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Master's Programme in People Management and Organizational Development

Preparing for Growth Economy in Terms of Workforce

A Qualitative Multiple-Case Study on Finnish Construction Companies

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Objectives

The main objective of this research is to explore how Finnish construction companies, affected by cyclical recessions, can prepare for the growth in terms of workforce. This study focuses on keeping remaining employees satisfied during recession, ensuring that let go employees are willing to return, and identifying other strategies on preparing for growth in terms of workforce. By reviewing current theories on employer branding, employee engagement, dismissing and laying off, and preparing for growth in the context of recession, theoretical framework is formed highlighting key factors for success. This framework is applied in practice by examining how five Finnish construction companies are currently preparing for growth in terms of workforce.

Methodology

The research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing a multiple-case study research method and comparative analysis. The data was collected through five semi-structured interviews with professionals from five case companies, specifically in the areas of human resource management, talent acquisition, marketing and communication. The research data consists of the transcriptions of these interviews.

Findings

Despite the suggestions from previous research, some companies paused external employer branding, fearing it could provoke negative reactions among let go employees, while others continued it through internship programs. The case companies employed various strategies to retain current employees, such as monitoring satisfaction, fostering team spirit, and offering benefits. Although some maintained communication with let go employees, most were not focused on re-employing them, missing potential cost-saving opportunities. For future growth, companies concentrated on improving recruitment processes, employer branding, and skills development to reduce the need for extensive hiring during growth.

Keywords Employer branding, employee engagement, dismissing and laying off employees, economic recession

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Tavoitteet

Tutkimuksen päätavoite on tutkia, miten syklisistä talouden laskusuhdanteista kärsivät suomalaiset rakennusalan yritykset voivat valmistautua nousukauteen työvoiman suhteen. Tutkimuksessa keskitytään siihen, miten nykyiset työntekijät pidetään tyytyväisinä, miten varmistetaan, että irtisanotut ja lomautetut työntekijät haluavat palata, kun sen aika on, sekä tunnistamaan muita strategioita liittyen nousukauteen valmistautumiseen työvoiman suhteen. Tarkastelemalla ajankohtaisia teorioita työnantajamielikuvasta, työntekijöiden sitouttamisesta, irtisanomisisesta ja lomauttamisesta ja valmistautumisesta nousukauteen laskusuhdanteen aikana, muodostetaan teoreettinen viitekehys, joka korostaa keskeisiä menestystekijöitä. Tätä viitekehystä sovelletaan käytäntöön analysoimalla, miten viisi suomalaista rakennusliikettä parhaillaan valmistautuu nousukauteen työvoiman osalta.

Metodologia

Tutkimus toteutetaan laadullisena tutkimuksena, käyttäen usean tapauksen tutkimusmenetelmää. Aineisto kerättiin viidellä puolistrukturoidulla haastattelulla, jotka tehtiin viiden eri case-yrityksen ammattilaisille henkilöstöjohtamisen, rekrytoinnin, markkinoinnin ja viestinnän alueilta. Tutkimusaineisto koostuu näiden haastatteluiden transkriptioista.

Tulokset

Vaikka aikaisempi tutkimus suositteli toisin, osa yrityksistä keskeytti ulkoisen työnantajamielikuvan markkinoinnin pelätен sen herättävän negatiivisia tunteita lomautetuissa ja irtisanotuissa työntekijöissä, kun taas toiset jatkoivat sitä esimerkiksi harjoitteluohjelmien kautta. Case-yrityksillä oli erilaisia strategioita nykyisten työntekijöiden sitouttamiseen, kuten työtyytyväisyyden seuranta, tiimihengen luominen ja työsuhde-etujen tarjoaminen. Uudelleenpalkkaamisen kustannustehokkuudesta huolimatta useimmat case-yritykset eivät keskittyneet lomautettujen ja irtisanottujen työntekijöiden uudelleentyöllistämiseen. Muita strategioita kasvuun valmistumiseen olivat rekrytointiprosessin, työnantajamielikuvan markkinoinnin sekä osaamisen kehittäminen.

Avainsanat Työnantajamielikuva, työntekijän sitouttaminen, irtisanominen ja lomauttaminen, talouden laskusuhdanne

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Mål

Huvudsyftet med denna forskning är att undersöka hur finska byggföretag, som påverkas av cykliska recessioner, kan förbereda sig för tillväxt vad gäller arbetskraft. Studien fokuserar på att hålla kvarvarande anställda nöjda under recessionen, säkerställa att uppsagda anställda är villiga att återvända vid behov, samt identifiera andra strategier för att förbereda sig för tillväxt vad gäller arbetskraft. Genom att granska aktuella teorier om arbetsgivarvarumärke, medarbetarengagemang, uppsägningar och förberedelser för tillväxt, skapas en teoretisk ram som belyser viktiga framgångsfaktorer. Denna ram tillämpas i praktiken genom att undersöka hur fem finska byggföretag för närvarande förbereder sig för tillväxt vad gäller arbetskraft.

Metodik

Forskningen genomförs som en kvalitativ studie med hjälp av en flerfallsmetod. Data samlades in genom fem halvstrukturerade intervjuer med professionella från fem olika fallföretag, verksamma inom personalledning, rekrytering, marknadsföring och kommunikation. Forskningsdata består av transkriptioner av dessa intervjuer.

Göra

Trots tidigare forskning som rekommenderade annat, valde vissa företag att pausa extern arbetsgivarmarknadsföring av rädsla för att väcka negativa känslor bland permitterade och uppsagda anställda, medan andra fortsatte med sådana insatser, till exempel genom praktikprogram. Fallföretagen använde olika strategier för att engagera nuvarande anställda, såsom att övervaka arbetsnöjdhet, främja teamanda och erbjuda anställningsförmåner. Trots kostnadseffektiviteten vid återanställning, fokuserade de flesta fallföretag inte på att återanställa permitterade och uppsagda arbetstagare. Andra strategier för att förbereda sig för tillväxt inkluderade förbättring av rekryteringsprocessen, arbetsgivarmarknadsföring och kompetensutveckling.

Nyckelord Arbetsgivarmaknadsföring, medarbetarengagemang, uppsägning och permittering av anställda, ekonomisk recession

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1 Introduction

During the last three years labor shortage has been a real challenge in Finnish construction industry. In 2021, Rakennusteollisuus RT ry reported that construction companies suffer from shortage of manpower more chronically than other industries and is more common in Finland than elsewhere in Europe. The labor shortage was seen as the biggest obstacle to growth and recruitment was perceived as difficult (Rakennuslehti, 2021).

However, due to Covid 19 pandemic and Russia's attack to Ukraine, consumer confidence collapsed, which rose the interest rate and slowed down investments (Muilu, 2023). This has affected especially construction industry, and many big companies have gone bankrupt. According to Rakennusliitto (2024), more than one fifth of the workers in construction industry are unemployed or laid off. It has been sad, yet interesting, to watch how recruitment challenges have turned into change negotiations and layoffs.

Nevertheless, it has been predicted that the construction industry will start to grow again next year (Raeste 2024). Additionally, as the construction industry is cyclically sensitive, there will be ups and downs in the future as well. Therefore, the construction companies would benefit on preparing for the next growth economy in terms of workforce. Among attracting new talent, the companies should think how they aim retain the remaining workforce and to re-employ their laid off and dismissed workers.

However, there is still little research investigating how construction companies prepare for growth in terms of workforce, and it has not been studied in the Finnish context. This paper aims to fulfill this research gap by studying what kind of practices Finnish construction companies have regarding retaining current employees, re-employing laid off and dismissed employees and what other strategies they are implementing in order to stay competitive in the upcoming war of talent.

1.1. Research objectives and research problem

The purpose of this study is to examine how Finnish construction companies can ensure that they have enough skilled workforce when they are back in growth. More precisely, the aim is to understand how they attempt to keep their laid off employees interested in returning and how they attempt to remain as an attractive employer for their remaining workforce in times of economic recession, as well as what other strategies they are implementing in order to make sure, that they are competitive in the upcoming war of talent in times of growth.

These topics are investigated by studying Finnish construction companies' employer branding to current employees during recession, how the companies aim to keep laid off and dismissed employees interested in returning as well as what other things they are doing on preparing for growth in terms of workforce. Based on this starting point, the following research questions were formed:

1. "How can Finnish construction companies ensure that they have enough workforce when they are back in growth?"
    1.1. "How do they ensure that the remaining employees want to stay and the laid-off and dismissed employees want to return?"

The research questions are approached through qualitative interviews to five big Finnish construction companies. The interviewees are in responsible positions regarding human resources, talent acquisition and communication. The companies and interviewees are kept anonymous because of the sensitivity of the study.

The interest of the study is to investigate how the case companies concretely are doing in times of economic recession terms of ensuring that they have enough workforce in times of growth. The different practices will be compared between case companies as well as reflected on the existing literature of employer branding, managing experience of laid off and dismissed

employees as well as re-employment practices. Therefore, this study can help Finnish construction companies in the future economic recessions, as the industry is cyclical.

1.2. The structure of the thesis

The thesis is divided into five main chapters:

Chapter 1 introduces the research topic and research problem. The chapter starts with introducing the context by going through the previous war of talent in the Finnish construction industry and labor shortage to the current economic recession, where one fifth of the workers are unemployed or laid off. After that, the research questions are presented with a short introduction to the study.

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical background of the study. Firstly, employer branding is defined as a background theory for staying attractive in the minds of current, let go and potential new employees. Secondly, employee engagement is analyzed to ensure that the current employees remain satisfied. Thirdly, the previous literature about feelings of dismissed and laid off employees are investigated, as well as how it affects negatively to employer brand in the eyes of current employees, and suggesting ways to reduce the negative effects based on previous literature. Fourthly, existing literature about preparing for the growth economy in terms of workforce are investigated. Finally, the fourth subchapter presents the theoretical framework, positioning it to this study, and is later used in fifth chapter in the discussion of findings.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology of the study. The first subchapter describes the approach of the study and general qualitative tradition followed in the research. The second subchapter instead, describes the research context. In the third subchapter, the data collection methods and sample are described. Finally, in the fourth subchapter, the analysis methods are described.

Chapter 4 presents the findings of the interviews. Firstly, the effects of the recession on case companies' workforce are presented. In the second subchapter, the case companies' attempts to stay as an attractive employer are presented. In the third subchapter, it is presented how the case companies ensure that the laid off and dismissed employees want to return. In the fourth subchapter, the case companies' other practices on preparing for growth in terms of workforce are presented. Finally, in the fifth subchapter there is a summary of the findings.

Chapter 5 discusses the main findings as well as concludes the research. Firstly, the main findings of the research are discussed by using the theoretical framework introduced in the chapter 2 as well as discussing the applicability of the theoretical model based on the findings. Based on the discussions, conclusions and recommendations are made and finally, last subchapters discuss research limitations and gives suggestions for further research.

2 Literature review

The research literature conversed with consists of previous literature about employer branding, employee engagement, feelings of employees during layoffs and dismisses and, finally, how construction companies can prepare for growth in terms of workforce. In the next subchapters, these topics will be examined, mirroring their importance especially during economic recession. In the fifth subchapter, there is a theoretical model combining all of the previous literature examined.

