ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

SECOND CYCLE DEGREE
IN INTERNATIONAL MANAGEMENT

Employer Branding Beyond Strategy: Informal Employer Branding Evidence From a B2B Port Environment
A Case Study Of Terminal Rinfuse Venezia

Supervisor
Prof. Alessandra Raggi

Defended by
Gaia Ferrante
0001166387

Graduation Session July 2026

Academic Year 2025/2026

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

The importance of alignment is often taken for granted as a fundamental prerequisite of an effective marketing strategy. This is particularly evident when considering the 3Bs framework attributed to Nader Tavassoli, in which business, brand, and behaviour are identified as key dimensions that must be aligned. For firms to be perceived in line with their strategic vision, they must implement actions that convey a coherent value proposition, addressing their external (customers) and internal (employees) stakeholders, and potential partners. Being the primary goal of branding, delivering a strong and consistent brand experience, organisations are required to create continuity between positioning, execution, and customer experience (Srivastava & Thomas, 2010).

In this perspective, employer branding can be interpreted as the process through which internal alignment is achieved, translating the external brand promise into an employee value proposition and embedding it within the business through organisational behaviours (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

While brand management has traditionally been associated with marketing departments, the concept of employer branding, derived from internal marketing practices, has been more closely linked to human resource management. Several scholars argue that employer branding responsibilities are grounded in HR-related activities such as internal communication, employee development, and organisational culture (Rafiq & Ahmed, 2000; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004), suggesting that HR should play a leading role in these processes. However, other contributions emphasise the need for a more integrated approach, in which marketing also plays a crucial role in aligning internal branding practices with the external value proposition. Such reciprocal benefits can enhance job satisfaction, employee retention and productivity, and organisational attractiveness, while also reducing costs (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). In this context, internal branding practices represent a critical link between strategy and execution that cannot be effective unless alignment is achieved across all organisational levels, from senior management to frontline employees (MacLaverty, McQuillan, & Oddie, 2007).

If the importance of branding has always been widely recognised in consumer markets, its application in business markets has been addressed afterwards. In recent decades, branding for B2B companies has emerged as a fundamental tool to secure contracts, enter new markets, attract talent, and strengthen investor confidence. What remains critical is that B2B represents a more complex environment than B2C, due to the intersection of supply chains and market forces, intricate decision-making systems, the prevalence of highly customised solutions, high-value transactions, and a strong reliance on personal selling (Coleman et al., 2011). Bhattacharjee et al., (2022) provided a comprehensive literature review on the topic, addressing the different perspectives developed in B2B branding research. What emerges is a diverse but fragmented field, in which several research streams are still evolving. Among the underdeveloped areas, the role of employer branding, together with internal brand engagement and digitalisation, appears to be relatively unexplored.

This emerging research area, and the lack of a structured approach to employer branding in terms of responsibility and planning, raise at least two issues:

- Despite the literature suggesting that a joint effort between HR and marketing departments represents the most balanced and effective approach to employer branding, in practice coordination between functions and individuals is not always effective. Could it therefore be possible that employer branding develops in informal and unstructured ways?
- If this is the case, what are the activities, practices, and shared values that enable such outcomes? How can different organisational functions foster and support these implicit sources of employer branding?

This study aims to explore how employer branding emerges in the absence of formal marketing structures, and to identify the organisational practices that enable internal and external brand alignment in B2B contexts.

To address these questions, this thesis examines the case study of a bulk port terminal located in the commercial port of Venice, Italy. The terminal is managed through a 25-year concession by the multinational Euroports. The company, named Terminal Rinfuse Venezia (TRV), operates within the complex ecosystem of a commercial port and is engaged daily in the international trade of bulk commodities through its operations.

This case is particularly interesting from a B2B marketing and employer branding perspective because the terminal lacks a formal marketing department, and the HR one handles multiple roles, among which employer branding is not a priority. Despite this, the company exhibits low employee turnover and high levels of engagement, conventional indicators of effective employer branding. Accordingly, analysing such an environment may reveal whether, and to what extent, strong internal branding can emerge without explicit initiatives, instead arising as a result of daily operations, commercial activities, and interpersonal interactions. Identifying these dynamics could also be useful in subsequently reinforcing them through targeted HR and marketing practices.

Despite the limitation of focusing on a single company, which prevents generalising the findings as a broader trend, this study may nonetheless provide valuable insights into informal employer branding practices, context-specific B2B marketing relationships, and emerging opportunities in industrial branding. Moreover, the port environment, characterised by distinctive sector-specific features, is not a conventional subject within this field of study. This research therefore aims to draw attention to a highly specialised and often overlooked context that nonetheless represents a fundamental pillar of the global economy. Precisely, according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD, 2024), over 80% of global raw materials, commodities, and finished goods are transported or traded by sea. This implies the existence of complex logistical systems, namely commercial ports, which have developed worldwide to support such vast and intricate flows of goods.

A facility of the scale of a commercial port, together with its terminals, represents an environment in which the interaction of multiple actors plays a crucial role in ensuring the functioning of supply chain links. These actors are primarily B2B organisations operating within a network characterised by business relationships, intense competition, strict regulatory frameworks, and significant fixed costs.

In such a complex and interdependent environment, alignment between internal organisational practices and external market positioning becomes critical, reinforcing the relevance of investigating how employer branding can emerge and operate even in the absence of formalised structures.

Methodology

This thesis is structured into several sections. The first part opens with a literature review addressing the field of branding, with particular attention to the concept of internal and external alignment and a focus on internal and employer branding, in order to examine recent trends and practices. An analysis of the specificities of industrial marketing, understood as B2B marketing within industrial sectors, is also included to capture the distinctive characteristics of this type of enterprises.

A subsequent chapter introduces and outlines the history, functioning, and business model of commercial ports in general, and later focuses specifically on Euroports and Terminal Rinfuse Venezia. This section offers a useful background for framing the case study. The data used in this part consist of secondary sources collected through a combination of online resources, industry reports, and academic literature.

Chapter III presents the first part of the analysis, offering a qualitative description of port-related business insights, including commercial and operational procedures, as well as marketing, branding and HR practices characterising Terminal Rinfuse Venezia and Euroports. Primary data were collected through on-site visits to the terminal, interviews with managers and employees, the observation of internal and public company-related materials, and direct observation of the organisational environment and daily workplace dynamics during visits to the terminal. This observational component, drawing on elements of qualitative observational research commonly employed in marketing studies, provided contextual insights into informal practices, interpersonal relationships, and organisational culture that complemented the information obtained through interviews and documentary sources.

The following chapters focus on the employer branding analysis. Both direct TRV employees, external consultants, on-call workers, and partners who frequent the terminal on a daily basis were involved in the completion of a survey about TRV-Euroports aimed at exploring their perceptions of the company as both an employer and a brand. Two versions of the survey were implemented to better capture the nuanced differences in the relationships with the company. Many of the topics emerging from the responses were later explored further through both one-to-one and group interviews conducted with a selected number of employees, managers, and department heads.

The surveys were distributed physically in paper form and handed directly to workers and employees in order to maximise participation. This mode of distribution was considered particularly appropriate given the operational nature and fast pace of the terminal environment, where a paper-based format allowed for a more immediate and accessible means of participation. Furthermore, many operational workers do not regularly use company devices or access digital communication tools as part of their daily routines. The data were subsequently collected and digitised for the purposes of the research.

The interpretation of results was also supported by observations collected during site visits, allowing the responses to be contextualised within the everyday organisational environment and compared with observed behaviours, practices, and interpersonal dynamics.

The objective of the analysis is first to identify potential patterns in the responses and then to link these findings to observed aspects of the business, in order to assess whether and which top-down initiatives are positively perceived by employees and, whether informal bottom-up practices, possibly typical of this context, can generate outcomes identifiable as employer branding.

The final part provides suggestions on how to strengthen the positive trends observed through a more formal implementation of practices and initiatives across different company departments, while also addressing existing weaknesses. Finally, the research proposes a possible framework for applying the findings to other contexts or industries.

Where descriptions are intentionally general or anonymised, this has been done to ensure that no sensitive or strategic information about the company is disclosed.

Chapter I - Literature Review

I.I Branding and alignment

In today's marketplace, brand is no longer about standing out through surface-level aesthetics to be recognisable; it is about promises and reliability. Branding has evolved into a 360-degree discipline of alignment among all company functions, summarised in the three core concepts of business, brand, and behaviour (Goodman, 2025). The 3Bs framework (Tavassoli) is a useful tool for identifying how to enhance the external promises made to customers through effective execution driven by internal, brand-led behaviour.

Breaking down the framework, the 3Bs can be understood as:

- Business: Mission, vision, and strategy. This includes the business model, operations, products, and services.
- Brand: Brand purpose, customer value proposition, and positioning. It encompasses the company narrative, design, and emotional experience, which should also be positively experienced by employees.
- Behaviour: Values, employee value proposition, competency framework, and leadership model. It reflects how staff behave and how the company presents itself within both internal and external communities.

By creating consistency among business, brand, and behaviour, thereby aligning intentions and actions, several benefits can be achieved, such as faster decision-making, more effective staff allocation, increased employee engagement and collaboration, more efficient resource management, greater stakeholder understanding, accountability at all levels, minimised waste, and higher success rates.

The value delivery process begins with the communication of these values from employer to employees; once embedded, they can drive motivation and productivity, enabling employees to convey the same values to customers (Sertis Corp, 2025).

Alignement is hence fundamental to ensure that internal stakeholders and resources, and external stakeholders, partners, customers and consumers are on the same wavelength.

Srivastava and Thomas (2010) deepen the concept of alignment from the perspective of business actors, stating that value delivery occurs through the coordinated actions of:

- Brand Visionaries: management
- Brand Providers: employees and channels
- Brand Believers: customers

This framework, such as the 3Bs, highlight the presence of virtuous cycles, which require a deliberate and continuous input from organisations to be activated and sustained. This need for structured internal alignment mechanisms naturally leads to the role of internal marketing, internal branding, and employer branding.

I.II Internal marketing, internal branding and employer branding

Although they have slightly different meanings, these three disciplines all refer to practices addressing a company's internal environment.

Internal marketing is the broader concept and can be defined as a planned effort that uses a marketing-based approach to increase employee motivation and satisfaction, foster customer orientation, enhance cross-functional coordination, and support the effective implementation of organisational strategies, ultimately contributing to customer satisfaction (Rafiq & Ahmed, 2000).

Internal branding is a sub-discipline of brand management and examines how internal alignment positively affects brand performance through the coordination of employees' communication and behaviours. It has traditionally followed a top-down approach; however, more recent perspectives emphasise participation and co-creation. The advent of social media and digitalisation has created significant opportunities to further develop this area, thanks to the introduction of new communication channels (Schmidt et al., 2021).

Employer branding, by contrast, can be understood as the application of branding principles to human resource management, aimed at positioning the organisation as an attractive employer and communicating a distinctive employment value proposition to current and potential employees (Barrow & Mosley, 2005).

While internal marketing and internal branding focus primarily on aligning and engaging employees to support organisational and brand objectives, employer branding extends this perspective by integrating both internal (culture, identity, retention) and external (attraction, reputation) dimensions (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). In today's competitive labour markets, organisations seek not only to retain and motivate talented employees but also to attract individuals whose values and expectations match the company's identity. These practices represent strategic tools for competitiveness and differentiation as an employer.

Ambler and Barrow, (1996) along with Barrow and Mosley, (2005) provided one of the most comprehensive analysis of what constitutes *The Employer Brand*. In the labour market, employer branding encompasses both functional and emotional benefits. At its core, a brand acts as a badge of identity and a promise of performance: it signals where something or someone comes from and carries an implicit guarantee that what has been promised will be delivered. Employer brands are therefore grounded in basic functional and performance guarantees, including fair compensation, a safe working environment, and the provision of the resources necessary to fulfil one's role and responsibilities.

At the same time, they deliver value in more subtle and complex ways. Brands promote relevant and attractive emotional benefits that help position functional attributes in the minds of employees. Emotional engagement is crucial, and the psychological benefits associated with employer branding are just as important as those linked to a brand products and services. People's emotional attachment to their employer is driven by the value they derive from the overall work experience, including satisfaction from tasks well performed, relationships with colleagues, and alignment with the organisation's purpose and values.

One of the main challenges of employer branding is ensuring consistency between vision and delivery; the gap between what is planned and what is actually experienced is crucial in determining brand authenticity. Another challenge managers face is balancing brand consistency with brand development. While this may appear contradictory, both are essential for brand sustainability. Alongside clarity, consistency, and continuity, a brand must also be able to evolve over time, adapting and refreshing itself to meet changing needs (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Barrow & Mosley, 2005).

As previously introduced, such efforts are justified by the tangible benefits of effective employer branding. Many scholars have examined the link between employee satisfaction, engagement, and key business outcomes. Empirical evidence shows that strong employee engagement is positively related to customer satisfaction and loyalty, productivity, profitability, and safety, and negatively related to employee turnover. The internal alignment of these performance areas can lead to improved organisational performance, which ultimately translates into stronger financial results (Harter et al., 2002; O'Boyle & Harter, 2013).

Although the strategic importance of employer branding is widely acknowledged, in practical terms there is an ongoing debate about whether it should be primarily managed by HR or marketing, especially in less structured companies or where multiple organisational functions are not perfectly aligned.

I.III HR vs marketing responsibility debate

It is foreseeable that, given the hybrid nature of a discipline such as employer branding, a debate may arise regarding which entity should oversee and take responsibility for its design and implementation.

From a branding perspective, engaging employees is seen as a matter of designing a value proposition made up of a promise and a positioning. This involves developing an appropriate marketing strategy directed at employees, supported by effective communication, reputation building, and differentiation (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Barrow & Mosley, 2005). Following this logic, employer branding should sit within marketing due to its focus on external perception, positioning, and brand consistency. According to a study made by the Canadian Marketing Association (MacLaverty et al., 2007), responsibility for internal branding is typically shared between the marketing function and the executive team, although it is most often embedded within the marketing department due to its role in linking the organisation's brand with customer experience.

This view is contrasted by scholars who argue that, since HR creates the employment experience, it should lead employer branding strategy. In this perspective, marketing is mainly involved at the communication stage, broadcasting what HR has already developed (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

If HR is responsible for creating the "product" of employer branding, along with its guidelines and strategic foundations, then marketing's role is primarily to convey the intended message externally.

HR is uniquely positioned to view the entire employee lifecycle as a single, integrated system. By managing these processes holistically, HR can effectively differentiate the organisation from its competitors and create a more attractive workplace for top talent (Cascio & Graham, 2016).

By leading the process, HR can also ensure that the brand promise is embedded in daily operational practices.

Yet in the 1990s, though with different terminology, George (1990) argued for the validity of using marketing strategies directed at the internal environment by segmenting and targeting employees in order to create optimal value propositions for them, and emphasised the importance of organisational behaviour (what we would today refer to as HR management) in enhancing the implementation of this marketing philosophy in such areas. The intuition of a combined effort between marketing and HR has since been confirmed by a vast body of literature. First, collaboration between HR and marketing should begin at an early stage of the process by jointly defining a unified vision that employees can internalise, and then aligning human resource policies with the external brand promise so that the internal culture reflects the promised service (Mosley, 2007).

Moroko and Uncles (2008) identify two key dimensions of successful employer branding characteristics: attractive/unattractive and accurate/aspirational. They also highlight HR metrics that can quantify a strategy's success, including the percentage of job offers accepted, the number of applicants per role, the average tenure, the average staff turnover, and the level of employee engagement. Since "Both the marketing and HR functions have a stake in the firm's culture, policies and processes and the way that they are portrayed internally (through internal marketing and communications) and externally (through product, corporate and recruitment promotion)", a successful employer branding strategy is one that aligns the employment experience with the employee value proposition, and co-developed by marketing and HR.

In this field mainly qualitative measures are used to understand what fosters employee engagement, such as employee awareness of the employer brand, understanding and acceptance of company values, emotional connection with the organisation, consistency between internal experience and brand promise, and levels of motivation and involvement (Kunerth & Mosley, 2011). To create a more comprehensive and quantifiable tool for measuring employee engagement, Gallup developed a 12-question model (Figure 1) that captures the key conditions employees need to perform effectively. Rather than measuring engagement directly, it focuses on the workplace factors that drive engagement.

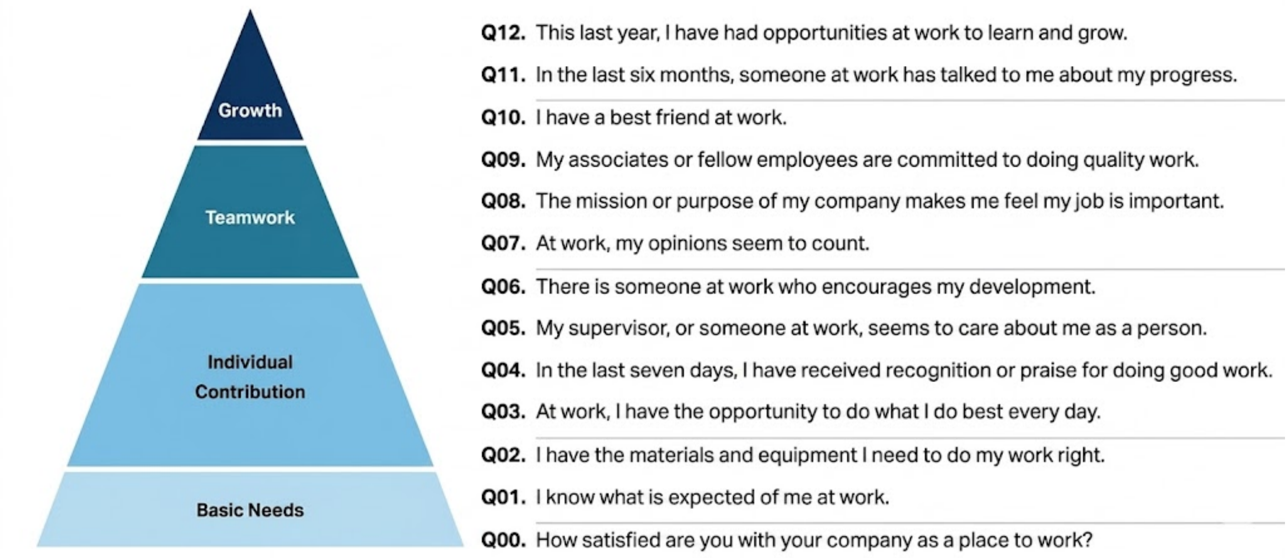
The model is structured around four progressive levels of employee needs:

- Basic needs: clarity of expectations and availability of resources
- Individual contribution: recognition, feedback, and the ability to use one's strengths
- Teamwork: relationships, collaboration, and sense of belonging
- Growth: development opportunities and long-term progression

Each level builds on the previous one, creating a hierarchical system in which engagement develops when these needs are consistently met. The Q12 model translates these conditions into measurable survey items (e.g. clarity of role, recognition, development, purpose), allowing organisations to identify actionable drivers of engagement rather than just outcomes. Importantly, Gallup's large-scale research shows that higher Q12 scores are strongly associated with improved business outcomes, including higher productivity, profitability, and customer loyalty, as well as lower turnover and absenteeism.

By applying this framework, O'Boyle and Harter (2013) found that the best organisations manage engagement systematically by embedding it in leadership practices, performance management, and

Figure 1: *Gallup Q12 Employee Engagement Model*



Note. Adapted from Gallup Q12® Meta-Analysis: 10th Edition (Gallup, 2024).

communication, rather than treating it as an isolated initiative or HR practice. Managers, especially local ones, are key drivers of engagement, and engagement should be measured through practical, actionable indicators. The goal is not measurement itself, but the improvement of workplace conditions.

While much of the literature emphasises a structured top-down approach to employer branding, where organisational values and brand identity are defined by management and then communicated internally, recent research suggests the importance of employee participation and co-creation in shaping the employer brand, recognising employees as active contributors to brand meaning. This shift reflects a broader move towards more dynamic and interactive models of brand building, where authenticity and consistency are achieved through continuous dialogue between the organisation and its members. As a result, co-creation can be explored as a complementary approach to traditional top-down strategies, potentially enhancing both employee engagement and the credibility of the employer brand. Familiarity/awareness, brand associations experience, and loyalty/commitment are the spheres in which the role of employees is co-created (Näppä et al., 2023).

I.IV Employer Branding in B2B market

After reviewing the branding literature, it is also appropriate to establish the theoretical background of the case study company's business environment, namely, the business-to-business (B2B) industrial service market. In this context, B2B marketing is typically defined by complex decision-making processes involving multiple stakeholders, long-term contractual relationships, and a strong emphasis on trust, reliability, and operational performance (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Here, purchasing and partnership decisions are rarely purely transactional; instead, they are embedded in networks of interdependent actors, where relational stability and service quality are critical success factors, as summarised in Table 1 (Mudambi, 2002). Consequently, branding in this environment serves as a warranty that reduces perceived risk and uncertainty, which in turn translates into lower perceived costs for both individuals and the firm. A strong brand reinforces relationships with business partners, as stakeholders seek the reassurance that they have made the right choice. In particular, brand identity in B2B services is strongly linked to organisational capabilities, employee behaviour, and service delivery consistency, reinforcing the importance of internal alignment in shaping external perceptions (Coleman et al., 2011).

Table 1. Comparison between B2C and B2B brand management approaches

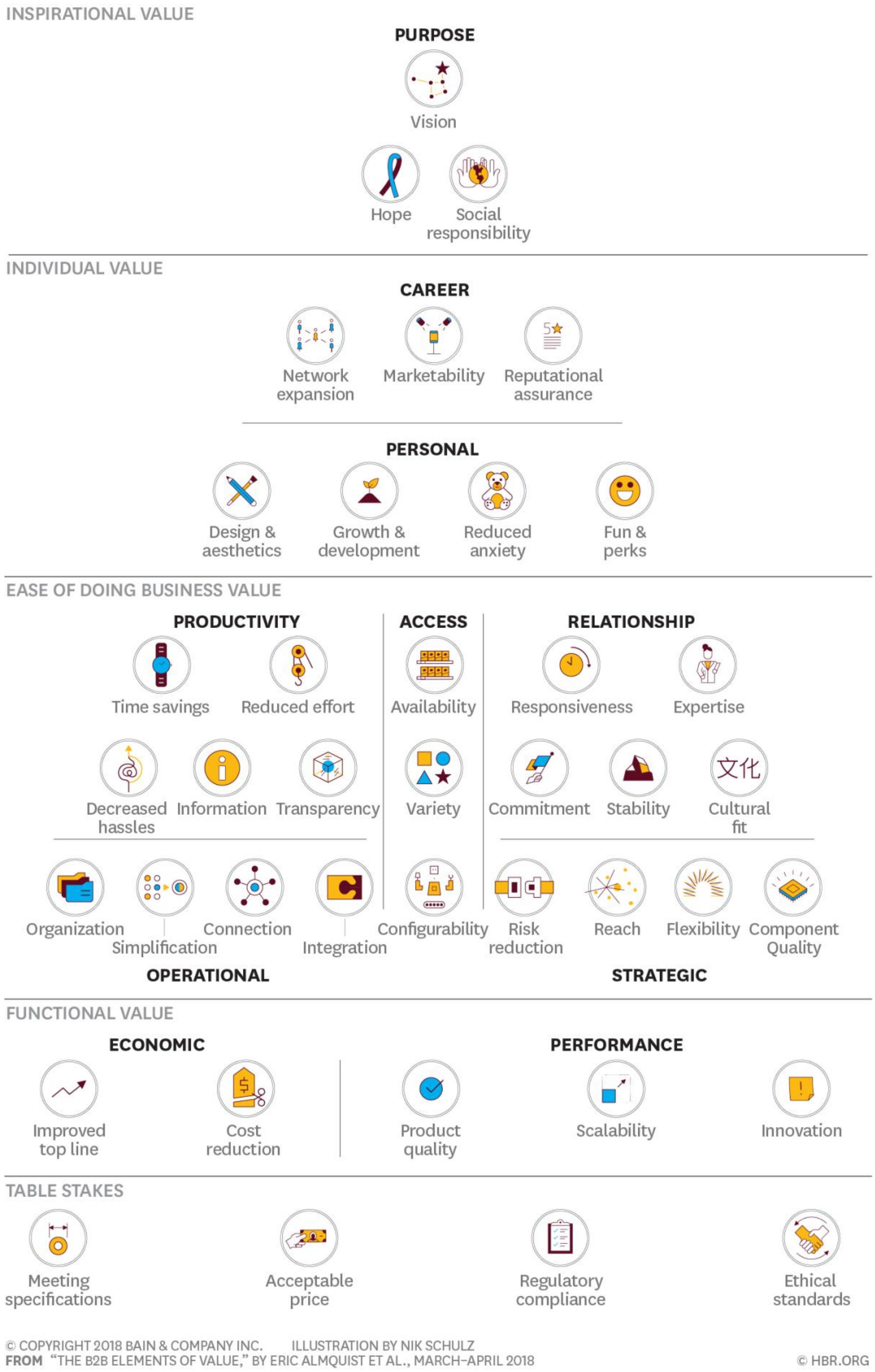
Consumer brand management	**Industrial brand management**
Branding at the product level, with increasing emphasis on corporate level	Branding at the corporate level, with experimentation at the product level
Customer perception of functional, emotional and self-expressive benefits of brands	More customer emphasis on risk-reduction; less customer emphasis on self-expressive benefits of brands
Moves to reduce the numbers of brands within a company	Number of brands within a company increasing due to acquisitions

Note. Adapted from Mudambi (2002).

Expanding upon this idea, Eric Almquist et al. (2018) demonstrate that business purchasing decisions are increasingly driven not only by rational and quantitative criteria, but also by subjective and relational considerations. In their framework of "The B2B Elements of Value" (Figure 2), the authors identify 40 attributes organised in a pyramid structure, ranging from functional elements at the base to individual and inspirational elements at the top. While functional attributes such as cost reduction and performance remain important, factors such as reducing customer uncertainty, simplifying operations, and ensuring compatibility between companies are becoming increasingly important in differentiating industrial service providers.

