

Rethinking employee attraction and retention strategies in tourism and hospitality: insights into workforce ecosystems

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to identify challenges and opportunities for a resilient workforce ecosystem in a peripheral region by exploring employee attraction and retention strategies within a tourism and hospitality business ecosystem. The study analyzes how tourism and hospitality actors describe the internal and external conditions for employer branding, staff attraction and retention.

Design/methodology/approach – The study takes an exploratory, qualitative approach. Empirical data were collected through interviews with 25 actors across different levels of the tourism and hospitality ecosystem in northern Sweden.

Findings – Attracting and retaining competent staff is one of the greatest challenges in tourism and hospitality, due to contextual and employer-related factors. The way forward demands a new approach that looks beyond the organizational level. Co-opetition on competence development, retention strategies and employer branding activities in the business ecosystem can be a solution to increase resilience and industry brand strength.

Research limitations/implications – There are limitations related to sampling and study context. Future research could identify good examples and solutions to address the challenges posed by the macro environment and further examine the formation and dynamics of collaborative networks in tourism and hospitality.

Practical implications – Several opportunities for a resilient workforce ecosystem for tourism and hospitality are outlined. These can be used strategically by actors at different levels of the ecosystem.

Originality/value – The ecosystem perspective has only recently been applied to workforce structures and employer branding, and studies in the tourism and hospitality industry are scarce.

Keywords Ecosystems, Co-opetition, Employer branding, Staff retention, Peripheral areas, Tourism

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Resilience through anticipatory and repeated adaptation has been identified as vital for firms to build a sustainable competitive advantage in a highly competitive world (de Oliveira Teixeira and Werther, 2013). Organizational resilience can be defined as “a firm’s ability to effectively absorb, develop situation-specific responses to, and ultimately engage in transformative activities to capitalize on disruptive surprises that potentially threaten organization survival” (Lengnick-Hall *et al.*, 2011, p. 244). Employees’ contributions are key to organizational resilience, helping firms absorb uncertainty, respond to threats and drive transformation (Lengnick-Hall *et al.*, 2011). To attract and retain employees, firms are increasingly using employer branding (e.g. Bagheri *et al.*, 2023), which centers on building a distinctive and desirable employer identity (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). However, problems in staff attraction and retention might lie beyond the scope of the individual employer, either in the overall industry (Manoharan *et al.*, 2023) or in regional competence supply.

Thus, the issue is too complex to focus solely on the organizational level, as it affects not only organizational resilience but also that of the industry and the region. Studying businesses and organizations in a broader context is, therefore, necessary if we are to understand the conditions for a resilient workforce ecosystem.

Moreover, there is a shift in the employment market, where businesses are not only hiring employees in the traditional sense but also engaging external partners, such as contractors, gig workers and other providers, as part of the workforce (Altman *et al.*, 2023a). For this reason, employment arrangements require careful planning of the workforce ecosystem, defined as:

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Funding: This work was supported by BFUF, the R&D Fund of the Swedish Tourism and Hospitality Industry, under grant number 2020-246.

Received 31 March 2025
Revised 15 January 2026
17 March 2026
Accepted 25 March 2026

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available on Emerald Insight at: <https://www.emerald.com/insight/0885-8624.htm>



Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing
Emerald Publishing Limited [ISSN 0885-8624]
[DOI 10.1108/JBIM-03-2025-0285]

a structure focused on value creation for an organization [that] encompasses actors, from within the organization and beyond, working to pursue both individual and collective goals, and includes interdependencies and complementarities among the participants (Altman *et al.*, 2022, p. 5).

Similarly, network literature in business and industrial marketing emphasizes that companies are not isolated islands but are part of a network in which internal and external environments and actors interact, and any business should always be studied as “part of a larger constellation” (Håkansson and Snehota, 2024, p. 122). In line with this, research has recently approached employer branding from an ecosystem perspective (Eriksson *et al.*, 2022). Here, different actors within an industry or regional area can be seen as co-opetitors, simultaneously co-operating to increase the talent pool while competing for the same competencies (Eriksson *et al.*, 2022).

While competent employees are crucial for any company, their role is even more vital in tourism and hospitality organizations, which depend on their staff to deliver and co-create experiences during each customer interaction (Namin *et al.*, 2022). Challenges in attracting and retaining staff in tourism and hospitality are often attributed to factors such as low pay, inconvenient working hours, a negative industry image (e.g. Innerhofer *et al.*, 2024; Lin *et al.*, 2018), poor conditions for learning and development (Ashton, 2018) and negative interpersonal interactions (Namin *et al.*, 2022). The supply of competence is also particularly challenging in peripheral or rural areas (Eriksson *et al.*, 2022), where the pool of potential employees is small and often geographically dispersed. Hence, collaborative action is needed to drive change and improve the employer brand of the tourism and hospitality sector. This requires co-ordinated efforts on multiple levels: individual organizations, industry associations and other relevant organizations, such as municipalities. Ultimately, collaboration within the ecosystem can revitalize a brand at the macro level (Cortez *et al.*, 2022) and potentially foster resilience and strength in both the individual organizations and the ecosystem. Hence, this suggests a new way to develop strategies for attractive work in the tourism and hospitality sector.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to identify challenges and opportunities for a resilient workforce ecosystem in a peripheral region by exploring employee attraction and retention strategies within a tourism and hospitality business ecosystem. The empirical study analyzes how tourism and hospitality actors describe the internal and external conditions for employer branding, staff attraction and retention within their organizations and across the industry.

As Håkansson and Snehota (2024) emphasize, context is extremely important when studying businesses. Research in employer branding tends to focus on larger organizations (Amarakoon and Colley, 2023) and larger cities, rather than rural areas (Junça Silva and Dias, 2023). While these create critical context and resource constraints for organizations, research on these aspects is still scant in the employer branding literature and the employer brand is often studied in isolation from its context. This study is situated in northern Sweden, a context of particular interest for several reasons. It is a geographically peripheral area with a cool climate and nature-based offerings, making it an attractive tourist destination. At the same time, the region faces staffing difficulties due to low population density, large geographical distances and competition for the workforce and talent, particularly amid an

ongoing green transition in the mining and steel manufacturing industries. The transition is driving societal change toward a greener future. In this context, the tourism and hospitality sector plays a major role in creating an attractive society and social well-being, ultimately benefiting all organizations within the peripheral ecosystem. The ongoing changes, together with seasonal tourism demands, require an understanding of how resilience, i.e. the ability to adapt and capitalize on these changes (Lengnick-Hall *et al.*, 2011), can be built into the organizations and the workforce ecosystem.

