

Remote work as a universal solution for companies? A qualitative study of German companies' employer branding between demands and challenges of implementing work-family-flexibility measures

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Imprint

Disrupt Adapt: New Ways to Deal with Current Challenges in Media and Communication

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Remote Work as a Universal Solution for Companies?

A Qualitative Study of German Companies' Employer Branding Between Demands and Challenges of Implementing Work-Family-Flexibility Measures

Amelie Baryal, Julia Burghaus, Felix Gasteyer, Nick Hoffmann, Leonard Landau

Abstract

This research project examined the role of remote work as part of family-oriented employer branding. The literature review indicates that there is no underlying research connecting the topics of remote work with strategic family-oriented employer branding. To gain insights into this rather unexplored topic, this project conducted 17 semi-structured guided interviews with interviewees from both Communication and Human Resource Departments representing different industries and companies of various sizes. The analysis and evaluation showed that there is no strategic connection between the use of remote work in employer branding and family issues within the companies yet. The usage of family-oriented measures depends on multiple factors and puts companies through a serious stress test. Over the last years, the demand for remote work increased significantly. This trend leads to new challenges and issues companies need to tackle. In summary, remote work can be viewed as an important part in a set of family-oriented employer branding measures. The future direction of this topic is uncertain and requires further research.

Keywords

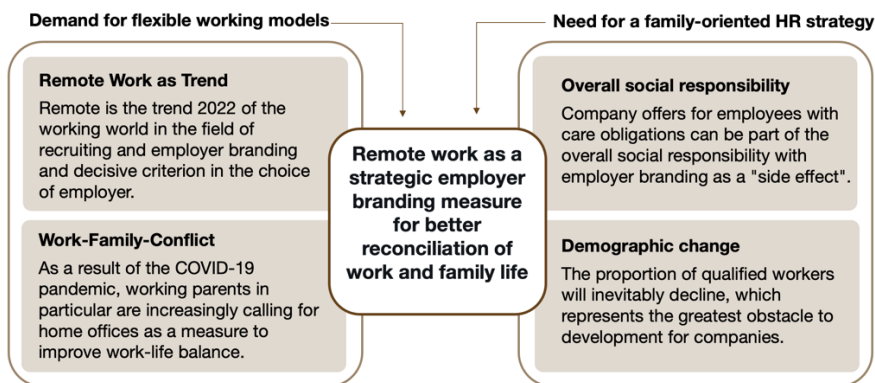
Remote Work, Strategic Employer Branding, Family-Orientation, Work-Family-Flexibility

Introduction

While the COVID-19 pandemic initially slowed down and, in some cases, even shut down working life by sending employees on short-time work and pausing projects. Over time, real leaps in development have become apparent, especially in the area of remote work (Ullah & Fellinger, 2021, p. 4). Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic has moved from being a decelerator to an accelerator of ongoing trends in the labor market. For example, the desire for home office options has increased very strongly during this time and the flexibilization of the working world is predicted to be the most relevant trend in recruiting and employer branding in 2022 in Germany (Ullah & Fellinger, 2021, p. 5).

As part of the ongoing digitalization and so-called New Work debate, the term remote work was already circulating across industries before, but with the pandemic it has now become a decisive criterion in employer selection (Forschungszentrum Familienbewusste Personalpolitik [FFP], n.d.; Ullah & Fellinger, 2021, p. 5). This is particularly evident among working parents who, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, are increasingly calling for home offices as a measure to better reconcile family and career to counteract so-called work-family conflicts (Ahrens, 2021, p. 368; Bergmann et al., 2020, p. 6). Facing up to this trend an employer is therefore seen as a key success factor in recruiting and employer branding to continue to fill vacancies with suitable professionals (Ullah & Fellinger, 2021, p. 5). This relevance becomes even clearer against the backdrop of the growing shortage of skilled workers, which is already becoming apparent in some industries and represents the greatest obstacle to development from a company's point of view. According to the German Federal Ministry for Economics and Climate Action, demographic change will inevitably lead to a decline in the proportion of qualified workers in Germany (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Klimaschutz, n.d.).

In order to still be able to attract and secure skilled workers, it is important to establish a strategy of family-oriented personnel policy, particularly with regard to employees with care obligations (Ahmetovic, 2009, p. 4; FFP, n.d.). However, this does not only affect working parents whose return to work after parental leave or childcare options are influenced by this. Such a strategy can also increase the attractiveness of employers regarding family planning (Berufundfamilie, n.d.). At the same time, company offers for employees with care obligations can also be seen as part of the overall social responsibility of companies and bring employer branding as a "side effect".

Figure 1.*Four central challenges.**Own depiction.*

Taken together, this study defines four central challenges (see Fig. 1): Remote work as an employer branding trend, increasing work-family conflicts on the part of employees, the overall social responsibility of companies and the effects of demographic change. To jointly meet this growing demand from employees for flexible work models on the one hand and the need for a family-oriented human resources strategy on the other, the question of remote work as a strategic employer branding measure to improve the compatibility of work and family arises. Based on the current state of research, this question cannot be answered, as there is no research merging these topics. Therefore, to close this research gap, this paper is based on a qualitative empirical research method to investigate the influence of remote work on the strategic employer branding of companies on family issues in Germany.

Literature Review

In this context, different concepts interact with each other: strategic communication and its planning and implementation, internal and external employer branding, as well as family orientation and remote work. To establish this relationship, this chapter aims to contrast the different theories and concepts individually before holistically merging and connecting them in a joint state of research.

