

## CSR, TRUST AND THE EMPLOYER BRAND

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### Abstract

The financial crisis has severely impacted the general trust in banks, institutions as well as companies (e.g. Tonkiss, 2009; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2009). At the same time, entrants to the job market seem to be increasingly interested in companies' responsible behaviour and sustainable governance. Before the background of demographic challenges and potential staffing bottlenecks of companies, the discussion about trust, CSR and the employer brand gains importance. The objective of the paper is to conceptualize the relation between the concepts trust, CSR and employer branding. Trust is understood as the "psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of another" (Rousseau et. al., 1998). The paper describes elements and determining factors for trust, and assays the influence of CSR activities and the employer brand on employer choice and trust. Finally, instruments rooted in CSR and employer branding are identified that enhance trust in companies.

**Keywords:** CSR, Workplace CSR, trust, employer choice, employer branding.

## Introduction

As a result of decreasing trust in companies (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2009) companies begin to consider trust and trustworthiness as elements of their stakeholder communication. Trust is an essential lubricant in situations with high perceived risk due to asymmetric information or power and high involvement of the potentially weaker party. This applies not at least to employment situations, where job seekers and even employees cannot evaluate beforehand real characteristics of a workplace, leadership style or career perspectives. Trust and perceived fairness may therefore be important criteria for employer choice and at the same time potential differentiation attributes for employers for attracting suitable job candidates and retaining their existing workforce. This is even more true, when demand for qualified and skilled employees exceeds supply, and a high quality workforce is essential to ensure competitive advantage.

Literature suggests, that trust is enhanced by responsible and fair behaviour of companies (e.g. Fukukawa et al., 2007; Perrini & Castaldo, 2008; Rupp et al., 2006; Pivato et. al., 2008; Hansen et. al., 2011). At the same time, it is argued that trust has positive effects on employee organizational citizenship (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Organ & Ryan, 1995), voluntary performance (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Chen, Hwang & Liu, 2012) and retention (Hemdi et al., 2006; Tzafrir & More, 2006). Another stream of literature tries to provide evidence on positive effects of CSR on employer choice (Albinger & Freeman, 2000; Brammer et al., 2007; Galbreath, 2010; Kim & Park, 2011; Lin et al., 2012), or employee attitudes (Folger et. al., 2005). Finally, a number of authors argue on the positive link between CSR and the employer brand.

However, few papers combined the results from organizational behavior theories, employer marketing and CSR literature. Also, little research was done about how to build trust in companies. Therefore the objective of this paper is

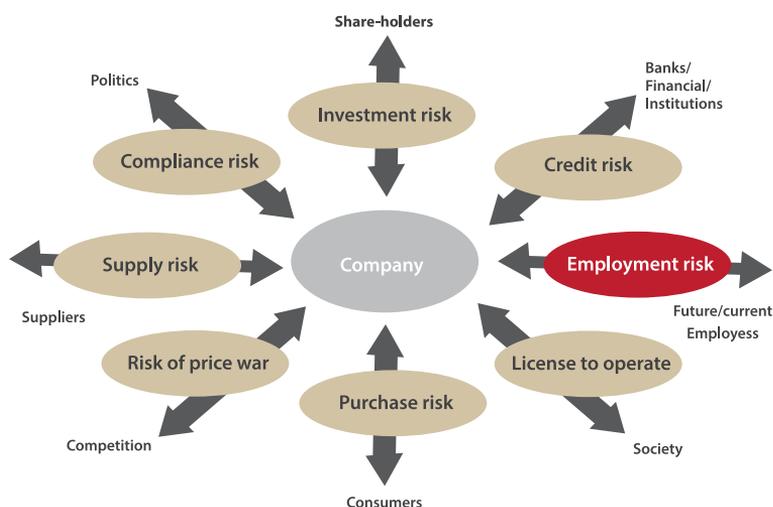
- (1) conceptualize the link between trust, CSR and the employer brand,
- (2) give more insights into which aspects of CSR potentially drive trust in companies.

To this end, we first will deepen the understanding about the role

of risk and trust in employment relations and detail the concept and components of trust. We will then shed some light about the reasons why CSR positively affects employer choice, commitment and retention, and which is the role of the employer brand. Finally, we will detail the impact of CSR on trust and the mechanisms how to build trust in companies by responsible behavior as well as by processes, structures and systems preventing opportunistic behavior.

