

St. Petersburg University  
Graduate School of Management  
Master in Management Program

**IMPACT OF EMPLOYER ATTRACTIVENESS AND CORPORATE IMAGE ON  
APPLICATION INTENTIONS OF RUSSIAN YOUNG SPECIALISTS**

Master's thesis by the 2nd year student Violetta Dobrobaba  
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**ЗАЯВЛЕНИЕ О САМОСТОЯТЕЛЬНОМ ХАРАКТЕРЕ ВЫПОЛНЕНИЯ  
ВЫПУСКНОЙ КВАЛИФИКАЦИОННОЙ РАБОТЫ**

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Мне известно содержание п. 9.7.1 Правил обучения по основным образовательным программам высшего и среднего профессионального образования в СПбГУ о том, что «ВКР выполняется индивидуально каждым студентом под руководством назначенного ему научного руководителя», и п. 51 Устава федерального государственного бюджетного образовательного учреждения высшего образования «Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет» о том, что «студент подлежит отчислению из Санкт-Петербургского университета за представление курсовой или выпускной квалификационной работы, выполненной другим лицом (лицами)».

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## ABSTRACT

Master Student's Name	Dobrobaba Violetta Ilinichna
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Master Thesis Title	Impact of Employer Attractiveness and Corporate Image on Application Intentions of Russian Young Specialists
Description of the goal, tasks and main results the research	<p>Goal: to explore the effects of employer attractiveness on applicants' intentions.</p> <p>Objectives:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. To analyze the theoretical background of the concepts "employer attractiveness" and "corporate image».</li><li>2. To conduct in-depth interviews with HR and Corporate Affairs managers to explore recruitment techniques, employer branding and corporate image management practices.</li><li>3. To conduct a survey among young professionals to analyze their perception of employer attractiveness and corporate image of the companies under study.</li><li>4. To investigate the mediating role of corporate image on the relationship between employer attractiveness and application intentions.</li><li>5. To provide recommendations for HR managers at large Russian audit and consulting firms on how to improve recruitment practices for attracting young professionals.</li></ol> <p>Results:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Employer attractiveness has a strong positive effect on applicants' intention to respond to a vacancy or accept a job offer</li><li>2. Employer attractiveness has a strong positive impact on the corporate image</li><li>3. Corporate image doesn't positively mediate the relationship between employer attractiveness and the application intentions of young specialists</li></ol>
Keywords	Employer attractiveness, employer brand, corporate image, young specialists, intention to apply for a job, application intention

## АННОТАЦИЯ

Автор	Добробаба Виолетта Ильинична
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Название ВКР	Влияние привлекательности работодателя и корпоративного имиджа на намерение молодых специалистов устроиться на работу
Описание цели, задач и основных результатов исследования	<p>Цель работы - изучить влияние привлекательности работодателя на намерения соискателей.</p> <p>Задачи:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Проанализировать теоретические предпосылки понятий "привлекательность работодателя" и "корпоративный имидж".</li><li>2. Провести глубинные интервью с менеджерами по персоналу и корпоративным вопросам с целью изучения методов подбора персонала, брендинга работодателя и практики управления корпоративным имиджем.</li><li>3. Провести опрос среди молодых специалистов для анализа их восприятия привлекательности работодателя и корпоративного имиджа исследуемых компаний.</li><li>4. Исследовать посредническую роль корпоративного имиджа на взаимосвязь между привлекательностью работодателя и намерениями соискателей.</li><li>5. Дать рекомендации HR-менеджерам крупных российских аудиторских и консалтинговых компаний по улучшению практики подбора персонала для привлечения молодых специалистов.</li></ol> <p>Результаты:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Привлекательность работодателя оказывает сильное положительное влияние на намерение соискателей откликнуться на вакансию или принять предложение о работе</li><li>2. Привлекательность работодателя оказывает сильное положительное влияние на корпоративный имидж</li><li>3. Корпоративный имидж не оказывает положительного опосредованного влияния на взаимосвязь между привлекательностью работодателя и намерениями молодых специалистов откликнуться на вакансию или принять предложение о работе</li></ol>

Ключевые слова	Привлекательность работодателя, бренд работодателя, корпоративный имидж, молодые специалисты, намерение найти работу, намерение устроиться на работу
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## INTRODUCTION

In the current business landscape characterized by uncertainty, instability, and intense competition, companies are increasingly recognizing the importance of human resources as a valuable intangible asset. Human resources cannot be easily replicated by competitors, providing companies with a significant competitive advantage (Mosley, 2007)). However, attracting and retaining the right personnel poses challenges and requires substantial time and effort. In recent years, the concept of employer brand has gained prominence in both academic and business literature as a means for companies to create a favorable image in the labor market and effectively attract and retain qualified employees (Brown et al., 2003; Gomes, Neves, 2011).

Building an employer brand is a gradual process that involves everyday work on how a company presents itself to the public and which promises it gives to jobseekers. Companies that invest in their employer brand broadcast its mission, philosophy and corporate culture to applicants, which ultimately allows you to form a staff who share the company's values. In turn, employer attractiveness is represented by the range of unique benefits that a company offers to candidates, making them an attractive choice and motivating applicants to respond to job openings (P. Banerjee, 2020).

While numerous studies have demonstrated the positive impact of the employer brand on application intentions (Collins and Stevens, 2002), there is still much to be understood about the factors that contribute to employer attractiveness and drive job responses. On one hand, some research suggests that employer attractiveness is primarily influenced by factors such as organizational culture, reputation, and opportunities for growth and development (Collins and Stevens, 2002; Lievens, 2016). On the other hand, there is a contradiction in the literature regarding the specific factors that contribute to employer attractiveness. Some studies argue that tangible benefits such as compensation and benefits packages, work-life balance, and job security play a significant role in attracting job seekers (Sivertzen et al., 2013; Lievens, 2016). Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the underlying factors that contribute to employer attractiveness and the mechanisms through which they influence job responses is yet to be achieved.

From another perspective, corporate image has been identified by several authors as a factor in attracting applicants (Silva, Dias, 2022, Sivertzen et al., 2013). Corporate image refers to the general perception of the company from the viewpoint of various stakeholders. It can

serve as a source of long-term competitive advantage, even in human resource management. Some authors suggest that corporate image directly affects job seekers' attraction (Lemmink et al., 2003; Kissel, Buttgen, 2015), while others argue that it primarily influences the employer brand, which subsequently positively affects job seekers (Edwards (2010; Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). As a result, the literature lacks a clear consensus on how corporate image precisely influences job seekers' decisions and its role in the relationship between employer attractiveness and application intentions.

Moreover, changing demographics and an increase in employees of a younger generation are forcing enterprises to reassess their value propositions and evaluate how effective they are compared to competitors in terms of their attractiveness, corporate reputation, and satisfaction of expectations of target job seekers. Therefore, many employers experience difficulties in attracting young specialists to work, because it is not clear to companies which factors young people value at work most of all. Some researchers believe that young people are attracted to organizations that offer opportunities for learning, growth, and development (Berthon, Ewing, Hah, 2005), while other researchers' work notes that students and recent graduates look at factors such as company culture, work-life balance, and job security (Magun, Rudnev, 2012). Hence, the incentives that attract young professionals to apply for a job in a particular company are not obvious in the literature.

Consequently, there is a contradiction between the growing need in modern companies to employ young professionals and the incompleteness of scientific research on how effective tools for attracting job seekers, such as employer attractiveness and corporate image, affect young professionals. This paper will attempt to resolve this contradiction by examining the impact of employer attractiveness and corporate image on the application intentions of young specialists.

In order to explore this contradiction, we decided to focus on Knowledge Intensive Firms (KIFs) for several reasons. KIFs rely on intellectual capital as the basis of their competitiveness, making them actively compete for employees, including young professionals who possess fresh knowledge and skills. One of the most significant segments of KIFs is professional services firms, which offer specialized expertise and services to clients. This segment includes companies such as audit and consulting firms, which actively interact with students and recent graduates because they play an important role in their workforce. These businesses are interesting to study due to their dependence on employee experience and



professionalism, as well as their hiring of a large number of employees at the same time of year, reflecting the highly competitive nature of the workforce in the audit and consulting services sector. These elements force businesses to "compete for talent" by purposefully investing in promoting the employer brand, corporate image, and using multiple communication channels with young professionals with an economic and management education.

In this research paper we will focus on two large Russian audit companies – Technology of Trust and Kept. The selection of these companies was based on several factors. Firstly, both companies have achieved high positions in the 2022 Employer Rating by FutureToday, which surveyed students of target educational specialties. This demonstrates their popularity and attractiveness among potential employees, making them relevant for our study. Secondly, we are interested in exploring how the unprecedented events of 2022 have impacted these companies' corporate image and their employer attractiveness. Lastly, the decision to choose these companies was also influenced by their willingness to participate in the study and their expressed interest in the research findings.

**The goal of the work** is to explore the effects of employer attractiveness on applicants' intentions.

**Objectives:**

1. To analyze the theoretical background of the concepts "employer attractiveness" and "corporate image».
2. To conduct in-depth interviews with HR and Corporate Affairs managers to explore recruitment techniques, employer branding and corporate image management practices.
3. To conduct a survey among young professionals to analyze their perception of employer attractiveness and corporate image of the companies under study.
4. To investigate the mediating role of corporate image on the relationship between employer attractiveness and application intentions.
5. To provide recommendations for HR managers at large Russian audit and consulting firms on how to improve recruitment practices for attracting young professionals.

**Research question:** What are the effects of employer attractiveness on applicants' intention and corporate image?

**Object of the research:** Russian young specialists.

**Subject of the research:** Russian young specialists' perception of the employer attractiveness and the corporate image of Kept and Technology of Trust.

This study will contribute theoretically to the literature on employer image and corporate image and to the field of human resource management, specifically the recruiting and selection procedures. Russian audit and consulting firms will be able to enhance their employer branding and recruiting tactics as well as their corporate image by comprehending the mechanism by which young specialists' perception of a company affects the choice of employer.

This master's thesis is organized into three chapters. Chapter 1 offers an in-depth analysis of the studied concepts based on the literature review, formulates hypotheses, and presents the research model. Chapter 2 provides a detailed description of the research context, including the research methods employed and how the collected information will be processed. Chapter 3 focuses on the interpretation of the results, highlights the study's limitations, and demonstrates the theoretical and practical value of the work.

## **CHAPTER 1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND ON EMPLOYER ATTRACTIVENESS AND CORPORATE IMAGE**

This chapter will conduct an in-depth analysis of existing academic sources on the concepts under study, namely employer attractiveness and corporate image. The literature review will define the role of these concepts in the organization, compare them with relative ones, and characterize the main theoretical frameworks related to the research topic. In addition, this paragraph will formulate the hypotheses of the study and present the research model.

### **1.1. Employer attractiveness as a factor in increasing its competitiveness on labor market**

Within the framework of the topic of this work, of particular interest is the definition of the essence of the concept of "attractiveness of the employer", which is based on the concepts of brand identity, reputation, image and employer brand. Let's consider each of the presented concepts in more detail and define their common features and differences.

To begin with, the concept of brand identity and employer brand is rooted in the broader term "brand," which has diverse definitions in academic literature. Generally, it refers to a combination of tangible and intangible characteristics that set apart a product, service, or company from its competitors, establishing a distinctive identity in consumers' minds. Keller (2008)<sup>1</sup> provides a definition of brand as "a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of other sellers." Keller argues that brands offer functional and emotional benefits to consumers and can create loyalty and preference. The concept of brand is multi-dimensional and complex, and its definition varies depending on the specific context.

Brand identity is the basis on which image and reputation are formed. It consists in the visual and verbal expression of the meaning and characteristics of the brand. Brand identity in employer studies is primarily represented by the organization's beliefs, expressed in the general atmosphere, style and attitude towards staff and applicants. Based on the employer brand identity, the job seeker can infer whether the organization is energetic, caring, breakthrough,

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<sup>1</sup> K.L. Keller, Strategic Brand Management: Building, Measuring and Managing Brand Equity. 3rd Edition, Pearson Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River. 2008.

stable, etc. Brand identity is important in building an employer's reputation and is a cognitive assessment of whether job seekers know about the organization.<sup>2</sup>

Reputation is a global, time-stable evaluative judgment about an organization that is shared by much of society.<sup>3</sup> Employer reputation represents an applicant's beliefs about an organization that are shaped by society's emotional assessment of the organization as an employer.<sup>4</sup>

Interest in studying employee perceptions of employer image emerged in the 1990s during the study of recruitment. The first idea behind this interest was to investigate the impact of employer image perceptions on job seekers' willingness to respond to a position. In 2001, M. Cable, and B. Turban published an article that contributed to the development of research aimed at understanding how job seekers relate to employers.<sup>5</sup>

Consider the approaches of various authors to the definition of the concept of "employer image".

According to A.Ya. Kibanova and I.B. Durakova, the employer's image is a subjective, collective image of an organization in the labor market, which is based on emotions.<sup>6</sup>

K.S. Akamova explains this concept as an emotionally colored image of the company in the labor market for employees, formed on the basis of the information broadcast by the organization. This image is able to motivate employees and job seekers to act in relation to the organization.<sup>7</sup>

M.V. Berdinskikh defines the image of the employer as an intangible asset of the organization. In his opinion, the image of the employer has an important place in the assessment of the place of work by employees and applicants.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> F. Lievens, Employer Image and Employer Branding: What We Know and What We Need to Know // Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior. 3. 2016. P. 407-437

<sup>3</sup> F. Lievens, Employer Image and Employer Branding: What We Know and What We Need to Know // Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior. 3. 2016. P. 407-437

<sup>4</sup> Kang Yang Trevor Yu, Hunter Morgan Davis, Integrating job search behavior into the study of job seekers' employer knowledge and organizational attraction // The International Journal of Human Resource Management, 30:9. 2019. P. 1448-1476

<sup>5</sup> F. Lievens, Employer Image and Employer Branding: What We Know and What We Need to Know // Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior. 3. 2016. P. 407-437

<sup>6</sup> A.Yu. Kibanov, I.B. Durakova, Organizational personnel management: strategy, marketing, internationalization: Proc. allowance. // M.: INFRA-M. 2009. P. 301

<sup>7</sup> N.L. Ivanova, D.A. Moshchinskaya, Peculiarities of perception of HR-brand by employees with different characteristics of social identity // Organizational Psychology. 2017. V. 7. No. 3. P. 37-50.

<sup>8</sup> M.V. Berdinsky, Formation of the image of the organization: a sociological analysis of abstract dissertation .... candidate of social sciences: 22.00.04 / Berdinsky, Maria Viktorovna. 2013. P. 26 — Access mode — URL:

According to Kristin Backhaus and Surinder Tikoo, the image of the employer is a set of ideas fixed in the memory of the staff about the employer, its functional (wages, benefits, vacation allowances) and symbolic (prestige of the firm) advantages.<sup>9</sup>

Employer image in a study by Kang Yang Trevor Yu and Hunter Morgan Davis is defined as a job seeker's perception of employer quality. Employer image, according to these authors, is built on three characteristics: organizational attributes (values and culture), the work environment of the organization (e.g., type of work), and its personnel.<sup>10</sup>

The process of forming the employer's image can be understood as a complex of interrelated activities, for the implementation of which elements of marketing communications and information transmission channels are used. The choice of communication channels depends on the specifics of the target audience to which the information is directed.

It should be noted that the determining factor in forming a positive image of the company is its high reputation. Nevertheless, there are the following differences between reputation and image:

- reputation is formed on the real facts of the company's activities, while the image does not necessarily reflect the real characteristics of the employer;
- the reputation of the organization in the labor market reflects the assessment and opinion that is formed in the course of real interaction with it, and the image of the organization can be formed on the basis of marketing communications without direct contact with the organization;
- the image of the employer is flexible, management can make adjustments to it using communications, it is very difficult to change the reputation;
- the formation of the image occurs at the stage of creation of the organization, and the reputation is earned throughout its life;

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<https://www.dissercat.com/content/formirovanie-imidzha-organizatsiisotsiologicheskii-analiz?ysclid=ldizoc40c4620993511/read> (Accessed 03/04/2023)

<sup>9</sup> K. Backhaus, S. Tikoo, Conceptualizing and researching employer branding // *Employer branding*. 2004. P. 501-517.

<sup>10</sup> Kang Yang, M.D. Hunter, Integrating job search behavior into the study of job seekers' employer knowledge and organizational attraction // *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 30:9. 2019. P. 1448-1476.

— reputation is a more robust assessment that shows how the general public feels about an organization.<sup>11</sup>

Under the influence of the image and reputation of the organization, the employer brand is formed.

The term employer brand was first studied by Ambler and Barrow in 1996. They wrote in their study that the employer brand is a set of economic, functional and psychological benefits that employment in a given organization provides and which are identified with this organization.<sup>12</sup>

Foreign sources define the employer brand as a tool aimed at shaping the perception in the minds of potential employees that the organization is primarily a great place to work.<sup>13</sup>

According to J. Sullivan, employer brand is a strategy aimed at managing the perception, awareness and beliefs of the staff about a particular organization.<sup>14</sup>

Employer brand is expressed by communicating to staff and job seekers the benefits that make an organization a desirable employer and set it apart from its competitors.<sup>15</sup>

Ewing defines employer brand as the set of economic, functional, and psychological benefits that comes from being employed by an organization.<sup>16</sup>

The brand of an organization in the labor market interacts with various target audiences, on the basis of which it is customary to divide it into external and internal. (Figure 1).

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<sup>11</sup> F. Lievens, Employer Image and Employer Branding: What We Know and What We Need to Know // Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior. 3. 2016. P. 407-437.

<sup>12</sup> T. Ambler, S. Barrow, The employer brand // Journal of Brand Management. 1996. P. 185-206.