The study responds to calls for more research on industry-level employer attractiveness (King *et al.*, 2021; Van Hove *et al.*, 2022) and a macro-level lens on talent management (King and Vaiman, 2019). It contributes to the body of knowledge by adopting a workforce ecosystem perspective to understand employee attraction and retention in tourism and hospitality. In doing so, the paper extends the literature on employer branding by changing the focus from the brand as a standalone unit to the larger ecosystem. The ecosystem perspective has gained increased popularity in strategy, manufacturing and innovation (Fedele *et al.*, 2025). Still, it has only recently been applied to workforce structures (Altman *et al.*, 2023b), and studies focusing on the tourism and hospitality industry are lacking.

An ecosystems approach

Teece (2007) defines a business ecosystem as a “community of organizations, institutions, and individuals that impact the enterprise and the enterprise’s customers and supplies” (p. 1325). Adner (2017) states that “the ecosystem is defined by the alignment structure of the multilateral set of partners that need to interact in order for a focal value proposition to materialize” (p. 42). From the perspective of the individual organization, the community represents the environment it must monitor and react to; at the same time, the organization is part of a “shared fate” by being tied to the overall performance of the ecosystem (Jacobides *et al.*, 2018). The ecosystem perspective has not been widely applied in branding, yet it offers potential for branding in general (Cortez *et al.*, 2022) and employer branding in particular (Näppä *et al.*, 2025). Central to employer branding is the value proposition, which represents what the firm offers to its employees (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). In an ecosystem, actors jointly create a value proposition, as joint actions can yield greater outputs than the actors could on their own (Adner, 2017). Furthermore, Cortez *et al.* (2022) suggest that the individual actors are also associated with the brand image of that specific ecosystem, highlighting the need for collaboration. Thus, value creation in an ecosystem is achieved through complementarities and interdependencies among actors (Jacobides *et al.*, 2018; Kapoor, 2018), and reciprocity and relationships within the ecosystem lay the foundation for co-created brand meaning (Cortez *et al.*, 2022).

Based on the extant literature, Eriksson *et al.* (2022) applied the ecosystem perspective to the employer branding context, building on four characteristics that describe the nature of ecosystems: artifacts (outputs), actors, activities among them and the alignment of these activities. The following sections describe these characteristics, including how to integrate workforce ecosystems and employer branding.

Artifacts

Adner (2017) proposes that ecosystems and value creation begin with a value proposition. As indicated earlier, research has only recently started to address employer branding at the industry level, where the industry brand in terms of employment can be seen as the co-created output. The principles of the industry brand can be based on those of the employer brand, defined by Ambler and Barrow (1996) as “the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company” (p. 187). Hence, employer branding is a strategic people and talent management practice and tool that centers on the employment value proposition (EVP) (Reis *et al.*, 2021). EVP represents how a company wants to be perceived as an attractive employer (Theurer *et al.*, 2018). Since organizational resilience reduces employment risks, signaling resilience can be an important part of the EVP, thereby increasing employer attractiveness (Buzzao and Rizzi, 2024). Addressing this from a workforce ecosystem perspective, the involved actors together contribute to this value proposition (cf. Kapoor, 2018).

While King *et al.* (2021) noted that there is a limited understanding of the influences at multiple levels on attracting and retaining employees in the tourism and hospitality industry, recent research suggests that employees form an industry-wide perception of the EVP (Näppä *et al.*, 2025). Similarly, a study of the hospitality industry in a rural context suggests that the industry's overall image can be enhanced through strategic employer branding, thereby increasing the likelihood of attracting and retaining skilled workers (Innerhofer *et al.*, 2024). Näppä *et al.* (2025) conclude that a strong EVP for tourism and hospitality requires a collaborative, multilevel approach and collective action from all actors in the industry's ecosystem. Hence, the industry brand in the form of an employment value proposition can be viewed as an output (artifact) of the ecosystem. As Adner (2017) highlights, for the value proposition to materialize, it is key to identify the actors that enable it.

Actors

The ecosystem consists of multiple actors with different resources, motivations and overall goals, as well as a dedication to the ecosystem strategy (Adner, 2017). In the tourism and hospitality sector, actors include not only the individual organizations and their employees but also industry associations and educational institutions (King *et al.*, 2021). All these actors collectively affect and are affected by the industry's reputation. In addition, other stakeholders may play a significant role in creating attractive employment opportunities. Thus, focusing on attraction and retention strategies solely from an organizational perspective can be futile. The interdependence of actors within a given industry closely aligns with that of the workforce ecosystem. A workforce ecosystem is a structured way of viewing how value is created and considers the intricacies of planning for human resources in an organization (Altman *et al.*, 2022). The nature of different employment arrangements (full-time, part-time, gig and temporary) and hiring from third-party organizations creates both flexibility and complexity for an organization (Altman *et al.*, 2022). While it may allow organizations to respond

quickly to increased demand, this requires a pool of potential employees to draw from, highlighting that organizational resilience depends on access to actors within a workforce ecosystem.

Resource availability and social resources are key elements to creating organizational resilience (Duchek, 2020). Yet remote and sparsely populated areas face specific challenges in attracting and retaining staff. Such areas tend to experience high levels of mobility not only of staff but also of residents and visitors (Carson *et al.*, 2014). Due to the structural weakness of peripheral areas, even small changes in mobility “can profoundly alter the composition and structure of the various network connections that define communities” (Carson *et al.*, 2014, p. 354). These authors have proposed a framework identifying eight characteristics that define sparsely populated areas: diverse, distant, dependent, disconnected, discontinuous, dynamic, detailed and delicate. While it is out of the scope of this paper to discuss all these aspects, the *dependent* characteristic is particularly relevant from an ecosystem perspective. This revolves around the fact that communities in sparsely populated areas are often socio-economically dependent on government agencies and economically dependent on natural resource industries or the public service sector. Furthermore, these communities depend on external sources of human capital because there are too few people available internally or in nearby locations (Carson *et al.*, 2014). Recent research shows that employer and place attractiveness strategies are strongly connected, highlighting the need for actors to combine employer and place branding efforts (Laurin and Parent-Lamarche, 2024).

