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New Strategic Role for HR: Leading the Employer-Branding Process

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ABSTRACT
Increasingly, organizations are focusing on the implications of their employer brands and the processes that will differentiate them from competitors in order to offer a more attractive place for top talent to work. In this article, we begin by reviewing constructs in marketing, human resources (HR), and industrial–organizational (I/O) psychology, many of which are closely related, that have been invoked to refer to the broad topic of employer branding. Following that, we review research findings in strategic human resources management as a basis for guiding and informing the employer-branding process. HR typically views processes in recruiting, on-boarding, training, performance management, and rewards separately and at the tactical/execution level. The role of strategic HR, however, is to consider these processes as a set to promote a positive employer brand. We conclude with action steps for organizations and key issues for HR/organizational behavior (OB) scholars to address in developing and improving employer brands.

KEYWORDS
Employer branding; organizational image; organizational reputation; social networks; strategic HRM

"Image is everything"—1990 advertising slogan for Canon EOS Rebel camera

Almost 20 years ago, the term "employer branding" became an important addition to the lexicon of human resource management. Since then there has been a great deal of attention devoted to the topic. Increasingly, organizations are focusing on the images that their employer brands convey, and the processes that will differentiate them from competitors, in order to offer a more attractive place for top talent to work. In this article we begin by reviewing constructs in marketing, human resources (HR), and industrial–organizational (I/O) psychology, many of which are closely related, that have been invoked to refer to the broad topic of employer branding. Following that, we review research findings in strategic human resources management (SHRM) as a basis for guiding and informing the employer-branding process. We argue that HR typically views processes in recruiting, on-boarding, training, performance management, and rewards separately and at the tactical/execution level. The role of strategic HR, however, is to assume primary responsibility for internal employer branding, and to consider these processes as a set of mechanisms to promote a positive employer brand. Based on our review of some key research findings in each of these areas, we recommend action steps for organizations and several key issues for HR/OB scholars to address in developing and improving employer brands.

Background and overview

The term "branding" originates from marketing. There are many studies on that topic in the marketing literature. According to the American Marketing Association, a brand is a "name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers" (n.d.).

"Branding" offers a number of valuable advantages. It clarifies to customers what a product does and why customers should care. It provides meaningful differences between products and services available to customers. Finally, it creates mental structures that help customers organize their knowledge about products and services and simplifies their decision making (Cascio, 2014).

From a customer's perspective, brands simplify choice, increase trust, reduce risk, and promise a particular level of value (Keller, 2012). In addition, the payoffs from well-known brands are significant (Kotler & Keller, 2009). They include higher profit margins, higher perceived quality, consistency and reliability, resilience to product or service failures, resilience to competition, stronger customer loyalty, higher recognition and awareness, and less price elasticity (Cascio, 2014).

When someone thinks of brand, it is usually a product, but many things can be branded, including organizations. In 1996 Amber and Barrow defined the term "employer brand" as "the package of functional (developmental and/or useful activities), economic (material or monetary

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reward), and psychological (feelings such as belonging, direction, and purpose) benefits provided by employment and identified by the employing company" (p. 186). Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) defined employer branding as "the process of building an identifiable and unique employer identity, and the employer brand as a concept of the firm that differentiates it from its competitors" (p. 502).

From their inception, corporate branding efforts have focused on consumers of a product or service, and these efforts have been led by the marketing function. Building on that literature, Amber and Barrow (1996) and Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) recognized early on the value to employers of building distinct identities that would appeal to employees, potential employees, and customers. They recognized the role that HR could play in the branding process, and the value that HR might add to the overall branding effort. To date, however, there have typically not been strong connections between corporate branding efforts on the marketing side, and employer branding efforts from the perspective of strategic HR. This article focuses on the latter, and it identifies specific roles that marketing and strategic HR play in the branding process.

King (1973) distinguished a brand from a product, stating that "a product is something that is made in a factory; a brand is something that is bought by a customer" (p. 37). In the case of an employer brand, the product is the employer, and the brand is the impression of what current and prospective employees believe the employer to represent.

