

# Talents for future – do top talents care about CSR corporate communication in recruiting? An empirical study

Gerrit Boehncke

## Abstract

**Purpose** – *The purpose of this paper is to present an empirical analysis, which consists of interviews with executive trainee programs of three international companies. The results of this analysis offer answers to questions currently being discussed in the corporate social responsibility (CSR) literature, namely, on the effects of CSR communication on top talent attraction.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *The study uses structured interviews to analyze the communication perceptions and expectations of (n = 15) top talents when making employer decisions. It compares these with the expectations and intentions of HR managers responsible for programs and communications (n = 15).*

**Findings** – *The study found that HR managers only partially reflect top talents' specific communication expectations. In addition to the program-specific CSR content, corporate communications have an overarching optimization potential in the communication mode and information architecture. It is particularly striking that future executives proactively seek CSR content in hiring and access corporate and brand communications for this purpose.*

**Research limitations** – *The study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which made a digital interview setting necessary and did not allow to react in detail on every physical signal. On top, the study has only 30 participants (15 HR/15 talents) from three different talent programs.*

**Implications** – *The study identifies practical, gender-specific and industry-specific implications for corporate communications regarding content and mode of communication. Companies should specify concrete measures for recruiting future executives, but they can also indicate efforts and first initiatives, thus setting a more decisive stage for an aspiration.*

**Originality/value** – *The study is characterized by its unique data set. Only a few companies have explicit programs for the development of future executives. The study also examines HR managers' communication planning and expectations and future executives' effective communication perceptions and perspectives.*

**Keywords** *CSR, Talent, Corporate social responsibility, Employer branding, Recruiting*

**Paper type** *Case study*

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## Introduction

European companies have flagged a problem for decades: too few qualified employees. Known as the “war for talent” (Chambers *et al.*, 1998), the structural competition among companies for qualified workers is not new. Companies strive to attract the attention of *talent* and prove their employer attractiveness to generate applicants and fill vacant positions. However, the *war for talent* does not differentiate between specific positions or employee profiles. Moreover, in previous studies, the *talents* being courted are usually viewed as a holistic group of applicants and described in terms of their motivations and expectations (Ansar and Baloch, 2018). Some studies call for a differentiated view of talent groups against the backdrop of better exploring communicated issues and their influencing factors (Srisuphaolam and Assarut, 2019).

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One group central to corporate success is the group of (future) executives (Ansoff, 1965). The term *future executives* was not established in previous literature but is suitable for highly qualified young employees selected for particular (*executive*) *leadership traineeships*. In the primarily quantitative perspective of the *war for talent*, the target group is unique because of its small number, high importance for the company's success and extreme hiring costs, suggesting a qualitative approach. As highly qualified talents, they belong to the "high potentials" (Ready *et al.*, 2010). By definition, they are expected to have outstanding operational performance and strategic competence. At the same time, as (future) executives, they shape corporate cultures and become important sponsors in strategic transformation and change processes (Lewin, 1947; Kotter, 1995), which is why their fit with the corporate culture (P-O fit) (Kristof, 1996) is central. As part of the management, they are central to the employee's trust and pride (McCauley and Kuhnert, 1992) in the company, their identification with the company as their in-group (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), which results in low churn rates and empowers corporate success (Schaefer *et al.*, 2024).

In recent years, the *war for talent* has intensified. While the declining birth rate in the EU (Eurostat) is lowering the number of talents in generations Y and Z (McCrandle and Wolfinger, 2009), other developments have exacerbated the situation since the 2020s. The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted private and public life and changed the world of work (Carnevale and Hatak, 2020). Remote work went from being the exception to the standard for many industries due to COVID-19. Formerly good advantages and amenities, which existed in classical office work, lost their value due to this flexibilization of work (Chit u and Russo, 2021).

However, the effects of COVID-19 are not limited to the mode of work (Ratten, 2020) but, together with another crisis, trigger a paradigm shift that also affects the communicative reality of the young generations. The pandemic and the end of a period of peace in Europe reveal the fragility of supposed constants and confront young generations Y and Z with new uncertainties. Before the outbreak of the crises, basic "physiological" and "safety" needs (Maslow, 1943) were taken for granted by the majority of European Gen Y and Gen Z. However, these generations are now experiencing a new contrasting reality. At the same time, unlike previous European crises and upheavals, COVID-19 and the Ukraine–Russia war are treated with particular presence and positionality in public communication. Exemplarily, the most used Twitter hashtag in 2020 in Germany was #Corona (Twitter), and the pandemic-related call #StayHome ranked third in Twitter annual trends. In the context of war, millions of people positioned themselves with #StopWar in their digital communication or participated in peace demonstrations, just as participation in the #FridaysForFuture sustainability movement had already occurred since the late 2010s.