Although the framework refers to customer value in external markets it remains useful for understanding which attributes are most valued in wider B2B industrial relationships. In operational contexts where service quality depends heavily on coordination, reliability, and responsiveness, the consistent delivery of these values also requires strong organisational alignment across functions. In B2B contexts, value creation extends beyond purely economic or technical performance, particularly in sectors characterised by operational complexity and long-term inter-organisational relationships. For industrial service companies, branding therefore contributes to reinforcing trust,

Figure 2: *The B2B Elements of Value Pyramid*.



Note. Adapted from "The B2B Elements of Value," by Eric Almquist, Jamie Cleghorn, and Lori Sherer, 2018, Harvard Business Review. Copyright 2018 by Harvard Business Publishing.

reducing uncertainty, and supporting relational stability among business partners.

To avoid overgeneralising, it is important to clarify that not all B2B marketing relies on strong relationships, as opportunistic or transaction-based approaches also occur. While the first is more common in medium and large enterprises, the latter is more likely to involve smaller businesses.

Table 2: B2B Marketing Types

Transactional B2B Marketing	**Relationship B2B marketing**
Product driven	Trust-based relationships
Large target audience = small businesses	Small, focused audience
Simpler buying process	More complex process
Small size of of purchase; more quantity	Large size of purchase and bids
Single stakeholder in buying process	Multi-stakeholder buying process
Emotional buying decision	Emotions invested + rational buying decisions
Increasing and generating revenues	Increasing and generating leads Increasing pipeline and revenue

Note. Adapted from Hall, S. (2017). Innovative B2B marketing: New models, processes and theory. Kogan Page.

Hall (2017), analyses these two approaches (Table 2), and highlights how the shift towards relationship-oriented strategies is an imperative for seeking growth companies, emphasising that long-term value creation increasingly depends on trust-based interactions and the quality of relationships between organisational actors. In the same manual he also suggests a revision of the traditional 4Ps marketing framework, which is limited because it stems from a product-centric, transactional logic that focuses on what the company sells rather than on how relationships are built. In B2B contexts, decision-making processes are complex, and value extends beyond the product itself. The new imperatives of B2B marketing, therefore, move beyond Product, Price, Place, and Promotion towards relationships, customer experience, value co-creation, and long-term engagement. Marketing is no longer simply about managing a mix, but about managing interactions within networks over time.

In this context, as B2B interactions are mediated by individuals rather than abstract organisations, employees play a crucial role in shaping customer perceptions, further reinforcing the importance of employer branding in ensuring consistent and credible relationship management.

A developing field called human-to-human (H2H) marketing also deals with all these issues. H2H marketing conceptualises all market interactions as fundamentally based on relationships between individuals rather than organisations, thereby emphasising the role of trust, empathy, and interpersonal communication in value creation. From this perspective, the distinction between B2B and B2C becomes less relevant, as both are ultimately reduced to interactions between people operating within organisational contexts. Consequently, the quality of these interactions depends not only on formal processes and service design but also on employees' attitudes, behaviours, and alignment with organisational values (Kotler et al., 2021). H2H marketing is rooted in the so-called Service-Dominant Logic, a paradigm developed by Vargo and Lusch (2004), that considers the exchange of services as the fundamental basis of all economic activity. Being inherently relational, it embraces value co-creation and promotes a network, later an ecosystem, perspective. This logic is characterised by intangibility and individualisation, with a focus on operant resources, service processes, and the co-creation of value between customers and firms.

This perspective is further reinforced by the very recent humanistic marketing approach, which emphasises the need for a shift towards a more sustainable, inclusive, and human-centred form of marketing capable of supporting long-term organisational growth in complex and uncertain environments. From this viewpoint, the distinction between external and internal stakeholders becomes increasingly blurred, as both customers and employees are understood as human actors participating in value creation processes (Ancarani, 2021; Panayotou & Pförtsch, 2021). Accordingly, organisations should foster a human-centric culture that supports not only customer experience but also employee engagement and development. Marketing is therefore no longer confined to communication or market transactions but becomes a strategic driver of innovation, requiring early involvement in value creation processes and a deep understanding of human needs across stakeholder groups.

Ultimately, the humanistic and H2H perspectives reinforce the idea that organisational performance in complex, service-based, and networked environments depends on the ability to integrate human, organisational, and technological dimensions. This further supports the argument that employer branding should not be considered solely as a recruitment or communication tool, but as a strategic mechanism for aligning people, culture, and value creation processes.

I.V Emerging Research Gap

Bhattacharjee et al. (2022), in a comprehensive review of B2B marketing literature, schematise the existing patterns of knowledge in the field and outline ongoing trends (Table 3), as well as the main research gaps.

Table 3. Established knowledge, emerging research streams, and future research directions in B2B

"What We Know"	**"Where Do We Go"**
Evolutionary Eras: The research tracks B2B branding through three significant, evolving eras, identifying nine key research areas, including digital/social media branding, sustainability branding, and financial brand equity.	**Sustainability-Focused Branding:** Researching how B2B brands can lead in environmental, social, and governance (ESG) efforts to create long-term value.
Strategic Shift: Branding is increasingly recognized as a key intangible asset, crucial for differentiation in competitive markets and for building emotional connections with customers.	**Digital & Social Media Integration:** Examining the impact of social media, digital platforms, and AI-powered tools on B2B brand management.
Methodological Trends: While research has grown, it is heavily reliant on surveys and interviews, with a need for more diverse analytical and theory-building approaches.	**Responsible Supply Chain Branding:** Studying how branding practices can encourage sustainability throughout the supply chain.
Contextual Differences: B2B branding is recognized as distinct from B2C, requiring a focus on corporate reputation, buyer-seller relationships, and complex decision-making processes rather than just product attributes	**Internal Branding:** Focusing on how employees act as brand ambassadors and the role of corporate culture.
	Small-to-Medium Enterprise (SME) Branding: Addressing the need for more studies on branding strategies within smaller B2B firms

Note. Adapted from Bhattacharjee et al. (2022).

Among the developing research streams, this thesis deepens the dynamics of internal branding while observing whether this process encounters other trends such as digitalisation, sustainability, or corporate social responsibility (CSR), which are now unavoidable strategic requirements.

When contextualising this intended analysis within the case study environment, limitations emerge in the applicability of the existing literature to a commercial port context.

Despite the increasing attention to employer branding, the current literature predominantly assumes the presence of formalised structures and clearly defined organisational responsibilities. However, a few scholars, such as Moroko and Uncles (2008), argue that employer branding is not purely formal and that there is no universally standardised process, as practices vary across organisations. Employer brand development can be strongly influenced by informal elements such as actual employee experience, organisational culture, and daily interactions. A successful employer brand depends on alignment between formal-strategic communication and experienced, socially enacted reality; when informal experiences contradict formal branding, the employer brand is weakened.

However, little is known about how a hybrid employer branding system may emerge in contexts where strong marketing and HR structures are limited by budget or operational constraints, such as in commercial port terminals and in many other complex B2B environments. This gap provides the foundation for the present study.

Informal employer branding practices, especially in contexts with limited resources, may represent significant opportunities. These can be indicated by spontaneous employee advocacy and organic storytelling, leadership and cultural signals, informal retention efforts, and localised community presence. Such practices can enhance authenticity, improve communication effectiveness, and strengthen trust while reducing organisational costs.

Chapter II - Commercial Ports As Complex Systems

In the following chapter, an analysis of the commercial port environment will be provided to better contextualise the case study company, Terminal Rinfuse Venezia - TRV, and its mother company, the Euroports group.

II.I Evolution and Role of Commercial Ports

As old as the history of trade, commercial ports have always played a crucial role in the transportation of goods and commodities. At the heart of what we nowadays call the supply chain, they gradually developed across centuries, transforming from small harbours to massive trade districts, occupying large portions of land adjacent to maritime locations. These organisations shaped landscapes and generated complex and interdependent systems, sometimes closely related to the functioning of cities, and others by developing the city out of it. Consequently, studies about this topic may involve multiple disciplines, ranging from highly technical fields such as industrial, naval and civil engineering to logistics, urban planning, sustainability, geography, history, maritime law, strategic management and international economics, where all components of trade come together (Palmer, 2020).

Despite the subject of commercial ports receiving relatively circumscribed attention in economics and management literature, their importance for world economy is anything but negligible. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD 2024), over 80% of world trade volume and 70% of world value is carried by sea, emphasising the centrality of complex logistic hubs able to move, unload, load and stack goods and commodities.

The Mediterranean was the cradle where maritime trade flourished through the millennia thanks to civilisations such as Greek and Romans, that took great advantages from the coastal environment, as well as the Italian Maritime Republics later on (Calfiero, 2021). A great impulse for the development of northern Europe ports was the discovery of America, which required countries with direct access to the Atlantic Ocean to equip themselves with suitable infrastructure and facilities. The Industrial Revolution confirmed the centrality of Mediterranean and Europe-centric trade, while in the past century, the increasing development of Eastern states has favoured a new central sea route hub in the Pacific Ocean (Soriani, 2002).

II.II Ports as Territorial and Industrial Systems

Without entering into a detailed analysis of urban planning or transport engineering, a brief discussion of ports as territorial and industrial systems helps to frame the context of this study. First it must be noted that, as previously mentioned for Mediterranean civilisations, ports and their cities benefit from mutual advantages arising from their proximity, which allows the exchange of wealth and resources. At the same time, this relationship can also generate conflicts, for example due to the land constraints that may limit the expansion of one or the other. A port in fact, risks declining when it is no longer possible to expand its infrastructure, or when it can no longer sustain increasing costs and growing environmental concerns (Zarei et al., 2024). These characteristics, namely the strong link with the territory and the presence of significant industrial assets, make the commercial ports comparable to industrial districts.

Alfred Marshall (1890), in a classical yet still widely cited approach, defines an industrial district as a localised industry concentrated in specific areas, where the proximity of firms generates external economies and facilitates knowledge diffusion. This concept was further refined by Giacomo Becattini (1989), who describes the industrial district as "a socio-territorial entity characterised by the active co-presence, in a limited area, of a community of people and a population of industrial firms" emphasising the bonds within a local social and territorial context. Extending this perspective, Walter Santagata (2004) introduces the notion of cultural district, referring to contexts in which cultural resources, local knowledge, and economic activities interact to support local development.

By distinguishing between culture in the sense of artistic and heritage assets, and culture meant as know-how, expertise, and shared identity, it becomes possible to interpret ports as agglomeration of tangible and intangible assets, which not only generates direct economic value through their core business but also play a fundamental role within broader value chains, supporting production and distribution processes across multiple industries. In this sense, commercial ports do not merely produce value; they enable its movement and circulation across economic systems. Aware of this, commercial ports may be considered a unique type of district. Similarly to industrial one, sector-specific know-how is accumulated and transmitted over centuries. Their geographic position not only connects them to their hinterland and urban environment, but also exposes them to continuous exchanges with other ports, including competitors. In this context knowledge spillover cross local boundaries and travels alongside goods and flows of trade. In a metaphorical sense, culture itself moves with ships, carrying practices, expertise, and operational models from one port to another, contributing to a constant process of learning, adaptation, and innovation.

Locally, the strong territorial influence of ports fosters close relationships between organisations, workers, and communities. This proximity shapes long-term relationships, informal networks, and a shared identity. For companies operating in such a sector, reputation also develops within a collaboration-competition ecosystem, which reinforces the district interpretation of the port environment. Evidence shows that governance structures and labour relations significantly influence organisational outcomes in port settings. However, existing studies focus on how to explain these outcomes in relation to investment and infrastructure (Bottalico, 2022); little is known about how labour, organisational processes, and human dynamics, if not fragmented, can shape organisational results, including employer branding.

II.III Seaport Terminals and Operations

To deepen the context of the analysis, we are going to explain what a commercial port is and which kinds of functions it can assume.

Seaports are located on the shores of seas or oceans and can be either non-commercial, such as fishing ports and marinas (ports for recreational and private boats and yachts), or commercial.

Commercial ports are usually complex organisms, further divided into terminals which are categorised, according to what they handle or trade, into:

- Cruise and RO-RO (roll-on/roll-off): respectively for tourism purposes, for loaded commercial trucks with drivers, and for the transport of wheeled cargo (cars, motorcycles, trucks).
- Container ports: where goods are mainly transported in containers.
- Bulk cargo ports: which deal with unpackaged solid or liquid cargo in large quantities, (Port Economics, Management and Policy).

In very specific cases, terminals are dedicated to a single industrial user, such as petrochemical plants or steel industries, enabling direct unloading and handling of raw materials and semi-finished goods (Roa et al., 2013).

Primary to understanding port functioning is the matter of governance. Most port terminals are leased to private operators through long-term concessions following a bidding process that secures terminal assets for decades. In most countries, in fact, the greater flexibility of private enterprise management is preferred for conducting operations, rather than central government control that sets directives. Despite the existence of several models combining private and public ownership and management, or a specialisation of one of these, the most common structure is public ownership with private operations in the form of a mixed partnership. Concessions are usually managed by an established public entity that concludes contracts, enforces standards and regulations, and manages the terminal award procedure, which consists of negotiation or, as previously mentioned, a competitive bidding process, a better solution in terms of transparency and avoiding favouritism.

Once a private operator wins the bid, they are required to pay an annual rent to the authority, which can be fixed, as well as include a variable component or a royalty on revenues (Notteboom et al., n.d.).

In Italy, ports and their terminals belong to the State under the "demanio" (state property), the complex of inalienable public assets protected and regulated by the Civil Code (1942). The public entity in charge of managing and organising ports is the "Autorità di Sistema Portuale" (Port Authority), which is divided into fifteen branches that coordinate port complexes according to the Italian regions to which they belong. The port authority system is, in turn, supervised by the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport.

This multi-level governance structure directly influences how operational responsibilities, labour organisation, and employment practices are distributed across port terminals.

Due to their configuration, port terminals face challenges in attracting, developing, and retaining skilled labour. Skill requirements are evolving, operational complexity is increasing, and working conditions are demanding (Caesar, 2024). The workforce is typically heterogeneous, comprising operational, technical, and administrative roles, often characterised by shift systems, physical demands, and strict safety requirements. In many cases, labour is partially supplied by external or specialised worker providers, while trade unions maintain a strong presence and significant bargaining power in regulating employment conditions and work organisation (Notteboom et al., n.d.).

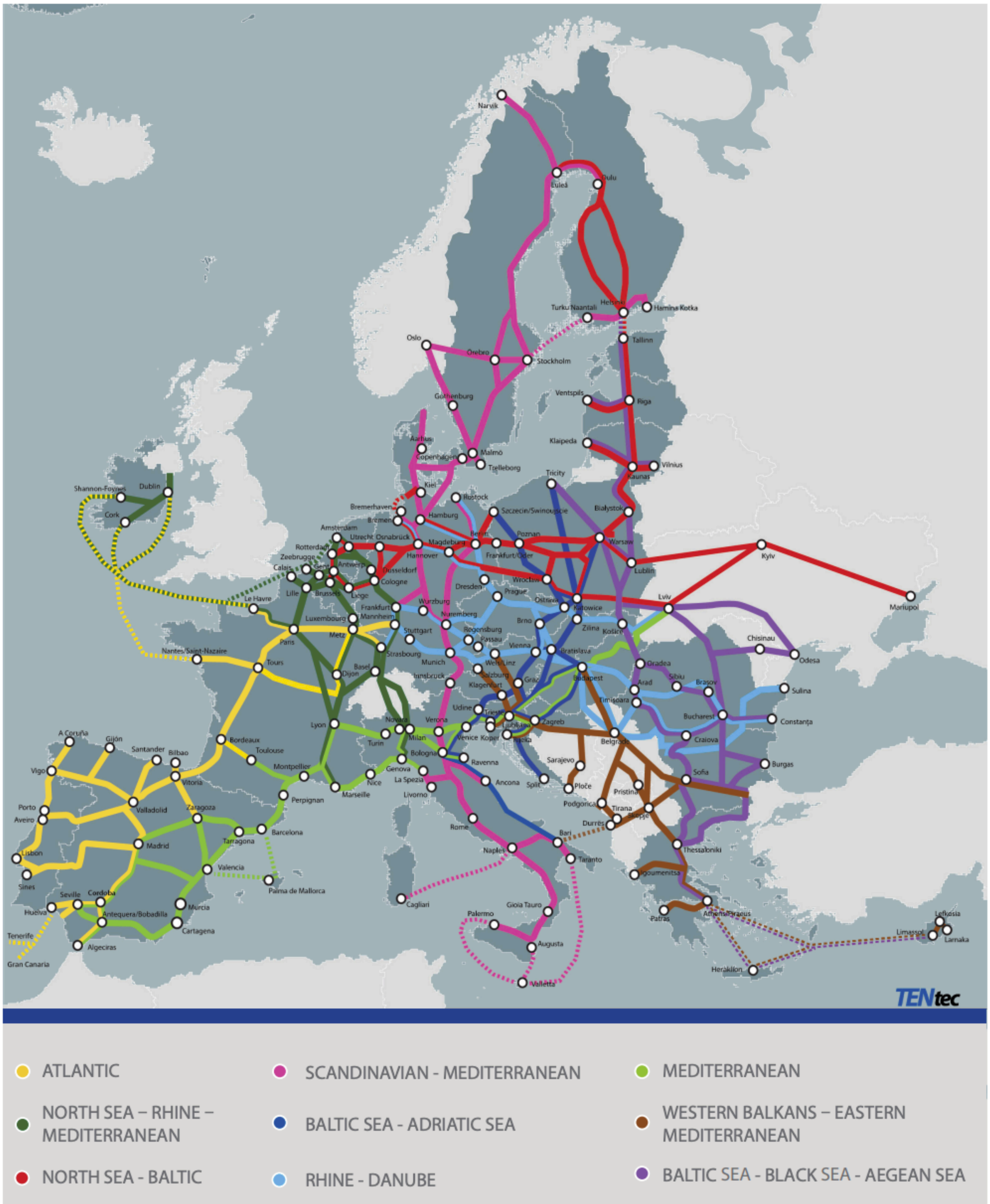
These conditions, combined with other structural constraints, may limit the development of formalised employer branding and HR practices. At the same time, they highlight the importance of day-to-day work experiences, interpersonal relations, and local organisational dynamics in shaping how the organisation is perceived by its workforce.

II.IV The European Port System and Euroports

For the European economy, ports are likewise important, since 74% of goods moving within the continent are transported by sea; they play a crucial role in both internal and external trade. European ports employ about 1.5 million workers and also constitute hubs for energy production (European Commission, n.d.). The European Commission already in 1974 set up a Port Working Group consisting of representatives from major European ports, and in 1993 the European Sea Ports Organisation (ESPO) was founded as an independent lobby. Its mission is to "influence public policy in the European Union in order to achieve a safe, efficient and environmentally sustainable European port sector" (European Sea Ports Organisation, n.d.).

Under the Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport, the European Union has progressively developed a comprehensive port policy aimed at improving competitiveness, transparency and sustainability in ports and across all mobility sectors. Great importance has been given to matters of market access, state aid rules, and environmental standards, especially with the introduction of the Port Services Regulation (2017).

Figure 3. *Map of the European Transport Corridors (TEN-T Network)*



Note. Adapted from Annex III – TEN-T revision 2023, European Commission (2023).

According to the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) policy, ports are divided into core and comprehensive ones. The network (Figure 3), comprises 329 strategically designated maritime ports across Europe.

Core network ports:

- Are the most strategically important ports, selected based on traffic volume and relevance;
- They are the backbone of the EU transport system and connect major corridors;
- They must meet higher technical and performance standards.

Comprehensive network ports:

- Include all other relevant ports, ensuring territorial coverage;
- Guarantee accessibility for all EU regions, including peripheral areas;
- Have less strict requirements compared to core ports.

Although commercial ports in Europe are more numerous, the TEN-T network includes only those considered crucial for improving connectivity, mobility, and integration across Europe (European Commission, 2016; European Commission, n.d.).

If a comprehensive strategic vision exists is because ports are no longer merely commercial gateways but systems operating at the intersection of trade, energy, security and geopolitics (Solís, 2026). This is clearly perceptible in current conflicts, from the Russian invasion of Ukraine which has caused major disruptions to Black Sea ports, to tensions regarding the Strait of Hormuz, which have affected the functioning of one of the most critical chokepoints in global trade.

According to Solis (2026), in order to be effective, a forward-looking port strategy should be built on:

- Resilience and security: better coordination among entities, increased cybersecurity, and assessment of foreign ownership of critical ports.
- Competitiveness and scale: ports should have access to financing for green and digital transformation.

These points are critical to the competitiveness of European ports, in an era in which superpowers such as China are expanding their presence across key maritime hubs through investments and acquisitions.

In this context, where ports act as gateways ensuring a healthy European economy, and where security and geopolitical equilibrium are at stake, Euroports group operates.

Euroports is one of the largest European maritime infrastructure and port-operating company, developing and managing maritime supply-chain solutions in Europe and beyond for international customers across various industries. It handles a wide range of cargo types, from bulk to containerised goods.

The company was established in 2006 following the acquisition of two terminals in Belgium and Spain, with the aim of developing an international port network. In the following years, in fact, the expansion continued through the acquisition of other terminals across Europe, including in Belgium, France, Finland, Germany, Spain, Italy, Bulgaria, Turkey, and beyond.

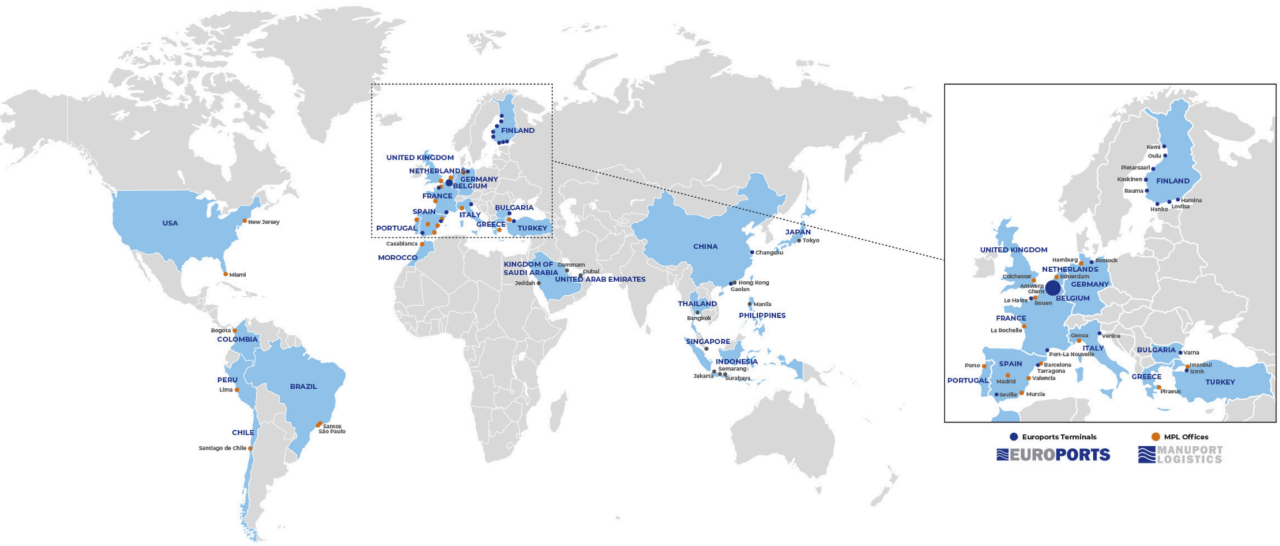
Today, it operates more than 50 terminals and logistics platforms across Europe and Asia, handling more than 70 million tonnes of goods every year.

The company is owned by a consortium consisting of PWV (an investment company focused on the Flemish economy), SFPIM (an investment fund fully owned by the Belgian State), and R-LOGITECH S.A. (an international logistics services provider).

Euroports is headquartered in Kallo, Belgium, and its workforce consists of about 2,700 employees (Euroports, n.d.). The top management is based in Belgium, while the rest of the facilities are divided into geographical areas and managed by the branches of competence.

In addition to its port terminal operations, Euroports also owns Manuport Logistics, a global freight forwarding company that provides integrated logistics services and completes the group's role within international supply chains.

Figure 4. *Geographic distribution of Euroports terminals and logistics operations worldwide*.



Note. Adapted from Euroports, Sustainability Report 2024, p. 11.

Worldwide, Euroports manages terminals in the following commercial ports:

Table 4. List of Euroports terminals worldwide

Country	Port / Location	Terminal Type / Activity
Belgium	Antwerp (4 terminals)	*Fertilisers & minerals; containers; sugar & agribulk; breakbulk & fruits*
	Ghent	*Dry bulk*
	Ghent All Weather Terminal	*Steel*
	Inland terminals	*Multipurpose*
Germany	Rostock (8 terminals)	*Liquid bulk, grain, fertiliser, ore, wood chips, waste, steel, wind turbines, paper, RoRo, multipurpose, multi-modal*
Italy	Venice	*Bulk*
Bulgaria	Devnya	*Fertilisers & minerals*
Turkey	Izmit	*Pulp*
Finland	Rauma	*Multipurpose*
	Hanko	*Multipurpose, RoRo*
	Pietarsaari	*Breakbulk*
	Hamina	*Multipurpose*
	Kaskinen	*Breakbulk*
	Kemi	*Bulk and breakbulk*
	Oulu	*Bulk*
	Loviisa	*Multipurpose*
France	Le Havre	*Sugar*
	Port-La Nouvelle	*Multipurpose*
China	Changshu	*Pulp*
	Gaolan	*Pulp*
Spain	Tarragona (3 terminals)	*Forest products; dry bulk (agribulk); mineral terminal*
	Sevilla	*Multipurpose*

Note. Adapted from Euroports (2024), "Global presence / Terminals network".

A very recognised strength of Euroports, that allows it to be in the top 10 of best European port operators, is the diversification it can offer across its terminals, it in fact offers solutions for: agribulk, fertilisers and minerals, fossil fuels, sugar, liquid bulk, alternative energy, forest products, steel and other metals, fresh and frozen foods and more.