How do employees talk about a company? How do they describe what it means to them? There are many ways to describe what makes a company attractive to current and potential employees, and why employees work for a specific company. An employee's desire to stay at a company often (but not always) implies that the company means something to that employee. As will become clear in the following paragraphs, writers and researchers have developed a number of constructs to help refine the broad concept of a brand.

Relevant constructs from marketing, HR, and I/O psychology

Brand image is a "set of associations linked to the brand that consumers hold in memory" (Keller, 1993, p. 2). Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) discussed employer brand image in a similar way, stating that "functional benefits of the employer brand describe elements of employment with the firm that are desirable in objective terms, like salary, benefits, and leave allowances. Symbolic benefits relate to perceptions about the prestige of the firm, and the social approval applicants imagine they will enjoy if they work for the organization" (p. 505).

> *Employer image* is an amalgamation of transient mental representations of specific aspects of a company as an employer. An image (a) is held by individuals (versus the general public), (b) might fluctuate (versus being relatively stable), (c) targets specific aspects (versus an overall impression), and (d) is cognitive in nature. . . . (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016, p. 409)

> Employer images help applicants to distinguish among employers. Positive images result in applicant pools that are larger and of higher quality, lead to quicker decision making and a stronger emotional bond, and are associated with higher organizational financial performance. (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016, p. 434)

Brand associations are thoughts and ideas that a brand name suggests in customers' minds (Aaker, 1991). Following that definition, *employer brand associations* are the thoughts and ideas that an employer's brand suggests in the minds of employees or potential employees.

Brand loyalty describes how a consumer feels about a specific product and service (Keller & Lehmann, 2003). It is the attachment that a customer has to a brand (Aaker, 1991). According to Backhaus and Tikoo (2004),

> employer branding creates two principal assets—brand associations and brand loyalty. Employer brand associations shape an employer's image that affects its attractiveness to potential employees. Employer branding impacts organization culture and organization identity that, in turn, contribute to employer brand loyalty. Employer brand loyalty contributes to increasing employee productivity. (p. 504–505)

It is therefore important for organizations to understand how their employees feel about their companies, their supervisors, and their co-workers. Do they feel encouraged and supported? Do they feel valued? Are they proud to be employees of their company? "Effective employer branding takes a proactive approach by identifying desired brand associations and then striving to develop these associations" (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, p. 506), for instance, by offering benefits such as career flexibility and opportunities for advancement.

Research has shown that employees consider their organization's employer brand to be more attractive when the organization as a whole is perceived to be successful, when they value the attributes of the organization's product or service, and when they view its external image as being attractive (Maxwell & Knox, 2009). An *organization's reputation* is a set of socially constructed characteristics, defined by the organization's previous actions (Weigelt & Camerer, 1988) and future prospects (Dowling & Moran, 2012; Sivertzen, Nilsen, & Olafsen, 2013). An organization's reputation plays a significant role in how attractive an organization will be to potential applicants. "Potential recruits are more likely to apply for a job at a particular organization that has an existing positive company reputation. The greater a company's reputation, the more attractive it tends to be to potential recruits" (Edwards, 2010, p. 8).

Research has shown that it is essential for firms to present accurate (Cable, Aiman-Smith, Mulvey, & Edwards, 2000) and authentic (Martin, 2008) representations of the firm and the employment experience. If we consider a brand as a promise (Feldwick, 1991; Ind, 2004; Kapferer, 2004), then an employer's brand is also a promise to employees that needs to be kept. Successful employer brands portray an organization accurately, and then consistently deliver the promise of the brand (Moroko & Uncles, 2008).

To illustrate, consider the following scenario. A firm advertises maternity and paternity leave options and emphasizes work–life balance. Based on that information, a prospective employee (John) applies to the firm. After he begins work, John realizes that the culture of the organization does not support those who take any time off, even for maternity or paternity leaves. This message is not verbally communicated to John, but it is something that he clearly senses when he learns that his supervisor, Sally, who is considered to be highly productive and successful, did not take more than a few days off after she had her baby. John clearly experiences cognitive dissonance, and realizes that his firm did not keep its promise.