It stands to reason that the changing communication reality will also have an impact on employers' image and brand communication when targeting (young) talent (Schaefer *et al.*, 2020; Chaudhary, 2018), as well as channel orchestration (Deepa and Baral, 2022). The research on talent behaviors to corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication in recruiting has grown intensively over the past years and has shown that authentic CSR recruiting messages can result in a competitive advantage (Aggarwal and Singh, 2023; Chen and Khuangga, 2021; Zhou *et al.*, 2018). While research agrees on a general positive influence of CSR communication on talent attraction and motivation, the exact level is still discussed and controversial (Leveson and Joiner, 2014; Waples and Brachle, 2020).

Given these issues, the findings of Srisuphaolarn and Assarut (2019), who found that CSR factors do not work the same for all talent groups or genders but are interpreted as group-specific, the current article addresses the question:

- Q1. What relevance does CSR communication have for the employer decision of future executives?

This guiding question is examined by three central hypotheses (H) established within the theoretical framework. The significance of the study is its contribution to the theoretical CSR discussion by expanding and specifying the focus group of future executives responsible for corporate strategies and who can actively influence economic developments. In addition, the study offers direct practical insights for corporate and recruiting communication, which impact target group consideration, process planning and cost structures. The study follows the calls for a qualitative approach (Klimkiewicz and Oltra, 2017; Waples and Brachle, 2020) by conducting standardized qualitative expert interviews with 15 representatives from the corporate side (HR managers) and 15 talents (successful program applicants). These interviews were analyzed according to Mayring's (2015) guidelines for qualitative content analysis to assess mutual expectations. The study concludes that HR managers generally align with talents' self-perception regarding the importance of CSR communication for recruiting future leaders and relevant focus dimensions. However, they have not sufficiently developed the communication scope, presentation methods, channel focus and specific sub-target group needs (e.g. gender-specific requirements), resulting in current communicative demands of talents being inadequately addressed.

As indicated, CSR communication, P-O fit and signaling theory define the relevant theoretical framework.

## Theoretical framework

### *Corporate social responsibility (CSR)*

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has already been declared a "business imperative" (Schaefer *et al.*, 2019) for B2B and B2C corporate communication in recent years. While the initial term was set by Bowen (1953), Carroll's (1979) definition might be the most popular. However, despite the increasing importance of CSR, definitions remain inconsistent (Carroll, 1991; Karmasin and Weder, 2011). This article understands CSR according to the European Commission's definition of "[...] as a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and their interaction with their stakeholders voluntarily" (CEC, 2001). This definition is extended for this paper according to the model of Turker (2009) and the application in existing employee-oriented studies by the unique stakeholder perspective on applicants. This results in three impact dimensions of CSR in employer communication:

1. social responsibility: representing the responsibility of a company toward society;
2. environmental responsibility: representing the responsibility of a company towards the natural environment (Chaudhary, 2018); and
3. employee responsibility: representing "a firm's actions that ensure the well-being and support of its employees through good working conditions, including career opportunities, organizational justice, family-friendly policies, and training and development" (Farooq *et al.*, 2014).

In the field of human resource management and recruiting, the potential of CSR communication for general employer brand building (Puncheva-Michelotti *et al.*, 2018) and talent acquisition (Waples and Brachle, 2020), talent retention (Koch *et al.*, 2019), employee engagement (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2008; Chaudhary, 2017; Greening and Turban, 2000) and the specific focus for environmental CSR communication in particular (Jnaneswar, 2023) is also increasingly coming into focus and has been the subject of extensive reviews in recent years (Tiba *et al.*, 2019; De Stefano *et al.*, 2018).

Recently, studies have focused on CSR authenticity and CSR evaluation as two specific variables in CSR communication, which were initially brought up by McShane and Cunningham (2012). Both variables describe how employees evaluate CSR communication

concerning different standards. While CSR evaluation describes the extent to which employees rate their company's efforts as sufficient to meet their responsibility to society (Du *et al.*, 2015), CSR authenticity focuses on how a company's behavior is seen as consistent and in line with the brand and brand values.

Accordingly, McShane and Cunningham (2012) and Du *et al.* (2015) attempt to compare companies' CSR activities with talent expectations and communicative benchmarks. Their result: the CSR communication can increase or decrease the attractiveness of the employer depending on the interpretation of the talents. While ideally applications from new candidates are encouraged and current employees are proud of the company, a negative evaluation can lead to higher turnover rates (De Roeck and Maon, 2018).

However, research at the intersection of CSR and HRM has blindly ignored a critical economic pain point. It leaves a strategic potential for companies untapped, considering the strategically central target group of *future executives* and their communication expectations (Boehncke, 2022). This target group represents a qualitative feature in the war for talent, which is often viewed in quantitative terms. Due to their status in the numerically smaller group of high potentials and view of the increasing demand in companies, future executives benefit from a comfortable situation in today's labor market (Ready *et al.*, 2010). Due to their particular ambition profile to develop into a strategic and cultural leadership position, it is suggested that future executives find the cultural fit with the company (Cable and Judge, 1994) and the accompanying specific cultural signaling, such as CSR content, conducive to their decision-making, what moderates *H1*:

*H1.* Assumes that the group actively seeks CSR as a cultural differentiation signal during its research and application phase.