Strategic Communication

The definition of strategic communication is traditionally approached through the concept of strategy, although there is no common understanding of the term (Nothhaft & Zerfaß, 2020, p. 8). According to prevailing opinion, it nevertheless represents a distinct, interdisciplinary approach that is characterized by various competing views (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015, p. 3). In the following, we adopt the understanding of strategic communication as the subject of strategic communication management by Zerfass et al. (2018) to anticipate further developments in the field (Van Ruler, 2018, p. 379; p. 502). Within strategic communication, the overarching focus is on the process of communication (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015, p. 15). This communication process results from an organization's strategic plan and focuses on the role of communication in achieving the organization's strategic goals (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015, p. 4). In the context of strategic communication, strategic planning and implementation are therefore of particular importance.

Zerfass et al. (2018) concretize regarding business research that strategic communication addresses the question of how communication can be thought of and managed in terms of its strategic importance as a resource (p. 487). Whether a communication activity is strategic depends on the strategic perspective of the communicator. If the communicator participates in communication processes with the calculus of achieving goals through communication, then communication is strategic. This is especially relevant in complex situations with limited resources. The critical importance of the goals, meaning their strategic significance, is also decisive (Nothhaft & Zerfaß, 2020, p. 9; Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 487; p. 493). Taken together, Zerfass et al. (2018) thus define strategic communication as "all communication that is substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity. Specifically, strategic communication is the purposeful use of communication by an organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals" (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 493).

In the context of the communication process mentioned above, this suggests an interplay between deliberative and emergent strategies, as reflected in common management theory (Mintzberg, 1994). This means that strategies are not always intentional and planned in advance, as actual success factors can also be due to hidden or invisible ("emergent") strategies – despite strategic planning (Van Ruler, 2018, p. 377; Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 494; p. 500). If, on the other hand, strategies are planned in advance and strategic communication is thus understood as a plan, the course of action is deliberately and intentionally determined and formulated beforehand. This step

therefore takes place before the actual communication (Gulbrandsen & Just, 2020, p. 38). Its development and adaptation usually result from internal organizational communication processes that include analysis documents, workshops, discussions, and decision rounds (Nothhaft & Zerfaß, 2020, p. 219). Consequently, strategic planning involves strategy development and elaboration (Van Ruler, 2018, p. 378; Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 499).

Strategy implementation, in turn, is primarily about the allocation of resources “to operational procedures or tactical dispositions” (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 500). In this phase, the previously planned measures are implemented by communicators acting and communicating deliberately and consciously (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 500). To this end, organizations ‘produce’ strategically relevant communications to convey their organizational content by means of messages. At the same time, strategic implementation also involves using various methods to monitor the formation of opinion internally and externally and to analyze the reputation (Nothhaft & Zerfaß, 2020, pp. 21–22). These insights can be integrated into the strategic decision-making process, allowing communication to support strategy implementation and contribute to the organizational success (Volk et al., 2017). Nevertheless, strategy implementation is described as something that is often not directly observable. Rather, it is evident in the way operational things are done (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 500).

Employer Branding

The term employer branding was first introduced by Ambler and Barrow (1996) as “the package of functional, economic, and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company” (p. 8). Therefore, it is important for employers to actively position themselves and build an attractive employer brand. The development of an integrative understanding of employer branding attempts to combine, on the one hand, the external promises of the recruitment process with internal employee experiences, and on the other hand, the development of an employer brand with the corporate and customer brand (Mosley, 2007, p. 130).

The internal perspective of employer branding focuses on positioning the employer brand in all areas, departments, and activities within an organization. Heider-Winter (2014) argues that the credibility of an employer brand increases, the more consistently the value proposition to the addressed target group is adhered to and implemented. This requires a strong acceptance of and identification with the employer brand (p. 155). Internal measures occur at all points of contact in a company and appear in onboarding and

development programs, employee interviews, bonuses or exit interviews (Brast et al., 2017, p. 38).

The external perspective centers around a company's environment and its stakeholders (Stuss & Herdan, 2017, p. 202). In this context, it is not sufficient to communicate above-average salaries or other benefits. Employers must rather create additional reasons for applicants to join and remain with the company (Cable & Turban, 2001, p. 128). Applicants should consider the company relevant in their job search, and "compete" for advertised positions (Latzel et al., 2015, p. 22). External measures can occur by offering workplace flexibility or increasing work-life-flexibility. These measures can also arise indirectly by providing company offerings for employees with care responsibilities outside of the company (Ahmetovic, 2009, p. 69; Wehrmann, 2013, p. 266).

This internal and external dichotomy leads to various challenges, like the strategic implementation of employer branding measures, and questions regarding the responsibility within a company. For this reason, Figurska and Matuska (2013) extend the concept of employer branding to include the aspect of strategic communication (p. 35). Therefore, employer branding requires a holistic integration of all corporate departments to ensure a successful corporate strategy (Minchington & Thorne, 2007, p. 14).

Family Orientation and Remote Work

The extent to which work obligations make it difficult to fulfill family responsibilities falls under the term "work-family conflict" (Ahrens, 2021, p. 369). In addition to employees with care responsibilities of any kind in the family sphere, a distinction is made between working parents and employees in the family planning phase (Berufundfamilie, n.d., pp. 3–5). Furthermore, in the case of working parents, a distinction is made between the topics of parental leave and childcare, as in Germany these are each based on different legal and time-related framework conditions.

The term family planning is principally understood to mean that couples decide at their own discretion how many children they want to have and at what intervals (Schmid et al., 2018). In the corporate context, the focus is particularly on the conflict that professionals may feel that family and career advancement cannot be reconciled, thus postponing family planning (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend [BMFSFJ], 2014, p. 7). Therefore, the concept of family planning is primarily interpreted on an individual level and is not subject to a standard framework in Germany.