<sup>13</sup> D.G. Kucherov, O.N. Alkanova, A.Yu Lisovskaia, V.S. Tsybova: Employer branding orientation: effects on recruitment performance under COVID-19 // The International Journal of Human Resource Management. 2019.

<sup>14</sup> J. Sullivan, Eight Elements of a Successful Employment Brand // ER Daily, 23 February. URL: <http://www.ere.net/2004/02/23/the-8-elements-of-a-successful-employment-brand>.

<sup>15</sup> S. Jenner, and S. Taylor, Employer branding-fad or the future of HR? in CIPD London // URL: <http://www.cipd.co.uk/NR/rdonlyres/56C8377F256B-4556-8650-8408B0E07576/0/empbrandlatfad.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> The role of brands in recruitment: mediating role of employer brand equity // Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources. 2020. 58. P. 173–196

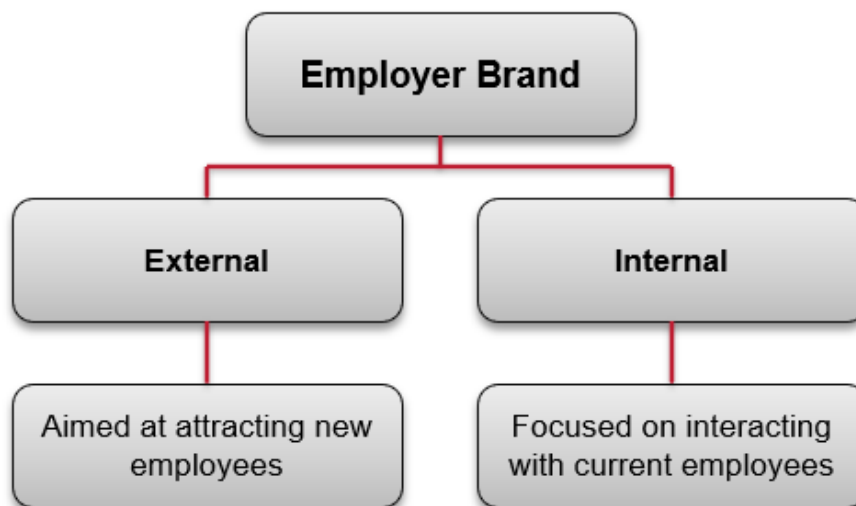


Figure 1 – External and internal employer brands<sup>17</sup>

The need to maintain the image of an attractive employer among employees lies in the importance of fulfilling the guarantees and promises of the employer brand, as well as in the formation of high loyalty and attachment to the organization among employees, which is expressed in strengthening the brand of the organization in the labor market.

Using an external brand, the employer organization broadcasts its mission, philosophy and corporate culture to applicants, which ultimately allows you to form a staff who share the company's values.

The external and internal brands of the employer are closely related to each other, since employees are the main carrier of information in the external environment about the organization, and their opinion largely influences the decisions of potential applicants.

Organizations create an employer brand with the following goals:

- Retention of personnel and their involvement in the process of labor activity;
- Ensuring unambiguous identification of the employer in the labor market and distinguishing him from competitors;

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<sup>17</sup> V.E. Devyataykin, HR-brand and the value proposition of the employer: connection and place in the system of attracting and retaining personnel. // Ya.P. Silin, E.B. Dvoryadkina, Proceedings of the XXI All-Russian Economic Forum of Young Scientists and Students. In 8 parts. Yekaterinburg: Ural State University of Economics, 2018. P. 135-138.

- Creation of trust relationships in the organization at all levels of management, thanks to individual, team and organizational involvement;
- Decreased recruitment costs;
- Decreased staff turnover;
- Improvement of organizational culture.

A positive result of the employer brand activity is the intention to respond to its vacancy. There are many theories that have been used to explain the effect of employer attractiveness on job applicant outcomes. The most common is the theory of signals (M. Spence).<sup>18</sup>

Signaling Theory, the founder of which is M. Spence. This theory is widely used in the study of job seeker behavior because job seekers do not have complete information about the organization and spend a lot of time evaluating potential employers based on the information available. Organizations send the appropriate signals through employer branding in an effort to gain a competitive advantage. Signals allow applicants to understand what the employer is like, its elements of corporate culture.

Signal theory is based on four key elements: the sender of the signal, the receiver of the signal, the signal itself, and feedback. The efficiency of signaling depends on the characteristics of the sender of the signal, the types of signaling actions and where they are carried out.<sup>19</sup>

Within the framework of the employer-applicant relationship, messages on the employer's website can serve as signals, messages about hiring are one of the first signals that applicants receive about the organization, its values.

Signals allow applicants to form a first impression of whether a given organization and its values are right for them.

These signals are called EVPs and carry key employer brand messages. EVP shows how a company wants job seekers to perceive it as an employer.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> M. Spence: Job Market Signaling. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 87, No. 3. (Aug., 1973), pp. 355-374.

<sup>19</sup> G. Thomas, S. Adebayo, D. Colette, Fergal, O. Adegboyega, Adams, Signaling the corporate brand promise to front-line employees: The role of learning and development in internal branding// *Tourism Management* 92. 2022.

<sup>20</sup> D.G. Kucherov, O.N. Alkanova, A.Yu Lisovskaia, V.S. Tsybova: Employer branding orientation: effects on recruitment performance under COVID-19 // *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*. 2019.



There are criteria that make it possible to ensure the greatest effectiveness of signals: compliance with reality, clear wording, uniqueness, taking into account the key needs of the staff, compliance with the organization's strategy, impact on emotional aspects.<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 2** – Signs of a successful EVP

Summarizing information about the employer brand, we can say that the employer brand is expressed in the expected receipt of unique tangible and intangible benefits that an employee or applicant sees in working in this organization.

Let's highlight the main distinguishing features of the employer brand and the image of the employer:

— the employer brand functions in a self-sustaining mode, while the image is easy to manage, it is amenable to influence and change;

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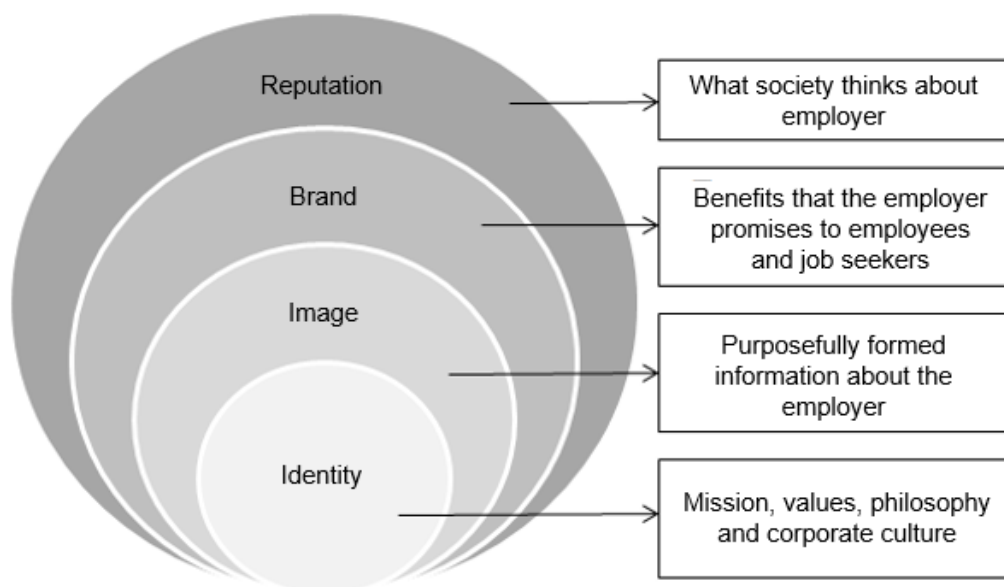
<sup>21</sup> How to put together an HR brand concept: a step-by-step guide // vc.ru URL: <https://vc.ru/headhunter/74771-kak-sobrat-koncepciyu-hr-brenda-poshagovoe-rukovodstvo> (accessed 04/13/2023).

— the employer brand is aimed at creating confidence among employees and job seekers in the advantages of the employer, while the image is aimed at stimulating job seekers to interact with the employer company;

— it takes a long time to form a brand, it is the ultimate goal of the organization, the image is created at the birth of the company and does not require a lot of time;

— reputation is the basis of the employer brand, and the image is formed on the basis of purposefully formed information about the employer company, which does not necessarily correspond to the real characteristics of the object.

Thus, the analysis of the concepts of "identity", "reputation", "image" and "brand" in terms of their influence on the formation of the attractiveness of the employer, allows us to conclude that they are interrelated (Figure 2). It follows that reputation, image and brand form the attractiveness of an employer. In other words, the higher the employer brand reputation in the particular organization, the more attractive an employer is perceived by potential employees.<sup>22</sup>



**Figure 3** – The relationship of the elements of identity, image, brand and reputation

<sup>22</sup> P. Berthon, M. Ewing L.L. Hah, Captivating company: dimensions of attractiveness in employer branding // International Journal of Advertising, 24:2. P. 151-172.

Thus, the work on creating an attractive image of the employer begins with the development of the company's image in the labor market and then moves on to the next stages of building an HR brand and reputation. Employer attractiveness is a vital factor that affects candidates' intention to apply for a job (Collins and Stevens, 2002).<sup>23</sup> Job seekers are more likely to prefer an organization that they associate as an attractive employer with favorable working conditions and unique competitive offerings. It is very unlikely that jobseekers will apply for a job from an organization that they are not attracted to. Consequently, we suggest that:

***Hypothesis 1: Employer attractiveness positively relates to application intentions.***

Within the academic literature, the concept of "employer attractiveness" has been approached from various perspectives, leading to several definitions. Cable and Turban (2001)<sup>24</sup> describe it as "the organization's ability to attract and retain valued employees through the inherent attractiveness of the work environment". Berthon (2005)<sup>25</sup>, on the other hand, emphasizes the advantages that potential employees may receive, referring to it as "the overall package of offerings (e.g., pay, benefits, work/life balance, job security, and advancement opportunities) an employer provides to its employees, which job seekers consider when evaluating an employer as a place to work". Jiang and Iles (2011)<sup>26</sup> suggest that employer attractiveness acts as a driving force, capturing the attention of job seekers and fostering loyalty among current employees.<sup>27</sup>

While these definitions exhibit certain similarities, our research will adopt the definition proposed by Kristof (1996)<sup>28</sup> as the basis for our study. Kristof defines employer attractiveness as "the degree to which an organization is perceived as offering a desirable work environment, opportunities for personal and professional development, and attractive rewards for competent employees". This particular definition explicitly recognizes the perception of the company by

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<sup>23</sup> C.J. Collins, C. K. Stevens, The Relationship between Early Recruitment-Related Activities and the Application Decisions of New Labor-Market Entrants // Journal of Applied Psychology 87(6):1121-33.

<sup>24</sup> D.M. Cable, D.M. Turban, Establishing the Dimensions, Sources and Value of Job Seekers' Employer Knowledge During Recruitment // Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management.

<sup>25</sup> P. Berthon, M. Ewing, L.L. Hah, Captivating company: Dimensions of attractiveness in employer branding // International Journal of Advertising 24(2) P. 151-172.

<sup>26</sup> TT Jiang, P. Iles, Employer-brand equity, organizational attractiveness and talent management in the Zhejiang private sector China // Journal of Technology Management in China. P. 97-110.

<sup>27</sup> TT Jiang, P. Iles, Employer-brand equity, organizational attractiveness and talent management in the Zhejiang private sector China // Journal of Technology Management in China. P. 97-110.

<sup>28</sup> A.L. Kristof, Person-Organization Fit: An Integrative Review of Its Conceptualizations, Measurement, and Implications// Personnel Psychology. P. 1 - 49.

both job seekers and current employees, taking into account various factors such as working conditions, environments, development opportunities, and financial incentives. Notably, this definition employs terms like "desirable" and "attractive," which are apparently linked to the concept of employer attractiveness.

When a company is perceived as a desirable employer, it can have a positive impact on its overall reputation and standing within the community. Turban and Cable (2003)<sup>29</sup> conducted research that demonstrated a positive relationship between employer attractiveness and corporate image. This connection arises from the notion that a company's employment practices and organizational culture are often seen as indicative of its broader values and characteristics. Thus, a favorable reputation for employer attractiveness can contribute to a positive overall corporate image. Moreover, Turban and Keon (1993)<sup>30</sup> found that perceived employer attractiveness is associated with an organization's external image. The authors highlight that candidates and external stakeholders often use employer attractiveness as a signal to gauge the organization's overall reputation. Therefore, we propose that:

***Hypothesis 2: Employer attractiveness positively relates to corporate image.***

A large number of modern studies are devoted to the study of the peculiarities of the formation of the attractive employer brand. For example, the study by Esra Alnıaçık<sup>31</sup> explored possible differences in the perception of economic, functional and psychological advantages of an employer by different cultures and genders. The study concludes that there are no universal rules for creating an attractive employer brand. The choice of the main aspects of the formation of an attractive employer brand should vary depending on the target group, the culture of society, the socio-economic situation in different countries. Thus, in order to successfully build an attractive employer brand, the first thing to do is to analyze the most valuable aspects for your target group.

Another study by P. Banerjee (2020) suggests that there are three characteristics of an attractive employer:<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> D.M. Cable, D.M. Turban, The Value of Organizational Reputation in the Recruitment Context: A Brand-Equity Perspective // Journal of Applied Social Psychology 33(11):2244 - 2266.

<sup>30</sup> D. B. Turban, T. L. Keon, Organizational Attractiveness: An Interactionist Perspective // Journal of Applied Psychology. P. 184-193.

<sup>31</sup> E. Alnıaçık, Attracting Talented Employees to the Company: Do We Need Different Employer Branding Strategies in Different Cultures? // Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 150. 2014. P. 336-344.

<sup>32</sup> P. Banerjee, The role of brands in recruitment: mediating role of employer brand equity // Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources. 2020. P. 173-196.

- Firstly, fame and visibility.
- Secondly, a successful employer brand is one that has an EVP that is relevant to and engaged by current and future employees.
- Thirdly, the difference from direct competitors.

Of particular interest within the framework of the topic of this final qualification work is the study of the perception of the employer brand by young professionals.

In the Russian labor market, every tenth vacancy is for a young specialist.<sup>33</sup> Little real work experience and lack of professional skills do not act as an obstacle for employers when hiring a young specialist, as they have a high potential for learning and good motivation for the development of themselves and the company.

This category of applicants is very carefully studying the unique employment benefits that the organization will provide them. In this regard, in many organizations there is a question of increasing the attractiveness in the labor market and promoting the employer brand to attract young professionals.

There are a number of activities that will increase their attractiveness to organizations interested in hiring young professionals:

- create a coherent EVP that will fit the business environment and characterize the attractive internal qualities of the organization;
- use appropriate communication channels for this target audience: social networks, job fairs, career days;
- provide flexibility in terms of wage management due to the lower expectations of young people.<sup>34</sup>

In conclusion, based on the conducted literature analysis, it can be asserted that a company's high reputation, image, and employer brand contribute to the development of an attractive corporate image. In today's competitive labor market, organizations that have an image as "attractive employers" enjoy several advantages, including access to skilled and loyal personnel, as well as a broader pool of potential job seekers. All in all, the concept of employer

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<sup>33</sup> D.G. Kucherov, A.L. Zamulin, V.S. Tsybova, How Young Professionals Choose Companies: Employer Brand and Salary Expectations // Russian Management Journal 17 (1): P. 29-46.

<sup>34</sup> D.G. Kucherov, A.L. Zamulin, V.S. Tsybova, How Young Professionals Choose Companies: Employer Brand and Salary Expectations // Russian Management Journal 17 (1): P. 29-46

attractiveness is defined by the perceived benefits that employees or applicants associate with working in a particular organization.

## **1.2. Corporate image: definition, role in the organization, elements and structure**

The conditions in which enterprises operate: globalization, political turbulence, the crisis associated with the consequences of COVID 19, dictate the need to search for reserves to increase competitiveness and ensure financial stability. The modern market is oversaturated with the same type of goods and services, and in order to increase competitiveness, it is important for an organization to form a positive impression about itself and the products it produces.

Competent management of the corporate image of the enterprise in the context of socio-economic changes is one of the factors for ensuring the effective operation of the enterprise, its stability and competitiveness in the long term. Moreover, the corporate image is a success factor not only in the field of customer relations, but also determines the company's success in a highly competitive labor market.<sup>35</sup>

An analysis of literary sources allows us to say that the essence of the concept of "corporate image", its elements and principles of effective formation have been deeply studied by domestic and foreign scientists.

So, N.L. Udaltsova under the corporate image defines the factors that reflect the main values of the organization, and their perception by people from the outside.<sup>36</sup>

According to S. Reid, the corporate image is the face of the organization, meets its goals and is aimed at achieving them.<sup>37</sup>

G. L. Tulchinsky interprets the concept of corporate image as a representation, which is based on knowledge about the profile of the organization, the type of its activity, the quality and features of the goods and services it produces.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> A.V. Ader, A.V. Dudko, M.S. Yemets, V.G. Krivolapov, I.P. Golchenko, Corporate image as a modern tool for the company's competitiveness // CITISE. No. 1 (31). 2022. P. 331-347.

<sup>36</sup> N.L. Udaltsova, Corporate Image as an Intangible Asset of a Company // Economic Sciences. 2023. No. 1 (218). P. 300-306.

<sup>37</sup> S. Reed, Are you effectively maintaining your corporate image? / S. Reed // Marketing, No.6, P. 86.

<sup>38</sup> G.L. Tulchinsky, PR firms: technology and efficiency / G. L. Tulchinsky. – [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://economuch.com/pr/imidj-firmyi-reputatsiya.html> (Accessed 04/12/2023).