Activities

The co-created brand can evolve through careful alignment of activities and actors striving for legitimacy of the business ecosystem (Cortez *et al.*, 2022). In the tourism service ecosystems literature, drawing on the service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2016), service organizations create value for themselves and for the aggregated destination (Monferrer Tirado *et al.*, 2024). This highlights mutual value creation: each actor relies on the activities of competing actors to co-create the overall customer experience, making access to competent employees a collective objective. To attract and retain employees, the ecosystem actors involved also need to create an attractive offering through various activities. At the organizational level, employer branding can serve as a long-term strategy for developing and communicating this offering. Employer branding focuses on building a differentiated employer identity to attract and retain employees (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). According to Sheehan *et al.* (2018), employer branding outcomes can be improved through coherent talent management practices, highlighting the importance of competitive remuneration and training and development opportunities. Training and development of staff are important strategic activities that help develop employees' ability to respond to rapid changes (Gouda and Tiwari, 2022), thereby increasing organizational resilience. In addition, this has a positive impact on employee turnover and the quality of applications, thus making talent management more attractive to different actors (Sheehan *et al.*, 2018).

However, despite the importance of employee training and development, recent research by [Parding et al. \(2023\)](#) highlights challenges faced by tourism and hospitality firms. First, given high staff turnover, it is perceived as risky to invest in costly formal learning activities, as the competence may walk out the door soon after the investment has been made, leaving the business without the competence needed, but with funding spent. Second, as there is a more or less constant shortage of staff, it is also practically difficult to organize formal learning activities – there are often not enough staff to cover shifts. Third, because these businesses often operate 24/7, scheduling staff at the same time is challenging. And finally, in terms of informal learning, it becomes burdensome to constantly introduce new staff members, partly because of staff shortages and partly because the “stayers” are often left with this responsibility without any extra time, monetary rewards or other benefits. Resilience is often characterized as coping with the unexpected or proactively anticipating and preparing for such disruptions ([Duchek, 2020](#)). Yet actors in these industries seem to struggle with this at the organizational level.

Research has shown that employees in the tourism and hospitality industry are highly mobile, switching employers to gain experience ([Cassel et al., 2018](#)). Employers value this practical experience more than a formal educational background or experience from other industries ([Cassel et al., 2018](#)). This means there is an industry expectation that employees hop between employers to develop their skills. For this reason, it is important to consider how to retain and develop employees and skills within the industry, rather than focusing solely on this at the organizational level. However, such an approach requires aligning activities between different actors.

Alignment

Alignment refers to the “extent to which there is mutual agreement among the members” regarding their roles and activities, and for the value proposition to “materialize,” the actors must interact ([Adner, 2017](#), p. 42). It is vital to identify and close any gaps that may arise from activity-based challenges or from partners’ expectations ([Adner, 2017](#)). According to [Lengnick-Hall et al. \(2011\)](#), resilience depends in part on an organization’s ability to build networks and relationships, since critical resources often lie beyond its boundaries. This form of social capital fosters relational coordination and shared goals, while facilitating the exchange of resources and knowledge – factors that are considered to strengthen resilience ([Duchek, 2020](#)).

Applying this to the workforce ecosystem, [King and Vaiman \(2019\)](#) suggest that current efforts tend to focus on increasing the organization’s attractiveness. This, however, leads organizations to fight over the same employees rather than strategically expand the talent pool ([King and Vaiman, 2019](#)), highlighting a lack of alignment. Employer branding can be particularly challenging in areas with already limited workforces, such as peripheral regions. Hence, the focus of recruitment activities goes beyond discussing the uniqueness of employment experience within the organization or career opportunities in the tourism and hospitality industry. Instead, the focus is on talent attraction to the region, which requires coordinated efforts ([Eriksson et al., 2022](#)). This could also mean

incorporating aspects of place branding into the process. Thus, applying the ecosystem lens, the actors in the industry participate in activities at the organizational and industry levels and contribute to marketing the local and/or regional place. Creating a strong offering for current and potential employees requires aligning these activities to develop the value proposition: a holistic industry brand (i.e. the artifact).

Methodology

The empirical study takes an exploratory, qualitative approach to address the study’s aim. Qualitative research is appropriate “for understanding the world from the perspective of those studied (i.e. informants)” ([Pratt, 2009](#), p. 856). Previous research on workforce ecosystems is limited, particularly in incorporating employer branding and resilience. Therefore, it is important to understand the “hows” and the “whys” and develop a theoretical understanding of the area. Hence, we are not striving for generalization but rather providing insights into the challenges and opportunities for a resilient workforce ecosystem from the perspectives of key actors in the tourism and hospitality sector.

Study context

The study is situated in Norrbotten County in the northernmost part of Sweden. While it is the largest of the 21 Swedish counties, occupying almost a quarter of the country’s area, the population is the seventh smallest and has been stagnating or declining for many years ([Ekonomifakta, 2025](#)). The unemployment rate is low, and the average age is high ([Ekonomifakta, 2025](#)), creating additional challenges for employers seeking to meet recruitment needs. Estimates suggest that SMEs and the public sector in northern Sweden (including Norrbotten) will need to recruit almost 48,000 people and train/develop 39,000 within the next few years ([Kandel et al., 2024](#)). The green industrial transition is also estimated to generate up to 20,000 new jobs in Norrbotten, both directly and indirectly, by 2030, which will likely lead to skills and labor shortages in many sectors ([Utveckla Norrbotten, 2024](#)). Moreover, the area is geographically peripheral, with long distances to higher-density populated areas, which is another factor contributing to the staffing challenge.

Norrbotten’s challenges are similar to those in other parts of the European Arctic region. A recent report from [OECD \(2025\)](#) describes the Northern Sparsely Populated Areas of Finland, Sweden, and Norway as facing “declining populations, labor shortages, low firm density, [...] regional disparities in digital accessibility [...], shrinking working-age population, low innovation diffusion outside high-tech sectors, and infrastructure limitations” (p. 3). At the same time, the region has strong innovation potential. It is a leader in renewable energy production, offering opportunities for the green transition, in which industries are working to reduce greenhouse gas emissions significantly ([OECD, 2025](#)). The green transition and the area’s unique natural assets are also highlighted as leverage for potential growth in eco- and cultural tourism ([OECD, 2025](#)).