Research (Davies, 2008) has shown that if employees trust their employer, and find the employer to be supportive and open, then they will be more satisfied. Moroko and Uncles (2008) showed that the employer brand is strengthened when the consumer-based promise and the corporate vision of the firm are aligned with the personal benefits offered to employees. These might include, for example, working conditions, hours, holiday entitlements, work–life balance, child care arrangements, training, perks, and other inputs to job satisfaction, commitment, and employee engagement. While focusing on keeping their promises, organizations need to have a distinctive message that fits their objectives and strategy. Indeed, Maxwell and Knox (2009) showed that the attributes employees consider most attractive can be different in each organization. Just as different products are beneficial for different people, not all employees are looking for the same offerings. An organization should focus on creating a distinctive brand that reflects its own strategy and culture.

Brand equity, as used in the marketing literature, is a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers (Aaker, 1991). In monetary terms, it is the premium that a consumer is willing to pay for a branded product or service compared to a generic one, for example, Doritos tortilla chips versus a supermarket brand. Market researchers then use cost-of-capital and return-on-capital figures to calculate the value of the asset (the brand's reputation) that produces the premium (Stewart, 1997). In the context of employer branding, brand equity increases potential applicants' desire to apply for work at an organization, and it reinforces the commitment of current employees to stay with and support that organization (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). In theory, the extent to which the brand contributes to attracting and retaining employees constitutes the equity associated with the employer brand (Wilden, Gudergan, & Lings, 2010). *Brand value* is "created when the customers and/or potential employees" (Love & Singh, 2011, p. 177) have a "high level of awareness of the brand; strong, positive, and unique brand associations; positive brand attitudes; intense brand attachment and loyalty; and a high degree of brand activity" (Keller & Lehmann, 2003, p. 29). Table 1 summarizes these constructs. As is obvious from the table, there is much overlap across them, for example, employer brand, organizational identity, and organizational reputation. To a large extent this may be due to the fact that the constructs originated in different fields. Nevertheless, there is a great need for construct-oriented evidence of validity to help clarify and deepen our understanding of the interrelationships and interactions among them.

Construct-oriented evidence includes qualitative as well as quantitative methods. Qualitative research plays an important role in contributing to and supplementing researchers' understanding of behavioral phenomena, but it should not replace quantitative research. As Lee, Mitchell, and Harman (2011) noted, qualitative research addresses questions such as what is occurring, how is it occurring, and what constructs should I evoke to explain it? New constructs linked together in new ways often produce novel theoretical insights. In contrast, quantitative methods that include probabilistic sampling and statistical inference are better suited to model empirically the relationships among constructs. Empirically derived conceptual frameworks based on methods such as structural equation modeling explicitly consider the interrelationships among constructs (Chan,

Table 1. Constructs associated with the concept of a brand.