Because CSR evaluation and authenticity, in particular, show how central the alignment of company characteristics with the demands of talents is, it is essential to consider the demands and relationships with which young talents position themselves. Social identity and P-O fit theory must be considered in particular.

The recruiting of future executives is a particular case with regard to signaling theory. Signaling theory will be considered below as the basic mechanics of the communication relationship.

### *Signaling theory*

Concerning the attraction process, it becomes clear, considering the signaling theory (Rynes *et al.*, 1991; Spence, 1973), that it is an asymmetric communication relationship (Celani and Singh, 2011). However, the communication hierarchy and information inequality in the recruitment phase (Toterhi and Recardo, 2013) contrasts Spence's (1973) perspective. Spence assumes that many applicants apply for a small number of job vacancies. He focuses on the company's selection phase. In Spence's model, the employer is at an information disadvantage, as he has to distinguish between productive and unproductive employees and has to create a way of providing evidence (signal) of this. However, this relationship changes when searching for and hiring exceptionally competent candidates. High potentials know their value and ability to choose between employers (Ready *et al.*, 2010). In the context of (top) talent attraction, it is the employers who have more information about their actual offer, benefits and advantages as an employer. They are faced with the challenge of sending signals to high potentials that initially encourage them to apply. To do this, they have to meet the talent requirements in terms of both content and form.

### *Person–organization fit*

To inspire high potentials for an employer, the requirements of the talents must be addressed. The P-O fit describes the fit between the individual and the organization and is

often understood to be multidimensional (Barrick and Parks-Leduc, 2019). This is particularly relevant for human resources, as hiring is fundamentally not job-oriented but company-oriented (Westerman and Cyr, 2004). This is of particular importance for future executives, as their job as managers also affects the cultural organization of the company (Ansoff, 1965), and, as managers, they are decisive for the P-O fit evaluation of other employees (Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2005). This article follows the understanding of the groundwork article by Kristof (1996), which describes two ways for the fit of persons (P) and organizations (O). Kristof's model of P-O fit is often reduced to the dimension of *supplementary fitness*. According to Kristof, this represents a supplementary, value-based fit that fosters increased intrinsic motivation among employees. Thus, *the supplementary fit* has the potential to satisfy employees' desire to engage in meaningful work for an employer judged to be "moral," i.e. in line with their value profile (Zhang *et al.*, 2020), thus generating a powerful employee–employer relationship.

Conversely, complementary fitness occurs when an individual's attributes complement those of the organization or team in a way that compensates for what is missing or enhances the existing dynamics. It is not about being similar but rather about how the differences between an individual and the organization can create a synergy. Complementary fit is essential for organizational diversity.

P-O fit has various effects on the employee–employer relationship that are relevant to performance. Performance indicators such as turnover rate, stress and work performance, as well as factors such as work attitude and organizational citizenship, are influenced by the P-O fit, which leads to *H2*:

*H2.* Assumes that future executives will make a supplementary value fit for identical CSR topics a prerequisite for application.

While supplementary and complementary fit refers exclusively to the individual perspective, social identity theory offers a reflection against the background of social expectations.

### ***Social identity theory***

According to the social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel and Turner, 1986), an individual's identity is a complex construct shaped by the continuous interplay with social relationships, involving both separation from and association with various social groups and institutions (DeRoeck *et al.*, 2014). As part of this identity formation, individuals evaluate relevant social groups or organizations' attitudes, values and competencies by rejecting or sharing them (Rodrigo *et al.*, 2019). These attitudes, values and competencies fit or do not fit one's attitudes or beliefs. In terms of employer decisions, positive acceptance and an associated shared identity (corporate identity) occur when candidates evaluate the communicated values as attractive (corporate attractiveness) (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). In this process, individuals reflect in a complex way. They evaluate profiles of social groups or organizations for themselves and according to the perceived external prestige (P-E-P) model (Dutton and Dukerich, 1994) from the expectation perspective of other groups already defined as relevant.

Taking career decisions as an example, a highly skilled job seeker with freedom of choice would, therefore, apply to a company that he or she considers attractive (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004; Klimkiewicz and Oltra, 2017), and that he or she also expects to be positively evaluated by other social groups or contacts that he or she considers relevant (Carmeli, 2005). At this point, the changed value cultures become relevant for the labor market. Concerning the *#FridaysforFuture* movement, it can be assumed, based on the quantitative support within the next generation of employees and the media and social media presence, that climate sustainability and social responsibility are topics that influence both the individually perceived and peer-expected corporate attractiveness.

For this reason, *H3* examines the evaluation of HR departments and the targeted use of CSR communication:

*H3.* Assumes that HR managers explicitly use CSR messaging as a strategic tool for recruiting future executives.