Tourism and hospitality are viewed as an “umbrella” industry encompassing many different types of businesses and

organizations. We adopt the definition by Bohlin *et al.* (2017), who state that the tourism and hospitality industry includes any actors that sell to customers whose purchases are regarded as tourism consumption. Tourism, in turn, is defined by UN Tourism (2026) as “a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes.” The largest number of tourism and hospitality employees in Sweden work in hotel and accommodation, followed by retail and food and beverage service (Tillväxtverket, 2025).

Sample and data

To explore the research problem, we conducted personal interviews with employers and other relevant actors with experience and knowledge of the tourism and hospitality industry. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was used to identify and contact potential participants, all based in Norrbotten, as earlier described. Using a maximum variation sampling approach (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), the researchers aimed to achieve a mix of informants representing various types of actors who could provide insights into the area of investigation. Hence, to gather perspectives from both the individual firm level and industry and societal points of view, the sample included entrepreneurs and managers, as well as people working in business development, recruitment, education and competence development in different capacities across a variety of firms and organizations. As the study was conducted from an employer/managerial perspective, the sample did not include employees such as front-line staff or seasonal workers.

In line with Saunders *et al.* (2018), sampling was considered completed when we reached data saturation, i.e. when new data tended to repeat what had been expressed in previous interviews. In total, we conducted interviews with 25 individuals – see overview in Table 1. It should be noted that, in addition to their roles in their respective organizations, nine participants were also part of a steering group connected to practical education in the tourism sector. All participants had extensive experience working in or with tourism and hospitality firms/organizations. To protect the integrity of the individuals, only the type of actor represented by each interviewee is indicated in the table.

The interviews were conducted via online conference tools such as Teams and Zoom, as the interviewees were geographically dispersed. An open-ended, semistructured interview guide was used to ensure that the same overall questions were covered across all interviews while also allowing probing. The questions covered the interviewee's views and experiences of the place, the industry and their organization, including employee attraction, development and retention, as well as employer and industry branding. The scope of the interview guide enabled the researchers to capture participants' perspectives on their individual organizations and the contexts in which they operate, thereby providing insight into how different actors were connected within the tourism and hospitality ecosystem. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 min, with an average of 45 min. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Two researchers then analyzed the data thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-step process, beginning with data familiarization and ending with report

Table 1 Interviewees

Respondent ID	Type of actor
R1	Business development consultancy firm
R2	Municipality
R3	Tourism and hospitality (T&H) company
R4	Destination marketing organization (DMO)
R5	T&H company
R6	T&H company
R7	Business park
R8	Business organization for entrepreneurs
R9	T&H company
R10	T&H company
R11	T&H company
R12	DMO
R13	T&H company
R14	DMO
R15	Recruitment and staffing company
R16	Municipality
R17	T&H educational organization
R18	Municipal association
R19	DMO
R20	Employers' association
R21	DMO
R22	T&H company
R23	T&H company
R24	T&H company
R25	Trade union

Source(s): Authors' own work

writing. After the initial coding, themes were identified and then reviewed and refined in discussions among the researchers. The headings in the Findings sections indicate the main themes that emerged. As Braun and Clarke (2021) point out, the analytical process can be viewed as a continuum between deductive and inductive. In this case, the analysis is grounded in the data, thus leaning more to the inductive approach. The interview transcripts were in Swedish, and to stay as close to the data as possible, the results were translated into English only in the last step of the process.

To enhance the study's trustworthiness, data were collected across different settings to capture variation; investigator triangulation was used to bring multiple perspectives to the analysis; and an audit trail was maintained, including recordings, notes, full transcriptions and documents related to the thematic analysis (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Follow-up and clarifying questions were used, and leading questions were avoided. Participants' accounts were represented through illustrative quotations to ground interpretation in the data. Transferability was supported by purposive participant selection to capture diverse experiences and by the provision of contextual information about the sampling and data collection (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Findings

The first two themes focus on the role of tourism and hospitality and on the industry's value proposition as described by the interviewed actors, including its relationship to the

specific geographical context of the study. This is followed by two other themes discussing the competitiveness of the industry value proposition and the regional talent pool and infrastructure. Finally, the “workforce ecosystem” theme centers on creating opportunities through ecosystem activities.

The role of tourism and hospitality in the business ecosystem in Northern Sweden

Tourism and hospitality are described as a key industry [1], for example, by this interviewee: “We are a key industry in the country, and perhaps even more so in the north. It is an industry that has a rather large turnover staff-wise and monetary-wise” (R6). Other interviewees share this view, for instance, by saying “We are the largest industry in the world” (R12). At the same time, several participants note that, even though the sector generates substantial revenues, it is not seen as an important or legitimate industry by others. This interviewee says people outside the industry do not seem to understand or acknowledge the industry’s influence: “I think that still, we are not treated as a real and important industry, but more of a ‘hobby industry’” (R12). In northern Sweden, mining and forestry are historically considered key industries, and it is within these sectors that the green transition is taking place. The mining industry is also described as a key competitor in terms of attracting and retaining staff, as the employment conditions, perhaps especially in terms of salary levels and employment security, are better than in tourism and hospitality.

Ultimately, the respondents point to complex, multilayered challenges with staff shortage stemming from:

- the current industry value proposition, including tourism employment and working conditions;
- competitiveness of industry value proposition in relation to competing industries;
- nonexistent talent pool in the region, and thus too few potential employees; and
- issues with local infrastructure such as housing and public services, as well as social embeddedness, which makes it challenging for newcomers to both come and stay.

These interviewee responses show the interconnectedness of actors in the industry and with other key actors in the region.

Current industry value proposition

Attract

Connected to “outsiders” view of tourism and hospitality, some highlight that the industry is sometimes seen as cool and exciting to work in, and that it does not deserve its poor reputation. However, there is a common perception of the industry as unattractive. This is mainly because of (real or perceived) poor working conditions, low salary and low status. As R16 puts it, “My perception is that everyone wants to have [the industry] and no one wants to work in it.” This also leads to the fact that employers cannot attract the most competent staff: “[...] the skills shortage is so great, you have no choice, and then you must take [...] those who lack the prerequisites” (R2). When asked to describe the industry in a few words, one interviewee says, “transfer – that people are on their way somewhere else” (R1). That is, employers largely see new staff

come and go, which is a cause for worry among all interviewees. R3 claims that:

This issue with competence supply and demand and staffing makes me concerned. There needs to be profound efforts, otherwise we will not have one adult Swedish person working in this industry.