The expertise in dealing with different type of goods is a factor that increases global reputation. Another key feature of the company is the range of value-added services, which allow a certain degree of customisation. The port infrastructure and the multi-modal freight forwarding services can, in fact, provide the following tailor-made services to customers: sieving, blending, bagging, packaging, sampling, quality control, container stuffing, customs clearance services, ship agency services, washing and repair, pest control, fumigation, cooling, humidity control, labelling, palletisation, container shipping, and re-strapping.

It is important to highlight these qualities, because as literature and empirical evidence suggest, diversification and customisation can be fundamental competitive features in B2B sector.

Having outlined the company structure, the following section will analyse the business model at group level, through which Euroports supports its vision of delivering sustainable, port-centric logistics solutions and pursues its mission of providing efficient, integrated, and value-added services to global customers (Euroports, n.d.). To visually display it, the following table presents it according to the Business Model Canvas framework by Alex Osterwalder (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010); the salient aspects are then explained below.

Table 5. Business Model Canvas of Euroports Group

<table>
<tr>
<td rowspan="2">Partners
• Shipping companies
• Logistics and transport providers
• Port authorities and public institutions
• Suppliers and subcontractors (increasingly strategic over time)
• Multimodal logistics partners (e.g. integrated networks like Manuport Logistics)</td>
<td>Key Activities
• Terminal operations and cargo handling
• Storage and logistics services
• Multimodal transport coordination
• Value-added logistics solutions</td>
<td rowspan="2" colspan="2">Value Proposition
• Integrated port and inland terminal management
• Tailor-made logistics solutions for industrial supply chains
• Efficient, reliable, and flexible cargo handling services
• End-to-end logistics coordination</td>
<td>Customer Relationships
• Long-term contractual relationships
• Trust-based, reliability-driven cooperation
• High focus on operational efficiency
• Service continuity and performance-based interaction</td>
<td rowspan="2">Customer Segments
• Industrial producers
• Commodity traders
• Importers and exporters
• Logistics and supply chain operators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Resources
• Network of port terminals
• Infrastructure and long-term concessions
• Skilled workforce, technical know-how
• Logistics and operational assets</td>
<td>Channels
• Direct terminal-based service delivery
• Integration in global supply chains
• Multimodal logistics (via subsidiary networks)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td colspan="3">Cost Structure
• Concession and infrastructure costs
• Labour and operational costs
• Capital-intensive equipment and maintenance
• Regulatory and compliance costs</td>
<td colspan="3">Revenue Streams
• Cargo handling fees
• Storage services
• Logistics and value-added services
• Transport-related services</td>
</tr>
</table>

Value proposition

The core activity through which value is delivered is the management of maritime and inland terminals, handling diverse types of cargo and serving various industrial supply chains. A high degree of diversification and value-added tailor-made services enrich the offer, resulting in flexible, integrated, and efficient logistics solutions.

Key Activities & Resources

Key activities include terminal operations, cargo handling, storage, and the provision of additional services, supported by key resources within a geographically diversified network of terminals, such as port infrastructure, long-term concessions, specialised assets, a skilled workforce, and know-how.

Customer & Partners Relationships

The main customer segments consist of commodity traders, industrial producers, exporter, and importers operating across various sectors. Relationships with them are typically long-term and based on reliability, operational efficiency and trust. In addition, relationships with key suppliers and public institutions play a crucial role, as port operations heavily rely on coordination with shipping companies, logistics providers and port authorities, making collaboration and compliance fundamental elements of the business model. It is also possible that suppliers become, over time, trusted partners in accomplishing operations through mutually beneficial exchanges.

Channels

Euroports delivers its services directly through its network of port terminals, which act as physical interfaces within the global supply chains. In addition to seaport facilities, through Manuport Logistics, multimodal transport is also enabled, allowing services to be extended beyond the port when required. This network guarantees an ent-to-end logistic solution and closer control over the supply chain.

Revenue Streams & Cost Structure

The revenue streams consist of payments for both core and additional services provided (loading and unloading of ships/transport, storage, tailor-made solutions), while the cost structure relies heavily on fixed costs such as concession fees, infrastructure backbone and capital-intensive assets.

II.V Case Study Context: Port of Venice and Terminal Rinfuse Venezia -TRV

Located in the north-east of the Italian peninsula, Venice developed around the 5th century AD, when populations from the mainland settled on small lagoon islands to escape barbarian invasions. The city subsequently evolved, being effectively built on water within the Venetian lagoon, a unique

natural environment formed in the 8th century BC by sediment deposits from rivers flowing into the Adriatic Sea, resulting in a complex morphology of tidal flats, salt marshes, and shallow channels.
From the exceptional urban configuration of Venice, it is possible to observe that, unlike other cities which have a clear boundary between land and sea, Venice developed according to a “diffuse port” pattern. This is due to the multiplicity of small islands that gradually shaped both the city and the lagoon in which it is located.
In this diffuse commercial city, governed by the Serenissima Republic of Venice, which held power from 697 to 1797, structured port facilities were not necessary, as merchants could directly unload and store traded goods in their houses and courtyards. This practice significantly influenced the architecture of the buildings.
From the 15th century onward, due to geopolitical changes and transformations in trade, such as the adoption of larger ships unsuitable for the lagoon’s small channels, the interests of the Republic increasingly shifted toward the mainland (Adami, 2018).
In the following centuries, the lagoon witnessed significant political changes, from conflicts with major European and Mediterranean powers to the conquest of the Serenissima Republic by Napoleonic France in 1797. Although Venice’s strategic importance declined on a global scale, the city and its lagoon retained regional significance within the Adriatic, particularly as a commercial, administrative, and cultural centre.
Only in the modern era ports activities began to concentrate and become more structured in defined areas. Until the 19th century, in fact, commercial ships continued to dock in the San Marco Basin. The construction of the Maritime Station between 1869 and 1880, on the western side of the city, represented a first step toward improving logistics in connection with railway transport. However, it was only at the beginning of the 20th century that the project of developing a heavy industrial district on the mainland, in the Marghera area, took shape. This shift also encouraged the improvement of the lagoon’s “infrastructure”: three inlets provided access to the sea, while a new channel, the “Oil Canal” (*Canale dei Petroli*), was excavated in the 1960s to allow the transit of larger ships to the industrial-petrochemical district, whose areas are nowadays largely dedicated to commercial port activities (Torricella & Artuso, 2016).
Today the commercial port of Venice (Figure 6) extends over approximately 2,000 hectares (20 km^2), including both water surfaces and operational land areas distributes between the historical port and Porto Marghera (Autorità di Sistema Portuale del Mare Adriatico Settentrionale, n.d.).
From a governance perspective the port system is managed by the Port System Authority of the Northern Adriatic Sea for the ports of Venice and Chioggia, also colloquially known as the Port

Figure 5. *Geographical location of the Port of Venice*

Note. Screenshot from Google Earth (2026).

Authority of Venice, which is responsible for planning, coordinating, and controlling port operations, as well as maintaining infrastructure and environmental management. Its role has become increasingly complex due to the coexistence of commercial, industrial, and passenger (cruise) activities, alongside the necessity of safeguarding the lagoon ecosystem. Environmental remediation, dredging activities, and pollution control measures are now central components of port governance, especially in formerly industrial areas (Torricella & Artuso, 2016; Adami, 2018).

The same Authority supervises both the ports of Venice and Chioggia, the latter being a town located at the southern edge of the Venetian lagoon. Within this port system, more than 1,200 companies operate with roughly 21,175 employees, supporting the supply chains and export activities of industries in Northern Italy and Central Europe.

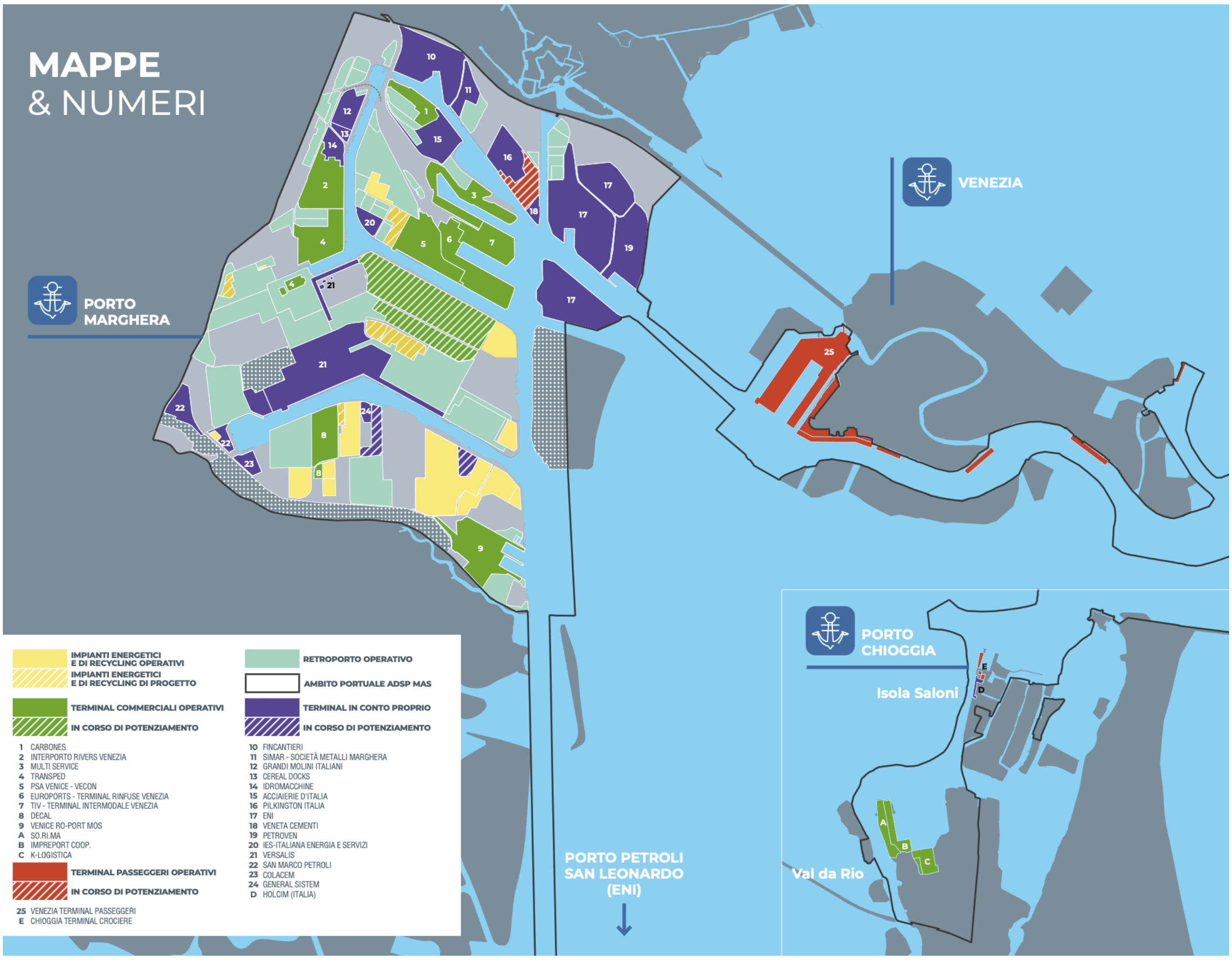
This governance model is grounded in the reform introduced by Law No. 84 of 1994, which reorganised the Italian port system by separating regulatory and operational functions (Legge 28 gennaio 1994, n. 84). Under this framework, port authorities retain ownership and oversight responsibilities, while terminal operations and cargo handling activities are entrusted to private operators through concession agreements. This hybrid model, combining public governance with private management, has contributed to increasing efficiency and investment in port activities, while also shaping the organisational and operational structures of individual terminals.

The port of Venice is multipurpose and equipped with extensive infrastructure. It includes 163 berths and 30 km of quays, enabling the handling of a wide range of cargo and passenger traffic. These facilities are distributed across 27 different terminals, each specialised in specific functions such as commercial logistics, industrial activities, and cruise services. The companies involved in the port now Venice activities generate an estimated direct production value of 6.6 billion euros, accounting for 27% of the municipal economy and 13% of the metropolitan city economy.

Alongside the terminal infrastructure, the port system is characterised by a wide variety of operators, each fulfilling specific functions within the logistics chain. These include:

- maritime agents, who represent shipping companies and coordinate vessel operations;
- freight forwarders, responsible for organizing the transport and logistics of goods;
- customs brokers, who manage customs clearance procedures;
- terminal operators, who manage cargo handling operations and the loading and unloading of goods within dedicated port areas;
- non-concessionary port enterprises, which provide operational services without holding a state concession;
- providers of specialised complementary and ancillary services, offering technical and support activities connected to port operations;
- temporary labor suppliers, ensuring workforce flexibility for port activities;
- companies providing services to ships, cargo, and passengers, including maintenance, assistance, and provisioning services;
- nautical technical services, such as pilotage, towing, and mooring, which ensure safe navigation and maneuvering within the port;
- institutions operating within the port, including public authorities responsible for regulation, security, customs, and health controls;
- registered fuel suppliers, responsible for the provision of fuel and energy products to vessels (Autorità di Sistema Portuale del Mare Adriatico Settentrionale, n.d.).

Figure 6. *Map of the Port of Venice terminal system and operational areas*



Note. Adapted from Porto di Venezia – Brochure Venezia, North Adriatic Sea Port Authority (2023).

Marghera, located on the mainland, hosts mainly commercial and industrial activities and is accessible to ships with a draft (vertical distance between the waterline and the bottom of the hull) of up to 11.5 meters.

The commercial portion of the port handles a diversified range of cargo, including containers, general cargo, bulk goods, and Ro-Ro traffic. These terminals are equipped with specialised infrastructure and are closely integrated with inland transport networks, ensuring efficient connections with Northern Italy and Central European markets. Venice is, in fact, strategically positioned between southern maritime routes and continental hinterlands. At this level, the main competitors are the Port of Trieste (Italy), followed by Koper (Slovenia), both of which benefit from deeper drafts and fewer geographical constraints.

These competitive dynamics, together with the physical limitations of the Venetian lagoon, shape long-term strategies and influence both the development of the lagoon ecosystem and that of the city of Venice itself.
In this context, the Terminal Rinfuse Venezia, the only Italian branch of Euroports, operates.

Ex Terminal Rinfuse Italia, a wider operator active in Genoa, Savona, and Venice, underwent subsequent restructuring within Italy's bulk port sector. The Venetian facility was later separated into Terminal Rinfuse Venezia (TRV), which was acquired by Euroports group in 2007.
In March 2025, following a competitive public tender, the Port System Authority of the Northern Adriatic Sea approved the granting of a 25-year concession, effective from October 2025, to Euroports. This concession renews the company's right to manage 278,500 square metres of Molo B (Pier B) in the Commercial Port of Marghera-Venice, including land, buildings, and docks. It permits the operation of loading, unloading, transhipment, storage, and handling operations of bulk goods, as well as all related port management activities on behalf of third parties.
The annual concession fee payable to the authority amounts to €3.163 million. In addition, Euroports commits to investing in the improvement and both ordinary and extraordinary maintenance of the concessioned facilities. The company plans to achieve a traffic volume of 3,568,000 tonnes by the end of the concession and to invest over €53 million in total.
The investment plan aims to increase storage capacity, upgrade railway infrastructure and freight handling systems, implement technologies to reduce environmental impact, and enhance digitalisation and operational safety. These measures will also support Euroports' target of a 40% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 through a planned 30% modal shift from road to rail transport (InforMare, 2025; Euroports, 2025).
The main goods handled include agri-bulk (used for livestock feed production), coal, steel products (mostly cast iron), and minerals (e.g., for fertiliser and glass production), among others.
With regard to the terminal's technical characteristics the following aspects should be highlighted:

- The terminal is located approximately 5 km from the Brescia–Milano–Torino / Trieste–Vienna–Munich highway corridor and 2 km from the main railway network, offering efficient connections to the Northern Adriatic, Central Europe, Austria, and Bavaria markets.
- It operates year-round, 24/7.
- Of the total 278,500 m² area, 42,000 m² are covered storage facilities.
- The maximum permitted draft at all berths is 11.5 metres.
- The maximum vessel length is 300 metres.

- The terminal includes 4 quays and 8 berths, with a total quay length of 1,730 metres.

Assets and facilities include one reach stacker, two tanker trucks, one road sweeper, eight front-end loaders, eight forklifts, six weighbridges, four mobile hoppers, three mobile screw conveyors, one rail wagon unloading pit, three rail gates, eight railway tracks, seven truck gates, and four road weighbridges. Traffic capacity reaches up to 500 vehicle movements per day.

Value-added services include:

- Freight forwarding, customs, and shipping agency services
- Cargo inspection and screening
- Long-term storage
- Container stuffing and stripping
- Delivery by rail and barge
- The terminal holds ISO certifications for quality, safety, environmental management, and food safety.

With its activities the terminal plays a crucial role in the functioning of the agri-food, project cargo, chemical industry supply chains.

Chapter III - Terminal Rinfuse Venezia: Organisational Analysis

After having examined the theoretical framework and the contextual analysis of the port environment, this chapter will tackle TRV from an organisational perspective. The aim is to observe how structural characteristics, operational dynamics, and internal practices contribute to shaping organisational identity. The first two parts of the chapter will present an analysis of what the business and the "brand" of TRV are, while the last subsections will focus more on behavioural aspects in order to depict how the company is contextualised according to the 3Bs framework.

III.I Business Model and Operational Context

III.I.I Governance and Organisational Structure

Molo B (Wharf B) is a historical terminal active since the 1960s and was managed until 1998 directly by the Port Authority, before becoming Terminal Rinfuse Italia and, consequently, TRV–Euroports from 2007.

The acquisition by Euroports resulted in an important shift from local Italian ownership to a multinational group, an action that brought relevant changes to the organisation.

Previously, the control chain was short and the majority shareholders resided in Italy, meaning they were physically close to the terminal operations. The control chain has increased in complexity, as have decision-making processes.

Nowadays, the terminal's governance falls under the Euroports Mediterranean regional division, managed from Spain, which in turn reports to the group's Belgian headquarters.

At the local level in Venice, the organisational structure is headed by a Terminal Manager who oversees several departments: Commercial Office, QHSE (Quality, Health, Safety, and Environment), Planning & OPEX (Operating Expenditure) and Land Coordination, Sea Operation Coordination, Administration and Human Resources, and Asset Management, for a total of 47 employees. Each department reports functionally to the corresponding Mediterranean division manager, including the Operations and Engineering Mediterranean Manager, Business Development Manager, Finance Manager, Human Resources Manager, and ultimately the Mediterranean Managing Director.

The workforce consists of both blue-collar and white-collar employees. However, the distinction is not always rigid, as many white-collar employees, primarily department managers, and personnel involved in operations and coordination activities, perform hybrid roles that require them to alternate between office-based activities and on-site terminal operations. In addition to their administrative and coordination tasks, they frequently spend time within the terminal supervising activities, interacting with operational personnel, and monitoring the progress of ongoing operations.

The governance structure comprises only a few hierarchical levels, making it relatively flat. This characteristic is also reflected in physical terms: within the terminal facility, all offices are located in a single-storey building, fostering proximity and facilitating frequent informal communication among departments. Furthermore, operational office employees carry out a dynamic working routine, alternating between office activities and on-site terminal operations, which further strengthens interdepartmental collaboration and direct interaction with the operational environment.

As a consequence, hierarchies are also observably developed with low power distance. As supported by management and organisation literature, in such organic configurations roles are more flexible, coordination is informal, and physical proximity (as in same-floor offices) fosters informal communication and a shared culture (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Mintzberg, 1980; Martin, 2002).

This setting, however, contrasts with the more rigid hierarchies above the terminal level, where the power structure is more vertical and each manager must report to the head of their department. This contrast ultimately reflects, on one side, the multinational structure of the organisation and, on the other, a locally embedded, flat, and dynamic operational environment.

This governance configuration is useful for understanding how responsibilities and decision-making processes are distributed across organisational levels, and how different functions contribute to the creation and delivery of value. In this sense, analysing the business model allows for a clearer identification of the roles, activities, and relationships that underpin the terminal's operations.

III.I.II The Business Model and the Value Chain

The business model of Terminal Rinfuse Venezia is comparable to that of the broader Euroports group, but it differs due to the field in which it is specialised and the actors it deals with.

Table 6. Business Model Canvas of Terminal Rinfuse Venezia

Partners	**Key Activities**	**Value Proposition**	**Customer Relationships**	**Customer Segments**
• Suppliers & service providers • Shipping & logistics operators • Port Authority (Northern Adriatic Sea)	• Cargo handling (loading/unloading) • Terminal operations • Storage • Customised services	• Bulk cargo transfer (sea ↔ land) • Key link in industrial supply chains • Specialised handling + limited diversification • Tailor-made logistics solutions	• Long-term • Trust-based • Reliability & efficiency driven	• Commodity traders • Industrial producers • Agribusiness, cement, steel, fertiliser sectors
	Key Resources • Concession • Infrastructure & equipment • Skilled workforce • Know-how & stakeholder network		**Channels** • Direct terminal operations • Vessel handling • Pre-operation negotiation	

Cost Structure	Revenue Streams
• Concession fees • Infrastructure maintenance • Equipment (capex) • Labour & operations	• Handling fees • Storage • Value-added services

Value Proposition

The main purpose the terminal serves is to ensure the movement of bulk cargo between sea and land, thereby representing a fundamental link in the supply chain of several industries that need to import, export, or transport bulk raw materials or semi-finished goods by sea.

The diversification of goods is limited by the terminal's area and assets, but it is sufficient to be managed by different specialised departments. This also allows the firm to offer tailored, value-added solutions when requested, thanks to its expertise.

Key Activities & Resources

Similarly to Euroports group, key activities include terminal operations, cargo handling, storage, and the provision of additional services. These are supported by a long-term concession, terminal infrastructure, specialised assets, skilled employees, and a strong network of stakeholders with whom know-how is co-developed.

Customer & Partner Relationships

Customers mainly consist of bulk commodity traders and industrial producers across various sectors, including major Italian agribusiness companies, as well as the cement, steel and fertiliser industries. Relationships with customers are typically long-term and based on reliability, operational efficiency, and trust.

In addition, relationships with key suppliers (such as spare parts companies, maintenance providers, and cleaning service companies) and public institutions, in this case, the Port System Authority of the Northern Adriatic Sea, play a crucial role.

Channels

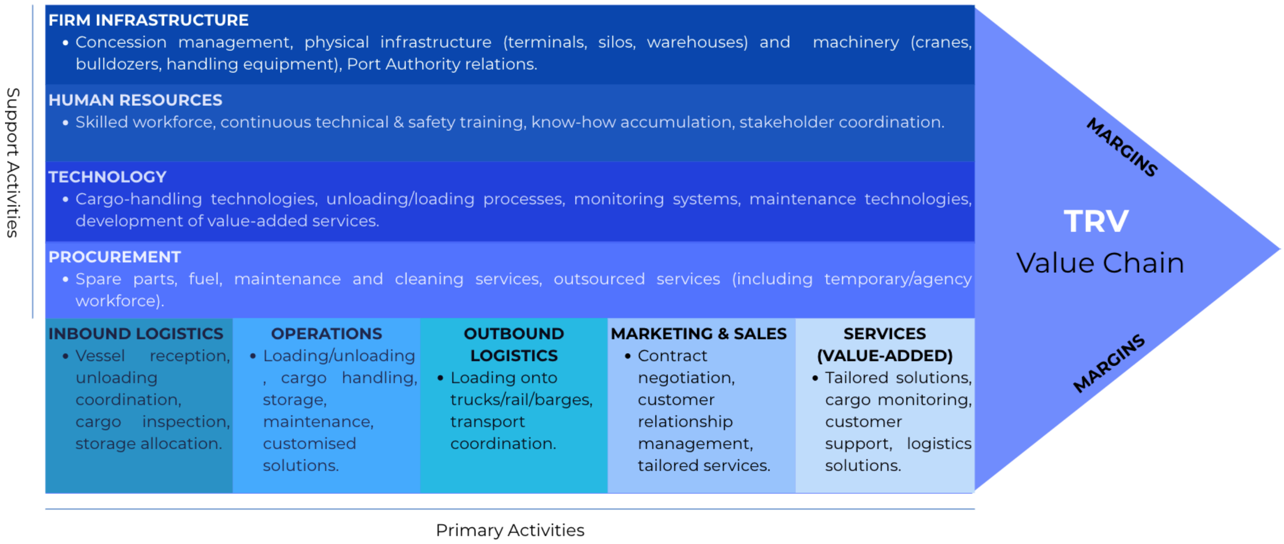
The company's services are delivered physically through the terminal. Deals are finalised when a ship is loaded or unloaded; this process is preceded by negotiations to organise contract terms and define whether customised services are required.

Revenue Streams & Cost Structure

Revenues are generated from payments for both core and additional services provided (loading and unloading of ships and transport, storage, and tailor-made solutions). The cost structure relies heavily on fixed costs such as concession fees, infrastructure maintenance (asphalt, tracks, offices, garages, sheds, silos), and capital-intensive assets (cranes, bulldozers, buckets, and other machinery).

By displaying the value chain of the terminal according to Michael Porter's framework and integrating the elements of the business model outlined above, we obtain a representation such as Figure 7.

