



Changing Perspectives: An Employer's Branding as a Communication Tool during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: *Many companies and organizations in the labor market are facing "War for talents". In order to acquire new, and retain existing employees, and, at the same time, to be considered the best employer on the market, more and more organizations are building and managing their own brand of employer. The employer's branding is most often associated with the activities of Marketing and Human Resources management experts; but, in practice, it often turns out that in the process, an indispensable partner in building the employer's branding is ignored, i.e. communication experts. Therefore, in this article, we defend the position that employer branding is also a communication skill, which, however, needs to be adapted to the current situation in these turbulent times associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes digitizing and adapting employer branding communication to both the needs of target groups and the requirements of digital processes. Therefore, the paper examined the societal change in work norms caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, to contribute to a more successful and efficient branding of the modern employer as a form of strategic communication in both the virtual and hybrid work environments.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In order to attract new and retain existing employees, more and more organizations are building and managing their employer brand, which needs to differentiate themselves from the rest of the employers and employees (Knox and Freeman, 2006). Employer branding has emerged as an important tool to differentiate an organization from its competition. According to Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), in order for an organization to remain at the top of the most desirable employers in the minds of talented young staff, it must be different from others. An employer brand refers to those characteristics of an organization that distinguishes it from the competition, and that make it different and attractive for employment. Therefore, it is important for employers to try to identify the wishes of potential and existing employees, identify the appropriate communication channels, and find out how to convince them that they are the best suitable employer (Bali and Dixit, 2016).

Employer branding is recognized as one of the most effective tools to meet these challenges, as it has a positive impact on employee motivation and engagement, helping them to internalize the organization's values, and the organization's perception of potential employers and employees (Love and Singh 2011; Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). Organizations use employer branding to recruit new staff and ensure that existing ones are involved in the company culture and strategy (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Gabršček and Novak, 2017). Employer branding initiatives are directed towards both internal and external audiences, as retaining talent and recruiting talent

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have become crucial for remaining competitive in the marketplace (Saini, 2019, 653). The Universum study in 2018 found that 84% of organizations identified as the most attractive employer in the world are among the top priorities of organizations dealing with the employer brand (Tumasjan et al., 2020). According to Nath (2020), in this era, where there is a strong need for competitive strategy, every organization puts enormous effort into fulfilling employee expectations to make themselves the best employer on the market. In an organization, while people are seen as the company's most essential resource, the brand is seen as the greatest asset.

The purpose of the paper is to determine the importance of communication professionals for successful and effective branding of employers as a form of strategic communication and to examine the social changes in work norms caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The labor market is changing dramatically due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. EMPLOYER BRANDING AND BRANDING ALIGNMENT

The term employer branding was first coined by Ambler and Barrow (1996, p. 187) and defined as a package of functional, economic and psychological benefits of employment that we associate with the employer. Employer branding tells us how existing and potential employees perceive an organization (Edwards, 2005). This growing realization about the importance of attracting the right employees at the outset has prompted scholars to suggest that these objectives can be attained through the development of an employer's brand. Such an approach can help to differentiate the firm to prospective candidates, and nurture the perception that it is a desirable environment to work in. Through employer branding activities, organizations can attract the caliber of employees needed to improve performance (Foster et al., 2010, p. 408). It reflects a view of its differentness from its competitors, and tells what makes it attractive as an employer (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004).

Employer branding is the process of creating an identity and managing the image of an employer or business organization. It communicates what career expectations are in terms of promotion, diversity of work and relationships between workers (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). It contributes to better communication with potential employees; retaining existing employees, thereby reducing employee departure costs, and improving employee engagement and company culture (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Barrow and Mosley, 2005). It encompasses the functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by a company to its workforce (Foster, et al., 2010, p. 408). Employer branding is a method for a company to attract high potential talent in the labor market (Kurniawan et al., 2020). Furthermore, employer branding is a conceptual framework that combines two different domains, which are - Human Resources (HR) and Marketing. It creates a differentiating factor for an organization in a competitive market (Nath 2020). The process of creating an employer's brand involves building and recognizing the unique identity of the employer, and managing it involves designing and using a variety of tools to influence brand perception among potential employers and employees. According to Nelke (2021), building and fostering an attractive employer brand helps organizations inspire and attract the right employees, and ensures that employees identify strongly with their employer.