Similar views are echoed by other interviewees who emphasize attracting competent staff and making them stay as the most important – and difficult – issue not only for the individual businesses but for the industry as a whole. One interviewee states:

It is not a problem to recruit young people to the industry; it is about making them see the potential to develop and make a career in the industry (R25).

As a solution, practical tourism education was launched, with tourism organizations participating in the steering group, demonstrating collaborative investments to attract new talent. This also demonstrates that organizations are taking an active role in fostering long-term resilience in the industry, even though they may not know whether it will pay off for the organization. While attracting new talent is important, retaining and developing employees is also crucial to increasing workforce ecosystem resilience.

Retain

Interestingly, a juxtaposition arises over whether the industry offers good conditions for employees to learn, develop and build careers. On the one hand, there are examples of interviewees who state that it is easy to advance, such as “If you are competent [and driven] enough, you may start as a dishwasher, and end as a hotel manager” (R11), and:

I don’t think everyone understands that it can be a pretty fast journey to advance within the tourism and hospitality industry. If you are competent, you can climb a few steps in a pretty short time (R9).

On the other hand, some interviewees describe an almost opposite view, expressing “You hit the ceiling pretty soon” (R8), as there are few levels from the floor to top management in many businesses. This interviewee contextualizes the possibilities for advancement in relation to the geography, saying that there are some limitations: “If you look at it from a Norrbottnian perspective, there are not heaps of positions to move upwards to, there aren’t, there is more production here” (R8). This interviewee further explains that, because the region is peripheral to larger cities, there are few higher-level positions to aspire to, which means working there can be a dead end. Hence, as this specific region has fewer job and advancement opportunities due to its small population and geographically peripheral location, potential and current employees may view tourism and hospitality as an industry with insufficient room to grow and develop or to build a career. This signals that context matters.

Finally, it is difficult for employers, particularly in small firms, to invest in staff training when turnover is high and staff are in short supply. As an employer, one may think, “with that turnover [...] on average they work maybe three seasons. [...] Should I as an employer finance training for guides? The payback on that is incredibly difficult” (R8). “In a business like this where you have a huge turnover of staff... it is only about keeping the nose above water all the time” (R3).

This interviewee argues that it is difficult to think about learning and development under these circumstances. Some of the interviewees also highlight that many firms lack someone

working specifically in human resources, and that routines and knowledge regarding competence development are often lacking. These findings may suggest that the organizations struggle to develop long-term, continuous capabilities to seize new opportunities and build on prior knowledge. Instead, resources are used for new recruitment and onboarding, rather than competence development and training.

Competitiveness of the industry value proposition in relation to competing industries

Attracting and retaining staff is challenging due to common employment conditions related to the industry's value proposition, as well as competing value propositions from other industries. In addition to the temporal aspects of short-term and seasonal contracts with large variations in demand for staff, tourism and hospitality companies and industries are associated with low wages. In comparison, other industries offer more competitive terms. Mining companies and other related industries in Norrbotten offer substantially higher salaries and often better employment conditions, such as full-time and permanent positions. For example, the median pretax full-time wage for a blue-collar worker in mining was SEK 49,100 per month in 2024, while it was 29,900 for a hotel receptionist and 29,500 for a waiter (SCB, 2026). It should also be noted that part-time jobs are predominant in tourism and hospitality (Patmalnieks, 2024), further reducing the competitiveness of salaries.

When referring to potential, current or former employees, one interviewee says that:

[...] they, of course, think that it is more interesting to find a mine [...], and the salary level is double that of a dishwasher in the tourism and hospitality industry (R8).

"To recruit a local [from the place] to come and work – that is almost hopeless" (R8). Hence, the local labor market in mining towns, in particular, makes it extremely difficult for tourism and hospitality companies to recruit locally, as they cannot compete with the salaries or job security offered there. The widespread use of short-term employment contracts in tourism and hospitality may prompt employees to seek more stable work in other industries. "There are many season-employment contracts, or short-term contracts and so on, so naturally there is less [employment] security" (R8). Another employer, who has an all-year-round business, says that their employees tend to stay, partly because they offer job security: "It is safe and secure here, for us there is no problem [with offering employment security]" (R5).

Regional talent pool and infrastructure

When it comes to the industry's conditions for prosperity, several participants note that the region is internationally attractive, with a strong destination brand. It seems that customer demand exceeds the industry's current capacity, and this shortfall stems from a lack of staff. Thus, the shortage of staff slows and hinders the industry's prosperity. There are even interviewees who claim that opening hours must sometimes be adjusted to address staff shortages, resulting in shorter hours than businesses prefer. Hence, the industry seems unable to build resilience and proactively innovate to create new customer experiences in the destination, despite high tourist demand.

Norrbotten county is geographically peripheral and has a population that is altogether too small to meet the demands of the labor market, not only in the tourism and hospitality industry. First, there are too few people in the region, which makes the competition for employees high within and across different actors in the ecosystem. One interviewee refers to a specific mining town, claiming they have "the lowest unemployment in the whole country" (R12). The unemployment rate in Norrbotten is the lowest in the country at 4.6%, compared to the national average of 8.4% in 2024 (Ekonomifakta, 2025). (Of those unemployed in the area, the majority are described as standing "far from the labor market" for various reasons). Another interviewee (R7) says, "We have so few people, so few people [to employ]." This entails a challenge for employers, sometimes leaving them short of staff altogether. Sometimes, the only option is to employ individuals who lack the necessary competence and may not perform well in the business. In smaller communities, the situation is especially severe. One interviewee points out that it is easier to recruit in the coastal region and the larger mining town.

Second, there is a problem attracting and retaining staff from outside Norrbotten, as housing is an issue in many parts of the region. It is difficult to find a place to stay, let alone a place that is not shared accommodation. This can cause potential employees to find other work opportunities, where their housing needs can be better met. For potential employees with partners, taking on a job may be even more of an obstacle if there is no possibility of housing of their own. "Where are they supposed to stay, unless they already have somewhere to live?" one interviewee (R23) asks, arguing that this is a big issue. "As it is now, we pack these young adults together in a flat, or a house, where they have to live in a collective."

