairs the findings of this research project showed that the majority of participants had somewhat beneficial experiences of them, some much more so than others, with one of the key benefits being a face-to-face conversation with a representative of a company. One popular suggestion which was brought up by a participant in group two was that colleges and employers should design industry specific fairs. All participants in this group agreed that this was a good idea as they felt as though traditional multi-industry graduate fairs were difficult to navigate in terms of finding the relevant employers to speak to. Participants said that for this reason they wasted a lot of time and often grew restless at these fairs. These findings are in line with those of Payne and Sumter (2005). The authors make suggestions about how to improve the success of graduate fairs for both employers and graduates. One of their suggestions was to have discipline-specific fairs. The reasons given were almost identical to those given by participants of this study. The authors also found that the majority of their participants had a somewhat positive experience from graduate/careers fairs. The data collected for this research fully supports Payne and Sumter's (2005) findings and this suggests to the researcher that this is an area that could be worth focusing on for employers and colleges. The industry/discipline specific fairs could be particularly beneficial in sectors such as IT where it is traditionally difficult for employers to attract enough talent to their organisations.

The findings of this research project combined with the analysis of the above literature suggests to the researcher that organisations who are aiming to attract recent and soon-to-be graduates should invest in attending these fairs as often as possible and should strive to ensure that they are sending the right employees to act as ambassadors for their organisations. On a broader spectrum these findings suggest that companies from the same discipline should work together in designing and running discipline specific graduate fairs. This would benefit employers and graduates alike because discipline specific fairs should only attract people who want to work in that discipline, therefore eliminating the time wasting element that both this research and

Payne and Sumpter's (2005) research found to be a negative element of traditional, multi-disciplined fairs.

6.3 Desired Employer Traits

During the literature analysis stage of this research project the researcher noted multiple studies of which the focus was on the aspects of an employer brand that high-level professionals said were the most important to focus on in order to positively influence prospective employees perceptions of their organisations' employer brand. Studies by Biswas and Suar (2016) Verma and Ahmed (2016) both identified similar reoccurring factors which their participants felt influenced prospective employees' perception of their organisations' employer brand. The findings of this research project supported these previous studies. Biswas and Suar (2016) and Verma and Ahmed (2016) named factors such as economic value, perceived levels of support, perceived levels of prestige associated with working for an organisation, social value and working environment as those that were most likely to influence prospective employees' perceptions of their participants' organisations. Each of the factors named were brought by the participants of this research project throughout the focus groups. This suggests to the researcher that organisations are actively researching the areas they need to focus on due to the increased acknowledgement that an organisation's employer brand is of fundamental importance when it comes to attracting employees.

One study which stood out during the literature analysis stage of this project was Chhabra and Sharma's (2011) study. The reason this research was of particular interest was due to the similar focus in terms of both topic and population. The authors sought to discover the most desirable employer branding attributes to final year management students and presented findings in line with those of this research project. Salary and benefits were found to be of the most important to their population whilst training and development opportunities, opportunities to progress, and company brand were also found to be leading attributes in terms of their influence on the perceptions of the final year management students. The findings of this research project fully support Chhabra and Sharma's findings. The recent graduates who were participants in this research project also named good salary and training and development opportunities as the most the most desirable attributes to find in a potential employer. Taking into consideration the fact that the populations and findings of this research project and Chhabra and Sharma (2011) are so similar, suggests to the researcher that the traits graduates and soon to be graduates desire most from employers can be generalised rather than thought of as specific to the individual. Again, further research with a larger sample would be required to make any definitive

conclusions but the researcher interprets the data as significant enough to justify further research.

In regards to the most desirable attributes employers can offer graduates, the findings of this research project also support Kucherov and Zamulin's (2016) study which focused on the best employer branding practices a company can implement to attract members of generation Y and the millennial generation to their organisations. Similarly to this study, the authors found training and development opportunities to be one of the most important features that an employer can ensure to have available in order to attract the desired demographic to their organisation.

After analysing both the findings of this research project and the relevant literature the author recommends that employers who want to attract recent graduates to their organisation should firstly ensure to offer a competitive salary. The findings of this project suggest that this is the first aspect of an employment offer that many graduates will look at and, if it doesn't meet their needs, any benefits on offer after this won't be considered as the graduate will already have moved onto the next offer. Offering a competitive salary isn't enough on its own however. Previous literature and the findings of this study strongly suggest that recent and soon-to-be graduates place major importance on the training and development opportunities that an organisation can offer them to help them to progress in their careers and on a personal level, as people. The researcher recommends that employers who want to attract graduates to their organisation should invest as much as possible in ensuring that effective, relevant training and development opportunities are central to working for their company, and that this investment in people is promoted as one of the key benefits to being an employee of the organisation.

6.4 Corporate Branding's Impact on Employer Branding

In regard to the role that corporate branding has in influencing recent graduates' perceptions of organisations as employers, as discussed in the findings chapter, the main theme to arise from this study is the that it can have a major influence. This is in line with the findings of Sousa and Ariscado (2016) who speak about the importance of an organisation's corporate brand and how it can benefit their employer brand. The authors advise that a strong corporate brand enhances positive perceptions of the organisation to a variety of audiences such as stakeholders and more importantly to this study, consumers. If, as is suggested by Bansal and Mendelson (2001), consumers of the brand and prospective employees are the same people, then Sousa and Ariscado's (2016) findings are right in line with the findings of this research project. The fact that almost all of the participants of this study agreed that a strong corporate brand gives

positive connotations about a company in terms of how they are as an employer, supports Sousa and Ariscado's (2016) argument that a corporate brand is worthy of constant management for the purpose of building a strong employer brand. The fact that a corporate brand is worthy of constant management is blatantly obvious for a variety of reasons, the point here is that the findings of this research supports the argument that one benefit of an organisation ensuring the constant management of their corporate brand, is that it supports the development and maintenance of a strong employer brand.

6.5 Gender Not Significant

The fifth objective of this study was to find out whether male and female recent graduates had different opinions regarding what traits they would and would not like to see from a potential employer. This objective was inspired during the early stages of literature analysis, mainly after the researcher questioned the findings of Bellou et al (2015). The authors advise that an employer's approach to attracting males to their organisation should be different to their approach to attracting females in terms of what they promote as benefits of working for their company. They claim that if the aim is to attract males to the organisation the focus should be on promoting factors such as organisational success, whereas if the aim is to attract females the focus should be on promoting factors such as flexible working practices. This advice directly conflicts with the findings of this research project which found only minor differences in the answers given by the all-female group when compared to the answers given by the all-male group. The researcher is not suggesting that this study disproves the findings presented by Bellou et al (2015). However the researcher deems the direct conflict of findings to be noteworthy.

It is worth noting that the methodology used by Bellou et al (2015) simply compared females to males, with no regard for their age, education level, or what stage of their career they were at, whilst the sample used for this study was specifically males and females who had graduated from university in within the past two years. This raises the question of whether differences in opinions regarding ideal employer traits among the sexes, is something that develops as they get older, progress in their careers, and develop as people. This could be an area worthy of further research.

The researcher is conflicted in terms of making recommendations to employers regarding whether they should alter the aspects they promote as positives of working for their organisations depending on what gender they are aiming to attract. On the basis of this study alone the researcher would advise an employer that gender is not an important element to factor

into their approach for attracting prospective employees. However, previous research suggests otherwise, and the researcher acknowledges that the limitations of this research project, particularly relating to sample size, mean that the data collected may not be a fair representation of the entire population.

6.6 Research Limitations

As mentioned above, research objective 5 which compared the answers given by male and female participants of the study, was inspired during data analysis when the researcher found himself questioning the validity of Bellou et al (2015) who claimed that employers should target males and females differently, as they desire different things. The fact that the researcher immediately questioned these findings suggests to him that he may have brought a bias regarding this objective into this study. The author noted this potential bias early on and kept it in mind during data analysis in an attempt to limit its impact on the validity of the results of this research. The researcher believes he was successful in doing so, however he acknowledges that he cannot categorically say that he was not influenced by this potential bias and so this is a potential limitation of the study.

Another limitation of this research project was that whilst the project's aim was to collect and analyse data from recent graduates from Ireland, the researcher ended up collecting and analysing data from ten participants who were all from Dublin and surrounding areas. Whilst some of the participants were originally from other locations around Ireland, all had been living in close proximity to Dublin for a number of years at the time that the focus groups took place. The researcher acknowledges that this could have an influence on the data collected as graduates from different parts of the country may not have the same opinions as graduates from Dublin and surrounding areas. Therefore, the findings of this study are less likely to be represent of the entire Irish population. With more time and resources, the researcher would have set up focus groups in different parts of the country to get a broader range of insights. The researcher could have set up an even number of focus groups in each province and the comparison of data would have been an interesting aspect to add to the project as well as giving more reliable data due to the larger number of participants that would be taking part in the study.

At different stages throughout the focus groups the researcher asked participants whether they felt they would feel less or more strongly about certain topics or be less or more influenced by certain employer tactics, when they first left college in comparison to after having some work experience behind them, after college. The researcher had to take participants at their word and

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felt that some of them were speculating. This was potentially due to not remembering how they felt at the time of leaving college, as for some participants almost two years had passed since then. With a lot more time and the required resources, the researcher acknowledges that more reliable data could be collected by interviewing the same participants when they initially leave college and then again, a year or two later with the same questions. This would give more much more reliable data as the participants would be giving answers based on the insights they had in that moment rather than speculating on how they think they felt in the past.