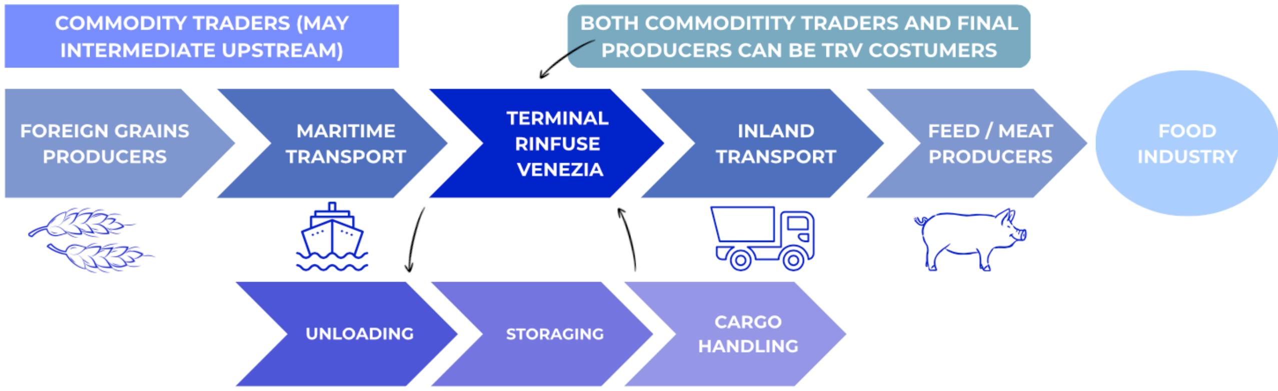
Figure 7. *Value Chain of Terminal Rinfuse Venezia*



Within this structure, value is primarily created through the efficient and reliable transfer of bulk goods between sea and land, positioning the terminal as a critical intermediary node between maritime transport and inland distribution within broader industrial supply chains. This role is reinforced by the use of specialised infrastructure and technical expertise, which enable the effective handling, storage, and movement of goods. Furthermore, the ability to offer customised, value-added services tailored to the needs of long-term clients enhances the overall value delivered, strengthening customer relationships and supporting a sustained competitive advantage. Understanding this integration within wider value chains also helps to contextualise the terminal's operational dependencies and the nature of its relationships with customers and partners.

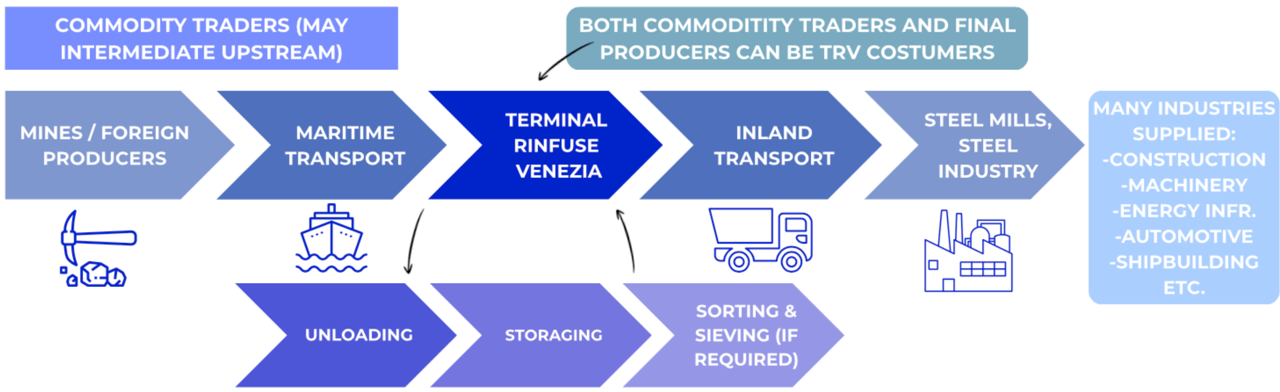
For example, in the agribusiness industry value chain (Figure 8), raw materials such as grains and cereals are transported by sea from exporting countries to the terminal, where they are unloaded, stored, and handled before being transferred to inland transport modes such as trucks and trains. These goods are then delivered to processing industries, in TRV case to major Italian feed manufacturers and meat producers. In this context, the terminal ensures continuity between maritime logistics and industrial production processes.

Figure 8. *Agribusiness Industry Value Chain*



Similarly, in the steel industry value chain (Figure 9), the terminal acts as a key logistical node, enabling the flow of essential inputs for industrial activities, such as cast iron and other raw materials used in steel production. In this business, in addition to standard handling operations, the terminal may also provide value-added services such as sorting and sifting materials according to their dimensions before distribution to the steel industry.

Figure 9. *Steel Industry Value Chain*



In both cases, the terminal operates as a critical interface within the value chain, where logistics performance, coordination, and timing are essential to ensuring the smooth functioning of interconnected industrial systems.

III.I.III Operational logic and Service Characteristics

It is now important to understand how the business works in terms of processes and operational steps.

Contact with clients. Everything starts with the awareness of a potential customer that needs to import/export a commodity, depending on whether they are the buyer or the trader. If this client is a loyal one, contracts and modalities are likely already established, and the process will therefore be smoother. Otherwise, in the case of a brand-new or non-routine customer, different situations may arise:

- A commercial relationship may have started earlier, for example at trade fairs, where terminal commercial and operational departments present their facilities and, most importantly, try to anticipate the market by identifying which commodities will have higher demand in the future and consequently contacting the relevant industries or companies involved in importing a specific good.
- A previously unknown potential customer may urgently need to unload, load, or store cargo and is primarily interested in receiving an offer that satisfies the need as quickly as possible and at the lowest cost.

In the first case, the proposal is designed to secure customer interest and loyalty; in the second case, the offer must be prepared in record time in order to outperform competitors. This situation may lead both to transactional, opportunistic relationships but also to the development of long-term, continuous relationships. A customer who perceives the terminal as a reliable actor capable of solving problems, ideally with tailored and attentive solutions, represents the best form of business reference.

Offer making. Whether the need for an offer is sudden or planned, it requires optimal coordination among the commercial, operational, and technical departments. The commercial office manages contacts and relationships with clients but cannot make any promise or proposal without first consulting the operational office, which coordinates traffic within the terminal, and the technical department, which assesses the feasibility of cargo dimensions and the assets required to complete the operation.

This coordination implies that all employees involved in the negotiation and offer preparation phase are highly skilled in their respective roles, but also open-minded and capable of problem-solving in relation to interdependent departments. Effective coordination leads to timely offer delivery, and since time is a critical resource, this represents a significant competitive advantage.

Once the offer specifications are established, contracts are typically defined with reference to Incoterms, globally recognised contractual standards that define the responsibilities, risks, and obligations of buyers and sellers in international trade (International Chamber of Commerce, 2020).

Deal conclusion. Although, once signed, a deal should be legally binding, the moment when the company can finally breathe a sigh of relief is the final stage, when the cargo is actually unloaded (or loaded). In this business, many changes, adjustments, and, more commonly, unforeseen events may occur. Whether it is a sudden change in cargo dimensions, a delay in docking, or machinery failure or unsuitability, the agreed terms can ultimately be threatened. It is up to terminal operators, especially when unexpected changes are requested by the client, to decide the degree of flexibility to adopt. Clearly, attempting to meet customer needs within the limits of economic feasibility will be appreciated and may represent a valuable opportunity to strengthen customer loyalty.

Administrative and operational procedures. Payments, authorisations, and trade documentation are managed at every stage of the business process by the respective departments. Financial operations include both receivables from clients and payments to suppliers, ensuring the economic continuity of terminal activities.

At the same time, a wide range of administrative procedures must be handled, particularly those required by the Port Authority and other regulatory bodies. These include authorisations for external personnel to access the terminal, permits for cargo handling and circulation, and compliance documentation related to safety, customs, and environmental regulations.

Together, these administrative and operational processes represent a fundamental component of terminal activities, as they ensure that operations are legally compliant, properly coordinated, and able to proceed without disruption.

A brief overview of TRV financial structure further highlights the cost dynamics of the terminal. In 2024, Terminal Rinfuse Venezia recorded revenues of approximately €20,1 million (Ufficio Camerale, 2025), with a cost structure heavily influenced by fixed components such as concession fees, infrastructure maintenance, and capital-intensive assets. Among these, the concession paid to the Port Authority represents a significant and relatively inflexible cost, regardless of traffic volumes.

This cost configuration implies that operational efficiency and volume continuity are essential to maintaining profitability, as fixed costs remain constant even in periods of lower activity. Consequently, the terminal's economic performance is highly sensitive to fluctuations in cargo flows, reinforcing the importance of securing long-term customer relationships and ensuring reliable operations.

III.I.IV Workforce, Interdependence & Network

Going back to the governance matter, the terminal employs 47 among employees and workers. This workforce is supported by external consultants who, although not directly employed by the company, work on a stable basis within the terminal offices and provide support in areas such as finance, administration, and human resources.

In the operational area, additional specialised labour is supplied on demand by external authorised cooperatives. The main provider is CLP (Venice Port Workers' Company), which has been active since the 1920s and was reformed in 2001. Labour represents another significant cost item, and, due to the industrial legacy of the area, trade unions hold strong bargaining power. As a result, these workers benefit from relatively high levels of protection.

As can be observed, even when considering only the workforce, multiple organisations coexist and interact within the terminal environment. Consequently, the employer brand should not address only internal employees, but also a broader network of external collaborators, including consulting firms and labour providers. Since these actors can directly contribute to operational performance, it is important to consider their role in shaping organisational perception.

This configuration reflects a broader network-based organisational model, in which the terminal operates through a system of interconnected actors, extending beyond its formal boundaries to include a wider ecosystem. In addition to labour providers, a dense network of suppliers exists. Maintenance services, industrial cleaning companies, naval service providers, machinery and spare parts suppliers, carpenters, and other specialised operators are routine actors with whom the company interacts. Since part of the supplier market is regulated by the Port Authority, which determines which actors are authorised to operate within port boundaries (e.g., firms providing labour, equipment, and specialised operational services without holding a terminal concession), terminals compete to establish strong and reliable relationships with the most efficient providers. In this context, a reputation as a trustworthy client also becomes an important factor.

Overall, this interdependent structure highlights how value creation within the terminal relies not only on internal resources, but also on the effective coordination of a wider network of actors, suggesting that organisational perception and reputation extend beyond firm boundaries and may influence both internal and external stakeholders.

III.I.V Constraints and need for Alignment

Having analysed the terminal business model, it is now possible to highlight its main constraints:

- **Fixed costs** (concessions, infrastructure), which primarily affect the financial and technical dimensions.
- **Regulatory constraints** (Port Authority requirements, safety regulations), which influence the administrative and strategic dimensions.

- **Dependence on vessel schedules and spatial limits**, which require continuous adaptation and problem-solving from technical and operational departments, as well as ongoing communication with the commercial function to adjust and customise service offerings.
- **Labour structure** (trade unions, external workforce), which makes the management of labour a critical aspect for administrative and HR functions.

Within this context, characterised by time pressure, uncertainty, interdependence, and operational complexity, the need for alignment across functions becomes imperative. However, due to a lack of resources or formal structures, such alignment cannot always be fully formalised. Instead, operations often rely on tacit knowledge, experience, and informal coordination mechanisms, which emerge as necessary conditions for effective organisational functioning.

What the company can consistently deliver under such constraints becomes its core value proposition. Reliability under conditions of uncertainty, flexibility as a competitive asset, and problem-solving capability as a source of perceived value represent key elements that the company can leverage to differentiate itself from competitors, while fostering strong relationships with customers, suppliers, and employees.

In this sense, operational capabilities do not remain confined to internal processes but extend to shape how the organisation is perceived externally. The translation of these capabilities into a coherent and recognisable identity becomes therefore a critical step in defining the firm's positioning within the market.

III.II Brand Identity and Organisational Positioning

III.II.I Corporate Brand Identity: the Group Narrative

At corporate group level, Euroports presents itself as an international logistics operator characterised by a strong emphasis on efficiency, safety, and integration within global supply chains.

The values on which the brand narrative is built are safety, performance, respect for people, integrity, and teamwork. These concepts are displayed throughout the motto: "*Safety, our responsibility. Performance, our passion. Respect for people, our foundation. Integrity, our core. Teamwork, our DNA.*" The Group thus promotes a standardisation of shared values across terminals, with a centralised narrative and a formalisation of identity through corporate communication.

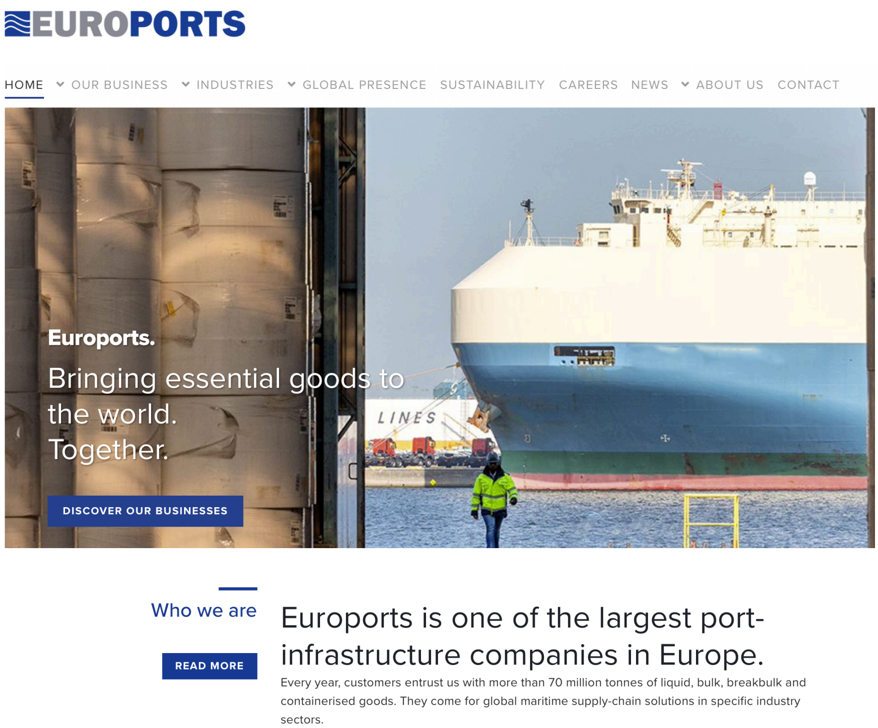
Although, compared to consumer markets, it might seem unusual to speak about branding, a company such as this must still shape its own identity by designing a brand and a coherent narrative. Firstly, this serves to unify the sense of belonging and to mark each terminal as part of the same group. The logo (Figure 10) and visual consistency (colours, typography, layout) are maintained across online communication and physical items such as documents, uniforms, signage, and equipment. In the same way, imagery and corporate storytelling are standardised, making visual identity a tool of cohesion across geographically dispersed sites, reinforcing the perception of 'one group' and abstracting operational diversity into a single brand image.

Figure 10. *Euroports corporate logo.*

Source: Euroports (n.d.)

The main platform through which the top-down group narrative is disclosed is the corporate website (Figure 11), which represents the company's main and most comprehensive communication tool, functioning as its core "business card." Here, the pages focus on the variety of services offered, the industries served, and the global presence of Euroports terminals.

Figure 11. *Euroports' website home-page.*



Source: Euroports (n.d.)

The website also contains the Sustainability Report, probably the most structured document expressing the company's intention to construct a positive brand both internally, by reinforcing shared values and organisational culture, and externally, by strengthening legitimacy and stakeholder trust. Beyond its reporting function, the document contributes to defining the corporate identity and presenting the company as responsible, transparent, and socially accountable within the logistics and port sector. It promotes safety culture, environmental responsibility, people-oriented values, diversity and inclusion, ethical governance, operational reliability, and long-term commitment.

Figure 12. *Euroports Sustainability Report 2024*

Note. Adapted from Euroports, Sustainability Report 2024, pp. 1 & 7.

The Sustainability Report (Figure 12) serves an external branding function by improving corporate reputation, addressing stakeholders and clients, aligning the company with ESG expectations, and legitimising operations within a sensitive sector such as logistics and port activities. As a global stakeholder-oriented communication tool, it also contributes to the internal dimension by reinforcing organisational values, creating alignment across terminals, supporting HR and employer branding, and strengthening the sense of belonging.

From a visual point of view, the report presents strong coherence with the overall branding, using the same style of images and visual communication adopted on the website. Photographs of infrastructure and workers are recurring, as are ESG vocabulary and concepts such as "people," "performance," "safety," and "sustainability."

However, it must also be noted that the highly formalised and strategic nature of sustainability communication may contribute to a certain distance between the corporate narrative and operational reality, particularly at local terminal level, where organisational identity is often shaped more by everyday practices than by institutional discourse.

At group level, Euroports maintains a presence across multiple social media platforms, including Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn. However, the intensity and strategic relevance of these channels appear differentiated. While Instagram and Facebook show a more limited level of activity and audience engagement, LinkedIn emerges as the company's primary communication platform. This reflects the predominantly business-oriented nature of the logistics and port sector, where communication is directed mainly toward institutional stakeholders, clients, partners, and potential professional recruits rather than mass public audiences. On this platform as well, visual communication is consistent: the logo appears on every page, while the images used depict terminal areas, employees at work, and, more generally, operational activities.

The content can be divided into four main thematic areas:

- Operational content: terminal activities, logistics flows, port operations, equipment, and infrastructure;
- Corporate communication: strategy updates, investments, company milestones, acquisitions, and expansion;
- People and HR-related content: employees at work, training initiatives, and team moments;
- Sustainability and ESG content: environmental initiatives, safety campaigns, and community engagement.

English is the official communication language of posts and contents, rarely something is also shared in french. The language used is formal but understandable, with a narrative that strongly focuses on infrastructure, efficiency, and operations.

In recent times, however, increased attention has been given to humanisation and employee-centred storytelling. Several posts highlight the professional journeys, experiences, and growth paths of individual employees within the organisation. This type of communication contributes to humanising the corporate brand and reinforces values related to people, teamwork, and professional development.

This evolution reflects a broader trend in corporate communication, where even highly industrial and operational sectors increasingly integrate human-centred narratives into their branding strategies in order to strengthen employer attractiveness and internal identification, (Crisan & Bortun, 2017; Hein et al., 2025).

III.II.II TRV Local Identity & Perceived Duality: Coexistence or Misalignment?

Following the Euroports acquisition of the Venetian terminal in 2007, the newly renamed Terminal Rinfuse Venezia underwent an important change in terms of brand identity. While it had previously been part of Terminal Rinfuse Italia, a well-known but relatively small Italian operator, it suddenly found itself becoming part of a much larger, more international, and rapidly developing organisation.

In the past, shareholders' opinions could be sought with a simple phone call, and decision-making processes were smoother, clearer, and more traditional. The increased complexity brought by the acquisition somewhat disrupted this established equilibrium.
Over the last decades, Euroports has gradually sought to strengthen its brand equity and increase the sense of belonging among its terminals across the group. As previously mentioned, the Euroports logo is displayed in every TRV office through desk flags and is regularly featured on helmets, work gear, gadgets, and other materials. However, visual symbols alone are not sufficient to align people's perceptions and identities.
This challenge reflects a broader issue discussed in the post-merger integration literature. While organisations often focus on operational and structural integration following an acquisition, achieving alignment at the cultural and identity levels is typically a longer and more complex process (Haspeslagh & Jemison, 1991; Bodner & Capron, 2018). In particular, the integration of an acquired company into a larger corporate group requires balancing the promotion of a shared corporate identity with the preservation of local characteristics that employees continue to value and identify with (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2009). This tension is especially relevant in the case of Terminal Rinfuse Venezia, where a strong local identity has continued to coexist with the growing influence of the Euroports brand.
To support this argument, on-site observations, research, and interviews clearly indicate that attachment to Venice and the port community is an important element shaping the terminal's identity independently of the group. Long-tenured employees who experienced the transition may be aware of two contrasting aspects: on the one hand, the relatively limited changes in the operational model under different ownership structures; on the other hand, the perceived improvements or deteriorations associated with these changes. As a result, managing such perceptions becomes one of the most critical challenges.
The perceived duality that may emerge from this situation is not limited to experienced employees but can arise whenever discrepancies occur between local ways of working and group-wide procedures. The risk, therefore, is that employees perceive themselves primarily as "TRV employees" rather than also as "Euroports employees”.
On the other hand, being part of a larger multinational group may foster trust among employees who associate group ownership with a solid and reliable employer capable of ensuring economic stability, opportunities, and personal growth.
The coexistence (or potential conflict) between local pride and corporate belonging may therefore positively or negatively influence the effectiveness of employer branding initiatives. Understanding how employees reconcile these potentially competing identities is essential for assessing the extent

to which a shared organisational identity has been successfully developed within Terminal Rinfuse Venezia.

III.III HR Practices and Internal Organisational Culture

Having seen how branding and communication are managed at group level, the discussion naturally flows into HR and organisational practices. Unlike marketing and communication departments, the HR function is articulated according to a vertical structure in which the Head of HR Management in the Belgian headquarters delegates an HR manager for each macro-area or branch, in this case the Mediterranean zone. An HR department is also present at local TRV level, supported by an external consultant. The following paragraph therefore presents a comprehensive analysis of human resources-related matters, divided thematically for the sake of clarity.

Recruitment, onboarding and retention: Given that HR is managed at Mediterranean level, it is important to observe that each country has its own cultural specificity; sometimes even cities within the same country appear very different. It is therefore important to better understand the culture, approach to work, aspirations, and expectations of the workforce characterising a specific context. The Euroports Italian terminal TRV is grounded in the Italian cultural system, which shows a high level of uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede et al., 2010). For this reason, Italian employees are generally less inclined to job mobility and tend to favour predictable, stable employment arrangements, demonstrating reluctance to disrupt established working patterns (Tavanti, 2012; EURES, 2024). These characteristics can partially explain the lower turnover rate at TRV compared to other Euroports terminals. It would be interesting to further analyse to what extent retention is influenced by actual well-being and job satisfaction.

As a consequence of low turnover, recruitment is also reduced. However, this does not mean that the company can neglect this important aspect. At TRV, the majority of employees are long-term workers; this implies that when they retire, a significant gap will need to be filled. Maintaining recruitment of new potential talent in a slow but constant and structured way is therefore an imperative for the future of the company. For this reason, TRV must remain attractive in the labour market. Nowadays, job offers are mainly published on LinkedIn; however, the social media presence is managed centrally at group level, meaning that terminal-specific activities may remain less visible.

The company participates in trade fairs, which provide a valuable opportunity to increase visibility, and collaborates with universities and specialised schools for curricular internships. At Mediterranean level, it is increasingly difficult to attract specialised technical-operational staff, while the market for administrative personnel remains relatively more dynamic. However, new requirements have emerged, such as demand for flexible working hours and the possibility of smart working.

The TRV onboarding phase, apart from bureaucratic procedures, consists of terminal visits and a substantial training component, which is more extensive and safety-focused depending on whether the new hire is a white-collar or blue-collar worker.

Training and Development: As mentioned, training starts from the very first day in the company. Safety training is a necessary requirement to access the terminal, and while a basic standard is required for all employees, operational and technical staff must obtain very high levels of safety certification. Other trainings may include courses in bureaucracy and customs management, security, waste management, and purchasing management. Training is also sometimes sponsored by suppliers or machinery manufacturers, who offer courses on how to use and manage industrial equipment and assets.

Following the acquisitions, Euroports provides English courses in its terminals for all employees. At TRV, this is delivered through a platform with native-speaking teachers via real-time video calls.

Personal development consists of the opportunity to grow within the company by acquiring highly specialised skills and knowledge and to be promoted over time.

Internal Communication: Group-terminal communication finds its primary development through the SharePoint intranet platform *EP One*. Through this system, the Belgian headquarters can communicate directly with all employees, while individual terminals can also share local communications. Employees across the group can stay updated on activities, developments, and news concerning other terminals worldwide. The platform also includes a section for reporting problems and submitting suggestions.

At TRV, almost all white-collar employees and heads of department are provided with a company phone to ensure smoother and more immediate communication during working hours, in addition to an institutional email address for formal communications. Apart from these tools, communication is often informal and conducted in person, especially within the office building. Nevertheless, previous internal surveys identified communication as an area requiring improvement, particularly regarding formal communication between departments. This is certainly an aspect on which the company should continue to work. Planned initiatives such as communication workshops may contribute to addressing the issue, although they may not be sufficient on their own.

Employee Autonomy: Employee autonomy at TRV appears to be shaped by the operational nature of port activities, where coordination, safety requirements, and interdependence between departments necessarily limit individual discretion. Terminal operations require constant alignment between technical, administrative, and operational functions in order to ensure efficiency, safety, and continuity of activities. Heads of department generally maintain a certain degree of independence in managing their areas of competence, especially thanks to their specialised expertise and practical experience, decision-making processes require anyway continuous communication and coordination with other departments and management levels.

At the operational level, autonomy is mainly expressed through practical problem-solving, rapid adaptation to unforeseen situations, and the management of activities requiring technical judgement and sector-specific know-how. Particularly in port environment, where unexpected variables such as vessel delays, technical failures, or customs-related issues frequently arise, the company functions are expected to react flexibly and make immediate operational decisions within clearly defined procedures and safety frameworks. In this sense, autonomy at TRV is less associated with complete individual independence and more with professional responsibility, experience-based judgement, and the ability to operate effectively within a highly interconnected organisational system.

Internal Values: Euroports promotes a set of shared values that contribute shaping organisational culture and guiding everyday behaviour. Respect, integrity, transparency, diversity, and inclusion emerge as core principles within the group's governance framework and labour policies. These values are reflected not only in formal commitments towards human rights, equal opportunities, and decent working conditions, but also in the emphasis placed on open and respectful communication throughout the organisation. Employees are encouraged to raise concerns and report unethical behaviour through dedicated whistleblowing channels, which are available to both internal and external stakeholders and guarantee confidentiality and protection for the reporting party. In this sense, whistleblowing mechanisms can be interpreted not only as compliance tools but also as tangible expressions of the company's commitment to transparency, accountability, and ethical conduct. Collectively, these elements contribute to fostering a work environment based on trust, mutual respect, and responsible behaviour, reinforcing the organisational culture beyond formal rules and procedures (Euroports, 2024).

Safety Culture: A core value of the group and a fundamental requirement of every workplace, especially in a high-risk and complex environment such as a commercial port, safety is promoted and taught in several ways. These range from a variety of courses organised by the company, often in collaboration with major training providers, to participation in Global Safety Day, an annual initiative dedicated to promoting workplace health and safety through awareness activities, training sessions, and employee engagement. The initiative aims to strengthen a shared safety culture by encouraging everyone to reflect on risks, safe behaviours, and collective responsibility for accident prevention.