The issues with housing and the creation of isolated communities have implications for additional aspects. One interviewee (R12) argues that this is not ideal for retention and local embeddedness. Hence, the possibility of participating in the local community is needed for individuals to feel at home and to want to invest their lives in and stay in the region. A job that one enjoys is not everything; life around work is just as important. Interviewee R23 describes a challenge for people from other parts of the country and immigrants to find their place in the local community. It can be difficult to find and become included in social contexts of interest and to find meaningful activities for all family members. One part of the problem thus lies in the fact that some even:

[...] move from the north because they don't become integrated [in the community]. ([...] Swimming school, football? If those parts don't work, parts that are not there in smaller communities[...]) ([...] People who move to [the place], work there, but then they move south again, because they don't feel like locals (R12).

This quote signals that attracting and retaining staff is about much more than offering a meaningful job with satisfactory working conditions – it is also about the local community being able to include and integrate newcomers. Interviewees also note that small places often lack adequate transportation and public services, such as schools, further reducing the attractiveness of employers in these locations. Thus, the value proposition includes elements that are beyond the control of individual employers or even the industry ecosystem.

Workforce ecosystem: creating opportunities through ecosystem activities

While the interviews mainly revolve around challenges in attracting and retaining staff, there are also examples of possible ways to, if not solve, at least ease these challenges. Apart from employment and working conditions, other factors can help attract and retain staff. The first is for employers to work together in various ways, the second is social embeddedness and the third is to intensify international recruitment.

First, several interviewees suggest that employers working together by sharing staff in various ways could be a way forward. An interviewee describes collaboration on an overarching level:

[Working in tourism and hospitality] can probably be quite volatile, it comes in large clusters, and it is very much about creating networks and working together with different actors to be able to build the most attractive offer possible. It feels like the tourism and hospitality industry works a lot with other companies, but also with the municipality and region (R15).

More concrete examples include that if two employers can only offer part-time jobs, they can offer the employee a full-time job by sharing the employment. This could build resilience in the ecosystem not only by retaining employees, so they do not need to seek work outside the industry, but also by fostering closer alignment with the ecosystem's actors.

Second, while staff competence is important for business prosperity, individual employers have not implemented efforts to increase it and the lack of training seems to have become an industry norm. The union representative (R25) expresses concern that employers do not prioritize competence development, as the long-term benefits are difficult to see. However, others view investment in staff training as a necessity regardless:

It's an industry where there is quite a high turnover of staff, and that's just the way it is, you just have to accept it. You can't just stop investing in or developing your staff for the sake of it; you must keep doing so. Then you know that they quit after a while, maybe (R6).

Participant R11 highlights the business benefits:

Competence development is not only important for the industry, but it also leads to other things as well. Having competent staff means better business for several reasons. One is that the staff becomes more efficient, the other is that I can actually charge more for my services.

This suggests an important opportunity at the organizational level, but it may be difficult to arrange alone and the need for it is industry-wide.

Another way for employers to work together is to collaborate across seasonal destinations, which would strengthen the workforce ecosystem by increasing staffing flexibility, enhancing job security for individuals and fostering additional ties and alignment within the industry. One interviewee says that organizing staff sharing between winter and summer destinations would require someone with a helicopter perspective, who could foster collaboration and synergy. Currently, this is lacking: "There is no collaboration between different summer and winter destinations" (R12). The same interviewee claims no actor works with this, yet it is needed. "Who is to think for everybody? That is an eternal question" (R12).

When it comes to collaborating more locally, solutions such as guide or driver pools are mentioned. It is suggested that greater collaboration, both locally and regionally, could make businesses more prosperous, as customers nowadays expect

solutions from A to Z. In one local community, the entrepreneurs have initiated a staffing agency, pooling staff among themselves: "We have even started up a staffing agency here, where we share freelancers between us as accommodation entrepreneurs" (R13). This interviewee describes how this makes the visit smoother for guests, as staff can now accompany them between different locations and activities.

Second, if collaboration between employers is central to retention, social embeddedness at the place is another, but related, factor. This is essential to making employees want to stay, especially those who are not from the region. One interviewee describes having worked with this, so that employees feel included and see that there are interesting things to do in their spare time. This means that the attraction and retention of staff is about much more than work; it is about being an attractive local community to live in. This line of argument is followed by another interviewee who says, "The challenge is to find staff that is locally anchored" (R10). Without that local anchorage:

[...] we know that at the end of the day, they never stay. So, therefore, it is important to find staff who are based locally, so to speak. They build their lives here (R10).

Finally, to fill vacancies, international recruitment activities are increasing and are described as important: "I don't think we can solve it [staffing problems] nationally, unfortunately. We need to get an international workforce" (R2). To do so, with acceptable retention rates, the social embeddedness described above seems key, as well as suitable housing and sufficient public services in the surrounding community. At the same time, an increasingly international workforce also creates new challenges: "I am very positive about foreign labor. I am, absolutely. But the language barrier is still a challenge, it really is" (R3). This suggests that offering employees courses in Swedish may also become necessary, placing increased demands on education providers (normally municipalities), which are also important actors in the workforce ecosystem.

Discussion and conclusions

This study aimed to identify challenges and opportunities for a resilient workforce ecosystem in tourism and hospitality. Findings suggest that attracting and retaining competent staff is a major challenge in the tourism and hospitality industry. This challenge has been amplified in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, which itself is an example of a major industry disruption. The study highlights that the way forward demands a new approach that looks beyond the organizational (micro) level. Moreover, firms in peripheral areas are struggling due to the overall labor market situation (low unemployment and an aging population) and infrastructure issues, such as a lack of housing. Thus, to achieve competitive advantage and workforce ecosystem resilience within the organization, actors must first create resilience at the meso and macro levels through interorganizational collaboration. This sheds light on the complexity of workforce ecosystems, which encompass actors and activities beyond the industry ecosystem. Table 2 outlines the actors, challenges and opportunities on these three levels.