In the methodology chapter the limitations of qualitative research were discussed specifically in relation to the methods of data collection and analysis that were used for this research project. In relation to its impact on this study overall, the researcher acknowledges that some academics would argue that the use of a qualitative approach in general limits the validity of the findings. Horsburgh (2003, p. 308) argues that qualitative research in general lacks "scientific rigour and credibility." Others, including the researcher dismiss these claims but they cannot be categorically denied and therefore are acknowledged by the research as a potential limitation of this study.

Chapter 7. Recommendations

This chapter outlines four suggestions that the researcher would recommend to an organisation whose aim is to attract more recent graduate to their organisation. The costs and timeline associated with the implementation of these recommendations are also included where applicable.

7.1 Offer a competitive salary

This may seem obvious to the reader. However, with all that has been said in recent years about how organisations should focus on the non-monetary benefits of working for their company, many employers have perhaps become confused into thinking that graduates are willing to overlook a less than competitive salary in place of these benefits. This findings of this research, combined with a thorough literature analysis, has found this not to be the case. Whilst the non-monetary benefits of working for a company are of huge importance to today's recent graduates, they are only taken into consideration when the graduate's primary needs/desires are met. This research has found that primary need/desire to be a competitive salary.

In terms of cost to the organisation, offering lower salaries to graduates will obviously reduce the wage bill by whatever the deficit is to a competitive salary for that position. However, an organisation must consider that this initial saving can cost them money in the long run. As found by this project, offering lower salaries is likely to lead to a high employee turnover rate. The costs associated with this will more often than not cost a company more than what they saved in the first place. The immediate financial costs include recruitment costs, the costs of training and developing a new employee, and the loss of investment in a departing employee's training and development. On top of this employers may see reduced moral of existing employees who have to work harder whilst a new team member is being trained in. This can impact the productivity of the entire affected team. ((Tracey & Hinkin, 2008)

7.2 Make training and development opportunities available to every employee and promote these opportunities internally and externally

The research project has found that recent graduates expect employers to make training and development opportunities available to them. Employers who want to attract and retain recent graduates need to facilitate their continued development. Having solid training and development programmes in place is a major attraction to graduates. Current employees should be encouraged to take part in relevant training, and prospective employees should be well

informed that these opportunities would be available to them if they were to accept a job at the organisation.

Training and development costs will vary depending on the size of the organisation, the number of employees at the organisation, and the type of training required to develop staff at the organisation, among other factors. Having efficient and effective training and development opportunities in place isn't a one off cost. Companies must incorporate this into their annual budgets to ensure there is a constant cycle of opportunities that are relevant to their employees. In terms of more focused training opportunities such as if an organisation wants to send an employee on a masters course to further develop their expertise, the costs will vary depending on the training programme. A part-time master's course taken over a two year period in NCI is approximately €8,000 in total per person.

In terms of timing, the implementation of effective training and development opportunities is something which will take constant management and not something that can be rolled out in a defined period of time and then left alone.

7.3 Use the company website to promote your employer brand

This research project found that a company's website is the first place recent graduates will go to research a company. An employer should ensure that their website, particularly their careers section, is easy to use, easy to read, and that it shares the company ethos in a way which promotes the company as a great place to work. The importance of website design in terms of attracting recent graduates should not be underestimated. This research project found that a good company website can have a majorly positive influence on recent graduates and increase the likelihood of them applying to an organisation. However it was also found that a poorly designed website can negatively influence a recent graduate's perceptions of an employer to the extent that it puts them off applying to the organisation. This study found that one of the most effective ways a company can promote their employer brand and company culture through their website is through the use of promotional videos, using current employees as storytellers. This method is highly recommended.

It is estimated that an organisation can produce an effective 90 second – two minute promotional video with a budget of approximately €2,700 (videomybusiness.co.uk). This could take anywhere from a few days to multiple weeks to compete depending on the resources allocated to the videos production. Organisations, particularly large organisations may opt to

hire one of the many media companies who offer total management of the production of such a video. This ensures quality but is reflected in a substantially higher cost to produce.

7.4 Attend Graduate Fairs

Employers who are aiming to attract recent graduates to their organisations should ensure that their companies are represented at graduate fairs. As discussed in previous chapter this has been found to give them a competitive advantage over companies in the same space who do not attend. Recent graduates were found to react well to face to face conversations with company representatives and indicated that they would more inclined to apply to a company having spoken to them at one of these events. Employers should ensure to send the right people to represent them at these events. The findings of this study suggest that employers should look to send employees who are passionate about the company and who are generally outgoing people.

Most universities and colleges will host careers/graduate fairs for their students each year. Most of these events charge employers a set fee to set up a stand. TCD, UCD and UCC charge employers €800 whilst DCU charges employers €500. Sometimes colleges will develop a partnership of sorts with employers who will not have to pay this fee, often due to them consistently hiring that college's graduates. There are other costs to take into consideration, one being that which is associated with a potential loss in productivity from the employees who are sent to represent the company at such events, since they are often held during working hours. Other costs would include the design and printing of brochures, the cost of designing a stall, and the cost of any training an employer may want to give the employees who are being sent as company representatives.

Chapter 8. Conclusion

The aim of this research project has been to gain an insight into the best practices that employers can adopt in order to attract recent university graduates to their organisations. This project did so by asking recent graduates themselves what they do and do not want to see from potential employers. The findings of this project offer valuable insights into the minds of these recent graduates and can be used by employers who want to gain an understanding of recent graduates' preferences. Whilst the majority of literature relating to similar populations' perceptions of what constitutes a strong employer brand is based on quantitative studies, the researcher of this research project set out to dig deeper. Rather than just asking how participants felt about each topic, the researcher wanted to find out why they felt the way they did. By digging deeper and exploring what influences graduates' perceptions, the researcher sought to gain a better understanding of how to estimate what graduates may or may not want to see from employers outside of the specific set of questions that was asked. For these reasons a qualitative approach was adopted.

The findings of this project vary in terms of whether they are in line with or conflict with previous literature. The findings of this project are in line with previous literature by highlighting the importance of non-monetary benefits to prospective employees. However, the

offer of a competitive salary was still found to be most important to the participants of this study with the importance of non-monetary benefits found to be secondary to this. This research also supports previous literature by highlighting the importance of an organisation offering training and development opportunities to their employees. Participants advised that this is the most important aspect of what an employer can offer once a person has started employment at their company.

Another finding of this project suggests that an organisation's company website is a highly effective tool in communicating the employer brand. A number of methods were highlighted, all of which were found to increase the likelihood of graduates perceiving an organisation to be an employer of choice after having viewed the content online.

Much of the literature focused on the importance of an organisation's corporate brand and its influence on the companies perceived employer brand. The findings of this research are in line with these studies in suggesting that prospective employees' perceptions of an employer brand can be strongly influenced by their perceptions of an organisation's corporate brand.

Another objective of this study was to investigate the influence that graduate/ careers fairs have on recent graduates. The findings suggest that most recent graduates find these events to be somewhat beneficial. As well as benefiting the graduates, the findings suggest that attending these events can be highly beneficial for employers also. Participants indicated that they would have a strong preference for an organisation they had spoken to at one of these events than another who they had not spoken to. Participants highlighted the value of a face to face discussion and for these reasons it is suggested that attending these events can give an organisation a competitive advantage over their competitors in the jobs market.

This study also set out to investigate whether recent graduates should be segregated by gender by employers who are promoting the positive aspects of working for their companies. The literature relating to this is of mixed opinion but the findings of this research indicate that there is little to no difference in what recent graduates want to see from employers that could be attributed to their gender alone.

This research project sought to gain an understanding of how organisations can effectively and consistently attract recent graduates from Irish universities. The focus on graduates in Ireland who were within two years of completing their university courses was undertaken with the aim of contributing something to the academic field of employer branding, in an area which the researcher found was lacking in material.

Employers are constantly introducing new practices to their organisations in the hope that they will help them gain an upper hand in the employment market. By understanding what recent graduates are looking for, employers can give themselves the best chance of attracting talented individuals to their organisation. As years go by, societal shifts will undoubtedly alter the elements that lead to an organisation being thought of as an ideal employer. As Bansel and Mendelson (2001) argued, in the same way organisations need to adapt and evolve to keep up with the demands of their consumers, employers will need to constantly evolve and adapt in order to remain as an employer of choice. The undertaking of research projects similar to this one will be vital to understanding why and when these changes are happening, and will give organisations an indication of when they are at risk of falling behind and what they can do to ensure that they do not. One thing that will not change, is that effective employer branding will remain as the key to gaining a competitive advantage in the ongoing war for talent.

Personal Learning Statement - CIPD

Having taken the option not to undertake a dissertation for the completion of my undergraduate degree, this was by far the most daunting aspect of the master's programme. The prospect of writing up to 20,000 words on the same topic seemed almost impossible to me and this made choosing a topic quite a stressful process. Luckily, People Resourcing was the first module taught on our programme and this is where I was introduced to the concept of employer branding. It immediately struck me as a very interesting topic and upon completion of the module I found myself wanting to know more. I was still reading articles on employer branding research projects after the module had finished and noted that one topic which kept coming up was the ongoing 'war for talent.' I felt that immersing myself in a topic which can give organisations a competitive advantage in this 'war' would be highly beneficial, and this combined with my natural interest in the subject, made it easy for me to choose employer branding as my research topic. Having a keen interest in the area immediately made the prospect of undertaking the dissertation less daunting than before. Rather than seeing the dissertation as a means to an end, I actually started looking forward to immersing myself in the field of employer branding and possibly, even if only a little bit, contributing something to of worth with my research. I had never immersed myself in a subject to the extent that I have with this project. The early stages of data analysis seem like a life time ago at this stage. Thinking back to the countless hours

spent researching, reading, writing, and re-writing I feel a great sense of completion to be able to submit a thesis which regardless of the result, I am proud of.

