

The role of HR practices in the process of employer branding – a case
of UK data centre industry

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Abstract

Extant scholarship has explored employer branding as an entity by developing an understanding on which HR practices make an organisation an attractive employer. With this widespread understanding, organisations have developed themselves into an attractive place to work. However, adopting these established HR practices does not ensure that organisations are capable of attracting suitable candidates. These organisations may not have managed to mark a presence among target audience they intend to attract. An insight into the process perspective of employer branding would be helpful in guiding such organisation on how to reach their target audiences and create a sustainable talent pool. Therefore, the purpose of this research to explore the process of employer branding and facilitating role of HR practices from the employer's perspective.

To gain this understanding, the data centre industry in the UK was selected, as this industry faces the challenges in terms of attracting suitable candidates to meet their growing talent needs. Thematic analysis of 31 semi-structured interviews with major stakeholders within the industry has been conducted to gain an insight on the process perspective of employer branding. Three overarching themes were developed from the data analysis – employer branding content, employer social presence and employer strategic positioning. Interaction between these themes (and their sub themes) has led to propose the employer branding process framework.

The proposed framework adds a further dimension to the current literature on employer branding suggesting that beyond the employer branding content and various communication strategies adopted by organisations, the employer branding process adopted by the organisations has a major role to play in attracting suitable candidates. Furthermore, to attract the untapped audiences and create a sustainable talent supply, organisations need to go beyond these initiatives and strategically position themselves as an attractive employer. This can be achieved by engaging with the potential candidates long before they start making their career choices and influence their decision about their potential employer.

The suggested employer branding process framework is subjective based on an exploratory approach. A further explanatory research can examine these findings empirically to establish the best practices in employer branding process. Additionally, a comparative study can be carried out to present a comparison between different practices and suggest advantages and disadvantages of different practices in employer branding process.

Declaration

I declare that no portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or qualification in any other university or other institute of learning.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

In a highly competitive labour market, organisations increasingly compete with each other to attract the best possible workforce to outperform their competitors. Intense competition in labour markets combined with shortage of available young workforce makes it difficult for organisations to attract the suitable talent. To win this “war for talent”, organisations try to influence candidates’ perceptions about the organisation as an attractive employer (Bhattacharya, Sen, & Korschun, 2008; Biswas & Suar, 2014). However, in the current competitive environment, organisations are losing control over their employer branding due to many information sources present in the market (Kohli, Suri, & Kapoor, 2015; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; McFarland & Ployhart, 2015). In this vulnerable and ever-changing market scenarios, how do organisations take control over the employer branding process and create the desired image of the organisation as an employer. An understanding of “how” an employer brand is promoted (communicating and positioning) has a huge impact on establishing a strong employer brand (Ghielen, De Cooman, & Sels, 2020). Previous research on employer branding provides very little operational guidance for organisations on effective implementation of employer branding process. This is largely because much of the research on employer branding has been conducted around applicant’s perception of the employer brand rather than the organisation’s perspective on designing and implementation of the employer branding process. Views of the management executives who are directly involved in the employer branding process can provide effective insights about designing, implementing and operationalising an effective employer branding process.

To gain such understanding, this study extends in the research direction suggested by Martin, Gollan, and Grigg (2011) by taking a process approach to employer branding by gaining a deeper understanding of the views of different stakeholders involved in creating and implementing the strategy led employer branding process. This study also complements the study of Edlinger (2015) on employer branding by collecting views of different organisational stakeholders involved in the employer branding process making it more contextual. Furthermore, this study addresses the need to capture and examine the voice of different groups of employees, managers and executives located inside as well as outside the organisation (Martin et al., 2011). This understating can help organisations in making the process of employer branding more effective. Hence, this study explores the views of management in organisations to understand different HR practices that influence and assist

the process of employer branding and place the organisation as an attractive employer among potential candidates.

Employer branding as a concept has been adopted from product marketing literature. Product marketing literature inherently interprets the marketing concept from two dominant point of views – economic utility point of view and managerial point of view (Cooke, Rayburn, & Abercrombie, 1992). Economic point of view is focused on developing the economic value of the product for its customers by focusing on different dimensions of the product to satisfy different needs of consumers. Whereas the managerial point of view concentrates on the marketing activities with a stress on strategic managerial dimensions. One of the tasks of the strategic marketing managerial activities is focused on promoting, generating and driving the demand to the targeted market segment.

In employer branding literature, product is organisation and consumers mean current and potential candidates. The current employer branding literature has predominantly adopted the economic point of view from marketing and has focused on developing certain organisational features and work practices that may attract potential candidates towards the employing organisation. Some prominent studies in employer branding have adopted economic point of view from marketing principles in exploring certain attributes such as functional, economical and psychological; or symbolic and instrumental attributes of employer brand and extend our understanding in what makes the product i.e., an employer brand attractive. (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Moroko & Uncles, 2008). Whereas, limited studies have adopted managerial point of view and explored the strategic dimension to guide the organisations on how to develop employer branding strategy to promote and drive the demand for organisation amongst target potential candidates. Moroko and Uncles (2009) adopted managerial dimension to ascertain that marketing segmentation principle can be applied in employer branding context to strengthen the relationship between employer branding and strategic objectives of the organisation. Moreover, most of the current knowledge on employer branding explores the recipients' views in gaining knowledge about attractive features of the organisation or effective communication channels. Arguably, it is only through collecting the views of HR and senior managers of the organisation, an understanding can be developed into the strategic employer branding process.

The employer branding literature has also explored the means of communication to get the organisational message across to the audiences such as use of job-advertisement, or social

media in recent times. However, these means arguably, merely maintain the social presence of the employing organisation in the employment market among job-seeking candidates. Unlike product marketing, which also targets at attracting unknown and new customers to the product brand, communication strategies of employer branding only focus on disseminating the organisational information to the active audiences. These strategies are non-targeted and rarely suggest any policies that would take the employer brand beyond active job-seeking candidates and foray into the untapped audiences with a targeted marketing approach. In summary, current literature of employer branding provides information on developing employer branding content and communication strategies, however, there is still lack of knowledge on the employer branding process that strategically utilises organisation's attractive features and communication channels and generates new targeted market for itself.

Majority of the prior research on employer brand is focused on developing the content of the employer brand has adopted a positivist perspective to explore what elements constitute a strong employer brand. Consequently, the extensive focus on the content of the employer brand content overlooks the process of the employer branding (how the brand is promoted). Nevertheless, along with the content of the employer brand, the process of employer branding also has an important contribution in creating a strong employer brand (Ghielen et al., 2020). These empirical studies present employer branding as a straight forward concept for HR practitioner that can successfully establish an employer brand by implementing certain HR practices (Mölk & Auer, 2018). However, some organisations still strive to create an attractive employer brand as extant literature lacks information about dissemination and implementation of employer branding content through the process of employer branding. Studying employer branding as process provides us with a better understanding and clarity of the application of branding strategies, that would also foster better transmission of employer branding content (Ghielen et al., 2020). Although, it has been established in the extant literature that certain organisational attributes have an important place in the employer brand creation, however, Backhaus (2018) propose to understand how these attributes are operationalised in an effective employer branding process. In the process of creating an employer brand, implementation of HR practices (routines and behavioural patterns) have a very limited role to play (Mölk & Auer, 2018).

Empirical literature on employer branding provides an understanding about HR practices that are adopted by organisations to attract candidates. With this widespread understanding, similar practices have been adopted across many organisations, hence provide very little

competitive advantage. It's how efficiently the process of employer branding has been implemented, makes a difference. Understanding the process also contributes to the current organisation and management knowledge that has been attained from variance – based generalizations (Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013). Variance based empirical studies are conducted on large samples helping us to understand “what works” however to make this knowledge actionable, it is important to understand “how it works”. Understanding the process generates the “know-how” knowledge in contrast to “know-what” knowledge created by variance-based research. Hence, understanding employer branding as a process may have practical consequences in the form of better-informed interventions for effective employer branding process and may provide more plausible course of action for practical execution of employer branding.

An additional understanding of process would eventually make employer branding more effective resource for those who are directly involved in it as their daily activities since thinking and acting works parallel rather sequentially (Weick, 1995). Organisations are seen as a noun and as a verb (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005), so can be the employer branding. The literature of organisational research acknowledges the importance of processes to gain an understanding of organisational life, however these processes get reduced to “variables” to gain the ease of comparisons (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005). Although studies of variables and things provide empirically grounded analytical orientation, studying process perspective enables to understand the sui generis nature of the process (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005). The ontological view which considers world made of process challenges to look beyond the traditional view of studying an organisation as a noun and accept to study organisations as verb in the current turbulent economic environment (Tsoukas, 2005). Since employer branding is an ongoing process in the continuously changing and dynamic world of economy, we can never have an accurate understanding of what works. This critical ontological distinction directs to move past the traditional view of looking at employer branding as an entity consisting of certain HR policies and practices, and adopt an alternative approach of studying it as a process in the world of ongoing change (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). An understanding of process would, therefore, enable organisations with a tool that could be customised as per their unique need and purpose, and also an introspection of what does not work for them.

There are a few conceptual studies that provide an explanation on managing the employer brand process (Aggerholm, Andersen, & Thomsen, 2011; Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Backhaus

& Tikoo, 2004; Martin et al., 2011). These studies have conceptualised employer branding as a strategic process of creating and implementing an attractive employer brand that attracts potential candidates and retains current employees. This conceptualisation places organisations in an important role of creating the employer brand and studying employer branding process from organisational perspective instead of candidates' or employees' perspectives. In the extant literature, there are a few studies (Edlinger, 2015; Martin et al., 2011; Mölk & Auer, 2018; Russell & Brannan, 2016) that have empirically explored the organisational practices and role of the management in the process of employer branding. Martin et al. (2011) work on employer branding practice is mostly conceptual, based on the anecdotal evidence. Thus, we have relatively little knowledge about the process of employer branding and its creation in the core organisational context. Furthermore, there are a few qualitative studies that have confirmed the primary role of HR managers in process of employer branding (Edlinger, 2015; Maheshwari, Gunesh, Lodorfos, & Konstantopoulou, 2017). Whereas, Martin et al. (2011) have stressed upon holding both, HR professionals, managers and other stakeholders responsible in the process of employer branding rather than holding only HR accountable for creating the employer brand. The boundary work on employer branding separates organisation from the context, which is considered as a problem in management studies (Edlinger, 2015; MacKay & Chia, 2013). Moreover, employer brand managers have “the disadvantage of being an outsider to the core operational business” (Edlinger, 2015, p. 454). Different experiences, different working domains and relative contextual power within the organisations, positions different department practitioners as an influencer in the process of employer branding. A departure from conventional employer branding literature where, typically, senior HR managers are involved in planning and allocating the resources to achieve organisational objectives, Martin et al. (2011) have suggested to include the views of line managers, trade representatives, and external consultants in the development and implementation of branding strategies.

1.2 Research aim and objectives

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study is to look beyond the traditional way of treating employer branding in terms of its contents and explore employer branding “as a process”. With this different perspective toward employer branding, this study aims to understand the process of employer branding and facilitating role of HR practices in this process within the data centre industry (UK) by drawing upon the views of major stakeholders in the organisation.

The following objectives have been set in this study-

- Understand the differentiation of employer branding as “a process”
- Evaluate the current literature to explore different constructs of the employer branding
- Understand the perception of major stakeholders on organisational level towards the employer branding process
- Explore their view on using HR practices in process of employer branding
- Propose a framework that encapsulates the process of employer branding

1.3 Relevance and contribution

In the ever-changing economic scenario and technological advancements new industries are emerging to support the needs of changing work environment. These changes take place at very fast pace and some organisations serve other businesses rather than serving end users directly (B2B business). Consequently, such organisations may lack an awareness among potential job seeking candidates. Hence, this study is relevant for such new industries, to present and position themselves among potential candidates as a potential employer. The employer branding process framework presented in this study may be useful for such organisations.

The current use of signalling theory in employer branding literature is limited to creating the employer branding “entity” through organisational HR practices. Implementation of signalling theory in this study extends the use of signalling theory in understanding the process perspective. This study also contributes towards employer branding literature by exploring the process perspective of employer branding and role of strategic positioning in the employer branding process. The results from this study may be practically relevant for the organisations in initiating or developing an effective employer branding process and create a sustainable talent supply.

The methodological contribution of this study is to applying three Rs (Reductionism, Reflexivity, and Representation) with the six-step process of thematic analysis. This approach mitigates the weakness of applying thematic analysis to analyse the qualitative data, making the data analysis process more rigorous and reliable.

1.4 Theoretical framework

The interplay of different HR practices could provide a comprehensive view of overarching employer branding process. To gain an understanding of HR practices that have an influence of candidates' decision to join an organisation, management scholars have used several theories ranging from social identity theory, person-organisation fit and psychological contract. All these theories have an equivalent active role of recipient in the process, which arguably comes into practice once the recipient has started interacting with the organisation. Bringing candidates to a stage where candidates start interacting with the organisation, is known as attraction. Organisations have an initial responsibility to draw candidates to this stage. It is sole responsibility of the organisation to place itself in the desired list of potential employers of a job-seeking candidate. Integrated view of different organisational efforts through employer branding process and relationship between these efforts brings into focus the comprehensive efforts taken by HR. HR practitioners are the actors "who draw upon practices to act". To explore organisational perspective on the process of employer branding, this study uses signalling theory to understand the efforts undertaken by the HR practitioners and other management stakeholders. Employer branding process also facilitates the understanding and communication of the employer brand content (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Ghielen et al., 2020). Hence, application of signalling theory to understand the process of employer branding facilitates both the purposes: 1) sending signals by employer through various HR practices to employment market to establish itself as an attractive employer, 2) ensuring that the signals sent through branding strategies are conveyed to targeted potential candidates (Ghielen et al., 2020; Wilden, Gudergan, & Lings, 2010).

Employer branding as a social phenomenon involves considering complexities of everyday organisational practices, unintended complexities that occur alongside the process of employer branding (Mölk & Auer, 2018). In the context of the process of employer branding, organisations are the signallers having specific information about their product (i.e. organisation), with the capacity to create the content of their employer branding appeal and choose their way of clear communication and the intended receivers (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2010). Signalling theory is based on the key assumption that information asymmetries are present in the job market (Spence, 1973). An aspect of signalling theory is to control any unintended and negative signals from the signal sender (Chang & Chin, 2018). Above assertions advise to adopt signalling theory for this study that seeks to understand the process perspective of employer branding by exploring the views of organisations' top

management who are in the capacity of controlling the signals and eliminating any unwanted asymmetries.

1.5 Thesis structure

The rest of the thesis addresses the research objectives as follows.

The following chapter (Chapter 2) gives a comprehensive review of the literature on employer branding. The chapter provides a brief discussion on branding, followed by discussion on employer branding – both as an entity and as a process. Next, there is a review on different constructs on employer branding followed by rationale for choosing signalling theory that guides this study. The rationale explains that studying employer branding process using signalling theory places organisation in a leading position where organisation can have a control over the effective implementation of the process. An assessment of relationship between HR practices, marketing and employer branding is also presented.