## Risk and trust in employer relations

Companies can be understood as long-term coalitions of individuals with not necessarily identical interests, joining together in order to reach a common goal (Schauenberg & Schmidt, 1983). At the same time, they are linked via transactional and other relations to a number of external stakeholders, again with their own and potentially conflicting interests (Freeman, 2000). In case of perfect competition and properly defined property rights, these relations can be designed via negotiation, contracts and prices. However, market failures such as asymmetric information, power asymmetries and external effects entail risks for cooperation and may lead to leeways for opportunistic behavior (Schauenberg, 2004; Bustamante, 2013) (see. Fig 1).



**Fig. 1.** Risk and Opportunism in company relations

Opportunism risks are also of high relevance in employee – employer relations. For example, due to information asymmetries, a high share of experience and trust components of the future workplace and the immateriality of the “product”, potential employees cannot judge beforehand some characteristics of the workplace, such as working atmosphere, training possibilities or contents of work (Petkovic, 2008; Böttger, 2012).<sup>10</sup> Other aspects will only be discovered once the employee began to work for the company. Finally, there are characteristics of the company or the workplace that only after years will be overt such as job security or perspectives of the industry (see fig. 2).<sup>11</sup>

**Fig. 2.** Risks in employment relations as a function of possibilities for ex-ante judgment



Source: Own illustration based on Grobe (2003); Petkovic (2008)

These risks of employment are perceived as especially important given the fact that employment relations are usually long-term and more difficult to change than other transactional relations (such as purchase of a product or service), producing a high degree of involvement of employees.

<sup>10</sup> This is also the result of its dependency on superiors and colleagues (Petkovic, 2008)

<sup>11</sup> Of course, also employers cannot entirely judge beforehand the competencies and the knowledge of job aspirants whom they plan to employ or the motivations and actions of actual employees. However, for the sake of simplicity, in this paper we will neglect this aspect and focus on risks of potential employees and the role of trust in employers.

In these situations, companies may search for possibilities to build trust towards actual and potential employees, hence reducing the perceived risks for actual and potential employees.

## The concept of trust

Trust can be defined as the “psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another” (Rousseau et. al., 1998). It reduces complexity (Luhmann, 2000) and is considered as social mechanism for maintaining the ability to act in situations of dependency and insecurity (Ripberger, 1998). It then enables coordination and cooperation between. Trust gets important whenever there is room for opportunistic behavior: by providing “cognitive and moral expectational maps” it enables coordination and cooperation, which would in the absence of trust not occur (Barber, 1983).

Trust builds on expectations, actors attribute to themselves or others when they choose rationally effective and morally and emotionally appropriate actions (Barber, 1983). Typically the concept of trust refers to “positive” expectations, or the (mutual) confidence in the other’s goodwill (Ring and Van de Ven, 1992; Sabel, 1993), and leads to the willingness of a party to engage in an action even if there is the risk of being exploited by the trustee.

These expectations are grounded in the degree of trustworthiness that is assumed to form an inherent characteristic of the behavior of the trustee (“character trust”), and in situational factors that render trustworthy behavior a rationally effective choice (“situational trust”) (Norderhaaven, 1995; Liebeskind & Oliver, 1998). Character trust is driven values, moral or empathy and decreases the gain from opportunistic behavior based on preferences (internal boundedness). In organizations, it can be encouraged by corporate values and culture, role models and recruiting procedures. Situational trust in contrast increases/decreases the incentives for opportunistic behavior based on external factors such as reputation, repeated action or social norms. Within companies, it is endorsed by transparency and social embeddedness. Both, situational and charac-

ter trust depend on information (experiences, communication and other sources of knowledge) about other the other party, which may serve as a signal for its “type” or the situational circumstances (Güth & Kliemt, 2007).

For the understanding of trust in company – employee relations it is also important to distinguish between personal and systemic trust (Giddens, 1990; Luhmann, 2001). Personal trust refers usually to dyadic situations where trustor and trustee can be identified for both parties, such as the trust of the employee in his superior. Systemic trust concerns expectations about behavior due to systemic characteristics (principles, rules, guidelines) (Giddens, 1990). It would refer to the trust of an employee in the company he is working for, or the trust of potential employees in companies as institution. Whereas personal trust may be based both on expectations about character and situation, systemic trust usually results situational factors.

Trust is an important asset for companies. It supports voluntary participation, satisfaction and turnover intention of current employees (Chen et al., 2012; Dirks & Ferrin, 2001, 2002; Hameed & et al., 2013), and general work intention and employer choice of potential employees (Herger, 2006).