This dissertation has taught me so much that I can bring with me into workplace and I feel that the knowledge I have gained in relation to employer branding will be a valuable asset to any human resources department. The particular focus on recent graduates in Ireland will be of particular benefit in the war for talent which I mentioned above. Employer branding is a topic which I will certainly be keeping up to date with as I enter and develop as a HR professional. Even looking as far forward as the year 2030 when it is estimated that there will be more new graduates than ever before in Ireland, I think this research project will stand to me. Through the countless articles and book chapters I have read, combined with the research I undertook myself, I feel that I have developed an understanding of what it is that attracts recent graduates to a company and I would feel confident in advising business people from different disciplines on the best practices they can implement to ensure they do just that.

Academically I feel I have progressed rapidly through this process. I have learned more from writing this dissertation than I ever did writing 3/4000-word assignments. Focusing on one subject in such detail is a challenge but I feel like I am now far better equipped to analyse topics in much more detail than before. I have improved myself in ways I didn't expect. I feel I can read and type quicker than before. I can find relevant articles much quicker through using the library and online databases so regularly. At the beginning of the project I found myself wasting a lot of time reading through articles, trying to decide whether they were relevant to my study, however I am now much quicker at this process as I know where to look and what I am looking for.

Completing this dissertation has by far been the most challenging, and most rewarding experience I have had in academia. I have learned more about employer branding than I could ever have expected at this beginning of the project and I know that this will be of huge benefit to me in my career as a HR professional.

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Appendices

Transcriptions

Focus Group 1 (Males)

P1 – Participant 1, P2 – Participant 2…

For the sake of anonymity companies have been given pseudonyms throughout the transcription. E.g. Company X, Company Y…

Researcher: Hi everyone, thank you for coming today. You've all already been briefed so we'll get straight into it. Could you each start off by telling me the traits that you look for in an ideal employer.

P1: Good benefits and training opportunities.

P2: Good T&D opportunities and good salary

P3: A chance to travel, salary is obviously a big one and I personally find any additional annual leave an attractive enticement.

P4: Additional annual leave I agree, also parental leave and that sort of thing. Salary would be the main attraction for me though.

P5: Having good man managers who are understanding and allow you to have a good work life balance. The opportunity to travel would also entice me to an organisation, I'd love to work in different locations around the world.

Researcher: And in terms of when you're initially looking for an employer without knowing about the ins and outs of the day to day life at the company what traits would make you want to apply at that initial stage?

P3: I suppose one thing I look out for is the company name itself, the brand, word of mouth also. You often hear whether someone is a good employer, maybe they host events and stuff like that.

P4: I agree, you tend to hear about a company's culture before you actually join them.

Researcher: And I know most of you are now a couple of years finished college, do you think that you would be less or pickier about finding an employer offering these traits now as opposed to when you first left college and why?

P5: Less so, when you first leave college I think everyone just looks for the most cash. Whoever is offering the most salary goes to the front of the queue and you'd basically go

anywhere to make as much money as possible. Now after a couple of years' experience in my job I think I'd look at things other than the bottom line amount of money.

P1: I agree I initially just looked at the salaries on offer and based my decision off that but now even after being in the job a short time I can see that there are other important factors. Especially at this stage of our careers I think that picking up skills we can use going forward is just as important as money.

P4: I think I would be pickier now. When I initially joined my company money was a big motivator but as I was completely switching fields to that which I'd studied into a new discipline for my job I was also looking for the support available to me to gain some knowledge or qualifications in the field I was going into. So when I left college exam support and things like that would've been quite important to me whereas now it wouldn't play a part in my decision.

Researcher: And J if you were to move job in the near future would you be more or less fussy and why so?

P5: Way more fussy for sure. When you first leave college you're probably most concerned with what salary you're going to be on but now after a few years obviously your salary goes up bit by bit so you have that bit more savings and aren't looking 100% at the salary amount. You'd be looking out more for annual leave days, work life balance, benefits like health insurance, pension and that sort of thing.

Researcher: And on the other end of the spectrum, when you're applying for jobs what traits do you not want to see from an employer?

P5: Bad reputation, word on the street spreads quickly especially in a small country with a relatively small city like Dublin. You hear about bad companies and that does turn you off. You might hear from past employees or clients who've been treated poorly might make you feel like you wouldn't want to work there at all. The smallest things can turn you off.

P1: Yes definitely. I think that every industry probably has certain companies who industry insiders have heard don't treat their employees particularly well and so the money that you get for the work that you do ends up not being worth it. I don't think that you really hear about these things until you're already in the industry though.

Researcher: In terms of the traits that you said you don't want to see from an employer, would you say you'd be pickier now or when you first left college?

P4: I think when you first come out of college to get that first step on the ladder, to get into the working world and earn some cash you first leave college and you might take the job that you know isn't really going to benefit you in the long term it's more about the immediate gratification. Only after being ibn the job for a while you might start to look at more long-term prospects.

P3: I also think when you start your job you're starting from the very bottom, it's just part of life that you need to work your way up. Everyone knows of the bad stuff in terms of workload and that sort of thing when you're younger but everybody has to start from somewhere and usually you start from the bottom and work your way up.

Researcher: Now we're going to move onto how companies put themselves out there as an employer. If we go around the table on this one I'd like to know how much if any influence you think a company's online presence has on your perceptions of them as an employer?

P3: I think it's definitely does. At the company I work for I worked on a campaign that was very targeted towards certain types of potential employees. In this case it was graduates so whether it was on Facebook or Instagram or Twitter we weren't just saying you know this is a grad program and this is what it entails, we were really trying to push the benefits of working for the company in general as opposed to focusing too much on the grad program itself. It's not necessarily just one channel we use either we had multiple different platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn.

Researcher: When you say you post benefits of working for your company what elements of working for your company where you're really pushing?

P3: So because it's a construction company I think construction companies in general are only really finding use for social media and that sort of thing now. I suppose with the company I'm working for salary is something we really pushed they didn't give an exact number but the posts mentioned the fact it was very competitive, the fact that we have a gym within the office, that we offer health insurance and discounts in certain shops, we offer extra annual leave and great training and development opportunities. Also, a lot of people that work for the company do masters in surrounding fields and the company can pay for that so these are the elements that we really pushed as we felt that they would really appeal to graduates.

P4: I work in the financial sector and we take a different approach. Most of our o recruiting is directly through agencies. We don't really use any social media devices. I suppose in terms of who were looking for, we'd probably be more niche so it's more direct how we approach people and its more seeking people with the desired qualification and skill set base, rather than pushing the benefits of working for the company as a whole to a mass audience.

Researcher: And would you say that you take a one-fits-all approach to your job advertising or is it more targeted? Would you have a different approach to trying to recruit someone straight out of college then you would to a more experienced professional?

P4: Well I know the hiring seems to be quite varied depending on whether people are coming with experience or straight from college. I think they give quite a distinctive criterion of the person that they're looking for rather than focus solely on the qualification also.

P5: Well just on that point, it sort of depends on what company you do work for. Obviously larger companies would have way bigger recruitment network whereas the company I work for is quite small and we don't really advertise on social media that sort of thing. We work for private clients and they're investors so the way my company would recruit would be more from within the industry through word of mouth from other employers and their managers and references. My company might give another company a reference for a former or current employee and vice versa. That's the way we do it, there's not much online recruitment or anything like that.

Researcher: And are there any companies that any of you can think of that have a strong online presence and do you have any notions about them as an employer?

P5: Paddy Power. The content that they put out on social media has very little to do with what they actually do in betting shops, it's more humorous and it gives off more of a light-hearted impression of the company. To people on the outside it may make the company seem more fun to work for basically so that would obviously have an influence on people to go there rather than a more boring, run of the mill looking company

P1: I think that with that comes the risk that there is still a lot of people won't join that company for those same reasons. I personally know a lot of people from my course in Trinity who didn't want to go to Paddy Power for the very reason that from the outside looking in it looks not serious enough if that makes sense?

Researcher: And could any of you tell me if you've ever considered applying to an organisation only to be put off after seeing their online material?

P5: Well that sort of thing doesn't really matter to me personally. I wouldn't Focus too much on the webpage, like I said earlier I would sort of more be looking at the benefits they offer even if they don't have a website it doesn't really make any impact on either way in terms of whether I'd apply to work for a company or not.
P3: I'd like to say it wouldn't bother me, but I suppose if I clicked on a website and I saw that it looked a bit backward the first connotation wouldn't be very positive. I might follow up with an application and that sort of thing but on first impressions it probably would matter to me. If they have a strong online presence I'd probably paint company in a better light but that's just me personally.

P4: I know coming from college I gave a couple of friends a hand filling out their applications and they involved all sorts of questionnaires and essay-based answers. It was very time-consuming and seemed a little bit excessive. I guess you could see people not filling out the application so that could put people off. That being said I can see that that maybe the company do this to sort out through the vast numbers of applications that they would have got otherwise. They make it more challenging and make someone have to work for wanting to work for the company with this first hurdle for the applicant. They might have such a large pool of people applying and such a limited resource that they feel it necessary but if that's not the goal then I think companies could definitely negatively influence people's perceptions of them by having excessive applications before you've even gotten to the interview stage.