Brand: A "Name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers." (American Marketing Association, n.d.)
Brand associations: Thoughts and ideas that a brand name suggests in customers' minds (Aaker, 1991).
Brand loyalty: How a consumer feels about a specific product and service (Keller & Lehmann, 2003).
Brand identity: "The part of the brand that can be vocalized."(Kotler, 1991, p. 442). "Other components of brand identities are brand logos and symbols" (Keller, 1993, p. 3)
Brand image: "The set of associations linked to the brand that consumers hold in memory" (Keller, 1993, p.2). "Perceptions about a brand, as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer's memory" (Keller, 1993, p. 3)
Brand name awareness: "Likelihood that a brand name will come to mind and the ease with which it does so" (Keller, 1993, p. 3).
Brand personality: "Psychological nature of a particular brand as intended by its sellers, though persons in the marketplace may see the brand otherwise (called brand image). These two perspectives compare to the personalities of individual humans: What we intend or desire, and what others see or believe" (American Marketing Association, n.d.).
Brand Recognition: "Consumer's ability to confirm prior exposure to the brand when given the brand as a cue" (Keller, 1993, p. 3)
Brand equity: A set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers" (Aaker, 1991).
Employer brand: The package of functional (developmental and/or useful activities), economic (material or monetary reward), and psychological (feelings such as belonging, direction, and purpose) benefits provided by employment and identified by the employing company" (Amber & Barrow, 1996, p. 186).
Employer image: An amalgamation of transient mental representations of specific aspects of a company as an employer. An image (a) is held by individuals (versus the general public), (b) might fluctuate (versus being relatively stable), (c) targets specific aspects (versus an overall impression), and (d) is cognitive in nature (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016).
Employer value proposition: The 'package' of reward features or employment advantages and benefits offered to employees" (Edwards, 2010, p. 7).
Organizational identity: The central, enduring, and distinctive character of an organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985).
Organizational reputation: A global, temporally stable, evaluative judgment about an organization that is shared by the general public, or by multiple constituencies, such as job seekers (Highhouse, Brooks, & Greguras, 2009). It is a set of socially constructed characteristics, defined by an organization's previous actions (Weigelt & Camerer, 1988) and future prospects (Dowling & Moran, 2012; Sivertzen et al., 2013).
Third-party employment branding: Independent entities that identify, recognize, and sustain best employers in various categories as well as overall management (e.g., working mothers or various ethnic groups).

2011). Hence they provide a deeper, fuller theoretical understanding of mediations and interactions among constructs, and this is why they are more meaningful than conceptually derived frameworks.

In reviewing the references cited for every term shown in Table 1, we found that, with few exceptions (e.g., the terms brand equity, organizational identity, and organizational reputation), most of the terms were derived conceptually and not empirically. As a starting point to develop construct-oriented evidence of validity, researchers need conceptual frameworks to organize and explain their data, and to provide direction for further investigation (Cascio & Aguinis, 2008). The conceptual framework specifies the meaning of each construct, distinguishes it from other constructs, and indicates how measures of the construct should relate to other variables (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education, 1999). Lievens and Slaughter (2016) adopted such an approach to identify similarities and differences among the terms "employer brand" and related constructs (brand awareness, organizational reputation, employer image, and organizational identity). They defined each construct in terms of its focus (cognitive vs. affective); stability (transient, stable, enduring); level of analysis (individual, collective); level of abstraction (specific, global); and type of constituent (outsider, insider). Because they were writing for an audience of researchers in organizational behavior and organizational psychology, they also included the relevant marketing term. As research in employer branding becomes more interdisciplinary, these types of frameworks are valuable, but, as noted earlier, we also need frameworks that are derived empirically to advance our theoretical understanding of the interrelationships among constructs.

Building and managing an employer brand: The role of social networks

Every organization already has an employer brand. The brand may be positive or negative. Some organizations may not know what their brand is. If organizations do not pay attention to their brands, then their brands will be shaped without them. In today's world of abundant access to information sharing, blogging, and social networks, the impact on an employer's brand can change very rapidly and can shape the brand in ways that organizations never intended. There is just too much at stake for a company not to take responsibility for building and managing its brand.

Having a user-friendly and welcoming website that shares candid information about the organization's internal environment, its culture, vision, mission, values, and the hiring process is an important step to introduce and communicate the brand to visitors to an organization's website. If your organization chooses to have a social media site, make sure that you stay informed and involved. Make sure that you have staff assigned to update and relay accurate and consistent information on your social media site. Ensure that it is interactive so that employees can share information and success stories. Have a place for discussions and comments so that you can learn about the current, former, and future employees' views and understand what they care about. Work diligently to learn and understand what employees/people are saying about your organization on social media and why they are saying it.