## Methodology

A unique feature of the study is its data set and the qualitative approach. This approach was chosen as the reference group for the strategically highly relevant target group for several reasons. In principle, the method follows the perspective of [Ragin \(1994\)](#): “Qualitative methods are appropriate for in-depth examination of cases because they aid the identification of key features of cases. Most qualitative methods enhance data.” The qualitative consideration and analysis follow the advantage analysis qualitative consideration by [Hammersley and Atkinson \(2019\)](#) and [Aspers and Corte \(2019\)](#). They state that qualitative research is currently particularly strengthened by the pressure of the labor market, as little time and significant expert perspectives are available ([Fine and Hancock, 2017](#)). This is particularly true for the numerically limited group of future executives who are particularly time-bound. A qualitative approach is also advantageous for the study, as decision-makers from HR and future executives can present their opinions and positions in a maximally humanistic way in direct dialog ([King et al., 1994](#)). In addition, the qualitative interpretation, which focuses on subjective motivations and behaviors at certain times for specific reasons, represents a significant aspect of the analysis and thus follows [McIntyre \(2005\)](#).

In data collection and evaluation, this study follows the specifications of [Mayring \(2015\)](#). The study is designed as a qualitative content analysis using a mixed methods approach. It considers the expectations, namely, the direct communicative expectations, and experiences of future executives who sought information about their future employer during their hiring process, as well as the communicative “expectation-expectations” ([Luhmann, 1984](#)) of the recruiting HR managers. In this context, recruiters, as professional company representatives, are responsible for capturing and targeting the content of their target and potential applicant audiences. They define and orchestrate content as part of the recruiting funnel ([Verhoeven, 2016](#)) to encourage suitable talent to apply. As this process involves an interplay of different content, the study looks at CSR-specific communication and general recruiting communication in terms of HR intention and talent perception.

To answer the hypotheses, the questions from the guiding theory frameworks were developed as exploratory questions. Following the mixed methods approach, 102 codes were already deductively generated from the literature before the material was first processed ([Table 1](#)). The CSR dimensions according to [Farooq et al. \(2014\)](#), dimensions of sender–receiver hierarchy according to signaling theory ([Spence, 1973](#)) and location in the recruiting funnel were decisive. Supplemental 63 subcodes were inductively generated from the interviews during the initial processing phase. Inter-coder reliability was calculated according to Cohen’s kappa ([Cohen, 1960](#)) and was  $k = 0.77$ . This value is considered substantial, given the amount of material and the complex code dimensions.

## Sample

A total of 30 qualitative guided interviews were conducted for the study. The interviewees for the interviews were  $n = 15$  talents from three programs explicitly created to form executives and  $n = 15$  HR managers at different hierarchical levels. Five HR managers and five talents were interviewed per program, resulting in an apparent saturation. The necessary commonality of the programs to be considered for the sample was the objective of developing program participants into company executives in the future. All programs considered were listed as traineeships. The programs were described as straightforward

**Table 1** Overview of question focus and code system

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Question focus for HR</i>	<i>Total number of codes (no. of deductive codes)</i>	<i>Question focus on talents</i>	<i>Total no. of codes (no. of deductive codes)</i>
<i>General recruiting communication</i>	Talent terminus	5 (5)	Awareness touchpoint	12 (6)
	Competence definition	5 (2)	Research process	8 (5)
	Recruiting process	4 (4)	Employer image	13 (3)
	(Expectation) relevant touchpoints	12 (12)	Knowledge of values and benefits	6 (4)
	(Expectation) reasons for decision	21 (12)	Decision reasons	22 (8)
<i>Focus on CSR and recruiting</i>	Use of CSR content in recruiting	8 (6)	Perception CSR in recruiting	7 (7)
	Use of CSR channels and formats in recruiting	12 (8)	Claim attitude CSR	9 (6)
	(Expectation) importance of CSR	7 (7)	Search behavior CSR	9 (2)
			Meaning CSR	5 (5)
<i>Overall</i>		<i>n</i> = 74 (56)		<i>n</i> = 91 (46)

**Source:** Own representation

career development programs to train future executives for the companies. Both former and current employees of the companies, as well as external applicants, were able to apply for the programs. The communication and advertising of the programs were pursued with different budgets and via different touchpoints, but always with a high level of investment by the companies. A comprehensible ad and communication budget of >€100,000 per program is rated high.

Differences between the programs relate to the industry of the programs, the program duration (1.5–3 years), the number of program participants (3–7/year) and the scope of international deployment opportunities (1–3 stations). To be considered for the sample, the companies also had to have more than 1,000 employees and operate on an intercontinental basis to offer international/intercontinental exchange and collaboration as a potential benefit. Participants in the future executive dimension were also required to either be active participants in the program at the time of the survey or complete it up to one year ago. This limit was defined to compare the programs' current communication with the talents' experiences and perceptions.