P1: With the company I work for, the fact that were in the software industry there is lot of information online not only on our site, but on various different websites. I don't know if it's the company themselves who puts out the material up but I know that when I was applying and preparing for the interview there was no shortage of material available online whether it was from past applicants or people within the company themselves. That sort of thing may have actually acted as a deterrent for some people because they put up examples of interview questions some of which may seem very difficult so from the outside looking in I suppose that could put certain people off applying for their positions

P3: Like P4 touched on there, when a company asks me to do extensive online applications it's an extreme put off. For me personally - the less clicks the better. If it's a couple of clicks and attaching a resume and a small cover letter I'd be much more inclined then a company whose asking you to do a 45 minute aptitude test before you've even got an interview.

Researcher: Okay so for this part of the focus group I'm just going to show you a two minute video and then I'm going to ask you a few questions about that video.

Researcher shows video to group

Researcher: So, after watching that video can you tell me if you think that's a video like that might positively or negatively influence your perceptions of a company as an employer?

P5: Definitely positive, that video is all about the positive aspects of that company. They didn't want to mention salary, they just spoke about seeing potential in people. The fact that they're committed to you, the benefits they offer etc - so the non-monetary benefits that BDO offer. Another thing they're probably trying to do there is make themselves out to be a lot more fun than the public would normally perceive BDO who are basically an accountancy firm to be.

P1: I think the main thing that I took from that video relating to that company is that they sort of have room for everyone at the company. That really gave the impression that all these people from different backgrounds were nervous at the start but that they never needed to worry about whether they fit in at the company because the company really put across the message that everyone is welcome here regardless of your background. They also push the message that you will be given the room and the tools that you need to grow at the company. You had some people saying they came from a highly technical backgrounds and other people saying they were in in human resource management and that sort of thing and yet they all fit in together into the social structure within the company.

P4: It was a very well put together advert which touched on a lot of things that I think would answer a lot of questions for a lot of people, such as opening yourself up to a wide audience of people. It mentioned a wide variety of benefits: financial, social and in a way they sort of took an egotistical view of themselves in order to make their company out to be something to look forward to working for.

Researcher: P5, you mentioned how they didn't really focus on the monetary aspects and they focused more on the other benefits of working for their organisation such as the social life and that sort of thing. Do you think focusing on these sorts of aspects in such a video is more appealing to you than an employer simply focusing on the financial aspects?

P5: Yes 100%. Obviously salary is important but there are a lot of other aspects in play. Maybe 15 or 20 years ago salary would have been the be all and end-all but now people want other things such as wanting to work in the city centre, they want to work in a fun environment etc. They touched on their office location which they push as a benefit as it is right beside places to go for a drink after work or to go out for lunch which other companies may not really broadcast. This company obviously states that as a major benefit to working for them. I think a lot of people, myself included, want to go into town every day to work.

Researcher: When you were/are considering applying to a company would you actively look out for a video like this or do you think that this is something that you might just stumble upon by chance or from other forms of research you were carrying out about the company?

P1: Generally, I wouldn't pay much attention to a video like that if I'm honest. Maybe that's just me being cynical but I think a lot of these videos will paint the company in the best light

possible and maybe not tell the full story. They're only going to speak about the positives, so I take them with a pinch of salt.

P3: Yes, I think that in today's world there's so much media coming at us all the time, like for example if I'm on Facebook there's so many different videos that auto play and for me to actually give a video 2 minutes attention like that, I'm not 100% sure that I would. However, I think that if I was applying to BDO anyway and the link to the video was there I would definitely watch it and it probably would get excited about the opportunity to work there from watching that video.

P4: I can't say I've ever gone looking for a video like that, but I think it's definitely a good resource for companies to have for people to watch to get an idea of the culture within the company. It's not just important that a company get the people with the right qualifications for the job on offer, organisations also want someone is going to fit the culture of the company.

P5: I think that's a good point that P1 made because any company in the world making a video about themselves to show potential employees are going to only focus on the positive aspects of working for the company and it probably doesn't reflect what really happens at the company.

P1: I think that they managed that side of it well. They didn't really come across as arrogant and I think it had a good energy to it.

P4: I agree it wasn't really narcissistic even though they were only focusing on the positives about themselves. I think it was a really well put together video

Researcher: I suppose that brings me to my next question which is basically would you be inclined to believe a video like that which just pushes the benefits of working for a company or would you feel sceptical that they're not painting full picture?

P1: I haven't watched many videos like that however with that particular video I don't think I take too much of a cynical approach because they really just focused on the energy and social aspect of working for the company, they didn't make any outrageous claims about themselves. That being said I think that usually I wouldn't take much from a video like that.

P4: I think how people see the video will very much depend on who the target audience is for the video. That video if it was geared towards someone who has just graduated or is soon to graduate it will come across very well. People at the company, according to the video, come from a variety of degree backgrounds and there seems to be a place there for everyone. Also I think that people who are out of college a couple of years would also be attracted to a video like that. One girl in the video mentioned that she applied for one job and was actually given a higher-level job with more responsibilities and more pay based on that initial application. So, I think that people who have bit of experience behind them would be attracted to that and the opportunity on offer at that company.

Researcher: And you touched on how it might vary in influence depending on the target market would you say that the video like that would have influenced you personally more as your first left college or now with a bit of experience behind you?

P3: I think that would have influenced me more when I first left college. I did change background and had I seen a video like that from my current employer it might have encouraged me more to actually apply whereas now a couple of years down the line with more experience you don't really care about if there's entry level positions for people from a variety of backgrounds and you're not worried about competence-based roles. So, for some points it might actually matter more and for other points wouldn't matter as much.

Researcher: Now just moving on to the next section, Sean I know you touched on this earlier - do you think that you'd be more attracted to a company that has a strong corporate brand and would you perceive them as a better option in terms of being an employer because of their strong corporate brand?

P3: I suppose when I first left College a corporate brand probably meant a lot to boost your ego more than anything else. You want to say to people all "look at me I work for such and such a company." I think you hunt for that in a way, but the more experience you get you may actually want to experience the smaller companies and you may understand what it means to work with these bigger companies. Sometimes it doesn't have the same working environment and you're just a number to the bigger companies, so your perceptions can change as you gain experience.

P5: To me, corporate brand didn't really matter when I first left College. I just wanted to get any job as quickly as possible and I was so focused on whichever company gave me the highest salary. That was the only thing that mattered to me when I was leaving college. It didn't matter to me if it was Company X or Company Z, I just looked at the money. However, now with more experience a part of me wonders what it would be like to work for some of these bigger companies. You hear about the big corporations like Company X offering benefits like free food and slides in the office, restaurants, laundry services etc - so that sort of thing, the more you hear about it and the the more you get used to your 9-5 at a cubicle desk job, I suppose the idea of working in such an abstract three environment becomes more appealing with time. It's the small things outside of your salary which can make a big difference to your daily life.

P1: I think the corporate brand definitely matters to me you know there's going to be a certain standard. You know you can expect professional standards from the company.

Researcher: So P1 are you saying that you associate their reputation for quality products and quality service with them being a quality employer?

P1: Yes, maybe that's naive but that's genuinely my opinion on it. Then again it could be daunting knowing you're going into a massive company. You don't want to get lost as a number amongst the crowd. I think if you're going into a company like that, not knowing anybody, it might be quite daunting but I suppose that's down to your personality.

Researcher: Just on that, with you being the most recent college leaver - was a strong corporate brand such a draw for you that it may have made you less picky about the favourable traits you seek an employer that you mentioned earlier?

P1: I think I'll always weigh up to pros and cons. I don't think that corporate brand alone is enough to influence me. If you take Company Y for example they have such a strong brand but you just constantly hear that they are nightmare to work for and even though they're a

massive brand I don't think I would have taken a job with them straight out of college just from word of mouth.

P4: On the other side of that the likes of Company X who are notorious for having excellent benefits and being a fun and inspiring place to work due to their portrayal in films and various other media outlets – they're also known to work you incredibly hard. I know when I left college I would certainly have taken a job with an employer like Company X over a similar job in a lesser known company, with a lesser known brand. I guess it comes down to a little bit of naivety and wanting to have the bragging rights of working for someone who everyone seems to consider a great employer.

Researcher: A| few of you have mentioned Company X, what is it about Company X in particular that you have heard that makes it such a great place to work?

P4: A lot of it is word of mouth and a lot of what you see in movies is what builds this opinion of them. I personally have never applied to work in Company X and I currently have no intention of applying to work in Company X, but I know that there's certain stupid aspects like slides in the office and unlimited free food and all of these things that are material and not that important, but still employ a fun culture that supports a lot more than just sitting at a desk and doing your job, which when we're thinking of work life balance and not being stressed then it's actually really appealing. However, it doesn't actually show you the job behind this and I think that with companies like Company X a lot of people, especially graduates and students might naively apply to a job solely for these things and they won't actually look at the job spec itself, they won't actually look at the hours worked either and they may end up in a job that they don't particularly like surrounded by all these fun things.

Researcher: And do you all think that you would be more drawn to a company that has a reputation for innovation, be it innovative products and services or innovative working practices?