Employees have access to websites that offer information about different organizations' offerings, including salaries, job descriptions, titles, an organization's culture, and so on. Current or potential employees rely on this information to acquire accurate representations of organizations they are interested in. For instance, Glassdoor.com is a site that offers information that can help current and potential employees to learn the salary details of various positions in a company. It also offers the feedback and input of employees about their current or former employers. Such information is often beneficial to employees, considering there are organizations that are not transparent in their job postings about the pay and job descriptions of the positions they describe. To learn details about the positions in question, employees and potential employees have to rely on sites such as glassdoor.com or indeed.com, to name just two. In addition, employers may not relay detailed information about the culture of the organization to potential employees. Individuals who are interested in learning more about the culture and the potential fit of organizations they are applying to can read candid reviews and feedback of current and former employees of those organizations on such sites. From an organization's perspective, it is important to understand and value what previous and current employees are saying on social media, and to assess whether the brand message that is being communicated is aligned with the organization's intended brand message. If not, it needs to understand where the messages diverge and reasons why, and make changes necessary to ensure the consistency and the coherence of the brand message internally and externally. This requires candid, objective assessments.

Social media have made it easy for people, including the brand's target audience, to find out whether a company's actions are aligned with its brand. A company whose advertisements promote its environmental friendliness, at the same time that various online sources show that its actions are not aligned with its message, is being affected negatively by social media. Needless to say, social media are always active. Also, people discuss almost anything on social media. Some employees may go home at the end of their work days feeling great about what they accomplished at work, and then go online to share how much they enjoy their employer. Others may have less enjoyable experiences at work and do the opposite. Organizations need to be vigilant when it comes to their brands, and stay proactive in involving their employees and listening to their needs. Doing so makes employees feel valued and respected, and this will be reflected on social media.

Remember: Employees are ambassadors who represent their employer's brand. Employees are the faces of their organizations. Their voices and opinions, key features of their organizations, can significantly impact their organization's brand. Observers have long recognized, for example, that a rude receptionist may discourage potential clients or customers. Today, social media can multiply the negative effects of those interactions rapidly and exponentially. In short, every employee in an organization, regardless of status or position, shapes the organization's brand. A company's brand is impacted not only by its current employees, but also by previous employees and future applicants. Bottom line: It is vital for organizations to actively shape and manage their employer brands, and they often use social media to do that.

Payoffs from a positive employer brand

To be sure, the development of an effective and successful employer brand adds significant value to an organization. For example, the beneficial effects of employer branding have been shown to include improved applicant quality (Collins & Han, 2004). More recently, Dineen and Allen (2016) showed that third-party employment branding, as reflected in "Best Places to Work" certifications, affects the quality of the applicant pool. Specifically, as the number of certifications increases, applicant quality is higher in smaller companies and higher when job openings are scarcer. Collective turnover rates are also lower in such firms, while organizational performance is higher, relative to competitors in the same industry (Fulmer, Gerhart, & Scott, 2003). As Dell and Ainspan (2001) argue: "The employer brand establishes the identity of the firm as an employer. It encompasses the firm's values, systems, policies, and behaviors toward the objectives of attracting, motivating, and retaining the firm's current and potential employees" (p. 10).

A key strategic role for HR is to lead internal employer-branding efforts, and to work in concert with marketing specialists who focus on external branding efforts. HR processes and management actions play key roles in internal employer branding. The next section of the article addresses those concerns in more detail.

Role of strategic HR in leading the employer-branding process

In today's competitive global marketplace, organizations strive to gain competitive advantage by attracting and retaining top talent in order to maximize productivity and profitability. As Amber and Barrow (1996) emphasized, people are the most important resource for an organization, and the organization's brand is its greatest asset. The purpose of strategic human resource management (SHRM) is to align the organization's strategic goals and objectives with its HR processes.

Strategic human resource management is the choice, alignment, and integration of an organization's human resource management (HRM) so its human capital resources most effectively contribute to strategic business objectives (Cascio, 2015). To do that well, it is essential to have a well-crafted HR strategy, for HR strategy focuses on the decisions, processes, and choices that organizations make about how to manage their people (Cascio & Boudreau, 2012).