The corporate image, according to F. Kotler, is the perception of an organization, its goods and services by society. The impact on the formation of the image of the organization occurs in the process of working on its individuality or positioning of goods.<sup>39</sup>

An analysis of the approaches of various authors to the definition of the essence of the concept of "corporate image" allows us to highlight the following fundamental features of this concept:

- First, a clear idea of the characteristics of the organization, formed in the minds of consumers, staff, suppliers and others, is the image. In other words, the image is the impression that arises in people who have a connection with the organization.

- Secondly, the content of the corporate image can be structured according to the nature of the relationship between the organization and the people who perceive it: consumers, suppliers, personnel, government agencies, etc.

- Thirdly, the process of creating the image of an organization occurs regardless of whether it forms it purposefully or not. In the case when an organization does not work on its image, it is formed randomly based on reviews.<sup>40</sup>

- Fourth, based on the above points, an important role in the formation of an effective corporate image is played by its assessment, which gives management a real understanding of how the organization is perceived by employees, consumers and business partners.

The analysis carried out allows us to determine the goals pursued by companies in the formation of a corporate image.<sup>41</sup>:

1. Increasing the recognition of the organization both in society as a whole and among its target audience;
2. Distinguishing the organization from competitors;
3. Formation of a positive and loyal attitude on the part of society.

The role of the corporate image in the organization is that it acts as a kind of tool, with proper management of which the organization can increase the effectiveness of its relations

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<sup>39</sup> F. Kotler, *Fundamentals of Marketing* // M.: Progress, 1998. P. 23.

<sup>40</sup> Y.A. Satarova, A systematic approach to the formation of a corporate image to strengthen the competitive position of an organization // *Economic Sciences*. 2022. No. 3 (55). P. 224-226.

<sup>41</sup> N.L. Udaltsova, Corporate Image as an Intangible Asset of a Company // *Economic Sciences*. 2023. No. 1 (218). P. 300-306.

with consumers, employees and partners, and, as a result, strengthen its position in the market and increase competitiveness.

The formation of a corporate image is a continuous process aimed at creating a positive perception among various stakeholders, including staff, business partners, and consumers. This process involves implementing a range of measures tailored to the organization's current target settings. As the organization seeks to shape its image, the focus of activities may vary, with certain measures being prioritized for one group while others are emphasized for another.

In this context, the theory of social identity highlights how individuals define themselves in relation to the organization they are associated with. According to social identity theory, people closely evaluate their impressions of organizations and consider how organizational characteristics might impact their self-identity if they are to join a particular organization. This means that individuals pay significant attention to factors such as organizational values, culture, and reputation when considering potential job offers.

According to social identity theory, organizational life, including a person's work, becomes part of his personal or social "identity" or "self-concept". People have a positive attitude towards those organizations whose values correspond to their own. Hence, organizational values help to establish the social identity of the individual. Accordingly, job seekers are more likely to be interested in employment in an organization whose values are similar to their own.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, social identity theory implies a correspondence between the values of the applicant and the values of the organization.

From a functional approach perspective, organizations can be characterized by various images. These images serve different purposes and appeal to different audiences<sup>43</sup>:

- mirror image: consists in representing the organization about itself;
- current image: consists in the formation of an adequate image;

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<sup>42</sup> V. Catano, The Influence of Corporate Social Responsibility, Psychologically Healthy Workplaces, and Individual Values in Attracting Millennial Job Applicants // *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science/Revue canadienne des sciences du comportement* 48(2).

<sup>43</sup> A.V. Ader, Corporate image as a modern tool for the company's competitiveness / A.V. Ader, A.V. Dudko, M.S. Yemets, V.G. Krivolapov, I.P. Golchenko // *CITISE*. No. 1 (31). 2022. P. 331-347



- desired image - the image that the organization seeks to achieve in the perception of people;
- corporate image is a collective image of the formed image of the organization.

The factors influencing the process of forming a positive image of the organization include:

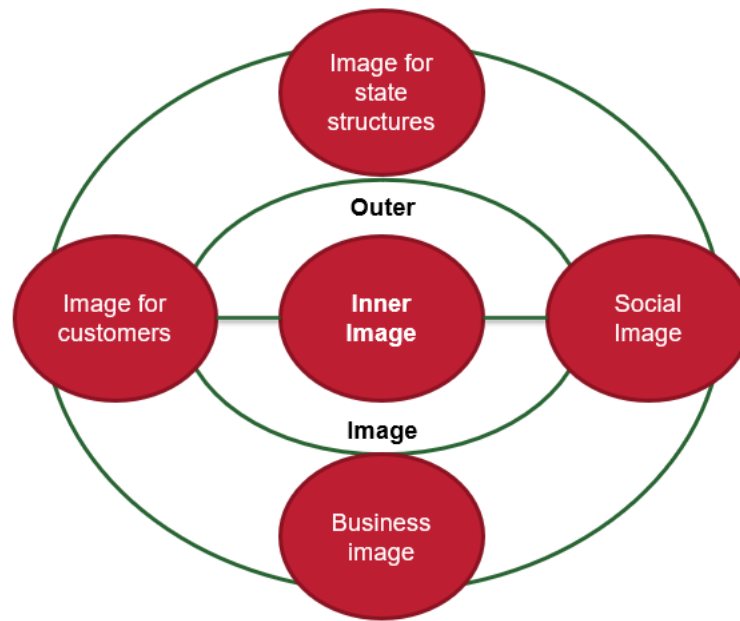
- History, philosophy, traditions, values and mission of the organization;
- Corporate identity of the organization;
- The financial result of the organization's activities;
- Social policy, which is carried out by the organization in relation to employees and to society as a whole;
- Availability of a code of business ethics and its observance;
- And others.

Elements of the corporate image affect both the external side of the organization and the processes taking place inside. On the basis of what, external and internal corporate image are distinguished (Figure 3).

The external corporate image is built on the perception of the organization by various stakeholder groups: consumers, business partners, society and the state. Consider how the corporate image affects the perception of the above groups.

1) The corporate image affects the formation of consumer interest and loyalty and includes elements that describe the products and services of the organization: quality, advertising, fame, design, price, promotional policy, and others.

2) The business image of the organization is based on the characteristics of partners: information transparency, business reputation, reliability, pricing policy and others.



**Figure 4** – The structure of the corporate image

3) The social image of the organization is formed on the basis of its corporate social responsibility policy. An organization that conducts corporate social activities, takes into account the interests of society in the course of its activities, is responsible for its activities to all persons who are somehow connected with the activities of the organization, and also proposes and implements measures to make the life of staff and society as a whole better.<sup>44</sup>

4) The image of an organization for government agencies is determined by the formed idea of it at the level of the legislative branch and administrative authorities.

A positive external corporate image contributes to the growth of demand for the organization's products, the expansion of the client base and sales markets, and the formation of attractiveness for investors.

Speaking about the internal corporate image, great importance is given to the relationship of the organization with the staff. In other words, these include factors that determine the loyalty of employees to the employer:

- climate and relationships in the team;

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<sup>44</sup> E.M. Kravtsova, V.Yu. Matveeva, Models of social responsibility of business in the global economy // Economics, Entrepreneurship and Law. 2016. 6(1). P. 81-98.

- leadership style and methods;
- representation of employees about work and the employer;
- corporate culture;
- corporate values;
- working conditions;
- balance of work and leisure;
- compensation and benefits policy;
- and others.

A positive internal image of the organization is a lever of influence on the motivational attitudes of the organization's personnel through the prestige of labor activity in this organization, the attractiveness of the employer, the reduction in staff rotation and the growth of labor productivity.

Candidates' perceptions of the organization are also influenced by its reputation, which is shaped unintentionally by its consumers, suppliers, employees, and partners. (Roberts and Dowling, 2002)<sup>45</sup> In turn, a positive corporate image that is formed purposefully and transferred to the public can signal that a company has strong values and is committed to providing a positive working environment for its employees. Additionally, it can create a perception that working for a particular company would be associated with prestige, recognition, and positive social status. The study by Edwards (2010)<sup>46</sup> emphasizes that a strong organizational image motivates candidates to apply for job offers.

From another perspective, a strong corporate image can contribute to the perception that a company is a good place to work, which can attract high-quality job candidates. As highlighted by Backhaus and Tikoo (2004)<sup>47</sup>, a good corporate image can signal to potential employees that a company is committed to providing a positive work environment and investing in its employees.

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<sup>45</sup> P. W. Roberts and G. R. Dowling, "Corporate Reputation and Sustained Superior Financial Performance, // Strategic Management Journal. Vol. 23, No. 1. 2002. P. 1077-1093.

<sup>46</sup> M. R. Edwards, An integrative review of employer branding and OB theory // Personnel Review, 39, P. 5-23.

<sup>47</sup> K. Backhaus, S. Tikoo, Conceptualizing and researching employer branding // The Career Development International, 9(5). 2004. P. 501-517.

This means that a strong corporate image can enhance the effects of employer attractiveness on job applicants' intention to apply for a job. That is why we hypothesize that:

***Hypothesis 3: Corporate image positively mediates the relationship between employer attractiveness and intention to apply for a job.***

In conclusion of this section, let's summarize and highlight the benefits that an organization with a positive corporate image receives:

1. Effective promotional activities, productivity in the field of promoting goods and services, productivity growth, simplification of the process of bringing new products or services to the market.

2. An increase in the competitiveness of the organization, caused by the preference of the consumer for an organization with a more attractive image, all other things being equal.

3. Formation of public opinion and its management with the help of various tools;

4. Reducing the rate of staff turnover, the formation of a staff of highly qualified and loyal employees, reducing the time and financial costs of finding personnel due to the prestige of labor activity in this organization and the attractiveness of the employer.

5. Prestige based on the public positioning of the values of the organization not only to make a profit, but also to help the public.

Thus, the corporate image is a means of increasing the competitiveness of the company and strengthening its position in the market and the degree of loyalty of employees to the employer. Elements of the corporate image influence the external side of the organization and internal processes.

### **1.3. Research hypotheses and model**

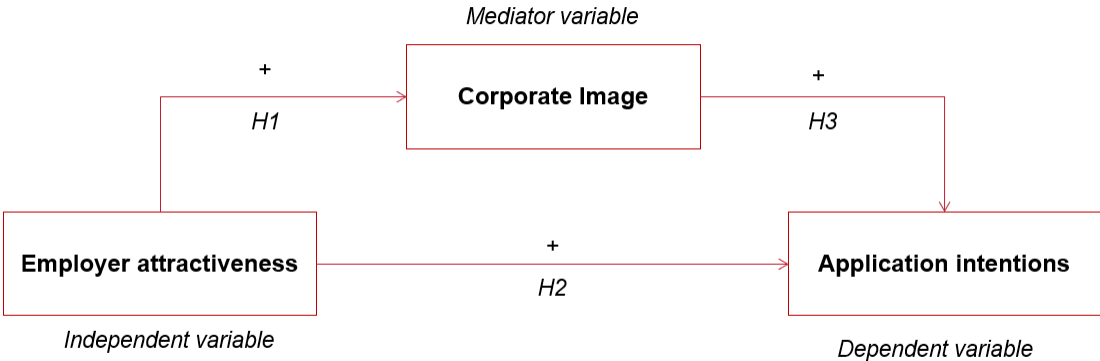
Based to the literature analysis we defined the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1: Employer attractiveness positively relates to corporate image.*

*Hypothesis 2: Employer attractiveness positively relates to application intentions.*

*Hypothesis 3: Corporate image positively mediates the relationship between employer attractiveness and intention to apply for a job.*

The analysis of the related literature helped to create the following structural research model (see figure 5). The model consists of 3 variables. The independent one is employer attractiveness that relates to corporate image and application intentions (dependable variable). Corporate image stands for mediator variable that explains the relationship between employer attractiveness and application intentions. It is also indicated in the picture the formulated above hypothesis that were based on the literature review and that will be tested further in the study.



**Figure 5 – Proposed research model**

## **CHAPTER 2. RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY**

The empirical task of this study is to test the hypotheses that were developed from the literature review and to investigate the mediating role of corporate image on employer attractiveness and the willingness of young professionals to apply for a job on the example of Kept and TeDo companies and students and graduates of Russian universities, studying on the target areas for employers.

To accomplish this task, the paper employs a mixed research methodology that utilizes both qualitative and quantitative research methods:

1. Qualitative research (series of semi-structured interviews)
2. Quantitative research (questionnaire survey)

### **2.1. Context of the research**

#### ***Audit and consulting firms***

To accomplish the goal of the study was chosen an audit industry because of its huge focus on attraction of employees. This industry represents knowledge-intensive firms (KIFs) the success of which depends on the employees' competencies and knowledge. Therefore, for this industry it is the main focus to attract the right people corresponding to the values of the company. That is why such kind of companies tend to attract the most talented young specialists to bring up them inside their corporate culture and maintain the intellectual capital they have in a strong way. These firms may operate in various industries, such as technology, research and development, consulting, or information services. KIFs are also stable "winners" of local ratings of the best employers in Russia (for example, ratings "HR-Brands", "Universum", "Future Today"). In our research we decided to focus on audit and consulting firms which represent the cluster of professional services firms because of the turbulence that they experience in recent times.

Professional services firms are a specific type of knowledge-intensive firm that offer specialized expertise and services to clients. These firms provide professional advice, consultation, and support in areas such as law, accounting, consulting, engineering, architecture, and healthcare. Professional services firms typically employ highly skilled and qualified professionals, such as lawyers, accountants, consultants, or doctors, who provide specialized knowledge and expertise to clients.

To conduct a depth analysis, we need to immerse into the Russian context of this type of organizations. There are more than 200 audit and consulting organizations operating in Russia, employing from 1 specialist to 4,000. The largest of them include 12 companies with a total annual revenue of more than 2 billion rubles in 2022 and the number of employees more than 250 people. In Russia, the largest and most profitable audit firms until mid-2022 were such international companies as Deloitte, PwC (PricewaterhouseCoopers), EY (Ernst & Young) and KPMG, which form the "Big Four" group of major international companies providing audit and consulting services on the global stage. These firms provide a wide range of services to clients, including auditing, accounting, consulting and tax services.

The main features of "Big Four" that differentiate this group from their competitors are the following:

1. **Global Presence:** The Big 4 have a significant global presence with offices in multiple countries around the world. This allows them to serve clients across various industries and geographical locations.
2. **Reputation:** The Big 4 are widely recognized as the leading providers of professional services in their respective fields. Their reputation for quality and expertise is a key factor in attracting and retaining clients.
3. **Range of Services:** The Big 4 provide a broad range of services, including audit, tax, advisory, and consulting services. This allows them to offer comprehensive solutions to their clients' complex business challenges.
4. **Industry Expertise:** Each of the Big 4 has developed expertise in specific industries, such as financial services, healthcare, technology, and energy. This enables them to provide specialized advice and insights to clients operating in those industries.
5. **Talent:** The Big 4 employ some of the best and brightest talent in the industry, including accountants, consultants, lawyers, and other professionals. They invest heavily in their people, offering extensive training and development programs to ensure that they remain at the forefront of their respective fields.
6. **Innovation:** The Big 4 are constantly innovating and evolving to stay ahead of the curve in a rapidly changing business environment. They are at the forefront of new developments in areas such as digital transformation, data analytics, and sustainability, among others.

Since the second half of 2022 the international offices of the companies were forced to close their branches in the Russian Federation due to political circumstances and register legal entities under new names: Business Solutions and Technologies (ex-Deloitte), Technology of Trust (ex-PwC), B1 (ex-Ernst & Young), Kept (ex-KPMG). However, these changes have not had much effect on the principles, values, and structural features of the companies, so the quality of services and customer confidence in the companies almost unchanged, so the new formed legal entities habitually represent the "Big Four" and meet all established beliefs about its members.

Worldwide, the Big Four are considered among the best professional advisors in finance and business. They have a wide range of clients in various industries, including many large companies and international corporations. In Russian realities, this trend continues.

The international affiliates of the Big Four have been active in Russia and have provided their services to the Russian market for over 30 years. Newly created Russian offices have taken over responsibilities and help companies comply with tax laws, as well as provide high quality auditing of financial statements.

To conduct a depth analysis in practice of the studying concepts were chosen two companies from the biggest and most profitable audit companies operating in the Russian market and providing highly qualified consulting services to a wide range of clients according to different ratings. The first company that is Technology of Trust specializes in audit, tax and consulting services. It also provides services in risk management, digital technology, and business transformation. Moreover, it is the second profitable company in the last year comparing to its direct competitors according to the rating of biggest consulting companies in Russia.<sup>48</sup> However, this company was defined as the least attractive to the students comparing to the same direct competitors.<sup>49</sup> The direct competitor of this company that has a bit smaller profit for the last year is Kept that provides audit, tax and advisory services. However, this company is the most attractive employer to the students at target universities and faculties. The reason why these two companies were chosen is that there can be an interesting and reasonable comparison of corporate and employer images of these two companies and determination of their influence on the application intentions of young professionals.

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<sup>48</sup> List of the largest consulting groups and companies in Russia (2022). – URL: [https://raex-rr.com/b2b/consulting/biggest\\_consulting\\_companies\\_and\\_groups/2022/](https://raex-rr.com/b2b/consulting/biggest_consulting_companies_and_groups/2022/)

<sup>49</sup> Rainting FutureToday. URL: <https://rating.fut.ru/#!/tab/156849800-2>



### *Young specialists in the Russian labor market*

In the Russian labor market it is customary to refer to young specialists as people from 15 to 29 years old,<sup>50</sup> who are most often still engaged in receiving education and are just beginning their professional development after educational institutions. The distinctive features of this category of citizens are weak economic activity, active change of social stratum in the society and the beginning of the work experience. At this age, young people undergo stages of individual transformation and self-discovery.