The research context chapter (Chapter 3) introduces the data centre industry, which is a less known industry, but very important and critical in today's digital economy. The chapter presents the contribution of data centre industry in the current economic scenario and its unprecedented growth in the time of pandemic. The data centre industry has been declared a critical infrastructure to support changing working requirements, however the industry still struggles to attract suitable candidates to meet the increasing work force requirements. This is predominantly due to lack of awareness about the industry among potential candidates. Apparently, smaller data centres with less awareness as an employer amongst potential candidates, struggle more to attract suitable candidates than the larger or more popular data centres. Due to lack of awareness, candidates do not consider the industry (particularly small-sized data centres) as their potential employer and do not consider acquiring skills needed to work in the industry. The other contributing factors towards talent shortage in the industry - current aging workforce and prevalent skills gap are also discussed in this chapter. All these contributing factors together make the data centre industry a suitable case for investigation in this study.

The methodology chapter (Chapter 4) provides an overview of the research paradigm, research process and ethical guidelines followed in this study. The philosophical assumptions provide a discussion on interpretive approach of the study and the ontological and epistemological position. The data collection section provides detailed discussion on the selecting the appropriate research participants, data collection, data storage, and transcription

techniques. The data analysis section reviews the software used and selection of thematic analysis for the study and its implementation in analysing the data.

The finding section is compiled of three chapters (Chapter 5 - 7) – each chapter represents one theme arising out of thematic data analysis. First of the three chapters (Chapter 5), has a discussion on the employer branding content required in the employer branding process and how participants use the relationship between symbolic and instrumental attributes to enhance the effectiveness of the employer branding content. Second of three chapters (Chapter 6), provides a discussion on communication methods and channels used by participants in communicating with their audience. It also explains the role of communication in gaining consistency in the employer branding process and engagement with the active audiences. The last chapter in the section (Chapter 7), discusses the strategic positioning of employer brand where organisations engage with their prospective audiences long before they make a career decision and try to influence their career choices and industry choices by promoting themselves as an attractive employer.

The discussion chapter (Chapter 8) presents a comprehensive framework for the employer branding process. This framework is based upon the research findings discussed in the Chapters 5 – 7. The framework suggests a relationship within the employer branding content created through HR practices, communicating the employer branding content using various communication channels and utilising these into the strategic positioning of employer brand. The interaction between instrumental and symbolic attributes of the employer branding content is discussed, which makes the content of employer branding more effective. The communication of employer branding is segmented based upon the target audience to initiate two-way communication with candidates and eliminate information asymmetry present in the employment market. Whereas the strategic positioning of the employer brand is concerned about proactively reaching out to and engaging with the target audiences to influence their decision regarding career and employer choices for an effective and sustainable employer branding process. This discussion also presents an argument of adopting strategic positioning from product marketing literature, same as other earlier adopted features of product marketing such as instrumental – symbolic framework and segmentation.

The conclusion chapter (Chapter 9) presents the theoretical, methodological and practical contribution of the study with a discussion on implications for researchers and practitioners. Discussion on limitation of the study and possible future research path conclude the chapter.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter starts with providing an understanding of different types of brands in the context of an organisation. It proceeds to a detailed discussion on ‘employer brand’ and different perspectives adopted in empirical research of employer branding. The chapter further explores and provides an insight into different constructs of the employer brand that play an essential role in defining an employer brand. A theoretical discussion is provided, which supports this qualitative study and a justification for choosing “signalling theory” over other theories offered in the relevant literature. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the role of HR practices in employer branding and the adoption of marketing principles in understanding and creating an attractive employer brand.

2.2 Brand – an understanding

Brand can be referred to “a name, term, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller’s goods or services as distinct from those of other sellers” (Wood, 2000, p. 664). Brand is a “mixture of attributes, tangible and intangible, symbolized in a trademark, which if managed properly, creates value and influence” (Edwards, 2009, p. 6). It creates a distinguished name or symbol for the goods or services so that it could be differentiated from those of its competitors on non-financial grounds (Aaker, 1992). The purpose of brand is not only to create, but also change and reinforce what people say or believe about the organization (Love & Singh, 2011). Every organisation puts their best efforts to distinguish itself from the others (organisations) in the market. For this purpose, organisations invest in establishing their identity by maintaining their different organisational brands such as corporate brand, consumer / product brand, employer brand.

A corporate brand is presentation of the organisation to various external audiences and all the stakeholders (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012). Corporate brand contributes to an organisation’s image formed and held by all the stakeholders (Balmer & Gray, 2003). A corporate brand is comprised of its various products and services, corporate alliances, social responsibility programs reflected through organisation’s value and culture (Hatch & Schultz, 1997). Thus, a corporate brand creates an alignment and interface between organisation’s identity and organisation’s stakeholders (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012). A product brand, on the other hand, presents an organisation’s product / services to its customer and influences their intention to buy / consume the products / services offered. A corporate brand requires a multi-disciplinary approach to represent the organisation as a whole and all the messages sent out by the organisation are synchronous and aligned (Balmer & Gray, 2003). Target audience of the

corporate brand could be multiple stakeholders related to the organisation. Whereas management of the employer brand is limited to the perception and presentation of organisation as an employer and its target audiences are both current and potential employees.

2.3 Employer brand

Employer branding is often linked to a company's reputation and image as an employer with internal and external stakeholders. Objective of employer branding is to differentiate the organisation as an employer from its competitors to attract and engage with the best suited talent available in the employment market. Managing an employer brand is an essential part of attracting, developing, and retaining a high-performing workforce (Biswas & Suar, 2014). Organisations adopt a systematic management approach to manage their employer brand among current and prospective employees

Employer branding term was first coined by Ambler and Barrow (1996). Since then, several academics have conducted empirical studies to explore this term deeply in organisational context and utilisation of HR practices in creating and managing an effective employer brand (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Berthon, Ewing, & Hah, 2005; Biswas & Suar, 2014; Lievens, Hoye, & Schreurs, 2005; Moroko & Uncles, 2008). Consequently, the current literature on employer branding focuses on identifying various HR practices that attract potential employees and retain current employees in the organisation (Agrawal & Swaroop, 2011; Collins & Kanar, 2014; Lievens, 2007; Wilden et al., 2010). However, while researching employer branding, researchers have adopted different perspectives on the concept of employer branding. While some have adopted a brand-equity¹ perspective (Cable & Turban, 2003; Collins & Kanar, 2014; Stockman, Van Hoye, & da Motta Veiga, 2020; Theurer, Tumasjan, Welpel, & Lievens, 2018), other have recently conceptualised employer branding as a process - guiding and informing the selection and integration of HR practices in creating an attractive employer brand (Carlini, Grace, France, & Lo Iacono, 2019; Cascio & Graham, 2016; Ghielen et al., 2020).

Employer branding traditionally and predominantly is perceived as an entity in the extant literature (Backhaus, 2018; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Lievens, Van Hoye, & Anseel, 2007; Moroko & Uncles, 2008; Tumasjan, Kunze, Bruch, & Welpel, 2019), where certain attributes

¹ Brand equity: A set of brand assets and liabilities that create the brand value. It is not measured "financially", rather is determined by the organisation's customer's perception about the brand (Aaker, 1992).

of organisations are combined together to attract potential candidates and retain current employees in establishing the organisation as an attractive employer.

“Employer branding entity” and “employer branding process” both are practical approaches to employer branding where each can be developed and managed by strategically utilising the organisational resources (Collins & Stevens, 2002; Theurer et al., 2018). In line to the requirement of this study, practical approach to employer branding need to be adopted. Hence, in the following sections, a detailed discussion is presented on two practical perspectives of employer branding – as an “entity” and as a “process”.

2.3.1 Employer branding – an entity

Employer branding as an entity is concerned with investigating employer branding as “a package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company” (Ambler & Barrow, 1996, p. 187). These dimensions of employer branding can be extended to five dimensions i.e., interest value, social value, economic value, development value and application value (Berthon et al., 2005). Another viewpoint classifies employer branding in to “instrumental and symbolic” attributes (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Lievens et al., 2007), where instrumental attributes correspond to functional and economic benefits and symbolic attributes correspond to the psychological benefits of the employment in an organisation (detailed discussion in section 2.4.3). The broad array of dimensions suggest that employer brand is created as an entity to influence a wide range of candidates’/employees’ expectations. These expectations are built upon functional and symbolic attributes of the employer brand retrospectively. Functional and economic benefits are well documented and explicit terms of the employment contract (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Moroko & Uncles, 2008). On the contrary, psychological and social benefits are not explicit, these are created by the various HR activities and practices adopted by the organisation (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Wilden et al., 2010).

To establish employer brand as an entity, organisations send signals of specific attributes associated with the organisation and respective job. Employer branding is further reinforced by conforming to those signalled attributes by fulfilling the expectations formed indirectly through these signals (Edwards, 2009; Moroko & Uncles, 2008). Using these attributes, organisations attempt to distinguish themselves from their competitors and establish a unique identity for themselves by adopting various HR practices perceived as desirable (Love & Singh, 2011). These organisational practices work as a mediator in attracting candidates to

the organisation and make them apply for a vacancy (Love & Singh, 2011). Current research on employer branding provides insight through empirical studies and investigates the “perception of potential employees” about the employer brand as an entity (Biswas & Suar, 2014; Edwards & Edwards, 2013; Lievens, 2007; Van Hoye, Bas, Cromheecke, & Lievens, 2013).

Moving away from providing the package of benefits or other employment attributes offered by the organisation, a few scholars have addressed the “entity of employer brand” in a broader meaning, which involves both employer and employees. Knox and Freeman (2006) defined employer brand as image (in view of employees) associated with an organisation uniquely in its role as an employer. Kimpakorn and Tocquer (2008, p. 534) extended this by involving potential employees and define it as “an organisation’s image seen through the eyes of its actual and potential employees”. Apparently, an employer brand as an entity can be defined as a package of several benefits and experience offered by an employer to the employees in exchange of providing employment, where association of employees with the attributes and experience provided by the organisation becomes an integral part of the offering.

Indication of treating employer brand as an entity can be evidenced in the research studies which have developed different scales to measure the employer brand’s attractiveness among potential candidates and current employees (King, Grace, & Funk, 2011; Srivastava & Bhatnagar, 2010; Srivastava, Bhatnagar, & Arora, 2017; Tanwar & Prasad, 2017). Moreover, while developing these scales for employer brand measurement, the data was collected from prospective candidates as well as current employees. For example, Srivastava et al. (2017) developed an 11 items scale of employer brand based on the quantitative data collected from 425 prospective employees to exhibit dominant dimensions of the employer brand and assess an organisation’s brand strength. Development of scales to measure an employer brand indicates treatment of employer brand as an entity that can be measured and quantified. Moreover, the participants in these studies were the potential candidates and current employees, who have nil or minor contribution, respectively, in developing the employer brand. Hence, results from these studies provide very little guidance on the steps / activities that can be helpful in creating an attractive employer brand. Nonetheless, the organisational characteristics / HR practices that were tested could form a foundation of building an attractive content for the employer brand and place organisation as a preferred employer at the time of recruitment. Still, there is lack of guidance on how to utilise these characteristics

in attracting the target audience and create/enhance a supply of talent pool by creating or enhancing visibility of the organisation.

Apart from developing scales, academics have also attempted to list a number of attributes that make an organisation attractive. Several HR practices were empirically tested to establish their contribution in creating an attractive employer brand. Lievens et al. (2007) stress on the core values of the organisation to be the main component of the employer brand for it to be attractive and successful, whereas Edwards (2009) links the employer image to the perception of employees stating that better employer image leads to higher level of talent attraction. All these practices have only been instrumental in providing comparative parameters and an advantage over other competitors while prospective candidates are contemplating upon different prospective employers. However, some organisations consciously work towards gaining an advantageous position and others may not. Hence, employer brand can be called an omnipresent feature where every organisation has an employer brand irrespective of whether they work towards creating one or not (Backhaus, 2016). The effectiveness of the employer brand content will eventually depend on how effectively it is used by the organisations in the process of employer branding.

2.3.2 Employer branding – a process

Before looking at the process perspective of employer branding, an understanding is needed on “what is a process?” A process can be defined as a series of events that precede and explain the occurrence of an outcome (Conway & Briner, 2005; Shaw & Jarvenpaa, 1997). In context of employer branding, the process perspective explains how and what sequence of organisational events may result in achieving the status of an attractive employer brand. While employer brand as an entity reflects different types of employer brand associations and organisational policies and practices generating differential responses, employer brand as process focuses on the employer brand awareness. Brand awareness “reflects brand node strength in the memory and how easily brand comes to mind” (Keller, 1993, p. 3). Thus, employer branding as process can be defined “as an activity that involves identifying and communicating a focused message about a unique shared employment experience associated with an organisation” (Collings, Mellahi, & Cascio, 2017, p. 240).

Current literature on the employer brand provides very little distinction between employer brand as an “entity” and employer brand as “process” (Theurer et al., 2018). However, a few academics have adopted process perspective (a means to build employer brand equity) in

their research on employer brand (Berthon et al., 2005; Davies & de Chernatony, 2008; Moroko & Uncles, 2008). Below is a discussion of a few definitions to understand the process perspective of the employer brand.

Employer branding is a process of presenting the organisation as an attractive and promising place to work with unique employment experience (Edwards, 2009). It can be seen as a systematic management of how the organisation is perceived as an employer by potential candidates. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) defined it as a process where organisation works towards creating distinguished and unique identity as an employer that differentiates it from its competitors. Employer branding is the unique way in which organisations differentiate themselves in employment market. Employer branding is also inter-disciplinary in nature as it integrates marketing and human resource together to provide insights on attracting and retaining suitable employees (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Edwards (2009) define it as an activity where “principles of marketing” and “science of branding” are adopted in designing HR policies & practices wherein target customers are potential and current employees. Conscious efforts by the organisation can help in creating a positive and attractive employer brand of the organisation. These conscious efforts are known as employer branding tool that position the organisation in the market as a desired employer and ensure organisation’s access to potential talented candidates (Wilden et al., 2010). An effective employer branding process provides a clearer picture of the potential employer’s work environment and associated attributes. This lowers the perceived risk associated with selecting a potential employer and places the organisation as the quality employer (Wilden et al., 2010).

Another stream of literature has focused on studying how current employees can be utilised in reinforcement of the brand in the employer branding process. Employer branding is seen as a process of reinforcing the brand promise to current / existing employees which motivates current employees to stay engaged with the organisation (Berthon et al., 2005). Consequently, an organisation creates a unique identity for itself where current employees identify with the employer’s identity (Foster, Abimbola, Punjaisri, & Cheng, 2010; Moroko & Uncles, 2008). An employer brand thus developed and maintained helps the organisations to attract, recruit, retain and engage the right talent.

Another perspective on employer branding process, stresses especially on the long-term features of the process. Employer branding process is not a short-term project, rather it is a long-term process of promoting the company in the employment market (Aggerholm et al.,

2011; Edlinger, 2015). This process is a long-term and targeted strategy which manages perceptions and awareness of the stakeholders including current and potential employees (Love & Singh, 2011). These long-term efforts referred as “employer branding” reflect the organisation’s efforts to promote the organisation both inside and outside the firm. To implement the process of employer branding an organisation needs to have a clear idea of the elements / practices that make it distinctive, unique and desirable as an employer. Unknown, unattractive and unclear value propositions create a weaker employer brand (Wallace, Lings, & Cameron, 2012). This may result in facing difficulties in attracting suitable talents and sustaining competitive advantage through employer image. To sustain the desired employer image, organisations need to constantly deliver on their employer brand promise (Love & Singh, 2011), which makes it a long-term and continuous process. A process that positions the organisation as “employer of choice” in the labour market to attract candidates (Srivastava et al., 2017). However, it is worthwhile to note that the employer branding process is not a separate entity, does not pre-exist and need not to be managed or created separately to be applied in the organisation. It is a process that is created within the organisation and exists through the communicative course of action that includes everyone in the organisation ranging from top management to multi stakeholders (Aggerholm et al., 2011; Edlinger, 2015).