Working closely with line managers, the HR function in an organization has the responsibility to identify and to specify the kinds of talent that will contribute most effectively to that organization's strategic objectives. Employer-branding campaigns spearheaded by leaders from HR and marketing can be particularly useful in attracting and retaining top talent, particularly if they involve employees in the overall process. Such campaigns clarify and manage an organization's tangible and intangible rewards, as well as its image and identity (Edwards, 2010).

Organizational identity is particularly relevant to the concept of employer branding, for it refers to the central, enduring, and distinctive character of an organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Organizations with strong identities encourage their employees to identify with their employing organizations (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Lievens, Van Hoye, & Anseel, 2007). Presenting an organization's shared values as part of a branding campaign provides information about its key characteristics and its organizational identity (Edwards, 2010). To the extent that potential and current employees are attracted to or share those values, that creates an affinity or linking of one's own identity to that of the organization, thereby motivating individuals to join or stay.

An effective employer-branding process is active both externally and internally (Barck, 2015). The marketing function, with input from HR and line managers, is ideally suited to focus on an organization's efforts to brand itself externally. Internally, HR should take the lead in ensuring that employees are able to validate the organization's employer value proposition (i.e., what they can expect to experience every day at work). That process begins with recruitment, and then continues through the on-boarding of new employees, training and developing them, performance management, and reward processes. While HR has long focused on each of these processes separately at the tactical/executional level, the role of strategic HR is to leverage them, individually as well as together as a set, as internal mechanisms to convey a positive employer brand. The following sections briefly consider each of these processes in more detail.

Recruitment

With respect to recruitment, research has shown over many decades the value of using realistic job previews (RJPs) (Landis, Earnest, & Allen, 2014; Popovich & Wanous, 1982). That is, in addition to telling applicants about the nice things a job has to offer (e.g., pay, benefits, opportunities for advancement), recruiters must also tell applicants about the unpleasant aspects of the job—for example, "It's hot, dirty, and sometimes you'll have to work on weekends." Research in actual company settings has indicated consistent results (Hom, 2011; Phillips, 1998; Premack & Wanous, 1985). That is, when the unrealistically positive expectations of job applicants are lowered to match the reality of the actual work setting prior to hire, job acceptance rates may be lower, but job performance, job satisfaction, and survival are higher for those who receive an RJP. For example, after apartment-complex operator Aimco switched to realistic, "day-in-the-life-of" descriptions of customer-facing jobs, it found that only 3% of new hires left within 90 days, compared to 22% prior to the use of the RJP (White, 2007).

In addition to RJPs, organizations might stress key features of the work environment and the organization's culture, such as teamwork, customer focus, fair treatment of employees, initiative, and innovation. Each contributes to a positive image of the organization. Potential recruits also want to know what an organization stands for, and honest communication of values is critically important to the branding process.

On-boarding

The process of on-boarding new employees, that is, helping them to become familiar with and to adapt to the new employment situation, is critically important, yet often underemphasized. This is an expensive mistake, since most turnover occurs during the first few months on the job. For example, at Marriott, 40% of the new employees who leave do so during the first 3 months (Klein & Weaver, 2000). It is important to emphasize that during this period an employee is more receptive to cues from the organizational environment than she or he is ever likely to be again. Such cues to proper behavior may come from a variety of sources, for example (Cascio, 2016):

- Official literature of the organization.
- Examples set by senior people.
- Formal instructions given by senior people.
- Examples given by peers.
- Rewards and punishments that flow from the employee's efforts.
- Responses to the employee's ideas.
- Degree of challenge in the assignments the employee receives.

A structured set of activities covering the first 90 days, such as those scheduled to occur prehire, on day 1, during the second week, and then at 15, 30, 45, and 90 days, can be extremely helpful in communicating an organization's culture, values, and norms of behavior to new employees (Moss, 2016). Culture, values, and norms of behavior are integral components of an employer's brand, for they affect brand image, brand awareness, and organizational reputation. Payoffs to companies that do on-boarding well are very real (Blackman, 2013). Of those with formal on-boarding programs, 68% report that new employees become productive more quickly, 67% report higher levels of employee engagement, and 51% report improved retention. In terms of business results, companies with the most effective on-boarding programs report a 17% increase in revenue per full-time employee, and a 16% increase in customer retention. That's a win–win for new employees and for the organization's brand.