An employer branding strategy is focused on maintaining employee loyalty through engagement and commitment based on employee support and connection (Sánchez, 2015). By engaging employees in the strategy, they create deeper emotional attachment among the employees, while being more motivated, productive (their key to the strategy is up to 43 percent more

productivity) and have more will to achieve the goals (Pompe, 2017). Applying this concept to employer branding, we define employer branding orientation as an approach in which the Human Resource Management processes revolve around the creation, development and protection of employer brand equity in an ongoing interaction with potential and incumbent employees, to achieve sustainable competitive advantages in the labor market (Tumasjan et al., 2019, p. 85).

The goal of identification with brand, values and organizational culture is to transform the organization into a “second home”, where employees feel good and fulfilled (Sánchez, 2015). Employer branding orientation affects both recruitment efficiency and positive affective climate directly (Tumasjan et al., 2019). The employer brand, therefore, puts employees at the forefront as the essential capital of the organization. Ensuring employee satisfaction is essential for the organization (Yalim and Mizrak, 2017); after all, our “representatives” of the organization are the employees, and they play an important role in attracting staff. Therefore, we first build the employer brand from the inside out. First, values must be internalized by leaders and “lived” with (Love and Singh, 2011). Organizational values are a core element of employer branding that help organizations to communicate to potential and existing employees who they are and what they stand for, because they reflect what is important to an organization, and serve as an indicator of a general standard of conduct. They demonstrate what an organization stands for and what employees can expect from it (Weske et al., 2018). Employee behavior following organizational values is related to the management of their personal goals by employees (Edwards, 2005), so organizations need to align business goals with personal goals (Smolla and Sutton, 2002). It is, therefore, crucial to align employee values and align them with organizational values, which are the basic building blocks of organizational culture, and represent competitive advantage and a tool for deepening employee loyalty, and, above all, promote a positive image of the organization.

Employers who often find themselves in the Most Wanted list create a unique work environment for employees that promote key organizational values such as honesty, integrity, respect, collaboration and trust and ensures open two-way communication with all employees (Love and Singh, 2011). Communication is thus one of the most important components of employer brand management, which is difficult to establish. According to Nurmi and Varis (2021), employees typically work in an organization for money, and the basis for long-term employer-employee relationships is difficult to build.

However, we must not forget about branding alignment. Foster et al. (2010) maintained that consistency between corporate branding, internal branding and employer branding is essential. The use of these terms is often confused; nevertheless, both the employer and the internal brand work together to form and maintain the new employer's perceptions of the employer's promises. In both cases, message consistency is crucial. This enables a ‘psychological contract’ to be created, and, together with the components of internal branding, can reduce the number of employees and increase brand loyalty and brand identification, thus creating a foundation that supports the co-creation of brand value (Saleem and Iglesias, 2016). Therefore, it must be considered that the employer brand and the corporate brand are highly interconnected (Hoppe, 2018). According to Foster et al. (2010), different researchers also suggest that alignment fosters closer working relations between the HR and marketing functions, and note the positive impact on organization performance and brand strength. On the other hand, the inconsistencies that occur when the corporate brand and employer brand are misaligned inevitably trigger doubts among the general public that can impact negatively upon employee satisfaction, brand credibility and competitiveness.

3. EMPLOYER BRANDING AS A TOOL OF COMMUNICATORS

Communication is one of the most important activities in an organization, since its operation is based on effective relationships, and is crucial in the processes of socialization, decision-making, problem solving and change management (Berger, 2014). Effective communication is also associated with increased employee satisfaction, productivity and efficiency (Gray and Laidlaw, 2004). Satisfaction also affects the remaining employees in the company, but because the company needs new employees, the job characteristics that are crucial for employee satisfaction must be communicated properly to the external public.

According to Berger (2014), inefficient communication is characteristic of organizations with low levels of employee trust, engagement and performance. Such problems may be due in part to the unwillingness or inability of managers and communicators to engage in research and best practices in the areas of leadership, organizational culture and communication needs of employees. Strategic communication enhances the performance of individuals and the organization by meeting the needs of employees, which is only possible with a solid foundation that rests on capable and communicative leaders and rich communication culture.