Other than defining it as a long-term process, employer branding is seen as a strategic activity that includes organisation’s objectives and values in the employer branding. As Edlinger (2015, p. 449) notes “the employer branding process elaborates on the aims and purposes of the employer brand creation which leads to creation and maintenance of organisational spaces for the employer brand creation which itself leads to the strategic selection of participants.” It is seen as an integrative mechanism where employees internalise the desired employer brand image and further project it to other stakeholders and customers (Love & Singh, 2011; Miles & Mangold, 2004). Employer branding process uses attributes such as organisation culture, commitment and identity as instruments in an integrative way to promote the organisation and create organisation’s desired image (Love & Singh, 2011). Simultaneously, employer branding process adopts marketing, communication and HR concepts in creation of an attractive employer brand (Martin et al., 2011).

Employer branding process has an important role to play in establishing effective employer brand (Ghielen et al., 2020). An effective employer brand process means that the employer brand is communicated clearly and unambiguously to the targeted audiences (Ghielen et al.,

2020). Consequently, a clear understanding of the employer brand is transferred onto the target audiences. Barrow and Mosley (2011) pointed a decade ago that the approach towards “Employer branding” lacks the rigour and the approach to employer branding is mostly limited to selling the benefits of the employer as a “great place to work”. However, even after a decade there is a paucity in employer branding literature that looks at employer branding from process perspective. Barrow and Mosley (2011) further suggested that commitment from HR and senior management can make a valuable contribution to the process of employer branding.

A few recent studies on employer branding have adopted process perspective to understand organisation and HR relationship in employer branding process (Edlinger, 2015; Maheshwari et al., 2017). However, the focus has been only limited to either understanding the skills required in the managers responsible for branding or adopting a shared responsibility amongst managers to strategically contribute to the employer branding initiatives. A most recent study on employer branding process indicates that effectiveness of employer brand is determined by strategic integration of employer brand content and process (Ghielen et al., 2020). However, there is still a lack of understanding on how to integrate employer branding content created through various HR practices in the employer branding process to attract targeted talent to the organisation.

This understanding of employer branding process would provide an insight into the organisational practices that employ different organisational attributes in the employer branding process. Defining the visibility of the organisation and implementing it with the use of organisation’s HR practices can be helpful in designing the employer branding process that is as unique to an organisation as its resources are. Along with creating a strong brand internally through strategic HR practices, it is critical to be able to transfer that image externally with similar effectiveness to achieve better employer brand visibility in the employment market (Foster et al., 2010; Itam, Misra, & Anjum, 2020). Based on their availability of the resources, organisations may have different ways of defining and designing their visibility among the potential candidates. However, the ultimate purpose of employer branding for all the organisations is to attract the best suited talent.

2.4 Constructs of employer branding

2.4.1 Internal employer branding

Employer branding is an intersection of human resource and brand marketing that involves external as well as internal promotion of the unique selling points of an employer differentiating it from its competitors (Theurer et al., 2018). Employer branding is considered critical for success of any business as it is used not only to appeal to potential employees; but also, to engage with current employees. Engaging current employees in the process of creating attractive branding is known as internal employer branding (Hoppe, 2018; Punjaisri, 2007).

There are differentiated views about internal marketing while defining it in context of employer branding. Some academics have suggested to use internal branding to influence current employee's behaviour towards organisation to earn employee loyalty and increased employee retention (Gilani & Cunningham, 2017; Wallace, de Chernatony, & Buil, 2013). Whereas others have seen internal branding as a mechanism to influence employees' brand supporting behaviours and earn employee engagement and advocacy towards the brand (Punjaisri, Evanschitzky, & Wilson, 2009; Raj & Jyothi, 2011). In the latter view, internal branding is seen as a mechanism to reinforce brand promise by transforming brand promise into reality through employees eventually strengthening the employer brand (Punjaisri, 2007). Internal employer branding promotes shared understanding of organisation's values while positively influencing employee's commitment towards employer brand.

Internal marketing approach has originated from customer services indicating that good customer services can be achieved when employees are satisfied and motivated (Miles & Mangold, 2004). Internal marketing in employer branding suggests that marketing techniques could be used to communicate the benefits of employment to internal employment markets - that is "the current employees" (Wilden et al., 2010). Arguably, involving current employees in the process of creating employer brand such as representing the company at recruitment campaigns may make employer branding more effective and authentic. Current employees have a first-hand experience of organisation's culture and personality and any misrepresentation would cost bad reputation to the organisation through word-of-mouth and other communication platforms (Love & Singh, 2011). An authentic organisation can position itself to earn loyal employees by positively influencing current employee's perception about the employer brand (Wallace et al., 2013). Current employees' individual perception of the employer has an influence on potential candidates' intention to join and pursue employment

with the organisation (Bussin & Mouton, 2019; Dechawatanapaisal, 2018). This further has an impact on potential candidates' expectation from the potential employer. When brand promise is achieved through employment experience, it contributes further towards internal employer branding of the organisation (Aaker, 1992; Punjaisri et al., 2009).

A strong internal brand facilitates the process of communicating the benefits of employment to its employees. Through internal branding organisations not only project a positive image to its current employees, but also motivate them to promote the desired brand image of the organisation to potential candidates (Love & Singh, 2011). Potential employees consider personal referrals of current employees as the most reliable source of gaining credible information about the potential employer (Cable & Turban, 2001). Treating current employees as their credible brand ambassador for conveying brand signals and attracting potential employees is a way of creating external employer brand by fulfilling internal employment brand promise. Organisation can earn loyal brand ambassador by integrating the brand message and promise in the organisation culture and work practices (Cable, Aiman-Smith, Mulvey, & Edwards, 2000; Mosley, 2007). Current employees are ambassadors of the organisation's employer brand as they spread either positive or negative (based on their experience with the organisation) information through word of mouth about the organisation they are associated with (Urbancová & Hudáková, 2017).

Employment experience is another important factor that brings value and influence to the organisation's internal branding. Organisation's distinctive employment attributes and practices bring differentiation from the competitors (Edwards, 2009). Providing rich and valuable experience to the current employees may create reliable internal brand ambassadors for the firm. Taj (2016) suggests a few ways such as providing two-way communication, adopting decentralized decision-making process, respecting local cultures and values of employees, flexible approach towards religious and cultural ideologies to create attractive image through internal marketing. If potential employees were to be treated as customers for the job openings, influencing the views held by current employees will influence the employer brand by using the internal employer branding (Davies, Chun, & Kamins, 2009). This, ultimately, makes internal brand marketing an substantially important task in the field of employer branding. Rao (2010) in her study of five big IT companies found "Employee referrals" as the predominant method to attract and recruit new candidates. One of the studied companies in this study used employee referrals to have current employees write about their positive and negative work experience in the job adverts in the newspaper, which works as a

very strong reference for the potential candidates. This resulted in recruiting candidates that are most suited with the organisation culture and with less recruitment efforts involved. Internal branding works as a bridge between organisation's strategy and its implementation. By involving current employees, organisations ensure successful implementation of the organisational strategy. Since current employees can become the brand ambassadors for the organisation, it is crucial for them to identify with the organisation's values, which can be achieved by engaging the employees with the organisation through internal branding (Raj & Jyothi, 2011; Vallaster & De Chernatony, 2005; Wallace et al., 2013).

HR practices can be centred around the desired brand image to drive employees to act in accordance to brand behaviour, which promotes internal branding (Chang, Melewar, Chiang, & Han, 2012). Nevertheless, internal branding efforts may not produce consistent results from across all the employees as employees' personal and situational factors may have an influence on employment experience and thus the internal branding (Punjaisri, Balmer, & Wilson, 2011). King and Grace (2008) assert the value of internal branding and maintain that success of external branding programme and eventually the effectiveness of employer branding process highly depends on effectiveness of internal branding.

2.4.2 External employer branding

A potential employee may get into a contract of a long-term employment with a potential firm. This will have long-term implications for both the parties involved in the employment relationship, which motivates a potential employee to gather as much information as possible about the prospective employer. Simultaneously, an employer or an organisation communicates with the external audience using external marketing, i.e., sending appropriate signals through employer branding will help organisations to attract talented candidates to the organisation (Edwards, 2009). There are different audiences of the same employer brand which may be looking at different information about the employer (Kalinska-Kula & Staniec, 2021). While internal brand is targeted at current employees, external branding is targeted at potential candidates who may be contemplating the organisation as a potential employer (Backhaus, 2016). However, the candidates may be at different stage of their career in the process of looking for a potential employer. Some may be experienced while being employed at another organisation, others may be fresh graduates starting out with their career, and others still in the education and exploring different career options as well as different employers.

Current literature has predominantly focused on the audiences that are currently and actively looking for work, whether experienced professionals or fresh graduates (Chang & Chin, 2018; Greening & Turban, 2000; Terjesen, Vinnicombe, & Freeman, 2007). Different communication methods such as communication through social media, job advertising on recruitment portals, and information seeking requirements such as career options, growth opportunities, financial benefits with the potential employer have been explored to understand what can attract these candidates to the organisation and place as a potential employer amongst several options available to them (Sivertzen, Nilsen, & Olafsen, 2013; Williamson, Lepak, & King, 2003). However, organisation may have very little control or scope to influence their decision at this stage as these candidates have already been exposed to several other career options and various other organisations (potential employers) present in the employment market (Trank, Rynes, & Bretz, 2002). The employer branding efforts mostly provide a ground for comparison between different options available and differentiation employment factors in relation to other employers by communicating the attractive features of the employment among a widespread audience (Collins & Stevens, 2002). Hence, employer branding efforts are largely directed at communicating factual information rather than creating a place by strategically directing the efforts at targeted audiences. Moreover, these audience may or may not look at the factual information sent out by the organisation making the employer branding efforts loosely targeted.

Employer branding external communication is targeted at potential candidates and attempts to influence their decisions by promises made to fulfil their future expectations through employment (Edwards, 2009). It may involve their financial expectations, career expectation or their ideologies towards society (Chapman, Uggerslev, Carroll, Piasentin, & Jones, 2005; Patwa, Abraham, & D'Cruz, 2018). Including examples of employment experience in external employer branding by exemplifying the actual employment experience as closely as possible, the external employer branding efforts are focused at showing how it would be to work as an employee through various communications methods (Ganu & Abdulai, 2014; Saini & Jawahar, 2019). Recent developments in technology have enabled various communications methods such as sharing videos of the organisation's normal working day, current employees' video interviews to communicate organisation's attracting features with potential candidates. However, careful and strategic content creation as well as selection of communication platform is substantially important to achieve desired results.

Apart from the employment experiences, potential candidates are also interested in the factual information about the organisation. The performance of the organisation is seen as a predictor of successful, profitable organisations which tend to appear more attractive to potential candidates because this reflects stability (Edwards, 2009). However, profitability should not be considered as only the factual information while designing the external employer branding. Potential candidates rate organisations higher that display socially responsible features such as environmentally friendly, community service, support to minority groups, quality of products and services (Turban & Greening, 1997); sponsoring various educational events (Collins & Stevens, 2002); corporate social responsibility (Hong & Kim, 2017). Cable and Turban (2003) also support the contribution of corporate reputation in increasing the attractiveness of the organisation. Hence, an economic advantage is achieved as candidates may be willing to work on reduced salary for a highly reputed organisation.

External branding improves the quantity and quality of talent pool and potential talented candidates applying for employment with the organisation (Urbancová & Hudáková, 2017). Hence, with strategic employer branding efforts, organisation may place itself in an advantageous position where best suited candidates could be recruited as employees. Employer branding efforts are focused on providing easier and faster-information access to candidates. Organisations use various forms of media to advertise and promote their value proposition (Rao, 2014). External branding facilitates two-way communication and brings organisation closer to potential candidates. It eliminates information asymmetry and promotes better interaction with candidates. The two-way communication may place organisation as a more genuine employer as candidates get an opportunity to interact with their potential colleagues and managers (Leekha Chhabra & Sharma, 2014).

External branding not only attracts the candidates to the organisation, but it also helps in building foundation for internal branding. Candidates who have higher and positive perceptions about the reputation (external identity) of the organisation are more involved with the organisation when they become employees in the organisation (Edwards, 2009). As mentioned earlier, current employees as brand ambassador of the organisation create a reputed external brand for the organisation by their actions and word of mouth (Charbonnier-Voirin, Poujol, & Vignolles, 2017; Stockman et al., 2020). External employer branding reinstates the importance of having a good corporate brand and product brand along with an attractive employer brand, which further calls for consistency among all these brands of an

organisation (discussed in detail in section 2.4.5). Consistency plays an important role in internal and external branding of the organisation to achieve desired results.

2.4.3 Symbolic and instrumental attributes

Organisations use various organisational and job attributes to create an attractive employer branding proposition. While designing their content for employer branding organisations consider the requirements of the wider target audience that they aim to attract. These wider audiences may have different expectations from their employer. While some candidates may be more attracted towards competitive salaries, career and growth opportunities, location of the organisation, others may be more inclined towards reputation of the organisation, its contribution towards social cause etc. Looking at these varied attractive attributes, organisational attributes can be divided into two broad categories – Symbolic attributes and Instrumental attributes. Symbolic attributes represent subjective and intangible features of the organisation whereas Instrumental attributes represent utilitarian, objective or functional features of the employment with an organisation (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Van Hove et al., 2013). Symbolic features of the employer brand correspond to the candidates' need to maintain and enhance their individual beliefs, values and self – image (Lievens, 2007; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Whereas instrumental attributes primarily fulfil the functional need of the candidates and correspond to the concrete and factual attributes of the organisation (Van Hove et al., 2013). Instrumental difference between organisations may be limited and cannot solely provide a point of differentiation for potential candidates (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Hence greater similarity between candidates' expectation and organisation's symbolic attributes makes the organisation more attractive (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Reis & Braga, 2016; Srivastava & Bhatnagar, 2010).

After Lievens and Highhouse (2003) proposed a symbolic and instrumental framework and established its influence on the attractiveness of the organisation as an employer, many empirical studies were conducted to understand and evaluate the influence of these attributes on the attractiveness of the organisation and attitude or behaviour of the potential candidates / employees. Some studies have focused on assessing the role of instrumental attributes in creating an attractive employer brand. For example, training and development opportunities, competitive compensation practices and offering innovative perks had a positive and significant influence in placing organisation as an attractive employer among potential candidates (Cable & Graham, 2000; García, Posthuma, & Quiñones, 2010; Renaud, Morin, & Fray, 2016). Similarly, in a study of 726 potential candidates across three countries, financial

compensation was an important factor for participants to consider an organisation as an attractive potential employer (Holtbrugge & Kreppel, 2015). These studies have established the role of instrumental attributes in placing the organisation as an attractive employer. However, higher instrumental benefits over symbolic attributes may work against the attraction of the organisation. It may leave an impression on the potential candidates that the organisation is trying to compensate financially for not providing symbolic benefits (Renaud et al., 2016). Whereas organisation with a high positive reputation may be able to employ candidates even on lower financial compensation (Cable & Turban, 2003; Tavassoli, Sorescu, & Chandy, 2014). In such cases, candidates get attracted to other intrinsic benefits that they may receive through their employment association with the organisation.