Welfare and Employee Well-being: Starting from the most critical aspect of welfare, the remuneration policy complies with national legislation, industry standards, and collective bargaining agreements. In the port sector, collective agreements play a particularly important role in influencing these policies. Salary payments are made regularly and punctually, and a fourteenth monthly salary is provided to all employees. Overtime and part-time work arrangements are permitted, while administrative staff may request to work remotely for a couple of days per week, although no formal or rigid guidelines currently regulate this practice. Naturally, this option is not available to technical and operational personnel, whose physical presence at the terminal is essential.

Operational workers follow shift schedules that guarantee rest periods from terminal activities, while the majority of white-collar employees work under standard 38 or 40-hour contracts.

TRV provides to its employees meal vouchers and adheres to the Edenred welfare platform, which enables companies to offer employees a range of flexible benefits, such as vouchers and services, through a digital system. These benefits are tax-efficient, as they are generally deductible for the company and partially exempt from taxation for employees, depending on national regulations.

Some positions benefit from additional welfare measures such as company cars, and the possibility of charging these vehicles, whether electric, at the terminal.

According to the latest internal well-being survey, employees experience relatively high levels of stress. As a result, the company has introduced stress-management courses in an effort to address the issue. Given the nature of port operations, the working environment is inherently fast-paced and characterised by numerous uncontrollable variables that are difficult to plan for or predict. Consequently, it is often challenging to intervene directly on the root causes of stress.

In addition to formal welfare measures, the company also promotes smaller social and well-being initiatives aimed at strengthening interpersonal relationships and improving the organisational climate. Some long-standing practices include the provision of water bottles and dispensers supplying fresh filtered still and sparkling water for employees, as well as the distribution of mineral supplements such as magnesium and potassium to operational personnel during the hot season, given the extended time spent working outdoors. The company also organises a dinner before the Christmas holidays accompanied by the distribution of gift hampers to employees.

More recently, the company has introduced new initiatives intended to encourage social cohesion and improve the working atmosphere, including stress- and conflict-management courses (as previously mentioned), monthly shared breakfasts among employees, and the intention to celebrate birthdays more regularly within the workplace. Although these initiatives may appear relatively informal or symbolic, they aim at reinforcing a sense of community, proximity, and employee recognition within the organisation.

III.IV Informal Marketing and Communication Practices

As previously mentioned, the TRV organisational chart does not show the existence of a marketing department, and this is precisely where the literature reviewed in the preceding chapters meets its first concrete test: if no marketing department exists, who manages internal and external communication?

External communication appears to be handled at group level through standardised corporate channels, leaving local communication structures at terminal level comparatively limited. This, however, does not imply the absence of communication and marketing practices altogether. Rather, those at terminal level are decentralised, embedded in the everyday fabric of organisational life, not a function assigned to a specific department, but a socially distributed process that emerges through interpersonal interaction and operational routines.

As highlighted by the literature reviewed in Chapter I, internal marketing scholars have suggested processes and formal practices that describe how an organisation deliberately builds internal marketing, consistently attending to a core set of organisational dimensions and framing them within planned, structured programmes designed and implemented by dedicated functions.

The following paragraphs instead examine a series of informal and largely spontaneous practices emerging from everyday organisational life at TRV. Although not intentionally designed as internal marketing initiatives, these practices nonetheless contribute to several internal marketing dimensions identified in the literature.

Local Reputation: The terminal is a recognised institution within the Venetian commercial port environment. Its local reputation serves as a guarantee of operational efficiency and accumulated know-how, functioning, in many respects, as an undesigned but effective branding asset. In the same way that a structured branding strategy builds and communicates a value proposition, local reputation performs an equivalent role organically: the historical standing of Molo B operations contributes to the overall identity and perceived reliability of the terminal, shaping how it is understood by partners, clients, and the surrounding port community without any deliberate communication effort. In a context where operational disruptions can generate significant economic consequences, a strong local reputation also reduces perceived risk for customers and business partners, reinforcing trust and long-term relationships.

Word of Mouth: The terminal and the port environment, the former being relatively circumscribed and involving a discrete number of actors, the latter being much larger, with multiple actors and interactions, are human interaction-centred systems. To a large extent, many external stakeholders gravitating around the terminal and collaborating in close contact with it (customers, suppliers, service companies, institutions, workforce providers, and workers themselves) contribute to the circulation of positive or negative opinions about TRV as both a business partner and a place to work. Through word of mouth, reputational capital is spontaneously built and reinforced. Similarly, the same process occurs among internal staff and employees. Daily work experiences constantly shape the positioning of the company in the minds of those who work there. Relationships and informal interactions, often taking place during breaks such as coffee or lunch breaks, are crucial drivers of values, reflections, and opinions. In a low-hierarchical environment such as TRV, this phenomenon may be even more pronounced.

Informal Knowledge Sharing: The operational environment of a port terminal is highly knowledge-intensive and relies heavily on the practical experience accumulated by its workforce. Beyond formal training activities, a significant portion of technical and sector-specific knowledge is exchanged through everyday interactions among colleagues. Informal conversations during operational activities, meetings, coffee breaks, or lunch breaks often become opportunities to discuss procedures, solve problems, and share experiences acquired over years of work in the port sector. Particularly in a relatively flat organisational structure such as TRV, these spontaneous exchanges facilitate the circulation of expertise across different functions and levels of seniority. In this sense, informal knowledge sharing acts as a complementary learning mechanism, contributing to the preservation and transmission of operational know-how while fostering continuous professional development. The resulting pool of shared knowledge strengthens organisational capabilities and supports the maintenance of the technical competencies upon which the terminal's operational performance and reputation are built.

Furthermore, informal knowledge sharing reinforces the accumulation of sector-specific competencies, enabling employees to develop specialised expertise that is closely embedded in the operational realities of the port industry and constitutes a valuable organisational asset that is difficult to replicate outside the sector.

Informal Communication Culture: Beyond knowledge sharing itself, everyday communication at TRV is often characterised by direct, informal, and highly practical interpersonal exchanges. Communication tends to prioritise speed, clarity, and immediate understanding over formal language structures. Employees belonging to different professional categories and levels of seniority interact continuously throughout daily activities, often relying on technical terminology, sector-specific jargon, and simplified operational language that is widely understood within the port environment.

In some cases, especially among local workers, elements of regional dialect may also emerge in informal conversations, reflecting the strong territorial and social integration of the port community. This contributes to the creation of a shared communicative culture that facilitates coordination and reinforces interpersonal relationships. At the same time, however, excessive reliance on informal communication may partially explain some of the difficulties highlighted in internal surveys regarding interdepartmental communication and the need for more structured information-sharing practices.

Employee Storytelling and Promotion: Closely linked to spontaneous communication, what employees have to tell about the company, namely how they present it and describe it to the external environment, is a crucial element of branding. In a sector where the human component is predominant, employees act as decisive touch-points, although to different degrees depending on their role and function. Different positions require interaction with a diverse range of actors. Within the port environment, employees are expected to communicate with a heterogeneous audience that includes public authorities, managers, trading company operators, highly skilled technical personnel, as well as truck drivers, ship crews, maintenance workers, machinery operators, and security guards. Communication skills must therefore be adaptable and sensitive to the specific audience being addressed in order to promote a positive brand image. In this sense, employees act as informal brand ambassadors, conveying impressions about the company through everyday interactions that often reach audiences beyond the organisation's direct communication channels.

Social/Community Presence: As anticipated in Chapter II, port terminal activities are strictly embedded within the broader port ecosystem, which is, in turn, often embedded within a larger industrial district. Living the port-industrial area of Porto Marghera and its surrounding urban fringe makes it possible to observe how the entire territory is shaped by these activities. In the early morning, roads, waterways, and bridges are filled with the flow of workers and employees, together with freight trains and the first lorries entering the port area. At lunchtime, historic, modest restaurants, as well as more recent bars and canteens, fill with the diverse port workforce: people performing different jobs and coming from different cultural backgrounds, yet sharing a common sense of belonging to the port community and contributing to its essential activities. These dynamics, as the literature suggests, are often linked to the existence of strong professional communities, including work teams, port companies, trade unions, and pools of dockworkers. Such communities contribute to the formation of a distinctive occupational culture and collective identity that extends beyond the workplace itself and becomes embedded in the wider port-city environment (Pigenet, 2012). The visibility of port activities within the surrounding territory contributes to the social embeddedness of the terminal, strengthening its recognition as a local institution and reinforcing its identity among both workers and external stakeholders.

Chapter IV - Empirical Findings

IV.I Research Design and Data Collection

The following chapter presents the results of the research conducted within the company.

In order to assess the actual degree of employee engagement, company reputation, and organisational positioning in the minds of employees, workers and collaborators, and subsequently evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of TRV's employer branding, a set of surveys was designed. The main and more extensive questionnaire focused primarily on employee engagement and was developed by drawing inspiration from the Gallup Q12 model, particularly regarding the thematic areas of basic needs, individual contribution, teamwork, and growth opportunities. Some questions from the original framework were retained, while others were added and reorganised into a more functional structure, progressing from objective aspects to experiential and perceptual dimensions, interpersonal relationships, company initiatives, and themes related to professional development. In addition to the Gallup framework, particular attention was devoted to certain topics considered especially relevant for the specific organisational context, with the aim of capturing more nuanced perceptions and opinions from respondents.

Closed questions adopted a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree). In addition, open-ended questions were included at the end of the questionnaire to allow respondents to further explain or contextualise their opinions.

The questionnaire was written in Italian, and the wording was simplified as much as possible to ensure accessibility for individuals unfamiliar with specific terminology, as well as for non-native Italian speakers working within the port environment. A deliberate decision was made to use the name "*TRV-Euroports*" consistently throughout the research instruments. This approach was adopted to encourage respondents to reflect on the organisation as a single entity and to minimise the risk of separating perceptions of the local terminal from those associated with the Euroports Group. As one of the themes emerging from preliminary observations concerned the coexistence of local and corporate identities, the use of a unified denomination aimed to avoid reinforcing this perceived duality and to ensure greater consistency in the interpretation of employer branding perceptions.

Once the thematic structure of the questionnaire had been defined, two different surveys were ultimately designed. The first and shorter version focused exclusively on the areas of Basic Conditions (role and tools), Work Experience and Engagement, Perception, and Internal Dynamics, and was distributed only to external collaborators of the company. This version was intentionally

kept concise in order to maximise response completion rates and reduce the risk of partial or randomly completed questionnaires.
The survey was distributed to workers and employees belonging to companies authorised under Article 16 of Law 84/1994, responsible for carrying out port operations and services such as loading, unloading, storage, and cargo handling activities, as well as to companies operating under Article 17, which provide temporary port labour to terminal operators when additional workforce is required. These organisations operate in close contact with TRV and its employees on a daily basis.
Although this part of the research does not directly measure the internal perception of TRV employees, it provides valuable insights into the company's external and hybrid employer image. In particular, Article 17 workers actively participate in terminal operations and spend a substantial part of their working life within the terminal environment, despite not being directly employed by TRV. Their perceptions therefore contribute to understand how the company is experienced and represented by actors situated at the boundary between internal and external organisational contexts. The involvement of these subjects enriches the research, as understanding TRV's reputation among closely connected external stakeholders may be particularly relevant for those dimensions of employer branding related to talent attraction, recruitment potential, and the reinforcement of brand equity.
A second and longer version of the survey was submitted to TRV employees, workers, and white-collar consultants, including those from external collaboration companies, as they spend most of their working day within TRV offices and participate in the company's HR initiatives. In addition to the previously mentioned sections (Basic Conditions, Work Experience and Engagement, Perception, and Internal Dynamics), this questionnaire included further sections on External Relations, Training, Safety and Company Initiatives, Informal Learning, and Personal Growth. A final set of open-ended questions explored opinions on training and company initiatives, learning and relationships, and general company perception, in order to provide a stronger qualitative basis for the subsequent interview analysis and to enhance the interpretation of the results. The extended structure of this survey also better suited the smaller number of respondents and placed greater emphasis on qualitative insights.
A demographics section was included to better map the sample of respondents and to classify them by gender, level of education, job category (blue- or white-collar), role (manager/head of department or not), and, for the longer survey, seniority within TRV and whether the respondent was a direct employee or an external consultant.
In both cases, the surveys were printed and distributed in paper format directly to respondents. This method was preferred as it allowed for immediate feedback and, in some cases, immediate completion. Moreover, not all respondents, particularly blue-collar workers, have easy access to a

company device such as a laptop or smartphone during working hours. Paper questionnaires also conveyed a greater sense of anonymity, could be distributed directly to participants, and were easy to understand and complete.

The surveys were administered and collected over a three-week period in May 2026. Quantitative responses were subsequently digitised and organised in Excel in order to analyse response trends, averages, and other descriptive statistics.

To conduct a deeper and more comprehensive analysis, the first survey phase was complemented by a series of interviews with terminal employees, during which several issues related to employer branding were explored in greater detail. Through one-to-one interviews, respondents were asked to discuss their working experience at TRV, highlight the company's critical aspects, describe communication and relationship dynamics within the workplace, and explain the reasons behind their decision to remain employed by the company.

An important employment-related topic, namely work-life balance, which had not been included in the first survey, was also investigated during this stage through a semi-structured questionnaire administered alongside the interviews. The results of this additional questionnaire were kept separate and analysed according to employee categories: white-collar employees, blue-collar workers, and the more "fluid" figures who, despite being classified as white-collar, are also directly involved in terminal operations. In line with emerging workforce classifications, these hybrid professional profiles are increasingly being referred to as "grey-collar" workers, a category that combines elements of both white- and blue-collar roles (De Riberolles, 2022).

Major response patterns and trends are presented in this chapter, while their broader implications and interpretation are discussed in Chapter V.

IV.II Sample Description

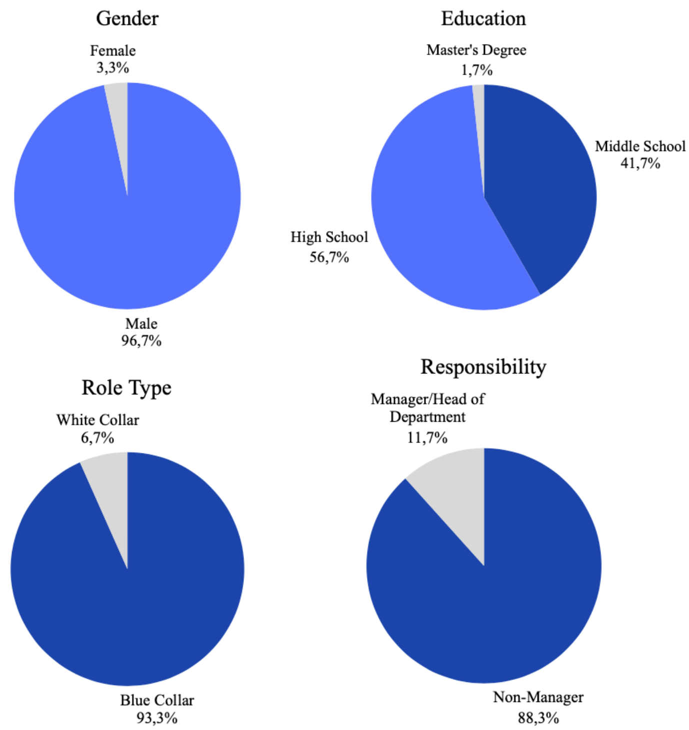
Overall, a total of 92 questionnaires were collected. Of these, 60 corresponded to the shorter questionnaire administered to external collaborators (maintenance companies and other suppliers) and Article 16/17 workers, while 32 corresponded to the extended questionnaire distributed to TRV employees, office-based collaborators, and consultants. The demographic composition and main characteristics of the two samples are presented below.

The external collaborators sample (Table 7; Figure 13) is heavily male-dominated (96.7%), reflecting the operational nature of port activities and the broader gender imbalance traditionally characterising the maritime and port industry (MacNeil & Ghosh, 2017). Most respondents are blue-collar workers directly involved in operational and logistics-related activities, while only a limited proportion occupy white-collar positions. Similarly, non-managerial roles constitute the vast

Table 7. I Survey Demographics

Demographics - External Survey		
Number of respondents		60
Gender	Male	58
	Female	2
Education	Middle school	25
	High school diploma	34
	Bachelor's degree	0
	Master's degree	1
Role Type	Blue Collar	56
	White collar	4
Responsibility	Non responsabile	53
	Responsabile	7

Figure 13. *I Survey Demographics Pie Charts*



majority of the sample, whereas only a small number of respondents hold supervisory or managerial responsibilities. With regard to educational background, respondents are primarily concentrated in middle school and high school qualifications, consistent with the technical and operational profile typically associated with port labour activities.

The internal survey sample (Table 8; Figure 14) consisted of 32 respondents, including both company employees and office-based collaborators operating within the organisation. Compared to the external collaborators sample, this group exhibited a slightly higher female representation, reflecting the more diversified composition of office-based and administrative functions relative to manual and operational port activities, which are traditionally characterised by a predominantly male workforce.

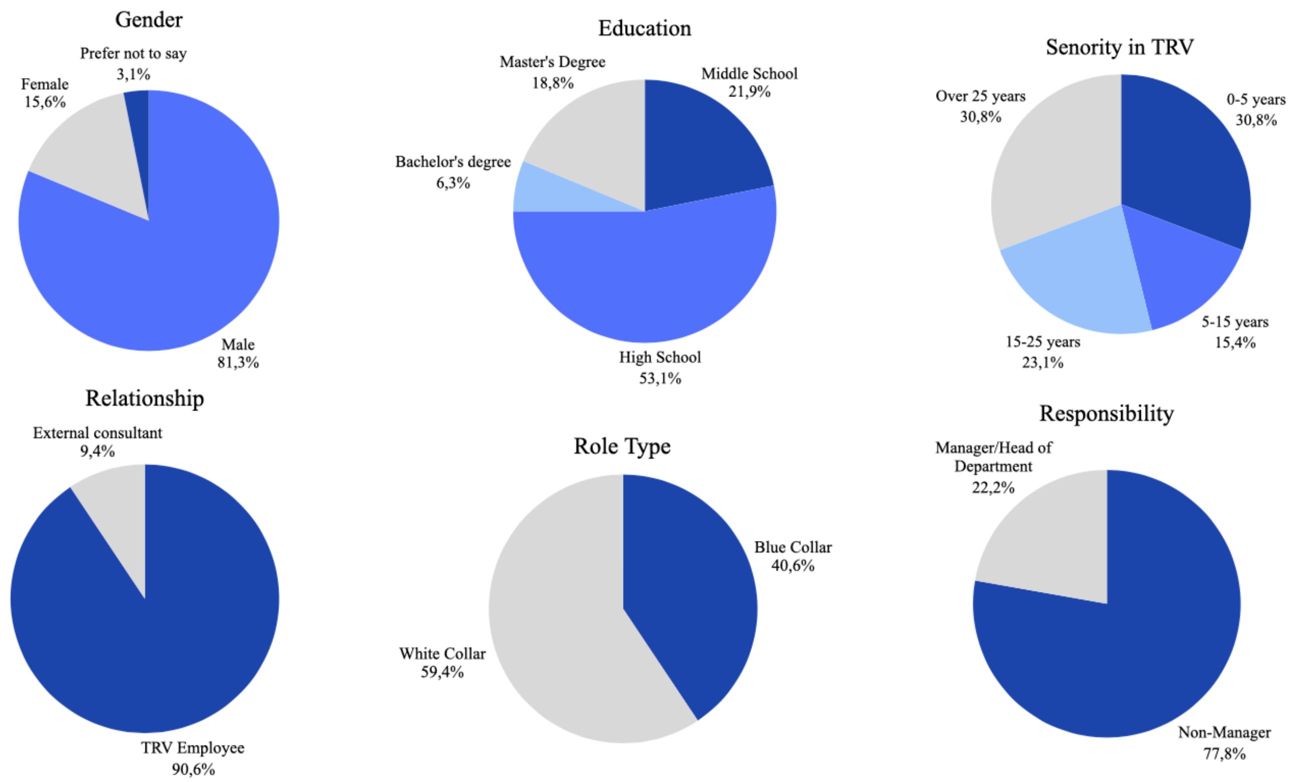
The sample presented a more diversified occupational profile, with a stronger representation of white-collar employees alongside operational personnel, highlighting the company's reliance on an on-call workforce to support its activities. Most respondents were directly employed by TRV, while a smaller proportion consisted of external collaborators and consultants who work within the company on a regular basis.

Demographics also represent individuals occupying different organisational positions, ranging from non-managerial employees to personnel with supervisory or managerial responsibilities. This diversity enabled the research to capture perceptions across multiple hierarchical levels and functional areas within the organisation. Furthermore, respondents displayed varying levels of

Table 8. II Survey Demographics

Demographics - Internal TRV Survey		
Number of respondents		60
Gender	Male	26
	Female	5
	Prefer not to say	1
Relationship	TRV Employee	29
	External consultant	3
Education	Middle school	7
	High school diploma	17
	Bachelor's degree	2
	Master's degree	6
Seniority in TRV	0–5 years	8
	5–15 years	4
	15–25 years	6
	Over 25 years	8
Role type	Blue collar	13
	White collar	19
Responsibility	Non-manager	24
	Manager	8

Figure 14. *II Survey Demographics Pie Charts*



organisational seniority, including both recently hired personnel and employees with extensive experience within the company. As a result, the sample includes individuals who have witnessed significant organisational developments, including changes in ownership and the company's subsequent growth. Such variation contributes to a broader understanding of organisational perceptions by incorporating viewpoints developed at different stages of employees' professional life.

With regard to educational attainment, the sample exhibited a relatively high level of qualification, with the majority of respondents holding at least a high school diploma and a substantial proportion possessing university-level education. Overall, the composition of the sample reflects the administrative, managerial, and operational functions represented within TRV, providing a comprehensive basis for analysing internal perceptions of organisational practices and, consequently, employer branding.

Concerning the properly qualitative part of the analysis, namely the interviews and semi-structured work-life balance questionnaires, 22 employees were involved. Specifically, the sample included 5 exclusively blue-collar workers, whose participation was more limited due to safety requirements and strict shift schedules that reduced opportunities for interaction; 9 exclusively white-collar employees; and 8 respondents occupying hybrid roles combining both office-based and operational responsibilities.

IV.III Quantitative Survey Results

Table 9 presents the descriptive results of the questionnaire items. For each statement, the average score was calculated using the weighted mean of responses on the five-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 5 indicates strong agreement.

Table 9. Weighted Mean Scores for the External Collaborators Questionnaire

Questions	AVG Score
Section 1 - Basic conditions (role and tools)	
I clearly understand what is expected of me in my role.	4,183
I have the tools and resources necessary to perform my job effectively (please answer only if these are provided by TRV-Euroports).	3,925
My role makes a meaningful contribution to TRV-Euroports' activities.	4,083
I receive adequate support from TRV-Euroports managers/supervisors.	4,083
Section 2 - Work Experience and Engagement	
I receive positive feedback from TRV-Euroports managers/supervisors when I perform my job well.	3,517
I feel motivated in my daily activities at TRV-Euroports.	3,661

I would recommend TRV-Euroports as a good place to work.	3,850
Section 3 - Perceptions	
TRV-Euroports has a clear identity as an employer (e.g., it is recognised within the port and terminal sector).	4,083
The values promoted by TRV-Euroports are reflected in everyday work (safety, performance, respect for people, integrity, and teamwork).	3,917
TRV-Euroports is attractive to potential new employees.	3,683
Working for TRV-Euroports provides both professional and personal value.	3,783
Section 4 - Internal Dynamics	
The positive aspects of TRV-Euroports are communicated primarily through informal channels (e.g., word of mouth among colleagues).	3,833
Relationships with TRV-Euroports staff influence my opinion about the company	3,617
TRV staff concretely represent the company's values (safety, performance, respect for people, integrity and teamwork)	3,900

Overall, respondents expressed moderately positive to more positive perceptions across all dimensions investigated. Average scores generally fall within the upper range of the five-point Likert scale, suggesting a favourable evaluation of both the relationship with TRV-Euroports and the company's organisational environment.

Particularly high scores emerged in relation to the clarity of expectations regarding respondents' roles, indicating that external collaborators have a clear understanding of what is required of them by the company. Similarly, within the same section, respondents reported feeling that their contribution is important to TRV-Euroports and that they receive adequate support from company personnel. These findings suggest a strong alignment between operational collaborators and the company's activities and values. A relatively high score was also recorded for the perception of TRV-Euroports as a recognisable and well-defined employer within the port sector.

By contrast, comparatively lower scores were recorded for the item concerning positive feedback for work well performed. Although this aspect is closely related to the perception of support, the results suggest a distinction between receiving operational assistance and receiving explicit recognition for one's contribution. Consequently, the motivation indicator also recorded a relatively lower score. While these results remain above the neutral midpoint of the scale, they may indicate areas where respondents perceive greater room for improvement.