Both talents and HR managers were made aware of the study by a program coordinator of the future executive program. The talents and HR managers reported to the program coordinator independently and without a report. Talents and HR managers did not receive compensation from the study management or internally within the companies. The talents were between 24 and 32 years old at the time of the study and were still employed by the companies at the time of the survey. Seven male and eight female talents agreed to participate in the study across all programs. All HR representatives had active touchpoints with future executive programs.

Due to the restrictions of COVID-19, all interviews were conducted digitally, transcribed, coded and analyzed according to the qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2003). The participants could choose between German and English as the interview language.

### **Criteria set**

The interviews comprised a questionnaire of nine guiding questions for the participants of the future executives and eight content-related guiding questions for the HR managers, each of which can be differentiated into two dimensions.

The first dimension looked at general aspects of recruiting communication, while the second dimension focused explicitly on the importance of CSR communication in recruiting.

### ***Presentation system***

The findings are presented according to the defined *H1* to *H3*. The coded and evaluated statements are presented as clustered findings. They are exemplified using anchor examples (Mayring, 2015) to convey an impression of the qualitative results as comprehensibly as possible.

### **Findings**

*H1*: The following findings were obtained regarding *H1*, which assumes that the group actively searches for CSR as a cultural differentiation signal during its research and application phase.

### ***Awareness touchpoints***

To understand the research process further, it is necessary to consider which channel the talents start through. Only a broad multichannel approach is currently practical here, as talents start through different channels. In no program did more than two talents indicate the same channel of origin, from private referrals to social media ads, university events, active sourcing and PR:

At e-Fellows, such an online scholarship network, the program was advertised there.

I became aware [...] of the employer and the position through this Facebook ad.

### ***Corporate content first***

The research procedure for future executives is striking across all programs. Most of the talents stated that they directly focused on information sent by the employer instead of using comparison platforms on which the employer and program are communicated by (ex-) employees (e.g. Kununu):

So I think the deciding factor was a website created specifically for the program. There was enough information about the company, the program, and the larger context around it that I thought about it.

### ***Skepticism about greenwashing***

Within all three programs, participants expressed concern that CSR communications could be functionalized for greenwashing and expressed dissatisfaction with existing communications solutions:

It was one of the deciding factors [...], even at the initial selection stage, was where I applied everywhere. On the other hand, the problem with CSR is that it can quickly be taken up as greenwashing. Furthermore, if too much advertising is done with the good things you do, it quickly becomes untrustworthy. [...] I think it's better if I notice that when I Google the corporation, and then I find that. Or it's discreet.

### ***High standard of proof***

Consistent with their concern about greenwashing, talents expect concrete evidence to be communicated. In their aspirational attitude, they also formulate several times that responsible work and communication is not a unique selling point for them but a standard:

I think the issue of attitude is the crucial point. [...] So, I think I can read that there is a commitment and a sense of responsibility. In this day and age, I can't imagine it any other way. It is [...] almost immanent and self-evident that a company assumes responsibility and communicates this. And then, however, purely through communication and attitude, that one also provides evidence and examples. In other words, when we say that it is important to us to produce less plastic, we do not have disposable to-go cups but have introduced a reusable system.

*H2:* Regarding *H2*, which assumes that future executives will make a supplementary value fit for identical CSR topics, which is a prerequisite for application, the following findings were obtained.

### ***Development and career opportunities***

Future executives from all programs paid particular attention to long-term career opportunities within the company. The participants stated that learning and exchange in the form of mentoring, a strong network and explicit learning and training formats were crucial criteria for them as decisive factors in their choice of employer:

[...] I found the prospect of being perceived as a manager at some point after this program and being accompanied on this path critical. [...]. So you do not just stop at one point in your career, but are accompanied along the way.

I initially [...] saw the program as a conscious step back. I accepted less salary [...], which may be unusual. However, I saw it as an opportunity to place myself [...].

### ***Awareness of people and planet measures***

While all the talents surveyed stated that measures from the people or planet area were essential to them, more than half of the participants from each program could name at least one specific measure taken by the company from the planet and people dimensions:

Today, for example, there are also regular initiatives on the intranet about how to invest in social projects at the company's headquarters, [...] for example, at local schools [...].

### ***Gender equality in focus***

Across programs, female future executives request that information on gender equity and female leadership be of particular concern to you:

I think in terms of diversity in leadership positions. I can sort of observe and make a guess at sort of statistics on diversity and leadership, but I do not have any hard data on that. Moreover, that would be nice to have some more kind of transparency.

### ***Benefit perception***

The program participants show different focuses on benefits. The participants in the automotive program focus on numerically fewer but stronger relationships. For them, relationships with other trainees, their team and their manager are significant, while at the same time, they particularly value remote work:

[...] on the one hand, the relationship with the managers [...]. I am encouraged, and they deal with me as a person and also give me targeted development opportunities that are always offered and also adapted to fit.

While most participants in the data program did not answer the question and focused more on hard benefits and their continuing education program, participants in the media program value presence and social exchange with groups:

The networking idea plays a very big role.