2.1 Employer branding

Ambler and Barrow (1996) define employer brand as 'the set of functional, economic, and psychological benefits, resulting from employment and being identified with the employing company'. Employer brand also aims to enhance employer attractiveness to both potential and current employees by showcasing the total benefits offered by the employer (Puncheva-Michelotti et al., 2018). Consequently, an employer brand represents a bundle of advantages associated with working for a specific company.

Employer branding, on the other hand, involves utilizing these benefits to create a perception of being an attractive employer in the minds of current and potential employees (Wilden at al., 2010). This process also serves to distinguish a company from its competitors. In successful internal employer branding, it is crucial to outline the benefits provided to employees in exchange for their contributions (Pawar, 2016). This employee value proposition can significantly influence the attraction of new talent and the engagement of current employees (Nagpal & Nagpal, 2019).

While the aim of external employer branding is to attract the target talent by conveying why the company is an excellent place to work at, it is crucial that this branding is based on realism (Mandhanya & Shah, 2010). Current employees will inevitably share their true experiences, and their word will influence the company's reputation (Mandhanya & Shah, 2010). Additionally, if

the employee value proposition conflicts with reality, it can lead to a breach of the psychological contract for employees, as the trust has been broken (Dàvila and Piña-Ramírez, 2014). This damages the employer brand and negatively impacts employee engagement (Dàvila and Piña-Ramírez, 2014).

In terms of employer branding in practice, employees have increasingly come to value employers who offer a psychologically safe work environment along with opportunities for skills development. Therefore, prioritizing a psychologically empowering workplace should be a key objective for companies, alongside valuing employees and treating them fairly. Once these principles are put into practice, they should be emphasized in employer branding initiatives. Since new employees are not immediately productive, employers gain significant benefits from high retention rates, which is why internal employer branding along external employer branding should be a continuous and ongoing process. (Goswami & Agarwal, 2015).

Furthermore, Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) suggest that employer branding can be carried out through a three-step process. Firstly, the company should develop a value proposition that highlights its unique cultural and employment characteristics. Secondly, external employer branding should be implemented, targeting potential employees and other key stakeholders, while ensuring alignment with the organization's broader branding efforts. Lastly, internal employer branding must be established, integrating it into the organizational culture to fulfill the brand promise made to new employees, with the aim of aligning and engaging employees to the company's values and goals. (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

When executed effectively, employer branding enhances employee satisfaction and retention as well as increases both the quantity and quality of applicants (Sullivan, 2004; Mandhanya & Shah, 2010). Additionally, employer branding is a strategy to gain competitive advantage in rising competition, as it also improves the brand image of the company in the minds of potential customers (Goswami & Agarwal, 2015). Therefore, employer branding should be a strategic priority for any company. It is especially important in

industries like construction that face manpower shortages, as it helps to compete in the war of talent. But is employer branding crucial during an economic recession, given the reduced need for new talent and the emphasis on cost-cutting?

According to Mandhanya and Shah (2010), given that talent is the key to growth, employer branding should be regarded as an essential strategy, particularly during recession. Additionally, downsizing a company's workforce can result in a decline in employer brand value (Campos-García & Zúñiga-Vicente, 2017). This highlights the critical importance of nurturing the employer brand during recession through both internal and external marketing efforts, as these actions significantly contribute to enhancing employee satisfaction, retaining current staff, and attracting new talent (Campos-García & Zúñiga-Vicente, 2017). Investing in employer branding not only boosts employee well-being and productivity but also improves a company's financial performance, helping it remain competitive both economically and in the ongoing war for talent (Campos-García & Zúñiga-Vicente, 2017).

Mouton and Bussin (2019), on the other hand, emphasize the importance of balancing between attracting and retaining top talent as well as managing costs, particularly in economically challenging business environments like during recession. High employee retention, which effective employer branding promotes, reduces the need for expensive recruitment processes. Recruitment is resource-intensive, requiring significant working hours from multiple employees, investment in tools such as recruitment platforms, and time for onboarding and training new hires who may not be immediately productive. Additionally, strong employer branding can lower compensation expectations, as satisfied employees are often willing to accept lower pay (Mouton & Bussin, 2019).

Similarly, Racolta-Paina and Mone (2010) suggest that a recession is an opportune time to implement internal marketing and strengthen an employer brand. Employer branding and internal marketing should be ongoing processes and halting them due to recession would undermine the brand

promise. Additionally, efforts on employer branding and internal marketing can boost employee engagement, as workers are likely to feel more valued and secure when they see that their organization is investing in them during a period when others are fearing of losing their jobs. (Racolta-Paina & Mone, 2010).

In conclusion, during economic recession the focus of employer branding should shift from attracting new talent to minimizing the negative impacts of the recession on the work environment, increasing employee engagement, and enhancing corporate reputation. This is important because, first, employer branding must be grounded in realism, which may be challenging during recession. Second, since companies are less likely to be recruiting new talent during recession, there is a little value in externally promoting the company as a great place to work. Still, while the primary focus might be on cost-cutting and operational efficiency, investing in employer branding can provide long-term benefits by enhancing employee retention, maintaining a positive company reputation, and preparing for future recruitment needs.

2.2 Employee engagement

According to Lieber (2009), employers might think that during recession the remaining employees will stay as they are grateful to just have a job. However, remaining employees often have low morale as their friends and fellow workers are gone, which results in decreased productivity (Bigelow & Chan, 1992). Additionally, the remaining employees are confused on what is expected from them and where the company is going, as well as fearing for further layoffs and dismissals (Bigelow & Chan, 1992).

Similarly, Mujtaba & Senathip (2020) state that layoffs and dismissals may reduce the engagement and productivity of the remaining staff and cause them to seek work elsewhere. Moreover, Tiwari and Lenka (2016) argue that the remaining employees often experience anxiety, depression, role ambiguity, and job insecurity, which can result in psychological distress and work-related illness. A lack of trust diminishes their willingness to take risks and

undermines perceived psychological safety, causing significant disengagement from both their roles and the employing organization (Tiwari & Lenka, 2016).

Therefore, companies should focus on employee engagement especially during recession (Lieber, 2009) as that way the staff will not only remain but also be more satisfied and productive (Tiwari & Lenka, 2016). The reasons to stay could be, for example, getting to develop skills by taking responsibility of more challenging tasks, additional pay or benefits and feeling valued in the organization (Lieber, 2009).

Farndale and Murrer (2015) define employee engagement as a positive attitude of an employee towards the employer organization and its values. According to Dàvila and Piña-Ramírez (2014), "engagement is the result of the psychological contract plus the experience between employee and employer". Kahn (1990), on the other hand, defines personal engagement as the harnessing of personality traits into one's work role, where engaged individuals physically, cognitively, and emotionally invest in their work performance. An engaged employee contributes significantly to their colleagues, deepening relationships and facilitating teamwork. Conversely, a disengaged employee detaches their personality from their work role, remaining distant from others, and only fulfilling necessary job duties without leveraging creativity or innovation for the organization (Kahn, 1990).

An engaged employee not only gives a lot of themselves but also finds meaningfulness in their work. According to Kahn (1990), a sense of psychological meaningfulness is experienced when individuals feel useful and important, and when their contributions are appreciated rather than taken for granted. Engaged employees often experience psychological safety in their work environments, which, according to Kahn (1990) means being able to work freely without anxiety, fear of retribution to career, status or self-image. On the other hand, feelings of meaninglessness arise when individuals believe that

little is expected of them, and they are given few opportunities to invest themselves in their work performances (Kahn, 1990).

Therefore, employee engagement is fostered by allowing individuals to contribute significantly and by having appropriate expectations of them. An engaged employee is less likely to want to change jobs, feeling that their current role is suitable and important, and believing in their opportunities to make an impact and grow within the organization. So, what other methods can be used to promote engagement?

Firstly, as downsizing and layoffs lead to psychological stress and disengagement among employees, Tiwari and Lenka (2016) recommend a three-step process to re-engage them: creating psychological safety by 1) offering opportunities to share knowledge and encouraging employees to express their ideas and concerns, 2) providing a platform for continuous learning, such as organizing workshops and seminars, and encouraging employees to take on challenging assignments and explore alternative problem-solving methods, and 3) creating opportunities to take risks by developing new business practices and strategies. By following these steps, organizations facing a recession have a better chance of succeeding, as in a psychologically safe environment employees are engaged, share knowledge, learn, and enhance their capabilities (Tiwari & Lenka, 2016).

Secondly, organizations should ensure they provide a realistic depiction of the organization and job roles from the beginning of the recruitment process. This approach helps to ensure that employee expectations are met, preventing a drop in motivation and maintaining job satisfaction (Rayton & Yalabik, 2014). Additionally, conflicting promises and reality would lead to the psychological contract breach, decreasing motivation and productivity of the employee (Dàvila and Piña-Ramírez, 2014).

Thirdly, organizations should offer job resources in order to support employees' development as professionals, as engaged employees have high

motivation to improve in their work. According to Xanthopoulou et al. (2009), job resources are the physical, social and psychological aspects of work that help to achieve work goals, reduce demands, and foster growth and development. These can be, for example, autonomy, social support, encouragement, feedback and opportunities for career development. Job resources promote employee engagement by creating a sense of meaningfulness and satisfaction through learning. (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009).

Fourthly, as employees often struggle in balancing their work and family responsibilities which may result in employee turnover (Nohe & Sonntag, 2014), organizations should aim to reduce the work-family conflict by offering flexible working arrangements as well as by providing instrumental, emotional, or informational social support. Social support can influence an individual's assessment of the stressful situation: stressors are seen as more manageable and less threatening, which decreases the employee's need of solving the work-family conflict by resigning from the job. (Nohe & Sonntag, 2014).

Fifthly, physical rewards such as salary, employee benefits and bonuses can help in employee engagement: monetary rewards motivate employees to stay with a company, and bonuses encourage to good performance (Farndale & Murrer, 2015). Physical rewards help to compete in the war of talent as almost all middle-sized or big companies have such benefits. On the other hand, it is advisable for organizations to not only focus on direct compensation but also providing non-physical rewards such as well-being related benefits, as they are better linked with inner motivation (De la Torre Ruiz et al., 2019).

Finally, offering supervisory support and hearing the employee voice are also necessary ways to foster employee engagement: according to Holland et al. (2017), employees who receive positive feedback from their supervisors tend to exhibit higher levels of commitment, and organizations with supportive working atmosphere tend to have more satisfied employees on average. Employee voice, on the other hand, refers to the bi-directional dialogue between

employees and leadership, allowing employees to voice concerns, opinions, and influence decision-making, providing employees a sense of control and influence, which positively impacts both employee performance and commitment (Holland et al., 2017).

All in all, employee engagement is a complex process that requires careful consideration of various factors, such as meeting employee expectations by fostering psychological safety in order to reduce the negative effects of downsizing during recession, realistic job descriptions, supporting employee development, offering flexible working arrangements and physical rewards, supporting well-being, offering supervisor support and hearing employee voice. These actions should be particularly encouraged during an economic recession, as employee satisfaction may decline when colleagues are laid off or dismissed, leading to reduced motivation and productivity, as well as an increased fear of losing their own jobs (Bigelow & Chan, 1992).