In turn, there is a broader consensus on the definition of parental leave based on legal requirements. According to the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, it is time off that parents take to care for and raise their own children (BMFSFJ, 2021). As an employee, each parent is entitled to be released from work by their employer for a total of up to three years (BMFSFJ, 2021). During this time off from work, the employee, as a non-employee, receives the so-called state parental allowance as compensation (BMFSFJ, 2021). Nevertheless, under certain conditions there is the possibility to work part-time (BMFSFJ, 2021). Irrespective of this employment during parental leave, there is special protection against dismissal and the right to return, so that the employee must be employed again in accordance with the contractual agreement (BMFSFJ, 2021). In Germany, the specific arrangements are governed by the Federal Parental Leave Act (Bundeselterngeld- und Elternzeitgesetz, § 1).

In contrast, the legal and temporal framework conditions around childcare are more variable. Statutory regulations only come into play in Germany regarding daycare facilities, as there is a legal entitlement to a childcare place for children from the age of one (Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung, 2022). In addition to state-run childcare facilities, there is also an increasing number of in-company childcare options (BMFSFJ, 2020, p. 3). In the following, the term childcare is understood primarily in its proper meaning as a supervisory activity towards children, in addition to the supervision of children in external facilities (Die Bundesregierung, 2022).

To reduce any reconciliation conflicts between childcare at home and simultaneous work, the potential of mobile working was already recognized as a suitable instrument by German companies before the COVID-19 pandemic, but it was far from being fully exploited (BMFSFJ, 2016; Erfolgsfaktor Familie, 2022). The terms home office and remote work are often used synonymously for this purpose. There is also frequent talk of so-called telework, which was already legally defined in 2016 (Bruhn, 2020, p. VII). These different understandings of the term will also be considered in the further course of this study by primarily referring to the broader definition of remote work to include all forms of mobile working that could offer an opportunity to better reconcile family and career. In fact, remote work encompasses location-independent and irregular work outside the company and thus includes more narrowly defined concepts of mobile work such as home office and teleworking. These specify, among other things, a certain regularity, and fixed premises (Deutscher Bundestag, 2017, pp. 4–5).

State of Research

After the various terms and concepts have been defined and differentiated, this chapter aims to summarize the state of research of strategic communication and employer branding in combination with the different family issues. The research in strategic communication and employer branding is similar with regards to its fragmentation and heterogeneity. The inflationary use of the term strategic communication in theory and practice as well as the vast amount of research streams also support this claim (Nothhaft & Zerfaß, 2020, p. 13). Studies regarding strategic communication often operate on a meso-level and focus on analyses from an organizational perspective with strategic processes (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2013, p. 77; Röttger et al., 2013, pp. 12–13).

For employer branding previous research seldom differentiated between the employer brand itself and the actual process of employer branding (Berthon et al. 2005, p. 153; Davies, 2008, p. 668; Moroko & Uncles, 2008, p. 161). Additionally, employer branding has been part of many different research fields which has led to inconsistent developments of definitions and target groups. These factors often inhibited theoretical and empirical advance (Theurer et al., 2018, pp. 155–156). Nowadays, studies frequently focus on researching the effects and benefits of agile and flexible working models as part of employer branding (Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Schall, 2019). Implementing these models can lead to higher levels of engagement, job satisfaction and work-related well-being. Oftentimes, these factors are linked to increased work intensity and the problem of not being able to switch off (Felstead & Henseke, 2017, p. 207). The COVID-19 pandemic forced many employees into working from home and thus increased family related conflicts of compatibility (Ahrens, 2021, p. 363).

The case study by Foreit et al. (1991) was the first to consider family planning in the context of a cost-benefit relation (p. 94). It compared possible costs and benefits for the implementation of family planning programs among mining companies in Peru. The programs included informational campaigns, education about contraceptive methods and showed to be more profitable compared to the costs of earlier absenteeism due to maternity leave. The study by Bächermann et al. (2020) examined the impact of family-friendly measures and structural characteristics in German companies to determine whether family-friendly working conditions influenced the duration of the interruption of employment after the birth of a child. The study showed that family-friendly measures have a particularly positive effect on women's return rates to the labor market, which in turn results in benefits for both employees and employers (p. 801). Wehrmann (2013) describes the importance

of day care centers for companies and highlights the connection of employer branding and the needs of working parents. A great know-how of the company combined with offers of company childcare can often result in increased work motivation (p. 277). In summary, the state of research on family orientation often originates from German speaking countries. Even though a distinction is made between the different family issues, as in Germany these are each based on different legal and time-related framework conditions, there are no clear differentiations between them in the literature which in turn highlights the need for a variety of family-friendly measures in all areas of the company to position itself as an attractive employer on the market. Furthermore, there is no research that connects remote work as a flexible work model with strategic family-oriented employer branding.

Derivation of the Research Question

After the presentation of the theory and research status of the subareas of strategic communication, employer branding, remote work and the topics of family planning, parental leave and childcare, these are combined in the following research guiding question:

To what extent does remote work influence the planning and implementation of strategic employer branding of companies in the areas of family planning, parental leave and childcare for employees in Germany?

Two central developments underline the relevance of the research question: On the one hand, the continuing trend among employees to increasingly work from home and, on the other hand, the question of how the use of remote work affects the strategic communication of companies in various family areas.

Methodology

Interviews and Qualitative Content Analysis

To answer the research question, we chose a qualitative research design with semi-standardized guided interviews. This is suitable for explorative research and the combination of the sub-areas of strategic communication, family-oriented employer branding, and flexible work models, such as remote work. It also facilitates the contribution to theory building and follow-up research.