### ***Identification with climate protection mission***

The future executives of the automotive program stand out due to their special attention to the publicly formulated requirement for the automotive industry to find a solution for sustainable (CO<sub>2</sub>-reduced) mobility. They perceive the company's public communication from the area of planet-oriented CSR and comment positively on the company's successes:

(Company name) also does sustainability there and every year and presents in its report. [...] (company name) also made it into the top 50 of the UN's most sustainable companies [...]. So a lot has happened in combination with targeted investments in hydrogen technology, fuel cells, e-mobility, and so on [...].

### ***Creative responsibility – a unique feature of the media program***

The future executives of the media program strongly reflect CSR issues and their employer's commitment, but they also focus on the mission of a media actor in the public discourse:

[...] classic CSR topics like diversity, climate and environment and employee issues were downstream for me. Nevertheless, what was upstream was the social impact you have as a publishing house by producing journalistic media at a very high level of quality. That was important for me. Central. And if that hadn't also been made as a job promise, I certainly wouldn't have started.

*H3:* The following findings were obtained regarding *H3*, which assumes that HR managers explicitly use CSR messaging as a strategic tool for recruiting future executives.

### ***Non-specific terms and recruiting process***

When determining the extent to which the specific group of future executives is recruited in a planned way with CSR content, it must first be established that no program uses fixed terms to describe program participants. Eight HR managers confirm the designation of "talents," but this term is not exclusive. Interestingly, four HR representatives indicated that terms derived from the program names can be used exclusively. HR representatives from all programs also indicated that they perceived the lack of a uniform term as a shortcoming:

We [...] would still speak of talents at this point, whereby there are also wide discussions as to whether a talent must necessarily have a management reference or whether one cannot also provide talent for a purely specialist career accordingly. From there, we are in the middle of the discussion, which concerns that and still use several names.

Regarding the recruiting process, HR leaders also indicated no exclusive channel strategy for recruiting future executives:

So usually, yes, our recruiting process is, we advertise the jobs, or we just go through other channels like active sourcing and things like that. Moreover, that's similar for these kinds of positions.

### ***Human resource managers expect three motivators in future executives***

HR managers from all programs emphasize the added value of well-known product brands and the synergy effects for the associated employer brand:

The basis for that, [...] is that we already offer a great market attractiveness [...] or a particular brand strength.

They see a significant aspect in the fundamental understanding, promotion and explicit communication of New Work (Aroles *et al.*, 2019) concepts:

In fact, we communicate quite consciously [...] with our attractive location at the [company's location] the big city, hip environment, lots of flexible options.

For HR managers, the critical issues of work–life balance and workload have a particular influence on their understanding of New Work. Concrete options for countering the stresses of a > 40-h week vary between the programs. At the same time, the program managers reflect that the expectations inherent in the program require a commitment of > 40 h per week:

Of course, you regularly hear the desire for a good work-life balance and no 60-hour weeks. But it is intrinsic to this program that a presentation sometimes has to be finalized for the next day. And then the participants sometimes work until 10 or 11 p.m., sure. But that's exactly the kind of challenge they learn the most from!

### ***The increasing importance of corporate social responsibility in recruiting***

The recruiters agree that prospective managers' interest in CSR communication in the context of employer research has increased significantly in recent years. The majority of recruiting HR stakeholders confirm that questions about CSR aspects are asked regularly:

In the [...] last few years, it has become more and more important, because [...] in the past, especially for high potentials for top talents, it was more the case that the hard facts, the benefits such as salary and the like, company cars and such topics counted, which of course is still important. However, especially when you now look at the climate crisis and the like [...], I believe this ultimately also plays a role in the decision.

### ***“Resource conservation” and “diversity”***

HR managers emphasize the dominant importance of the ecological sustainability focus. Implicitly, they make this clear because quantitatively more than 25% more statements are made on the topic of “ecological” sustainability. However, the HR managers also explicitly highlight the particular importance of the topic of resource conservation:

Our biggest problem is that some applicants are not up for [company name] because of the environmental footprint or because the internal combustion engine issue is discredited.

### ***Corporate social responsibility in awareness and loyalty***

HR managers see particular relevance of CSR at the beginning and end of the recruiting funnel:

That is coming right to the front. [...]. Starting with the pictures of people that you see on the company's communications, so to speak, that they do not just have the classic white men in the picture, [...] but also people of other skin colors, other origins, other genders, to make it clear at first glance that they are open to this topic.”

### ***Specific content requirements***

When asked about specific content for future executive communication, the HR manager from the media company showed a specific awareness of content needs. Neither at the level of the channel strategy nor in paid strategy do target group needs lead to an

adjustment of strategy or content elements. This group of recruiters, therefore, sees the uniform approach to candidates as a deficit:

I wish we would differentiate. I think that would make sense, and I think it is also easy to once again present roles like that in a more exposed way. We don't do it.