Because of the fairly large age range of the group and its socio-demographic heterogeneity, it is generally accepted to divide it into two subgroups: those from 15 to 22 years old and from 23 to 29.<sup>51</sup> The first group includes young people who are in the process of obtaining secondary special or higher education. Most often, people in this group have no professional work experience or short experience, which is most often obtained during educational practice from an educational institution. It is also worth noting that young people in this group are heavily financially dependent on their families. The second group of young professionals includes those who have already graduated from educational institutions and started their professional career. Some members of this group have already achieved some professional achievements and financial stability at this age.

However, these divisions within this social group are arbitrary, since there are still no official state documents in the current federal legislation that regulate the age limits and characteristic criteria for the concept of "young specialists. In spite of this, some organizations independently characterize the status of "young specialists" to develop and promote special development programs for students and recent graduates. For example, Russian Railways in its regulation (approved by Russian Railways on June 30, 2014 No. 1545r) described a "young specialist" as a graduate of a higher or secondary educational institution under 30 years of age and first employed within 3 months after graduation. Meanwhile, Russian researchers have come to the conclusion that young specialists include employees who graduated from an educational institution no more than 3 years ago.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> O. Demidova, E. Marelli, M. Signorelli, Youth labour market performances in the Russian and Italian regions // *Economic Systems* 39(1). 2014. P. 4-55.

<sup>51</sup> S.N. Ponomarenko, Socio-demographic characteristics of young people and conditions of their social formation // *Bulletin of the Saratov State Socio-Economic University*. 2013. P. 94

<sup>52</sup> Yu.A. Zubok, M.I. Avdeeva, Young specialist // *Sociology of Youth: an encyclopedic dictionary*. 2008. P. 277.

Thus, we can identify three main criteria that characterize the socio-demographic group of society "young professionals":

1. Persons under the age of 30;
2. Persons who have received a specialized secondary or higher education;
3. Persons who have been employed within 1-3 years after graduation from educational institutions.

International Labor Organization's analysis of global youth employment trends for 2022<sup>53</sup>, which publishes annual research reports, led to the following conclusions:

1. COVID-19 had a negative impact on the employment of young people, especially between the ages of 15 to 24, because this category of citizens is the least qualified, so companies when faced with a crisis took jobs from this group. In addition, for this category of people significantly reduced the number of open vacancies due to quarantine measures, as most organizations tried to keep existing jobs, while reducing the recruitment of new employees.

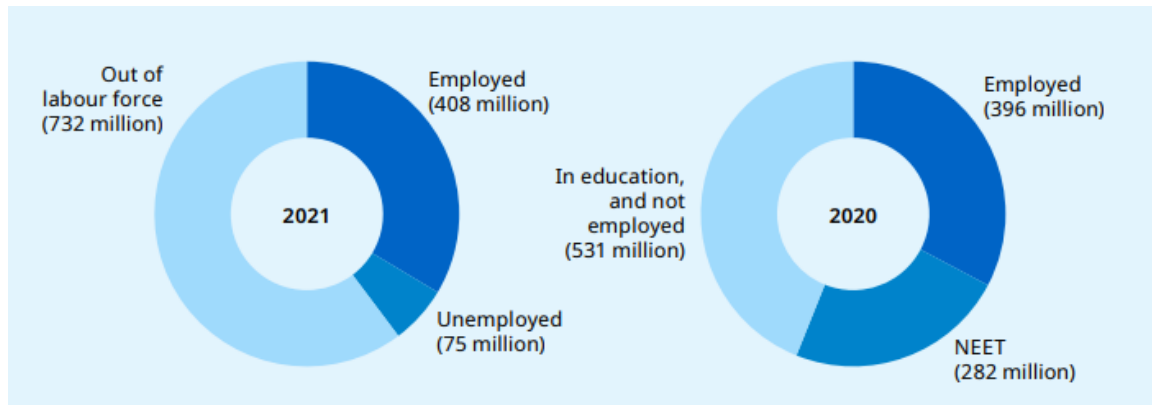
2. Global youth employment fell sharply by 34 million in 2019-2020, the lowest in 15 years. This trend will have a negative impact on young people due to the fact that a large percentage of them have missed this important stage of personal development and this could lead to employment problems later on.

3. Young people face a very large number of different risks and uncertainties in the labor market. At the moment they are threatened by such large-scale risks as geopolitical and macroeconomic (e.g. inflation, supply chain). They can have a strong impact on the number of jobs, on potential crises for companies, and on the future of organizations in a particular country.

4. One environment-independent factor in youth unemployment is their desire to obtain quality higher or secondary education to promote more prestigious and higher-paying jobs in the future. For example, in 2020, as we can see in the figure below, 44% of young people from around the world were enrolled in an educational institution but had no jobs.

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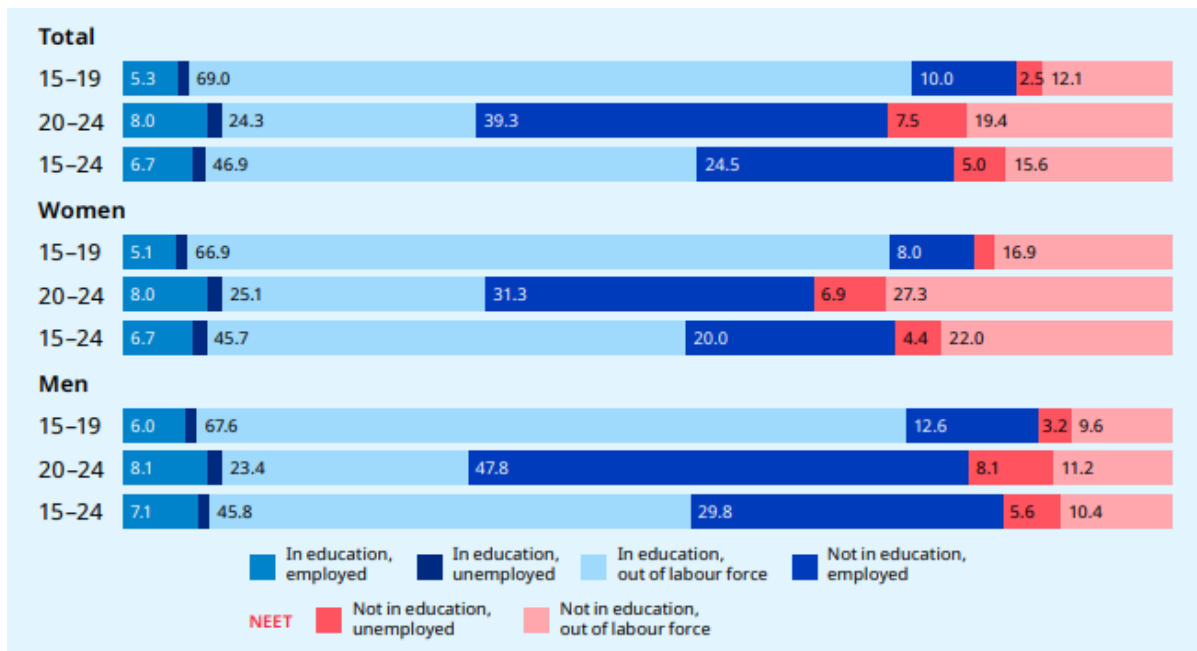
<sup>53</sup> Global Employment Trends for Youth. 2022. – URL: [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms\\_853321.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_853321.pdf)



**Figure 6.** Global overview of the labour market for young people, latest available year

5. Young people learn digital skills and competencies much faster than their older, more experienced colleagues. The study also showed that young professionals prefer to use modern technology in their daily tasks.

6. Finally, according to statistics from International Labor Organizations, the largest number of unemployed people can be traced to the age category of 20-24 years old, which by a significant margin exceeds the category of people aged 15-19 years old. Moreover, young girls who are not engaged in educational and professional activities are much more numerous than young boys. To summarize, nearly half of the entire study population of young people in 86 countries were unemployed, confirming the difficulty of finding a job for young people.



**Figure 7.** Decomposition of young people by status in education and in the labor market, outlier-adjusted unweighted average of available countries, by age and sex, 2019 (percentage)

Despite the global trends among young professionals, there are still some local peculiarities that are specific to the Russian context. Due to the unstable geopolitical situation since the beginning of 2022 and the announcement of a partial mobilization of citizens in September of that year, the number of emigrants in Russia has increased markedly. The main reasons for Russians to cross the border of the Russian Federation are worries about personal safety, concern for the economic and humanitarian situation in the country, and disagreement with the political position of the state. The majority of emigrants are young people under 40 years of age, with average or above average incomes and completed higher education (80%).<sup>54</sup> The most numerical group of emigrants are young people aged 25 to 34 years (49%), employed in IT (~ 50%). According to some data, about 4.5 million citizens have left Russia since the beginning of 2022.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Educated and young people are increasingly leaving Russia. – URL: <https://www.dw.com/ru/the-educated-and-young-are-increasingly-leavingrussia/a-47127456>

<sup>55</sup> FSB: 3.8 million people left Russia in the first quarter of 2022. – URL: <https://m.polit.ru/news/2022/05/06/zag-ranitsa/>

This emigration wave has exacerbated a pre-existing problem in developing countries such as Russia - a shortage of talent. One of the causes of this problem in the Russian context is the demographic hole of the 1990s, which is characterized by a sharp decline in the birth rate due to political perestroika and turbulence in these years.<sup>56</sup> This problem has reached its climax today, as children born during this decade are now aged 23-33. Because of this, the number of job openings for aspiring professionals exceeds the number of resumes open for job searches.<sup>57</sup> The second large-scale reason is the drain of educated young people from Russia, which has also exacerbated the search for suitable personnel for companies, made it even more expensive and made it more difficult to keep talented young people in companies.

Thus, the analysis of a number of modern publications studying the labor behavior and labor relations of recent graduates allowed us to identify the 5 most obvious trends of this group at the labor market:

1. Recent graduates and more experienced young professionals are very flexible with regard to physical mobility, so they are willing to consider more favorable offers for themselves without being tied to the location of the job.<sup>58</sup>
2. There has been a very increased trend toward telecommuting in recent years, primarily due to the proliferation of COVID-19. Young people are not ready to go back to their usual 40-hour office work schedule from 9 am to 6 pm and do not want to be tied to one place.
3. Young professionals pay very close attention to the unique employment benefits that employers are willing to offer them. Consequently, companies should pay more attention to their attractiveness in the labor market in order to attract the most talented and suitable young employees.
4. Young people have increasingly preferred personal comfort and emotional stability to the insistence on building a successful career, which will be the only meaning of life. This segment of the population is more free-spirited and inquisitive and wants to see the manager as an equal team player.

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<sup>56</sup> A fight for personnel, vacancies for adults and the blue color of mood — what awaits the labor market in the new year. – URL: <https://ngs.ru/text/job/2023/01/16/71971295/>

<sup>57</sup> Russian Statistical Yearbook 2022. – URL: [https://rosstat.gov.ru/storage/mediabank/Ejagodnik\\_2022.pdf](https://rosstat.gov.ru/storage/mediabank/Ejagodnik_2022.pdf)

<sup>58</sup> Why young people do not want to build a great career. Expert opinion. – URL: <https://v1.ru/text/job/2023/02/18/-72069863/>

5. Due to the constant and accelerated development of technology, young people are increasingly retrained in IT-professions. For several years the Russian labor market has supported the trend of changing careers among job seekers, which used to scare the employers, but today does not cause any resistance. Some researches assert that representatives of generation Z (people born since 1997 till 2012), by the end of their career will have about 17 lines from different jobs and 5 different professions.<sup>59</sup>

All of these trends suggest that the young professional sector of the labor market is quite volatile and vulnerable due to haunting demographic issues and political actions, which makes it very difficult for companies to hire talented young employees. As such, companies must take a number of actions to offer the most preferable environment for talented young people, which will also be a deterrent for this group of employees in the company.

## **2.2. Research methodology**

In order to ensure qualitative, accurate and comprehensive research results, a mix of research methods was chosen: qualitative and quantitative.

The first stage of the research is aimed at interviewing representatives of two audit companies (Technologies of Trust and Kept) from departments related to the studied concepts in this work. For this purpose, employees who develop the employer's brand as well as the corporate image of the organization were invited. This step helped to understand the company's perspective on the research topic. The interview allowed the researcher to learn about the company's policies, culture, practices, and issues related to the research topic, as well as identify key issues to explore further.

The second stage is the survey among young professionals, which aims to obtain numerical data that can be analyzed statistically and draw conclusions on a wider range of individuals. The survey is designed to collect information from young professionals about their views on the companies under study in terms of their attractiveness as employers and overall corporate image from operations, as well as to analyze the willingness and readiness of young job seekers to respond to the vacancies of these companies and work in them in the future.

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<sup>59</sup> The future of work: 17 jobs and five different careers. – URL: <https://www.smh.com.au/opinion/the-future-of-work-17-jobs-and-five-different-careers-20170728-gxko39.html>

The consistent use of both research methods helps to address the limitations of each type of study, compensating for the shortcomings of individual data collection methods. For example, interviews with company representatives can be biased because the representatives may have an interest in presenting the company in a positive light. Interviews with young professionals address this limitation by gathering their opinions on employment practices and overall perceptions of companies, which provides a more complete and balanced view of the organizations involved in the study.

The qualitative research, which consisted of 4 separate interviews with the employees of the studied companies, helped to achieve many of the goals ensuring the completeness and quality of the next stage of the research - the quantitative research, namely, the survey of young professionals. In addition, the first stage of the research helped to form an in-depth view of the current state of recruitment in the studied companies, their state of the employer brand and corporate image, as well as methods of their maintenance and development. All the information obtained in the qualitative study will be studied and processed in detail in the next chapter and will help to formulate the general conclusions of the study and bring value to the stakeholders.

In this way, both methods complement and develop each other, with one providing the context and foundation for the other. By carefully examining both data sources, it is possible to gain a comprehensive understanding of the research problem and develop recommendations based on a larger and more diverse sample.

### **2.2.1. Qualitative research**

The qualitative research methodology was chosen in order to deeply investigate the context, the current state of employer branding, corporate image and how it affects attraction of young professionals in the companies studied and the subsequent in-depth analysis of the information obtained. The purpose of the qualitative research was to understand the characteristics and problems of the recruiting process in the companies studied, employer brand development tactics and corporate image, and to find out which subgroups of young professionals the companies were most interested in in order to correctly classify the target audience for future quantitative research. In addition, the interviews were used to find out what methods companies use to attract young professionals, how effective they are, how they affect the attractiveness of their employer brand compared with their competitors, and what channels of communication they use to find target candidates. This research method allowed us to

determine which communication channels, particularly social media, would be used to find the target audience for the quantitative research.

This type of research required an analysis of not only primary but also secondary data. In order to obtain primary data, a total of 4 interviews were conducted with representatives of Kept and Technology of Trust, 2 interviews per company. Interviewees were invited to participate in the interviews based on their position and area of responsibility. Participants were expected to have in-depth expertise in their area of responsibility, as well as a good understanding of what is happening in the labor market and the industry market as a whole. In the end, the specialists from two different departments participated in the interview: an employee from the HR Department responsible for the development and promotion of the employer's brand, and an employee from the Corporate Affairs/PR Department, representing the company's interests in public and broadcasting the necessary information about the company in the media to maintain the reputation and create a certain image.

The questions of the interview guide were based on the reviewed literature and had a close correlation with the theoretical aspects, which had to be confirmed in practice. In addition, one of the goals of the questions included in the questionnaire was to investigate the industry in greater depth and to determine the impact of the unstable market situation that has unfolded in recent years from the distribution of COVID-19 from 2020 onwards due to the introduction of multiple sanctions packages against companies conducting their operations in the Russian market. The questions of the questionnaire were designed in an open format, which implies that respondents were required to give detailed answers to reveal all aspects of the issue.

The structure of the interview for HR specialists consisted of two separate questionnaires. The first questionnaire was dedicated to the topic of recruitment and recruiting and included questions clarifying the stages of recruitment in the company, the aspects that work well or poorly, the target audience for recruitment, performance metrics, and key changes in this process caused by the events of recent years. This block of questions allowed us to understand to what extent the recruitment process has changed and whether its efficiency has suffered due to the socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as due to the geopolitical situation in the Russian Federation from the beginning of 2022. The answers of the interviewees made it possible to understand whether to add a block of questions about



the external environment and its impact on the candidates to the quantitative study. The second part of the questionnaire was focused directly on the image of the employer and its role in the organization, what activities the company carries out to develop and promote it, what audience they try to engage and through what channels, and how they measure the effectiveness of the actions taken.

The second questionnaire was designed for communication with a representative of Corporate Affairs/PR and its aim was to study in depth the corporate image of the investigated company, its components, its uniqueness and its role in the fate of the organization as well as the ways the company measures its effectiveness and efficiency. This block of questions was dedicated to the development and maintenance of the corporate image, translation of the company's mission and values, and corporate and social responsibility. The answers received from the companies' representatives made it possible to understand which categories of the corporate image are worth focusing on in the quantitative research, and whether there is a correlation between the corporate image of the company and the attractiveness of the company. The full structure of the interview is presented in "Appendix 1".

**Table 1.** The tasks of interview questions

<b>Topic of the interview</b>	<b>The tasks of the topic</b>	<b>Number of questions in the block</b>
Attraction and recruitment	To find out how the process of recruiting young specialists works at the moment, what problems they face in this process, and what the main characteristics of the target group of job seekers are	7
Employer image and attractiveness	To find out what practices companies use to attract young professionals, what works well and what does not, and what events are held to improve the attractiveness of the employer	9
Corporate image	To find out how the company maintains its corporate image, what	15

	problems it faces in this process, and how it tries to satisfy its stakeholders	
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Each interview lasted an average of 60 minutes and was conducted in a semi-structured manner, that is, during the interview, questions were not strictly prescribed and clarifying questions could also be added to the main questions if the respondent did not disclose their message in sufficient depth. The interview was conducted entirely in Russian, due to the fact that this is the official language of the country of the study and, accordingly, of the employees of Russian companies operating in Russia.