P1: I think I want to avoid going into company to just be another clog in the machine. With an innovative company you can be excited about being a forward thinking company. I work for quite a big company and I work for quite an innovative branch of this company. However a guy that I went to college with works in a different, less innovative branch of the same company and we are both only there a couple of months and are having completely different experiences. Mines been a lot better.

Researcher: The next stage of focus group was touched on earlier when you're named out your ideal traits for an employer. So in terms of when you first left college in comparison to now which for some of you is a couple of years later, how much importance do you place on the opportunity to grow and develop within an organisation in terms of the training and development opportunities that they have on offer?

P4: For me it's hugely important. When you're coming out of college you're looking at salary, you just want to make money whereas a couple of years afterwards as you get older you start thinking about various other needs such as a mortgage. There has to be opportunity for growth within a company to get you up to the salary that will help you with that or if you plateau you'll be looking elsewhere

P3: I agree the more training you do in a company your salary will reflect that the more qualified you are so I find training and development really important

P1: Yes and getting back to what initially attracted me to a company I think it comes across as quite arrogant when a company don't promote the organic growth opportunities that they might have within the company and if company doesn't show that it may put me off. It helps if you can see current employees who have climbed the corporate ladder because otherwise I think unless you're quite a demotivated person I don't see how you would want to work for any length of time in a place knowing that you aren't necessarily working towards progressing. I suppose sometimes people would be at a company who offer training development and growth opportunities and may never move up in the company because they may be happy where they are or they may not show the required traits to move up but knowing that the opportunity is there for those who want to go after it is a major attraction.

P2: I agree I think especially when it comes to sort of retaining people outside of salary there needs to be opportunities to go to the next level. I think training and development courses and that sort of thing or major trait for a company to have especially in today's society

P3: Yes I think that you know especially at our age, we'll be coming to the age soon where we might be having kids or might want to get a mortgage and being able to move up in your job is going to be so important. So it's something that you have to look out for now to prepare for the future. Benefits like health and life insurance and decent parental may not seem important right now but it's something people our age need to be looking at rather than just looking at the financials. You may even be willing to take a pay cut to find a job that offers better benefits and I think that'll only become more important as you get older

Researcher: And I know that you just sort of mentioned it there how important it is for companies to promote benefits outside of the monetary aspects of working for them. So how do you feel a company could best promote these benefits to potential employees or future employees?

P3: Well one example I can give from my own personal experience is that the company who I now work for I did a work placement with about six years ago in transition year and I got to see the ins and outs of working at the company. And now before I applied I'm still in touch with the mentor per se that I had for that work placement and he has progressed rapidly through the company and is pushing on six figures now so I don't think I could ask for much better motivation for myself.

Researcher: P3 I know you mentioned earlier the importance of training days and stuff like that and the importance that you place on being able to progress throughout an organisation. Are there any standard training methods that you as recent graduate would like to see from an employer? So would it be something like the training days that you mentioned or would it be the opportunity to have a mentor, the opportunity to shadow someone who is maybe above you in the company in a position you may be able to go for a future or anything else you can think of?

P3: Going from experience I can say that I'm very happy with the way that my company approach training and development. They not only focus on training and development in terms of the individual but they also have opportunities to develop wider transferable skills which are made available to a wide spectrum of people within the organisation. So in that sense you

can sort of manage your own development which I think is really good. I think an organisation can instil a learning culture which not only facilitates growth but actually makes people want to grow.

P4: I think that training and development within an organisation keeps your current employees happy and I think it's worth thinking back to the video you showed earlier and the question you put to us about whether or not that lead us to believe that a certain company was a strong employer. I think that the best way for a company to put their best foot forward as a good employer is to have current employees who are happy, who are developing and who can spread your message at events like careers or graduate fairs. So essentially I think training and development can help an organisation attract employees by using the current employees as examples and ambassadors

Researcher: When you first left College how important was it for you all to get a job relating to what you learnt in college? P3 I know you studied marketing in university how important was it for you to go straight into a marketing position?

P3: Well I wouldn't say it specifically had to be marketing but it definitely had to be something business-related that I could use the skills that I picked up, be that HR or supply chain or something along those lines. When I first left College obviously I was so eager to get working. I still felt it had to be something related to what I studied in college, just I wasn't narrowing my search strictly to marketing.

P5: I think that a lot of people when they leave college find themselves in the position where they're not necessarily using the exact skills that they picked up in college. I mean I've gone into an industry similar to that which trained in in college but I can't say I find myself doing many of the tasks that I trained to do in college in my day-to-day job. I think college gave me a good base to go from but what I find myself doing now in my day-to-day job I never learnt to do in college and I think many people would find themselves in the same position. I personally know a lot of people who began careers in fields that weren't necessarily what they studied in college. I have one friend for example who studied Economics, Politics and Law and since he left College has been working in human resources. I think it's important to have an open mind when you leave college and you might not be doing yourself any favours narrowing your scope too much based specifically on the title of your college course.

P4: Yes I agree I don't think it's too important at all, especially with the system we have in Ireland. I think a lot of young people sort of fall into college courses based on leaving cert points as opposed to what they actually want to do. Its only when they leave college and realise the opportunities available once you have that degree, regardless of the subject that a lot of people feel but they don't necessarily have to work in the field in which they were trained. I personally did a science degree and then did a complete 180 degrees switch when I left college and joined the accounting company I now work for. I think that in college everyone picks up a lot of transferable skills which makes it easier to do that and I think that when people leave college they realise that there are a lot of employers who are willing to not only hire from a broad pool but also show you how you can progress and develop within the company without necessarily having the degree which you think that company would be on the lookout for.

P1: I agree that the theory of a course probably isn't as important as the skills that you have which enable you to complete the course. In my personal experience I did an engineering degree but I remember when I was leaving school I was looking around at the different options and I noticed that a large number of CEOs came from an engineering background and so I sort of went into it with the mind-set that it wasn't final. I knew if I could get through degree, even if I didn't want to work specifically in engineering, that it would give me a good foundation and a good skill set to be successful in a variety of industries. I think that most modern employers share this way of thinking.

Researcher: And I know that you personally went into directly into the field in which you trained, probably more so than anyone else here. Do you think that you would have sacrificed going into the field that you studied for something like a higher salary or better benefits or anything else that would appeal to you?

P1: To be honest yes if the package was right I certainly would have moved into another field and started a job there. I think that my degree gave me problem solving skills and things like that which could have helped me too be successful in a variety of roles across a variety of fields.

Researcher: P4 you touched on this earlier so if we start with you and then maybe we can go around the table, did any of you attend any graduate or careers fairs before, during or after college and did you find them beneficial?

P4: Yes, before my final year of college I thought I had a very specific idea of what I wanted to do and then I went to the graduate fair at the end of third year and realised that jobs in that space are incredibly limited and progression was virtually non-existent and I soon found myself straying away from that. The Graduate Fairs I feel are excellent opportunities for you to go and speak to multiple employers and people from multiple industries that you may not have considered before. I spoke to people who helped me realise that the skills I have are transferable skills that I have picked up in college. The fairs helped me to broaden my horizons. So my personal experience is that these graduate fairs opened me up to possibilities that I hadn't ever considered previously so they helped me greatly and I found them very beneficial.

P5: To me the college fairs are very like the video you showed earlier in that they all sort of speak about the benefits of working for the industry or company and they offer free sweets and stuff like that to entice as many students over so they can talk to them about how great the company is in a similar way to the video. The cynical part of me says that they're all saying the same thing and it's a check list of what they're going to colleges to tell people. So I guess it's beneficial to speak to people who actually work for these companies but I certainly take it with a pinch of salt. The careers fair itself would not make me apply to a company I would certainly do my own research outside of what I'm told at these fairs.

P2: I think that the person the company sends to a careers fair has a very important role. A company can only say so many nice things about themselves and I suppose it comes down to this individual or pair of individuals to make the company seem as attractive as possible to as many people as possible - that's the reason they're there.

Researcher: And do you think that a company's presence at these fares might give them an advantage over a company who had no presence at these fairs when it came to you deciding who you wished to apply for?

P4: Absolutely! If there were two companies offering a similar job with a similar salary in the same location and I've spoken to one of them at a careers fair and I hadn't spoken to one of them in that sort of setting then I think that the company I spoke to would definitely appeal more to me than the other one.

Researcher: And do you feel that the face-to-face one on one conversation with a real person is more influential than something like a careers webpage even if you're getting generally the same information does speaking to an actual employee have more of an influence on you than your own research might?

P5: For me it makes a small difference but I always do my own research and probably rely on that more than speaking to the person who's paid to be at the career fair. If you relied solely on what you heard at careers fairs then you'd leave thinking every company there was the best company in the world to work for.

P4: I think it definitely has more of an influence hearing it from someone's mouth rather than reading it on a website or hearing it from a third party. I think we instinctively want to trust what these people are telling us and it would probably influence me more whether that's my own naivety or not.

Researcher: Would an organisation's charity or humanitarian work or involvement in the community influence your perceptions of them as an employer?

Everyone: No.

P5: I think that sort of thing would make my grandmother more attracted to working for these people or more attracted to me working for these people but I don't think that that's something that's particularly of interest to graduates or soon-to-be graduates, it's certainly not of interest to myself or by the sounds of it anyone else at the table here. I think it might appeal to an older audience but it's not something that's going to influence me in any way about the company as an employer.

P4: I think it's very much depends on the person who is considering applying again. For me personally I don't look out for accountancy firms who do charity work and knowing that a particular company is heavily involved in that sort of thing wouldn't make me any more or less likely to reply to them I simply don't care to be 100% honest.