Symbolic attributes provide substantial grounds to potential candidates to compare, prioritise and choose one organisation over the other if all the potential employers provide similar instrumental benefits such as salary and wages (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). In such case, organisations distinguish themselves in their offering of intrinsic rewards and assurance to meet socio – emotional needs of the candidates (Edwards, 2009). Organisations may fulfil ideological concerns of candidates through their operations and make useful contribution to the society (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003). The positive reputation of an organisation works as a compensation / premium for employees who accept jobs on a lower financial benefit (Viktoria Rampl & Kenning, 2014). In comparison to non-profit organisations which already have a high social reputation profit organisations focus more on providing intrinsic benefits and signalling symbolic attributes of the organisation to attract candidates (Aaker, Vohs, & Mogilner, 2010; De Cooman & Pepermans, 2012).

Symbolic attributes of the employer brand also reflect feel good factor and supportive work culture of the employment (Bhatnagar & Srivastava, 2008). For example, offering flexible work practices, organisations being involved in CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) activities, promoting employees' welfare practices can position the organisation as an attractive employer and earn positive favourable response from the employees (Carlini et al., 2019; Lin, Chen, & Chen, 2016; Thompson, Payne, & Taylor, 2015). Potential candidates may favour such organisations as a potential employer and current employee are more engaged. Hence, organisations need to send signals to potential candidates by various activities and policies which establish them as a reputed employer providing intrinsic or symbolic benefits.

2.4.4 Interaction between symbolic and instrumental attributes

As discussed above, most of the studies on symbolic and instrumental attributes and their role in creating an attractive employer brand have studied the influence of these attributes on the attitudes of potential candidates/employees during their interaction with organisation. These attributes have been studied independent of each other indicating these attributes as independent factors of the employer brand and share no dynamics between them. However, some academics have attempted to challenge this concept and tried to establish a relationship or interaction among these attributes.

Lievens and Highhouse (2003) collected the views of 399 participants to understand the value these participants assign to symbolic and instrumental attributes. The results suggested that these participants have a preference for symbolic attributes over instrumental attributes in predicting an organisation's attractiveness as an employer. In contrast, Kumari and Saini (2018) collected data from 240 participants to understand whether symbolic and instrumental attributes have any influence on each other while contributing to the attractiveness of the organisation. The results from this study suggested that majority of participants placed higher importance on instrumental attributes in assessing the attractiveness of an organisation. However, a combination of symbolic attributes makes the organisation more attractive while contemplating about their potential employer.

Although symbolic and functional attributes have been found to have preference over one another in different studies and hence their influence on organisational attractiveness. There is still a lack in understanding if these attributes work independent of each other. Should it be left to candidates' perception in assessing these attributes or organisations should place more value on focusing either instrumental or symbolic attributes? Can organisations utilise these attributes in enhancing influence of these attributes on one another and the organisational attractiveness overall? In the process of employer branding, higher importance should be attributed to symbolic attributes or instrumental attributes?

2.4.5 Consistency and accurate experience

As discussed earlier (in section 2.1), an organisation maintains multiple brands such as corporate brand, product brand and employer brand. These brands are not independent of each other and hence, the strategies to maintain and communicate these brands are interrelated (Wilden et al., 2010). Organisations send out messages to establish these brands and create an identity for themselves. However, audience of these brands could be the same,

which means a product user could be a potential candidate, or an external stakeholder could be a potential employee. In such scenario, the same audience would be receiving message from different sources. Hence, it is inevitable for organisations to be extremely cautious in designing and disseminating information about the organisation through various sources. Potential employees try to fill information asymmetries by withdrawing information through other sources of the organisation before considering an organisation as a potential employer (Altmann & Suess, 2015). They draw conclusions from all other sources available alongside the employer brand image such as corporate image and product image. Applicants not only look at attractive features of the potential employer, but also evaluate the employer brand before considering to applying for a job (Moroko & Uncles, 2008). A consistent employer image not only increases the quantity of the applicants, also increases the quality of people applying for the job (Elving, Westhoff, Meeusen, & Schoonderbeek, 2012). Any inconsistencies in the information provided through different channels may damage the reputation of the organisation. Through internal branding organisations attempt to achieve consistency amongst various branding messages (King & Grace, 2008; Raj & Jyothi, 2011). Consistency in the message by removing any asymmetries present in the employment market can make employer brand significantly effective. Close coupling among different brands of the organisation may result in making the employer branding process more effective and successful in attracting quality and quantity of the candidates and increases the candidate pool (Edwards, 2009). Signals sent through employer brand communicate the employer brand promise to the potential and current employees and increases the understanding of the employer brand with an assurance to fulfil its promises (Karanges, Johnston, Lings, & Beatson, 2018).

Consistency and accurate experience of the employer brand are two major characteristics of an attractive employer brand (Moroko & Uncles, 2008; Wilden et al., 2010). Employer brand consistency has been discussed in literature in three dimensions – first dimension is consistency with other brands of the organisation (Edlinger, 2015; King & Grace, 2008), second dimension is consistency between external branding and internal communication (Knox & Freeman, 2006; Moroko & Uncles, 2008; Wilden et al., 2010) and third dimension is consistency between employer branding message and employment experience (Botha, Bussin, & De Swardt, 2011; Mosley, 2007). Common feature among all these dimensions is the perceptions and expectations potential candidates may have formed based on the information disseminated by the organisation through different sources. When potential

candidates have formed a perception and intend to start an employment relationship with the organisation, it becomes the responsibility of the organisation to provide consistency among what has been advertised through the employer brand, product brand and corporate brand (Mosley, 2007).

Consistency also needs to be achieved between the external employer brand and the internal communication with the current employees (Knox & Freeman, 2006). Achieving consistency at this level is substantially important as communication with current employees forms a part of their employment experience with the organisation. These employees will leave feedback about the organisation on several social media platforms. On the other hand, potential candidates not only rely on the information provided in the advertised job vacancy, but also use different means such as social media pages and employer review sites to look for further details (Carpentier, Van Hoye, & Weijters, 2019; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016). If the feedback of current employees does not match with the advertised content of the organisation, inconsistency between different messages is created, and organisations' employer brand becomes ineffective. Edlinger (2015) added a new dimension to the consistent and accurate image of employer branding. Inclusion of desirable and exclusion of illegitimate meaning of employer brand is as important as creating one. This interpretation expands the role of the organisation in establishing an unambiguous employer brand and protect it from unwanted / harmful interpretations.

Consistency between what has been advertised and the employment experience provided thereafter is the most challenging aspect. Arguably, there is a considerable time difference between when the expectations are formed and when the actual employment experience may take place. Many factors such as organisations' work environment may have changed, the people – that make culture of any organisation – may have moved. In such scenario, candidates' expectations may not be able to meet with provided employment experience due to distance between organisation and the target audience. It would be helpful to understand how HR practices could be employed in bringing potential candidates closer to the organisation enabling to build expectations by personally interacting with the organisation. Can the inconsistencies arising out of time and place distance be eliminated by effective use of HR practices?

Current literature on achieving consistency suggests to have organisation wide clear understanding of branding messages and integrate it well in the employer branding content

(Edlinger, 2015). Merely designing and implementing policies is not helpful in achieving branding objectives. For an effective management of employer brand, there needs to be an organisation wide understanding of the brand messages conveyed through corporate, consumer and employer brand of the organisation (Edlinger, 2015; Moroko & Uncles, 2008). This understanding helps to achieve consistency and narrow down or eliminate the gap between what has been advertised through different communication channels. Getting across the right meaning of the employer brand is an important aspect in creating an attractive employer brand and providing the accurate experience. Any deviations from the ideal interpretation or practices of the desired employer brand may be harmful to the employer brand. Constant efforts to refine and reinforce the employer brand can reduce ambiguities and enhances acceptance (Edlinger, 2015).

2.5 Theoretical concepts in employer branding

Since the introduction of Employer branding, academics have used several theoretical lenses to explore this concept deeply and through multiple perspectives. These perspectives have provided various dimensions to understand how organisations can appear as an attractive employer against their competitors and among potential candidates as well as current employees. These theories have provided multi-dimensional perspective on employer branding.

For example, person-organisation fit theory emphasises higher level of congruence between the employing organisation and candidates' beliefs, values and culture as an underlying feature for an attractive organisation (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Bhatnagar & Srivastava, 2008; Tanwar & Kumar, 2019). Social identity theory suggest that candidates may be attracted to certain organisations to enhance and fulfil their self-esteem through their employment relationship with the organisation (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Younis & Hammad, 2020). Through certain organisation affiliation candidates seek social approval and recognize themselves as part of the broader community, hence certain organisations may seem attractive than others to the candidates according to their needs of social identity (Highhouse, Thornbury, & Little, 2007). Other theories such as psychological contract theory, organisational behaviour theory have also been used to deeply explore employer branding and its impact on candidates' attraction, behaviour and expectations towards the organisation.

Moreover, all the above theories have predominantly captured potential candidates' or current employees' perspectives. These theories highlight and have been explored from the employees' or candidates' perspective to observe and understand the attractive features of the organisation. Most recently Ghielen et al. (2020) investigated the response collected from 2123 individuals to report that better clarity on person-organisation fit improved organisation's attractiveness and strengthens the effectiveness of the employer brand. Similarly, social identity theory was used by Younis and Hammad (2020) to analyse the views of 382 students and potential candidates and determine the combined effect of corporate and employer image of an organisation's attractiveness.

It is evident from the above discussion that multiple theories have been adopted to explore the features of employer branding that make an organisation an attractive place to work. However, signalling theory has been the most dominant theory in the development of literature of employer branding. Implementing signalling theory in exploration of employer branding has provided audiences' perspective on how they perceive and respond to different practices and features of an organisation. It also provides an understanding on what communication channels are preferred by recipients in the employment market.

In the next section, an overview on the signalling theory and its utilisation in the employer branding literature is provided. A discussion on the use of signalling theory for the current study is also provided. The section provides a background on signalling theory and its gradual adoption in the HR literature from the marketing literature. Application of signalling theory in this study can strengthen the exploratory power of the theory from employer branding process perspective and offers a lens that examines the application of HR practices of the organisation in the process of employer branding.

2.5.1 Signalling theory

Signalling theory was introduced by Spence (1973) to understand the communication between organisations and labour markets, and then adopted in the human resource literature (Krausert, 2016). According to signalling theory, a potential customer uses various signals such as warranty, price, and advertisements to make a purchase decision. Similar to a product consumer, a potential employee receives and perceives signals through various organisational activities such as work-climate, culture, or career growth opportunities (Edlinger, 2015; Wilden et al., 2010). However, various channels of communication and information sources create information asymmetry about the product (Chang & Chin, 2018; Yasar, Martin, &

Kiessling, 2020). The direct interaction that takes place between signal sender and signal receiver could be one potential source to minimise the asymmetry, where the signal sender has more information about their product than the signal receiver (Sharma & Romero, 2021). However, this situation places the signal sender in a relative advantageous position to control information being transmitted in the market (Sharma & Romero, 2021).

In the context of employer branding, information asymmetries may arise due to the difference between “what is being advertised” and “what is being perceived”. Although, organisations intend to send out only positive signals, it is the insiders’ communication with outside world that unintentionally helps to reduce information asymmetry (Connelly et al., 2010). The employing organisation takes a decision on which information to be shared with the customers or potential employees (outside world) as it may want to hold negative signals whereas send out positive signals to create a positive image (Taj, 2016). Although, an organisation makes efforts to send out only the positive signals, it needs to be aware of its activities which may send out negative signals (such as dishonesty, unreliability, non-credibility) unintentionally. An organisation should be careful in handling these multiple signals as negative signals may disturb the receivers and can damage the reputation / positive image created by the positive signals (Wilden et al., 2010). Arguably, no organisation would ever deliberately send out signals that damage its reputation as an employer. However, conscious efforts are needed by the organisation to minimise the effects created by unintentional negative signals. Whether a signal is intended or unintended also depends on the recipient depending on their priorities and background (Taj, 2016). An unintentional signal may be picked up by the recipient whereas an intentional signal may be completely ignored. This reinforces the need for organisations to take responsibility to bring clarity and eliminate any asymmetry created while sending out the signals to minimise misinterpretation.

While sending signals about the organisation, the HR function makes deliberate efforts to send across the information and control the interpretation of practices, regulation and culture of the organisation by sending proactive signals through their actions and communication (Edlinger, 2015). Additionally, there are some brand-associations that may or may not be controlled by the employer but have a substantial impact on employer branding (Collins & Stevens, 2002; Wilden et al., 2010). A proactive approach in identifying and managing these brand - associations and making these associations part of desired employer brand is an important function of HR in developing desired employer brand (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

Signalling is effective where either there are relatively numerous signallers, or the competition is rigorous. With unemployment rate going down continuously organisations compete to attract the available talent in employment market. Therefore, in an employment market, where there is limited talent pool and numerous positions to be filled-in, role of signalling becomes highly significant (Chang & Chin, 2018). Building on signalling theory, Tumasjan, Strobel, and Welp (2011) argued that one of many strategies to enhance applicant attraction is making use of job characteristics and working conditions such as salary, allowances, flexible working time and career advancement. This indicates that organisations need to ensure that they implement attractive policies and send accurate and attractive signals to potential candidates to attract them. Moreover, effective signalling may reduce receiver's cost in accessing information about the organisation, which, consequently, may have a significant impact on their decision about determining their potential employer (Chang & Chin, 2018). Potential employees are concerned about the expectations that they would have to meet once employed. Higher clarity on this would save them from underperforming at work which leads to lower perceived risk of joining a prospective employer (Collins & Stevens, 2002; Wilden et al., 2010). To alleviate this risk, it is required that organisations should put efforts towards sending clear signals to the prospective candidates. Sending clear signals leads to clear and positive employer brand image eventually increasing the employer attractiveness (Carpentier & Van Hove, 2021). Potential employees would not want to make bad choices in choosing their prospective employer.

Empirical studies have been conducted based on signalling theory to establish the role of HR practices in creating an attractive employer brand. The extant research on employer branding using signalling theory informs that there seems to exist a tacit consensus that these practices induce an anticipated organisational support and culture in the potential applicant's mind. In an attempt to attract candidates and influence their decisions, organisations purposely send signals in the employment market to attract a pool of candidates and then select, employ and retain the best suited candidates (Karanges et al., 2018; Spence, 1973). In an employment relationship, potential candidates and employees expect their functional needs as well as non-functional expectations to be fulfilled through their association with an organisation (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Candidates' interest in non-functional attributes such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities, vision and mission of the organisation, training and development opportunities, flexible working hours; is an indication that employees expect tangible (instrumental) as well as intangible (symbolic) benefits from their

employer (Carlini et al., 2019; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Thompson et al., 2015). Hence, organisations use both tangible and intangible attributes of employment to establish themselves as an attractive employer (Carlini et al., 2019; Tumasjan et al., 2011).