In the course of this research method a number of secondary sources were also studied, such as official websites of companies, annual reports on operating results, profile websites, which helped to reveal the depth of the research, answer the remaining questions, examine in more detail general information about the studied companies, get acquainted with the results of their activities, as well as reveal regularities.

### **2.2.2. Quantitative research**

#### ***Sample and data collection***

As a general population for this study were taken 2 - 4-year undergraduate students, graduate students or recent graduates who graduated from higher education institutions not more than 3 years ago. Mainly the students of such target universities as St. Petersburg State University, MGIMO, Moscow State University Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation, Higher School of Economics, Plekhanov Russian Economics University and St. Petersburg State Economic University were invited to take part in the survey, but students of other universities could also take part in the survey, provided they were highly motivated to build a career in audit or consulting industry or were aware of the activities of the companies they study. First of all, the students of target departments were invited to participate in the survey: economic, financial, business management or management, law, tax and audit, and computer science and information technology.

The focus on target universities and faculties is due to the fact that the most appropriate universities were identified during the interviews with representatives of the companies under study based on previous experience of interaction with them and due to the fact that the greatest

number of students interested in employment in the companies under study come directly from them. Besides, another important reason for filtering universities is the quality of education in economic and business specialties, which is confirmed by the rating of economic universities in Russia. It is important to note that the main share of educational institutions is located in the largest cities of the country, in Moscow and St. Petersburg, where headquarters and main branches of the studied companies are located and where they mainly invite young specialists to work. These companies are ready to provide fair selection opportunities to all applicants regardless of the candidate's profile, field of study and educational institution, but statistically the most common faculties were identified among the students who successfully passed the selection in the companies, as their profile of study overlaps very much with the activities conducted by Kept and TechnologyDeliveries. Accordingly, the survey was therefore distributed primarily to target universities, faculties, and graduation years.

The age of the respondent did not play a major role in the search for potential participants, as the main requirement was either the completion of higher education or the recent graduation, which puts such a range of individuals in the category of young professionals who have recently received a document of higher education.

In terms of the necessary sample size for producing reliable results, the study aimed to gather a minimum of 200 responses. This number was deemed suitable for both the research design and statistical analysis utilizing the SEM method. When examining problem or phenomenon studies, the suggested sample size typically falls between 150-200 respondents (Baumgartner and Homburg, 1996)<sup>60</sup>. For SEM, the appropriate sample size is dependent on several factors such as the number of latent variables, indicators, pathways, and level of accuracy required. In consideration of the characteristics of the research model and existing literature (Hair et al., 2017)<sup>61</sup>, the recommended sample size for this study is also around 200 respondents, as the model is not overly complex.

Quota sampling and snowball sampling methods were used to obtain the required number of responses. Quota Sampling is a non-random sampling technique used to ensure that participants in a survey or study are representative of the population's demographics. This

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<sup>60</sup> H. Baumgartner, Ch. Homburg, Applications of structural equation modeling in marketing and consumer research: A review. // Intern. J. of Research in Marketing 13. 1996. P. 139-161

<sup>61</sup> J.F. Hair Jr, L. Matthews, PLS-SEM or CB-SEM: updated guidelines on which method to use // International Journal of Multivariate Data Analysis 1(2):107

technique involves establishing a set of criteria to represent the demographics of the population being studied, including age, gender, and socio-economic status. On the other hand, Snowball Sampling is a technique that relies on referrals from initial participants to generate more participants. In this technique, a researcher would start by finding a few participants who meet their study's criteria and interview them. After the initial interviews, the researcher would ask each participant if they know anyone else that would be interested in participating in the study. This technique can be useful for finding participants in hard-to-reach groups, where there is no easy way to identify the population.

The questionnaire was distributed online through two main channels. The first was the Russian social network Vkontakte, which is the 3rd most visited site in Russia and the 2nd most popular social media platform, used by 78% of Internet users aged 18-60<sup>62</sup>. The second channel to receive respondents was the instant messenger Telegram, the 2nd most popular messenger in Russia after WhatsApp, which accounts for 36% of market share and is actively used daily by over 17 million Russians<sup>63</sup>.

Both platforms were used to find a target audience for the survey and to distribute a letter urging people to fill out questionnaires. For this purpose, distribution was used both in educational channels, groups, or communities of universities that met the criteria of the target universities and faculties, but also through personal messages using a pinpoint search for people who fit the profile.

The total number of responses received was 120, but because the first two sections of the survey contained the same questions about different companies, the data was processed in a uniform way, so information about both companies was used to make a statistical model and run the tests, which amounted to 240 unique responses. Missing data had to be found only in the socio-demographic questions due to misinterpretation of the question by two respondents. The core questions related to the three variables studied did not contain any missing data due to the fact that they were marked as required questions.

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<sup>62</sup> Global Web Index 2020: How the pandemic has changed social networks. – URL: <https://vc.ru/u/431296-ex-libris/160538-global-web-index-2020-kak-pandemiya-izmenila-socialnye-seti?ysclid=lidh2tt4ni999881579>

<sup>63</sup> The most popular messenger apps. – URL: <https://www.similarweb.com/blog/ru/research-ru/market-research-ru/worldwide-messaging-apps/>

Responses were carefully checked, but there was no need to exclude any respondents from the sample for any reason due to the not very strict requirements for the target candidates of the companies studied.

The oldest participant was 30 years old, the youngest 19. More than half of the respondents belonged to the category of citizens aged 20-23 years (55%). Regarding the gender of the participants, most of them were female (70%), and the remaining 30% were male, which is a frequent tendency for such fields of higher education as economics, law, and the humanities.<sup>64</sup> More detailed information about the age and gender of respondents is presented in the table below in quantitative form (see Table 1).

**Table 2.** Sample structure by gender and age

		Gender		
		Male	Female	Total
Age group	19-22 years old	16	45	61
	23-26 years old	17	33	50
	27-30 years old	2	5	7
	Total	35	85	120

Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample respondents are presented in the table below (see Table 2). The largest number of respondents are either undergraduate or graduate students. Most often students from the Higher School of Management, St. Petersburg State University, Plekhanov Russian University of Economics filled out the survey, but also students from other regional universities who represent the "Other" category participated in the survey as well. Most of the respondents are studying at the Faculty of Economics or the Faculty of Business and Management. In addition, a great interest in the studied companies and business industry can be seen from the students of humanities or creative professions, who accounted for 12.5% of the total proportion of the sample. Most of the respondents are unemployed (58%), while only 42% of the respondents have a job, their own business or an internship at a company.

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<sup>64</sup> The ratio of girls and boys in universities in different specialties. – URL: <https://adukar.com/ru/news/abiturientu/sootnoshenie-devushek-i-parnej-v-vuzah-na-raznyh-specialnostyah>

**Table 3.** Respondents' socio-demographic characteristics

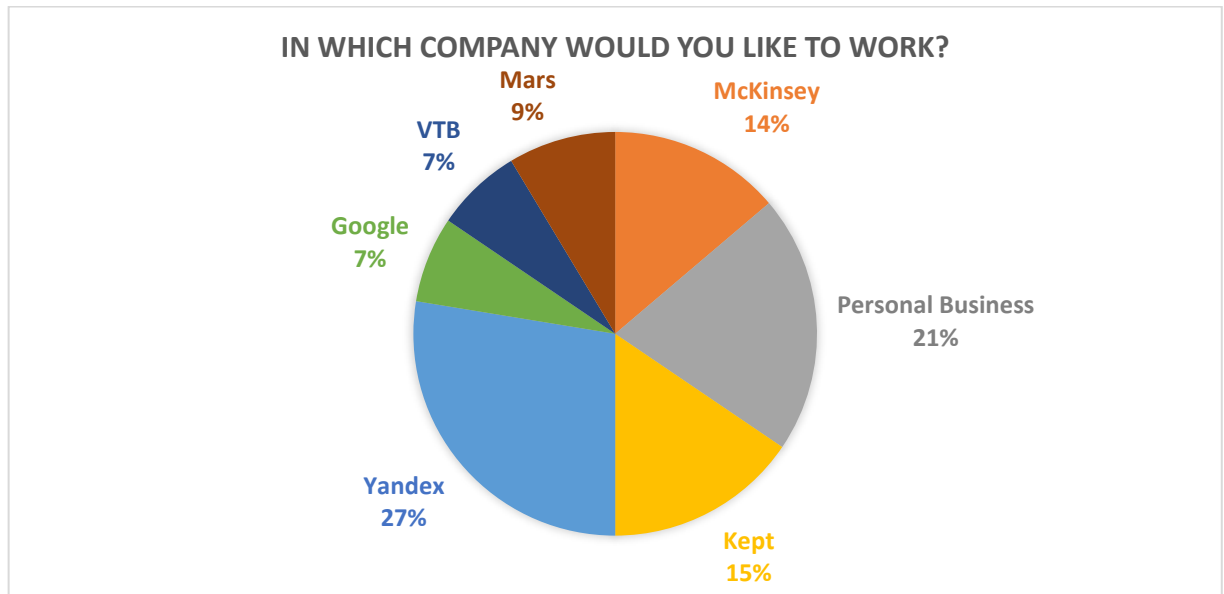
<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Item</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Educational Institute	National Research University Higher School of Economics	23	19%
	St. Petersburg State University	21	17,5%
	Plekhanov New Economic University	12	10%
	St. Petersburg State University of Economics And Finance	8	6,6%
	Financial University Under the Government Of The Russian Federation	7	5,8%
	Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy And Public Administration	7	5,8%
	National Research University Itmo	6	5%
	Moscow State University	4	3,3%
	SPBPU	3	2,5%
	Bauman Moscow State Technical University	3	2,5%
	GUU	2	1,6%
	MGIMO	2	1,6%
	Other	22	18,3%
	Faculty	Faculty of Economics	48
Faculty of Business/ Management		38	31,7%
Faculty of Law		3	2,5%
Faculty of Mathematics		4	3,3
Faculty of Computer Science/ Information Technology		7	5,8%
Humanitarian or Creative Faculties		15	12,5%
Faculty of Engineering		5	4,1%
Level of Education	1st year undergraduate/specialty	7	5,8%
	2nd year of bachelor/specialty	9	7,5%
	3rd year of bachelor/specialty	26	21,6%
	4th year of bachelor/specialty	27	22,5%

	5th year of specialist	2	1,6%
	1st year of magistracy	14	11,7%
	2nd year of magistracy	25	20,8%
	Graduate(s) 2020-2022	9	7,5%
Employment status	Employed	50	41,7%
	Unemployed	70	58,3%

For a better understanding of the sample, questions were asked directly about personal needs when choosing a job, expectations from the employer, reasons for choosing a current job or internship, and preferred company for the next job. As the main criteria of choosing the employer students and young professionals mostly mentioned:

- the level of salary,
- rating/positive image/prestige of the company,
- social responsibility (the goal of the business is not profit but value to stakeholders),
- interesting tasks and projects,
- growth opportunities,
- relationships within the team,
- corporate culture,
- company values,
- work-life balance,
- adequate, supportive, and respectful management,
- working conditions - social package, office location, hybrid work format.

The most popular companies for further employment the respondents identified the following:



**Figure 8.** Distribution of respondents' preferences

The most attractive place of work for respondents is one of the largest IT companies in Russia, Yandex, which combines many subsidiaries that create an ecosystem of complementary products. Moreover, Yandex is the best employer among students at leading universities according to the annual FutureToday 2023 employer ranking<sup>65</sup>. This graph also depicts the growing trend of young professionals choosing their own business as a place of employment and moving away from corporate employment. Companies from the consulting and auditing industry, such as Kept and McKinsey, are in third and fourth place as preferred places of employment, which is quite expected for the profile of the sample, since most respondents are studying at the Department of Economics or the Department of Business or have already completed their studies there.

#### *Development of the questionnaire*

Quantitative research entails the collection and analysis of numerical data using statistical methods. These methods are employed to identify trends, patterns, causation, and prediction within the data. Quantitative methods have the potential to be generalized to the entire population under study, provided a certain level of data quality is adhered to. Common methods of quantitative research include observation, interviewing, experimentation, and the use of secondary data.

<sup>65</sup> Rainting FutureToday. URL: <https://rating.fut.ru/#!/tab/156849800-2>



For this particular study, a survey was chosen as the primary data collection method due to its popularity in research on this topic and its convenience in obtaining quantitative data. The survey was conducted online, as it is the easiest way to reach the target group. Furthermore, the questionnaire was translated into Russian to eliminate any misunderstandings and misinterpretations of questions and concepts, as it is the native language of the study participants.

The questionnaire was partly borrowed from the article of Kissel, Büttgen (2015)<sup>66</sup>, who investigated the impact of corporate image, employer attractiveness, and the use of social media on employee attraction.

The developed questionnaire (see Appendix 2) consists of 42 questions aimed at understanding the behavioral patterns and respondents' perception of the studied companies, as well as determining their demographic characteristics. A 5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree was used to assess respondent perceptions. The questionnaire was thematically divided into three blocks, the first two of which had the same questions and measured respondents' attitudes towards different companies. Within each block there was a division into three thematic parts: questions about the corporate image, the attractiveness of the employer, and the respondent's willingness to respond to a given company's vacancy. The data collected from these sections will be analyzed to test the hypotheses formulated.

The corporate image section included questions about the quality of the company's services, trust and respect for the company, perception of its reputation, pricing policy, market stability, leadership, competitiveness, vision of the future, and environmental responsibility. The questions were based on the reputation scale of Fombrun et al (2006)<sup>67</sup> and consisted of 18 items. The respondents were then asked about their attitude towards the company as an employer: whether they liked the company as an employer, whether it was different enough from its competitors, whether the company could meet the needs of its employees, whether it met the expectations of the respondent and several other similar questions. This block consisted

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<sup>66</sup> P. Kissel, M. Büttgen Using social media to communicate employer brand identity: The impact on corporate image and employer attractiveness. // *Journal of Brand Management* 22(9):755-777. 2015.

<sup>67</sup> Ch.J. Fombrun, Corporate citizenship: creating intangible assets across institutional environments // *Academy of Management Review*. 2006, Vol. 31, No. 2, P. 329–346.

of 9 questions and was based on Keller's (1993)<sup>68</sup> and Aaker's (1996)<sup>69</sup> ideas of consumer-based brand equity and Delgado-Ballester's (2004)<sup>70</sup> ideas of trust. The third section of questions consisted of a 4 item scale adapted from Taylor and Bergmann (1987),<sup>71</sup> Harris and Fink (1987)<sup>72</sup> and Zeithaml et al (1996)<sup>73</sup> and focused on the respondent's intention to get a job with the company under study. In this part, participants could show their willingness and desire to be employed by one or both companies or express their reluctance and indifference to these companies. The questions included stages of readiness such as: intention, reflection, willingness to accept a job offer, and desire to work for the company.

Finally, the last part of the survey was devoted to collecting general socio-demographic data and characteristics. In this block, respondents were required to provide information about their year of birth, gender, educational institution, department, and level of education.

In order to obtain an assessment of the constructs under study, it was necessary to develop their scales. Operational definitions of variables and their scales were taken from previous research on corporate image and employer attractiveness and adapted to the specifics of the companies studied. However, the author still relied heavily on reliable sources in creating the statement formulations. The full questionnaire can be seen directly in the appendix (see Appendix 2).

All items were positively worded, and respondents were asked to rate their attitudes toward the companies under study. Respondents could vary their level of agreement depending on their individual perceptions. It should also be noted that all items were rated on a standard five-point Likert scale, where 1 corresponds to "strongly disagree," 5 to "strongly agree," and 3 stands for "difficult to answer."

### ***Data analysis procedure***

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<sup>68</sup> K. L. Keller, Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Managing Customer-Based Brand Equity // *Journal of Marketing*. 1993.

<sup>69</sup> D.A. Aaker, Measuring Brand Equity across Products and Markets. *California Management Review*, 38. 1996. P. 102-120. – URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/41165845>

<sup>70</sup> E. Delgado-Ballester, Applicability of a brand trust scale across product categories: A multigroup invariance analysis // *European Journal of Marketing*. 2004.

<sup>71</sup> Taylor, M.S. and Bergmann, T.J. (1987) Organizational recruitment activities and applicants' reactions at different stages of the recruitment process. *Personnel Psychology* 40(2): 261–285.

<sup>72</sup> Harris, M.M. and Fink, L.S. (1987) A field study of applicant reactions to employment opportunities: Does the recruiter make a difference? *Personnel Psychology* 40(4): 765–784.

<sup>73</sup> Zeithaml, V.A., Berry, L.L. and Parasuraman, A. (1996) The behavioral consequences of service quality. *Journal of Marketing* 60(2): 31–46.

This paper will use PLS-SEM data analysis methods in SmartPLS software. The rationale for using these methods and statistical software will be given below.

The statistical analysis of the proposed model was carried out using SPSS and SmartPLS programs, employing both confirmatory factor analysis which assists researchers in validating the reliability and validity of the measurement instruments and structural equation modeling techniques. The customary research design implemented here is traditional and has been previously used in a plethora of studies. The primary aim of exploratory factor analysis is to corroborate the reliability and internal consistency of the factors within the model. To obtain meaningful latent constructs, the questionnaire collects estimates of observable variables (items). Although the majority of the model's variables were gauged using multi-item scales that had been validated by other researchers, it was still vital to verify the reliability of the latent constructs. Moreover, a few items of several variables were reworded to reflect the study's subject matter and the background of the participants.