P3: I agree I certainly don't think that it would influence me applying or not applying for a company. Obviously if you're in a company a few years it might matter to you more personally that you want to be involved in this sort of thing and so if you can do that through work then great! In terms of applying for a job I really wouldn't care about that sort of thing.

Researcher: And how much importance would you place on the actual physical working environment? I know Company X and slides were mentioned earlier but would this sort of thing give an organisation an advantage over an organisation who had the more traditional desks in cubicles and what you'd expect from an office job type of environment?

P5: I don't think the physical environment is as important as the environment and atmosphere in general. I think that when people are at their desk if they are being serious that's fine, they are there to do their job but it's important to have an area where you can go and have a chat or a laugh on your coffee break and that sort of thing. So the physical environment it's important to an extent in that you should have areas where you can do this sort of thing but in my opinion you go to work to work so I don't get too hung up on whether or not the office has bean bags and that sort of thing.

P1: Yes I think there has to be some sort of in formality, whether that's just having a casual Friday every week. Jobs, particularly desk jobs could become mundane pretty quickly. Where I work it's not only young people who enjoy casual Friday's the older people definitely seem to appreciate it too.

P3: I think this sort of thing that you notice once you're already in the door of a company as opposed to when you're actually applying for a job.

Researcher: And in terms of literal office location would one company who offer a similar salary, similar benefits, similar job and a similar commute have an advantage over the other company offering the same thing if they were based in a nicer location?

P5: Yes definitely, my company has offices in town and also offices in Maynooth which is only 20 minute drive from where I live. However I love working in town because you're in the centre of everything and even though my commute is an hour and 20 minutes from door to door I'd choose working in town any day over the closer location. You can meet up with people during the day for lunch or after work if you want to go for a drink it's nice to be at the centre of the action.

P3: Yes and even if both jobs are in the city and one was in a nicer area than another I think the job in the nicer area would definitely be more attractive to me.

P4: Yes like P5 said I mean there's more options for what you can do after work and what you can do on lunch and things like that.

Researcher: And on that one do you think you'll be willing to travel further like P5 for an item location?

P1: I think in order to travel further it would maybe be more to do with security with things like locking up your bike or something if you're working in a particularly bad area. Then I'd be willing to travel further to work in a nicer area but not necessarily for the sake of aesthetics.

Researcher: P2 I know that you're the only one here who's within walking distance of where you work. If you were offered maybe a slightly better salary or other benefits would you be willing to take a job in the city centre for example?

P2: Yes I would. I'd be more than happy to have a longer commute if the right package was in place in terms of salary and benefits.

Researcher: Ok thank you very much everyone for taking part today it's been very informative and very helpful and I will end the focus group there.

Focus Group 2 (Females)

P1 – Participant 1, P2 – Participant 2…

For the sake of anonymity companies have been given pseudonyms throughout the transcription. E.g. Company X, Company Y…

Researcher: Ok thank you everyone for coming today. You've all been briefed on the topic for today's focus group so we will just get straight into it. Can we start by going around the table and I'd like each of you to tell me the traits that you look for in an ideal employer?

P1: I want an employer who appreciates my talents and gives me the opportunity to develop myself.

P2: I think the main thing for me is a good work life balance. The benefits on offer are obviously important as well and the salary that goes with it.

P3: I think the main thing for me would be salary. I also look out for a good social aspect to a company but salary is the main thing. I also look out for a big company name because you feel more secure in the job.

P4: I also look for somewhere with a good salary. The hours are important to me as well as I don't want to be working around the clock. Perks are also something that come into it such as Christmas bonus, healthcare and that sort of thing.

P5: I want an employer that gives me the opportunity to be successful. I also look at the salary and bonus that is on offer. Also having just come out of college I'd be attracted to a company whose management is willing to guide you and help you develop in your first position.

Researcher: And would you say when you first left college you'd have been more or less picky about finding these traits in an employer as opposed to now?

P1: Yes when I first left College I would have been afraid of not being able to find a job so I would definitely have been less picky than I would now.

P2: I agree, when I first left college I just wanted to get a job in the field which I studied in. However, after getting a couple of years' experience you get more of an idea of what you actually want from an employer and you're not afraid to go and try and get that.

P3: I also agree when you first get out of college you just want to get the job somewhat related to what you've done whereas once you have a bit of experience you get an idea of what you want.

P4: I was the exact same when I first got out of college, I just wanted to take any job that I could get. Now I have more of an idea of what I actually want from an employer and what kind of perks and stuff like that, that actually benefit me that I'd be looking for from an employer.

P5: I think that when you first come out of college you will take what you can get. I think it's only after working for a couple of people over a couple of years that you sort of form an idea of what you actually want from an employer.

Researcher: And on the back of that can you think of any standout traits that you would not like to see from a potential employer?

P1: For me the traits I don't want are more to do with the people at the company. You don't want a boss who is constantly on your back.

P2: I'd be the same. It is more about the culture of the company. I don't like the sort of structure where orders just come from the top down and you're expected to follow them. I want to work somewhere where I feel my voice is heard and if a company doesn't facilitate that it would put me off wanting to work for them.

P3: Yes I also agree with that. For me micromanaging is a big no and something that would put me off an employer completely.

P4: You don't want to be treated just as a number who could be replaced at any time. You want them to value you as an employee and as a person.

P5: I agree I want to work somewhere that my voice is heard. I don't want to work for a company where the boss just shouts orders down and everyone follows suit.

Researcher: Do you think you would be more willing to accept these negative aspects of working for a company when you first left College compared to now that most of you have a couple of years' experience?

P1: I would definitely be pickier now. If I knew an employer had those negative traits I would not apply for a job in that company. When I first left college I probably would have done anything just to get my foot on the ladder.

P2: I think it would definitely put me off now, maybe not back then. However, I think that the negative traits we mentioned are something which you could only find out about when you are already working for the company. When you first leave college I think you need to just jump into a job to see how things are run and only then will you get an idea of what you like and don't like.

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P3: I would definitely have been more willing to accept these negative traits when I first left College. You're eager to start working and will pretty much take what you can get.

P5: Having just left College I think that these traits would put me off an employer and potentially stop me applying to work there if I knew these traits existed.

Researcher: Would negative word of mouth alone be enough to turn you off applying for or accepting a job from a potential employer?

P1: No, being a mature student with a lot of work experience I would not let what other people think put me off potentially applying to a company.

P2: I think it depends on who it was and where it's coming from. There's a lot of websites now that will rate employers and if the vast majority of ratings were negative I would be inclined to believe them whereas if it's just one person who has had a bad experience which I've seen in the past, and they decide to tell everyone that they shouldn't work for the company when actually the company is a good place to work and that was a one-off for experience. So you have to be careful who you listen to.

P4: I think you have to do your research. It's also dependent on if it's just one person saying it or if a lot of people are saying it. I think if the majority of people were saying it then it probably would put me off. I think now that I'm in a job if I was looking to move job and I heard a lot of negative things about an employer, I'd be less inclined to go there. However, when I first left college I think I would have been more willing to give it a go anyway regardless of what people say, again because I was just so eager to start working somewhere.

Researcher: Moving on to the next section, I'd like to know if you think that an organisation's online presence has an impact on how you perceive them as an employer?

P1: Being older, I don't think it would have as much of an influence on me as it might the younger generation. You are all so used to IT and that sort of thing and would know exactly where to look. For me, I would be more dependent on word of mouth.

P5: Rather than just reading stuff online I personally like to try and have a conversation with someone from the company. I think you can get more of an idea what to actually expect from an employer rather than just reading what they put on their website or social media feeds.

P2: I think it absolutely does influence how you see them. When I'm going for an interview the first place I will look and research is the company website. You're not going to be able to find someone from every company do you want to apply to have a real conversation with, and for me personally like I say the first thing I do is go to the internet to do my research I suppose it has the potential to influence me either positively or negatively just depending on what exactly it is that they're saying or posting.

P4: Yes, I think it depends on what exactly you're looking at. If you're just looking at their official Facebook page or their website, then obviously they're only going to say positive things so I will take that sort of thing with a pinch of salt. They obviously want to make themselves look great. I think people's reviews of a company would be more accurate and helpful.

P5: Yes I agree with the other girls. I think it's important to get your information from a wide range of sources as opposed to just going to the official website.

Researcher: And if you were to research a company online what platform would you go to first?

P3: Usually the company website. However, with all the social media we have at our disposal we can use Facebook and Twitter pages to see what people are actually saying about the company. So whilst I tend to go to the official website, I think social media platforms may give a more accurate idea of how the company operates.

P4: Yes, if I'm applying to a job I go to the company website first to get a feel for what they are like and what they do. Personally, I don't think I would think to go on their Facebook page

P2: Yes, I don't think I would look far outside their website when I'm initially applying for a job. However, if I was offered a position and considering taking it then I think would be more likely to use that other platforms like Facebook etc to try and grasp a better idea what people actually think of the company.

P1: I know if I'm preparing for an interview and need to get research done then I would go to the company website. I use it more as interview preparation than research before I was actually offered an interview at the company. Still in my industry, with the years' experience I have it's usually not difficult to find someone who you can speak to who will have an idea about what it's like to work in difference companies or offices and that would still be my go to research method. That being said I think when preparing for an interview if everyone goes to the company website everyone is going to be saying the same thing and at an interview as we know you want to stand out.