In the following, the interview guideline is explained in detail: First, the interview partners were given a brief introduction to the research project. An

icebreaker question was posed at the beginning to encourage the conversation. The interviewees were asked to report on their changed daily work routine in the COVID-19 pandemic and to explain how their company is structurally organized in terms of employer branding as an interface between the human resources and communications departments. They were also asked about the impact of remote work on the company's communications. After the general questions, the guide was divided into the three subsections of family issues. The first section was about the company's internal handling of family topics, the importance of remote work in employer branding, and the inclusion of family topics in the company's job advertisements. Questions were asked about the internal presentation and sharing of family issues and company attitudes of pandemic-related remote work in relation to family planning. The second section focused on the area of parental leave and asked about the company's level of information on this area. Other questions discussed the return of employees after parental leave and changes triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. The third section dealt with the topic of childcare. Again, questions were asked about the status quo and the impact of the pandemic on childcare. In addition, the role of businesses in the family issue was discussed and a question was asked about the outlook for the future. This also included a question about future measures in the area of family orientation. At the end, the interview partners had the opportunity to add further points to the previously asked questions. The interview guide ended with a clarification of the background of the research project to the interview partners and the possibility to clarify final questions.

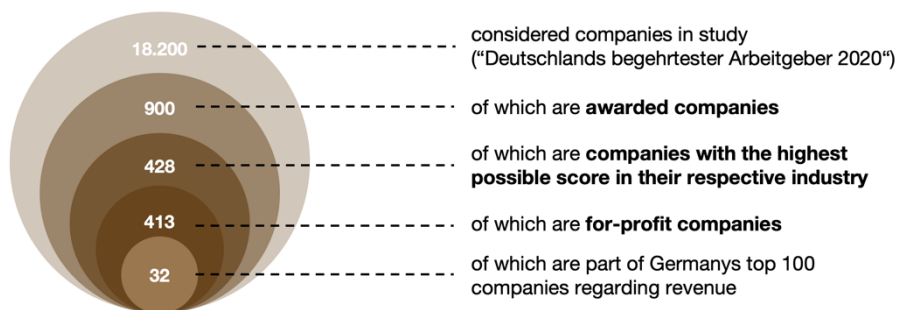
The interviews were subsequently transcribed. The transcription rules were adapted from Misoch (2019) and Dresing and Pehl (2018). Following the transcription, we analyzed the interviews using a qualitative content analysis. Referring to Mayring (2010), two-step-procedure with a schema-based first step and an ascending (text-guided) second step was used to develop a category system from the collected data. In the first step, two supercategories were determined, while in the second step, the level of abstraction for the dimensions below the supercategories was determined based on paraphrasing and content reduction of content-bearing text passages (Mayring, 2010, p. 70). The category system is described in further detail under *Results*.

Population and Sample

Our sample consists of two different sub-samples. In the beginning the companies of sample 1 were contacted. Afterwards we used sample 2 to additionally include the perspective of companies, which were awarded particularly for their family-friendliness.

Sample 1 (see Fi. 2) is based on a study conducted by the F.A.Z. Institut in cooperation with the Institute for Management and Economic Research (IMWF) investigating the most coveted employers in Germany in 2020 (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 2020, October 29). This study, which includes data from around 18,200 companies in Germany, served as basis for the first sampling. The sample was determined in several steps: The ranking includes over 900 excellent employers. Of these employers, 428 received the highest possible industry rating of 100 points. The highest rating of 100 points was compiled for each industry individually. The individual ratings are therefore not comparable to each other, as they only represent the most desirable employers in each industry. Companies from different industries and of different sizes were included in the survey. Due to our focus on family-friendliness of for-profit businesses, all government agencies, charitable associations, or non-profit organizations were removed from the list. After removing the aforementioned organizations, a list of 413 employers remained.

Figure 2.
Sample 1.

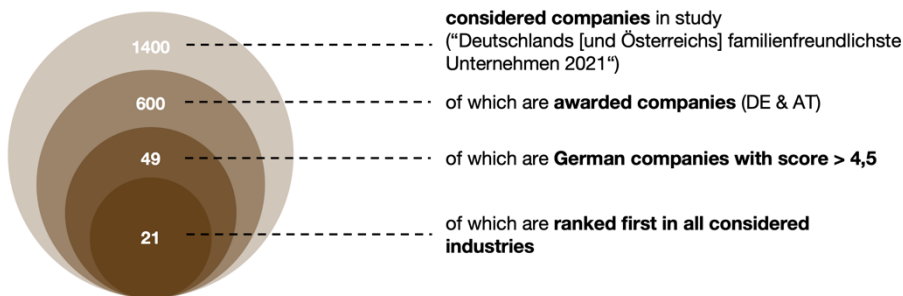


Own depiction.

Subsequently, an intersection of these 413 employers was formed with the "100 companies with the highest turnover in Germany in 2018", based on the expert opinion of the Monopolies Commission 2020. According to Bächmann et al. (2020, p. 800), family-friendly measures increase with the size of a company. Therefore, we intertwined these two rankings. This intersection comprises 32 companies (see Fig. 2). Based on these 32 companies, the potential interview partners were contacted in writing and by telephone. To include the perspective of companies which were awarded particularly for their family-friendliness, sample 2 was formed from a new population

parallel to sample 1. Sample 2 was based on a study examining the most family-friendly companies in Germany & Austria in 2021. The study was conducted by kununu, an internet portal for employer ratings, and the magazine "Freundin" (kununu, 2021, December 1). The study examined 1,400 companies in Germany and approximately 300 companies in Austria. The ones from Austria were excluded due to their location. The companies examined were included in the study if they had at least 50 reviews on kununu, at least one of which had been submitted since January 1, 2021, had a score of 3.5 (out of five possible stars), and had at least 3.3 stars in certain review categories (kununu, 2021). Sample 2 finally consisted of 21 German companies that could show the first places of all 29 defined industries with a score of more than 4.50 points (see Fig. 2).

Figure 3.
Sample 2.



Own depiction.

Regardless of the sample, the interviewees had to be employed in the company at least since 2019, as the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were measured. We interviewed only one person from each company, while it did not matter whether the person was a parent themselves. The interviewees needed to have a managerial position or at least a position with managerial functions. During the interviews the perspective of the company and not the personal perspective of the interviewees was relevant. A total of 17 people from human resources, public relations and communications departments were interviewed. Of these, 14 interviewees were from the sample 1 and three from the sample 2.