Upon ensuring factor consistency, the next steps can be taken to directly scrutinize regression paths and theorized connections between exogenous and endogenous variables. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is a multivariate statistical analysis method that can be used to test complex relationships between latent and observed variables. SEM modeling has gained popularity in marketing and management research as it allows researchers to simultaneously study several interrelated relationships among a set of variables, accounting for measurement error (Baumgartner and Homburg, 1996)<sup>74</sup>. One of the crucial advantages of SEM is that it can test complex models with numerous variables and relationships. SEM has the added feature of verifying overall consistency (validity and reliability) for measurement and structural models. Furthermore, SEM can incorporate higher-order latent constructs into models and verify their internal consistency and validity, unlike traditional regression analysis (Fornell, 1982)<sup>75</sup>. Additionally, SEM can be used to test for moderation effects of not just nominal variables (like age group or gender), but also interval variables, as well as mediation effects that explain the relationship between two other variables.

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<sup>74</sup> H. Baumgartner, Ch. Homburg, Applications of structural equation modeling in marketing and consumer research: A review. // Intern. J. of Research in Marketing 13. 1996. P. 139-161

<sup>75</sup> C. Fornell, F. Bookstein Two Structural Equation Models: LISREL and PLS Applied to Consumer Exit-Voice Theory // Journal of Marketing Research. – URL: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Two-Structural-Equation-Models%3A-LISREL-and-PLS-to-Fornell-Bookstein/f10b42bcc4832695b97185719a57fb7fe9ce624d>

There are two primary SEM methods: covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM) and partial least squares-based SEM (PLS-SEM). In this paper, the PLS-SEM method was elected due to the fact that PLS-SEM is a suitable analysis technique for exploratory studies as it captures the maximum explained variance of endogenous constructs, consequently leading to a higher predictive value (Hair et al., 2017)<sup>76</sup>. PLS-SEM is a widely-used variation of SEM methodology that provides researchers with several advantages over traditional SEM. One of the significant advantages of PLS-SEM is that it can handle small sample sizes and non-normally distributed data, which are not possible within traditional SEM. (Richter et al., 2016)<sup>77</sup> PLS-SEM can also model non-linear relationships among variables, whereas traditional SEM necessitates linear relationships between variables. In addition, PLS-SEM can efficiently handle variables with high correlation, which may cause problems with multicollinearity in traditional SEM. Finally, PLS-SEM provides better prediction quality than traditional SEM models (Ronkko & Evermann, 2013)<sup>78</sup>.

The statistical software SmartPLS 4.0 was utilized to obtain model estimates, where all observed variables were standardized in accordance with the software guidelines. SmartPLS software is a powerful and prominent tool utilized for structural equation modeling. The software is based on partial least squares algorithms. SmartPLS software has several advantages that make it an optimal solution for researchers who are conducting PLS-SEM analyses. One significant advantage of SmartPLS software is its ability to handle complex models. Researchers can use the software for comprehensive structural equation modeling analyses of complex models that have higher-order latent variables. This capability is a significant advantage since many research questions involve complex relationships that cannot be accurately assessed using simpler models (Rondan-Cataluna, 2015)<sup>79</sup>.

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<sup>76</sup> J.F. Hair Jr, L. Matthews, PLS-SEM or CB-SEM: updated guidelines on which method to use // *International Journal of Multivariate Data Analysis* 1(2):107

<sup>77</sup> N.F. Richter, European management research using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) // *European Management Journal*. 2016. – URL: [researchgate.net...European...partial...structural...](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309111111)

<sup>78</sup> J. Evermann, Is My Model Right? Model Quality and Model Misspecification in PLS // *Recommendations for IS Research*. SSRN Electronic Journal. – URL: <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.233769>

<sup>79</sup> F.J. Rondan-Cataluña, A comparison of the different versions of popular technology acceptance models: A non-linear perspective // *Kybernetes* 44(5). 2015.

Additionally, SmartPLS software is robust. It is a valuable analysis tool for analyzing non-normal distributed data and small sample sizes. This robustness is due to the software's reliance on resampling techniques, such as bootstrapping, which increase the accuracy of the results when dealing with non-normal data and small sample sizes. The software employs an asymptotic distribution-free (ADF) bootstrap technique as well, which increases the statistical power of the sample used to estimate the parameter values, making the results more reliable and accurate. Finally, SmartPLS software provides advanced graphical visualizations of the data, which can facilitate the interpretation of complex PLS-SEM model results. These visualizations provide researchers with an opportunity to identify trends and patterns in their data, contributing to a greater understanding of the research question.

Overall, SmartPLS software is a valuable research tool that allows researchers to conduct PLS-SEM analyses with greater accuracy and reliability. The software's user-friendly interface, ability to handle complex models with higher-order latent variables, robustness, flexibility, and advanced visualizations make it an essential tool for researchers in various research contexts.

## **CHAPTER 3. RESULTS OF THE EMPIRICAL STUDY**

This chapter will interpret the results of the qualitative and quantitative research methods, namely all phases of the interview will be analyzed and summarized, a factor analysis will be conducted, the model will be analyzed for fit and hypotheses will be tested, and conclusions and results of the entire study will be formulated. At the end of the chapter, the author will outline the limitations of the study and potential ways in which other researchers can develop this topic.

### **3.1. Qualitative research results**

This section will analyze the process of conducting interviews with representatives of the companies under study and draw conclusions based on the information obtained.

The first stage of the empirical research was to conduct in-depth interviews with representatives of Trust Technology and Kept. Two interviews were conducted with each company: one of them with an employee engaged in developing and maintaining the employer's brand, the second one with an employee of PR/Corporate Affairs department, which is mostly related to broadcasting the corporate image of the organization to the masses and to communication with the media.

One of the stages of the qualitative research was aimed at determining the company's own assessment of its employer brand and attractiveness for young professionals, at highlighting the existing problems companies have faced in the recruitment process in recent years, including during the pandemic and the imposition of restrictive economic and political sanctions on Russia and companies operating in its territory. In addition, a great emphasis in this stage was placed on determining the target groups of young professionals, their characteristics and channels of attraction in order to correctly select ways of communication with the target audience of potential job seekers in the next stage of the study.

The second stage of qualitative research was devoted to identifying the unique characteristics of companies' corporate image, their values, principles and mission, their communication strategy, as well as their position in corporate social responsibility.

Interpretation of the results will go according to the stages of the interview. The first block of questions was devoted to attracting new employees to the company. Both companies distinguish for themselves two large blocks of categories of potential future employees - young

specialists (current students and recent graduates), and experienced specialists (with more than 1 year of work experience). At Kept, the ratio of experienced specialists to young specialists in the recruitment process is 30:70. Both companies follow a fairly standard and common way of selecting the most suitable candidates today. First there is online screening of resumes sent in by applicants, and then candidates who have been screened move on to the next stage - testing, which tests the ability to analyze numerical and verbal information. Various specialization tests may also be added to this stage for more experienced professionals in their specialty. If the testing is successful, the candidate moves on to the interview phase, first with the HR specialist and then with the hiring manager.

One of the main reasons for hiring students and recent graduates, according to HR specialists in the companies studied, is the desire to grow specialists within the firm who would have a good understanding of all internal processes. However, when hiring this category of persons companies face a number of problems. The most significant of them: the demographic hole in the population of 22 to 33 years, the difficulty of combining study and work at the same time, the outflow of talented and educated people from the country in the last year due to political turmoil, the insufficient level of technical knowledge and communication skills, the reason for the latter is mainly associated with a long distance learning process due to the pandemic.

Despite the problems in recruitment, companies stated that the most effective practice for attracting young professionals is to hold events with target students at their place of study, open online events-getting to know the company to raise awareness about the company, educational events where participants can prove themselves, enrich their knowledge, develop their skills and even get an invitation to an accelerated selection to the company. Although, according to a Kept specialist, job fairs are less effective in attracting targeted applicants due to the fact that they are held for a very large audience of students:

*«The university job fairs for our company are rather poor and ineffective. A lot of students from different faculties come there, they wander around the companies, moreover, many of them are not our target audience».*

According to company experts, the change of legal entity and rebranding did not have a very radical and significant impact on the number of responses to vacancies, because

companies continue to broadcast the fact to the masses that they remained faithful to their previous principles and quality standards, which should not negatively affect the working conditions of employees and their employment, the former employees and customers remained. At the beginning of this journey, many job seekers lost sight of the Big Four companies when choosing a place to work, also places in the top employers for young professionals from FutureToday<sup>80</sup> dropped several positions, but once companies began to gain momentum and hold more events for students and recent graduates, awareness of them in the labor market has increased dramatically, resulting in an increase in responses to job openings. Technology of Trust shares information about this in this way:

*"When our international office left the Russian market, but we had not yet introduced a local company, students lost us for a while, there was also a slump in the ratings and in the number of participants at our internal events, but now things have started to change for the better and return to the previous state».*

Moving on to the topic of targeting young professionals and institutions of higher education, we can distinguish three main areas of specialization: economic specialties, which are the first priority for sourcing, technical specialties in which analytical thinking is well developed, and humanities specialties, which are not a priority, but from which sometimes come ambitious and diligent candidates who wish to strongly change the vector of their professional development. The top universities for attracting young specialists include the best universities in the country for training specialists in economic and technical specialties: HSE, the Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation, RANKhigS, ITMO, Plekhanov Russian University of Economics, Moscow State University, MGTU, Saint Petersburg State University, SPbPU, but companies are ready to consider candidates from other universities as well if they have strong motivation, well developed analytical thinking, and communication and team-building skills.

The most common channels of communication with young professionals used by companies and in which they maintain their corporate communities are telegrams, VKontakte, and the main partners for publishing and sending out information about the company and open vacancies are hh.ru, FutureToday, and partner universities.

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<sup>80</sup> Rainting FutureToday. URL: <https://rating.fut.ru/#/tab/156849800-2>



As for existing stereotypes about the industry, such as relatively Big 3 low wages, frequent overtime, bad work team, disrespectful attitude towards employees,<sup>81</sup> companies confirmed that some of the stereotypes are indeed the reality of working in them, but they always warn a potential employee about these things at the interview stages to identify his/her willingness and motivation to join the company. However, companies go to great lengths to comprehensively address all stereotypes. For example, Kept openly shares the benefits of working for the company on their social networks so that stereotypes don't spoil the overall image of the employer, whereas Technology of Trust regularly interviews current employees to reveal the veil of what employees do in their workplace and how much time they devote to it:

*«There are long hours, and they are in any company, but they are not daily. There are busy seasons, when we need to handle reports. But it all depends on the time-management of the employee. This myth about daily overtime comes from those who do not know how to manage their time. We also actively broadcast employees' lives through social networks, using the format of interviews, to show what our employees do during the day and how they handle their workload».*

In the second block of questions, the company answered about their employer brand. The main objective of employer brand development according to both companies is to broadcast through various activities and communications the priorities and values the company follows in order to attract the right people who share the same principles, to increase the level of loyalty to the company, thus strong and steady employer brand levels out some uncomfortable working conditions for applicants. Kept tries to differentiate itself from its competitors with its unique brand book, regular career development through a special system of internal assessment of employees, as well as increasing awareness of the friendly and welcoming corporate culture. On the other hand, Trust Technology tries to differ from its competitors with its unique career development program, allowing young specialists to try themselves in different business fields and define the most interesting and promising for them.

At the beginning of the third block of questions, companies were asked about the current image of the organizations in which they work in the labor market. Both companies noted that

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<sup>81</sup> Meet the Big 4 Accounting Firms. – URL: <https://www.big4bound.com/big-4-accounting-firms/>

the people working in the company and the teams they form are their main asset, for which they are valued by their stakeholders. In both companies it is common to support each other, provide mutual assistance, and not to try in every way to overtake the colleagues. Besides, openness, honesty and sincerity among colleagues thrive in Kept, which the company also notes as one of its main advantages:

*«We have very open employees, in general everything inside the company is open, nothing is hidden, honesty, sincerity, warmth, and the absence of competition flourish. We have no ratings, no star employees who go over the heads of their colleagues».*

At the same time, Technology of Trust prides itself on its high quality standards and wide range of services. The main goal of both companies is to change the world for the better through business and economy by means of professional knowledge, which they share with their clients.

The main professional values of companies are people, professionalism, knowledge and quality of services due to the fact that these are the main assets of companies, on the basis of which the entire business is built. Companies need not just to keep up with the times, but even to be ahead of time and create new frameworks, as they advise other companies on how to do business properly and efficiently

In terms of corporate and social responsibility, both companies actively make efforts to support society and the environment. For example, Kept has its own charitable foundation, through which they fight developmental disabilities in children, teach doctors and families how to cope with such problems, and support the Bolshoi Theater and a number of other local communities. Trust Technology is developing an entire service line, "ESG and Sustainability," in which it advises other companies on how to be more responsible in their business practices, reduce harmful emissions, form a sustainable supply chain and a number of other issues on the topic.

Thus, in-depth analysis of conducted interviews helped to analyze the current state of employer brand and corporate image in such companies as Trust Technology and Kept, to identify their own assessment of the studied concepts, existing disturbing problems, to find similarities and differences between companies. This analysis will help to make further

qualitative conclusions to maintain and develop employer brand and corporate image for more effective attraction of young specialists.

### 3.2. Quantitative research results

#### 3.2.1. Frequency analysis

This section will show the frequency of respondents' answers to questions about companies and calculate the average value for each block to get a general idea of young professionals' perceptions of the companies being studied. In addition, the data obtained will be compared with the answers of the interviewed companies' professionals in order to understand to what extent the expectations about the effectiveness of the ongoing activities of employers to attract young specialists coincide with the actual perception of these activities and the employers themselves by the target applicants.

Recall that the survey involved 120 young specialists and used a 5-points Likert scale to select the closest assessment of each statement:

*1 - Disagree completely*

*2 - Disagree*

*3 - Neutral/Uncertain*

*4 - Agree*

*5 - Totally agree*

The results of the answers in averaged form are presented in the table below.

**Table 4.** Frequency analysis.

The type of the question	Kept – item mean	Kept – construct mean	Technology of Trust – item mean	Technology of Trust – construct mean
<b>Corporate image</b>				

1. I have a good feeling about this company.	3,7		3,7	
2. I trust this company.	3,6		3,6	
3. I admire this company.	3,0		3,1	
4. I respect this company.	3,7		3,7	
5. Offers high quality products and services.	3,7		3,7	
6. Develops innovative products and services.	3,3	3,5	3,5	3,5
7. Has an excellent reputation due to its products and services.	3,8		3,7	
8. Stands behind its products and services.	3,6		3,6	
9. Offers products and services that are good value for money.	3,3		3,5	
10. Has excellent leadership.	3,2		3,3	
11. Has a clear vision for its future.	3,4		3,4	

12. Recognizes and takes advantage of market opportunities.	3,8		3,7	
13. Is financially stable.	3,6		3,6	
14. Has a strong record of profitability.	3,5		3,5	
15. Tends to outperform its competitors	3,3		3,5	
16. Is an environmentally responsible company.	3,2		3,3	
17. Maintains high standards in the way it treats people and nature.	3,3		3,3	
18. Supports environmentally friendly projects.	3,3		3,3	
<b>Employer attractiveness</b>				
1. This employer offers attractive jobs.	3,5		3,5	
2. This employer differentiates itself positively from others.	3,2	3,2	3,2	3,2

3. This is an employer I can identify with very well.	3,1		3,1	
4. I like this employer.	3,3		3,5	
5. I feel attached to this employer.	3,0		3,1	
6. This employer meets my expectations.	3,1		3,2	
7. I feel confidence in this employer.	3,4		3,4	
8. I believe this employer would make any effort to satisfy me as an employee.	3,0		3,1	
9. I believe this employer cares much about fulfilling the needs of its employees.	3,2		3,2	
<b>Application intentions</b>				
1. I intend to apply for a position within this organization.	2,9	3,1	3,0	3,1
2. I consider this company as a potential future employer.	3,1		3,1	

3. I would be very likely to accept a job offer of this company.	3,4		3,3	
4. I would like to work for this company.	3,2		3,2	

In order to identify patterns and formulate problems in the current state of recruitment, employer brand and corporate image, we will analyze each block of the questionnaire separately for each company and correlate these results with the information we received during interviews with the companies.

According to the author of the questionnaire (Kissel, Büttgen, 2015)<sup>82</sup>, the Corporate Image construct can be logically divided into 4 thematic facets for convenience: emotional (1-4 items), product (5-9 items), strategic (10-15 items), and sustainable (16-18 items). The lowest score (3.0/3.1) in the first category for both companies in relation to the statement "I admire this company," which suggests that job seekers have difficulty answering how satisfied they are with the activities carried out by the company. This may be due to the fact that this audience of individuals is not interested in the projects that the companies conduct, or the fact that the word "admire" evokes very strong emotions that cannot always be applied to companies. The highest score in this category was given to both companies related to respect for these companies and a general pleasant impression of them (3.7). This score indicates that respondents rather agree that they respect the companies' activities and treat them well.

In the second category, related to companies' products, respondents were least confident that companies create and develop innovative products or services and that the price of their products or services matches their quality (3.3). This suggests that respondents are not confident that companies are capable of developing innovative products or services and that

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<sup>82</sup> P. Kissel, M. Büttgen, Using Social Media to Communicate Employer Brand Identity: The Impact on Corporate Image and Employer Attractiveness. // Journal of Brand Management, 22. P. 755-777. – URL: <https://doi.org/10.1057/bm.2015.42>

they are overpriced for the quality of services they provide. Despite this, survey participants tend to answer in the affirmative that the quality of services provided is still at a high level, and that the companies have a good reputation because of this.