P3: I agree if you're going solely off what they say on the website then you run the risk of saying the same thing as everyone else.

Researcher: Can any of you think of a company that has a strong online presence and have you got any notions about them as an employer?

P4: I think of Company X or eBay or those sorts of places.

P2: Yes, I think they're the ones that stand out - you sort of put them up on a pedestal.

P5: Yes, you're always hearing and a reading about how great they are to work for and that they have all these extra things for employees that other employers don't have. That's probably them themselves putting a lot of that out there. I think that you will always have to consider working for them if you're offered to as opposed to another company. You know that they're great supposedly to work for and also their success as a company gives you that extra security where don't feel like you could lose your job.

P2: I agree, I think with companies like that as well it's great to have on your CV so that's another aspect of it.

P1: Also because those companies are so global you might be able to transfer internally and travel while you're working which I know is a very attractive prospect to a lot of people.

Researcher: We will move on to that in more detail in a moment. Just to finish up on the online aspect of it can any of you think of a time when you may have been considering applying to a company only to be put off applying after looking at their online resources?

P5: Yes, only the other week I was applying for a job in administration for a construction company. After speaking to someone from the company they told me where to go online and look at the resources to try and get a better understanding of what the job and the company entails. After looking at the website I was more confused than I was before and that was a bit of a put off for me. They didn't really sell themselves to me as a company through their website which made me less inclined to actually go for the interview.

Researcher: Ok so for the next part of the focus group I'm going to show you a 2 minute video and then I'm going to ask you a couple of questions about the video.

Researcher Shows Video

Researcher: Ok so just after watching that video if we go around the table could you all tell me if you feel that a video like that could influence your perceptions of a company as a potential employer?

P1: Yes I do. They gave a very positive overview and it sounded like it was very well balanced. They seem to give plenty of opportunity for people progressing their roles and that sort of thing. They also had the health and well-being side of it which is pushed so much in so many companies now because it's so important to people these days. It sounded really good to me from the video.

P2: Well, I mean the video looked amazing, but I think you have to be sceptical because this is a video that they have produced and it's their employees and they've probably been told what to say and just sell the company in a positive light. It looks amazing and sounds great and mentions a lot of the things that I would be looking for in an employer, but personally, I would definitely take it with a pinch of salt and be a bit sceptical about it.

P4: I feel that a video like that would definitely encourage me to go and apply for that company. It sounds really good and they put in certain things that I personally would be looking for in an employer such as the social aspect of it and the fact that you can progress, and I think they made some other good points like that that would draw you in.

P5: I think they're really focused on diversity and diversity of opinion among employees and to me that's a very attractive prospect. I think that diversity really allows the company and its people to grow to their full potential. As P2 said I would take it with a pinch of salt since they're all speaking about their own company, they're not going to speak badly on a promotional video about their company. However, they all seem genuine in how they express their opinions and they all seemed genuinely happy to work there. It seems like a really open environment.

P4: I understand what the girls are saying. Their definitely is that aspect where you think the company has produced this video so obviously they're only going to say positive things.

P2: Well yes, but at the same time they can't really lie about what they say. They might be able to promote themselves but they couldn't blatantly lie and get away with it. Especially with things they mentioned like they support women going out on maternity leave and stuff like that. These are huge benefits and they pointed to them so they stick in your mind.

P3: They seem to know what to target in terms of what they pushed as the main benefits of working for them. One of the people in the video left for 6 years and then came back and she's still seems very positive about the company, so I think that sort of aspect of it makes you more inclined to believe it.

P4: Yes I think it's definitely more believable and influential when you're hearing about people's stories and their actual experience there as opposed to just having one person from the company tell you about all these things.

P3: Yes, and like P2 said they can't really lie in those videos. Obviously they can jazz themselves up but they can't blatantly tell lies.

Researcher: And when you're applying to a company or looking for a job, would you ever think of going on a website like YouTube and actively searching for a video like this about a company that you're considering, or is it something that you might just come across when on their website or something along those lines?

P4: I think it's something I would just come across when on their website or something like that. It's not something I would think to go looking for. You wouldn't assume that every company has one.

P2: With that, I think that with the effort that the company obviously put into the video that if you're researching a company it won't take long for you to come across the video because I'm sure they would have it available across a few platforms. I definitely wouldn't go to YouTube to research a company because I wouldn't think of it, but I'd like to think if there is a video like this out there it's fairly easy to stumble upon if you're researching the company online in terms of being an employer.

Researcher: And again just gone back to when you were first leaving college in comparison with now, having worked for a couple of years - do you think a video like that would have influenced you more when you were just leaving college or now that some of you have some experience behind you?

P1: Definitely when I first left College. You're literally seeking excitement. The last thing you want when you leave college is a boring job and this one looks quite exciting from the video.

P4: I think that with that particular video, the points that they made would have more of an influence on me now as opposed to back when I first left College. Some of the things they mentioned I know personally I don't have in my job now and I would like to, and it is something that I have thought about. Some of the stuff they mentioned are things I thought that I would like to get from a future job so that video in particular would definitely draw me in more now than a word back then.

P2: I take a different view. I think when I was first leaving college I probably would have been more gullible back then and thought "wow this looks great." I can see myself jumping into applying to somewhere like this after watching such a video whereas now that you have a taste of the real world you're going to be more sceptical naturally.

P1: Yes, now that you've seen the reality of it you might be less inclined to believe a video like that.

P3: Yes, I definitely be questioning forever and not that was actually the way it was going to be at the company much more now than I would back then because back then I simply didn't know how businesses work.

Researcher: So would you say that an organisation could make videos like that tailored towards the demographic that they're hoping to attract and mention different benefits depending on their target market?

P4: Definitely. I think that video in particular was targeted towards someone my age because of the benefits that they offered and spoke about. They definitely knew what to say, they knew what people are looking for and I think that the people who would find these things attractive would fit my age range and position. They spoke about maternity leave and that sort of thing and you wouldn't think of stuff like that when you were coming out of college. I think they could definitely tailor that video and by pushing different benefits appeal to new graduates.

P1: I think new graduates should be given some credit as opposed to just assuming that they would be gullible and buy into this straight away. They probably have experience of this when they were choosing what college to go to and the different colleges were making similar videos.

Researcher: P5 you are the most recent College graduate here. Just listening to P4 mentioning she's a bit older now and she would be listening out for stuff like the maternity leave and parental leave a company offer, I'm interested to hear if the same sorts of things appeal to you?

P5: No actually I think just leaving college it's a bit early for me to be thinking about maternity leave and that sort of thing. I'd be more interested in hearing about the social aspect of working for an organisation and holiday allotments and salary and that sort of thing. Those mentioning maternity leave would frankly go in one ear and out the other at this stage of my life to be honest.

P1: It's similar to thinking about your pension when you first you start working, nobody does. I think as you get older these things become more important to you as you start planning for your future. At this stage of my life pension scheme would be the first thing I would look at from a potential new employer.

Researcher: Now just moving on to the next section of the focus group. We've already discussed companies like Company X who have a big name and their influence. So, would you say that you would be influenced by a company's corporate brand in terms of your perceptions of them as an employer and would you choose one company over another based on their stronger corporate brand?

P2: Yes I definitely would favoured a stronger corporate brand because you hurt so much more about them. It's sort of been tried and tested and you would be much less apprehensive about job security and that sort of thing. With smaller companies you have less of an idea at the direction in which the company will go. Also with the bigger companies, because they employ so many people from my experience you've often heard a thing or two on the Grapevine about what they like as an employer so you feel as if there is less risk involved.

P4: I feel the same. At this point I would be attracted to a stronger corporate brand because at my age you have to think more about job security and your future. You hear stories about people in smaller organisations being let go all the time. I think when you first leave college you don't think about these things.

P2: Then again you also hear about these large organisations who because of their big name often offer lower salaries and less benefits than the smaller companies so there is also that side of it to consider. They feel they can get people nearly on name alone so they don't have to be as competitive with what they actually pay. You hear of people going to these organisations for the experience and then leaving after a few years for a job with double the salary in a smaller company, doing the same job.

P1: Yes I agree, and this opens the door to abuse of power where these larger organisations don't want to offer permanent contracts, so they're all on temporary contracts and have no job security. As the most mature person here I can say from experience that as you get older that sort of thing gets a lot more worrying than when you're younger.

Researcher: And for those of you who said that you would choose the stronger corporate brand over the smaller company - would you be less picky about finding the positive traits or avoiding the negative traits that you mentioned earlier in order to work for a company with a very strong corporate brand?

P4: It's not that I think I would be less picky, it's more that I feel with the big corporations with strong corporate brands that I likely would have heard if they are particularly bad employer, whereas with a smaller company you're much less likely to know. With a big company, especially in Ireland, you're nearly sure to know someone who knows someone who has worked there and you can get an idea of what it's like but with a smaller company you won't really know until you start working there.

Researcher: And would you say that a job's perceived prestige is directly linked to the company's corporate brand?

P1: I actually have sort of personal experience with this one. I have a colleague whose husband works in marketing. He recently changed jobs. It's the same job but instead of working for Brown Thomas he's now working for Dunnes Stores and immediately even within her family there was kind of a negative opinion of it even though the job he's doing is the same level, they associate the brand with the job prestige as you say.

Researcher: Do you think that you would be more attracted to a company that has a reputation for innovation, be it innovative products and services or innovative working practices?