Results

From the qualitative interviews with the leading executives of the companies surveyed, several findings were identified. On the one hand, the results focus on family topics as a general field, which are strategically communicated in employer branding, and on the other hand, the statements of the interview partners can be further differentiated into the three family topics: family planning, parental leave and childcare. The present study concentrates on the linkage of the topics: strategic employer branding, remote work and family-oriented communication and measures of companies. In order to analyze this topic in detail, a category system was developed in the present study, which systematically analyses the topic area. This is presented in the following chapter to subsequently cluster and present the results of this study from the interviews conducted using the category system.

Category System

The starting point for the evaluation was a scheme-based procedure relying on the central interest of the research question (Mayring, 2010, p. 69). This was defined as

causes and effects of social developments and framework conditions on the resulting measures or consequences in corporate contexts of remote work, family and employer branding.

In the literature, current HR challenges for companies are linked to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as to preceding factors, which were largely confirmed by the interviewees. This results in the first top category of *challenges/reasons* for change. In response to these challenges, companies take certain actions, which are therefore titled *measures/consequences*.

This way, the category *challenges/reasons* for change was divided into four dimensions that were sorted hierarchically by means of their relevance for companies: *legal requirements/regulations*, *family orientation*, *socio-cultural factors*, and *company-specific* factors. Lower categories were only then coded, when a statement could not be assigned to a subcategory of a higher level.

The *legal requirements/regulations* subcategory referred to challenges or reasons attributable to any type of governmental law or regulation. *Family orientation* included those challenges specifically related to specific family issues. The category *socio-cultural factors* included challenges with overall social or interpersonal factors, like work-life-flexibility but also the lack of social exchanges at work during pandemic times. Lastly, the category of *company-specific factors* referred to specific challenges of individual

companies that could not be assigned to any of the three categories above, i.e., strong corporate governance policies of one specific company. At the second level, the category *measures/consequences* was split up into *measures specific to a family issue* as well as *external measures* and *internal measures* to account for both corresponding dimensions of employer branding. *External measures* were further divided into the categories of *external employer branding* and *measures from external providers* such as family service providers. *Internal measures* were divided into those focused on *remote work* as well as a category for other *issues outside of remote work*. Finally, *information channels* used for the measures were recorded. In general, answers that included information regarding more than one category were coded multiple times, respectively.

Table 1.

Category System.

1. Challenges/ reactions for change <i>(Only one item per statement)</i>	1.1 Legal requirements 1.2 Family orientation 1.3 Socio-cultural factors 1.4 Company-specific factors															
2. Measures/ consequences <i>(Multiple items for one statement, if necessary)</i>	<table border="0"> <tr> <td style="vertical-align: top;">2.1 Specific to one family issue</td> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <table border="0"> <tr> <td>2.1.1 Family planning</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2.1.2 Parental leave</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2.1.3 Childcare</td> </tr> </table> </td> </tr> <tr> <td style="vertical-align: top;">2.2 General: External measures</td> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <table border="0"> <tr> <td>2.2.1 External employer branding</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2.2.2 Measures from external providers</td> </tr> </table> </td> </tr> <tr> <td style="vertical-align: top;">2.3 General: Internal measures</td> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <table border="0"> <tr> <td>2.3.1 Concerning remote work</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2.3.2 Issues outside of remote work</td> </tr> </table> </td> </tr> <tr> <td style="vertical-align: top;">2.4 Information channels</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	2.1 Specific to one family issue	<table border="0"> <tr> <td>2.1.1 Family planning</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2.1.2 Parental leave</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2.1.3 Childcare</td> </tr> </table>	2.1.1 Family planning	2.1.2 Parental leave	2.1.3 Childcare	2.2 General: External measures	<table border="0"> <tr> <td>2.2.1 External employer branding</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2.2.2 Measures from external providers</td> </tr> </table>	2.2.1 External employer branding	2.2.2 Measures from external providers	2.3 General: Internal measures	<table border="0"> <tr> <td>2.3.1 Concerning remote work</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2.3.2 Issues outside of remote work</td> </tr> </table>	2.3.1 Concerning remote work	2.3.2 Issues outside of remote work	2.4 Information channels	
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2.4 Information channels																

Overarching Family Issues

From the interviews conducted, various findings emerged which, with the help of the category system, can be divided into the major sub-areas *challenges and reasons for change* and *measures and consequences*, which are subsequently examined in further detail. Family-oriented positioning poses a great challenge to the communication of companies because the employees' demand for flexibility is growing. In a context of a sharp competition for workforce, out of this arises an increased relevance for effective employer branding as well as the strategic planning of HR departments or supervisors, who

need to have an overview of the entire life cycle and availability of an employee in order to make the availability of their workforce plannable to a certain extent.

Particularly in a comparison of internal and external communication, it is noticeable that the compatibility of family and career has a greater significance internally. In external employer branding measures, the topic is considered to be standard and is therefore no longer explicitly mentioned. Another reason in this regard are the individual preferences of the individual (potential) employees. It is often not possible for the company to identify a clear opinion majority regarding flexibility measures. This is also due to the fact that needs change in the respective life phases of employees, which requires differentiated communication on the part of the company. "Lifecycle-oriented communication" is one approach to take into account the individual interests and needs of (potential) employees.

According to the interviewees' statements, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic partially led to an increase in workers taking parental leave. Furthermore, working together while working from home is a communicative challenge, which, among other things, affects the integration of all members into the teams. In addition, the conditions in home office, such as the working environment and data protection issues, can negatively influence remote work and lead to a preference for working in the company office.