2.3 Dismissing and laying off – feelings of employees

Due to the economic recession, the war of talent has changed to layoffs and dismisses as the companies have had to let go employees in order to save costs and increase profits. The worker's market has changed to employer's market, as there are more job seekers than available jobs. But how do the layoffs and dismisses affect the employer attractiveness in the eyes of employees?

According to Shlosberg (2010), dismissing causes a lot of stress in both dismissed and remaining employees. The dismissed are stressed about their financial situation and the remaining ones are scared for their own position (Shlosberg, 2010). Therefore, laying off and dismissing employees can result in negative emotions towards the company in the minds of remaining and let go employees, causing harm for the employer brand.

After the recession companies aim to rebuild their workforce as fast as possible (Jaye, 2021). Besides of hiring new employees, they can bring back

previously laid off and dismissed employees (Jaye, 2021). Re-employing is cost-saving as the recruiters can contact the former employees directly and they are already familiar with the company and the job so there is no need to spend that much time on interviewing and onboarding (Jaye, 2021). Therefore, re-employing former employees should be a strategic focus of any company after recession. But how can the companies ensure that the laid off and dismissed workers are willing to return, and that way keep their position strong in the war for talent?

According to Shlosberg (2010), feelings of dismissed and laid off employees do not differ a lot, as in both situations people lose their jobs. Therefore, layoffs and dismisses should be treated similarly, trying to decrease the employee perceptions about feelings of betrayal, personal failure, the uncertainty of future, disrespect and unfair treatment as well as stress about loss of income and loss of money to cover immediate financial needs (Shlosberg, 2010). Moreover, Mujtaba & Senathip (2020) argue that the let go employees may suffer from depression, anxiety and lack of confidence. Thus, layoffs and dismissals are a crisis in the life of an employee in which the employer should try to help to minimize the negative effects of the situation.

In order to help alleviate employees' negative emotions, employers should be transparent by openly sharing the company's current status and strategy, as this allows employees to anticipate the possibility of layoffs and dismissals (Shlosberg, 2010). If layoffs and dismissals come as surprise, employees are more likely to lose trust in the employer and may be reluctant to return in the future.

Additionally, meanwhile the dismissed employees are let go because there is no need for their work input in the near future, and they have likely been underperforming, the situation with the laid off is different: they are let go because of the company's financial situation, which is more likely the leadership's fault, not employees' (Shlosberg, 2010), although the economic recession is a wider theme which nor the employer or employee can effect. Therefore, in order to reduce the feelings of unfairness, the staff needs to be let go

with dignity, making sure that they are treated respectfully (Shlosberg, 2010). This benefits the organization even in situations where the employee may not be rehired, as employees who feel they were treated fairly during the layoff process tend to be more engaged and productive during their remaining time at the company (Naumann et al., 1998). Furthermore, positive leadership actions, combined with effective communication skills, can eliminate negative work environments and alleviate the pain and anxiety that employees might experience due to layoffs and downsizing (Vlachos, 2013).

According to Dávila and Piña-Ramírez (2014), in order to build trust, managers must listen to their employees, interact with them and show that they care. Similarly, Naumann et al. (1998) argue that, to maintain employee engagement when delivering unwanted news such as layoffs, managers must provide a sufficient explanation for the decision and reinforce the employees' belief that the organization cares about their well-being. Additionally, fostering organizational commitment by demonstrating that employees' contributions are valued and clearly communicating the organization's commitment to them will, in turn, encourage reciprocal commitment from employees (Naumann et al., 1998). By taking these actions, employees are more likely to be interested in returning when their contributions are needed again.

All in all, as the layoffs and dismissals are a major crisis in an employee's life, often leading to negative emotions toward the company and adverse health effects. To ensure that employees are willing to return if needed, companies must handle the layoff process as well as possible. This involves being transparent about the company's financial situation to reduce the element of surprise, treating the departing employees with respect, and demonstrating genuine care. Maintaining active communication with the laid-off employees helps them feel less forgotten and more receptive to the possibility of re-employment.

2.4 Preparing for growth during recession

In their study Danforth et al. (2017) examined the strategies used in US during economic recession and recovery in the construction industry. Part of their study concentrated on human resources related issues, focusing on what people management strategies the companies used and what lessons they learned what could be done better in the future (Danforth et al., 2017).

Regarding staffing control, construction companies aimed to survive the recession by retaining key employees and letting go of underperformers, thereby preparing for the recovery. However, companies with a limited number of market sectors particularly had to let go talented employees, leading to lack of skilled workforce in times of growth, which required training new employees through apprenticeship programs for construction students and newly graduated as well as encouraging youth to apply to study construction. Balancing employee retention and cost reduction was experienced challenging, as cost-cutting involved reducing the workforce, salaries, benefits, and bonuses. These actions led to decrease in employee loyalty and morale. (Danforth et al., 2017).

Additionally, developing employee skills was seen as crucial in terms of preparing for growth, especially given the lack of budget for training during the recession and the loss of skilled employees. This challenge was addressed by creating training programs where older employees shared their industry experience, while younger employees contributed their knowledge of new technologies in construction, such as building information modeling (BIM) and project management software. (Danforth et al., 2017). Furthermore, as other business activities slow down during recession, managers have more opportunities to renew business processes, such as employer branding (Racolta-Pauna & Mone, 2010).

Similarly, Selden (2016) argues that when transitioning from recession to recovery, employers should continue to invest in training and development while also recruiting and retaining diverse workers. However, cost-cutting strategies employed during recession can have a long-lasting effect on the

satisfaction and morale of remaining employees, increaseing the likelyhood that they will seek opportunities elsewhere once the economy recovers and more jobs become available. Therefore, post-recession, employers should continue to invest not only in skills development but also in employee satisfaction, as stressed and disengaged employees can negatively impact an organization's overall success. (Selden, 2016).

On the other hand, there can be also positive outcomes of the recession. Danforth et al. (2017) found that employee attitudes improved when their companies successfully emerged from the recession, as these companies were perceived as financially stable. This perception boosted employees' confidence in the company's leadership, processes, and overall stability. Respondents also admired companies that viewed the recession not as a threat, but as an opportunity for industry and self-improvement, which reportedly boosted individual employee morale. (Danforth et al., 2017).

All in all, various strategies can be implemented when preparing for recovery, but ensuring having skilled workforce is especially important. This can be achieved by offering continouous training and skills development. During large-scale layoffs, even talented employees may be let go, making it valuable for departing employees to share their knowledge with others before leaving the company. Additionally, a recession can provide an opportunity to renew HR processes, as there may be more time available due to a reduced need for recruitment, allowing organizations to better prepare for future growth.

2.5 Theoretical model

This chapter presents the theoretical framework of the study, conceptualizing how the Finnish construction companies can prepare for the growth in terms of workforce. The framework is formed by combining the key elements of previous literature, starting with dismissing and laying off employees due to recession, retention of remaining employees during recession, and finally re-employing the former employees during recovery. In all these stages,

employer branding is important and therefore visualized as an overarching concept in the theoretical model.

When dismissing and laying off employees, it is crucial to manage their experience in a way that encourages them to return during times of growth. This benefits the companies as rehiring former employees is cost-effective as there is no need for extensive recruitment process and onboarding (Jaye, 2021). Effectively managing the experience of laid-off and dismissed employees is particularly important, as layoffs and dismissals can have negative impacts on employees' feelings towards the organization (Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020). By treating the let go employees with respect, being transparent about the company's financial situation, actively listening and engaging with them, as well as demonstrating genuine care, companies can mitigate the negative feelings ((Dávila & Piña-Ramírez, 2014; Vlachos, 2013). This approach increases the likelihood that the let go employees will be interested in returning when needed.

As another strategy on preparing for the future growth in terms of workforce, it is essential for companies to retain their remaining staff through employee engagement practices. Layoffs and dismissals can diminish the engagement and productivity of remaining employees, leading them to seek employment elsewhere (Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020). Employee engagement can be enhanced by meeting employee expectations through transparent communication about the job (Rayton & Yalabik, 2014), fostering psychological safety (Tiwari & Lenka, 2016), providing development opportunities to motivate employees who are eager to learn (Gruman & Saks, 2011; Xanthopoulou et al., 2009), offering flexible work arrangements to mitigate work-family conflict (Nohe & Sonntag, 2014), and providing benefits such as bonuses and well-being incentives (Farndale & Murrer, 2015; De la Torre-Ruiz et al., 2019). Additionally, offering supervisor support and building trust as well as hearing employee voice (Holland et al., 2017) can further enhance engagement. By implementing these practices, the construction companies can ensure that their remaining employees are more satisfied and productive.

Other strategies on preparing for the future growth in terms of particularly crucial, as budget constraints during recession may have limited training opportunities for remaining employees (Danforth et al., 2017). Many skills were lost when laid off and dismissed employees left the organization, and re-employed staff who have been outside of working life will also require training. Additionally, with a reduced need for recruitment, companies have more time to renew their HR processes, such as employer branding and recruitment processes, making them as effective as possible to better prepare for the growth.

At every stage, effective employer branding is crucial, as it boosts employee engagement and enhances corporate reputation among remaining employees, laid-off and dismissed employees, potential new employees, and other key stakeholders, including prospective customers. Therefore, maintaining employer branding during recession is essential for competing in the war of talent during times of recovery.

In conclusion, the theoretical model presented below demonstrates how Finnish construction companies can effectively prepare for the growth economy in terms of workforce. By focusing on managing employee experience during layoffs and dismissals, actively engaging the remaining workforce, fostering skills development during the recovery phase, and rehiring the let go employees in times of recovery, construction companies can ensure they remain competitive in the war of talent when the economy starts growing again.

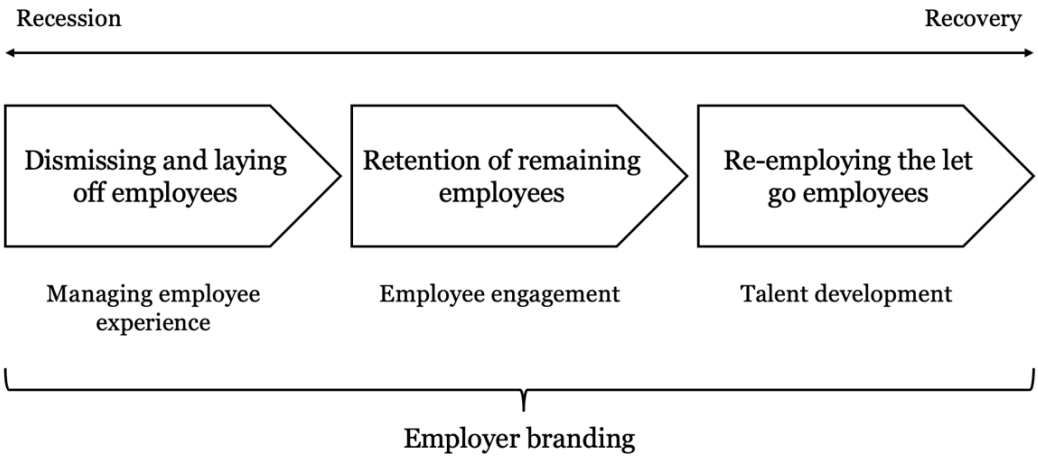

Figure 1. Visualized theoretical framework.