To make signalling process effective, organisations not only attempt to send out positive signals, but also hold back negative signals (Taj, 2016). Interestingly, only legitimate signals that gain employees' approval will lead to positive reputational gains (Connelly et al., 2010). Cognitive processing of signals by individuals suggests that each individual may perceive the same signal differently (Drover, Wood, & Corbett, 2018). Sometimes negative signals may appear unintentionally (Spence, 2002). For example, employees who were not chosen for a training programme may not see the organisation as a place for growth and opportunities. Organisations need to be aware of the activities that may send out negative signals unintentionally and carry out a constant evaluation of signals being transmitted through its activities and take deliberate steps to minimise the effect and transmission of unintentional negative signals (Carpentier et al., 2019; Chang & Chin, 2018). The effectiveness of signals is also relative to the recipient of the signals, as a recipient may ignore positive signals and pick negative signals and build an image of the organisation based on their perception (Connelly et al., 2010). The negative signals not only have an influence on the immediate receivers, but also can damage the reputation of the organisation by spreading the word. An understanding of handling sources of the signals and the impact of negative signals that might occur during communication with the targeted audience would benefit the organisation in creating a desired image in the employment market. Negative feedback of the receiver may be sent in a communal way damaging the reputation of the organisation. Hence, gaining a close proximity and direct communication with the targeted audience could be helpful in making employer branding more effective by eliminating information asymmetry.

The above discussion highlights the importance of signal receiver in the employer branding process through signalling. Nonetheless, the importance of sender in the process cannot be overlooked. To make the process effective and gain a wholesome understanding of the employer branding process, considering the sender's perspective on the employer branding process is equally substantial. Moreover, the employer branding process is initiated by the employing organisation i.e., signal sender. Hence, this study places focus on understanding the sender's perspective on the employer branding process as the sender's initiate and regulate the employer branding process to achieve effective results.

Application of signalling theory and its application in understanding signal sender's perspective can facilitate understanding of the employer brand process in following ways - 1) sending signals by employer through various HR practices to employment market to establish itself as an attractive employer, 2) ensuring that the signals sent through branding strategies are conveyed to targeted potential candidates (Ghielen et al., 2020; Wilden et al., 2010). The assumption in the signalling theory that organisation's managers know more about the organisations than the outsiders (Taj, 2016). Thus, adopting signalling theory can help in exploring the process perspective of employer branding by exploring the views of organisations' senior management who are in capacity of controlling the signals and eliminating any unwanted asymmetries. Another assumption is that signalling is, partly, effective when signal receivers are actively looking for signals (Ilmola & Kuusi, 2006). Adoption of signalling theory would also attempt to contest the current understanding that signalling is effective where signal receivers are looking for signals (Connelly et al., 2010). Hence, signalling theory is appropriate to gain this understanding, as this study looks at reaching out to potential candidates who are unaware about the industry, consequently not looking for any signals from such potential employers actively.

The discussion above suggests that organisation can strategically utilise their HR practices in influencing the decision of their potential candidates by sending out positive signals and withholding any negative signals. It also presents a great opportunity for the organisation to remove any information asymmetries present in the employment market by implementing better communication strategies and gaining proximity to its signal receivers. Hence, exploring the employer brand process from a signal sender perspective would enable an insight into effective utilisation of signalling in the employer branding process.

2.6 Employer branding - HR practices or Marketing principles

It is debatable whether employer branding is a function of HRM or marketing. While the content disseminated through employer brand is created by designing and implementing the attractive HR practices, marketing strategies and principles play an important role in communicating the well-crafted employer branding content to the targeted audiences. Treatment of employer branding as one hard-core HR or marketing function may hinder the effectiveness of the process. Moreover, it may also be ineffective in achieving consistency between organisations' different branding contents (as discussed in section 2.4.5) in employer branding initiatives. Scholars have regarded employer branding as a synthesis of marketing principles and HR activities (Wallace et al., 2012). Edwards (2009) indicate that marketing

and HR should join hands to create attractive employer brand by applying “science of branding” and “principles of marketing” to HR activities. Edwards (2009) also advises against considering employer branding as one-time activity as this is a continuous and ongoing process which needs organisation wide attention. Whereas, Edlinger (2015) suggests that involvement of all the stakeholders in the employer branding process is a necessity for co-creation however, the onus of creation and outcome of the employer branding still lies with the HR. In the sections below, a discussion is provided to reflect the role of HRM and marketing in establishing an effective employer brand. Before discussing the role of HR practices in employer branding, an understanding on the meaning of HR practices in context is important.

2.6.1 HR Practices

Human resource practices are known to be a constellation of interrelated policies that give strategic guidance to make decisions about people management (Greer, Lusch, & Hitt, 2017). While designing these HR practices senior management as well as line managers are centrally involved to achieve organisation’s objective through these practices and shape the employment relationship accordingly (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). In an organisation, HR does not work in isolation, rather it works as a mediator to bring alignment amongst employees and functions organisations wide to achieve organisation’s vision and mission. All the departments are interrelated and intertwined where everyone from line manager to senior management from each department is working towards achieving the common organisational objectives. Another important role of the HR practices is to define and design employment relations where focus of HRM is not only to achieve organizational objectives rather it should also work toward establishing outstanding employment relationships (Rubery, Earnshaw, Marchington, Cooke, & Vincent, 2002). Since employment relationship is a very broad concept, we can argue that it means to establish relationships with current and potential employees as well as all the stakeholders who are an integral part of the organisation.

Concerning with management of employees (both current and potential) HRM practices have been identified in several aspects. HRM practices are seen as a system that attracts, develops, and retains talented workforce to ensure organisational effectiveness and implementation of competitive strategy (Schuler & Jackson, 2014). Besides, effective implementation, HRM practices are also conceptualised as a set of internally consistent policies and practices designed and implemented to ensure effective utilisation of organisation’s human capital towards achievement of its business objectives (Wang, Werner, Sun, Gilley, & Gilley, 2017).

Similarly, HRM practices are also utilised and implemented towards development of organisational competencies which are organisation specific and produce unique organisational social relations and knowledge to achieve and sustain competitive advantage (Smale, 2008). Although different approaches such as contingency approach or configuration approach, have been suggested by academics for effective management of human resources, all these approaches consistently focus towards achieving organisational objectives and competitive advantage by effective utilisation of available human resources (Negron, 2020; Signoretti, Pederiva, & Zaninotto, 2022).

In various approaches, it is evident that human resources have a large influence on the policies being designed and implemented while working towards achieving competitive advantage for the organisation. The human resource policies are a deliberate and strategic choice rather than mere situational response to circumstances (Lengnick-Hall, Beck, & Lengnick-Hall, 2011). These policies lead and help the organisation to achieve its vision in such a way that is mutually beneficial to both the organisation and its stakeholders and each one values the relationship developed in the journey. However, Armstrong (2006) advises not to overlook the new opportunities that arise along way and build capabilities to capitalise on those new opportunities. This requires HR to have dynamic approach to handle various circumstances arising out of business activities or market conditions while effectively meeting the organisational objectives.

2.6.2 Employer branding and HR practices

Employer branding positions an organisation as an attractive employer in the mind of potential employees (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Lievens et al., 2007). The purpose of creating employer brand is to create a unique employer value proposition in the labour market (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). These value propositions help organisations to attract best suited candidates from the labour market. The shift of focus in the employer branding literature from engagement of current employees (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Lievens et al., 2007) to attraction of potential employees (Edwards & Edwards, 2013; Van Hove et al., 2013) implies higher involvement of HR department in employer branding. HR department is primarily held responsible for providing organisational information to potential candidates to attract them towards the organisation. The role of HR is mainly defined as a creator of the employer brand by focusing their efforts on establishing the desired employer brand through promotional activities, communication, networking (Edlinger, 2015). Along with promotional advertising, organisations utilise different means

and approaches such as feedback forums and employees' word-of-mouth to advertise the HR practices adopted and implemented by the organisation (Slavković, Pavlović, & Simić, 2018). These communication strategies are focused on providing realistic job previews to prospective candidates (Baur, Buckley, Bagdasarov, & Dharmasiri, 2014). Based on these previews, candidates decide whether or not the organisation suits their expectations and is a desirable place to work. Consequently, HR practices may reflect the organisational intention and values towards its employees influencing potential candidate's decision about their prospective employer (Maheshwari et al., 2017).

a) HR practices as facilitator of employer brand

An organisation's success depends on its ability to attract and retain the best suited talent, which identifies important role of HR in creating an attractive employer brand (Moroko & Uncles, 2008). Employer branding includes designing the set of HR practices and creating a work environment conducive to achieve organizational strategic goals (Backhaus, 2016). Many scholars have researched the interconnection of employer branding and HRM, both conceptually and empirically and established that HR practices have a very important role in creating attractive employer brand. Srivastava et al. (2017) in their study of 425 participants (prospective and current employees) found that HR systems and processes were the most dominant dimension to assess the employer brand of an organisation, which took precedence over perceived organisational culture and reputation. However, job-seeking candidates and the current employees may have different criteria of an attractive organisation. Srivastava et al. (2017) also confirmed that job-seeking candidates were most attracted to career growth opportunities challenging work environment, training and development and performance-based pay. Apparently, various HR practices and attributes such as talent management practices, employee welfare practices, time-off programs for employees, intrinsic and prestige values, gender equality, work-life balance, career growth opportunities, flexible work practices, job security, corporate social responsibility (CSR) are found to be attractive attributes for potential employees (Altmann & Suess, 2015; De Cooman & Pepermans, 2012; Holtbrugge & Kreppel, 2015; Hong & Kim, 2017; Iseke & Pull, 2017; Kumari & Saini, 2018; Kwame Mensah, Nyigmah Bawole, & Wedchayanon, 2016; Lin et al., 2016; Onken-Menke, Nüesch, & Kröll, 2017). However, innovative approach to HR practices that suit the need and lifestyle of the job-seeking candidates may enhance the attractiveness of an employer (Robertson & Khatibi, 2012).

Beyond interacting with organisational content through various communication channels, the first physical interaction, which a candidate may have with the organisation, is with the HR or its HR activities such as reading a job advert. The reciprocal obligation on HR starts with the recruitment process and continues till an employee is associated with the organisation (Rousseau, Hansen, & Tomprou, 2018). HR attempts to fulfil the mutual obligation that has taken place during the employee life cycle (Moroko & Uncles, 2008). Fulfilling these obligations leaves a positive impression on the candidates and employees, creating an attractive image of the organisation as an employer. Unique HRM practices are known as synonymous to distinct and recognizable employer brand (Edwards, 2009). These practices adopt employer branding as a tool to “engage employee loyalty and build organizational commitment” contributing towards positive image of the organisation (Martin, Beaumont, Doig, & Pate, 2005, p. 78).

Employer branding, as a tool, develops attractive employer brand by implementing HR practices that are designed and implemented by the HR practitioners in consultation with the top management to achieve strategic goals of the organisation, with a targeted and long-term strategy (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Moreover, HR works as a bridge or mediator between the corporate objectives and organisation culture. Hence, providing HR a platform to be able to transparently communicate and engage with potential candidates and employees would add value to the process of employer branding (Bondarouk, Ruël, Axinia, & Arama, 2014). In-depth awareness of integrating employer branding principles into the design and implementation of HR practices would result in successful implementation of the employer branding process (Maheshwari et al., 2017). This understanding helps HR practitioners to integrate the employer branding message and organisation culture in their employer branding initiatives enabling consistency in the employer brand messaging, perception and employer brand experience.

b) HR associated activities influencing employer brand

Along with HR practices, there are other peripheral activities that HR is a part of or works closely with, has an impact on the image of the organisation as an employer. Employees can, sometimes, be willing to forego some financial benefits to work for a better reputed organisation. This aligns with the concept of social identity theory where employees would prefer to work with a socially reputed organisation to improve their own self-esteem. To establish the impact of peripheral activities on the employer attractiveness, Story, Castanheira, and Hartig (2016) collected data from 532 participants and established that

corporate social responsibility (CSR) works as an important tool for attracting and recruiting talented candidates. Hong and Kim (2017) also support the instrumental role of CSR in increasing attractiveness of an employer through an empirical study based on response from 62 Korean undergraduate students. However, Kumari and Saini (2018) found only limited contribution of CSR in attracting candidates when CSR was compared against career growth opportunities.

Similarly, maintaining gender balance / equality in the organisation also signals organisational justice and increases perceived attractiveness of the employer. Iseke and Pull (2017) collected data from 537 university students to show that gender balance and equality increase perceived attractiveness of the organisation as an employer. Maintaining gender balance adds to the prestige value of the organisation. These prestige values and other intrinsic benefits provided by the organisations add to their attractiveness since organisations mention these attributes in their job advertisements to attract better quantity and quality of candidates (De Cooman & Pepermans, 2012). Scanning the content of 1768 job advertisement published in Belgium lead De Cooman and Pepermans (2012) concluded that profit organisations highlight these intrinsic attributes in their job advertisement to appear as an attractive employer. Adopting and promoting talent management practices also adds to the intrinsic value of the organisation and eventually increases organizational attractiveness as an employer (Kwame Mensah et al., 2016). The way customers' attitude can be influenced by changing the attitude of front-line employees (Davies et al., 2009). Similarly, it can be argued that employer brand and its perception in the mind of potential employees can be influenced through distinct approach of the HR, thus creating a unique employer brand equity for the organisation.

c) Employer branding and HR performance metrics

In the era of strong competition, employees can prove as a strong pillar on which any business should focus upon while developing its strategy (Urbancová & Hudáková, 2017). It is the prime job of HR to achieve consistency in employer brand messaging and experience while dealing with current employees and managing HR activities. Hence, HR can play a pivotal role in creating in attracting potential candidates and providing accurate and consistent experience to retain these talented employees which would lead to creating employer brand ambassadors for the organisation (Joo & McLean, 2006). Creating an attractive image not only attracts talented candidates, but it also helps the organisation to compete with competitors by creating a sustainable competitive advantage (Urbancová &

Hudáková, 2017). Other benefits of creating an attractive image are less time and resources spent in finding new candidates for a vacancy by building a pool of qualified candidates and achieving higher retention rate by reduced employee turnover (Cable & Turban, 2001). These acquired benefits are also used as performance metric for the HR efficiency. Hence, creating an attractive employer brand may make HR job more efficient.

In accordance with the concept of brand equity transfer, employees and executives agree to work on lower pay (to a certain extent) as they feel privileged to be associated with a strong and reputed employer brand (Cable & Turban, 2003; Tavassoli et al., 2014). The association with a stronger brand also reduces the uncertainty in the candidates' mind while choosing their prospective employer, and which eventually results in lower turnover rate after the employment association is established. Since one of the KPIs of the HR is to negotiate remuneration and achieving low employee turnover (Hong, Hao, Kumar, Ramendran, & Kadiresan, 2012), creating an attractive employer brand helps HR to attract and appoint highly qualified and talented people on comparatively lower remuneration. This reinforces the importance for HR to pay extra attention to create an attractive employer image, which can be achieved by designing and implementing effective HR practices.

d) HR practices as protector of employer brand

Identifying and marketing distinctive employment and organisational attributes are known as core strategies to create an effective employer brand. To gain legitimacy these activities need to be coupled with human resource practices for authentic implementation of strategies. The role of HR in the process of creating the employer brand is considered challenging since there is a shift in their role from as an outsider to operational business to strategic partner in organisation and working with top management and key stakeholders (Edlinger, 2015). This shift expands the contribution of HR in extra roles such as 1) controller; 2) promoter; 3) protector 4) policing. Being at the interface of the internal and external branding by combining the principles of HR and marketing makes HR role challenging. Consequently, HR is recently seen as the owner / creator of the employer brand. Apparently, HR could be in a powerful position to have the ability to influence the employer brand by their actions. In addition to the prime responsibility of promoting and controlling the employer brand, the role of HR as a protector is to protect the employer brand from undesired interpretations, unauthorized contributors, illegitimate content and disadvantageous features (Edlinger, 2015).

e) Sustained competitive advantage through HR practices

HR practices are also instrumental in achieving sustained competitive advantage. According to resource-based view, sustained competitive advantage is said to be achieved when other competitors are not able to copy / imitate the competitive advantage achieved by a particular organisation (Barney, 1991). If another organisation can copy the efforts or duplicate the advantage, then the competitive advantage is not sustained. Distinctive HR practices fulfil the criteria of sustained competitive advantage i.e., valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable, (Barney & Wright, 1998). HR practices can be unique and inimitable due to being specific to the particular organisation depending on its culture, value and circumstances (Berisha Qehaja & Kutllovci, 2015). It is comparatively easy to imitate the functional characteristics of the firm, but it can be really difficult to copy the values, culture and circumstances of the firm, given to many factors such as industry, products and services offered, location, HR practices, organisational culture (Barney & Wright, 1998).