In the closer examination provided by the conducted interviews, challenges to the mandatory introduction of remote work by the German government were also identified for the family issues. The beginning of mandatory remote work during the pandemic created great challenges and influenced childcare as a major family issue with the reconciliation of work and family with the obligation to care as a challenge for employed parents and therefore also for the companies. The blending of work and personal life led to the need for support, especially for employees with children, and demanded flexibility from companies. Remote work represents both an opportunity and a risk. In addition to the inclusion of all team members in the home office in a community, the direct environment is a major influencing factor here. It turned out that parents tended to prefer coming to the office because they had the peace and quiet to work there. Thus, it was not always possible to combine caregiving responsibilities to productive work in the home office.

On the one hand, the variety of offers is limited by the respective liquidity of the companies, since they need financial resources to implement large-scale home offices or similar measures around flexible working. In most cases, these can be provided primarily by larger companies or corporations according to the interviewees. On the other hand, through their own perception and

positioning with their responsibilities, which expand or limit the variety of offers for employees by the companies.

The pandemic-related government measures led to a mandatory remote work requirement in companies. For employees on parental leave and those returning to work, this circumstance meant both new opportunities and further restrictions. Remote work made it possible to slowly re-enter the workforce through the part-time work model from the home office. In this case, the working hours defined in advance must not be exceeded, which gives parents the chance to stay in touch with the company and still be able to take their parental leave. In addition to the option of part-time work, the companies prefer processes that involve maintaining contact with the parents during parental leave and only starting again when they return. Different opportunities are provided for this, such as update meetings between a team member and the colleague on parental leave, as well as coordination with the HR department regarding various re-entry options. Information about these processes, contact partners and coordination channels takes place digitally and enables options for remotely working parents on parental leave. The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying expansion of digital offerings and communications had no impact on companies' offerings on the one hand, and on the other hand led to the implementation of new opportunities for companies and parents according to the statements of the different interviewees. Related to remote work are implementations such as online platforms for virtual care services from external providers for children of certain age groups or the introduction of digital "family rooms" on the intranet or on communication platforms for parents to exchange information with each other as a measure by the company for its employees. Communication platforms such as Microsoft Teams also support the implementation of flexible working time models. Companies use the platform's status and calendar function to make the respective attendances and absences of an employee working flextime transparent. This makes it easier to organize the interplay between work and private life and to communicate parents' everyday tasks, such as picking up the children from music lessons and the associated absence of the employee for this time, to the team. Digital communication tools are also used for strategic planning in companies, as agreements on working time models, queries and sickness notifications can be communicated more efficiently, enabling HR, among others, to coordinate employees and positions in the company. The question of the specific role and use of remote work can be clarified by the interviews conducted. Remote work together with other offers such as flexible working models is a widely used option for parents as well as employees without

children. Working remotely makes it possible to implement flexible working models, such as flextime, in a way that is appropriate for everyday life, since travel times and changes of location can be avoided and the transition from professional to private tasks can be implemented more quickly especially in a family context.

While the measures taken by the companies are largely overlapping across family topics, they differ between the offerings to support employees in part on specific family topics, such as family planning, parental leave and childcare, which are summarized further in the following.

Family planning

The term family planning is not defined uniformly by the companies. While some do not differentiate the term at all, but instead use the standardized term "work-family issues," others also include the organization of care for dependents under the term. Family planning poses the greatest challenge to organizations in the context of flexibility. While parental leave and childcare entail clear basic needs for parents, family planning for employers is highly individual. The fact that an employee's pregnancy must be reported to the employer at a certain point provides a frame. Established processes and communicated information primarily include the opportunity for exchange with experts, HR and the direct supervisor as well as best practice examples. One challenge here is the flexibility and family-oriented positioning of companies.

Parental leave

The term parental leave is partly differentiated from the term maternity leave. Both terms describe a total maximum grace period after birth of three years and are combined in this research project under the generic term parental leave. A special feature of parental leave in Germany is the guarantee of employment upon return to the company. This circumstance is taken into account by companies in their internal communications and is referred to in various expressions, such as the "home port principle". A prominent influence of the COVID-19 pandemic was the return to parental leave after the birth of the child and early return to work. In this context, parents felt the need to take parental leave a second time and felt their return to work had been premature beforehand. While the remote work offer applies to all employees who are not involved in operations, the uptake of the offer and the needs of parents differ. On the one hand, flexible working time models and remote work support childcare from home. On the other hand, parents use

work in the office to be able to work in a concentrated manner, as their personal environment at home does not offer the corresponding opportunity. The processes during parental leave are very similar across companies. The ideal process involves regular contact between a contact person in the company and the respective parent. Firstly, the formal return from parental leave is coordinated with a contact person from the HR department, and secondly, attempts are made to maintain contact with the team in order to make it as easy as possible for the employee to re-acclimate and come to terms with the time off within the company. Two measures that are only indirectly related to remote work are the introduction of additional parental vacation in addition to parental leave, as well as opportunities for further development after parental leave, such as extra traineeships for returning employees.

Childcare

The term childcare includes the supervisory responsibilities of parents, which is defined in this research, from the end of parental leave until the child's 18th birthday. Childcare encompasses the largest time frame and presents challenges to employees and employers especially in terms of available childcare places and related flexible work schedules. The COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to digital offerings and communications had little or no impact on company offerings at some companies but led to the implementation of new opportunities for companies and parents at others. One example of such implementations are online platforms for virtual childcare offerings from external providers for children of certain age groups. Furthermore, internal communication and the networking of parents in digital "family spaces", including on the intranet or on communication platforms, represent a way for parents to exchange information with each other. Likewise, communication platforms such as Microsoft Teams also support the implementation of flexible working time models such as flextime. Companies use the status and calendar function of the platform to make the respective attendances and absences transparent. These are also highly relevant to the issue of childcare, with the combination of private and professional obligations. In this way, parents' everyday tasks, such as picking up their children from school and the associated absence of the employee for this time, can also be communicated to their team.