## **Role of CSR for trust in employers**

### ***CSR and the employer brand***

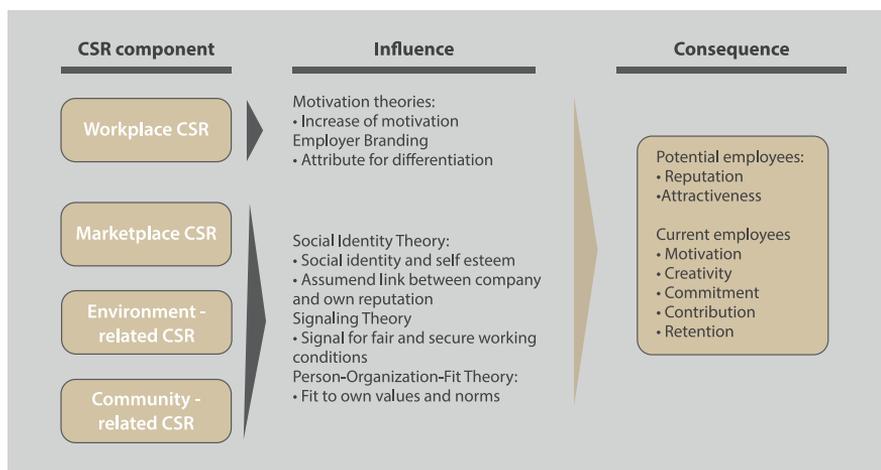
CSR may be defined as “the responsibility of enterprises for their impacts on society” (European Commission, 2011). It implies the integration of “social, environmental, ethical, human rights and consumer concerns into business operations and core strategy in close collaboration with their stakeholders” (ibid). The scope of responsibility can be derived from general values and ethical considerations reigning in a society or dialectically from the expectations of legitimate stakeholders of a company. Employees, as one of the core stakeholders of the company, are paid specific attention in several frameworks of CSR. For example, the European Union (2008) distinguishes four main areas of responsibility, with “workplace CSR” being the component which is most prominently directed to

employees. The ISO 26000 names seven core subjects of responsibility of the ISO 26000, where “Human Rights” and “Labor Practices” contain CSR aspects with particular relevance for employees (see fig. 4).

The particular attention paid to employees in theory and practice may partly be explained with the positive consequences of CSR on employee’s attitudes and behavior. A number of studies show, that CSR is an important aspect for job selection (Turban and Greening, 1997; Albinger & Freeman, 2000; Brammer et al., 2007; Galbreath, 2010; Kim & Park, 2011; Lin et al., 2012; Bustamante, 2014). Other studies reveal that CSR positively influences commitment (Brammer, 2007) and organizational identity (Fukukawa & al., 2007) and hereby motivation and productivity.

Different theories can be adduced to clarify the positive effects of CSR for companies as employers. (see fig. 3 for an overview).

### Why is CSR appreciated by graduates?



**Fig. 3.** Positive effects of different CSR components

Source: own illustration

It is straightforward, that aspects of workplace CSR– such as work-life balance, social benefits and health management – positively influence job satisfaction, staff commitment and loyalty of current employees, leading potentially to higher motivation, productivity and innovation (see Euro-

pean Commission 2008 for an overview of studies). Also, as far as potential employees are able to evaluate workplace characteristics beforehand, they allow employers to differentiate themselves and may support a positive the cognitive and affective judgment of the company in question.

But also other aspects of CSR seem to be of importance for employees. According to Social Identity theory, working for a company known to be responsible might positively influence social identity and self –esteem of people who associate themselves with it (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et. al., 1994; Cable & Graham, 2000). Therefore, when employees expect a positive link between companies' (CSR) image and their personal reputation, CSR may strengthen employer attractiveness and employee commitment (Herrbach & Mignonac, 2004). Signaling theory assumes that organizational attributes serve as signals for other unknown attributes (Spence, 1974; Rynes, 1991). General CSR may be interpreted as signal for fairness towards the employee, when information about workplace characteristics is incomplete (Rupp, 2006) and hence increases employer attractiveness and trustfulness (Turban & Greening, 1997). Finally, people increasingly look for jobs that allow not only for social, but also for personal identification (v. Rosenstiehl, 2001) and prefer working for a company exhibiting values similar to values (Chatman, 1989). For example, literature suggests that based on own moral duties to act in a fair way, employees would react negatively when companies treat other stakeholders in an unfair way and vice versa (Cropanzano et al., 2001; Rupp et. al., 2006). Moreover, with increasing consciousness for ecological and social behaviour, people expect employers to reflect their ethical concerns and engage in CSR activities (Greening & Turban, 2000; Maxfield, 2008). This does not only have positive effects on employer choice, but also – especially when employees get personally involved in CSR projects via volunteering or other activities – to increasing identification, hereby facilitating retention of employees.