3 Methodology

This chapter describes the methodological decisions made for the study. The first subchapter describes the approach of the study and general qualitative tradition followed in the research. The second subchapter instead, describes the research context. In the third subchapter, the data collection methods and sample are described. Finally, in the fourth subchapter, the analysis methods are described.

3.1 Research approach and general qualitative tradition followed

A qualitative research approach is suitable for answering the research questions as the goal is to investigate a phenomenon and to deepen understanding of it (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2019, 13). This study is a case study without any specific qualitative tradition followed.

Gustafsson (2017) describes a case study as an in-depth examination of an individual, a group or a specific unit, with the goal of drawing broader conclusions across multiple units. Similarly, Thomas (2011) suggests that a case study involves analyzing systems using a comprehensive perspective, often utilizing one or more methods. However, according to Cousin (2005), the primary goal of a case study is not merely to analyze cases, but rather define them and explore a particular context in order to understand it. In another words, an aim of a case study is to deepen understanding of a topic by studying it in practice.

This study employs a case study approach to investigate complex business issues and represent the findings in a down-to-earth way (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, 117). More precisely, the chosen approach is a multiple case study as several companies are investigated in order to examine patterns, differences and similarities across multiple cases, as the approach offers insights that might not appear from studying a single case (Yin, 2009). Similarly, Baxter and Jack (2008, as cited in Gustafsson, 2017) state that, a key

difference between a single case study and a multiple case study is that, in the latter, multiple cases are examined to gain insight into both the differences and similarities among them. Another advantage of a multiple case study is that it enables the researcher to analyze the data both within each individual case and across multiple cases (Yin, 2009). Additionally, as the practices might differ a lot in different companies, having multiple cases as well as comparing the findings to previous research increases the reliability of the study (Baxter & Jack, 2008, as cited in Gustafsson, 2017).

Therefore, by employing a multiple case study method, the goal of this study is to analyze the findings by comparing the similarities and differences across various companies. Subsequently, these findings are compared to existing literature and the theoretical model. As such, the study follows a comparative multiple case study approach. Finally, by using this approach and comparing the findings to previous literature, this study aims to provide insights for Finnish construction companies how they can better compete in terms of workforce after the recession.

3.2 Research context

The research context for this study is the employee retention and re-employment practices of Finnish construction companies during recession. More specifically, the research focuses on the context of economic recession started from the COVID-19 pandemic and deepened by Russia's attack to Ukraine in 2022, which has especially affected the construction industry (Muilu, 2023).

The case companies consist of five different Finnish construction companies that are defined as big, meaning they all have more than 250 employees (Yrittäjät). However, some companies are significantly bigger than others. Some also operate in other countries among Finland but in order to keep to companies anonymous no further information is provided.

Five case companies were selected for this study to enhance its reliability, as practices can vary significantly between different companies (Baxter & Jack, 2008, as cited in Gustafsson, 2017). Additionally, this selection helps to

gather more information of how the topics of this study are applied in practice. Including multiple case companies also allows for identifying similarities and differences across them and facilitates comparison of the findings with previous research (Yin, 2009).

Finnish case companies were specifically chosen to examine how construction companies in Finland prepare for the growth economy in terms of workforce. If a company were part of a larger group or had an international parent company, external orders could influence its operations, thereby affecting the study's focus on local practices. Additionally, companies involved in residential construction were selected for this study, as this sector has been hit hardest from the recession. These companies have likely faced layoffs and employee dismissals, that way being able to provide valuable information for this study. Large case companies were chosen because they are more likely to have established processes for human resource management, whereas smaller companies may lack such organization.

Among residential construction, the companies specialize in a wide range of services such as business premises, repair and infrastructure construction as well as other services like energy, building technology and property development services. Because of the sensitivity of the topics of this study, the companies and interviewees will be kept anonymous. Therefore, the information provided about the companies and interviewees in this study is presented in such a way that neither individuals nor companies can be identified.

As shown in Table 1, the sizes of the companies vary, with the smallest company in this case study having approximately 400 employees, while the largest companies have over 1000 employees. Additionally, the smallest company in terms of turnover has an annual turnover of around 200 million euros, whereas the largest companies' turnover exceeds 700 million euros per year. The number of employees in 2022, the turnover in 2022, and the services by each company are presented from largest to smallest below.

Company	Number of employees in 2022	Turnover in 2022 (euros)	Services
A	Over 1000	Over 700 million	Residential, business premises, repair and infrastructure construction
B	Over 1000	Over 700 million	Residential, business premises, repair and infrastructure construction, energy, life cycle and building technology services
C	Over 700	Over 500 million	Residential, business premises and repair construction, life cycle services, property development
D	Over 500	Over 200 million	Residential, service and business premises construction, property development
E	Around 400	Around 400 million	Residential, business premises and repair construction, property development

Table 1. Case companies from largest to smallest according to the number of employees in 2022.

The employees of the companies consist of various experts beginning from blue-collar workers that some are outsourced, construction supervisors, project-, site- and production engineers, responsible site managers, construction

managers, project managers, support functions like HR, financial management, along with other administrative services, culminating with the top management. Further details about the interviewees are provided in the following subchapter.

3.3 Data collection methods and sample

The interviewing method was chosen because interviews are an effective, practical way to gather data that is not elsewhere available (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, 81). The interviews were semi-structured as among covering certain themes there is autonomy to explore ideas that come up during the interviews (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). This approach considered beneficial as it allowed the interviewees to introduce ideas related to the topic that were not identified as important during the planning of the interview questions.

The semi-structured interviews were built around the themes of literature review. The interview guide was prepared beforehand and used in every interview. However, as every interview is different, there were changes on the order of the questions and what other unplanned ideas came up in the conversation.

Primary data was collected by interviewing the people working closely with people management and employer branding in the case companies as they have the best understanding on how the companies ensure having enough workforce after recession. Four of the interviewees primarily worked with people management or recruitment and one primarily worked with communication. Four interviewees were female, and one was male. Four out of five interviewees had worked in construction industry for more than 10 years, so they had a good understanding on regarding the challenges of getting enough workforce during growth economy. All interviewees were in responsible management positions, but two of them were particularly high in the hierarchy as they were part of the management team. Because of the sensitivity of the study, the interviewees will be kept anonymous.

Employer company	Responsibilities
A	Recruitment, workforce availability and retention
B	Human resource management of entire company
C	Human resource management of the business area
D	Communication and marketing
E	Human resource management of entire company

Table 2. Description of the interviewee's backgrounds and responsibilities.

Each interview was conducted online in Teams and lasted approximately 45 minutes. Each session included 10 questions (as presented in Appendix 1) along with follow-up questions. All interviews were recorded and transcribed with the interviewees' permission. The language of each interview was Finnish.

3.4 Data analysis

The data will be analyzed by comparative case study analysis method, with the help of thematic- and cross-case analysis. Thematic analysis will be used in order to identify patterns and themes in the interviews (Braun & Claurke, 2006, 79), as it is a good way to analyze qualitative data. The method suits well for this study because of the semi-structured interviews focusing on specific themes so similarities will be found in every interview. After that, the comparative analysis research method will be employed to identify patterns, trends, and differences across companies through cross-case analysis. In the fifth chapter, this comparative analysis will be further expanded by comparing the findings to previous research.

The data analysis starts by systematically going through the automatic transcriptions formed by Teams. After familiarizing with the data, analysis will start by generating codes, then forming categories out of the codes, finding themes and concepts based on the categories, and finally, forming a theory based on the themes and concepts (Saldana, 2013).

Additionally, similarities and differences will be identified by comparing the interview findings across different companies. Best practices and effective strategies will be identified based on actions observed in various companies, while differences are also noted. Finally, in the fifth subchapter, the interview findings are compared to previous research to determine whether they align with each other. The findings of the interviews are presented alongside the theoretical model developed based on previous literature, taking into account the model's applicability in the light of the interview findings. Based on the results of the comparison between companies and previous research, conclusions will be drawn and final recommendations provided.

3.5 Evaluation of the study

In terms of reliability, this study can be easily repeated by interviewing human resource managers of Finnish construction companies. However, the world changes all the time and so do the organizations, so most likely the findings are not exactly same, especially if focusing on different case companies. In order to improve the reliability of this study, multiple case companies were chosen to be interviewed, and the interviews were planned carefully basing on the theory of literature review. However, as this is a qualitative study, the results depend on the researcher's own interpretations.

In terms of validity, the aim has been to increase it by conducting the literature review carefully in order to generate a good understanding of the research topic. That way, also interview guide was created carefully basing on the literature review and then analyzed by widely used thematic method as well as comparative case study analysis.

Finally, when it comes to generalizability of the results, as this is a case study, the aim was not to produce generalized knowledge (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 122). However, the aim was to investigate the topic of in the context of Finnish construction companies during recession, so that as the construction industry is cyclical, the Finnish construction companies would benefit on knowing how they can prepare for the next growth economy in terms of work-force. Therefore, the results may be generalized in Finnish context among big construction companies.

4 Findings

In this chapter, the main findings from the interviews are presented, beginning with the effect of the recession on company workforce in the first subchapter, remaining as an attractive employer in the second subchapter, ensuring that the laid off and dismissed employees want to return in the third subchapter, preparing for the growth economy in terms of workforce in the fourth subchapter, and finally, in the fifth subchapter there is a summary of all of the findings.

4.1 Effects of the recession on company workforce

Some case companies have suffered more from the economic recession than others. For example, company C has dismissed or laid off 180 employees, while company E has dismissed or laid off only 15 employees in total. Company B had dismissed and laid off around 100 employees whereas company A had dismissed 60 and laid off numerous employees on top of that but did not reveal the exact number. The interviewee from company D could not provide the exact number of dismissed and laid off employees, but according to Finder (2024), since 2020 the workforce has decreased by approximately 60 since 2020. Considering recent change negotiations and unaccounted layoffs, the total reduction is likely around 80 to 100 employees.

Additionally, company A reported that only a few new projects have been started meanwhile there are a lot of unsold apartments. Residential construction business area has been suffering from the recession the most, which has led to dismissing and laying off mostly construction workers and supervisors.

Company B has had two rounds of change negotiations in the past three years, involving operational restructuring and financial arrangements. To minimize layoffs and dismissals, the company has reallocated employees from residential construction to business premises construction where there have been more ongoing projects. Company C also suffered from a lack of projects, resulting in a 10% reduction in workforce.

Company D, on the other hand, had gone through process changes, ventured into new business areas by focusing on business-to-business sales. These organizational changes resulted in two rounds of change negotiations, involving both layoffs and numerous dismissals within a year. Though the exact number is unknown, Finder (2024) estimates around 60 dismissals, not accounting the layoffs or the result of latest change negotiations.

Finally, company E, similarly to company B, has reallocated employees from residential construction to business premises projects where there has been more need for workforce. The recession has not impacted company E as much as many competitors. A significant factor in their success is focusing on customer-ordered projects instead of self-financed ones, reducing the risk of unsold apartments. Additionally, being a private company, profits have not been paid to owners which has supported its financial position.