This consideration becomes particularly relevant in light of the scores associated with recommending TRV-Euroports as a good place to work, its attractiveness to potential employees, and the value associated with working for the company. As these dimensions are closely connected to employer branding, they warrant further attention and are discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

Table 10. Weighted Mean Scores for the Internal Employees Questionnaire

Questions	AVG score
Section 1 - Basic conditions (role and tools)	
I clearly understand what is expected of me in my role.	4,156
I have the tools and resources necessary to perform my job effectively.	3,656
My role makes a meaningful contribution to TRV-Euroports' activities.	4,188
I receive adequate support from my supervisor.	3,906
Section 2 - Work Experience and Engagement	
I feel valued for the work I do.	3,379
I receive positive feedback when I perform my job well.	3,313
I feel motivated in my daily work activities.	3,219
I am proud to work for this company (TRV-Euroports).	3,813
I would recommend this company as a good place to work.	3,781
I consider my remuneration to be appropriate for the role I perform.	3,107
I am satisfied with my remuneration.	3,107
Section 3 - Perceptions	
The company has a clear identity as an employer (e.g. it is recognised within the port and terminal sector).	4,200
The values promoted by the company are reflected in everyday work (safety, performance, respect for people, integrity, and teamwork).	3,719
What the company promises its employees corresponds to what is actually experienced in practice.	3,688
The company is attractive to potential new employees.	3,833
Working for this company provides both professional and personal value.	3,700
Section 4 - Internal Dynamics	
The positive aspects of the company are communicated primarily through informal channels (e.g. word of mouth among colleagues).	3,344
Relationships with colleagues influence my perception of the company.	3,719
Managers and colleagues embody the company's values in practice.	3,375
The company's reputation is built more through actions than through official communication.	3,793
Section 5 - B2B Context and External Relationships	
The quality of relationships with clients and partners reflects the company's values.	3,828
Employees' behaviour influences how clients and partners perceive the company.	4,345
I feel responsible for representing the company externally.	4,172
Section 6 - Training, Safety, and Company Initiatives	
The company provides adequate training on workplace health and safety.	4,621

I feel sufficiently prepared to deal with operational or safety-related situations connected to my job.	4,276
The company invests in employees' professional development (e.g. technical training, language training, professional updates).	4,250
I consider the training opportunities provided to be beneficial for my professional development.	3,931
The company promotes activities or initiatives aimed at fostering collaboration and a positive working environment (e.g. team-building activities, events, company gatherings).	3,893
I appreciate the initiatives organised by the company to improve relationships among colleagues and the workplace atmosphere.	3,857
The activities organised by the company contribute to strengthening employees' sense of belonging to the organisation.	3,679
Section 7 - Informal Learning and Personal Development	
Daily relationships help me grow professionally.	3,800
There is a culture of knowledge and experience sharing within the company.	3,321
I feel professionally enriched by the people I work with.	3,786
My daily work activities enable me to acquire new skills, including through informal learning.	4,069
My experience at TRV-Euroports has contributed to my personal growth.	4,034
Colleagues are willing to help and share practical knowledge.	3,714
I have learned important aspects of my job primarily through direct on-the-job experience.	4,333
The relationships I have built within the company represent an important value to me.	4,100

This version of the survey is considerably more extensive than the previous questionnaire. While some questions were retained from the external collaborators survey, additional items were introduced to explore dimensions that can only be assessed by individuals directly involved in the organisation. In particular, Sections 5-7 focus on situations, relationships, and initiatives experienced by employees on a daily basis and aim to evaluate both company perception and appreciation of organisational activities.

As with the previous survey, responses generally display a medium-to-high positive trend. Strongly negative evaluations (scores of 1 or 2) were almost absent across the majority of items and appeared only in relation to specific questions that consequently recorded lower weighted average scores.

Among the lowest-rated items there is satisfaction with remuneration. Although this result may appear critical at first glance, it is not uncommon in employee surveys, as satisfaction with compensation is influenced not only by actual pay levels but also by perceptions of fairness, recognition, expectations, and reward systems (Ducharme et al., 2005; Judge et al., 2010). Similarly, perceptions regarding the feedback received for work well performed, motivation in daily activities, and feelings of being valued within the organisation also recorded relatively lower scores.

These findings are consistent with the results of the external collaborators survey and suggest that there is considerable room for improvement in the areas of recognition, engagement, and employee appreciation.

Scores of approximately 3.35 were recorded for items concerning positive word of mouth sharing about the company and the extent to which managers are perceived as representatives of organisational values. These results may suggest that, although employees generally recognise the company's values and organisational identity, there is a weaker perception of their active dissemination through informal communication channels and managerial behaviour.

Within the latter sections of the questionnaire, the only comparatively low score concerns the perception of a culture of knowledge and experience sharing within the company. This finding is particularly interesting, as the topic emerged repeatedly during the interviews and generated contrasting views among participants. While some respondents described knowledge sharing as a strong feature of the organisational environment, others perceived it less positively. This aspect is therefore explored further in the qualitative analysis.

With regard to the highest-rated dimensions, role clarity and the perceived importance of employees' contributions to the organisation received particularly positive evaluations, mirroring the results obtained from the external collaborators survey. Likewise, respondents generally agreed that TRV-Euroports possesses a clear identity as an employer and is recognised within the port and terminal sector. A high level of awareness also emerged regarding employees' responsibility in representing the company during interactions with customers, suppliers, and external partners, suggesting a strong understanding of their role as ambassadors of the organisation.

The most positive results were recorded for workplace health and safety training. This finding indicates that the company's commitment to safety is not only formally communicated but is also perceived by employees as effectively implemented in practice. More broadly, all items relating to training, preparation, and professional development achieved favourable evaluations. In addition, respondents expressed strong agreement with statements concerning learning through daily experience, suggesting that TRV-Euroports is perceived as an environment that supports both professional growth and the acquisition of practical knowledge through work activities.

Overall, while the survey highlights some clearly positive and some comparatively weaker dimensions, a substantial number of items recorded scores between approximately 3.6 and 3.9. These results cannot be interpreted as either strongly positive or negative and therefore occupy a more ambiguous position. Rather than indicating a clear judgement, they suggest perceptions that are generally favourable but not unequivocal. For this reason, the quantitative findings alone are insufficient to fully understand the underlying reasons behind respondents' evaluations. The qualitative analysis therefore becomes particularly important, as it provides the contextual information necessary to interpret these intermediate scores and to better understand how employees experience organisational practices, relationships, and employer branding dynamics in their daily work environment.

IV.IV Qualitative Findings

IV.IV.I Open-Ended Questions

The only open-ended question included in the external questionnaire was: *"What reputation do you think TRV-Euroports has?"*. Respondents had the opportunity to answer either briefly or in detail.
Among those who answered, 7 respondents expressed a critical view of TRV, suggesting there is room for improvement within the organisation and indicating a moderate level of satisfaction. A further 18 respondents described the company as generally good, while 16 rated its reputation as very good or excellent. These respondents considered the terminal to be a serious and reliable company, attentive to industry regulations and professional relationships. They described TRV-Euroports as a stable and well-established organisation, a trustworthy business partner, a guarantee of quality, and a company supported by good infrastructure and qualified personnel.
Therefore, it can be concluded that more than 80% of the external stakeholders who answered the question hold a positive perception of TRV-Euroports' reputation.
The longer and more detailed open-ended questions included in the internal questionnaire were analysed by topic, reporting the most relevant response patterns and enriching the interpretation through evidence gathered from the interviews.

Training and Company Initiatives

- *Which company initiatives have you appreciated the most?*
- *Are there any activities or initiatives you would like to see introduced or improved?*
- *Do you believe the training you have received is adequate for the requirements of your job? Why?*

Regarding the first question, a wide variety of responses was observed. The most frequently appreciated initiative appears to be the General Meeting, a quarterly event during which all employees gather and each function provides an update on departmental activities and the objectives achieved. Other recurring positive initiatives include team-building activities, English language courses, the monthly organised breakfast, company dinners, and safety-related training and events such as Global Safety Day. Some respondents also appreciated courses on conflict and stress management, as well as specialised training initiatives such as cybersecurity programmes. A few respondents highlighted the value of field training and opportunities to visit other Euroports terminals to learn from different operational contexts.

Similarly, responses to the second question revealed a variety of perspectives and suggestions. Apart from those who did not identify any areas for improvement, recurring recommendations included the implementation of more function-specific training programmes, the definition and communication of a clearer strategy for future company development and asset renewal, and stronger communication, coordination, and team-building activities across departments, including sports-related initiatives. Respondents also suggested increasing awareness among external stakeholders regarding production processes. Some participants highlighted the need to strengthen volunteering initiatives connected to ESG objectives and to further develop conflict management training. One respondent specifically suggested introducing training related to artificial intelligence, while another proposed initiatives aimed at improving digital literacy.

Several of these suggestions are reflected in the responses to the third question. Training is generally perceived as adequate, particularly in the field of health and safety, although some respondents indicated that additional role-specific training opportunities could be beneficial. In some functions, employees independently seek specialised training opportunities despite company support. Furthermore, digitalisation and IT-related component of training was identified as an area with potential for improvement. Nevertheless, overall satisfaction with training remains high.

Learning and Relationships

- *Is there a person, situation, or work experience that has contributed particularly to your professional growth?*
- *Which aspects of working at TRV-Euroports have enriched you the most, either professionally or personally?*
- *Do you believe that some skills are learned more through daily experience than through formal training? In what way?*
- *What is the last thing you learned at TRV?*

Responses in this section were particularly rich and diverse. Daily work experience emerged as the most significant source of learning. In some cases, supervisors and colleagues played a crucial role in professional development, while for others the broader work experience, including relationships with suppliers, partners, and trade unions, was considered more influential. Among the most appreciated dimensions were opportunities for exchange within a multinational environment, interactions with colleagues from other countries within the group, and exposure to different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Intergenerational collaboration and teamwork were also frequently mentioned as valuable learning opportunities. Respondents identified transparency and commitment as inspiring organisational practices and noted that the company supports employee ideas aimed at improving organisational performance, in some cases leading to the development of employee-generated patents.

According to respondents, learning is largely embedded in daily work experience. Depending on the nature of the role, knowledge acquisition occurs through interactions with colleagues, practical problem-solving, or individual skill development. Almost all respondents agreed that learning is primarily a natural and continuous process rather than a structured one. Working at TRV-Euroports requires employees to learn through everyday operations, unexpected situations, and interpersonal dynamics. Observing how colleagues manage complex or stressful situations was also considered an effective way of developing professional awareness and understanding how to contribute to the organisation's success.

General Perception of the Company

- *What reputation do you believe TRV-Euroports has?*
- *In your opinion, what makes this company a good place to work?*
- *What makes you remain at TRV-Euroports rather than seeking employment elsewhere (whether in a similar or a different organisation)?*
- *If you had to describe this company to a friend or acquaintance, what would you say?*

Similarly to the external collaborators questionnaire, the overall perception of TRV-Euroports' reputation is predominantly positive. Among the respondents, only a limited number described the company's reputation as average rather than clearly positive. Safety culture, the company's multinational dimension and consequent perception as a stable organisation, and the prestige associated with the terminal emerged as the principal factors contributing to its reputation as a desirable workplace. Additional elements frequently mentioned include organisational values, relationships with colleagues, and welfare initiatives.

Interestingly, and somewhat in contrast with the results of the closed-ended survey questions, remuneration emerged as one of the most frequently cited reasons for remaining with the company. Salary and economic stability were repeatedly identified as important retention factors. This finding suggests that the qualitative responses provide a more nuanced interpretation of the quantitative results, highlighting how compensation may be evaluated differently when discussed in a broader context rather than through a single survey item. Seniority, a dynamic and challenging work environment, career development opportunities across different fields, and the possibility of professional growth were also identified as important reasons for remaining within the organisation.

Despite the overall positive perception of the company across these broad areas, some critical aspects emerged from both the written responses and the interviews. The main concerns identified include:

- A lack of structured coordination and communication among the various terminal functions, limiting opportunities to share problems, perspectives, and potential solutions.

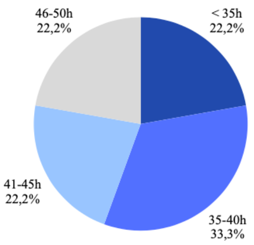
- The need for a clearer hierarchical structure, with more clearly defined responsibilities, decision-making processes, and accountable figures.
- The development of a more clearly defined strategic plan aimed at standardising procedures and establishing a consistent framework for relationships with clients. In some cases, uncertainty regarding future directions is perceived as a source of stress.
- The perception of being a "*family-run multinational*", where some initiatives are viewed as more symbolic than substantive. In particular, certain respondents felt that activities related to ESG objectives appeared to be more of a façade than a genuine effort by the Euroports Group to improve daily working conditions, employee well-being, and sustainability practices. This perception also reflects the persistence of a degree of duality between the local and corporate identities.
- A perceived lack of investment in the development of younger and future employees. Several respondents suggested that the company should offer more opportunities for students and early-career individuals, facilitating talent attraction and long-term workforce development.

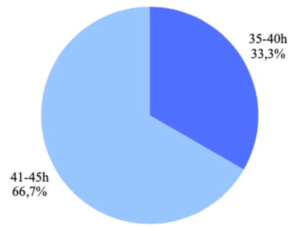
IV.IV.II Work-life Balance

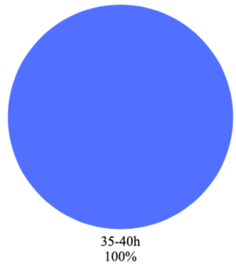
In this section, the results of the semi-structured interviews on work-life balance are presented. To better illustrate the main response trends, the findings are organised according to the interview structure used during the brief interviews and are discussed subsequently. Responses and opinions were collected and analysed separately by interviewing homogeneous groups of employees with different role types, namely white-collar, hybrid (grey-collar), and blue-collar workers.

Table 11. Work-Life Balance Questionnaire Results by Employee Category

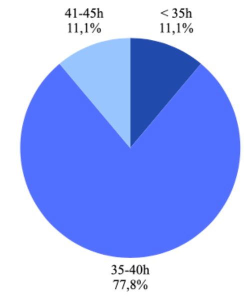
The three columns present the results for white-collar employees, employees occupying hybrid operational-administrative roles and blue-collar employees.		
1. Which of the following categories best describes your role?		
White Collar (clerical/ managerial)	Grey Collar (technical/ specialist)	Blue-collar (operational)
2. On average, how many hours do you work per week?		

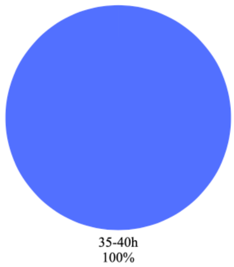


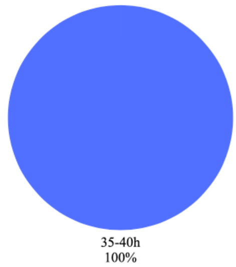




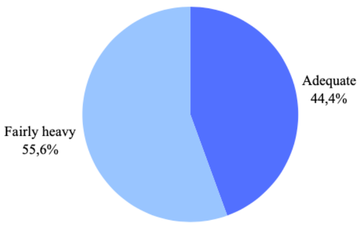
3. How many working hours per week are specified in your employment contract?

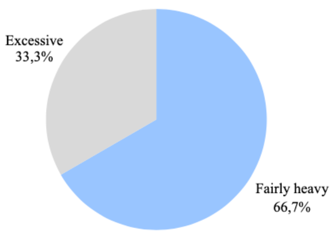


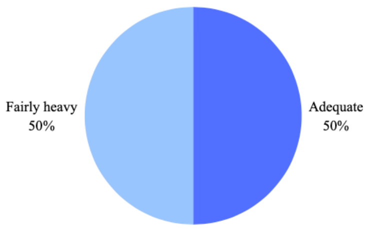




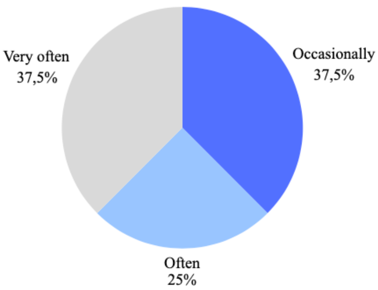
4. How would you describe your workload?

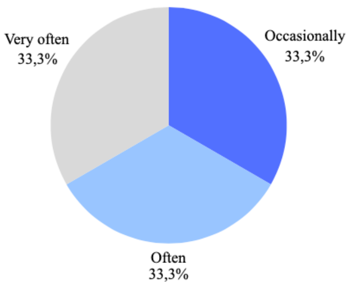


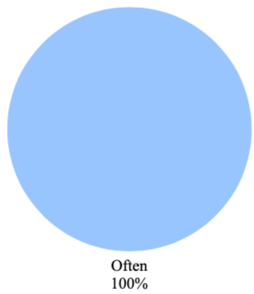




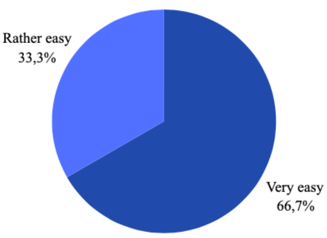
5. How often do you work overtime?

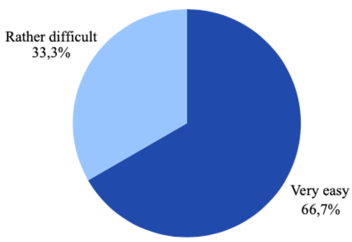


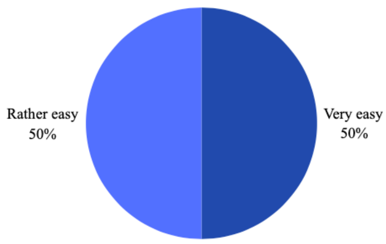




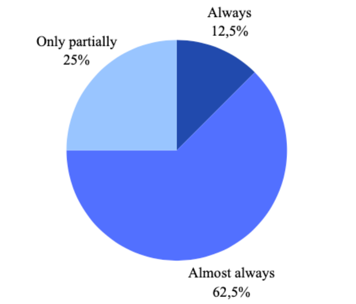
6. How easy is it for you to obtain days or time off when needed?

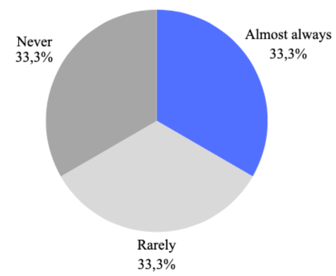


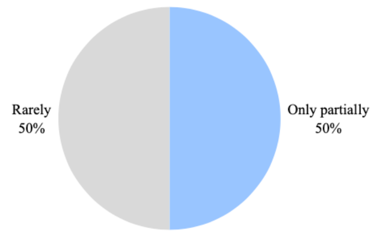




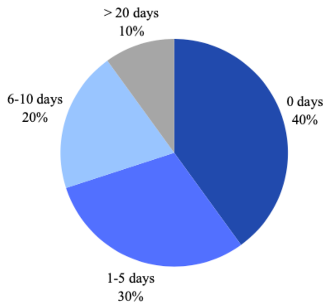
7. Are you normally able to use all of your annual leave entitlement?

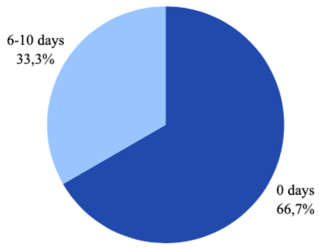


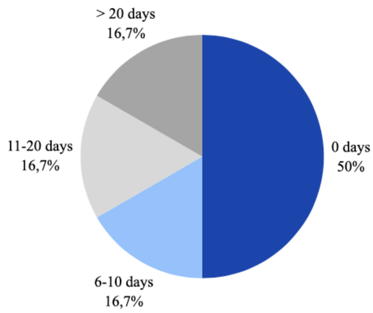




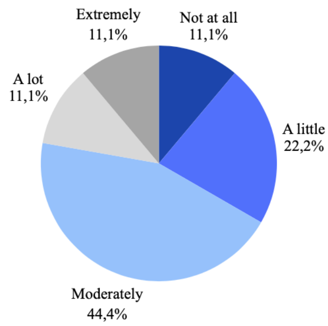
8. In the last 12 months, how many days of sick leave have you taken?

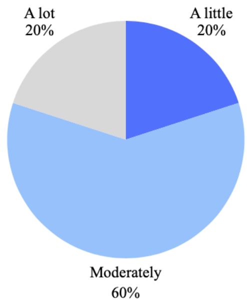


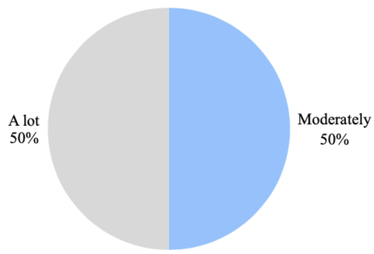




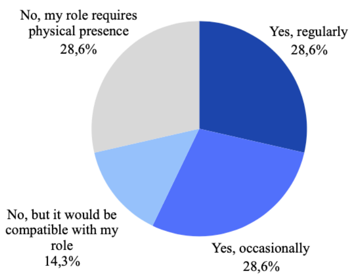
9. How stressed do you feel because of your work?

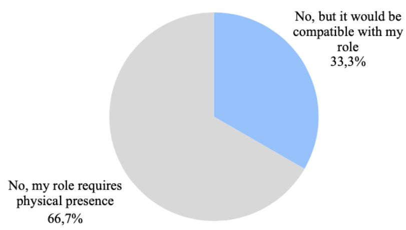


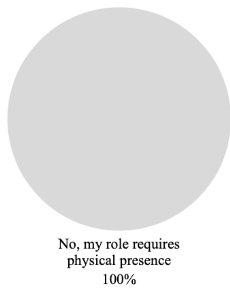




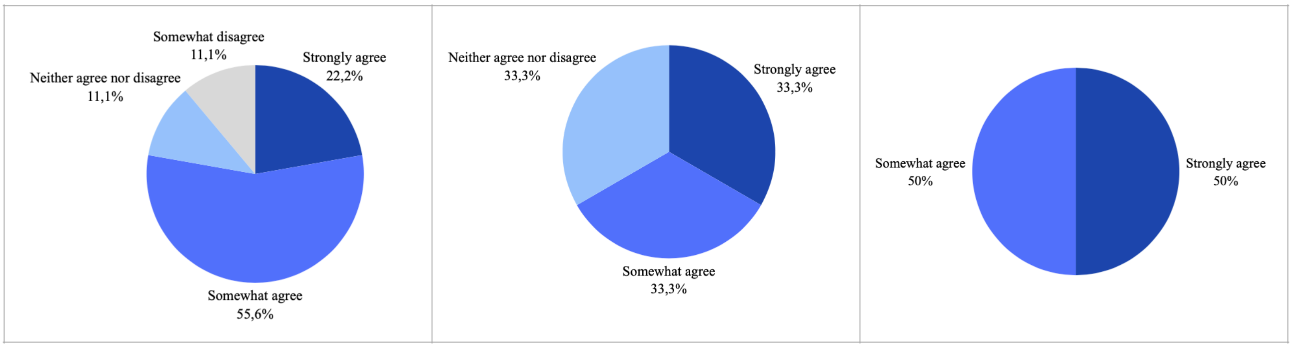
10. Do you have the possibility to work remotely (smart working)?







11. Overall, do you believe your job allows you to maintain a good work-life balance?



At first glance, the pie charts reveal notable differences in the distribution of responses across the three employee groups. This suggests that white-collar, grey-collar, and blue-collar positions are characterised by substantially different working conditions and job characteristics, which in turn influence employees' perceptions of work–life balance.

The first aspect that can be noticed is the discrepancy between the hours specified in the employment contract and the hours actually worked. This difference is usually due to the need to complete pending tasks and is particularly evident among white-collar and grey-collar employees. However, the amount of overtime worked appears to be relatively consistent and frequent across all employee categories.

The workload seems to affect grey-collar employees the most. On the other hand, requesting annual leave or time off appears to be relatively easy for all groups, especially for white-collar and blue-collar employees. Nevertheless, using the full annual leave entitlement seems unlikely for the majority of grey-collar and blue-collar workers.

The number of sick-leave days shows some interesting differences among the groups. Grey-collar employees report the lowest number of days absent due to health issues. Blue-collar employees present a mixed picture: more than half of them report very low levels of absence, while the others report a higher number of sick-leave days, mainly due to medical surgeries or conditions that required extended recovery periods. White-collar employees show more varied results; however, except for cases involving serious personal health conditions, the average number of sick-leave days generally does not exceed one week.

Perceptions of stress among white-collar employees are also highly varied, covering almost the entire range of possible responses. This appears to depend largely on the specific role performed, a situation that is similar among grey-collar employees. For blue-collar employees, stress could originate from different factors. Their operational roles require significant physical involvement in cargo loading and unloading activities, exposure to weather conditions, handling powders and bulk materials, and operating machinery.

Remote working is, unsurprisingly, not available for blue-collar employees. Among grey-collar workers, opinions are more divided. Some of these employees could perform part of their duties remotely; however, a sense of responsibility and the greater ease of supervising operations and business activities in person are often preferred. A similar situation can be observed among white-collar employees, whose roles would generally allow for a higher degree of remote work. Nevertheless, direct human interaction and physical presence are frequently preferred over remote communication.

Overall, despite some critical aspects and a small percentage of less positive responses, employees generally appear to be satisfied with the work-life balance offered by TRV-Euroports.

The following are the most salient observations:

"Grey-collar" employees appear to be the most critical group. They report the heaviest workloads, show difficulties in fully using their annual leave entitlement, and experience relatively high stress levels. This could indicate that these outcomes are related to their hybrid function and the need to oversee both the administrative and operational aspects of their department.

Blue-collar employees present an apparent paradox. They cannot work remotely and perform physically demanding tasks. Nevertheless, they report relatively positive perceptions of work–life balance. This may suggest that clearer schedules, defined shifts, and the absence of after-hours responsibilities contribute positively to their work-life balance.

Stress appears to be role-dependent and contingent on seasonal peaks or specific operational events, rather than category-dependent. Especially among white-collar employees, responses are highly dispersed. This suggests that individual responsibilities and specific positions may influence stress levels more than broad occupational categories. Within this category, in fact, administrative, HR, finance, commercial, IT, operative office and port-side pre-unloading coordination functions are all included.

During the interviews, it emerged that the main source of stress arises when workloads accumulate simultaneously, suggesting that, in some cases, additional personnel may be required to distribute tasks more effectively. However, this tends to be a temporary feeling and can alternatively stem from unexpected problems during a vessel's unloading phase, contractual issues, or equipment breakdowns. In such situations, administrative, finance, asset management, and the relevant blue-collar personnel must immediately intervene to assess the nature of the problem and ensure that a supplier or maintenance company is contracted as quickly as possible to resolve the issue within budget and in sufficient time to unload the cargo as agreed. By contrast, periods characterised by relatively low traffic levels are generally perceived as very calm.

Perceived work-life balance remains positive despite overtime. Employees often work beyond their contractual hours, yet most still agree or strongly agree that they maintain a good work-life balance.