### *Differences in corporate social responsibility definition*

The HR managers showed differences in their understanding of CSR-specific communication regarding various formats and topics:

Media sees an extensive range of channels and formats.

The program managers from the media area see numerous channel and format options for using CSR in recruiting communication.

On the other hand, on various platforms. Be it kununu as an employer rating platform, Xing or LinkedIn as a job-related social media platform. This is also where videos fit in.

Automotive puts the ecological mission in perspective positively.

Ecological sustainability is relevant for most HR managers. However, the HR managers of the automotive company take a constructive perspective contrary to the communication pressure of the target group.

We are [...] pioneers then also in the field of e-mobility. We are in the process of developing further in the sense of a transformation and not only being successful with combustion but also with other methods.

### **Summary**

The interviews showed that company representatives are aware of the relevant demands and perceptions of talent representatives. It was clear that the attention of HR representatives can mean something other than an effective communications solution already perceived by the talent or a communications solution. Regarding specific communication planning and perceptions, the focus on various initial awareness touchpoints, the meaning of salary, the most relevant funnel stages for CSR corporate communication and the need for more differentiated CSR content stood out.

The future executives also emphasize aspects that need to be reflected by HR managers.

*Career prospects:* The talents focus on the importance of long-term career prospects in the company, which are strongly associated with support measures, further training, networks and close mentors. HR professionals did not reflect these meanings to the same extent.

*Industry- and gender-specific content:* The talents name industry-specific and gender-specific content needs. Recruiters considered neither the dominant industry specifics nor the gender-specific perspectives.

*Content proof:* The talents presuppose a minimum level of responsible action on the part of companies, which is why they need more than labeling. Instead, talents demand more substantial proof and communication of concrete measures in corporate communications instead of abstract labels and statements. HR managers do not reflect this demand for proof in the same way.

### **Discussion**

The lack of understanding of the target group is particularly relevant for researchers and practitioners. In none of the programs did HR managers state that they used a fixed term.

This implies that there is no or limited common understanding of the target group or exchange among HR managers regarding communication expectations, measures and content. This finding follows the discussion of [Waples and Brachle \(2020\)](#) and suggests the differentiation of the (young) applicant group by an additional strategically highly relevant target group. The study also addresses [Morsing's et al. \(2008\)](#) criticism that a few previously clearly defined target groups dominate the research discourse.

It is particularly relevant for practitioners that direct statements from HR managers also confirm the lack of a cross-program, expectation – and needs-oriented content strategy. The lack of differentiation of the target group is an economically relevant point. The talents surveyed confirm the need for the cost-intensive multichannel approach through the broad awareness touchpoints.

Concerning content planning, understanding the *New Work* and the work–life balance becomes relevant in addition to salary and career perspective. Popular portrayals sweepingly emphasize the convenience of the younger generation ([Fernandez et al., 2023](#)) – the majority of HR managers also attach exceptionally high importance to this topic. Contrary to these assessments, future executives are not seeking this supposed benefit. Their statements on company and evening events, international work and travel expenses show that they accept a high investment of time. The assessment of this target group thus ties in with the much-noted research discourse on employee motivators. It distinguishes the *future executives* in their demands from the motivators of the general talent group ([Achim et al., 2013](#)).

The overarching CSR-specific aspects also require a more differentiated discussion. HR managers see the growing importance of CSR content in recruiting and agree with the communication maxim of [Schaefer et al. \(2019\)](#). However, in the interviews, they did not formulate any specific requirements for content or its location in the recruiting funnel. The statements of the talents show that CSR content has only been perceived to a minimal extent and is limited to *awareness* and *loyalty* levels. This applicant perspective represents a relevant addition, especially for the research on the risks of greenwashing and its negative effects on brand perceptions ([Xiao et al., 2022](#)). It proposes to examine the thesis of what effect the communication timing, in terms of the funnel stage, has on the evaluation of specific applicant groups.

The reflection of the *future executives* must be viewed critically, as they demonstrate a broad knowledge of the respective corporate values across all programs. Therefore, it can be assumed that they have considered a minimum of value- and attitude-related company content. The talents absolve companies from explicitly planning and preparing CSR content for recruiting talent – and instead, emphasize the special requirement for CSR brand content.

Operationally, companies must ensure a link or reference to existing CSR content elements during the hiring process for future executives.

## Conclusion

The study draws several conclusions about CSR corporate communication, presented below according to their academic, political and practical dimensions.

From an academic perspective, there are three key findings. The first is the recognition of cross-program target group blurring. A shared understanding of the target group is required to ensure optimized coordination between all players in corporate communications, which also entails uniform target group naming. Only in this way can expectations and drivers be identified and effectively addressed in a target group-specific manner.

Likewise, HR managers underestimate the communicative relevance of social relationships and long-term career prospects. In line with their role perspective, future executives rate relationships with other executives, mentors and a well-developed network as motivating and relevant for their decision. Likewise, long-term career prospects and their development within the company take precedence over short-term salary maximization. These aspects mark a particular and relevant distinction from many operational talents in the early career phase.