Company	**Effects of the recession on workforce**
A	Few new projects caused many layoffs especially in residential construction, including 60 dismissals last year.
B	Nearly 100 layoffs or dismissals. Reallocating employees to busier business premises construction.
C	Due to fewer construction sites, change negotiations resulted in nearly 100 layoffs and 80 dismissals.
D	Process changes, B2B focus, and restructuring led to layoffs and dismissals, with about 60 dismissals estimated.
E	Around 15 layoffs or dismissals. Reallocating employees to busier business premises construction.

Table 3. Description of effects of the recession on company workforce.

4.2 Employer branding during recession

As according to previous research layoffs and dismisses harm employer brand in the eyes of both remaining and let go employees (Shlosberg, 2010), the interviewees were asked how they aim to remain as an attractive employer during recession and how they ensure that current employees stay.

4.2.1 External employer branding

Two interviewees felt that it was not a right time to do external employer branding because they had just completed change negotiations, as it might create negative feelings for the dismissed and laid off employees and would not be based on realism:

"We have been maintaining low profile in terms of promoting our employer brand, especially given the high number of dismissals and layoffs over the past year and a half. Particularly for those who have had to leave us, we want to avoid creating a negative image. Additionally, if there are many laid off employees, it is hard to communicate externally that apply to us." (Company A)

"When it comes to external communication and employer branding, especially during times of change negotiations and layoffs, we cannot portray our employer brand in a positive light. We can't boast about how great it is to work here or highlight our excellent benefits when the reality is that we have to dismiss and lay off employees." (Company D)

On the other hand, some companies wanted to continue external employer branding through internship programs. Despite the hard situations, the recruitment process and employment of interns were seen as a way to stand out from competitors and leave a positive image of the company in the eyes of both selected and non-selected applicants. Interns were also seen as a most

significant source of employees and some companies were aware that organizing internship programs will help them compete in the war of talent in the future when they are back in times of growth:

"We haven't completely cut back on these programs because we know we will need them in the future. We have tried to take as many as we realistically can, and this year about 50 trainees have started, with more on the way. We have received a good number of applications. I'm not sure if it's because they specifically want to work with us or if the overall job market for trainees is so bad that other construction companies can't take as many." (Company C)

"We're trying to stand out in the internship search and approached it differently this year compared to many of our competitors. After selecting our summer trainees, we organize various events for them as a group throughout the summer (…). Typically, the internship application process can be quite long, so this year we had just a two-week application period. Throughout the process, we made an effort to provide continuous feedback and updates to the applicants. We even offered personal feedback on their applications if they requested it, and 70 individuals took advantage of this." (Company B)

According to the interviewee from company B, the recruitment process for interns served both as an employer branding exercise and an opportunity to meet each other. They invested in the job seeker experience by offering personal feedback to every applicant, and they also told the end result quicker than it is typically done. Additionally, they made great efforts on internship experience for the selected candidates by organizing events where they could get to know each other and have fun as a group. By executing the recruitment process well, even the applicants who are not selected will have a positive image of the company:

"Our application process included group interviews at our headquarters, where applicants met our leaders and learned about our strategy and sustainability efforts. Former interns also shared their experiences. This approach received very positive feedback from both the applicants and our supervisors." (Company B)

4.3 Retention of remaining employees

The companies had various ways to ensure that their current employees stay. Firstly, four out of five companies reported actively measuring job satisfaction through employee surveys and addressing potential issues that arise. Secondly, open communication and visioning the future was seen important in terms of building we-spirit, trust and sense of security. Thirdly, despite of the layoffs and dismisses, the companies wanted to invest in remaining personnel by organizing events in order to do team building. Fourthly, some companies offered possibilities for employees to develop their skills. Finally, employee benefits were reviewed, and some had improved them during the recession.

4.3.1 Monitoring employee satisfaction by surveys

Employee surveys were seen as a tool to stay up to date on employees' feelings and spot how different groups of people experienced things and predict the potential issues, and after that think how their job satisfaction could be improved:

"We cannot identify individuals [from the survey], but we can still examine the data quite effectively through various backgrounds. This allows us to look at the data by specific team or business unit (...). For example, we can see how young men or older employees experience things differently. This way, we can better understand what issues might arise and think about how to improve the satisfaction and meaningfulness of work for different groups." (Company A)

Even though they had conducted employee surveys already before recession, interviewee from company A mentioned that due to recession they felt that significant changes were not seen through lighter surveys. Therefore, they started to do surveys more actively, highlighting identified issues and ensuring that actions are taken to address them:

"The follow-up survey is crucial (...). For the teams that had the weakest results, we conduct the survey again to see if the agreed-upon measures have started to make a difference about six months later. This way, we aim to determine whether we have succeeded in addressing these various issues." (Company A)

Also companies B, C and E reported measuring employee satisfaction by surveys:

"We measure our employee engagement quarterly and conduct regular employee surveys. While we noticed a decline in our recommended ENPS (Employee Net Promoter Score) during the change negotiations, just last week we took the latest survey. According to the survey, we are now experiencing record-high results." (Company B)

"We conduct an annual employee survey, where we naturally monitor certain aspects to assess how our employees are feeling and thriving here." (Company C)

"Our employee survey results from last all show that our ENPS is historically high, increasing many years in a row." (Company E)

4.3.2 Future-centered communication

During the challenging financial situation caused by the recession, open communication was seen as crucial for building trust. Some companies focused on the future by discussing their direction, fostering a sense of unity and team spirit by highlighting that this is the current situation, but we will overcome this together. By concentrating on the future, the attention was shifted from current challenges to more hopeful scenarios:

"When leadership communicates, there is a strong emphasis on the future. They talk about what we want to be and the direction we are heading towards. The aim is to instill confidence that once the situation turns around, we will be ready to tackle things more effectively. This future-focused approach is essential, as it keeps as from dwelling on the current challenges." (Company A)

"The communication has heavily focused on the strategy and its process. Even though our financial situation has been tight and remains challenging, we emphasize that our strategy is advancing and working." (Company D)

Among communicating internally how the current strategy is processing and functioning, the primary focus of company D was to create a sense of security so that employees feel that there will be work in the future as well and they do not have to be afraid of losing their jobs:

"We highlight project wins and securing a good order backlog, which fosters confidence that current employees will have work and, hopefully, in the future, those who have been laid off or dismissed will as well." (Company D)

Due to launching new strategy company D also wanted to improve engagement by increasing internal communication. They started organizing Teams-meetings where their CEO updated on the current situation and next steps. Additionally, the leadership started visiting different offices and discussing the strategy and development ideas with employees:

"During the strategy tours, both the CEO and the development manager visit regional offices, allowing them to meet employees face to face. This enables more detailed discussions about progress, questions, and ideas for improvement." (Company D)

4.3.3 Team building activities

Despite of the challenging financial situation, events for employees were seen as essential way to do team building and build company culture as well as to send a message to remaining employees that they are valued:

"We have focused on community spirit during the past year, trying to create company culture by organizing events and other occasions. Maybe that's something that we have put in more effort than before. Even though we had change negotiations recently, and it was said that we shouldn't organize celebrations in order to cut costs, we decided to do it anyways as we want to take good care of our employees." (Company B)

Additionally, Company E had continued organizing celebrations and other events for employees in order to support team building and sense of belonging, all though they had had to cut down costs from the events in order to prevent the dismissed and laid off employees feel that they are spending a lot of money for fun meanwhile they lost their jobs:

"We have a summer party planned for all our employees. Additionally, various units are organizing wellbeing days and similar activities to promote team building and sense of belonging. Of course, we have had to lower our altitude a bit due to the current financial situation. We don't want it to seem like some are just having fun and spending money while others lose their jobs." (Company E)

4.3.4 Offering development possibilities

Offering development possibilities was seen as a way to engage employees and that way ensure their retention. Company C had just launched a training program for site managers as they are the ones that lead the construction projects:

"We're trying to develop skills and provide opportunities for individuals to grow. For instance, we just launched an academy program as we want to invest in the growth of our people (…). The main goal is to introduce our ways of working, including our systems, digitalization, leadership, and production expertise. This training is particularly designed for the site managers as the construction projects are at the core of our strategy." (Company C)

The training program was seen crucial for future in order to make sure that the knowledge exists in the company even if some employees would go elsewhere. Additionally, by training the aim was to make the production more efficient and that way save costs. Thus, offering development possibilities were not only seen as way to engage current employees but also as direct competitive advantage for the company:

"When the growth economy starts and likely lasts for several years, construction companies will compete for the same skilled workers. There will be offers from other companies, so through the academy we want to share our existing in-house expertise with our current employees. This way, we aim to increase productivity and efficiency." (Company C)

On the other hand, due to change negotiations and strategy changes, employees in company D had had to develop their skills due to changes in their roles. Therefore, instead of offering optional development possibilities that would help on moving forward in their career, the remaining people were forced to adapt new skills. These changes were perceived as difficult:

"Of course [we are trying to remain our employees satisfied] but given that we have had two rounds of change negotiations within a year, it means we're practically in a state of continuous change. People have had to redefine their roles, and with the new strategy, there's been a lot of change over the past year. Constant change is always quite challenging." (Company D)

4.3.5 Employee benefits

Employee benefits were also seen as an important factor on keeping the remaining employees satisfied. Company C, for example, had increased some benefits despite of the challenging financial situation:

"On a smaller scale, we have also reviewed our employee benefits. Despite the poor market situation, we increased our sports and culture benefit." (Company C)

Similarly, company E wanted to focus on employee satisfaction by offering drinks and snacks as well as a free breakfast once a week:

"At all our offices and most construction sites with offices, we offer refreshments like soft drinks, coffee, and tea, along with fruits and various snacks to enhance workplace well-being. Additionally, every Tuesday morning, we offer breakfast for entire staff at these offices." (Company E)

Additionally, they offered sports and culture benefits as well as other benefits that support mental and physical well-being. Meanwhile it felt contradictory that they put a lot of money in employee well-being while others lost their jobs, they did not want to reduce the benefits, as they felt that retaining employee satisfaction is more important than cutting down the costs:

"In a way it's like throwing money around while some are out of work, but we really want to maintain a certain standard. Spreading and expanding misery would not improve anyone's situation. We haven't given up on our employee benefits: we offer wellness benefits that include options for massage and dental care, insurances as well as company bicycles to employees who want to utilize them as part of their benefits package." (Company E)

4.4 Ensuring that let go employees want to return

As it is predicted that the growth economy starts next year (Raeste 2024)., and since before the recession construction industry suffered from labor shortage (Rakennuslehti, 2021), the interviewees were asked if they have prepared for the growth in terms of workforce, and how do they ensure that the laid off and dismissed employees want to return.