Human resource practices and pool of organisational work-force, put together make the HR capital of any organisation (Wright, McMahan, & McWilliams, 1994; Youndt & Snell, 2004). However, there are different views in deciding which of these, HR practices or workforce, is more important to achieve competitive advantage for any organisation. Based on a practice-oriented approach some scholars believe that HR practices are a source of competitive advantage by creating value for the firm (Schuler & MacMillan, 1984; Ulrich & Lake, 1991). The very nature of being firm's specific and addressing the particular needs and circumstances of an organisation, HR practices become non-transferrable to any other organisation. Hence, HR practices contribute towards achieving sustained competitive advantage (Khandekar & Sharma, 2005; Pahuja & Dalal, 2012).

Conversely, from a theoretical perspective it was suggested that human resource is the main source of competitive advantage and not the HR practices (Wright et al., 1994). This argument is supported by the fact that HR practices are easily imitated or substituted and hence cannot bring sustained competitive advantage to the firm (Hatch & Dyer, 2004). However, there was an agreement on statement that HR practices play an important role in developing the human capital pool and thus enabling sustained competitive advantage. To be known as distinguished employer, organisations should focus on providing added value (such as career progression opportunities, work-life balance opportunities) to the employees other than just salary and benefits (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Following the above discussion, it can be concluded that HR practices help an organisation to realise its human capital potential

and hence develop an attractive image as an employer. For example, by adopting and implementing robust training and development practices an organisation can invest and develop its talent pool, which sends signal to the current and prospective employees that the organisation values and invests in the talented people (Hatch & Dyer, 2004; Tanwar & Prasad, 2017).

Hence, it is understood that both the components of human capital, HR practices and work force are equally important in achieving competitive advantage. This enables an organisation of attracting and retaining the valued human capital. For the competitive advantage to be sustained, the employer brand promise had to be attractive, accurate and consistent. This combination can be achieved by attracting the talented candidates through organisation's unique offering and fulfilling the expectations of the employees created through employer branding activities (Moroko & Uncles, 2008; Sengupta, Bamel, & Singh, 2015). Any strategic mismatch can prove harmful to the image of the organisation as an employer.

HR practices designed in line with organisational objectives (which are prime responsibility of the HR department), manage the human capital and help the organisation to achieve its goal. In the process, these practices help organisations to attract and retain the best suited talent but are not limited to this objective. These practices also support and reinforce a culture that makes the organisation a stable and difficult to imitate place, which ultimately earns a competitive advantage for the organisation and sustains it too (Joo & McLean, 2006). Based on resource-based view, unlike manufacturing and production techniques, employees' knowledge, skills and capabilities are difficult to replicate and represent unique image of the organisation to its stakeholders (Rao, 2014). Management practices, described as "input competencies", the more unusual these are, the more difficult to replicate and hence provide sustained competitive advantage to the organisations (Rao, 2014).

2.6.3 Employer branding and marketing principles

Employer branding is seen as a function that stands at the cross section of HR and marketing (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Cable & Turban, 2001; Moroko & Uncles, 2009). While HR practices contribute towards creating an attractive content for the employer brand, marketing principles can help in disseminating these attractive features to the target audiences in an effective manner (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). The HR efforts strategically lead internal employer branding efforts through designing and implementing and validating effective HR

practices, whereas collaboration with marketing specialist helps in effective external branding efforts (Cascio & Graham, 2016).

Ambler and Barrow (1996) laid the foundation of implementing marketing approach in HR to manage the employer brand experience. Since the introduction of employer branding, many studies have been carried out in understanding what attracts customers of the employer brand i.e., potential candidates to the organisation (Chapman et al., 2005; Greening & Turban, 2000; Thompson et al., 2015). Later, Lievens and Highhouse (2003) used marketing-based viewpoint to study the attractive features of the organisation. They used instrumental – symbolic framework to explore differentiating features of any organisation and predict the organisation attractiveness as an employer in comparison to the contending organisations. However, unlike the discipline of marketing, employer branding literature lacks the empirical studies that could guide HR professionals on strategies and guidelines to successfully market or establish the employer brand.

Applying a marketing perspective into employer branding provides certain references that have postulated foundation for employer branding literature. First of all, as mentioned above employer branding term in itself has originated taking reference from product branding (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). Furthermore, the symbolic and instrumental attributes of employer brand correspond to the symbolic and instrumental attributes of a product brand (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). In product marketing literature instrumental attributes correspond to the product related attributes, whereas symbolic attributes correspond to the non-product related attributes. Similarly, in employer branding literature instrumental attributes correspond to the objective, concrete and factual information about the organisation, whereas symbolic attributes correspond to the subjective and intangible attributes of the organisation. Furthermore, employer brand image is compared to brand equity from marketing literature (Cascio & Graham, 2016). A premium brand equity earned from product marketing means a premium price that a customer is willing to pay for a branded product over a generic one (Aaker, 1992). Similar concept has been adopted in employer branding literature where a candidate is willing to forego some financial benefits to work for a reputed employer brand (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). A reputed employer brand equity also contributes towards attracting and retaining high quality employees (Wilden et al., 2010).

Another important concept adopted from marketing literature is segmentation. Segmentation in product marketing is discussed to segment the consumers from one another based on their “geography, purchase and usage behaviour, decision-making processes, demographics, lifestyle, psychographics, personality and motivation” (Moroko & Uncles, 2009, p. 181). Segmenting consumers based on certain characteristics helps organisations to develop market strategies which are more profitable to respective consumers group. A similar logic has been adopted in employer branding literature which suggests to segment the potential candidates and employees based on their observable factors such as age, seniority, location; and unobservable factors such as career focus, bargaining power, choice barriers to entry and exit (Moroko & Uncles, 2009; Tüzüner & Yüksel, 2009). Segmenting employer branding strategies based on the target audience can make organisation’s employer branding more relevant and effective (Davies, Mete, & Whelan, 2018; Moroko & Uncles, 2009). Segmenting the target audience could be helpful in designing the employer branding strategies that suit the respective segment of the audience. However, there are different views on segmenting employees to create an attractive employer brand. While some argue to present employer brand differently to different groups making it highly relevant for the particular group of employees to counter differences in their perception of the same employer image (Davies et al., 2018; Moroko & Uncles, 2009); others have argued to work towards creating coherent culture in the organisation through employer branding practices (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Nonetheless, adopting this marketing perspective has provided another dimension in the employer branding literature.

As a marketing personnel is responsible for product image; it is the responsibility of HR to create and position the organisation image as an employer in mind of all potential candidates and current employee (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Cascio & Graham, 2016). To achieve this objective, organisations advertise their distinctive characteristics as an attractive employer. However, comparing an employer brand with another employer brand by actually testing it, could be much riskier than comparing a product brand. There is high risk involved with an employee taking up a job in an organisation that does not fulfil its promises. When a potential candidate has joined the company, employer brand takes over the corporate and consumer brand. This calls for higher responsibility on HR to maintain consistency in employer brand and employee experience.

Cross functional collaboration has been asserted by the academics and researchers to maintain consistency and credibility of the information, which is also essential to maintain a

consistent employer brand (King & Grace, 2008; Knox & Freeman, 2006; Mosley, 2007; Robertson & Khatibi, 2012). Working in close collaboration with other departments may make the employer brand more credible, reliable and consistent. Practically, it is more than just adopting and applying marketing principles. Employer branding is a vast concept and it involves a mix of marketing and human resource (Edwards, 2009). Part of the audience of employer brand i.e. current employees can see the brand as a whole as they are the insiders now (Klimchak, Ward Bartlett, & MacKenzie, 2020). This makes employer branding more discrete and distinct process. Considering the employment experience as product brand and functional expertise of human resource in managing employees' life cycle and experience within an organisation makes this process very demanding. Ideally, HR manager should take a front seat in creating an employer brand while the marketing can contribute with their expertise to understand and implement the basics of the marketing. Barrow and Mosley (2011) acknowledge the distinctiveness of employer branding context by proposing that it should be studied in its own right to gain more meaningful insights.

2.7 Summary

In this chapter, a detailed discussion on employer branding was presented. An assessment of employer branding as “an entity” and as “a process” was presented to highlight the difference in their understanding and application in empirical research. The importance of researching employer branding as process was also highlighted, existence of which is currently lacking in the employer branding literature. Next, the discussion on different constructs of employer branding was presented which form an integral part while designing the employer branding process. It is important to note that this study does not aim to discover a set of particular HR practices that contribute to the employer branding process, rather the objective is to explore how organisations can utilise their existing HR practices in creating an attractive employer brand. Hence, a discussion on construct of employer branding is more relevant for this study.

A further discussion on adoption and preference for “signalling theory” over other relevant theories is presented, highlighting that signalling theory is not influenced by the role of the audience in the process of implementation. The chapter continues with a discussion on the role of HR practices and marketing highlighting how HR practices and marketing principles play their individual roles as well as interact with each other in employer branding. It was concluded that employer branding literature is built up on using concepts from marketing literature, however the prime responsibility of designing and establishing an attractive employer brand lies with the HR.

Chapter 3 Research Context

3.1 Introduction

This chapter starts with discussion of carefully selecting the industry for employer branding studies. Particular industry may have an important role to play in conducting the employer branding research, because not every industry may have been facing employer branding challenges. Long existence in the employment market can make these industries easily recognisable among potential candidates. Hence, selecting an industry that is currently facing employer branding challenge is paramount to meet the objectives of this study. Selection of data centre industry in the UK for this study is justified in the following section. A discussion on skills shortage in the UK data centre industry is presented and reasons for the skills shortage are discussed, which make this industry a suitable case for study.

3.2 Importance of focus on industry in employer branding

Existing studies on employer branding have focused on one particular industry such as banking industry, IT industry, hotel industry to understand the relationship between HR practices and employer branding. These industries were selected after a rigorous consideration to meet the objectives of the study. The selection of industry had particular relevance to the objectives of those studies and the results achieved. However, the industries where these studies were based at, were not facing any employer branding challenges since these industries are very well known in the employment market. The studies have only focused to explore on the HR practices and their influence on employer branding. Apparently, industries in which an organisation is embedded has a huge influence on employer branding initiatives and potential candidates' decision-making process (Wilden et al., 2010). Arguably, the relevant industry can have a substantial impact and can subsequently differentiate employer branding efforts taken by the organisation in any particular industry. Nevertheless, organisations need to design their employer branding strategy that differentiates them from the rest of the organisations embedded in the same industry, to position themselves as the preferred potential employer against the competing potential employers (Wilden et al., 2010).

Empirical studies on the process of employer branding have mostly been conducted in the industries which already had a recognition in the employment market such as banking industry (Maheshwari et al., 2017); prestigious army groups (Lievens, 2007); large renowned business with strong branding initiatives (Edlinger, 2015), or an intra-organisational study within a global organisation and world-leader within their own field (Russell & Brannan, 2016). All these studies have been carried out on the industries already holding an

advantageous position either due to their size of operation, scale of business, relevance of the services or recognition as an industry. The findings of these existing studies cannot be replicated / implemented in the businesses that lack all of these organisational specific attributes.

The focus of this study is on emerging, but thriving industry – data centre industry, which has huge contribution to the current data dominated economy. However, the industry is still unknown among potential candidates looking for potential employers, or among the recent graduate students who are in the process of choosing a career path. This lack of awareness about the industry poses difficulties for the data centre industry to attract potential candidates (Brown, 2021). The lack of awareness about the industry largely impacts the small and medium sized data centres. These data centres find it more difficult to attract potential candidates in comparison to some large and well-known data centres. However, big data centres are well-known for their own brand name and other multiple businesses they are involved with, instead of being in the data centre businesses. Example of such data centres are Google, Microsoft etc., which are not dependent on industry branding to attract potential candidates. These organisations have established their own reputed employer image. Furthermore, before discussing the skills shortage in the data centre industry, it is important to understand the importance of data centre industry in the current economy.

3.3 Selection of data centre industry

In the current data driven economy, the need for internet and the devices connected to internet is growing exponentially. Large amount of data is captured, routed, stored, evaluated and retrieved every day to run the current data driven economy (Gray, 2022). As depicted in Figure 3.1 Global internet user growth, Cisco predicts that by 2023, the internet traffic will increase three times and internet users will grow nearly 6% within a span of five years (Cisco, 2020).

With this shift towards data, increased reliance on data and data analytics is needed to enhance organisation's efficiency, productivity, cost-effectiveness of operations and securing all the organisational data (Gray, 2022). Since data centres provide physical storage space for the data, the demand for data centres is simultaneously growing.

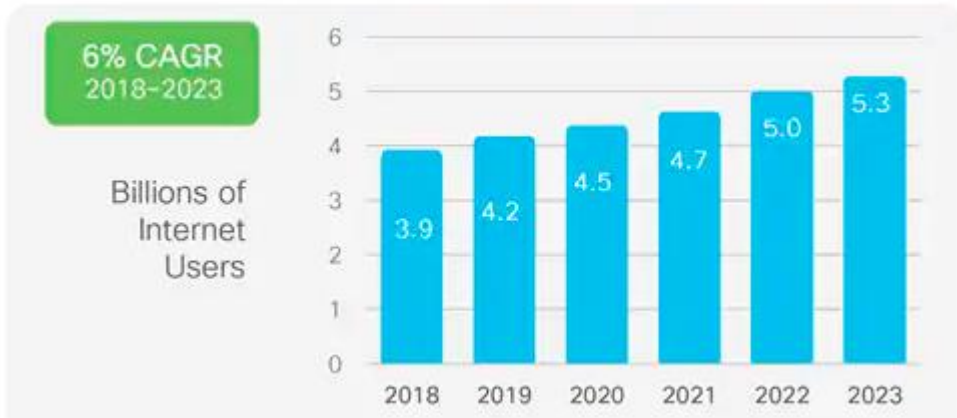


Figure 3.1 Global internet user growth

Data centres can be called a relatively new industry. This term was first coined in mid-90s, and the industry has been growing exponentially since then. For example, 37% of data centre operators developed new data centre space in a span of just one year between July, 2012 to June, 2013 (Heslin, 2014). Another survey carried out by Uptime Institute suggests that 70% (out of 100 respondents) built new data centre space or added space in last five years (Heslin, 2014). Within the period of 2021 – 2027, data centre market is expected to grow at compound annual growth rate of over 4.95% (Arizton, 2022). However, there still exists a large gap between demand and supply of data centres. Figure 3.2 shows clear distinction between demand and supply of data centres (Heslin, 2014).