In the next category, Kept received more doubts about its strategic vision. Respondents are not confident that this company is winning the competition from its competitors. On the other hand, respondents are more likely to believe that Trust Technology is capable of outperforming its competitors, but they still have difficulty answering about the company's leadership competencies. Most likely the survey participants had difficulties in assessing the competitors' leadership due to the fact that both companies perform very similar activities and provide similar services on a par with their competitors, so it was probably very difficult for them to assess the winning position of any of the companies against their competitors. This suggests that the companies lack distinctiveness from each other, as well as a more strategic vision to be able to outperform their competitors. On the other hand, respondents agree that both companies are very timely and immediate in seizing market opportunities, as evidenced by the 2022 rebranding of both companies.

Finally, the sustainability category in the corporate image construct for both companies is close to the "Neutral/Uncertain" statement, indicating that respondents are poorly informed about the companies' sustainable activities, the actions they take to protect the environment, or the assistance they provide to various social groups.

In the next construct, all of the items asked how attractive the employer seemed to the respondent. Again, in this block, respondents had difficulty identifying companies and distinguishing them from each other as employers. Moreover, both companies were more likely to fail to meet responding young professionals' expectations of employment. Respondents were also not confident that employers would make an effort to improve the employee experience and in meeting their needs and requirements. Consequently, employers' perceptions of their attractiveness differ greatly from the actual perceptions of target young professionals. This suggests that companies have not sufficiently clarified their target job seekers' expectations of the job, and that companies are not effectively broadcasting their employer brand and working through candidates' doubts about employment with these companies. Companies scored the highest in this block with respect to the attractiveness of jobs and confidence in employers. Consequently, respondents are interested in vacancies of these companies and they feel



reliability and stability of both companies, but working conditions, relations in the team, similarity with competitors strongly and similar factors decrease the attractiveness of the studied companies in the eyes of young professionals.

The next block, devoted to the respondents' intention to get a job in the studied companies, showed that the respondents are absolutely not sure that they are interested in these companies as employers (2,9-3,2). Despite this, survey participants are more likely to be willing to accept a job offer from one of the companies (3.4/3.3). This suggests that respondents are unlikely to purposefully apply for jobs at Kept and Technology of Trust, but if invited to work at these companies, they will consider these offers.

The average scores for each block are the same for both companies, which again confirms the fact that respondents do not see unique characteristics and features of either company. They have equal attitudes towards the corporate image, the attractiveness of the employer, and the intention to get a job with them. This suggests that when choosing a vacancy between these companies, it would be very difficult for a job seeker to make a choice in favor of one of them, as he or she evaluates them equally. This finding contradicts the companies' responses that they have a unique employer value proposition as well as a distinctive corporate image that can distinguish the company from direct competitors.

Overall, with the highest score for the corporate image block (3.5), respondents were not willing to name Kept and Technology of Trust as attractive employers for them (3.2), and therefore were not sure they would consider them as potential employers and respond to their jobs (3.1).

### **3.2.2. Structural model and hypotheses testing**

In this section the structural model of the study will be tested and the statistical hypotheses will be tested. The first step will be to analyze the model for the significance of the paths of latent variables without mediation effects to confirm the main hypotheses. The next step will be a similar analysis for the mediating variable. At the end of this section, a model visualizing the results of the tested hypotheses will be presented.

#### ***Model fit justification***

This part will describe, provide index results, and provide a comparison to the targets in order to confirm the validity and reliability of the measurement model. All characteristics will be provided based on the SmartPLS manual in which the statistical tests were conducted.

The understanding and assessment of model fit is one of the critical aspects of any Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis. Therefore, the selection of an appropriate index is crucial for determining the goodness of fit (GoF) in any SEM. While there are a plethora of goodness-of-fit measures available in the literature, their suitability is highly specific to the model type and objectives of the study.

In the context of Partial Least Squares - Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), however, the traditional criterion such as the GoF measure is not recommended for model validation. Henseler and Sarstedt (2014)<sup>83</sup> argue that such measures only provide overall information about the quality of the fit, while not accounting for the measurement quality of the indicator variables in the PLS-SEM. Instead, a more appropriate approach is to consider approximate fit indices that are specific to PLS-SEM.

The software program SmartPLS includes various approximate fit indices that are specific to PLS-SEM, including standard root mean square residual (SRMR) and normed fit index (NFI) which should be assessed along with their respective thresholds,  $SRMR < 0.08$  and  $NFI > 0.90$ . These approximate indices provide insight into the overall model fit based on the predicted correlation or covariance structure generated by the model. By analyzing these indices, researchers can evaluate the extent to which their PLS-SEM model fits the data, and whether it accounts for the relationships and interactions underlying their research question.

In order to test the validity and reliability of the model, the author chose the PLS-algorithm method in SmartPLS 4.0. The results of testing the model are presented in Appendix 3.

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<sup>83</sup> J. Henseler, Ch. M. Ringle, M. Sarstedt, A new criterion for assessing discriminant validity in variance-based structural equation modeling // Article *in* Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science. 2014. P. 22

Based on the work of other researchers, the standard root mean square residual (SRMR) value should be less than 0.08. (Hu and Bentler, 1999)<sup>84</sup> to prevent model mis-specification. The resulting SRMR value is 0.072, which is less than 0.08, hence the requirements are met.

We will use the normed fit index (NFI) as the second main value, as recommended by the SmartPLS 4.0 guide. The researchers (Bentler and Bonett (1980)<sup>85</sup> recommend considering values between 0.9 and 1 as most appropriate. The resulting NFI value is 0.928, which falls within the recommended range ( $0.9 < 0.928 < 0.1$ ).

Thus, the analysis of the measurement model confirmed its quality, validity and reliability by comparing the obtained values with the recommended values. Therefore, for further hypothesis testing the model was taken unchanged.

### ***Construct reliability and validity***

To begin with, it is crucial to evaluate the measurement properties of the latent constructs in a PLS-SEM analysis that are conducting by using construct reliability and validity. Evaluating construct reliability and validity is necessary to ensure that we are using reliable and valid measurements to test hypotheses and provide robust evidence for the research question.

Construct reliability refers to the degree of consistency and stability of the measures used to assess a latent construct. It is important to establish that the measures used to assess a construct are reliable, meaning that they are consistent and produce the same results when administered multiple times. By examining the reliability of the indicators, researchers can determine whether the instrument used for measuring constructs is reliable and consistent.

Construct validity, on the other hand, refers to the extent to which the latent constructs used in the model reflect the theoretical concept that they are supposed to measure. There are different types of construct validity, including content validity, criterion-related validity, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. In the SmartPLS framework, construct validity is assessed by examining the convergent validity and discriminant validity of the indicators and

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<sup>84</sup> L.T. Hu, P.M. Bentler, Cutoff Criteria for Fit Indexes in Covariance Structure Analysis: Conventional Criteria versus New Alternatives. // Structural Equation Modeling, 6. 1999. P. 1-55.

<sup>85</sup> P.M. Bentler, D.G. Bonett, Significance Tests and Goodness-of-Fit in the Analysis of Covariance Structures. // Psychological Bulletin, 88. 1980. P. 588-600.

constructs. Convergent validity measures how well the different indicators of the same construct are related to each other, while discriminant validity measures how unique and distinct each construct is compared to other constructs in the same model.

There are 3 statistical criteria for checking construct reliability in SmartPLS: Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, Average variance extracted (AVE). Below will be given the accepted values for each of the indicators, as well as the results of the analysis for comparison.

The usual rule of thumb is that a Cronbach's alpha of 0.7 and above is good. This requirement is met for all variables.

According to Hair, Hult, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2014)<sup>86</sup>, the minimal composite reliability value in the PLS-SEM analysis should surpass 0.7, which is also met for every variable.

For convergent validity, the AVE value must be greater than 0.50 (Hair et al., 2019)<sup>87</sup>. Based on the results, the AVE criterion for each of the variables is greater than 0.5, so the requirements are met.

**Table 5.** Construct reliability and validity

	<b>Cronbach's alpha</b>	<b>Composite reliability</b>	<b>Average variance extracted (AVE)</b>
<b>Attractiveness</b>	0,958	0,958	0,748
<b>Image</b>	0,958	0,961	0,585
<b>Intention</b>	0,945	0,947	0,860

To evaluate construct validity in SmartPLS, there is one reliable criterion, the Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT). The recommended threshold for discriminant validity by

<sup>86</sup> J. Hair, T. Hult, C. Ringle, M. Sarstedt, A Primer on Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). // Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc. 2014.

<sup>87</sup> Revisiting Hair Et al.'s Multivariate Data Analysis: 40 Years Later. // The Great Facilitator, Reflections on the Contributions of Joseph F. Hair, Jr. to Marketing and Business Research. 2019. P.113-119.

Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2015) is less than 0.90. The table below shows the results of latent constructs and each of them does not exceed the required criterion.

**Table 6.** Discriminant validity

	<b>Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT)</b>
<b>Image &lt;-&gt; Attractiveness</b>	0,751
<b>Intention &lt;-&gt; Attractiveness</b>	0,822
<b>Intention &lt;-&gt; Image</b>	0,648

Thus, the evaluation of construct reliability and validity showed that the measures used in the analysis are reliable, and that the constructs are valid and useful for modeling relationships between variables.

### *Hypotheses testing*

Prior to conducting hypothesis testing, it is essential to evaluate the presence of multicollinearity amongst variables. To verify this, the statsmodels module in SmartPLS was utilized to compute the variable inflation factors (VIF), which is a widely-used method for assessing multicollinearity. Typically, a recommended cut-off value for VIF lies between 5 and 10, where a lower value signifies lower multicollinearity (Craney and Surles, 2002)<sup>88</sup>.

As demonstrated in Appendix 5, none of the centered measures within the regression model exhibited a VIF value exceeding 10 and just two of them are higher than 5, indicating that the variables are suitable for the purposes of regression modeling. This outcome suggests that there is no serious multicollinearity issue with the variables under investigation.

Having validated the data and measures utilizing VIF computation analysis, the present study aims to test the hypotheses by undertaking a regression modeling analysis of the hypothesized measures, specifically, employer attractiveness, corporate image and application intentions. The reliabilities of the measures of the variables are evaluated using R-squared, and path coefficients are generated for each tested relationship.

**Table 7.** Regression analysis results

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<sup>88</sup> T.A. Craney, and J.G. Surles, Model-Dependent Variance Inflation Factor Cutoff Values Model-Dependent Variance Inflation Factor Cutoff Values. // Quality Engineering, 14. 2002. P. 391-403.

	Path coefficients	P values	R-square	f-square
Attractiveness -> Image	0,768	0,00	0,54	1,19
Attractiveness -> Intention	0,767	0,00	0,62	0,58
Image -> Intention	0,072	0,50	0,62	0,01

The regression analysis performed allowed us to support H1 and H2:

H1: Employer attractiveness positively relates to the corporate image. It was proposed that employer attractiveness (EA) would positively affect corporate image (CI). Path coefficient (0.768), effect size for path coefficient ( $f^2=1.191$ ) that is considered as very large, and the influence of EA on CI were all significant ( $p<0.05$ ).

H2: Employer attractiveness positively relates to application intentions. It was proposed that employer attractiveness (EA) would positively affect application intentions (AI). EA had a substantial impact on AI ( $p<0.05$ ), path coefficient (0.767), and the effect size for path coefficient was estimated to be large as well ( $f^2= 0.586$ ).

Based on the analysis of the mediating effect of the model, hypothesis H3 was rejected due to insignificant p-value and  $f^2$ .

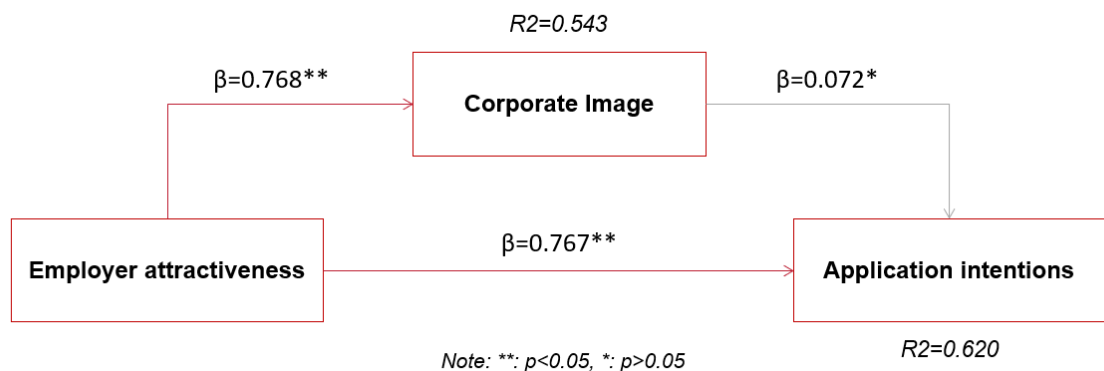
H3: Corporate image will mediate the positive relationship between the employer attractiveness and the intention to apply for a job offer. The corporate image (CI) was predicted to have a mediating effect on the relationship between employer attractiveness (EA) and application intentions (AI). Path coefficient and effect size for path coefficient were both determined to be insignificant after considering the impact of EA on CI ( $p>0.1$ ,  $f^2<0.02$ ). According to theory the mediating effect exists only when there are significant paths between independent variable and mediator, mediator and dependent variable, that is called full mediation. In another case when all the paths between dependent, independent, and mediating variables are significant. It is called partial mediating effect. These rules are not in line with

the results of bootstrapping algorithm of analysis. which proves that there cannot be a mediating effect, hence this hypothesis should be rejected.

It is worth noting that the analysis of control variables, as well as the analysis of data obtained by each company separately did not show statistically significant and unique results, so they were not included in the description of the results.

### *Structural model of the research*

Above, various statistical tests were performed to test a number of hypotheses and the validity of the model itself, but not all hypotheses were ultimately supported. Consequently, the relationship of employer attractiveness with corporate image and intention to apply for a job were confirmed as significant. However, statistical tests showed the insignificance of the mediating variable corporate image on the relationship between employer attractiveness and intention to apply for a job.



**Figure 9.** Analysis results

## **3.3. Discussion of the results**

### **3.3.1. Interpretation of the results**

This study analyzes the influence of employer attractiveness on the intention of young professionals to respond to a vacancy, thereby expressing their desire to work in this company. This paper differs from other research papers in that it explores the relationship between employer attractiveness and willingness to respond to a position, taking into account the

mediating role of the company's corporate image. Thus, the analysis of the results of in-depth interviews and the analysis of the studied variables will allow to explore more deeply the role of employer attractiveness in the choice of a job seeker in the Russian labor market - whether it really influences the intention to respond to a job.

The results of the qualitative analysis gave us to understand that the companies studied actively develop their employer brand, as they noted a strong correlation with the desire of young professionals to work in their companies. In addition, the companies noted that the separation from international parent companies and the formation of their own Russian offices did not significantly affect the number of responses from young professionals, indicating that young professionals pay less attention to the overall reputation of the company than to the benefits of working in it. The rest of the qualitative research findings were used for the next stage - the survey of young specialists, so they are not presented in this section.

The results of the quantitative study proved that various aspects that create an image of an attractive employer, such as matching the applicant's expectations, confidence in the employer, attractive vacancies, positive difference from competitors, do have a positive and significant impact on young professionals' desire to work in such companies. This finding is consistent with the study (Kissel, Buttgen, 2015) that "one of the main predictors of application intentions is perceived attractiveness." Other work similarly confirmed the positive relationship between applicants' perceived attractiveness to the job and the employer's brand, which did influence applicants' choice of employment.<sup>89</sup> It was also demonstrated by Sivertzen et al. (2013), that the organization's employer branding made it more attractive to candidates for open positions. Thus, studies that examine the relationship of employer brand or attractiveness confirm their positive and strong influence on job seekers' willingness to respond to a job. In this paper, this relationship has also been confirmed in the context of the Russian labor market and on the audience of young professionals.

The study also revealed that the corporate image of an organization itself has a very large impact on the intention to apply for a job at that company without any mediation factor. Thus, the various components of the corporate image, namely the overall impression of the

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<sup>89</sup> J. Cordes, R. Vogel, Comparing employer attractiveness of public sector organizations to nonprofit and private sector organizations: an experimental study in Germany and the US // Review of Public Personnel Administration.



company's product/services, its strategic vision, its sustainability and frugality initiatives, and the emotional state that the company evokes, all influence job seekers' decisions and make them interested and willing to work for companies that care about their reputation in the eyes of various stakeholders.

However, this paper did not confirm the mediating role of corporate image on the relationship between employer attractiveness and young professionals' intention to apply for a job. A strongly statistically significant relationship exists between employer attractiveness and job seekers' intention to apply for a job by itself, which is confirmed in the studies cited above. The corporate image is not the cause of this relationship, does not explain it, and especially does not make it stronger. Therefore, we are forced to reject the hypothesis that corporate image has a mediating role on the relationship between employer attractiveness and young professionals' willingness to respond to vacancies.

This conclusion differs from the results of other studies where the mediating role of corporate image has been analyzed and confirmed (Silva, Dias, 2022). More likely, this hypothesis was rejected due to the peculiarities of the context in which the study was conducted. The Russian labor market overcame several large-scale crises during the last 3 years and its economic situation is still shaky. The first shock to the labor market was the pandemic caused by the spread of COVID-19 in 2020 and greatly changed the approach to the format of work. Therefore, job seekers had new requirements for potential employers, in particular young professionals who did not catch the usual approach of conducting offline classes in educational institutions and faced immediately with the online selection to different companies, not imagining a different reality.