When overtime is not performed by a head of department, it is paid and carried out on a voluntary basis, which may increase the satisfaction of employees who wish to work additional hours and earn extra income. Overall, for employees who perform unpaid overtime, this appears to be mainly driven by a sense of responsibility and commitment. Surprisingly, it does not seem to negatively affect their perception of the company. This suggests that factors such as autonomy, flexibility, organisational culture, and the ease of taking leave may mitigate the negative effects of overtime.

Chapter V - Discussion and Analysis

V.I Introduction to Discussion

As considered in Chapter III, the organisational context of the study is characterised by specific features deriving both from the top-down coordination of the Euroports Group and from a locally embedded, bottom-up organisational culture. Within TRV, these two dimensions coexist and interact on a daily basis, shaping organisational practices, relationships, and employee experiences, although not always without tensions or contrasting perspectives.

Chapter IV subsequently presented the findings of the empirical research, which aimed to investigate employees' perceptions of the organisation as a whole, considering both the local reality of TRV and its integration within the broader Euroports Group. While the previous chapter focused on reporting and describing the evidence collected through surveys and interviews, the present chapter moves beyond description and seeks to interpret these findings.

The objective of this discussion is to connect the observed organisational dynamics and employees perceptions with the concepts of employer branding, employee engagement, and internal branding explored in the literature. In doing so, the chapter aims to answer the research question and assess whether positive employer branding outcomes can emerge in a complex B2B port environment characterised by limited formal employer-branding structures.

As is typical of case study research, the purpose is not to establish universally generalisable conclusions, but rather to develop a contextualised understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and to generate insights that may contribute to both theory and practice.

Based on the literature review, employer branding research is predominantly conducted in large organisations and often assumes the presence of formal HR and branding structures. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to these dynamics in more operational environments, such as commercial ports and B2B organisations, where the literature tends to focus more on economic, financial, and operational performance than on employee engagement and organisational perceptions. The limited attention given to informal employer-branding mechanisms, together with the lack of in-depth research on employer branding within the commercial port environment, provides the foundation for the present study.

Accordingly, the discussion focuses on examining the extent to which employer branding can emerge in a commercial port terminal characterised by limited formal employer-branding structures, as well as identifying the organisational factors that may contribute to its development.

V.II Employer Branding Without Formal Structures: Drivers and Evidence from TRV

Looking back at the literature reviewed in Chapter I, once the analysis of TRV-Euroports has been conducted, it is possible to observe how theoretical concepts translate into organisational reality.

Starting with the issue of alignment, it can be argued that the Euroports Group has certainly made efforts to create consistency and alignment across its terminal network. However, at the local level, additional measures may be required to strengthen this process. Interviews with employees revealed that, to a certain extent, the sense of belonging to the company is strong and that Euroports is perceived as a solid and reputable organisation. At the same time, the Group is often viewed as a distant reality, both physically and organisationally.

Employees tend to identify more strongly with TRV, namely the local terminal in which they operate on a daily basis. This dynamic highlights the presence of a well-established business organisation whose operational legitimacy is rarely questioned, while its brand identity and behavioural influence appear less clearly defined at the local level.

Consistent with the literature, it is therefore possible to affirm that a top-down approach aimed at shaping internal branding exists within Euroports. However, the findings raise the question of whether these efforts are, at times, insufficient to fully penetrate the local organisational context, or whether they encounter other forces throughout the communication process. These forces, embedded in local culture, interpersonal relationships, and everyday work practices, may interact with corporate branding efforts and contribute to the emergence of a distinct organisational identity.

The marketing function, both at group and terminal level, appears to be relatively weak or largely absent. In the following sections, several actions aimed at improving the current situation will be proposed. On the other hand, HR functions, both at group and local level, appear to have become increasingly involved in recent years in organising initiatives aimed at enhancing employee engagement, well-being, team building, and organisational cohesion.

Employees' opinions regarding these initiatives are somewhat divided. Some activities are viewed very positively and generate enthusiasm, while others are perceived more critically. Certain respondents considered these initiatives as attempts to compensate for unresolved organisational issues, particularly shortcomings in communication and budget constraints which, for example, may limit the company's ability to recruit additional personnel, reduce workloads, undertake significant investments in infrastructure and asset modernisation, or implement major structural changes.

With regard to the B2B environment, TRV largely reflects the characteristics described in the literature and, in some respects, appears to represent an even more pronounced example of them. The human component plays a central role, and interactions with customers, suppliers, and partners are distributed across multiple organisational actors. Consequently, coordination becomes a critical success factor, as organisational performance depends heavily on the ability of different individuals and departments to act consistently and effectively.

Despite the presence of some critical issues, several indicators suggest the existence of a positive employer brand. From an external perspective, survey results indicate that TRV enjoys a generally good or excellent reputation within the port sector. At the same time, the company remains relatively unknown outside its industrial and territorial context. Unless individuals are already familiar with the port and industrial district environment, opportunities to become aware of the company are limited, partly because TRV's online presence and external communication activities remain relatively modest.

Employee turnover is very low, with more than half of the workforce reporting a seniority of over ten or fifteen years. While this phenomenon may be partially explained by characteristics of the Italian labour market, where employment stability is often highly valued, interview findings suggest that retention cannot be attributed solely to this factor. Employees with shorter tenure also expressed a willingness to remain within the organisation and pursue their professional development at TRV.

Survey results further show that employees believe their behaviour influences how the company is perceived and that they feel a certain responsibility in representing the organisation outside the workplace. This awareness may translate into forms of organic advocacy and positive brand ambassadorship. Furthermore, despite the existence of areas requiring improvement, the overall perception of the company remains largely positive.

Taken together, these elements suggest the presence of a positive employer brand, despite the absence of clearly articulated employer-branding strategies or formal employer value proposition statements. If these outcomes have been achieved under the current conditions, it becomes legitimate to consider how much stronger the employer brand could become if some of the existing organisational limitations were effectively addressed.

Having established the presence of employer-branding outcomes within TRV, it becomes necessary to examine the organisational factors that contribute to their emergence. The following sections therefore analyse the main dimensions of employee experience that appear to sustain and reinforce these outcomes.

V.II.I Specialisation and Continuous Learning as Sources of Organisational Attachment

This first highlighted dimension refers to how, at TRV, specialised professionals are shaped. Joining the terminal allows employees to continuously learn, acquire rare know-how, and become experts. This creates personal growth, professional identity, and consequently organisational attachment. The more employees learn through structured training, and to a greater extent through daily experience, the more specialised and valuable they become, but also the more connected they feel to the organisation where that expertise was developed. This, on one hand, reinforces retention since it would be a waste to start from the beginning in another type of company (and very similar competitors are just a few in the area), and on the other hand allows the company to boast very skilled staff.

This is especially true for those employees who started at TRV in low-responsibility or operational roles (e.g., crane and loader operators, warehouse workers) and, over the years, improved their position by acquiring more responsibility, for example by moving across functions and thus getting to know the business very well, eventually reaching supervisory or head of department roles. For companies of this type, these kinds of resources are more valuable than individuals with perhaps higher educational qualifications but lacking practical expertise and organic knowledge of port systems. This continuous learning environment contributes to an informal employer brand identity of TRV as a "learning organisation" or "place to build expertise from within." Since the skills and knowledge acquired are not easily transferable, organisational attachment and switching costs increase, and the company tends to develop a strong stock of firm-specific human capital. Firm-specific human capital enhances employees' productivity within the organisation while having limited value outside it, creating a relationship of mutual dependence between the worker and the firm and reinforcing long-term retention (Lazear, 2009).

V.II.II Cross-Functional Collaboration as a Driver of Engagement

Despite the fact that, for certain aspects, the way it is conducted does not satisfy everyone, communication and cross-functional collaboration are vital for the terminal, especially among white-collar employees. In deeply interconnected offices such as TRV, nobody can work alone: a planner needs operations, operations need administration, commercial needs planning, everybody needs QHSE, and HR manages them all. Since understanding what the other functions do is fundamental, learning becomes unavoidable. Employees therefore acquire knowledge of what others do, how value is created, and how they contribute to the business. This process creates awareness, teamwork, and engagement, in line with Gallup's central dimensions of "individual contribution" and "teamwork".

At TRV, an individual's job does not finish with simply carrying out their own function but extends to a broader understanding of everyone's role, contribution, and challenges. Administration, finance, or commercial staff have a strong understanding not only of what agreeing a deal on a cargo loading operation means, but also of what unloading it entails, the bureaucratic procedures involved, and the possible sudden issues that may arise. Employees learn not only their own tasks but also gain exposure to other operational processes. They are more likely to perceive the significance of their role when they understand how it contributes to the wider operational system, a result confirmed by the positive feedback to statements such as "My role makes a meaningful contribution to TRV-Euroports' activities." This strengthens engagement because individuals can identify the impact of their work on collective outcomes.

Continuous interaction fosters cooperation and a shared understanding of organisational objectives, reinforcing a collective rather than individualistic culture. There are no free-riders. At first sight, survey results may not clearly reveal this tacit and informal knowledge-sharing process. However, interviews and personal stories shared by employees revealed that, although not always explicit, colleagues voluntarily exchange information and knowledge. This process occurs more or less intentionally, driven by the implicit willingness to keep up with the business. Employees frequently ask each other questions, move among offices, and talk about their work during lunch breaks, thus communicating spontaneously.

Further confirmation of this existing dimension is that one of the most appreciated company initiatives is the General Meeting, the recently introduced quarterly meeting through which every function provides updates to and receives updates from the rest of the organisation. The positive reception of this initiative suggests that employees value opportunities to gain a broader understanding of the business beyond their immediate responsibilities. Rather than focusing exclusively on their own tasks, employees appear interested in knowing what other departments are doing, understanding current organisational developments, and maintaining visibility over the terminal's overall performance.

V.II.III Informal Leadership and Low Power Distance

Another important difference between Euroports and TRV that emerges from the analysis concerns the overall organisational structure and the way hierarchical relationships are experienced by employees. As previously discussed, Euroports presents a more vertical governance structure. By contrast, TRV is characterised by a relatively flat organisational chart, consisting of a terminal manager and multiple divisions with their respective managers or heads of department directly below. This structural difference has important implications for daily interactions and contributes to shaping employees' perceptions of the work environment.

Employees therefore have direct access to their supervisors, reducing communication barriers and facilitating the rapid resolution of operational issues. The absence of excessive hierarchical layers encourages open dialogue and information sharing. Employees may feel more comfortable raising concerns, asking questions, or proposing improvements. When leaders are visible and approachable, employees often interpret this as evidence that the organisation values their contribution and well-being, despite survey results showing that perceptions regarding disclosure and encouragement still have room for improvement. This low-hierarchy environment also appears to facilitate practical day-to-day coordination, for example in requesting leave or days off, as employees can more easily communicate and coordinate with colleagues to ensure operational coverage and workload continuity.

Regular interaction with management can foster trust and create an environment where employees feel safe expressing opinions and reporting mistakes without fear of disproportionate negative consequences. In operational environments such as port terminals, low hierarchy can improve responsiveness because information travels quickly and decisions can be made without lengthy bureaucratic processes. This openness may also have some drawbacks, as the constant flow of people and ease of access can occasionally create a more chaotic environment. Nevertheless, the daily presence of both local and foreign managers, alongside members of the operational workforce, fosters a highly informal atmosphere in which individuals feel welcomed and comfortable interacting with one another regardless of their role.

A particularly interesting point regarding TRV is that these leadership characteristics are not formally designed as employer branding practices, yet they shape how employees experience and navigate their daily work. While it is not entirely clear whether employees perceive this not hierarchical environment as uniformly positive, it nevertheless appears to influence positively behaviours, interactions, and the overall way in which work is carried out. This is precisely what makes them drivers of informal employer branding rather than formal HR initiatives.

Another eventually related observation is that there is no formal dress code in the office and, for obvious reasons, it is possible to see elegant business attire and orange operational suits within the same workspace, with everything appearing perfectly in place. This absence of strict appearance requirements may also reinforce perceptions of trust, authenticity, and flexibility. Moreover, the absence of a strict dress code may reduce visible symbols of hierarchy and power, fostering a workplace environment characterised by accessibility, openness, and informal interpersonal relations. As suggested by Rafaeli and Pratt (1993), workplace dress is not merely functional but also symbolic, communicating organisational values and expectations. In this sense, dress can also influence cognitive and behavioural processes, shaping how individuals perceive and experience their work environment (Adam & Galinsky, 2012). The informal dress environment may therefore contribute to the perception of TRV as an accessible and people-oriented workplace.

V.II.IV Human Interaction as a Strategic Organisational Capability

In the same way employees learn sector-specific knowledge, they also learn how to interact with sector-operating individuals. The two macro groups of employees potentially have to deal with:

- White collars: foreign group managers, customs offices, foreign truck drivers, international traders and agencies, other company managers, institutions, and workers.
- Blue collars: their managers, foreign truck drivers, vessel crews, suppliers, other functions, and authorities.

They generally deal with people with different educational levels, from different countries, and with different cultural backgrounds. Clearly, dealing with all these stakeholders implies developing a certain sensitivity that, from what emerges from the respondents, is more evident in the blue-collar dimension, where cultural clashes can be stronger since many workers (external or internal) are foreigners.

Within this context, employees develop communication skills, negotiation abilities, cultural sensitivity, and practical leadership. If supported by company initiatives such as language courses or conflict management training, employees, similarly to the first dimension highlighted, acquire skills (in this case soft skills) that enrich them as resources. While these competencies increase employees' professional versatility and career opportunities, they may also reinforce their appreciation of the developmental environment offered by TRV, thereby encouraging long-term retention.

From an employer branding perspective, this constant exposure to heterogeneous stakeholders contributes to the perception of TRV as a workplace where employees not only develop technical competencies but also acquire valuable interpersonal and cross-cultural skills, reinforcing the idea of the organisation as a context for continuous professional and personal development. Even when employees are not formally trained, they learn cross-cultural communication, develop adaptability,

and gain confidence in dealing with complexity. As a result, employees increasingly see themselves as capable of handling both complex operational situations and diverse interpersonal relationships.
The continuous interaction with people from different countries, professional backgrounds, and educational levels also appears to contribute to a generally tolerant and inclusive work environment. Although the terminal workforce remains predominantly male, respondents, particularly female employees, did not report significant experiences of discrimination and generally described workplace environment and relationships as balanced, respectful and collaborative. The nature of the business requires employees to focus on cooperation and problem-solving regardless of personal differences, fostering interactions based primarily on professional and human relationships rather than on demographic or hierarchical distinctions. This aspect also has implications for employer branding. Employees who experience positive interpersonal relationships and an inclusive work environment are more likely to develop favourable perceptions of the organisation and communicate these experiences externally. Furthermore, inclusivity and supportive workplace relationships can foster higher levels of employee engagement and a stronger sense of belonging, reinforcing employees' emotional connection to the organisation. In this sense, employees may indirectly act as ambassadors of the company, transmitting to colleagues, potential candidates, customers, and stakeholders an image of TRV as a professional, welcoming, and people-oriented workplace.

V.II.V Local Identity and Organisational Belonging

The dimensions discussed previously ultimately converge within the context of the terminal. Continuous learning, cross-functional collaboration, informal leadership, and everyday interactions all take place within the same physical and social environment. As a result, employees tend to develop a sense of belonging not only towards the company but also towards the terminal itself.
From the interviews, it emerged that many employees are proud to work within the port sector. Although port activities may appear rough, dirty, or unattractive from the outside, those who work in this environment often recognise its importance and uniqueness. The port is a strategic infrastructure that connects local businesses to international markets and supports a large number of economic activities. Employees are generally aware of this role and of the contribution their work makes to the wider logistics chain.
Moreover, daily relationships are developed primarily at the local level. Employees can interact with the same colleagues, customers, truck drivers, authorities, and operational workers over long periods of time. Through these repeated interactions, familiarity and mutual recognition emerge,

creating a sense of community that goes beyond formal organisational structures. This attachment appears to be directed more towards the local reality of TRV than towards the wider Euroports group. While employees recognise the advantages of belonging to a large international organisation, their everyday experience is shaped by the terminal, the people working within it, and the local culture that characterises it.

From an employer branding perspective, this sense of belonging represents an important source of organisational attachment. Employees are not connected to the organisation only through contractual or economic factors, but also through the relationships, experiences, and professional identity developed within the port environment. In this sense, the employer brand emerges not only from what the company offers, but also from what employees feel they are part of.

The expression “we are a family-run multinational”, which emerged during the interviews to highlight the difference between TRV and the wider group, further reflects this dynamic. Employees are aware of the combination of resources, stability, and opportunities offered by a multinational company while still experiencing the closeness, familiarity, and sense of community typically associated with a smaller local organisation. At the same time, however, this particular combination is not without its drawbacks. The coexistence of a local and informal organisational culture with the structures and requirements of a large multinational group may generate frictions that require targeted managerial interventions.

V.II.VI Safety Culture, Organisational Trust and Work-Life Balance

For this final highlighted dimension, it must be said that it is supported by concrete company measures.

From an employer branding perspective, safety represents more than a compliance requirement; it becomes part of the employment experience itself. From the field research, it emerged that safety is actually a value respected and communicated by TRV-Euroports, and employees clearly perceive this. Safety concerns compliance and risk management, but it also implicitly conveys care, professionalism, and responsibility, which reinforce trust, belonging, and organisational credibility. Knowing that they belong to a large and solid company that is consistent with its values transmits confidence to employees and helps them develop trust in the organisation.

In this sense, a strong safety culture reinforces organisational trust and credibility while strengthening employees' sense of belonging. As these perceptions emerge through everyday practices rather than dedicated branding initiatives, safety can be considered an important driver of TRV's informal employer brand.

Similarly, as the work-life balance research showed, if the company culture allows for a flexible organisation of work, such as smart working when physical presence is not required, days off, and voluntarily paid overtime hours, this can offset some of the more negative aspects of the job, namely stress levels and workload. Overall, despite not being the most attractive or glamorous place to work, and despite the port environment often being rough and unpleasant, almost every employee, from operational workers to country managers, appears genuinely satisfied with working in the commercial port sector.

Last but not least, all these aspects produce positive outcomes because they are supported by a generally positive, although not always explicitly acknowledged, satisfaction with remuneration. This economic dimension supports many of the other employee satisfaction dynamics described above. While the new HR initiatives introduced by the company certainly contribute positively, the elements discussed previously are more likely to play a fundamental role in increasing retention and job satisfaction. Notably, this aligns with what Randstad (2025) identifies as the key drivers of employer attractiveness in the Italian market, where factors such as competitive salaries, job security, a pleasant work atmosphere, work-life balance, and financial stability consistently rank among the most valued attributes by employees. TRV appears to perform reasonably well across several of these dimensions, which contributes to explain the overall levels of satisfaction and retention observed throughout this research. It is worth noting that in 2025, for the first time, diversity and inclusion entered the ranking of the five most important drivers in employer attractiveness according to Randstad, replacing career progression which had previously held that position. While female representation in the port sector remains structurally limited, TRV's broader diversity in terms of nationalities, backgrounds, and professional profiles is a positive signal and one that, if intentionally cultivated, could become increasingly relevant as this dimension grows in importance among potential employees. Together, these dimensions contribute to shaping an employer brand that is experienced daily by employees and grounded in concrete organisational practices rather than formal employer branding activities.

V.III Managerial and Organisational Implications

As discussed in the previous subchapter, TRV exhibits characteristics that positively influence employee perceptions and indirectly support employer branding. Even though the company does not appear to pursue a formal employer branding strategy, employees reported experiences that foster commitment, satisfaction, and organisational attachment. Despite this, some aspects and practices should be supported more or actually implemented from scratch. Unlike traditional fourquadrant managerial frameworks, the proposed actions comprise only three categories: Maintain, Strengthen, and Implement. No organisational practices emerged from the findings that were certainly considered ineffective or counterproductive enough to justify an "Eliminate" category. Consequently, the framework focuses exclusively on preserving, enhancing, and introducing practices that support employer branding and employee retention. Here is how they could be organised:

Table 12. Suggested Actions for TRV

Maintain	Strengthen	Implement
Competitive compensation	Internal and cross-department communication	Structured student and new-talents initiatives
Strong safety culture	Regular company-wide meetings	Dedicated TRV website
Training and professional development	Employee feedback channels	Dedicated LinkedIn presence and website careers section
Positive interpersonal relationships	Conflict management mechanisms	Marketing and Communication Function in TRV
Work-life balance and flexibility	Team building initiatives	Dedicated employer branding activities

Table 12 allows to visualise the suggested actions, namely:

Maintain: The aspects with positive employer branding externalities, as highlighted in the previous subchapter, should be preserved. A competitive compensation, strong safety culture, training and professional development, and positive interpersonal relationships represent key strengths of TRV-Euroports and important drivers of employee retention and organisational commitment. These elements should continue to be supported and periodically updated to ensure their long-term effectiveness. This is particularly true for salaries, which should keep up with changes in purchasing power, and for training initiatives, which must anticipate and keep pace with new technologies, industry trends, and market demand.

Maintain but Continuously Adapt: Work-life balance and flexibility emerged as positive aspects of the employee experience and therefore constitute strengths that should be preserved. However, they should not be viewed as static achievements. Although the survey results indicate an overall positive perception of work-life balance, the reported workload and overtime suggest there is still room for improvement, particularly as the job market evolves and expectations regarding work-life balance differ across generations. While Generation X employees may be more accustomed to extended working hours and greater integration of professional and personal life, Millennials and Generation Z increasingly value flexibility, clear boundaries between work and personal life, and reduced reliance on overtime. Recent Randstad Workmonitor findings (2025) suggest that work-life balance has become one of the most important factors influencing employee attraction and retention, surpassing salary as the primary workplace priority. Similarly, Deloitte's 2024 *Gen Z and Millennial Survey* identifies work-life balance as the top factor considered by younger generations when choosing an employer, while also highlighting long working hours as a major source of stress and dissatisfaction. These findings suggest that maintaining a healthy balance between professional and personal life is becoming increasingly important for employer attractiveness in a changing labour market, indicating that a positive balance is not only beneficial for employee well-being but also for companies' employer branding. Although commitment, responsibility, and passion for work remain important organisational values, regularly exceeding 40-45 working hours per week may not be sustainable in the long term. Consequently, TRV should continuously monitor workload intensity, overtime practices, and employee expectations to ensure that work-life balance remains a competitive advantage for both current and future generations of employees.

Strengthen: The aspects to strengthen are mainly those highlighted from the research as critical, divisive or with great potential. At least for official cross-departmental activities, employees would prefer a more structured communication standard capable of informing all the involved functions simultaneously, complementing the existing informal communication practices. Such an approach would also contribute to a clearer definition of leadership responsibilities and decision-making processes across the organisation. General meetings are an appreciated initiative and a potential moment of confrontation; maybe holding them more often and alongside other activities would be prolific. Another aspect needing to be more structured, or at least intentional, is the feedback mechanism, resulting from surveys as the weakest aspect of employee engagement and where small actions could lead to exponentially greater engagement, motivation and satisfaction. Maybe heads of department or supervisors could be trained and reminded on how to give positive but also negative feedback in a constructive and motivating way. Similarly, empowering employees and learning how to solve conflicts, professionally speaking, perhaps due to different approaches to the business, can certainly reduce perceived stress and increase employee validation. In this regard, focused team building initiatives can help. The problem is not conflicts themselves; it is when confrontation is sterile. Conflict can be good if it nudges problem solving, the merging of opinions and cross-contamination, and ultimately learning and soft skill refinement.

Implement: the actions to be implemented are, eventually, a proper employer branding strategy, or at least, over time, the implementation of a marketing and communication function at the local terminal level. This is not because it is essential for the terminal business at 360 degrees, but because, despite employer branding somehow already working, there is room to implement major improvements in TRV's external image and to invest in what is currently the company's greatest employer branding liability, namely talent attraction.

First, it would be necessary for TRV to have at least a dedicated website displaying the story of the terminal and its strategic importance, serving as a good business card for both potential customers and potential future employees. The website could then provide direct access to terminal contacts for clients, as well as a career section for future talent. It does not need to be complex; a clean, informative, and well-maintained presence, developed in line with group guidelines and visual identity, would already represent a significant step forward in terms of external visibility and perceived professionalism.

Along with the website, a LinkedIn page managed at the local level would increase visibility in the Venetian virtual marketplace, raise awareness of port-related jobs and activities, and increase curiosity and approachability towards these positions. It would also make it easier for the company to monitor from the social media for potential business partners and, especially, for talent acquisition. TRV could also encourage employee advocacy by having current employees share company content, like they are already doing at group level, as it is one of the most credible and low-cost ways to build an authentic employer brand image externally.

As previously mentioned, if many employees in TRV have very high seniority, it means that in a few years they will have to be replaced, which is imperative considering that the concession won in 2025 will last for 25 years. Having a pool of new resources to draw from is undoubtedly strategic.

Following the same logic, the company could also invest more in relationships with educational institutions. Strengthening bonds with high schools, specialised higher education institutions, and universities would give young students the opportunity to experience meaningful work opportunities through internships and would allow TRV to shape its future workforce. Clearly, these experiences must take place from a constructive perspective, emphasising structured onboarding and mentorship to make them genuinely formative rather than merely exploitative.

Participating in career fairs would be another way of gaining visibility, offering the company a direct channel to meet potential candidates, present its culture and values, and position itself as a desirable employer within the local and sectoral job market. If the company aims to grow, its workforce should grow with it, and investing in people is as strategic as investing in infrastructure or technology.

Obviously, these initiatives should be supported by a concrete commitment to hiring additional personnel when needed. Employer branding alone cannot compensate for structural understaffing. As the company grows, expanding the workforce becomes essential not only to support operational development but also to reduce the workload of existing employees, improve work-life balance, and sustain employee engagement over time.

If employer branding begins to be actively implemented, the company can also start to measure its impact, perhaps even in financial terms, tracking indicators such as cost per hire, time to fill a position, retention rates or the return on investment of training and recruitment initiatives, turning what is often perceived as a soft function into a concrete and accountable business lever.