In the context of employer branding, communicating specific childcare offerings challenges companies to consider the interests of prospective employees. In this context, childcare is not a significantly relevant topic for young career starters, but rather of interest to more professionally experienced candidates. In this regard, lifecycle-oriented communication is an

approach to consider the individual interests and needs of (potential) employees. In the area of childcare, the companies studied offer some measures that are only superficially related to remote work. These include offers of mobile emergency childcare, which can take place both at the employees' homes and externally at the respective providers' facilities. In addition, some companies supplemented their offerings with additional days off, childcare days, or even sick days due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the related closure of childcare centers. Since most of the offers cannot be related to remote work, they are not considered further on, but are only briefly listed here to show the variety and adjustments made by companies due to the pandemic. These include childcare subsidies, individual flextime models as well as parent-child offices, child vacation programs, sabbaticals as well as childcare centers close to the company, which were not abolished despite many challenges caused by the pandemic but adapted and expanded depending on the situation.

Overall, the changes in working culture brought about by the pandemic have mostly become established. Most companies even do not plan to return to full staffing. Instead, hybrid models are envisaged, in which some of the employees are in the office while others work remotely.

Discussion

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviewed companies were confronted with fundamental upheavals and changes to established structures, work processes and corporate culture. In line with the existing literature, the pandemic had a reinforcing effect on developments that had already been initiated beforehand (Ahrens, 2021, p. 368; Bergmann et al., 2020, p. 6, Ullah & Fellinger, 2021, p. 5). Many of the interviewees confirmed that they had already had established regulations or company agreements on the subject of remote work and flexible working hours in the company before the pandemic. COVID-19 then added acute challenges for companies by bringing about a greatly increased use of home office. This resulted in a greater blending of private and professional contexts, an exacerbation of personal time conflicts among employees and the complication of communicative processes, putting increased pressures on employers to take measures for acquiring and retaining employees. The high relevance of the research gap identified by this paper, which was largely underexamined all in all, could thus be confirmed in the interviews.

In general, family orientation played an important role in the employer branding efforts of the interviewed companies, although it was striking that the was

given significantly greater relevance in internal than in external branding measures. Opportunities to address potential new employees in a needs-oriented manner regarding family orientation and work-life-flexibility were not being fully utilized, which was especially surprising in view of the increasing relevance of the topic for the job selection decisions of applicants. The focus on internal communication of family issues can possibly also be attributed to the fact that the different family areas often have to be addressed with separate measures and thus demand a great deal of attention by leaders in order to manage the existing workforce. As already assumed in the research question, a distinction between family planning, parental leave and childcare was therefore useful to represent these differences in practice.

While the different family topics were not uniformly organized in all interviewed companies, they were usually either addressed as a separate topic or included in the context of other topics such as work-life balance, diversity & inclusion, social services, or similar.

Questions of family planning are of highly individual nature, which are decided at the discretion of each family and therefore generally not regulated by corporations (BMFSFJ, 2014, p. 7; Schmid et al., 2018). Consequently, the negotiation of the topic is largely a matter of individual coordination between the employee and their manager. Many interviewees emphasized a large leeway for decision-making that leaders are granted in this regard. For this reason, the topic can only be marginally associated with an overarching employer branding strategy. For measures and communication regarding parental leave, more clearly established structures and a greater strategical orientation could be identified. These included dedicated content platforms and support offerings for parents, as well as a strategy for maintaining contact with employees taking parental leave, in order to facilitate the re-integration into work. There were various options reported for returning to the company, with the part-time model dominating. Remote work, on the other hand, hardly played a role as a model for returning from parental leave, which contradicts the implicit assumption of the research question in this direction. This might be due to the fact that remote work was often viewed as problematic (Felstead & Henseke, 2017, p. 207). For employers, it means increased difficulties communicating and organizing work digitally, as well as a lacking environment for corporate culture and creativity. Employees on the other hand have to forgo social interactions which are crucial for their mental health when working remotely. This problematic perception of remote work, according to the interviewees, changed over the time since the beginning of the pandemic. More and more executives are now referring to the opportunities of remote work.

Of all the family issues, childcare poses the greatest challenge to employers, as parents are potentially more likely to be absent from work at short notice due to emergency care requirements. In response to this, the companies surveyed strive to ensure the greatest possible degree of flexibility regarding working hours and work location, which is reflected in a high level of acceptance of home office as well as the broad facilitation of part-time and flextime models. Again though, remote work only plays a limited part in this regard, as working from home is no final solution for childcare. In a worst-case scenario, neither the job nor the children receive enough attention in a context where both have to be managed simultaneously – a criticism which was also leveled against parent-child offices. Remote work thus can aid with providing greater work-life-flexibility but has to be viewed with its specific limitations in mind and embedded in a greater context of a variety of measures. While the topic of childcare evidently receives a great amount of attention in strategic planning, the necessity of a supporting informal dimension for a family-friendly working environment was frequently emphasized, as well. Interviewees stated that it is not enough to formally implement the above-mentioned measures; the corresponding principles must also be culturally embedded. This finding is in line with research by Heider-Winter (2014) which suggests that a consistent implementation of an employer brand's value proposition is crucial for its credibility (Heider-Winter, 2014, p. 155).

Among the measures described, some can clearly be assigned to a deliberate practice of strategic communications (Van Ruler, 2018, p. 377; Zeffass et al., 2018, p. 494). In some cases, for example, the topics of family and remote work were directly addressed in employer marketing or specifically marketed in job advertisements, although sometimes as part of the overall package of "flexible working". Employer awards were strategically placed in external communications. In contrast, some statements revealed the communication for the relevant areas to be rather strategically emergent (Van Ruler, 2018, p. 378; Zeffass et al., 2018, p. 499). Within some companies, family issues were not raised in job advertisements because the family-friendly image of the company in the region is known by the employees. As a result, reliance is placed on the image effect of the company for the effectiveness of the employer brand, and the topic isn't addressed separately. The goal of communicating a family-oriented HR policy in general is present in these cases, but remote work is not necessarily planned as a component of this strategy.