CSR hence not only is part of “functional” workplace attributes, but it also potentially affects emotions and feelings (Zajonc & Markus, 1982), and hence may shape attitudes towards potential employers.<sup>12</sup>

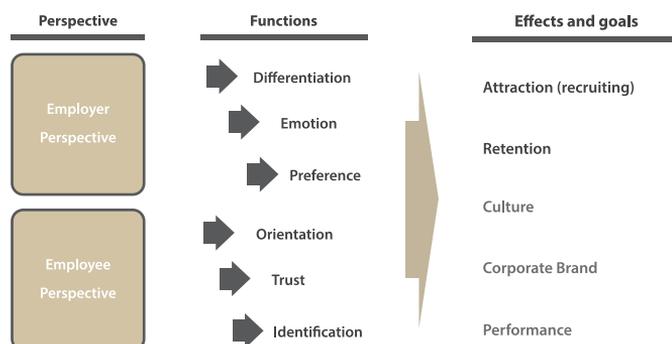
However, a strong CSR performance does not necessarily coincide with an image as a responsible employer. Comparing indices for CSR performance with indices for CSR reputation, one can detect significant differ-

<sup>12</sup> Lichtenstein et al. (2004) argue in the same way respective the effect of responsible behavior on consumers' attitudes toward the corporation

ences. Companies with a very good CSR reputation, such as Google or Walt Disney (CSR Reputation Institute, 2013) do not rate as high in indices for CSR performance (e.g. Corporate Knights, 2013) and vice versa. CSR image and CSR identity in these cases differ from each other, requiring an adequate positioning of CSR to relevant stakeholders via employer marketing and employer branding.

Employer branding can be understood as the identity based development and positioning of a company as a credible and attractive employer, both for existing and potential employees (Deutsche Employer Branding Akademie, 2007). It comprises the planning, steering, coordination, and controlling of the employer brand (Sponheuer, 2010, p. 27) as “the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company” (Ambler & Barrow, 1996, p. 187).

From a company perspective, the employer brand serves as an instrument to differentiate a company from its competitors in the eyes of potential and current employees (Althausen, 2001; Petkovic, 2008), either by providing functional benefits of the workplace or by creating sympathy and affection (Scholz, 1992; Petkovic, 2008) for the company in question. From the perspective of (future) employees, it helps to give orientation by conveying a clear image of functional and emotional workplace (Petkovic, 2008). Besides, brands should transmit trust, hence reducing the perceived risk involved with a job commitment. Finally, it supports social and personal identification (Meffert et. al., 2002; Herrmann, 2005) if perceived company values are in accordance with the self-concept and aspired value system of (potential) employees (Ross, 1971; Herriot, 2002) (see also Fig 4).