According to Miles (2005), employees are the most critical stakeholders in organizations. As brand ambassadors, they can support organizational values through interaction with customers and other public, and, consequently, have a positive impact on business results. As the model (Figure 1) shows, organizational goals and values are the foundations of the employer branding process, as they provide a reason for the company to exist and provide insight into the way it operates. The mission and values of the organization are the foundation upon which the desired brand image is defined. The messages conveyed within the organization must reflect the mission, values and desired image of the organization clearly. They should also communicate the behaviors and attitudes that the organization views as important and that they expect from employees. It is crucial that messages are designed proactively and transmitted regularly through all messaging channels so that the employee branding process is also effective.

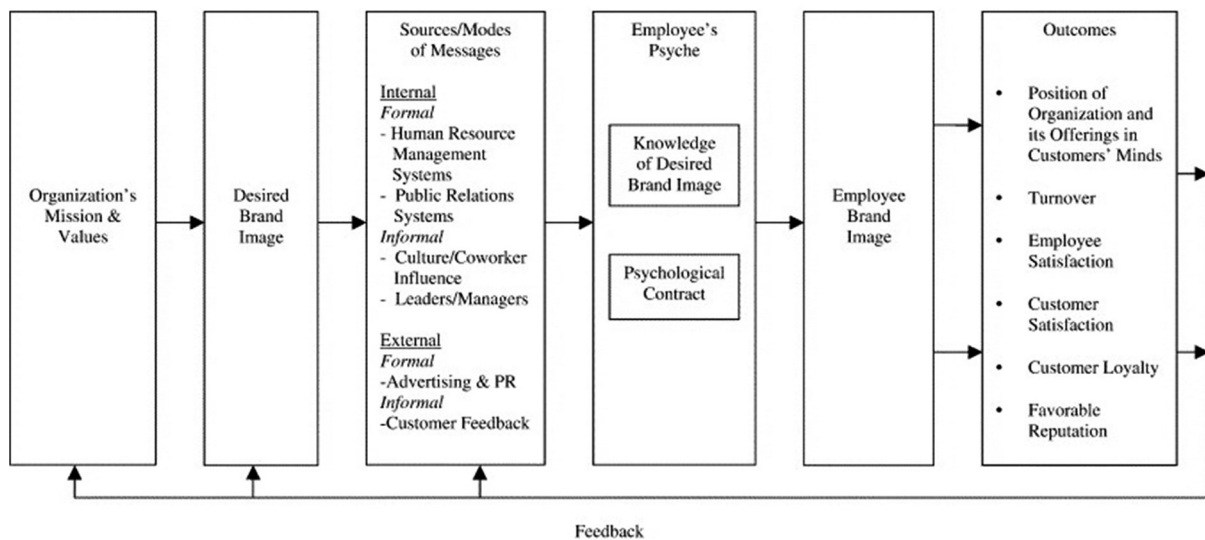


Figure 1. Employer brand management
 Source: Miles and Mangol (2004)

The individual steps of implementation and management of the employer brand (in the model mentioned above) show that the area of management of the employer brand is distinctly interdisciplinary. Employer branding can also be considered from the point of view of strategic communication, or purposeful use of communication of an organization in order to fulfil its goal, political affiliation and social campaigns, according to Hallahan et al. And according to Petrucci (2018), corporate communication is a strategic function that solves organizational problems when a company faces poor quality job applicants, multiple employee departures, and poor response. At that time, the collaboration of experts in HR communication and management was crucial. The employer brand must be strategic and flexible enough to evolve; it is an ongoing process of creating a brand through a coordinated plan, implemented jointly by corporate communications and HR. Through an employer branding strategy, important objectives can be set for an organization as an employer, which all affect the image of the employer in the eyes of current and potential employees (Nurmi and Varis, 2021).

Neill (2014) ranked Public Relations among the key elements of the employer brand development process. Public Relations professionals can be a key element in designing and managing an employer's brand and company reputation, but this potential often remains untapped. Public Relations professionals are especially helpful in formulating strategic communication plans and in disseminating key messages. Their job is to prepare communication campaigns in accordance with defined communication channels, and to prepare appropriate messages to inform the stakeholders about the mission, values and desired image of the brand, thus enabling employees to learn and understand the vision of the organization. Public Relations professionals know how to communicate effectively by integrating the receivers into communication. However, this does not mean that Public Relations should only be involved in the branding process when the brand is communicated. It should already be involved in the planning phase, when the values of the organization are just being determined, as well as in the evaluation phase of communication, by conducting surveys and qualitative research (Neill, 2016). It would also be necessary to involve communicators in the very process of selecting, recruiting and directing staff, that is, at the stages when employees are only familiar with the core values of the company and organization and its ethical policies (Neill, 2016; Martin et al., 2005).