This study highlights the impact of the regional context on talent management, both as a source of challenges and as a potential source of solutions. As Eriksson *et al.* (2022) also

Table 2 Summary of identified challenges and opportunities

Level	Actors	Challenges	Activity opportunities
Micro: Organizational	<i>Businesses</i>	High turnover Insufficient resources for development	Communicating advancement opportunities Offering training and development
Meso: Industry	<i>Competitors, industry organizations (staffing companies, trade unions, umbrella organizations and educational institutions)</i>	Seasonal work Negative image of industry Competition with other industries	Collaborative employment and sharing employees Industry brand communication Joint training
Macro: Business environment	<i>Local and regional DMOs, municipalities, counties and nonindustry competitors</i>	Shortage of workforce Shortage of housing Exclusion from the local community	Collaboration in international recruitment, marketing and job fairs Lobbying for political and regional change

Source(s): Authors' own work

suggest, collaborating on employer branding activities can help increase resilience and brand strength. This could, and should, take place in the ecosystem to strengthen not only the individual organizations but the ecosystem itself. Stronger actors, an improved regional image and a greater talent pool will create benefits at the organizational level. However, this requires alignment of actors in different levels of the ecosystem and their activities, as suggested by the ecosystem literature (Adner, 2017; Eriksson *et al.*, 2022).

On the business (micro) level in the tourism and hospitality industry, it seems challenging to offer good conditions for learning and development, largely due to high staff turnover, employees being tied up 24/7 and a general staff shortage. This becomes a major hindrance for organizational resilience: "If employees are too much involved into operational business and do not have the capacity to scan the environment, the organization would not be able to identify critical developments" (Duchek, 2020, p. 235). How can employers and other actors meet these challenges in a way that makes attracting and retaining staff easier? Having competent staff is considered essential for business prosperity and organizational resilience; therefore, making room and planning for training and development is necessary. Managing this within the larger ecosystem, in particular at the meso-industry level, is an opportunity, particularly for smaller firms that lack dedicated resources for competence development. Training employees is a crucial element for building organizational resilience, as frontline work requires them to adapt to the unexpected in the co-creation of value (Monferrer Tirado *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, visualizing and communicating the possibilities for advancement in the organization and industry is also important to counter the perception of "dead-end" jobs in tourism and hospitality. Consistent communication from multiple key actors can strengthen industry brand communication, leading to a stronger brand image, as suggested by Cortez *et al.* (2022).

Additional challenges at the industry level include seasonal work, a negative industry image and tough competition with other industries. These difficulties tend to be aggravated in sparsely populated areas, where businesses are often small. The findings of this study indicate that increased collaboration between various actors is an opportunity to help address the challenges. For instance, by sharing staff, individuals can be offered full-time, year-round employment. Moreover, by sharing training, learning and development activities and positions, the industry's work conditions can become more attractive, potentially making it easier to attract and retain staff.

It seems essential that businesses and organizations in the industry unite and see one another as collaborators rather than competitors. The tourism and hospitality industry depends on collaboration to create a holistic tourism experience that goes beyond the individual provider's offering (Monferrer Tirado *et al.*, 2024). The ecosystem perspective on employer branding, staff attraction and retention is beneficial as it broadens our understanding of competition. By analyzing the actors in the ecosystem, it is possible to identify other employers that potential employees may consider outside of the industry. In the northern, peripheral context of this study, the mining industry can compete for the same talent, highlighting the need for tourism and hospitality to build a compelling value proposition. This is supported in previous research, for example, by Manoharan and colleagues (2023), who suggest talent branding on the industry level.

At the same time, the industry and all individual actors are part of a greater macro business environment. In the study context, the green transition is putting northern Sweden on the map, offering great potential for tourism and hospitality organizations to collaborate with mining companies as well. Attracting outside talent to the mining industry can bring potential employees to the region in the form of accompanying spouses and families. As the place branding literature suggests, people are not only seeking a place to stay but also meaningful

experiences and leisure activities (Laurin and Parent-Lamarche, 2024). Thus, the availability of tourism and hospitality in any area is of utmost importance to other industries, and co-operation with these organizations can be very valuable for both parties to showcase the place's diverse offerings. Moreover, organizations across industries can lobby for solutions to infrastructure-related questions, such as housing. Businesses and organizations in tourism and hospitality play a major role in filling the place with attractive activities and offerings from a customer or visitor perspective. This can be particularly important in international recruitment activities.

Thus, building on Adner's (2017) definition of an ecosystem that highlights the value proposition as being central, and Hakansson and Snehota's (2024) work emphasizing the embeddedness of the organization in a larger network, this study shows that employer branding strategies to attract and retain employees must account for activities and actors beyond their organizational boundaries. Thus, finding relevant avenues for co-opetition is of utmost importance, within and across ecosystems. To drive change and build resilience, different types of actors should work together, but not all activities contribute to the industry's overall value proposition. Instead, some are approached between businesses and other industry players, while others require collaboration at a regional or municipal level. Figure 1 illustrates different types of actors and activities around which they can collaborate, as discussed throughout this section. Successful collaboration and co-opetition provide the conditions for a resilient workforce ecosystem, thereby strengthening also the individual organizations' resilience.

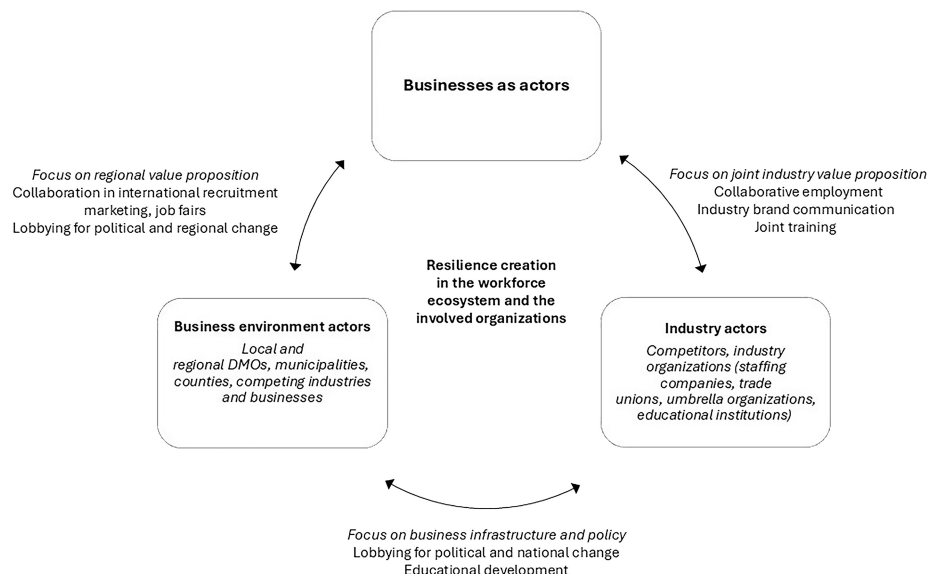
Implications for theory and practice

This study is positioned at the intersection between studies in tourism and hospitality, branding and work organization. Previous research (e.g. Baum *et al.*, 2020) has highlighted that the tourism and hospitality industry has long struggled to attract and retain employees, with short-term contracts often coexisting with the "gig economy" that has recently gained