Training and development

Opportunities for training and development are important to all generations in the workforce, but particularly to young adults at the early stages of their careers. It is an important feature of an employer's brand. In the United States, Generation Y, born 1981–1995, includes more than 78 million members. It will comprise more than 40% of the U.S. workforce by 2020, and fully half of the global workforce well before that (Kwoh, 2012). In terms of what is most important in a job to members of Generation Y, the number one characteristic is opportunities for continuous learning and skill development (Hirsch, 2016a; Meister & Willyerd, 2010).

Training and development enjoy a rich research tradition in the fields of personnel psychology, industrial and organizational psychology, and human resource management. Indeed, meta-analyses have demonstrated repeatedly that training has an overall positive effect on job-related behaviors and performance (Arthur, Bennett, Edens, & Bell, 2003; Brown & Stizmann, 2011). The average effect size is 0.62. That is, on average, the performance of individuals or teams that receive training is 0.62 standard deviations better than performance without training—but the effectiveness of training varies, depending on the delivery method and the skill or task being trained.

Four characteristics seem to distinguish companies with the most effective training practices (Colvin, 2009; Rifkin, 2011):

- Top management is committed to training and development; training is part of the corporate culture. This is especially true of leading companies, such as Google, Disney, Marriott, and Cisco.
- Training is tied to business strategy and objectives and is linked to bottom-line results.
- Organizational environments are feedback rich; they stress continuous improvement, promote risk taking, offer one-on-one coaching, and afford opportunities to learn from the successes and failures of decisions.
- There is commitment to invest the necessary resources, to provide sufficient time and money for training.

Each of these features lends itself to external as well as internal employer-branding efforts. As with recruiting and on-boarding, opportunities to participate in training constitute tangible evidence of an organization's commitment to the personal and professional development of its employees. Positive training experiences directly enhance an employer's brand.

Performance management

With respect to performance management, more and more organizations are emphasizing frequent communication and feedback, not once-a-year performance appraisal (Cascio, 2016; Meyrowitz, Mueller-Hanson, O'Leary, & Pulakos, 2012). Feedback is important to every generation, but the need for constant feedback is often associated with Generation Y. As digital natives, they are accustomed to getting immediate responses and unfettered access.

As they are just beginning their careers, quality feedback helps them navigate the challenges and opportunities that they face. More to the point, they want feedback, and if they don't get it, they'll likely start looking for work elsewhere (Hirsch, 2016). How often? Fewer than one in 10 think weekly feedback is enough. Fully 35% want it multiple times a day, while 25% think once a day is fine. As one consultant noted:

"Take the amount of feedback you would want, and then double it. Then double it again, and you'll meet the Millennials halfway" (Shaw, in Hirsch, 2016). Why do these twenty-somethings need so much feedback? Jeff Lawson, CEO of Twilio, a cloud communication company, noted: "They want to always be learning, always be growing … It's not that they're looking for constant praise, but rather they want to keep score. They want to know how they're doing … If you get into the habit of regular feedback, it's not confrontational; it's just the ebb and flow of conversation and a constant tweaking of how you work with somebody" (Lawson, in Bryant, 2014).

Feedback is a critical component of any performance-management system, and empirical research has revealed solid organizational payoffs for implementing such systems. Organizations with strong performance-management systems, as rated by employees and managers, are 51% more likely to outperform their competitors on financial measures, and 41% more likely to outperform their competitors on nonfinancial measures (e.g., customer satisfaction, employee retention, quality of products or services) (Adler & Ort, 2013; Bernthal, Rogers, & Smith, 2003). With respect to employer branding, organizations with solid performance-management systems can proudly proclaim, "We grow people." As with training and development, regular, constructive feedback provides additional evidence of an organization's commitment to the personal and professional development of its employees. That is a key feature of a positive employer brand.