P4: Definitely in terms of working practices. Some companies operate using old systems and ways of doing things. I'd definitely be attracted to an organisation that is constantly trying to improve the way they work and get with the times.

P3: And it is such a competitive jobs market nowadays. So, when you hear of these companies who offer these great work spaces and these great packages you're less inclined to accept the job with a monotonous, old fashioned approach to how they work. I think as the jobs market gets even more competitive these organisations are trying to outdo each other which gives employees more choice.

P5: With that, companies can often say they're forward-thinking and a great place to work but again you won't know the reality of it until you actually work there.

Researcher: How much importance do you place on an organisation offering you opportunity to grow, train and develop within the organisation?

P1: Well now that I've gone to the trouble of doing a masters, I would be very appreciative of that. After taking that initiative myself, I would definitely be looking for a company who are eager to further develop my skills and reward you for showing that initiative and bettering yourself. And I suppose with internal training programs and stuff like that, the more that you develop the more your pay scale is going to reflect that. And again to bring up the pension at this point in my life that's quite an important thing to me.

P2: Even aside from the monetary aspect I think that everyone wants to improve. You don't want to go stale in your position so mentally you want the opportunity to develop yourself. It's a huge trait for a company to have if they want to support you to go and better yourself and with that you hope that when you complete a training program you'll be rewarded for it.

P4: That's also a massive thing for me. In the company I am in at the moment there is no room for progression. Well the only way you can progress is to go to team lead and those jobs rarely if ever come about. Even as we passed the exams we're required to do everyone is still doing the same job, so a lot of people are actually leaving because of that. You need to be able to progress, nobody wants to sit in the same job for years on end, knowing there is no room to grow.

P3: Yes, I think the lack of training in organisations will often force people to go and get their own training and once they have it up and leave the company who didn't assist them when they needed it.

Researcher: And just on that note P4 do you think that it's more the fact that you're sitting in the same job and getting bored or if that company was to for example offer you a 5 or 10% increase per annum would you be less inclined to want to leave?

P4: Yes, it would certainly help because salary is a big thing. I think people would definitely be more inclined to stay if they were getting salary increases.

Researcher: And can any of you think of any standout training methods that you want to see from an employer such as mentoring or training days or shadowing other higher-level employees or anything else you can think of?

P3: At the moment we're doing training days in the company where you get put with someone that you don't really know and it's all about communication skills. Everyone finds it great because it's fun and it's interactive and they take you away from work for the day to do it so I think everyone appreciates the effort that goes into it, along with the opportunity to enhance skills that they can actually use in their day-to-day job. I think trying to make training and development as fun as possible when it's not leading to an actual qualification is the best way to go, because you avoid people getting bored and losing interest.

P2: I think that's an important point to make that training should take place during working hours. I've seen in the past where people are expected to do their training in their own time and I think that just frustrates people and makes them not want to do it, which sort of defeats the whole purpose because you have to want to learn to be able to learn. Another issue that arises is when staff have to pay for their own training even though it's going to directly benefit the company. I think it's vital in situations like that, that a company shows they support their staff and I think it's an important trait to have if you're looking at how to present yourself as a good employer, either to pay for or give you the time back for doing that training. I know where I work - for a long time nobody really did anything about bettering themselves but we introduced a scheme where we pay for the deposits for people's training courses and stuff like that and even though it was taken back on a monthly basis, people still appreciated that initial faith and support and now there is sort of a learning culture embedded in our company. I think because of this our people are better and our centre and services are running a lot better, as people continually get new ideas and bring them back to the centre and train each other. We're avoiding the staleness that can come about from nobody trying to develop themselves.

Researcher: And P1 you're the highest ranked person here as an assistant director, do you have much to do with organising training for staff and what do you feel is the best way to approach it in terms of new staff coming in appreciating what you can offer?

P1: Yes, well with students coming through in particular there's a lot of focus on developing them as much as we can. We have five new graduates coming on in September and they will initially go through an induction. We also have what we call a professional development pathway which maps out their development for them. We also sponsor Masters Programs and that sort of thing if that's what people want to do. So, there is a lot there for these young people coming through. One thing I will say that I don't necessarily like is something that P2 touched on which is that where traditionally we would have used classroom-based training, these training courses are sort of being moved to online where staff are being told to do them in their own time because you will not get time at work to do it. One mandatory training course that's coming out now is actually 33 hours of online learning, which staff are expected to do in their own time and I don't think this is very appealing to them. So, as an organisation there are positives and negatives to the training and development methods used. From our perspective it would be very advantageous for staff to complete that particular 33-hour program however the question arises whether or not they will want to do it and how much will they actually put into it in their own time.

Researcher: And do you think that having all of these training and development opportunities available help you to attract graduates?

P1: Yes, I certainly do. However, I always think that maybe they don't consider that these courses may actually put them out and not be during work time .With the likes of that

mandatory course everyone eventually falls in line because they have to do it, but I worry about going forward whether these people will have much of an interest in trying to develop themselves if they're having negative experiences such as that.

Researcher: And in terms of when you all left college initially - was it vitally important to you to get a job in what you studied or would something like a higher salary or better benefits package have persuaded you to maybe work in a different industry which you were not trained in?

P4: When I first came out of college I was offered a permanent job somewhere that my friend was working. It wasn't directly related to what I have studied for my degree, but I just wanted a permanent job, so I took what was offered. Now it might be different but back then I just wanted to start working.

Researcher: And P5 I know that you just finished your psychology degree. If you are offered more money to work in something other than psychology would you be tempted to take it or are you only interested in taking a job where you can use what you learnt from your degree?

P5: Obviously I would weigh up the pros and cons of each contract but right now I feel as if I want to get straight into a position which will give me some relevant experience towards working as a clinical psychologist in future. I would rather work for a lower salary now if it meant gaining experience that will help me get to where I want to be in the future.

Researcher: So, the next section then just to talk about careers and graduate fairs. Did any of you attend these fares before, during, or after college and did you find them beneficial?

P4: Yes, I can remember attending a few. I didn't find them very beneficial. It was just lots of different stands where they call you over and tell you how great the company was, but you know they're only trying to sell you on the positives and not telling you the full story.

P2: I think that if the grad fair is tailored towards a specific industry it may be more beneficial. I remember going to a couple where the vast majority of stands had nothing to do with what I was studying so you're just sort of walking around aimlessly. If you know exactly what industry you want to work in and they tailor a careers fair towards graduates who want to go into that specific industry, and only have companies who are offering jobs in that industry, I think it would be a lot more beneficial.

P1: I agree that if they're industry-specific they can be very beneficial. Also, if you want to work abroad I think they're a great idea as you can get contacts that will make finding a job in your particular field a lot easier.

P5: I agree they should be tailored to the industry specific and then they could be very beneficial. However, if you don't know exactly what you want to do I don't think you get much from the experience.

Researcher: And do you think that if you were to go to these events knowing exactly what you want to work at - would one organisation's presence at these events give them an advantage over an organisation who aren't attending these events when it came to where you wanted to work or apply to work?

P4: Yes, I think if I went and spoke to someone and I liked what they were telling me I would definitely be inclined to apply to them first rather than another company.

P1: Yes, I think it's definitely beneficial to be able to put a face to the company.

P2: I agree, it's sort of stays in the mind when you've met someone, and you can think back and say "yes I met him he was very friendly" and it would make you more inclined to apply to that company.

Researcher: So, would you say that the human aspect of speaking to someone one on one, even with the same information, has more of an influence than reading that information off for example a company website?

Everyone: Yes.

P3: I think it also helps because you might get more from the experience because any questions that you have could be answered on the spot as opposed to looking for answers online which you may or may not find. I think face-to-face is hugely beneficial.

Researcher: Would an organisation's level of community involvement or charity or humanitarian work influence your perceptions of them as an employer?

P4: For me I think it would. It would be nice to know that your employer isn't just about the bottom line and that they like to give back too.

P1: I also think that if a company is involved in the community rather than just being in the community I will tend to look at them more favourably.

P2: I don't think it would be a deciding Factor but it would give off positive connotations about the company.

Researcher: And do you think that more abstract working environment such as those we mentioned earlier like at Company X would have appealed to you more as a new graduate or now?

P3: I think definitely as a new graduate that sort of thing would have appealed to me a lot. You think of beanbags instead of desks, after work parties and stuff like that and as a new graduate it will be really appealing whereas now almost 2 years down the line with some experience of working in the real world, I think it would be less of an attraction for me.

P5: I think office layout is a huge thing. It's been shown to have a significant impact on your mental state and the actual work that you produce.

P2: I think the fact that a company would go to the efforts to try and accommodate people by having a more liveable working environment is a trait in itself and it shows that they care about the employees, because it's no secret that people aren't in love with the mundane office environment we are all used to.

Researcher: And just to finish. In terms of location, would an organisation with an office in a nicer location have an advantage over a company in a less desirable location if the packages on offer were similar and the commute was a similar distance?

Everyone: Yes.

P4: Definitely, I work in the city centre and this is a big bonus of working for the company I work for. It's so easy to get to and there's so much around. I think working in the city is a big attraction for a lot of people.

Researcher: Ok everyone well that is the end of the focus group. Thank you all very much for coming it's been very informative.
(Setia, 2016) (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010)

(Given, 2008) (Krueger & Casey, 2014) (Eaton, 2017) (Graue, 2015) (Flick, 2013)

(Rosenthal, 2016) (Kvale, 1996) (Braun, et al., 2014) (Haggarty, 2009)