popularity in other industries. We contribute with knowledge on how tourism and hospitality organizations can rethink their workforce and increase organizational resilience through co-opetition in the ecosystem, leading to a stronger industry value proposition. The concept of resilience is also important in employer branding: how can we attract, develop and retain employees who can anticipate and adapt to changes in the business environment? Co-opetition has been described as a strategically driven, paradoxical relationship that can operate on multiple levels, allowing firms to co-operate in some areas while competing in others (Virtanen and Kock, 2022). In a study of high-tech startups in China, Zhang and Li (2025) show that firms can increase their resilience by engaging in co-opetition in an entrepreneurial ecosystem. Such involvement can be an opportunity to address challenges experienced also in a very different setting, i.e. the tourism and hospitality industry in a peripheral area of northern Europe. Certain activities have been implemented by regional keystone actors in Northern Sweden. For example, collaboration between (competing) municipalities on international recruitment and newcomer welcoming, as well as industry-led business councils, demonstrates that collaboration is feasible. As seen in this study, the creation of new education programs in which tourism and hospitality companies actively participate demonstrates the existence of functioning initiatives aimed at increasing resilience in the ecosystem, aligning the actors without necessarily creating direct value for each actor. Similar initiatives could be developed to train existing employees to build their resilience capabilities, such as new service development that goes beyond customer service and hospitality knowledge.

The study context is a geographically remote area, with a low unemployment rate and difficulties attracting new citizens and ultimately the workforce, which makes it an interesting case for understanding resilience on an ecosystem level. Under these demanding circumstances, co-opetition seems necessary. Research on co-opetition is growing, but it seems focused

Figure 1 Actors and activities in the workforce ecosystem



mainly on manufacturing industries selling physical products (Meena *et al.*, 2023). In the study's setting, where tourism and hospitality employers compete with one another, they also collectively compete as an industry against employers in other industries (for instance, mining). As Duchek (2020) states, unexpected challenges and changes may arise from within or outside the organization. While the green transition is portrayed as positive for the future and the region, it creates even more difficulties for employers in tourism and hospitality to compete with other sectors due to factors such as low salaries, inconvenient working hours and short-term employment contracts. At the regional level, most of these employers are also facing similar issues with access to housing, leisure activities and public services, such as schools.

Moreover, there is a potential collision between place-brand images of untouched nature and those of heavy industry, which can create conflicts within the ecosystem. As Adner (2017) describes, in a successful ecosystem, all actors are satisfied with their positions, even if some might benefit more from specific actions. This becomes particularly interesting in place branding, where multiple industries may need to co-operate to attract people to the place. At the same time, these industries are competing with each other for employees, using their industry brands and within each industry, using their individual employer brands. This again highlights the complexity of co-branding and common value propositions. As described in the ecosystem literature (e.g. Adner, 2017), competition and co-operation will occur at multiple levels: to attract new talent to the region, it is not sufficient for companies to convey their own employer brand. They also may need to “sell” the place as a place to live.

In particular, tourism and hospitality firms serve as important building blocks of the place itself by offering leisure activities for those working and living in the region and directly contributing to the place brand and attractiveness. Thus, employers in other industries should also be interested in ensuring that sufficient leisure activities are available. Therefore, actors in tourism and hospitality need to find opportunities for collaboration within and co-operation outside the industry to align activities and create a resilient workforce ecosystem. Tourism and hospitality businesses could also collaborate with companies in other sectors, destination marketing organizations and municipal and regional bodies to communicate the place brand and the opportunities it offers to new inhabitants and potential employees.

Alignment of activities also means that an industry-wide employment value proposition can be developed as an ecosystem artifact (output). This value proposition should encapsulate how the tourism and hospitality industry would like to be perceived as an attractive employer (cf. Theurer *et al.*, 2018) by highlighting the package of benefits provided by employment and identified with the industry (cf. Ambler and Barrow, 1996). Building and retaining resilience within the organization and the workforce ecosystem can also signal an important benefit, increasing the industry's and businesses' attractiveness as employers (Buzzao and Rizzi, 2024). The ecosystem lens in employer branding is a growing area that shows potential (e.g. Eriksson *et al.*, 2022; Näppä *et al.*, 2025). Whereas Eriksson *et al.* (2022) focus on indirect social exchange behaviors in the business ecosystem, this study

contributes to understanding influences at multiple levels on attracting and retaining employees in the tourism and hospitality industry (King *et al.*, 2021). As such, it also responds to recent calls for research on multi-stakeholder perspectives on challenges faced by tourism companies and solutions through resilience building (Trupp *et al.*, 2025).

Limitations and future research

The current study is situated in a geographical and socio-demographical context that has a substantial impact on the actors involved. While this limits the applicability of the empirical results, it also underscores the need to consider the current state of society, societal change and labor market conditions in tourism and hospitality research and policy discussions. Studies of other rural, remote contexts are needed to highlight best practices and working solutions to address the challenges posed by the macro environment and to build resilience.

The empirical data consisted of personal interviews with 25 individuals representing different types of actors on the micro, meso and macro levels of the tourism and hospitality industry in northern Sweden. Many different types of questions were covered during the interviews, which were inductively coded. This exploratory study provides important insights into different perspectives within the ecosystem but naturally lacks generalizability. Larger-scale quantitative studies, or longitudinal, in-depth studies of ecosystem actors, are needed to examine further how collaborative networks form and how co-opetition occurs and evolves within them.

Note

- [1] The term “key industry” (or “basic industry”) refers to fundamental industries that constitute a substantial part of the nation's total economy. In Sweden, this has traditionally been forestry, farming, fishing and mining. Today, other sectors, including tourism and hospitality, also claim to be key industries.

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