Active communication with the laid off employees was seen as an essential way to manage employee experience, knowing how the laid off employees are feeling and making sure they know what the current job situation looks like, hoping that this way they would want to return when there is enough work:

"We aim to keep in touch with the laid off employees, not so much with the dismissed ones. I don't know if 'active' is the right term, but we aim to have

active and regular communication with them, so they know what's going on and don't feel forgotten." (Company A)

"We have advised the supervisors to keep in touch with laid off employees and inform them about the situation, such as how many people are currently working with calculation, and what are the workload and overall situation like. This way, we maintain a connection with them, create a sense that they aren't completely forgotten, and that way they might want to return to work here." (Company C)

"The supervisors are aware of how each laid off employee felt when they left and whether they have hopes of returning or what their plans might be. Many keep in touch with their colleagues, and when new job openings come up, the news spread quickly." (Company D)

"Supervisors do keep in touch with laid off employees, maintaining a connection and discussing the current work situation, letting them know we are doing our best to keep everyone employed. We also have conversations to understand their personal preferences or needs and try to accommodate them as much as possible when timing their return." (Company E)

Interviewee from Company E also reported that they have trained supervisors on understanding what kind of experiences people have in terms of laying off and dismissing, and how different personalities should be encountered:

"[In the leadership training day] we talked about how to interact with different types of people in daily situations and how to work with them. For example, when there come layoffs, the experiences vary greatly depending on the individual." (Company E)

However, when asked if they have specific processes in place for maintaining communication with the let go employees, all companies responded with a no. The amount of communication relied on supervisors' intuition:

"No, not necessarily. It may be agreed upon differently in each business unit, how often they communicate and what the standard discussions look like, but there isn't a standardized process. In some units, there are long-term layoffs, while others might have shorter, more segmented ones, so it's a bit different, which makes it hard to create a black and white approach. (…). Usually, former supervisors are the ones who keep in touch with them." (Company A)

"Regarding the individuals, [the amount of communication] it depends on them, so there isn't a separate process for that (…). Mostly the communication relies on offering new jobs every other week, which is legislate and managed by HR." (Company B)

"No, there isn't anything like a shared process. It [the amount of communication] entirely depends on the supervisor and how they choose to implement it." (Company C)

"There are no certain communication processes to let go employees. It isn't in the communication unit's agenda." (Company D)

"It largely depends on the supervisor's intuition regarding the situation. Some individuals may prefer not to be contacted because they have other things going on during their layoff. We are not a very process-driven organization, we haven't wanted to create rigid rules or guidelines here. Instead, we believe more in having a solid foundation and ensuring certain things are taken care of, but we trust that we have capable leaders and supervisors who can apply their judgment and handle the situation effectively." (Company E)

When asked, if the companies had maintained contact with former employees before the recession, it occurred that is not processes for alumnis either:

"There isn't a concrete practice for this, at least not as an initiative led by the company (…). Some individuals have organized informal alumni

gatherings from time to time, which have been quite successful, but there is no formal practice in place." (Company A)

"There is no formal alumni practice in place, although we have considered organizing something at some point. We do have informal gatherings where individuals meet, but these are not initiated by the employer. Additionally, we have an annual event where we invite all our staff and stakeholders. Some key former employees, that are wanted back, are also invited to this event, but there isn't any systematic alumni engagement happening." (Company B)

"The individuals who have been with the company for a long time have developed strong networks and friendships, maintaining contact with each other. However, I don't think there is any systematic approach to this." (Company C)

"There hasn't been an alumni practice in place. It hasn't bee included in any processes or on the communication agenda in any way." (Company D)

"While there is some employee turnover, we don't have any formal operational model in place for maintaining alumni relations." (Company C)

In terms of ensuring that the let go employees want to return, unlike the other companies, Company A offered training for the employees that had been laid off for a long time, aiming to train some of the laid off workers to be future trainers in times of growth, hoping that this way they will likely return:

"We have started offering internal training for our long-term laid off employees. The goal is to train some of them to become trainers themselves. This way, we also aim to increase their interest in continuing to work with us in the future." (Company A)

However, not all employees were necessarily wanted back, all though the laid off were kept in touch with at least by sending legitimate letters about new job openings. Therefore, the recession was seen as a possibility to get rid of underperformers by dismissing them:

*"If we dismiss a person, we see that in the near future there will not be the type of work that this person can do. And then again, if we lay off, we believe that there will be work for these skills and this person (…). I would hope that we have successfully chosen those individuals who have the greatest motivation, passion and drive to work with us in the future, however, the reality is that it's challenging to identify all the underperformers." (*Company A)

"To be honest, there are some people who we hope will find employment elsewhere. But of course, we still keep in touch with them. For example, a supervisor might give a call especially to the ones who actively ensure that they remain on the job market. We also comply with the legal requirements for offering work, meaning we constantly send them letters whenever a new position becomes available. From the HR side, we maintain contact to stay up to date with their situation." (Company B)

"To be frank, I believe that there are both cases. Of course, we are not aiming to let go the best employees. However, in certain roles, I believe that some good employees might have also been let go." (Company C)

"To be honest, no company dismisses its top performers first. If we're being blunt, these moments also provide companies an opportunity to clean up the organization a bit." (Company E)

4.5 Preparing for growth in terms of workforce

The interviewees reported that aside retaining the current employees by employer branding and ensuring that the laid off employees want to return by managing their experience they have been preparing for the growth economy by developing processes and skills.

Three interviewees reported that they are working on developing HR processes, because when the growth starts there will not be time for that. These processes included improving employer branding and recruitment processes as well as increasing partnerships with educational institutions:

"We have been improving our recruitment processes behind the scenes, so that we can effectively address workforce availability challenges. Through this, we are developing and evolving our employer branding efforts and recruitment marketing, considering how we could identify the key attractors for future talent. While we may not be able to communicate this extensively at this stage, we are creating the framework for future communication." (Company A)

"We are definitely focusing on our recruitment strategy by considering our employer brand. We need to think how we present ourselves and make our company attractive so that people want to work here. Of course, we have also discussed a lot about partnership with educational institutions and the need to invest more in that area. Practically, we are rethinking the entire recruitment process, including basic things like job postings and onboarding of new employees. We need to reassess everything from the start because once the growth begins, there is no time to think – we just have to act." (Company C)

Additionally, interviewee from Company E felt that developing operations and employee skills are the most important way to stay competitive in times of growth, as when the organization is skilled there is no need to recruit a lot at once, and that way they will not suffer from manpower shortage that much:

"We are investing in developing our operations and supporting employee skills, as this way, when we experience growth again, hopefully soon, we won't find ourselves in a situation where we need to recruit heavily or where our operations are disrupted." (Company E)

Similarly, as mentioned in the previous subchapter, company A trained long-term laid-off employees in order to make sure to have skilled workforce when they return to work during times of growth. Additionally, interviewee from Company D reported that employees are continuously trained and taught new skills in order to keep up with the new strategy:

People have had to redefine their roles, and with the new strategy, there has been a lot of change over the past year." (Company D)

As another concrete example, Company A had started building their own headhunting unit, as a way to differentiate from competitors and getting competitive advantage from the direct approach with potential candidates:

"We have started building our own direct search functionality, as we have noticed and confirmed through studies that headhunters often contact certain employee groups frequently, but rarely get direct calls from people in the construction companies. Therefore, we want to take the initiative to contact these people ourselves, as it might be more successful." (Company A)

4.6 Summary of the findings

As summarized in Table 3, the recession impacted the case companies in various ways, with some experiencing more severe effects than others, effecting the resources they had to invest on human resource management. Except for company E, all the companies reported nearly 100 layoffs or dismissals, although some did not disclose the exact numbers.

Secondly, as shown in Table 4 below, two case companies felt that it is not the right time to focus on external employer branding, as highlighting themselves as attractive employers might provoke negative feelings among the let go employees. In contrast, two other case companies continued their employer branding efforts through internship programs, which they viewed as a significant source of potential employees. Therefore, it is safe to conclude, that the case companies did not have shared practices regarding employer branding.

Thirdly, the case companies employed different strategies to ensure the retention of remaining employees. A shared practice was identified as four of the companies reported conducting surveys to monitor employee satisfaction and address potential issues. The companies were not as aligned in other employee engagement practices, although some similarities were found between

different pairs of companies. Two companies aimed to shift employees' focus to more optimistic scenarios through future-centered communication. Additionally, two companies organized team-building activities to foster team spirit and demonstrate appreciation for their remaining employees. Furthermore, two companies enhanced or maintained employee benefits such as sports and culture benefits, free breakfasts and other initiatives to keep employees satisfied. Differing from others, only one company reported engaging employees by offering skills development opportunities.

Fourthly, to encourage laid off employees to return, a common practice among the majority was that four out of five case companies sought to maintain a connection with them through regular communication, ensuring that they feel valued. However, all companies reported that they do not have specific processes for communicating with the let go employees, the frequency of communication instead depends on the supervisors' discretion and intuition. Differentiating from others, one company also offered training for long-term laid-off employees to increase their likelihood of returning. Another company reported training supervisors on understanding the let go employees' feelings and how to encounter them. However, three case companies indicated that they do not necessarily want all let go employees to return, viewing the recession as an opportunity to get rid of underperformers.

Finally, a shared practice regarding preparing for the growth economy in terms of workforce was developing HR processes, such as recruitment strategies and employer branding, as three case companies reported to do so. Additionally, three companies focused on developing the remaining and laid off employees' skills to reduce the need for extensive recruitment during times of growth. One company also reported increasing partnerships with educational institutions to prepare for future workforce needs. Another case company also concentrated on building own direct search unit to proactively approach potential candidates, thereby differentiating from competitors.

Area of preparing for growth in terms of workforce	**Strategy employed**	**Company employing the strategy**
Employer branding	Pausing external employer branding as it needs to base on realism	A, D
	Continuing external employer branding through internship programs	C, B
Retention of remaining employees	Monitoring employee satisfaction by surveys and addressing potential issues	A, B, C, E
	Shifting attention to more hopeful scenarios by future-centered communication	A, D
	Encouraging employees to share ideas and participate in decision-making	D
	Arranging celebrations and events to foster team spirit	B, E

	Offering development possibilities through training programs	C
	Not cutting on or increasing employee benefits such as sports and culture benefits	C, E
Ensuring that the let go employees are willing to return	Active communication with the laid off employees	A, C, D, E
	No specific processes regarding communication to let go employees during recession nor to other former employees before recession	A, B, C, D, E
	Training supervisors to encounter let go employees	E
	Offering training for long-term laid off employees	A
	Not necessarily wanting back all of the let go employees	A, B, C, E
Other strategies on preparing for the growth	Developing HR processes	A, C, E
	Building own direct search unit	A

	Increasing partnerships with educational institutions	C
	Developing employee skills	A, D, E

Table 4. Summary of the findings.

5 Discussions and conclusions

This chapter discusses the main findings and provides conclusions for the study. The first subchapter discusses the main findings from the interviews, comparing the strategies employed by the case companies to prepare for the growth economy in terms of workforce, and relating these strategies to the theoretical framework established from previous research. This framework includes studies on employee dismissals, layoffs, and retention of remaining staff during recession, as well as re-employing previously let go employees after recession, having employer branding as an overarching concept.

Given that the purpose of this research was to explore how Finnish construction companies prepare for workforce demands in a growing economy, the processes and practices of the case companies are critically evaluated considering existing theories on the subject. Based on these discussions, several concrete recommendations and suggestions are provided for the companies. In the end of the first subchapter, the applicability of the theoretical model is discussed and visualized (Graph 2).

The second subchapter provides managerial implications while the third subchapter addresses the limitations of the study. After that, the fourth subchapter offers suggestions for future research. Finally, the last subchapter summarizes the study and concludes the paper.