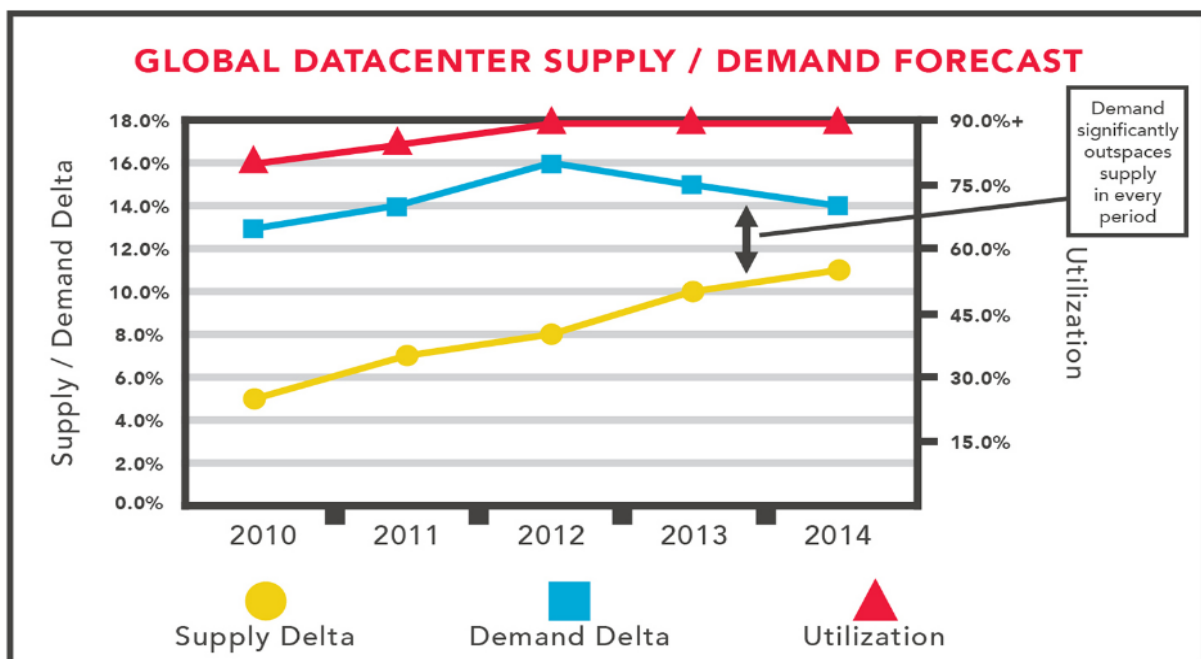


Figure 3.2 Demand and supply of data centres

This gap indicates that more data centres would be needed to meet the growing need of the current data driven economy. Moreover, the growth in data centre industry has not been linear. Even in the times of global recession and pandemic, this industry has been very resilient and had continued to grow (Future Tech, 2022). Not surprisingly, the data centre industry has grown enormously in the time of pandemic and has shown no signs of slowing down (Brown, 2021).

3.4 UK Data centre industry

Since data centres are spread world-wide, it is not feasible to cover all the data centres across the world. This study is focused on data centres in the UK and the talent attraction challenges faced by those data centres. British government white paper on industrial strategy puts the United Kingdom at the forefront of the future industries of AI and data economy (Department for Business Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2018) . To tap into this growing trend of data centres, the British government has decided to chalk out its industrial strategy that focuses on building infrastructure which is adequate to face the productivity challenges in digital transformation. Accordingly, the UK based data centres would need to cater the need of storing data of worth over \$135 billion annually (Lima, 2020).



Figure 3.3 Data centre market – forecast and analysis

In the UK, business investments in the data infrastructure is also expected to grow between 5% - 11% by 2025 (Lima, 2020). Similarly, as shown above in Figure 3.3, data centre market in the UK is expected to grow by USD 35.79 billion progressing at CAGR of 21.03% between 2021 – 2026 (Technavio, 2022). With the growing number of data centres’ infrastructures, there would be huge demand of data centre professionals in coming years.

3.5 Skills shortage in the UK data centre industry

As discussed above, the demand for data centres is growing exponentially, consequently there is an ever-increasing demand for the data centre professional in the UK. However, the data centres companies in the UK are struggling to meet the staffing needs of their organisations and constantly fall short of the required work force. In a recent study, it was reported that data centre operators and owners are struggling to find suitable qualified candidates and nearly 50% open jobs have not been filled (Brown, 2021). With the passing time, the situation is forecasted to get worse as the demand for data centre staff would grow approximately 30% in the coming years (Pressley, 2021). With other contributing factors, such as approximately 50% current data centre staff retiring by 2025 will only add to the severity of the situation (Pressley, 2021). Similarly, there has been a decline of 40% between 2015 – 2020 in the number of students in the UK choosing to study engineering and relevant subjects who could be the potential engineers of the future (Hook, 2022). With ever increasing demand for employees and shrinking talent pool has made the current situation unsustainable. Hence, data centres need to focus on attracting and creating sustainable talent pool to meet their growing workforce needs.

3.6 Reasons behind talent shortage

There are various factors that contribute towards the skills shortage in the UK data centre industry. There is an awareness about these factors which have been reported on websites, organisational reports, conferences and meetings at larger industry level. The below mentioned reasons are the prevalent reasons industrywide and there seems to be a consensus on the challenges that the industry needs to face and solve together.

3.6.1 Lack of awareness about the industry

Online reports suggest (which was later confirmed by participants during data collection) that there is a lack of awareness about career options and career progression opportunities available in the data centre industry (Brown, 2021). Consequently, many potential candidates (including young graduates) may not consider the data centre industry as preferred potential employer. Lack of knowledge about the industry leads to lack of knowledge about potential work opportunities available with the data centre industry (Hook, 2022). Young adults choose their career paths long before joining any industry (Donnelly, 2016) and they are not aware of the opportunities available in the data centre industry (Brown, 2021). Hence, the data centre

industry needs to create an image as an attractive and prospective employer and promote interest about themselves in the prospective candidates.

To match the growing demand of the growing data centre industry, it is extremely critical to create an attractive image as an employer for the candidates to consider this industry as a potential employer (Pressley, 2021). Although, data centres are highly automated, and a big set-up can be run by less than ten people. Still, there is a huge requirement of people to work in data centres due to exponential growth in the industry. However, the industry is still unheard of among the job-seeking candidates (Hook, 2022). Most of the millennium generation are not aware of the employment opportunities offered by this industry (Future Tech, 2022). Data centre industry is also poorly promoted as a career path for engineers at university level, which contributes towards the lack of awareness of the data centre industry as a career route (Donnelly, 2016). To attract candidates towards the industry, the candidates need to be interested in making career in the organisations operating within the industry.

3.6.2 Skills gap

The shortage of potential candidates is attributed not only to the lack of skilled candidates. Another concern of the industry is to find suitable skilled employees to fill the vacant roles. There are two main reasons behind the skills gap – 1) evolving skill set needed for the industry 2) widening talent gap (Hook, 2022). The industry faces the challenge of recruiting and retaining the staff due to the required skills gap which is getting wider due to changing technology and the distance between organisations and educational institutes (Hook, 2022; Pressley, 2021). There is a lack of candidates who have relevant qualifications and can be recruited directly (Future Tech, 2022)

The industry is constantly changing, and introduction of new technology is changing the way data centres work. Hence, the skills gap is widening due to the fact that there is a distance between educational institutes and industries (Brown, 2021). The education curriculum is not constantly updated with new advancements in technologies. Thus, demand for such suitably qualified candidates is outpacing the supply and this contributes towards shortage of skilled candidates. Hence, availability of qualified candidates is just part of problem with data centre staffing, since the skills set required in the data centre people is also evolving along with the industry.

3.6.3 Aging workforce

Attracting young candidates is paramount for the industry, as the current work force is aging and they will be approaching towards retirement very soon (Brown, 2021). Hence, the industry, which can be called the backbone of today's economy or "sixth utility" and "critical infrastructure" will see many of its current employees retiring in near future. The average age of current data centre employee is 55, which suggests that they will be approaching retirement very soon (Donnelly, 2016). Pressley (2021) reported that nearly half of the existing data centre employees would be retiring by 2025, whereas the demand for skills work force will grow approximately 30% in the same period. The growing demand of employees to meet the growth of the industry along with current aging workforce, has created a critical situation for the industry (Donnelly, 2016). Hence attracting younger candidates is critically needed to solve the looming skills shortage in the data centre industry.

3.7 Summary

With the above discussion, it is clear that organisations operating in certain industry such as IT or banking industry may not be facing difficulties in attracting candidates. It is due to the fact that these industries have a very long existence. Some of the organisations operating in these industries have created a good reputation for themselves, hence need no introduction in the employment market. Whereas organisations operating in new industries (rising due to technical advancements and economical changes) may find it difficult to attract candidates. Data centre industry is one such industry. Due to feasibility issues the data centre industry in the UK was selected for this study. This industry in the UK is growing rapidly in a data driven economy, which grew even quickly in the pandemic period. However, lack of awareness about the industry among potential candidates as well as current students, poses employer branding challenges for the organisations operating in the data centre industry in the UK. The growing nature of the industry along with lack of awareness in the employment market makes it an appropriate case to be studied.

Chapter 4 Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology applied in this study. Methodology shapes our adopted methods for research and has a profound impact on certain choices made in the research journey. It intertwines the whole research process together in a coherent way to make the research more effective. This chapter on methodology presents the rationale of the research approach in selecting the philosophical lens, data collection and data analysis methods and procedure used in this study. The chapter starts with presenting the rationale for conducting exploratory study with an inductive approach. This is followed by philosophical assumptions adopted and applied, and how these are utilised in answering the research questions and achieve the research objectives. Moving forward, an explanation on the research design and methods used, is presented. A discussion on data collection – questionnaire used, appointment of participants, data storage is presented followed by the methods applied in data analysis - interview transcripts, coding and analysing data using thematic analysis, and a snapshot on findings arrived at. The chapter concludes with a discussion on ethical considerations, and reliability and validity of the study.

4.2 Exploratory study

This research is exploratory in nature and was set out to understand the process of employer branding. Unlike explanatory research, where main objective is to explain why certain phenomena work in a particular way, exploratory research is aimed at exploring and investigating an underdeveloped phenomenon (Ruane, 2005; Swedberg, 2020). While explanatory research looks at establishing relationships to understand cause and effect pattern, exploratory research explores the general phenomena to develop an understanding (Matthews & Ross, 2010; Starbuck, 2006). Exploratory research helps to explore a topic and clarify the concepts where limited prior research is available. The main purpose of an exploratory research is to understand and explore the topic generally, and not to provide any conclusive recommendations (Mligo, 2016; Swedberg, 2020). However, it may provide initial groundwork for further explanatory research on the certain phenomena under study. Since employer branding phenomenon has been less explored as a process, undertaking exploratory study was suitable to achieve the research objectives.

4.3 Research Paradigm

Research paradigm was first introduced by Thomas Kuhn in 1962, which means philosophical way of thinking (Brad Wray, 2011). It describes a researcher's perspective on

research which reflects researcher's abstract beliefs and principles about the worldview (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012). Research paradigm can be defined as a "conceptual lens through which a researcher examines the methodological aspects of their research project to determine the research methods that will be used and how the data will be analysed" (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017, p. 26). Paradigms are human constructions which explain researcher's belief that guides the research undertaken and influences the way research is carried out (such as data collection and data analysis), and the results are interpreted (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Hence, a research paradigm should be able to answer these primary questions:

- 1) Ontological perspective: What is the nature of reality?
- 2) Epistemological perspective: What is the relation between researcher and the research? How does the researcher acquire the knowledge?

4.3.1 Ontology of a paradigm

Ontology is concerned with the assumptions that guide our understanding about the nature of existence or reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). It is the study of being. It represents the underlying belief system of the researcher about the reality that guides the research undertaken (Wahyuni, 2012). Ontological assumptions help to reveal what reality is and influence in determining the nature of existence of a specific phenomenon. It helps to conceptualise the form of existing reality and the belief about reality that is yet to be uncovered (Whitehead, 2007). Hence, this understanding about reality helps to orientate the researcher's thinking about the research problem, its significance and the approach to solve the research problem (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016). This conceptualisation further provides guidance to withdraw meaning from the collected data.

4.3.2 Epistemology of a paradigm

Epistemology is concerned with understanding the world with general assumptions made about nature of knowledge and how this knowledge can be acquired (Saunders et al., 2012). It is a way of looking at the world and making sense out of it (Bryman, 2008). From a research perspective, epistemology focuses on what can be accepted as knowledge in the particular research area (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It is focused on defining the theory of knowledge or more succinctly "how we know what we know". Epistemology defines the relationship between the research and the researcher (Tashakkori, Teddlie, & Teddlie, 1998). Additionally, understanding knowledge involves what the knowledge entails which can include nature of knowledge, its varied possibility, scope and legitimacy. Bryman (2008, p.

13) defines epistemology as “an issue concerns the question of what is (or should be) regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline”. Epistemological perspective also stresses that the assumption of knowledge has an impact on how knowledge is uncovered (decisions a researcher makes about kind of methods to be used in the research) (Lee & Lings, 2008).

There are multiple philosophical positions based on a researcher’s belief about knowledge and how it is acquired. These positions are positivist, realist, pragmatist, critical realist and interpretivist. Following section discusses two most dominant philosophical positions used in management research – positivism and interpretivism, with a discussion on their ontological and epistemological perspectives and an explanation of how both can be utilised to investigate a research problem.

4.3.3 Interpretivism

Interpretivist perspective suggests that there are multiple realities (Saunders et al., 2016). Reality is socially constructed, it exists within the mind of social actors, individuals and groups within different socio historical contexts (Bell, Bryman, & Harley, 2018). This view underlies most major interpretive approaches. Interpretivist views reality as being socially constructed between social actors as they interact with each other (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Hence, reality is unstable, constantly changing, and unavoidably subjective. Therefore, understanding of reality cannot be developed by standing apart from it. In a social research perspective, an interpretivist epistemology believes that knowledge is created by interaction with different people and hence people cannot be seen as separate entity from their knowledge (Jonassen, 1991; Saunders et al., 2012). Therefore, the researcher and the research subject are closely linked. This implies that researcher is unavoidably involved with the reality they are studying.

Epistemology of interpretivist approach assumes that understanding of knowledge is never complete (Holden & Lynch, 2004). At any one point, interpretivist approach views understanding of knowledge completely in flux. Any interpretation is interlinked with the historical context – the point in time when the interpretation was stated (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Hence, at one point, an interpretation is both influenced by past interpretation and in turn influencing future interpretation. This approach views phenomena as time and context bound, making it very subjective (Gray, 2021). Knowledge of phenomena cannot be separated from its context. Reality is viewed as a whole and individual phenomenon is viewed in relation to that whole (the hermeneutic circle) (Lee & Lings, 2008). Hence, knowledge is primarily descriptive and ideographic rather than abstract from specific context.

One must immerse oneself completely in the context to truly understand the meaning and experiences which one is attempting to study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Ontology of interpretivist approach is relativism. Relativism views reality as subjective and differs from one individual to another (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Hence, reality is perceived through intersubjectivity by understanding social and experiential aspects of the research. These individual realities are mediated and constructed by individual senses. Hence, there may be as many realities as individuals interpreting it (Saunders et al., 2016). The involved individuals shape, mould and construct the reality, hence the reality such obtained may be influenced by the subjective bias of the researcher.