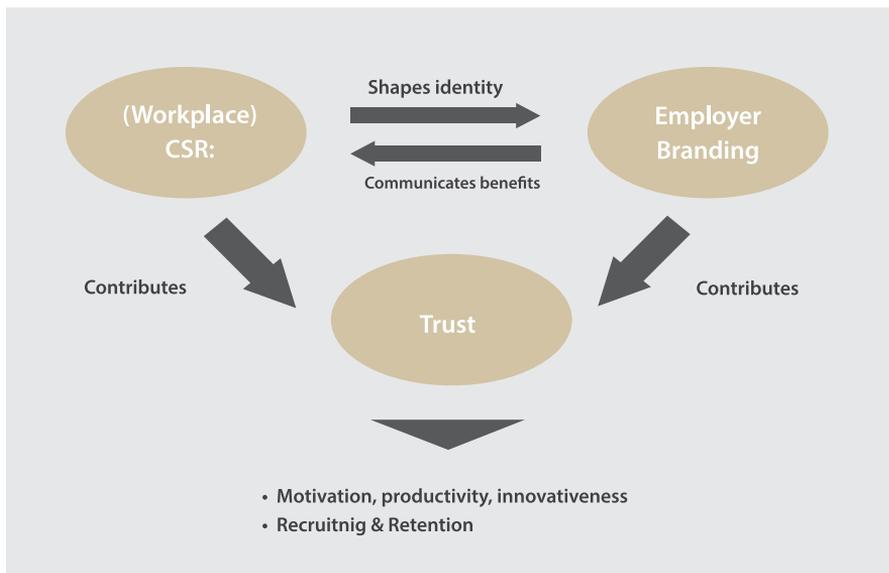


**Fig. 4.** Functions and effects of the employer brand

The integration of CSR in the employer brand does not only support the communication of CSR to relevant stakeholders, but at the same time potentially strengthens the employer brand and its potential to attract and retain employees: If “responsible” workplace attributes play a decisive role for job aspirants, CSR is an important attribute for differentiation from competitors.

If ecological and social consciousness and fairness is part of the value system of the target employees of a company, its communication enhances identification (Meffert et. al., 2002) and perceived “added value” (e.g. Varadarajan & Menon, 1988; Gardberg & Fombrun, 2006; McWilliams et al., 2006) of the employer in question. Finally, if CSR is taken as a signal for trustworthiness, its integration in the positioning allows strengthening the image of the company as a trustful, reliable and fair employer (see fig. 5).

**Fig. 5.** Consequences of CSR and Employer Branding on trust



Source: Own illustration

## ***Building trust by CSR and employer branding***

As could be seen in the preceding chapters, one essential effect of CSR and its integration in the employer brand is to enhance trust of current and future employees in companies as employers: CSR serves as a signal for being fair to (potential) employees when information about the workplace is incomplete and experience and trust characteristics of the employment relation are high. Integrating CSR in the employer brand underlines the function of the brand to establish trust in the company.

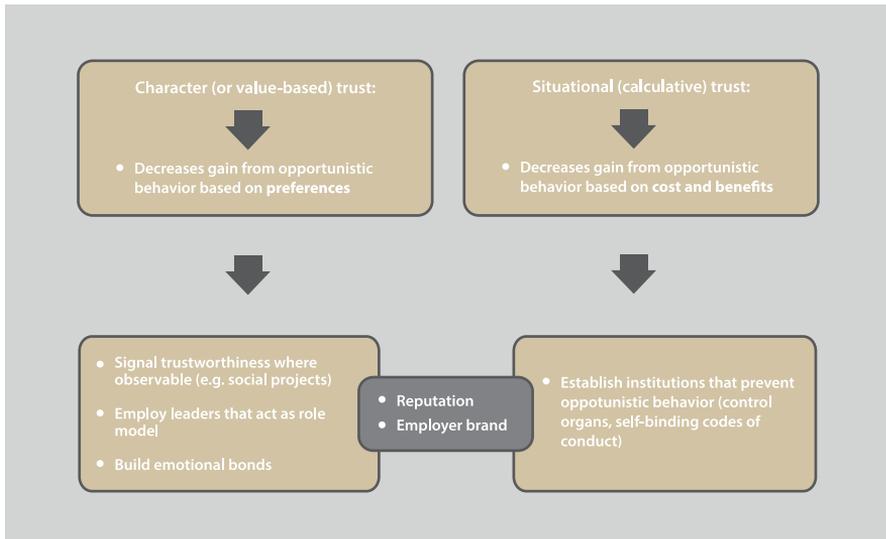
Referring to chapter 3, trust may be built in two essential ways: Fomenting trust in the character of a company (“character trust”), or via establishing structures, processes and incentives that would make it costly to companies to deviate from promised behavior (situational trust).

Character trust depends on the belief of the trustor in preferences and values of the trustee that would make him behave in a responsible way. It is enhanced by signals of the trustee, for example by behaving (repeatedly) trustful with respect to other potential trustees, even if situational factors would not require this. Responsible behavior, e.g. with respect to society, environment or market partners might therefore be one way to build character trust. Moreover, personal ties and emotions play a decisive role for character trust. Hence, the building of positive emotions towards a company via employer branding as well as the personalization of CSR by showing people within a company that stand for its values and ideas might be a way to promote character trust. Finally, the identification with a company by a supports character trust positively (Hameed, et. Al. (2013). As explained in chapter 4, a perceived fit in values will positively influence personal identification. But also, for active employees, voluntary social work is seen as important instrument to foster identification and hereby trust in companies.