Rewards

The final strategic HR process that we consider here is rewards, which can be viewed in a broader context as total compensation. Compensation is anything that an employer is willing to offer in return for employee contributions. Total compensation includes direct (cash) as well as indirect (benefits and services) rewards. It also includes rewards that an employee receives based on his or her relationship with the organization, such as recognition and status, employment security, learning opportunities, and challenging work (Greene, 2011; Newman, Gerhart, & Milkovich, 2016).

In the context of employer branding, there are many possible ways to structure rewards, but to have maximum impact, the rewards offered should be consistent with the overall strategy of an organization, and they should be tailored to attract, retain, and motivate the kinds of talent that is most desirable for a given organization. As noted by Greene (2011), some organizations adopt a strategy that richly rewards individual performance. Others may differentiate less dramatically among individuals and tie rewards more closely to team or organizational results. Some reward long service with time-based step increases, rich benefits, and no incentives (common in the public sector). Others may offer modest levels of base pay, plus equity and/or significant short-term incentives based on performance. This profile of rewards is common in startup organizations whose revenues are uncertain.

Different mixes of total rewards appeal to different talent segments, and the number of alternative configurations of direct, indirect, and relational rewards is vast. Among multinational organizations, legal constraints (e.g., involving employee stock ownership or various types of benefits) or cultural norms (e.g., in collectivist cultures) may require firms to tailor rewards to fit those requirements. The key consideration is to ensure that the rewards offered, and the way that those rewards are communicated to interested parties, is consistent with the image and employer brand that an organization is trying to convey. Doing so will ensure that employees are able to validate the organization's employer value proposition.

What HR can do to help organizations develop and improve their employer brands

Here are some specific steps that HR can take to enhance an employer's brand.

- Administer anonymous surveys, use suggestion boxes, and use exit interviews (Spain & Groysberg, 2016) to understand the ideas, opinions, and concerns of current and previous employees. Find out what is important to them and get their input before undertaking major internal and external communications efforts.
- Ensure that the chief executive officer (CEO) and strategic leaders from HR, marketing, information technology (IT), finance, and other functional areas are all on board with the employer-brand message and its development. Align the message with the organization's overall strategy and objectives. Make sure that it is authentic, honest, and consistent throughout the organization.
- An organization's internal and external actions, together with its values, should convey the same brand message. Remember that all employees, including management, front line, and even contractors working in an organization, regardless of their status or position, represent an organization's brand.
- Value employees by making them part of the message of the employer brand. Share that message with employees, and take the time to educate

them about each facet of it. Employees need to understand how to share the message appropriately, and how to be a part of sharing their stories through different modes of communication, including social media.

- Ensure that communication methods are convenient and easy to use, and that all information is clear and current. Use video testimonials of employees, along with images that reflect an organization's message and brand in action.
- Every organization should stay informed about its employer brand, for example, by monitoring what employees say on internal company surveys versus what they say about the company on social media. Assess whether both messages are aligned. If not, take steps to learn why employees feel the ways they do. Based on the data collected, implement changes to ensure that the employer-brand message is consistent both inside and outside the organization. Recognize that building a positive employer brand is not a one-time event. Rather, it is a process that requires constant care, time, and commitment. Most importantly, live your brand. That is authentic HR leadership in action.

Future questions for HR/OB scholars to address

There is a great need for researchers to define and to clarify constructs used in the domain of employer branding. We agree with Lievens and Slaughter (2016) that researchers and practitioners refrain from inventing new terms for constructs that already exist. Beyond that, it is important for HR/OB scholars to assess the degree to which HR is contributing to employer brand strength and processes. They might consider using indicators and measurements that can deepen understanding of outcomes, such as the following:

- Ability to attract top talent.
- Level of employee engagement.
- Customer/client satisfaction.
- Retention of top talent.
- Drivers of financial performance.

Collecting both qualitative and quantitative information on these issues will enable HR to assume a new strategic role, leading internal employer-branding efforts, and to collaborate with the marketing function to improve an employer's brand externally. It also will help senior leaders to appreciate the critical role that HR plays in the employer-branding process.

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