The second major shock has been and continues to be the sanctions packages imposed on the Russian Federation, on Russian individuals and legal entities, and on organizations operating in the Russian Federation.<sup>90</sup> The sanctions imposed severe restrictions on imports, international activities, and especially on international companies with subsidiaries in Russia. Many such companies have been forced to close their Russian branches, sell their businesses,

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<sup>90</sup> 10 packages of EU sanctions. There are 1,275 Russians on the blacklist, 435 measures have been introduced against legal entities from the Russian Federation. – URL: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/17142747>

and dismiss their employees.<sup>91</sup> The consulting and auditing industry is no exception in this situation, as the leading companies in this area were local representations of international organizations, so the sanctions affected them in the first place. Thus, these contextual features may have greatly influenced job seekers' perceptions of the corporate image of companies, particularly international companies, many of whose reputations have suffered greatly over the past year.

It is also worth noting that recently established analogues of international consulting and auditing companies take the example of their parent companies, follow their principles and values, but the change of names and legal entity dictates them to nurture their reputation and prominence among stakeholders almost from scratch. Therefore, a study conducted on newly established local audit companies could show false results due to the fact that the companies under study have not yet had time to establish their corporate image, so it may not show a clear relationship with the attractiveness of employers and the intention to respond to the vacancy.

As the survey results showed, young professionals in their final years of higher education or recent graduates look primarily at what companies are willing to offer them in the workplace, what benefits and perks they will receive by becoming part of this company, and what professional path awaits them. Therefore, the influence of employer attractiveness on young professionals' choice of employer does not become stronger when considering a company's corporate image. This leads to another conclusion that young professionals rely more on employer brand and image characteristics than on corporate image and reputation when choosing their first places of employment. They were not strongly influenced by the fact that international companies were forced to leave the Russian market and, at the same time, created local offices in Russia, relying on the experience of former international branches. Young specialists turned out to be flexible and loyal to such changes and focused their attention on the advantages they could get from the newly created companies. This is confirmed by the statistics of young specialists' responses in the companies studied, which remained almost unchanged compared to the situation before the change of legal entities.

Consequently, to attract more young professionals, audit and consulting firms should focus on their employer brand, offering unique benefits to students and recent graduates to

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<sup>91</sup> Only 8.5% of Western companies were able to leave Russia by the end of 2022. – URL: <https://www.forbes.ru/biznes/483977-tol-ko-8-5-zapadnyh-kompanij-smogli-ujti-iz-rossii-do-konca-2022-goda>

differentiate themselves from the competition, rather than focusing only on maintaining a corporate image in the hope that it will spark a desire and willingness in young professionals to work for that company.

### **3.3.2. Theoretical and practical implications**

The results of the study contribute to both theoretical conclusions and practical ones.

The results of the empirical study provided more in-depth arguments about how employer attractiveness affects young professionals' intentions and corporate image, which will allow researchers to better understand the relationship between these variables. This study is unique because of its contextual features: the study was conducted in the Russian Federation, which is undergoing a period of economic and political instability and investigated the perception of young professionals studying at institutions of higher education or beginning their careers in Russia.

Moreover, this study contributes to the academic literature by examining a very rare structural model with a mediating variable - corporate image. Researchers who have studied models with similar variables and their relationships (Silva, Dias, 2022, Sivertzen et al., 2013) have concluded that “employer branding, together with corporate reputation have a positive impact on the intention to apply for a job offer and that corporate reputation mediates the relationship between employer branding and the intention to apply for a job”. Most previous studies (Lemmink et al., 2003; Kissel, Buttgen, 2015) have focused on the inverse effect of corporate image on employer attractiveness and have used other mediators in the model or not at all, which adds to the novelty of this study and brings valuable insights for researchers.

The results of the empirical study confirmed that employer attractiveness positively influences the corporate image of the company and the intention of Russian young professionals to respond to a vacancy or accept a job offer, although the study results did not confirm that corporate image positively mediates the relationship between employer attractiveness and the intention of Russian young professionals to respond to a vacancy. Possible reasons for the rejection of this hypothesis have been described above in the Discussion section, so in this section we will formulate recommendations for recruitment practitioners at large Russian audit and consulting companies to improve employer

attractiveness and corporate image and to attract the right young professionals more accurately.  
Our recommendations are tabulated below.

<b>Recommended Action</b>	<b>Stages</b>	<b>Responsible department</b>	<b>Metrics</b>	<b>Expected Result</b>
1. Identify the target category of young professionals	<p>- analyze the common socio-demographic and personal characteristics of young professionals who:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• attend your events</li> <li>• apply for the jobs</li> <li>• get job offers</li> </ul>	Human Resources	<p>- the N of ideal young professional who attended the events</p> <p>- the N of ideal young professional who applied for a job</p> <p>- the N of ideal young professional who got a job offer</p>	Most suitable and talented candidate profile of an ideal young professional has been distinguished
2. Define doubts and objections of candidates and handle them	<p>- analyze stereotypes existing at the market about the company</p> <p>- interview young professionals about their objections to working at the company</p>	Human Resources	<p>- the N of stereotypes existing on the market</p> <p>- the number of possible solutions</p>	The company is more informed about the problems the candidates see inside it
3. Develop and maintain a unique EVP	<p>- analyze the cultural characteristics of TA</p> <p>- analyze socio-demographic characteristics</p> <p>- assess the economic</p>	Human Resources	- the N of target participants of the events before and after the announcement of the updated EVP	The EVP meets the young professionals' expectations

	<p>situation in the country</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- put forward the most suitable working conditions for potential employees</li> <li>- reflects the internal benefits of working for the organization</li> <li>- analyze what works well for competitors (e.g. Big Three) and borrow some tactics</li> <li>- organize these insights into a coherent and unique EVP</li> </ul>			
<p>4. Communicate it actively to the target group</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- analyze what are the main social networks target group use</li> <li>- organize different educational, professional and career events</li> <li>- present more actively the updated EVP via social media and at the events</li> <li>- provide solutions to objections and stereotypes through benefits and real stories of employees</li> </ul>	<p>Human Resources</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the N of job applications from targeted young professionals before and after announcement of the updated EVP</li> </ul>	<p>Target young professionals are aware of the benefits and advantages of work at the company and more and more target jobseekers consider the company for the employment</p>

5. Track the effectiveness of activities undertaken	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Regularly collect statistics, evaluate metrics used, compare the proposed results with the factual ones</li> </ul>	Human Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- All of the above-mentioned metrics in dynamics</li> </ul>	More accurate information will be obtained for future use
6. Develop and spread unique corporate image	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Try to distinguish the expectations of the existing stakeholders</li> <li>- Compare current corporate image with the competitors' ones</li> <li>- Try to define the unique characteristics that your company has</li> <li>- Prepare a cohesive image of a sustainable company and communicate it wisely and intensively to different stakeholders</li> </ul>	PR or Corporate Affairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the N of stakeholders' expectations in accordance with their category</li> <li>- the N of promises that the company can ensure in accordance with the category of stakeholders</li> </ul>	Different groups of stakeholders can easily differentiate your company from the competitors
7. Develop competitive advantage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Analyze the activities, processes, competencies, or resources that your company employ and which are difficult to replicate</li> <li>- Define which of them you can rely on and develop in a more proficient way to stand</li> </ul>	Strategy Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the N of clients before and after development of the competitive advantage</li> <li>- the N of candidates' applications before and after development of the competitive advantage</li> </ul>	You will gain more attention and profit because you will be an expert in sth narrow that your competitors cannot replicate

	out from your competitors			
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Thus, our recommendations can be used by large Russian audit or consulting companies in order to increase the attractiveness of their employer image, to identify target groups to attract within the category of young specialists, to make recruitment more accurate with less effort. It is recommended that companies go through all steps 1-5 in order to analyze the current state of the various aspects related to recruitment, and to identify existing problems in these steps and then eliminate them. Steps 6-7 are most relevant for Russian audit companies, due to the fact that their activities are very close to each other, and should be carried out in parallel with steps 1-5. These steps will help differentiate the company from its competitors by strategically developing a competitive advantage. Subsequently, the efforts undertaken can also have an impact on recruitment, because job seekers will clearly see the difference between the company and its competitors and will more easily make a decision about employment.

### **3.3.3. Limitations and future research**

Despite the use of multimethodology, which enabled the examination of the research topic from various stakeholder perspectives and compensated for the weaknesses of the individual methods used, certain limitations emerged in the study. This section aims to mitigate these restrictions by suggesting recommendations for future research that will facilitate a more thorough investigation of this topic.

The study focused on two large Russian auditing companies, rendering the generalization of the results to the entire industry problematic. Accordingly, future studies should explore the impact of the examined variables on a larger sample of companies within this sector or analyze the effect on other industries.

Moreover, the study's sample size of 120 participants is sufficient for this type of research but inadequate to make reliable generalizations to the entire target population. It is, thus, recommended that future studies encompass a larger sample, thereby enabling more robust conclusions that are transferable to the entire population.

Furthermore, the survey only incorporated participants from the Generation Z age group, which limits the understanding of other age cohorts. Subsequent analyses should

investigate differing age groups, such as the millennial generation, in distinct geographical locations where similar studies do not currently exist.

The survey was conducted in an online format, which does not allow communication with its participants and implies loss of control for the researcher, hence, some questions may have been difficult to interpret for some of the respondents, which could lead to bias in the answers and may compromise the validity of the results.

Another limitation concerns the reliance on a single mediator variable, corporate image, in the research model, necessitating future research that includes other moderating or mediating variables, such as social media influence, company ranking, and gender equality among employees, to evaluate their influence on the relationship between dependent and independent variables.

Finally, future researchers can examine the impact of employer attractiveness on employee retention through the mediating function of corporate image because it is interesting to compare how the studied concepts affect the applicants versus current employees and develop more effective recruitment and retention strategies for company specialists.



## CONCLUSION

This section will provide a short review of all phases of the study, summarizing their results and answering the research question.

The aim of the study was to examine the relationship between employer attractiveness and the intention of Russian young professionals to respond to a vacancy. This research goal was achieved through various methods. First, an in-depth analysis of academic and practical literature was conducted to explain terms such as employer attractiveness and corporate image, and explanations of related concepts were provided. Based on the literature review, hypotheses were formulated and a research model was proposed in which employer attractiveness was the independent variable, intention to respond was the dependent variable, and corporate image acted as a mediator.

In order to test the proposed hypotheses, an empirical study was conducted, which consisted of two parts. In the first part specialists of two large Russian audit companies were interviewed, the current problems they face in recruitment were highlighted, their assessments of corporate image and their own attractiveness as an employer were revealed, and the sample characteristics necessary for the next stage of research were determined.

In the second part of the empirical study, an online survey was conducted on the perception of the corporate image and employer image of the companies under study among young professionals studying or graduating in economics or management at the target universities. The survey was distributed through social networks and messengers and 120 unique respondents took part in it. The content of the survey was modeled on academic sources.

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to statistically analyze the data obtained, prior to which variables were tested for validity and reliability and the model for validity and consistency. As a result, 2 of the 3 hypotheses were supported, namely, that the attractiveness of the employer has a positive effect on the image of the company and on the intention of young professionals to respond to the vacancy. However, the hypothesis that corporate image positively mediates the relationship between employer attractiveness and application intentions was rejected due to the contextual features of the study.

Based on the results of chapters one and two, recommendations for practitioners in roadmap format were formulated, and conclusions were drawn as to how this study contributes

to the existing literature. However, due to some limitations of the study and because one of the three hypotheses was rejected, it is recommended that context be explored in more depth in future work, that more respondents be recruited, that other factors that may influence young professionals' intention to respond to a job be considered, or that other mediating variables be added to the model.

Thus, through a comprehensive literature review, several in-depth interviews, and statistical analysis of the data obtained from the survey, we can answer the research question posed: What is the effect of employer attractiveness on applicants' intention and corporate image?

Firstly, employer attractiveness has a strong positive effect on applicants' intention to respond to a vacancy or accept a job offer, as such a company has good recognition in the employers' market and positively stands out from its competitors due to its unique EVP. A company becomes attractive to a job seeker only if it can meet his needs and offer more than its competitors, for example, offer comfortable working conditions, competitive compensation and social package, opportunities for professional or personal development. Therefore, an attractive employer provides very pleasant working conditions to its target applicants, which encourages them to respond to its vacancies and choose this company rather than its competitors.

Secondly, the attractiveness of the employer also has a positive effect on the corporate image, as a general idea of the company as a separate organization based on the opinions of various stakeholders. The job seekers are one of the categories of stakeholders whose interests a company must satisfy in order to do business successfully. Therefore, when a company has "attractive employer" status, the overall opinion of the company, referred to as "corporate image", also improves, which in turn attracts more job seekers to the organization, provides the employer with the most talented candidates, and subsequently will affect the overall performance of the company and its profitability. Therefore, employer attractiveness has a strong positive impact on the corporate image and ultimately affects the perception of the company by all categories of stakeholders.

Thus, the study has helped to better understand how employer attractiveness affects the corporate image of the company and the intention of Russian young professionals to respond

to a vacancy, to make a theoretical contribution to the academic literature on human resource management, and to formulate recommendations for recruiters of large Russian consulting and auditing firms.

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## **APPENDIX 1. In-depth interview design.**

### **Interview guide (employer image):**

#### Attraction (recruitment)

1. How is the recruiting process structured?
2. What problems do you face in this area? What works well?
3. How has this process changed over the past year? How has it been affected by the pandemic? Changing legal entities? How has it affected the company's attractiveness to young professionals?
4. How do you select young specialists? What problems are you facing?
5. What groups of students/graduates/young professionals are targeted for recruitment?
6. What recruitment performance metrics do you use at the company?
7. Do stereotypes about the industry affect the attraction of young professionals? How do you combat stereotypes about the Big Four's image (e.g. low salaries, constant overtime)?

#### Image and attractiveness of the company as an employer

1. Describe the employer image of the company you work for?
2. How do you develop your employer's image?
3. What activities do you do to do this?
4. Through what channels do you do this?
5. How do you measure the effectiveness of your efforts in this aspect? (metrics)
6. How does your employer's image affect job seekers?
7. How do you try to distinguish yourself from your competitors in the process of recruiting young professionals?
8. What is the value proposition (EVP) for candidates? Is it different for attracting young professionals?
9. What channels are you using to attract young professionals, and why?

### **Interview guide (corporate image):**

1. What is the mission of your corporate brand? (+Targets, objectives)
2. What is the uniqueness of your corporate brand?
3. What is your competitive advantage over your competitors? How do you broadcast it?
4. What are your company values?
5. Do you have a brand book? How do you use it?
6. What is your communication strategy? How do you communicate with consumers? How do you communicate your mission to the masses? Through what channels of communication? How do you build stakeholder trust in you?
7. What audience are you targeting?
8. What promises do you make to your consumers?
9. How do you build awareness of your corporate brand?
10. How do you develop and maintain your company's corporate brand?
11. How has your corporate brand changed due to the pandemic? Over the past year?
12. How do you think your company's corporate brand affects your consumers? On job seekers? Young professionals in particular?
13. How do you compete with your competitors?
14. How do you take care of your employees? About the environment?
15. Do you support ESG principles? What do you do about it?

## **APPENDIX 2. Questionnaire.**

### **Corporate image**

1. I have a good feeling about this company.
2. I trust this company.
3. I admire this company.
4. I respect this company.
5. Offers high quality products and services.
6. Develops innovative products and services.
7. Has an excellent reputation due to its products and services.
8. Stands behind its products and services.
9. Offers products and services that are good value for money.
10. Has excellent leadership.
11. Has a clear vision for its future.
12. Recognizes and takes advantage of market opportunities.
13. Is financially stable.
14. Has a strong record of profitability.
15. Tends to outperform its competitors
16. Is an environmentally responsible company.
17. Maintains high standards in the way it treats people and nature.
18. Supports environmentally friendly projects.

### **Employer attractiveness**

1. This employer offers attractive jobs.
2. This employer differentiates itself positively from others.
3. This is an employer I can identify with very well.
4. I like this employer.
5. I feel attached to this employer.
6. This employer meets my expectations.

7. I feel confidence in this employer.
8. I believe this employer would make any effort to satisfy me as an employee.
9. I believe this employer cares much about fulfilling the needs of its employees.

### **Application intentions**

1. I intend to apply for a position within this organization.
2. I consider this company as a potential future employer.
3. I would be very likely to accept a job offer of this company.
4. I would like to work for this company.

### **Demographic information**

1. Enter your year of birth.
2. Enter your gender.
3. What college or university are you attending?
4. In which department are you studying?
5. Please indicate your course of study.

**APPENDIX 3. Model fit.**

	<b>Saturated model</b>	<b>Estimated model</b>
<b>SRMR</b>	0.072	0.072
<b>d-ULS</b>	2.556	2.556
<b>d-G</b>	1.415	1.415
<b>Chi-square</b>	1,741.203	1,741.203
<b>NFI</b>	0.928	0.928

#### APPENDIX 4. Construct reliability and validity.

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted
Attractiveness	0,958	0,958	0,964	0,748
Image	0,958	0,961	0,962	0,585
Intention	0,945	0,947	0,961	0,860

#### Discriminant validity

	Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT)
Image <-> Attractiveness	0,751
Intention <-> Attractiveness	0,822
Intention <-> Image	0,648



**APPENDIX 5. Collinearity statistics (VIF).**

	VIF
AttrAttac	4,379
AttrDif	3,342
AttrExp	3,535
AttrIden	3,282
AttrLike	5,249
AttrNeeds	4,914
AttrSatis	4,520
AttrTrust	3,412
AttrVac	2,902
CIAct	3,443
CIAdm	2,218
CIAdv	3,040
CIEcCl	3,580
CIEcol	3,844
CIFeel	3,627
CIInn	2,645
CILead	3,508
CIPerf	2,610
CIProf	3,201
CIQual	3,845
CIRep	3,717

CIResp	3,260
CISTab	2,819
CISand	3,641
CITrust	3,565
CIVal	2,764
CIVis	2,690
IntApply	3,447
IntFutEmp	4,509
IntOffer	4,701
IntWtoW	5,890