V.IV Towards a Framework of Informal Employer Branding in B2B Port Environments

So far, it has been possible to identify the underlying causes of what has been defined as “informal” employer branding, as discussed in the previous sections of this chapter. In addition, several elements have emerged that occupy an intermediate position, functioning both as outcomes and as reinforcing causes, such as employee engagement and a sense of belonging. Finally, the consequences and manifestations of positive employer branding are reflected in employee pride, willingness to remain with the organisation, low turnover, and a positive organisational reputation.

Several frameworks have been proposed in the employer branding literature to conceptualise the construct itself (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004), as discussed more broadly in Chapter I, or to guide its strategic implementation through operationally oriented contributions. Many of these practical frameworks originate from company websites, consultancy reports, or professional blogs. However, what remains less explored is a framework that maps the essential organisational conditions from which employer branding emerges organically, particularly in contexts where no formal employer branding strategy exists.

In light of more recent findings on employer branding, including evidence from the global and Italian labour markets provided by Randstad Employer Brand Research studies, and supported by the field research conducted for this study, it has been possible to identify several useful elements and dynamics that help address this gap. The proposed pyramidal framework seeks to define the requirements for the successful development of informal employer branding and is intended to be contextualised within an industrial setting, specifically commercial port environments. Due to the lack of testing in other sectors and contexts, it is not intended to be generalised beyond this setting.

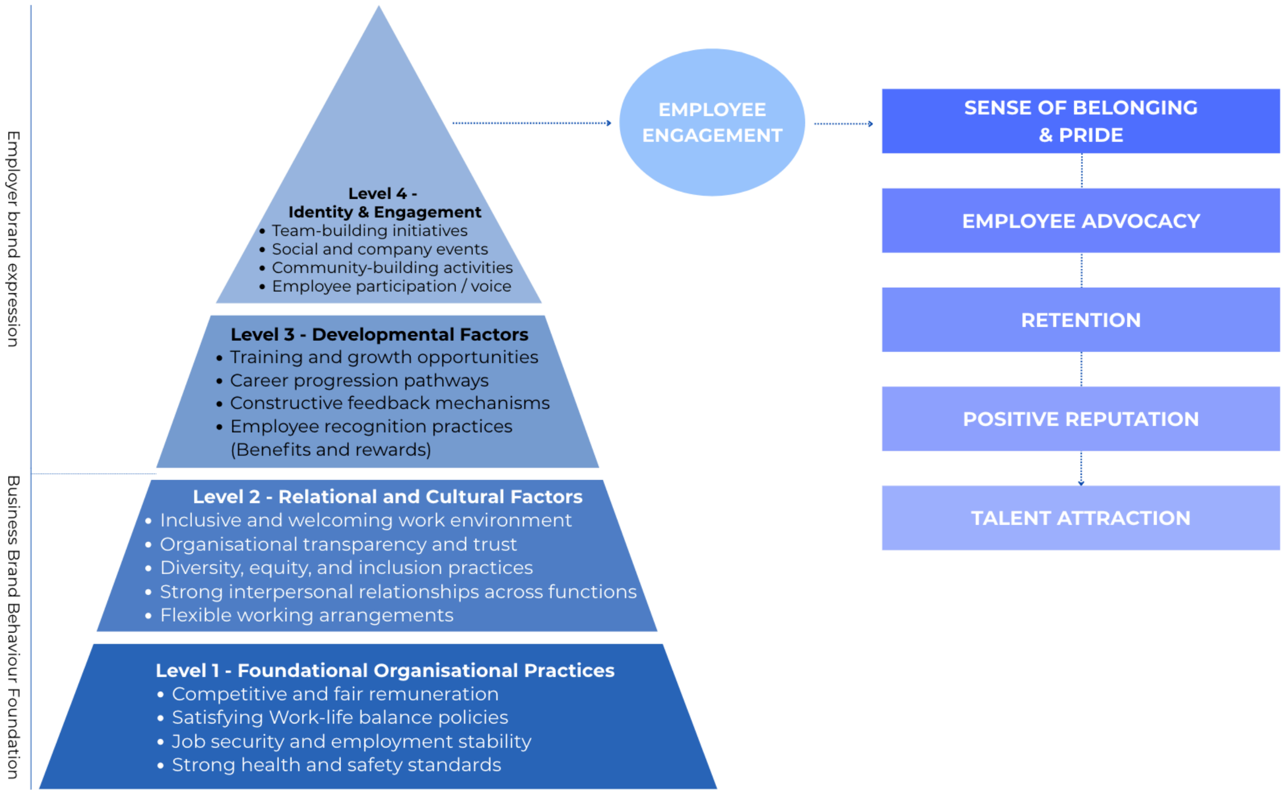
The proposed pyramid identifies a progression from foundational factors to engagement related outcomes, illustrating the layers upon which an informal employer brand can develop and be sustained in practice.

Level 1 displays the foundational, non-negotiable base requirements upon which employer branding is anchored, namely those related to remuneration, safety, job security, and work-life balance. The second level adds the relational and cultural factors that contribute to making the workplace welcoming, inclusive and pleasant, including the quality of interpersonal relationships. These first two levels embody the principle of business brand behaviour alignment introduced in Chapter I, meaning that for employer branding to be credible and sustainable, it must first be grounded in what the company genuinely is and does, in how it remunerates, protects, includes and organises its people, before any higher-order expression of identity and engagement can take place.

The findings of this research suggest that the elements included within these first two levels represent the fundamental conditions employees expect from their employer and upon which they form a neutral to positive evaluation of the organisation. By contrast, the upper two levels contain the factors that employees themselves frequently identified as enhancing an already positive work experience. These dimensions contribute to fostering employee engagement, strengthening organisational attachment, and creating a deeper sense of connection with the company.

The upper two levels, therefore, represent the space where employer branding actively expresses itself, translating solid organisational foundations into tangible experiences of growth, recognition, belonging and shared identity. Developmental factors enable employees to grow both professionally and economically while receiving recognition for their achievements and contributions.

Figure 15. *The Employer Value Pyramid: From Organisational Foundations to Brand Outcomes.*



In the context of a commercial port environment, learning often occurs organically through day-to-day operational activities, problem-solving, and interactions with colleagues, customers, and stakeholders. However, organisations can further enhance this natural learning process by investing in training programmes, skill development initiatives, and structured feedback and recognition mechanisms.

Finally, the top of the pyramid encompasses the initiatives that reinforce and amplify the effects of the underlying levels. These include team-building activities, community-building initiatives, social events, and practices that encourage employees' active participation in organisational life. Such initiatives contribute to creating a stronger sense of involvement and connection with the organisation. When employees perceive themselves as valued and necessary members of the company, they are more likely to develop a stronger emotional connection to their work and to the company.

If the conditions outlined in this framework are effectively implemented, informal employer branding is more likely to generate and develop positive outcomes, such as engagement, sense of belonging and pride, which in turn translate into employee advocacy, retention, positive reputation and, ultimately, if adequately supported, talent attraction.

V.V Limitations of the Study

The primary limitation of this study is that the research has been conducted on one terminal only. Although some dynamics have been observed and validated, they may not be universal and could instead be specific to this terminal. Conducting a mapping of at least all terminal competitors within the same port would certainly have been a more comprehensive undertaking, but also a more complex one, requiring additional time and resources. It would also have been interesting to analyse the network of port relationships, although this would have partially shifted the focus away from a purely company-level employer branding study.

Although the survey responses showed certain trends, the sample is relatively circumscribed and, as is always the case with surveys, there may be response biases due to a lack of commitment when completing the questionnaire or different interpretations of the answers' scale. Moreover, as displayed in the findings chapter, the scores obtained generally ranged from approximately 3 to 4.6, showing relatively limited variation and not always revealing very clear differences between dimensions. The questionnaire could have included even more detailed questions, but in order to ensure a satisfactory number of valid responses, it was necessary to avoid excessive complexity and length, which could have caused a high non-response rate.

Likewise, although confidentiality was guaranteed, it cannot be excluded that some respondents were reluctant to express particularly critical opinions regarding their employer. This aspect is difficult to avoid completely in organisational research and may have influenced some of the responses collected.

Moreover, while the combination of surveys, interviews, and direct observation helped strengthen the findings, some interpretations inevitably remain tied to employees' subjective perceptions rather than to objective organisational performance indicators.

Due to strict safety requirements and the nature of terminal operations, it was not possible to observe cargo-handling activities from very close up or for prolonged periods, nor to observe the prolonged interactions among blue-collar workers. Likewise, their perspective could have been explored more deeply, especially considering that studies on employer branding less frequently focus on this workforce.

Finally, the study provides an analysis of employees' perceptions and organisational dynamics at a specific point in time. However, culture, perceptions, and organisational practices continuously evolve in response to management changes, organisational developments, and external market conditions. Major limitations leave the floor for the direction of future research.

V.VI Directions for Future Research

In light of the limitations outlined above, future research could adopt a comparative approach involving multiple terminals, either within the same port or across different ports, to assess whether the drivers identified in this study are context-specific or transferable to other operational environments. It could also focus on district or context-specific trends, since the studied terminal in Venice, embedded in a western European culture, could differ considerably from radically diverse cultural contexts, and in this sense it would be valuable to test whether the framework developed here is actually applicable on a broader or global scale.

Another interesting direction could be a deeper comparative analysis of employer branding perceptions according to different job roles within complex organisations such as this one, namely the blue-collar versus white-collar perspective. Purely operational roles are a segment relatively underrepresented in the literature, and in this as in other contexts it would be valuable to analyse trends separately across different roles, in order to highlight whether structural differences or even forms of perceived inequality exist between them.

Future research could also complement this study by adopting an external perspective, surveying potential candidates or recent graduates to understand how TRV and the port sector are perceived from the outside, directly addressing whether and how the talent attraction gap is configured. Along the same lines, it could investigate whether a collective or sectoral employer branding strategy at port or logistics district level could be more effective than individual terminal efforts, particularly for attracting younger talent unfamiliar with the sector. Within the broader inclusivity agenda, the role and experience of female employees in port sector culture would also deserve dedicated attention, given the historically male-dominated nature of the industry.

Finally, future research could track how employer branding perceptions evolve following specific organisational changes, which in this case could include the implementation of the recommendations suggested here, as well as in the broader market can be managerial and organisational development. In line with the recommendation to eventually measure employer branding in financial terms, future research could also attempt to develop or apply a framework for quantifying the return on employer branding investments in industrial and operational contexts, where this type of measurement remains largely unexplored.

Conclusion

This thesis explored how employer branding can emerge and generate positive organisational outputs even in the absence of formal structures or functions and of a clear strategy, a configuration recurring in industrial businesses. While existing literature largely conceptualises employer branding as a planned and coordinated set of actions developed through the collaboration of HR and marketing functions, the findings of this study suggest that employer branding may also emerge through informal organisational processes embedded in everyday work practices.

Through the case study of Terminal Rinfuse Venezia, a commercial terminal located in the port of Venice, Italy, and part of the larger Euroports Group, the research conducted within the company through mainly qualitative instruments identified several factors that contribute to the development of a positive employer brand for TRV-Euroports. The evidence indicates that employee attachment, engagement, organisational reputation, and sense of belonging are not exclusively generated by communication campaigns, employer value propositions, or structured branding programmes. Instead, they can arise from the daily experience of work itself, in a context where specific business-embedded characteristics emerge as a necessary foundation for employer branding to develop.

More specifically, continuous learning opportunities, cross-functional collaboration, low power distance, strong interpersonal relationships, local organisational identity, and a well-established safety culture emerged as key drivers of employee engagement and organisational belonging. These elements contribute to creating a work environment in which employees perceive trust, competence development, and meaningful participation in organisational activities. In this sense, employer branding appears not only as a communication process but as a lived and co-created organisational reality.

In line with and reinforcing B2B marketing literature, this research highlighted the importance of the human component and interaction in highly specialised industrial fields, where organisational value is created through networks of persons interactions rather than through products alone. Consistently with Human-to-Human (H2H) marketing and Service-Dominant Logic perspectives, the study demonstrates that employees represent a fundamental interface between the organisation and its stakeholders. Consequently, organisational culture, behaviours, and interpersonal relationships become strategic resources that shape both internal and external perceptions of the company.

From a theoretical perspective, the research contributes to the discussion on internal branding within B2B environments by proposing the concept of informal employer branding. Rather than viewing employer branding as exclusively dependent on formal strategies, this research suggests that it can develop through a combination of operational practices, spontaneous social interactions, leadership behaviours, and locally embedded organisational cultures. Informal or organic employer branding therefore complements, rather than replaces, formal branding initiatives, providing an additional lens through which organisational attractiveness and employee engagement can be understood. In the absence of formalised internal marketing strategies, it can nonetheless manifest and strengthen the company brand, consistently with the extent to which it is supported by a solid business model and coherent organisational behaviour.

From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest that organisations operating in resource-constrained, highly operational, or industrial contexts should not underestimate the strategic value of informal organisational dynamics. While formal employer branding programmes can strengthen visibility and consistency, many of the factors that shape employee perceptions are generated through consolidated governance models, everyday interactions, learning opportunities, the quality of the working environment, and broader welfare policies. Managers should therefore recognise, support, and deliberately nurture these informal mechanisms while strengthening the structural aspects essential to engagement and retention. Employee engagement is observably nudged more by consolidated welfare and wellbeing aspects than by ad hoc HR initiatives, which can, for example, strengthen engagement when employee satisfaction is already high.

Since this research suggests that employer branding extends beyond strategy alone, a framework of company configurations and managerial practices more likely to induce the organic generation of positive employer branding was proposed.

Although the findings cannot be generalised with certainty beyond the specific context of Terminal Rinfuse Venezia, the study highlights a sector that has received limited attention within marketing literature but that constitutes a pillar for national and global economies.

Commercial ports represent complex socio-technical systems and can be considered real districts where organisational performance depends heavily on coordination, trust, expertise, and the long-term relationships of multiple stakeholders. Untangling how employer branding emerges within such environments contributes to a broader understanding of branding, organisational culture, and employee engagement in B2B settings. The sector's core business has remained largely unchanged for centuries, in such a context, attracting and retaining qualified talent becomes an increasingly important source of competitiveness and renewal. Sector-wide employer branding initiatives could therefore contribute to increasing the attractiveness of port-related careers and supporting the long-term development of the industry.

References

Adam, H., & Galinsky, A. D. (2012). Enclothed cognition. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 48*(4), 918–925.

Adami, A. (2018). Il porto di Venezia e la gestione delle acque lagunari. *L'Acqua, 3*, 1–10.

Almquist, E., Cleghorn, J., & Sherer, L. (2018). The B2B elements of value. *Harvard Business Review, 96*(2), 72–81.

Ambler, T., & Barrow, S. (1996). The employer brand. *Journal of Brand Management, 4*(3), 185–206.

Ancarani, F. (2021). Humanistic management into practice: What should a humanistic manager do? In P. Kotler, W. A. Pförtsch, & U. Sponholz (Eds.), *Humanism in marketing: Responsible leadership and the human-to-human approach*. Springer.

Autorità di Sistema Portuale del Mare Adriatico Settentrionale. (n.d.). *Port of Venice*. Retrieved April 14, 2026.

Autorità di Sistema Portuale del Mare Adriatico Settentrionale. (n.d.). *Terminal e operatori*. Retrieved April 14, 2026.

Backhaus, K., & Tikoo, S. (2004). Conceptualizing and researching employer branding. *Career Development International, 9*(5), 501–517.

Barrow, S., & Mosley, R. (2005). *The employer brand: Bringing the best of brand management to people at work*. John Wiley & Sons.

Becattini, G. (1989). Riflessioni sul distretto industriale marshalliano come concetto socio-economico. *Stato e Mercato, 25*, 111–128.

Becattini, G. (2004). *Industrial districts: A new approach to industrial change*. Edward Elgar.

Bhattacharjee, D. R., Pradhan, D., & Swani, K. (2022). Business-to-business (B2B) branding: What we know and where do we go. *Industrial Marketing Management, 101*, 30–44.

Biraglia, A., Fuchs, C., et al. (2023). When and why consumers react negatively to brand acquisitions: A values authenticity account. *Journal of Marketing, 87*(4), 536–556.

Bodner, J., & Capron, L. (2018). Post-merger integration: A review and agenda for future research. *Journal of Management and Governance, 22*(1), 1–32.

Bottalico, A. (2022). Innovation and labor in the port industry: A comparison between Genoa and Antwerp. *Journal of Business Logistics*.

Burns, T., & Stalker, G. M. (1961). *The management of innovation*. Tavistock.

Caesar, L. D. (2024). Emerging dynamics of training, recruiting and retaining a sustainable maritime workforce: A skill resilience framework. *Sustainability, 16*(1), 239.

Cafiero, G. (2021). Ports and maritime transport in history and actuality: Focus on intermodality and the Italian situation. *World Complexity Science Academy Journal, 2*(2).

Cascio, W. F., & Graham, B. Z. (2016). New strategic role for HR: Leading the employer-branding process. *Organization Management Journal, 13*(4), 182–192.

Codice civile. (1942). Art. 822: Demanio pubblico (R.D. 16 marzo 1942, n. 262). *Gazzetta Ufficiale*.

Coleman, D., de Chernatony, L., & Christodoulides, G. (2011). B2B service brand identity: Scale development and validation. *Industrial Marketing Management, 40*(7), 1063–1071.

Crisan, C., & Bortun, D. (2017). Digital storytelling and employer branding: An exploratory connection. *Management Dynamics in the Knowledge Economy, 5*(2), 273–287.

De Riberolles, H. (2022, September 21). Grey-collar workers: An emerging trend. *Primeum*.

Deloitte. (2024). *Deloitte's 2024 Gen Z and Millennial Survey*. Deloitte Insights.

Ducharme, M. J., Singh, P., & Podolsky, M. (2005). Exploring the links between performance appraisal satisfaction and organizational commitment. *Compensation & Benefits Review, 37*(5), 46–52.

EURES – European Employment Services. (2024). *Labour market information: Italy*. European Commission.

European Commission. (2016). *List of 329 TEN-T ports*. European Commission.

European Commission. (n.d.). *Ports*. European Commission.

European Commission. (n.d.). *Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T)*. European Commission.

European Parliament and Council of the European Union. (2017). Regulation (EU) 2017/352 of 15 February 2017 establishing a framework for the provision of port services and common rules on the financial transparency of ports. *Official Journal of the European Union*.

European Sea Ports Organisation. (n.d.). *Organisation*. ESPO.

Euroports. (2024). *Labour & human rights*. Euroports.

Euroports. (2025, October 2). *Euroports celebrates 25-year Terminal Rinfuse Venezia concession*. Euroports.

Euroports. (n.d.). *About us*. Euroports.

Euroports. (n.d.). *Bringing essential goods to the world. Together*. Euroports.

Euroports. (n.d.). *Sustainability report presentation*. Seidat.

Euroports. (n.d.). *Vision, mission and values*. Euroports.

Gallup. (n.d.). *Q12 employee engagement survey*. Gallup.

George, W. R. (1990). Internal marketing and organizational behavior: A partnership in developing customer-conscious employees. *Journal of Business Research, 20*(1), 63–70.

Goodman, D. S. (2025, July 21). Brand alignment: Aligning the 3Bs – Business, brand, and behaviour (A Dufil case study). *Medium*.

Hall, S. (2017). *Innovative B2B marketing: New models, processes and theory*. Kogan Page.

Harter, J. K., Schmidt, F. L., & Hayes, T. L. (2002). Business-unit-level relationship between employee satisfaction, employee engagement, and business outcomes. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 87*(2), 268–279.

Haspeslagh, P. C., & Jemison, D. B. (1991). *Managing acquisitions: Creating value through corporate renewal*. Free Press.

Hein, A. Z., Elving, W. J. L., Koster, S., & Edzes, A. (2025). One size fits all? Employer branding in different contexts. *Corporate Reputation Review*.

Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J., & Minkov, M. (2010). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind* (3rd ed.). McGraw-Hill.

Informare. (2025, March 21). Porto Marghera, rinnovo della concessione a Terminal Rinfuse Venezia. *Informare*.

Institute for Strategy and Competitiveness. (n.d.). *The value chain*. Harvard Business School.

International Chamber of Commerce. (2020). *Incoterms® 2020: ICC rules for the use of domestic and international trade terms*. ICC Publishing.

Judge, T. A., Piccolo, R. F., Podsakoff, N. P., Shaw, J. C., & Rich, B. L. (2010). The relationship between pay and job satisfaction: A meta-analysis of the literature. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 77*(2), 157–167.

Keller, K. L., & Kotler, P. (2016). Branding in B2B firms. In *Marketing management* (15th ed.). Pearson.

Kotler, P., Pförtsch, W. A., & Sponholz, U. (2021). *H2H marketing: The genesis of human-to-human marketing*. Springer.

Kunerth, B., & Mosley, R. (2011). Applying employer brand management to employee engagement. *Strategic HR Review, 10*(3), 19–26.

Lazear, E. P. (2009). Firm-specific human capital: A skill-weights approach. *Journal of Political Economy, 117*(5), 914–940.

Legge 28 gennaio 1994, n. 84. (1994). Riordino della legislazione in materia portuale. *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, n. 28 del 4 febbraio 1994*.

MacLaverty, N., McQuillan, P., & Oddie, H. (2007). *Internal branding best practices study*. Canadian Marketing Association.

MacNeil, A., & Ghosh, S. (2017). Gender imbalance in the maritime industry: Impediments, initiatives and recommendations. *Australian Journal of Maritime & Ocean Affairs, 9*(1), 42–55.

Marshall, A. (1920). *Principles of economics* (8th ed.). Macmillan.

Martin, J. (2002). *Organizational culture: Mapping the terrain*. Sage.

Ministero delle Infrastrutture e dei Trasporti. (n.d.). *Autorità di sistema portuale*. Ministero delle Infrastrutture e dei Trasporti.

Mintzberg, H. (1980). Structure in 5's: A synthesis of the research on organization design. *Management Science, 26*(3), 322–341.

Moroko, L., & Uncles, M. D. (2008). Characteristics of successful employer brands. *Journal of Brand Management, 16*(3), 160–175.

Mosley, R. (2007). Customer experience, organisational culture and the employer brand. *Journal of Brand Management, 15*(2), 123–134.

Mudambi, S. (2002). Branding importance in business-to-business markets: Three buyer clusters. *Industrial Marketing Management, 31*(6), 525–533.

Muzellec, L., & Lambkin, M. C. (2009). Corporate branding and brand architecture: A conceptual framework. *Marketing Theory, 9*(1), 39–54.

Näppä, A., et al. (2023). I just work here! Employees as co-creators of the employer brand. *Journal of Marketing Management*.

Notteboom, T., Pallis, A., & Rodrigue, J.-P. (n.d.). *Terminal concessions and land leases*. Port Economics, Management and Policy.

O'Boyle, E., & Harter, J. K. (2022). *Employee engagement models: Learn from the best*. Gallup.

Osterwalder, A., & Pigneur, Y. (2010). *Business model generation: A handbook for visionaries, game changers, and challengers*. John Wiley & Sons.

Palmer, S. (2020). *History of the ports*.

Panayotou, T., & Pförtsch, W. A. (2021). Implications of humanistic marketing. In P. Kotler, W. A. Pförtsch, & U. Sponholz (Eds.), *Humanism in marketing: Responsible leadership and the human-to-human approach*. Springer.

Pawar, A. (2016). Leveraging the employer brand strategy with employee value proposition. *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Business Research, 5*(2), 35–44.

Pigenet, M. (2012). Labour and trade union cultures: The idiosyncratic experience of the European dockworkers in the 19th to the 21st centuries. *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research, 18*(2), 143–155.

Port Economics, Management and Policy. (n.d.). *Port terminals and terminal operators*.

Rafaeli, A., & Pratt, M. G. (1993). Tailored meanings: On the meaning and impact of organizational dress. *Academy of Management Review, 18*(1), 32–55.

Rafiq, M., & Ahmed, P. K. (2000). Advances in the internal marketing concept: Definition, synthesis and extension. *Journal of Services Marketing, 14*(6), 449–462.

Randstad. (2025). *Employer Brand Research 2025 – Italia*. Randstad Italia.

Randstad. (2025). *Randstad employer brand research: Global report 2025*. Randstad.

Roa, I., Amante García, B., & others. (2013). Ports: Definition and study of types, sizes and business models. *Journal of Industrial Engineering and Management, 6*(4), 1055–1064.

Santagata, W. (2004). *Cultural districts and economic development*.

Schmidt, H. J., Ind, N., & Iglesias, O. (2021). Internal branding: In search of a new paradigm. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*.

Sertis Corp. (2025). 3Bs alignment: Business, brand, behavior. *Medium*.

Solís, S. (2026, February 25). Towards a European ports strategy: Competitiveness and strategic autonomy begin at the quay. *Friends of Europe*.

Soriani, S. (2002). *Porti, città e territorio costiero*. Il Mulino.

Srivastava, R. K., & Thomas, G. M. (2010). Managing brand performance: Aligning positioning, execution and experience. *Journal of Brand Management, 17*(7), 465–471.

Tavanti, M. (2012). The cultural dimensions of Italian leadership: Power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity from an American perspective. *Leadership, 8*(3), 241–258.

Tavassoli, N. (n.d.). *Business, brand, behaviour (3Bs) framework*. London Business School.

Torricella, N., & Artuso, G. (2016). Il porto di Venezia: Passato, presente e futuro. *Studi Costieri, 23*, 119–121.

Ufficio Camerale. (2025). *Terminal Rinfuse Venezia S.p.A.*

United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. (2024). *Review of maritime transport 2024*. United Nations.

Vargo, S. L., & Lusch, R. F. (2004). Evolving to a new dominant logic for marketing. *Journal of Marketing, 68*(1), 1–17.

Zarei, M., Arasteh, M., & Shahab, S. (2024). Exploring port–city relationships: A bibliometric and content analysis. *Sustainability, 16*(11), 4341.

List of Tables

List of Figures

Use of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence tools (ChatGPT - OpenAI, free version; Grammarly, free version; and Claude, free version) were used to support grammatical revision, language refinement, and formatting in selected sections of this thesis. All research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation of findings, and final academic content remain the sole responsibility of the author.