5.1 Discussion of the main findings

All in all, this research has shown that preparing for the growth economy in terms of workforce is a complex task that requires careful attention to managing employee experience of those who are laid off and dismissed in order to protect the employer brand and ensure that they are willing to return when needed. Equally important is to maintain the engagement of remaining employees, whose motivation may decline due to layoffs and dismissals, potentially leading them to seek employment elsewhere. Additionally, construction

companies must ensure that their employees' skills remain competitive in order to be well-prepared for future growth.

The case companies were in varying situations regarding the impact of the economic recession. Some had had to lay off significantly more staff than others, and while some had sufficient resources to support the satisfaction of their current employees, others were constrained by budget cuts, which included reductions in employee benefits. These differences naturally influenced the findings, but they also provided a diverse range of responses.

In terms of employer branding, the interview findings somewhat diverged from the recommendations of previous research. Two case companies felt that it was not the right time to engage in external employer branding. Given that they had recently had to lay off and dismiss employees, promoting themselves as an attractive workplace could potentially provoke negative feelings among those who were let go. Although previous research recommends not halting employer branding during a recession, it is encouraging that these companies acknowledge the importance of grounding their employer branding efforts in reality.

Consistent with previous research, it is important not to misrepresent the situation, especially during challenging times (Mandhanya & Shah, 2010; Dàvila and Piña-Ramírez, 2014). Conversely, two other companies continued external employer branding by organizing internship programs. These programs were viewed as a crucial source of future talent, and the recruitment process served as an effective way to market the company to potential employees, even those who were not selected. This is in line with previous research, as it is suggested that employer branding is particularly important during a recession, as it is vital for growth (Mandhanya & Shah, 2010; Goswami & Agarwal, 2015). Thus, it is positive that these two companies maintained their employer branding activities.

Nevertheless, for companies that have completely paused their employer branding efforts, it would be beneficial to explore ways to communicate positive aspects both externally and internally to mitigate the negative impact of downsizing on employer brand value (Campos-García & Zúñiga- Vicente, 2017). For example, they could highlight that the company remains a secure employer with new opportunities on the horizon. External employer branding should be continued as it is an effective tool for enhancing company reputation, and completely halting these efforts could undermine the brand promise (Racolta-Paina & Mone, 2010). Additionally, internal employer branding is crucial during times of recession as it increases employee retention which benefits the organization in terms of saving costs (Goswami & Agarwal, 2015; Mouton & Bussin, 2019).

In terms of keeping remaining staff satisfied, the interview findings revealed that all companies were acutely aware of the impending growth economy and recognized the need to begin preparations immediately. Findings that were not mentioned in the literature review, were that majority of the case companies, four out of five, reported monitoring employee satisfaction by surveys and addressing the potential issues. Two companies also shifted their internal communication to more optimistic future scenarios, that way trying to foster sense of unity and team spirit.

In line with previous research, two case companies continued their team-building efforts. Team building enhances employees' perceived social support, fostering a sense of meaningfulness and satisfaction (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009). Additionally, two companies maintained employee benefits despite their focus on cost-saving measures. This is a positive signal, as physical rewards can contribute to employee engagement (Farndale & Murrer, 2015) and help with competing in the war of talent.

However, only one company reported offering development opportunities in order to enhance employee satisfaction. This would be important, as engaged employees have high motivation to improve in their work (Xanthopoulou et

al., 2009). Additionally, only one of the five case companies reported involving employees in decision-making and actively seeking their feedback on survival strategies. This is significant, as research indicates that employee engagement improves when individuals feel valued and are given the opportunity to contribute (Lieber, 2009; Kahn, 1990). Involving employees in the process of building a better future could make them feel useful and important, fostering a sense of psychological safety and meaningfulness that leads to higher engagement (Kahn, 1990; Tiwari & Lenka, 2016). As such, the case companies would benefit from establishing a two-way dialogue by actively soliciting feedback and ideas from their employees.

Furthermore, the case companies did not mention any specific practices aimed at reducing work-family conflict or offering supervisor support, such as providing positive feedback and maintaining ongoing communication with remaining employees (Holland et al., 2017). Therefore, the case companies would benefit from better understanding that layoffs and dismissals can decrease the engagement and productivity of remaining employees, potentially leading them to seek employment elsewhere (Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020).

Regarding the dismissals and layoffs, the findings revealed that four case companies were generally not interested in re-employing many employees who had been let go. They viewed these employees either underperformers or as possessing skills that were no longer needed due to organizational changes. However, one company acknowledged that, due to the large scale of layoffs, they had had to let go of talented employees as well. Another company admitted that in a large organization, it can be challenging to accurately identify underperformers, which may have led to the retention of less productive employees while letting go of more valuable ones. This is quite surprising, as previous research highlights the advantages of re-employing former employees. Such practices are cost-effective, as they eliminate the need for lengthy recruitment processes and reduce the need for extensive training (Jaye, 2021). This is particularly important to understand during recession,

as when the growth starts the companies aim to rebuild their workforce as fast as possible (Jaye, 2021).

Furthermore, despite existing theories emphasizing the importance of managing the experience of let go employees in order to protect the employer brand (Shlosberg, 2010), all case companies lacked formal processes for maintaining contact with these individuals. Even though four of the case companies reported that they actively communicate with the laid off employees, this communication primarily relied on HR sending statutory emails about available jobs and on supervisors' discretion and intuition to reach out to the let go employees. This informal approach carries the risk that some employees may not be contacted regularly, leading them to feel forgotten and undervalued, which can foster negative emotions towards the company and harm the employer brand (Shlosberg, 2010). Nor did the case companies have any alumni practices for maintain contact with former employees prior to the recession. Therefore, the companies would benefit from better understanding the value of re-employing former staff.

To address these issues, the case companies would benefit from establishing formal processes for communicating with laid-off employees and other former employees who left voluntarily. For example, supervisors could schedule regular check-ins with laid-off employees every few weeks to ask how they are doing, discuss their employment hopes, and gauge their interest in returning. This consistent communication would help to build trust between the let go employees and the company, making them feel valued and more likely to view their former employer positively, thereby increasing their willingness to return when opportunities arise (Davila & Pina-Ramirez, 2014).. Additionally, companies could organize events for alumni, particularly key talent who have moved on, to update them on the company's progress and upcoming projects, thus keeping the door open for their potential return.

Furthermore, one company reported that it trains supervisors to better understand the feelings of let go employees and how to encounter them, a

practice that is recommendable for all case companies. This is in line with previous research, as Shlosberg (2010) underlines that the employees need to be let go with dignity, making sure that they are treated respectfully. Similarly, Dávila and Piña-Ramírez (2014) underline the importance of interacting with the let go employees, demonstrating genuine care. Additionally, another case company provided training for long-term laid-off employees, which is likely to enhance their motivation to return when needed.

In terms of preparing for the growth economy, aside from retaining current staff and managing the experience of let go employees, three case companies reported focusing on refining processes related to recruitment and employer branding. A silver line of the recession was the opportunity to renew these processes, with the understanding that such initiatives must be undertaken now, as time will be scarce once economic growth resumes. For instance, one case company took the proactive step on developing an inhouse direct search unit to improve recruitment effectiveness by eliminating the need for and external recruiter as the initial point of contact between potential employees and the company.

Additionally, another case company reported increasing partnerships with educational institutions, as students were seen as an important source of new employees. These actions are in line with previous research suggesting that recession is a good opportunity to improve business processes as there is more time for that as other activities are scaled back (Racolta-Paina & Mone, 2010). Additionally, due to downsizing, prior literature recommends training students and newly graduates through apprenticeship programs (Danforth et al., 2017).

In line with previous research, three case companies also recognized that developing employee skills is a crucial strategy for mitigating the need for extensive recruitment during times of growth, thereby helping to avoid an immediate talent shortage. To this end, some companies implemented training programmes where construction supervisors could share their knowledge

with each other, ensuring that critical skills remain within the company even if some employees leave during the anticipated war for talent. Notably, one company extended training opportunities to long-term laid-off employees, a commendable move given that these individuals are often the most in need of skill development due to their time away from active work.

These training initiatives were also viewed as a competitive advantage, as they enhanced the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of daily site supervision. It is encouraging that the case companies prioritized skills development as part of their growth strategy, particularly since previous research indicates that companies often struggle with a lack of skilled workers post-recession due to prior layoffs and dismissals (Danforth et al., 2017). As demonstrated by some case companies, all companies would benefit from fostering training programmes where knowledge is shared, and, for example, younger employees teach older colleagues on how to use new technologies, and older employees share their industry experience to younger colleagues (Danforth et al., 2017).

Overall, when reflecting on the applicability of the theoretical model, the interviews revealed somewhat conflicting results regarding employer branding (as demonstrated in Figure 2 below). Although the model recommends maintaining employer branding efforts continuously throughout a recession, two case companies chose to avoid it, fearing that promoting themselves as a great workplace might evoke negative emotions among the let go employees.

The theoretical model proved applicable in terms of retaining remaining employees, as the case companies implemented several practices focused on employee engagement. Consistent with previous research, the case companies recognized that dismissals and layoffs negatively impact the motivation and productivity of the remaining workforce, and they actively sought to maintain employee satisfaction during the recession. Additionally, some companies continued to engage in employer branding activities throughout the recession, aligning with both prior research and the theoretical model.

However, the theoretical model was not applicable in terms of re-employing the let go employees as the findings indicate that four case companies were not particularly interested in re-employing former employees, while the theoretical model highlights the importance of managing employee experience in order to ensure that the let go employees are willing to return after recession. This is somewhat surprising, as previous research emphasizes the value of re-employment, highlighting its cost-effectiveness compared to recruiting new employees. Moreover, given the high number of layoffs and dismissals, it would be reasonable to assume that the case companies had to let go talented employees alongside underperformers.

Finally, in terms of preparing for the growth economy, the theoretical model's recommendation to focus on talent development was evident in the interviews. The case companies were renewing HR processes and promoting training programs, reflecting the model's emphasis on developing talent.