In addition to the question of employer awareness considered here, questions about employee motivation or employer loyalty (Ng *et al.*, 2019) could also be relevant.

The second key finding is that CSR communication for future executives can be classified between classic corporate communication and recruiting communication. Future executives are critical of CSR signals. For them, CSR signals are not an exclusive recruiting imperative and not a naively accepted signal – instead, CSR messages are a fundamental standard and self-image of brand communication.

Future executives are independently acting users who can cope with a more profound link and information structures.

Finally, a study's core finding concerns the perspective on CSR communication, which is fundamentally different from other recruiting communication content in that it cannot convey final successes. Instead, the communication focuses on efforts and further development measures. An employer cannot achieve good enough or conclusive success on behalf of society.

On the one hand, this perspective makes future executives' concern about greenwashing (Seele and Gatti, 2017) understandable and, on the other hand, opens up communicative possibilities for addressing future executives. If companies understand and pursue CSR as a business imperative (Schaefer *et al.*, 2019), they are also in a position to formulate reasonable efforts to recruit future executives. Future executives are concerned with this reasonable effort and the confirmation of a field of action in which they can become influential leaders and cultural ambassadors. Employers who pursue CSR as a long-term objective and requirement for their own company enable future executives to achieve a second dimension of effectiveness besides the functional one.

Concerning political derivations, it was found that future executives show a particular need for content, especially regarding diversity and sustainability. Because diversity is a cross-program requirement, especially for female future executives, communicating CSR content by different actors in multimedia formats offers added value

Explicit legal provisions on CO2 reduction and gender quotas in management positions as a minimum and consequences for non-compliance are relevant here for the communicative expectation management of future executives.

Regarding the practical implications, there are currently differences between the perceptions and expectations of future executives and the intentions and expectations of company representatives responsible for communications in HR departments concerning the design and impact of employer communications. This concerns both general aspects, such as the application motivators of future executives, and specific CSR aspects.

HR managers are pushing responsibility-oriented multichannel corporate communication and see a need to differentiate their communication across all programs. Greater content diversification and the multichannel approach are considered necessary and valued by the talents and, therefore, represent future practical areas of responsibility for HR and communication teams.

It should be noted that CSR communication is corporate communication for future executives and does not have to dominate the recruiting funnel. It is sufficient to provide a

responsible self-image in the attraction phase, and references should be made to concrete measures and successes. Success documentation is sufficient as long as it refers to other CSR content.

Concrete evidence of CSR becomes necessary during the transition from the action phase to the loyalty phase in onboarding. Here, future managers can demonstrate their responsible self-image as part of the corporate cultural habitus and formulate the requirements for future management and their role as cultural ambassadors.

These findings mean that *H1* is confirmed for the hypotheses. Talents actively search for CSR signals, emphasizing their interpretation of information.

*H2* is confirmed to a limited extent. Talents ask more intensively about specific CSR dimensions with diversity and environmental sustainability. For these, they demand information that represents a fundamental fit. At the same time, they attach particular importance to credible efforts. Female talents are also more interested than male talents. The group still has different focus areas and aspirations regarding the exact communication degree.

Moreover, finally, *H3* is confirmed. HR managers value and use CSR content as a strategic tool but see the need to expand it further.

## Limitations

Several limitations exist to the study. The study is limited by country-specific communication planning. All three programs considered organized their communication from Germany, even if it was applied internationally. CSR content and presented mode thus follow German topic and channel assessments from 2020 to 2022.

Moreover, the period under consideration represents a peculiarity and potential limitation. In 2020/2021, COVID-19 was formative for the European labor market and public communication. In 2022, another crisis came up with the Russia-Ukraine war. Crises and responsible communication thus took on a new public dimension in the 2020s.

Finally, the programs considered were exclusively those from corporate groups. It was impossible to compare the programs with those of startups, growing companies or SMEs within the scope of the study.

## Directions for future research

The study defined practical company findings and work potentials and raised structural and content-related questions.

Concerning company structural aspects, the study showed that the current understanding of target groups on the company side is under-differentiated. HR managers do not have a uniform term or picture of target group needs. An exciting perspective for future research is the cooperation between HR management and online marketing. From the development processes of specific content to the definition of concrete (user) target groups to the development of possible audience personas and key performance indicators (KPI), an examination of the work mode can be valuable for corporate practice.

The current study has suggested that gender – and industry-specific expectations can significantly impact evaluation. It would be interesting to examine the mode of communication and gender – and industry-specific boundaries of greenwashing and pinkwashing (Gatti *et al.*, 2019).

Finally, subsequent studies could examine the influence of new corporate structures on employer branding and recruiting communication. Expanding CSR departments and increasing CSR content as authentic brand content could also influence employer perceptions by high-potential and future executives.

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