The intricacy of communication professionals and the employer brand is also evident in the use of social media, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Organizations leverage the power of social media, and create engaging video content and audience segmentation to be effective in promoting their employer brand (Bali and Dixit, 2016). Not surprisingly, social media are at the top of the list of channels where more and more money is being invested to reach talent. Social media are a great EB communication tool, as they offer a variety of direct communication options, such as posts, video content, private messages. Engaging employees on social media all contribute significantly to a successful internal brand (Jiang, 2014). An employer brand can be communicated in many ways, but, most often, it is still the website that represents the first contact of a potential employee. The intranet can enhance employee engagement greatly when using tools such as a forum. Martin et al. (2005) and Tumasjan et al. (2020) also highlighted the importance of career websites, social networks, blogs and other online digital platforms. Due to their strong communication skills, Public Relations professionals can make an important contribution to the development of promotional materials and videos to promote ethics and values (Neill, 2016).

Brand communication is focused on the internal and external goals of the public.

Although a company's brand focuses primarily on external stakeholders, communication with the internal public is crucial in ensuring brand value (Mokina, 2014). The consistency of these messages is important, as it influences perceptions among employees, potential employees, and consumers positively, and, more importantly, ensures that employees are aligned with the brand and its presentation (Knox and Freeman, 2006; Miles, 2004). Moroko and Uncles (2008), assessed the accuracy and coherence of internal communication as a key aspect of the brand process. According to Sánchez (2015), communicators can take advantage of internal communication channels to inform about a comfortable work environment in the company, and career and career opportunities based on effort and talent. Through internal communication channels, they can spread personal stories or testimonies, and create personal values that are worth mentioning, thus fostering a sense of belonging and pride among employees.

Internal communication is one of the fastest growing specializations in Public Relations, and is gaining attention again due to a number of factors, including the growth of the employer brand (Moroko and Uncles, 2008), job insecurity caused by the recession (Gallup, 2013), and expected and growing labor shortages (Moroko and Uncles, 2008). Effective internal communication can lead to greater employee commitment and loyalty (Sharma and Kamalanabhan, 2012). An appropriate internal communication policy, which includes the benefits of work and its conditions, can have a positive impact on employee performance and development; the goal is employees who will not only feel satisfied with their salaries or performance of their duties, but also with the climate, culture, messages, identity, and purpose of the organization (Sánchez, 2015).

In the context of employee brand communication, Public Relations efforts should focus on both employees and external stakeholders. The purpose of an employer's external brand communication is to differentiate between competing organizations. Formal external sources of communication include advertising and Public Relations and provide information about the organization and an image of the brand to a wide range of external stakeholders (Miles, 2004).

4. THE BRAND AS A COMMUNICATION TOOL DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the labor market dramatically. According to me (Ernstsson, 2021), the labor market has shifted to increasingly digitalized and remote forms.

While, before the pandemic, most employees worked in the office, many employees are now experiencing hybrid jobs and accelerated digitization in the workplace. These changes require new management concepts and individual support for each employee, and, of course, a new way of communicating. Similarly, changes in the employer's company brands need to be changed and adapted to the new situation. However, many companies must first adapt to the current situation. This includes the resolute digitization of employer brand processes, and, last but not least, the adaptation of employer brand communication to both the needs of target groups and the requirements of digital processes (Nelke, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic was a turning point for society, both in social life and internally in an organizational environment that fostered technological development and digitalization, as well as a structural change. (Ernstsson, 2021) And, last but not least, communication. As suggested by Nelke (2021), managers need to pay more attention to some key points, so that employees will monitor changes so that they are not overburdened and remain engaged in the organization. One of them is also clear and consistent communication, as transparency is needed.