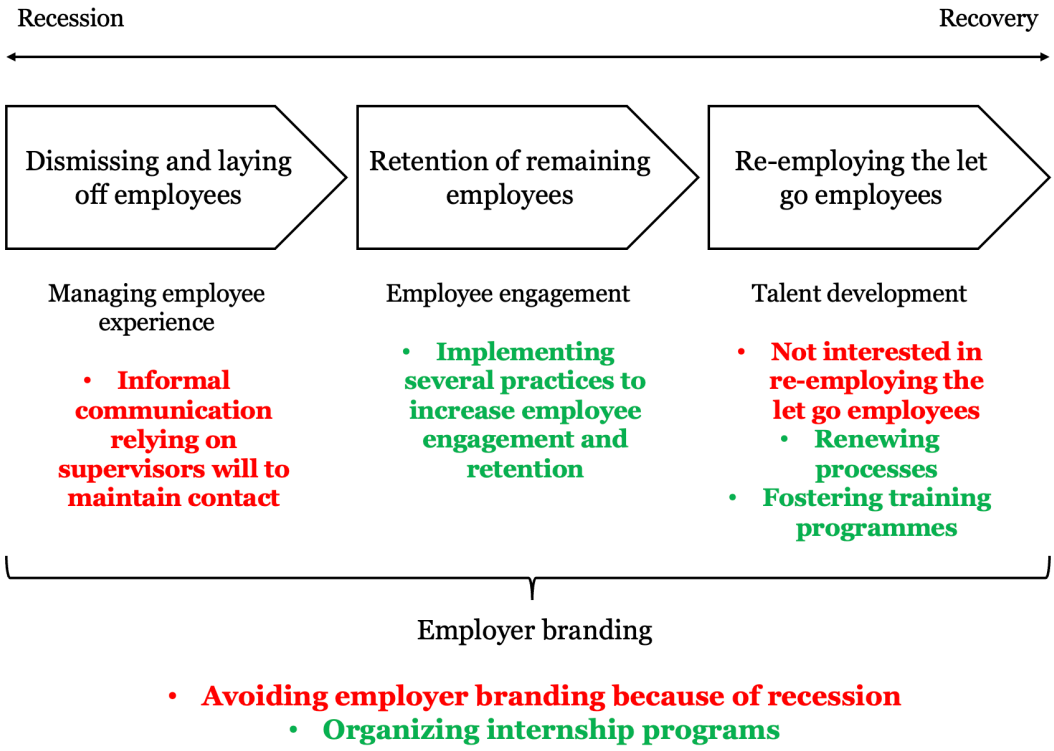

Figure 2. Main findings and applicability of the theoretical model. *

*Results that do not reflect the applicability of the theoretical model are highlighted in red, while those that align with the model are shown in green.

5.2 Managerial implications

This study originated from the recognition that the construction industry is inherently cyclical, frequently experiencing periods of labour shortage during times of growth followed by economic downturns, during which employees are laid off and dismissed. As a result, despite the necessity for letting go employees, the case companies will eventually face a growing economy and war for talent. The objective for this study was to determine how Finnish construction companies can effectively prepare for such growth in terms of ensuring they will have enough skilled workforce.

The study addressed this issue by examining how five case companies maintain their appeal as employers during economic recession, particularly in the eyes of both remaining and let go employees. It was also explored how they ensure that the laid off and dismissed employees want to return when needed, and what other actions they have taken in order to prepare for the growth in terms of workforce. The research approach was designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Finnish construction companies prepare for workforce needs during economic growth. By analysing this process in detail, the study compared the case companies' employer branding strategies, targeted at both current and former employees, to existing research, providing a deep insight into the matter.

From a managerial perspective, this study offers valuable insights to better understand the process of preparing for growth economy in terms of workforce and the crucial factors in it. The research was conducted by reviewing existing theories on dismissing and laying off employees, retention of remaining employees during recession and re-employing the let go employees, with employer branding serving as the overarching throughout all these stages. These elements were combined into a clear framework, providing

managers a practical tool to ensure they have enough skilled workforce after the recession.

For the case companies, the study presents a detail assessment of their current preparedness for the growth in terms of workforce. While many aspects of their processes are already well-executed, there are areas for improvement, such as considering formalizing communication with former employees, which is currently informal and varies depending on individual supervisors' willingness to maintain contact.

Beyond the case companies, also other Finnish construction companies can benefit from this study by using the theoretical model as a practical tool. Additionally, they can compare their own practices with those of the case companies to enhance their preparations for workforce needs during periods of economic growth.

The findings of this study must be viewed in the context of the current situation of the case companies, with consideration given to Finland's economic environment and the broader political factors influencing it, such as Russia's attack war in Ukraine. However, since the construction industry is highly sensitive to economic disruptions and therefore cyclical, this study's insights may prove to be valuable in future economic recessions when construction companies are preparing for upcoming workforce needs in times of growth.

5.3 Limitations of the research

The aim of this research was to explore how Finnish construction case companies prepare for growth economy in terms of workforce. This approach provided an in-depth understanding of the research topic while also offering a clear overview of the current practices employed by the case companies. Multiple case companies were selected to enhance the understanding of the subject, as each had unique practices and processes. The impact of the economic recession varied across the companies as some were more affected

than others, leading to a diverse set of results that enriched the overall understanding.

However, this study is highly context-specific and time-sensitive, meaning that the findings cannot be easily generalized to other contexts. Additionally, cultural factors, unique company characteristics, and the willingness of interviewees to disclose sensitive company information may have influenced the responses, as could the researcher's interpretations. Despite these limitations, although the findings cannot be directly applied to different countries or cultures, the study was conducted rigorously within its chosen research framework. As such, it offers valuable insights that could be beneficial in other business contexts, particularly for companies in any industry experiencing economic downturns and looking to prepare for times of growth in terms of workforce.

Furthermore, the data for this study was collected through qualitative interviews, which inherently leaves room for the researcher's personal interpretations. Since the analysis was conducted by a single individual, the findings reflect that singular perspective. Additionally, the theoretical model was not entirely applicable, as the previous research and interview findings were partially conflicting. Although previous research may suggest certain practices, if contrary strategies prove effective for the companies involved, it cannot be claimed that their actions are wrong. Moreover, many unique strategies were employed among the case companies, with no unified practices evident. Therefore, definitive conclusions cannot be drawn.

Moreover, the data set was somewhat limited, as only five participants were chosen to be interviewed. However, this was a deliberate choice, as the interviewees were responsible for employer branding and human resources in five different companies. However, this limitation raises the possibility that the interviewees may have presented an overly positive view of their company and its employer brand. Additionally, given the sensitive nature of the

subject, there remains a chance that the interviewees withheld certain information, despite of the study being anonymous.

5.4 Suggestions for further research

Given the extensive amount of research on attracting new employees, this study focused on the relatively unexplored areas of retaining current employees during recession and ensuring that dismissed and laid off employees are willing to return when they are needed. As the previous research as well as the results of the interviews were partly conflicting, and the theoretical model was not applicable in those areas, more research is needed how construction companies can prepare for the growth in terms of workforce. However, while this study covers a broad range of topics, future research could delve deeper into specific areas, such as re-employing former employees or retaining remaining staff during recession, to gain a more detailed understanding of these subjects.

Another interesting subject for future research could be to explore more specifically the alumni practices companies use to attract former employees back into the organization. This topic could be studied beyond the construction industry and outside the context of economic recessions. During the interviews conducted for this study, all participants were asked whether their companies had implemented alumni processes prior to the recession, and none of them had. Therefore, expanding knowledge on this subject could be valuable, particularly highlighting the benefits of rehiring former employees and providing companies with insights on how to effectively develop and implement alumni programs.

Additionally, this research has examined how construction companies prepare for growth economy in terms of workforce in the Finnish context. Similar studies have been conducted in other countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, but these had a broader focus, encompassing a wide range of strategies construction companies used to navigate economic

recessions. In these studies, human resource management was only a minor component, indicating a need for more research with this specific focus. Moreover, there is limited prior research specifically addressing how Finnish construction companies prepare for economic growth, which underscores the importance of conducting more similar studies in Finland.

Furthermore, this research was conducted entirely through qualitative methods. One suggestion for future research would be to investigate the topic using quantitative methods as well. This approach could shift the focus from internal processes to assessing the actual preparedness of companies to ensure having enough skilled workforce after the recession. For example, quantitative questionnaires could be used to measure the effectiveness of preparations.

Finally, although this study concentrated on the managerial perspective, it would be also valuable to explore the employee perspective – how they perceive the company's handling of layoffs and dismissals, as well as efforts to retain remaining staff during recession. By gathering feedback directly from employees, the companies could gain practical insights on how successful their strategies have been.

5.5 Conclusions

To address the research questions, "How can Finnish construction companies ensure that they have enough workforce when they are back in growth?" and "How do they ensure that remaining employees want to stay and the laid-off and dismissed employees want to return?", this study has examined how five Finnish construction companies manage the experiences of laid off and dismissed employees, aim to keep the remaining staff satisfied, and take additional measures to prepare for the growth economy in terms of workforce.

By reviewing existing theories on employer branding, employee engagement, the experiences of dismissed and laid off employees, and strategies for preparing for next growth economy during recession, and by comparing prior

research with findings from interviews through a comparative case study analysis, this research has provided valuable insights into how construction companies can better prepare for the next growth economy in terms of workforce.

While the theoretical model developed from previous research proved applicable in terms of employee engagement and preparing for growth through development of skills and processes, the interview findings indicated that the case companies were not as committed to re-employing the let go employees as previous research suggested. Additionally, although earlier studies recommended to continue employer branding efforts, especially during a recession, some case companies had decided to pause these initiatives.

Due to these conflicting results, the theoretical model is not entirely applicable and cannot be directly implemented by construction companies aiming to prepare for future growth in terms of workforce. Instead, Finnish construction companies can benefit from this study by comparing their strategies with those employed by the case companies interviewed. Furthermore, the strategies used by various companies, especially those that aligned with previous research, can be considered particularly beneficial.

In conclusion, it is evident that further research is needed to determine which actions construction companies facing recession should take to better prepare for the next growth economy in terms of workforce.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Kuvaile vastuualueitasi nykyisessä roolissasi.

- Miten kauan olet työskennellyt yrityksessä, nykyisessä positiossa ja ylipäätään rakennusalalla?

Miten nykyinen taantuma/laskusuhdanne on vaikuttanut yritykseenne?

- Miten työntekijöiden näkökulmasta, onko jouduttu irtisanomaan tai lomauttamaan henkilöstöä, ja missä määrin?
    - Onko teillä jonkinlaisia prosesseja siihen, miten minimoitte lomautusten/irtisanomisten määrän?

Aikaisemman tutkimuksen mukaan lomautuksilla ja irtisanomisilla on negatiivinen vaikutus työnantajamielikuvaan sekä nykyisten että lomautettujen/irtisanottujen työntekijöiden silmissä. Millä tavoin pyritte pysymään vetovoimaisena työnantajana laman/taantuman aikana?

- Millä tavoin vahvistatte työnantajamielikuvaa näinä aikoina? Kertoisitko jotain esimerkkejä.
- Miten varmistatte, että nykyiset (ei lomautetut/irtisanotut) työntekijät pysyvät teillä?

On ennustettu, että rakennusala alkaa kasvamaan ensi vuonna. Ennen nykyistä laskusuhdannetta, rakennusala kärsi voimakkaasti työvoimapulasta. Oletteko valmistautuneet tulevaan nousukauteen työvoiman/rekrytoinnin näkökulmasta?

- Osaatko antaa esimerkkejä tästä? Miksi ette, jos ette ole?
- Miten varmistatte, että lomautetut/irtisanotut työntekijät haluavat palata, kun sen aika on?

    - Pidättekö heihin yhteyttä? Jos kyllä, miten? Minkälaisia toimintatapoja/prosesseja?
    - Oletteko pitäneet yhteyttä entisiin työntekijöihin jo ennen laskusuhdannetta? Miten, jonkinlaista alumnikäytäntöä?

Onko jotain, mitä yrityksesi ei vielä tee, mutta mielestäsi pitäisi tehdä, jotta varmistetaan että on tarpeeksi työvoimaa nousukauden alettua?

- Onko jotain, jota muut yritykset tekevät mutta te ette vielä?
- Onko jotain ideoita/ajatuksia, joita haluaisit vielä aiheeseen liittyen kertoa?