Situational trust may be endorsed by establishing structures and systems that increase the cost of exploiting. E.g. the setting of guidelines for responsible behaviour or fair leadership, the integration of performance indicators linked to employee related responsibility, or the building of a reputation for being a good employer increase the cost of not com-

plying with promises to employees. Also, the existence of social norms – or a company culture based on fairness – positively influences situational trust. However, as in the case of character trust, information about the existence of these institutional factors is condition for building situational trust.

**Fig. 6.** Instruments to build trust in companies



Source: Own illustration

## Summary and outlook

The aim of this paper was to contribute to the understanding of trust and its interplay with CSR, trust and employer branding. According to selected theoretical frameworks, CSR seems to strengthen positive associations with potential employers, both because of an appreciation of workplace CSR related attributes (such as health care or work-life balance) and because of positive effects in personal and social identification and the trustworthiness of companies. The integration of CSR in the employer brand is not only in line with its (similar) objectives (orientation, but also trust building and identification), but also serves to close the gap between actual CSR performance and perceived CSR. Trust is fomented by both – CSR and employer branding. CSR potentially contributes

to trust in an employer by signaling its fair character via observable other activities (character trust) as well as by institutions enhancing situational trust. Employer branding supports observability and information, but also shapes situational trust, making it costly to damage reputation by playing unfair.

Future research should empirically undermine the findings and shed some more light on the gaps between actual CSR, perceived CSR and trust in companies.

Also, the effects of CSR on a cognitive and affective level should be investigated.

Research respective the relation between CSR, trust and employer branding has just begun. Companies already use trust as value proposition to their stakeholders. Understanding the ways how it can be enhanced is a major challenge which may allow companies to differentiate themselves better from their competitors.

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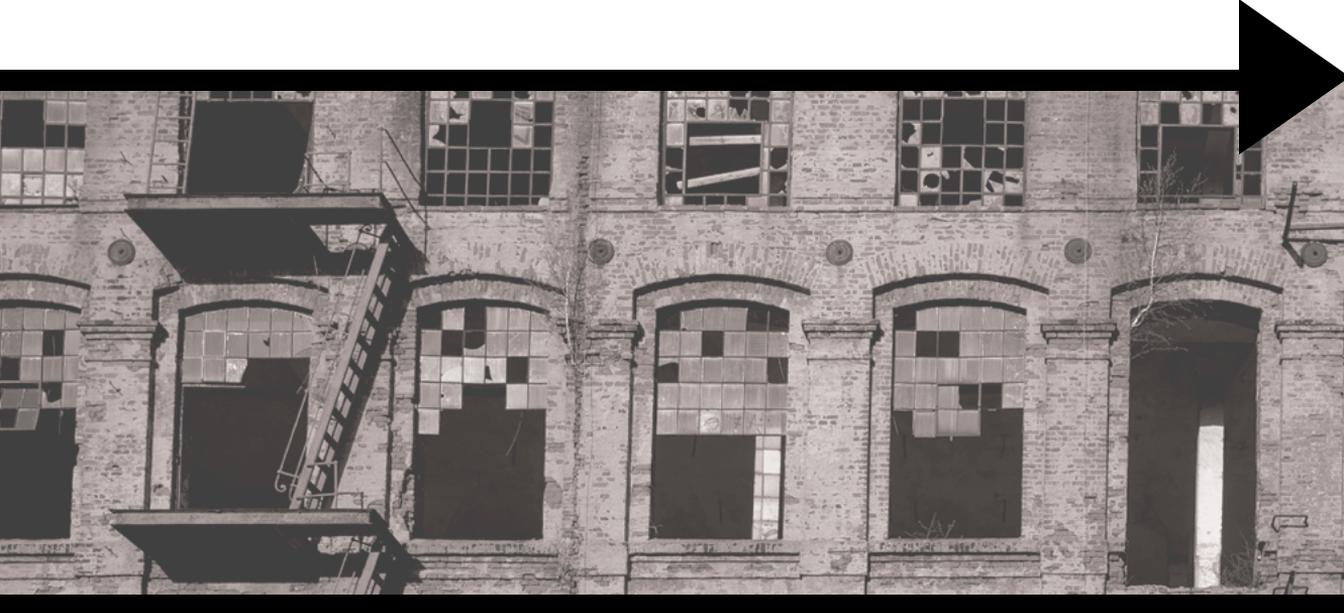
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