A similar picture emerges at the internal level. From a deliberate point of view, family issues and flexibilization offers are directly marketed in some

companies, for which special contact persons, teams or responsible departments are even created, and their availability is concretely communicated to new employees. On the other hand, it could be observed, that, for example in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic, strategies aiming at implementing and communicating flexibility measures were not always intentional and planned in advance, but often rather emerged out of practice. Whereas the concept of remote work was met with great skepticism in some cases at the beginning, it has now subsided and turned into broad acceptance, leading to general internal support for the measure. Hybrid work is now communicated as an important component of flexible working arrangements, while this was not the case at the beginning of the pandemic and has therefore only developed out of practice.

In conclusion, a greatly increased demand for family orientation can be confirmed as an overarching trend in business which companies have to deal with. Particularly against the backdrop of the shortage of skilled workers due to demographic change, the need for a family-oriented HR policy that takes into account all the needs of current and potential employees in terms of family orientation and thus encompasses family care obligations of all kinds becomes apparent (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Klimaschutz, n.d.).

While there could not be identified a consistent differentiation between family planning, parental leave and childcare in practice, there still were recognizable differences between the three areas in the strategic orientation of the measures and communication in each case. A reason for this might be that the family planning of employees is very individually shaped, while parental leave and childcare are associated with clear basic needs of working parents. Even though the companies themselves did not always explicitly distinguish between the family areas defined here, a distinction is made between family planning and parental leave coordination as one category and care responsibilities as another category, which includes both childcare and care for other family members. Although the latter was not explicitly addressed in this study, this target group seems to receive just as much attention on the corporate side, so that an expansion of the scientific understanding of the term used in this paper may be necessary. Thus, even though not complete reflective of the use in practice, the differentiation of the three family topics in this paper was useful to gain an understanding of the weighting these areas receive within corporate contexts, and to provide starting points for further research.

Finally, as the researched phenomena came about during the COVID-19 pandemic, the results are of preliminary nature and still remain to be verified

for post-pandemic contexts. The results may also be limited by the fact that the interviews for this paper were conducted predominantly with large companies that are financially liquid enough to be able to afford respective measures, and also have received awards for their family-friendliness. It therefore could be explored further to what extent the results can also be applied to smaller companies. However, the position of the companies in the sample as leading players in the German economy suggests that this development might be generalizable on a larger scale.

Regarding the ambivalent results on remote work as a measure of flexibilization, future research could be concerned with determining possible ways of strategically leveraging the measure for employer branding in greater detail. A continued normalization of remote work many organizations might lead to it being used even less for branding purposes, like already seen in some instances. In this context, it would also be interesting to find out what requirements employees have looking at a possible long-term implementation of remote work – especially with regards to family issues. Finally, greater detail could be given to the usefulness of the concept of emergence in the context of strategic communication to identify communicative structures in companies. A point of reference of this work would be to test, to which degree taken measures can be defined as part of an ‘emergent’ strategy.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate the possibilities of using remote work as a measure to improve the compatibility of family and work, and to highlight specifically how this is communicated by companies in Germany as part of the strategic planning and implementation of employer branding. In general, it became apparent that the various areas of the research question can be differentiated on the basis of different legal and time-related framework conditions (see chapter *Family-orientation and Remote Work*), but that companies do not consistently adopt this differentiation between family planning, parental leave, and childcare. At the same time, companies consider mobile working as part of their employer brand, but is not usually part of a formulated strategy, although the compatibility of family and career is seen as a central criterion for employer attractiveness. This suggests that these strategies are not always strategically planned in advance but can also emerge (see chapter *Strategic Communication*). It is questionable to what extent the concept of emergence and thus a more management-oriented understanding of strategic communication within employer branding could broaden the perspective. Nevertheless, the interviewees explain that remote work does

not exclusively occur in connection with family issues, but that psychological aspects of working together are also addressed. Supportively, the results show that remote work in the family sector is also seen as a challenge, so that mobile working is not a blanket solution for all employees. Rather, the discussions revealed that a broad range of offers must be made available for different phases of life. It must be possible to adapt these measures individually, for example to the care of family members. Remote work was thus recognized in isolated cases as a measure to improve the compatibility of family and career even before the COVID-19 pandemic, but it has not yet taken on a central role within the flexible working time models in the family sector. As a result, remote work is described less as a stand-alone work model but is available for selection together with other offers.

The extent to which the communication of remote work as a family-friendly measure will be strategically planned and implemented in employer branding in the future cannot be answered conclusively. This research is limited by the fact that at the time the interviews were conducted, there was a Germany-wide home office obligation. However, the increasing relevance of family orientation as part of the work-life balance, which was also attributed by companies to the demands of today's young professionals and generational differences, also reflects the ongoing flexibilization of the world of work and consequently the need for a comprehensive package of measures. According to the results, a hybrid form of work is also emerging as a future model alongside remote work. Companies should monitor the trends (introduced in Fig. 1) to continue to attract and secure new skilled workers as attractive and competitive employers, especially regarding employees with care responsibilities.

To better understand the ongoing flexibilization of working models, science needs a shared understanding of the topic. Despite the high relevance in practice and increasing thematization in science, a common understanding of the terms remote work, hybrid work as well as future or new work is still missing. Our interviews confirmed this, as the terms were used differently by the companies. This study has provided an initial starting point by qualitatively investigating the entrepreneurial tension between an increasingly flexible working environment and the growing importance of work-family balance to close part of the existing research gap in family-oriented employer branding.

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