A survey was conducted among various experts in companies on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the employer's brand. According to Nelke (2021), many experts cited budget cuts in their area as acute issues, due to the economic changes brought about by the COVID-19 crisis and the rather limited number of staff. In most cases, recruitment procedures have been restored, which poses the problem that the growing workload needs to be managed with a now smaller budget. Overall, almost all, respondents stated that getting new employees and retaining existing talent was becoming increasingly difficult. In some industries, competitors are very active, especially through the use of social media, so employers' brand experts fear that their company would be at a disadvantage in the "war for talent". Respondents perceived the employer's brand as a team effort involving Human Resources, Corporate Communication, Marketing and, if any, the Employment Department. Because working from home, teleworking, and online events are the new standard, this teamwork sometimes proves to be more difficult than before. Acquiring content and images from the workplace for employer brand activities is also time-consuming, and requires more preparatory work and coordination. The lack of direct communication with investors has been described as one of the main challenges of COVID-19 measures. Events and Fairs for target groups of apprentices, students and young professionals were particularly lacking. This is surprising, as it is precisely these target groups that typically visit various social media sites and can be targeted there as well. Respondents broadly agreed on the vital importance of an employer-targeted brand strategy during COVID-19: Appropriate channels and a carefully tailored approach are key to the success of employers' brand activities, especially in times of growing online communication. It seems that most companies still need professional campaigns.

According to Nelke (2021), there were many challenges for the employer brand during the COVID-19 pandemic: The brand of the employer of your company in the future. This results in less recognition of the employer's brand and poorer return on applications - both in terms of quantity and quality. Therefore, experts believe that it is especially important that the processes of fundamental change take place in companies. The employer brand needs to be approached more decisively and more strategically, and with a much greater emphasis on the digital corner. This requires time, transparency and resources. In the future, more personal, virtual forms of recruitment and communication with employees will be available. Agile work and the stronger involvement of existing employees in the processes will lead to greater job satisfaction, which will then have a positive impact on the employer's brand. The messages they send to applicants should be more awareness-oriented, and companies should map and streamline the path of candidates more clearly. Targeted cooperation with universities can also help to make a company visible as a potentially attractive employer at an early stage. The professional and successful brand of online employers includes various forms of online events, live chats, chat rooms in the selection process, and ongoing, integrated activities on social media channels. These pathways and tools should be documented in a strategic plan, and complemented by a thematic plan. In this process, the employer's brand is entirely under the auspices of the company's brand, and does not violate any new "communication ground". This is the only way to ensure consistent communication of the overall image of the company, and to create a unified image between the target groups. In practice, it is essential to convince supervisors that, without an employer's professional brand, future requirements for the company cannot be met. To prevent this development, all employer brand processes need to be tested and digital tools used.

5. CONCLUSION

As we have shown in the paper, the employer's brand is undoubtedly a communication skill. Nevertheless, market, personnel and management aspects are most often mentioned in the scientific literature, and communication is mentioned only indirectly. Public Relations professionals are a key element in the design and management of an employer's brand. They are especially useful in creating strategic communication plans, and implementing them through defined and carefully selected communication channels by disseminating messages that communicate the mission, values and desired image of the brand. They play the most important role in the planning phase, when the values of the organization are still being established, and in the involvement in the process of personnel selection, recruitment and guidance, i.e. in the phases when employees are just learning values and ethical standards. The importance of involving communication experts is also evident in their use of different digital platforms, which was especially evident during the pandemic, when we were witnessing increasing digitalization. Namely, a great digital platform also plays an effective role in the branding of employers. Competition in attracting qualified professionals is growing, as the attractiveness of the company to (potential) employees is becoming more important than the attractiveness of consumers. Organizations are focused increasingly on building a strong employer brand that reflects their values and goals, and is hiring professionals increasingly in this area as well. At the same time, there is a growing mindset about the employer brand as a connecting task involving HR, Marketing and Corporate Communication functions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also caused many changes in the labor market. However, companies can take advantage of this situation as an opportunity to raise awareness of the brand image as an employer (Kurniavan et al., 2020), with the aim of contributing to a more successful and efficient employer brand as a form of strategic communication in both the virtual and hybrid work environments.

Due to the pandemic, it is obvious that virtual meetings and the acceleration of digitalization will continue to change the way many businesses operate. This development highlights the urgent need for companies to professionalize the brand of their external and internal employer through online channels and adapt it to teleworking. Therefore, it is crucial for companies to revise their existing employer brand strategy, or create a brand plan for the employer that includes tools online and offline (Nelke, 2021).

According to Ernstsson (2021), a fruitful definition of the brand of a successful employer is one that encompasses and internalizes a deep understanding of modern society through a late modern view of work as a crumbling social institution and an employer's brand that adapts accordingly. Based on this assumption, it manages to build strong relationships between the employer and the employee.

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