4.3.4 Positivism

The positivist paradigm is grounded in the scientific methods of investigation in research. The positivist paradigm signifies an external and objective reality independent from the researcher (Burrell & Morgan, 2017). It is driven by the belief that research based on experimentation and reasoning, is the only legitimate way to extending and acquiring knowledge (Lee & Lings, 2008). Positivist school of thought recommends adopting quantitative methodology with an emphasis to measure the researched phenomena objectively (Greener, 2008; Saunders et al., 2016). It is essentially focused on establishing a cause-and-effect relationship. Research rooted in positivist paradigm is discovered using deductive logic, developing and testing hypotheses and relationship between different variables (Bell et al., 2018). The hypothetic deductive approach to test theories further allows confirmation or rejection of these hypotheses using several statistical analyses to derive conclusions (Wood & Welch, 2010). These conclusions are hence, statistically generalisable. It is also attributed to be a bias free research paradigm since the researcher is seen as an external entity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Hence, a positivist researcher is placed outside of the research as an observer.

The critique of positivist approach, however, suggests that being an external observer to the research, researcher has a limited interaction with the participants (Bell et al., 2018). The limited interaction between researcher and the participants has a negative impact on understanding human behaviour. Scholars have further argued that relationship between natural scientist and the subjects under study is substantially different from the relationship between social scientist and their participants (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Hence, conducting social science research with a positivist paradigm may not be able to fully explore the

phenomena, where researcher does not have an opportunity to fully immerse in the research setting and with its participants (Walliman, 2015).

Positivist ontology adopts a realism approach (Lee & Lings, 2008). It views the world as an external objective, reality of which is single in any studied situation regardless of researcher's views. A positivist reality interprets society through observations and measurements (Scotland, 2012). Hence positivist reality is not mediated by the senses and the researched phenomena has an independent existence. Consequently, the knowledge acquired is absolute and value-free (Saunders et al., 2016).

Positivist epistemology assumes that understanding of knowledge can be gained through observable and measurable facts. Hence the aim in gaining such knowledge is to establish cause-effect relationship and develop credible and meaningful data. Positivist epistemology believes in implementing certain rules to explore patterns while attempting to gain knowledge (Carson, Gilmore, Perry, & Gronhaug, 2001). Objective viewpoint of a positivist supports in maintaining a distance between the researcher and the research participants, hence the probabilities of getting influenced by the researcher's preconception are absent (Greener, 2008). Positivism derives universal and statistically generalisable rules which are unaffected by contextual variables.

4.3.5 The guiding philosophy

Research philosophy guides the research question, research objectives and ultimately the researcher's view about knowledge (Bell et al., 2018; Lee & Lings, 2008). Based on the above discussion and in line with the research objectives, this research is guided by Interpretivist philosophy. Interpretivist approach is concerned with understanding social reality as a construction of individual participants together (Brad Wray, 2011; Saunders et al., 2016). Interpretivism is aligned with the inductive approach as the researcher and participants' essential orientation is inductive. In the process, researcher attempts to generate theory from data and not impose existing theory on participants while interacting with them. Inductive nature of interpretive approach is naturally consistent with qualitative data, which does not necessarily require existing theory to structure its conduct. An interpretive theory aims to conceptualise the phenomenon under study in the abstract form and acknowledges subjectivity in theory development (Wahyuni, 2012).

Another important feature “generalisability” has been a focal point of debate while being guided by interpretivist approach over a positivist. Positivist researcher believes that statistical generalisability of findings is vital to good research (Wood & Welch, 2010). It confirms to their belief about objective reality and their aim to explain it. However, interpretivist has a different viewpoint. Interpretive research is concerned with individual interpretation, meaning and experiences of the subjective world (Greener, 2008). Finding from the interpretive research is context dependent – it largely depends on social situation at that time, the participants and the researcher themselves (Brad Wray, 2011). An objective reality cannot be generalised from the interpretation of such data. Interpretive research is not aimed at creating general laws which can be applied across different situations. Fundamental idea of interpretive approach is not to ignore the individual interpretations of the world (Walliman, 2015).

Non-generalisability has also led interpretive research to be questioned for its rigour. The concept of rigour is used to criticise interpretive work as idiosyncratic and biased in comparison to scientific and quantitative work (Bell et al., 2018). However, such criticism on evaluating the rigor of qualitative research is strongly opposed as it substitutes moral values and individual positions as guarantors of standards (Seale, 2004). It is also argued that evaluating rigor on an objective criterion discards the value of careful scholarship and rigorous argument which demonstrates the relationship between findings and evidence (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These findings are further supported with clear description of multiple viewpoints before arriving at a conclusion to answer the important research question (Boeije, 2009). The idea of rigour is intertwined with the philosophical assumptions as well which mentions that views about the world and objective truth influence the researcher’s approach of uncovering it (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Hence, approaching the research with an objective to uncover the essential truth certainly needs to meet the traditional requirements of validity while assessing the quality of representation of that reality (Bell et al., 2018). Whereas, if the underlying assumption of reality is that there is no such thing as truth, then an assessment of whether the research has been able to uncover it or not, is meaningless (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

This qualitative research takes a middle ground to believe that there is an external reality that can be uncovered, however the reality can be represented in different ways (Boblin, Ireland, Kirkpatrick, & Robertson, 2013). The idea is to make a convincing presentation to the audience that the representation of particular realities being presented is valuable and is

extracted from the credible data (Ellis et al., 2008). Hence, the reality uncovered through the research is justifiable. There is certain theoretical guidance, data collection and data analysis technique as well, which are rigorous and transparent in interpretive research (Silverman, 2015). The research is presented in a way which assures that appropriate strategies and methods have been used in this study. Hence, acknowledging and explaining researcher's role in the interpretation allows to enhance the perception of rigour of the work (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rigour in qualitative research is associated with the quality of research methods and its implementation (discussed in data collection and data analysis section). Guided by the philosophy, below research questions were framed that help in achieving the aim of the study-

- What is role of HR practices in the process of employer branding?
- How are the employer branding constructs utilised in the process of employer branding?
- How does the process of employer branding ensure that it reaches the target audience?

4.4 Inductive approach

There are predominantly two kinds of research approaches commonly adopted by researchers - inductive approach and deductive approach (Bell et al., 2018). Selecting most appropriate approach is substantially important to find answers to the research questions, justify the theoretical implication and deriving conclusions (Bell et al., 2018; Lee & Lings, 2008). Deductive approach is a way to test any particular theory. It starts with a theory, develops hypotheses based on the theory, generates evidence to test the theory to prove or refute the hypotheses (Gray, 2021; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). Whereas inductive approach in research is a process of forming or modifying general theories based on specific observations and recurring patterns (Saunders et al., 2009; Thomas, 2006). Deductive approach focuses on testing the hypothesis to obtain the desired results, consequently key themes emerging from the data may get overlooked (Lee & Lings, 2008; Saunders et al., 2016). In contrast, inductive approach identifies the actual themes arising from the data to provide insight about the phenomenon under study rather than providing evidence for the results (Bell et al., 2018; Gray, 2021). However, the ultimate purpose of both the approaches is to establish a link between the theoretical world and real world (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lee & Lings, 2008). While deductive approach is criticised for its weaker connection to reality, inductive approach is criticised for specific observations that cannot be generalised

(Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Wood & Welch, 2010). Since both the approaches serve different purpose, an approach can be selected based upon the research objectives. While deductive approach provides an opportunity to establish relationship between different variables using an existing theory, an inductive approach provides an opportunity to modify or develop a new theory (Greener, 2008; Walliman, 2015).

Being exploratory in nature, inductive approach was most suited to this particular research and certain choices regarding data collection and data analysis were made that could help to fully explore the research questions. The inductive rationale in exploratory study is paramount where the researched phenomenon is explored to find patterns which contribute towards building or development of theory (Bryman & Burgess, 2002; Saunders et al., 2016). This study adopted the research design involving detailed inductive qualitative investigations. Inductive approach is particularly suited to exploratory study aimed to unravel the relationship between employer branding process and HR practices. Adopting inductive approach enabled to carry out a close examination of less-researched aspect of the employer branding phenomenon – the process aspect.

Conducting meaningful research requires consistency between methodology, data collection methods and data analysis technique to demonstrate an underlying logic throughout the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Walliman, 2015). This consistency also earns credibility from the readers of the research report, leading them towards the significant findings of the study. Hence, adopting a particular approach can help in achieving consistency during different stages of the research. Inductive approach can guide both, the whole research or the specific mode of data analysis (Lee & Lings, 2008; Saunders et al., 2016). In this study, whole research was guided by the inductive approach. Collecting data through semi-structured interviews allowed to adopt an inductive approach where the interview questionnaire was used only as a guide and the questions asked were open-ended to fully explore participant's perspective without any preconceptions (Bell et al., 2018). This approach allowed to gain an understanding on the research questions from the participant's perspective revealing unanticipated themes at times. The unstructured data collected through semi-structured interviews allowed for an inductive analysis where focus was to identify recurring and dominant themes in the data rather than testing a hypothesis (as in deductive approach) (Bryman & Burgess, 2002). Reporting of findings was also inductive in nature since the data is presented in the form of a narration rather than in charts, tables or diagrams (Boeije, 2009; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Although, the recurrent themes and

relationship between them can be presented in form of flow-diagram or figures. General propositions and subsequent conclusion are derived based on the recurrent and significant themes inherent in the raw data. Despite being criticised for not demonstrating high standards (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013), inductive approach is widely used in several types of data analysis and is consistent with describing general patterns. It prompted to conclude the study with the most evident emerging pattern rather than providing multiple statements (Walliman, 2015).

4.5 Qualitative research

While conducting the research, a decision needs to be taken regarding the approach most suited to the study undertaken. Three different approaches available are – Quantitative, Qualitative and Mixed-method approach (Bell et al., 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). While choosing the best suited approach for a research, different factors to be considered are - research objectives and research questions (Greener, 2008). Since objective of this study is to explore a phenomenon which has limited prior information available and the phenomenon needs to be explored deeply, a qualitative approach to the study was considered to be most suited. The prime reason why a researcher may consider doing a qualitative study is, when the state of knowledge in an area is inadequate (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008). Qualitative research contributes towards and supplements researcher's understanding of the particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative approach was also considered the most suitable for this study as this approach is fluid and humanistic, the fluid approach reconciles well with the fluid features of the organisations, whereas the humanistic approach extends the support in approaching participants for the interview and understand their views on the under-explored research on the process of employer branding (Miles et al., 2014). Since this study is aimed at addressing questions such as “what is occurring”, “how it is occurring” and “what constructs are needed to explain it”, qualitative research methodology would be more suited than quantitative research methodology (Bluhm, Harman, Lee, & Mitchell, 2011). A brief comparison of qualitative and quantitative research methods below justifies the adopted qualitative research methodology.

Quantitative methodologies often seek to “explain and predict what happens in the social world by searching for regularities and causal relationships between its constituent elements’, whereas qualitative methodologies posit that one can only understand [social reality] by occupying the frame of reference of the participants in action (Holden & Lynch, 2004). One has to understand [social reality] from the inside rather than the outside. Qualitative

methodologies offer an opportunity to explore social reality by collecting rich data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). New and unique constructs, thus, found through qualitative research and linked together often produce novel theoretical insights (Suter, 2011). Quantitative research methodology does not offer such opportunity to deeply explore a phenomenon, as quantitative research usually has predetermined set of questions and ignores any extra information revealed during data collection process (Yilmaz, 2013). Whereas, a qualitative researcher records and analyses all the data collected which allows to reveal unexpected aspects that may have a strong influence on the researched phenomenon and on the participants (Ellis et al., 2008).

Qualitative methods have also received criticism for two reasons – non-generalisability of findings, and researcher’s bias in interpretation of data which may lead to non-replicability (Ellis et al., 2008; Stenbacka, 2001). Since purpose of undertaking qualitative research is not aimed at achieving generalisation from the collected data, the above weakness does not have any implication on this study and achieving its objectives. Moreover, interpretivist research is not entirely free from researcher’s bias, a reflective approach is adopted to become aware of these individual biases and efforts are always taken to minimise researcher bias. Hence, a reflexive approach was adopted in this study where data collection and analysis, both were conducted with non-judgemental approach. Moreover, all the emerging themes during the data analysis were informed by the data collected through semi-structured interviews, and not by the existing literature.

4.6 Data collection

This section outlines the procedure used to gain access to the participants and process used for data collection. Driven by an interpretivist philosophy, this study has adopted naturalistic approach to data collection. This exploratory study on the process of employer branding, has collected data by conducting semi-structured interviews with key position holders responsible for driving or contributing to the employer branding initiatives within their respective organisation in data centre industry. Semi-structured interviews (discussed in section 4.6.3) were focused on investigating challenges and strategies adopted towards employer branding in the data centre industry. The industry is affected by lack of awareness as a potential employer among the potential candidates. The limited ability to attract candidates is partly due to this industry being relatively new and the industry does not serve consumers directly. This feature makes this industry a special case to be investigated.

Driven by literature and with initial understanding that HR is primarily responsible for creating an attractive employer brand, firstly HR managers from the data centres were approached for the interviews. After talking to a few HR professional, it became apparent that HR practices can influence the decision of candidates at the recruitment stage, when a candidate has already shortlisted the organisation or industry as a potential employer. However, at the attraction stage, only HR efforts are not enough, and involvement of the senior management is equally important. With this understanding, to make this study more relevant and effective, next step was to approach the decision influencers in the data centre organisations as well as relevant industrial trade bodies and consultants. It is important to note that since data centre industry is an emerging industry, there are many industrial trade bodies set up and consultants, who are involved in promoting the data centre industry within and to the outside world such as suppliers, customers, potential employees and government. All these bodies work towards creating a recognition for the data centres through different events, promotions, conferences and many other promotional activities. Hence, including the views of executives from these industrial trade bodies was considerably important to gain an in-depth and rounded understanding.

4.6.1 Access to the participants

The online platforms such as websites and professionals' social media platform – “LinkedIn” proved to be a great help in data collection process for this study. The hunting for participants, started with visiting the data centres' websites, and from there accessing the organisation's LinkedIn page. From there, with a scan into their employees list, relevant potential participants were shortlisted. The seemingly relevant participants were initially approached using their LinkedIn profile. A short message was sent to introduce the researcher and the research objective. The message also included a brief explanation on how their participation was valuable and could contribute towards understanding the research problem. There were many LinkedIn connection requests that were not accepted, while others accepted but ignored later on looking at the time required for an interview call - a drawback of qualitative approach (Newcomer, Hatry, & Wholey, 2015). Hence, certain population were not willing to participate in the research study as it required a considerable amount of time out of their busy schedule. Data collection for this study was particularly challenging in terms of time required for the interviews as the target population were senior members of the management team in respective organisation who are supposedly busier than their subordinates. A few of those approached were very responsive and agreed to participate in

the study. With initial purposive sampling and interviewing first few participants, later on with both purposive sampling and snowball sampling (discussed in detail in next section), it was possible to reach optimal number of participants until data saturation was reached.

In the next step of data collection, all the relevant documents were shared with agreed participants such as “write-up on research”, “participant information sheet”, “interview questionnaire” (refer appendix I, II and III for these documents). All the participants had signed the “participant consent form” (refer appendix IV for sample participant consent form) before filling in the “demographics form” (refer appendix V for sample demographics form) and the scheduled interview call. With one participant “non-discloser agreement” was also signed, as the participant shared some information which should not be shared with other participants who could be their potential competitors. After the participants signed the consent form, a mutually convenient date and time for the telephonic call was agreed upon. Except two face – to -face interviews (researcher visited the participant’s office at data centre site), rest of the interviews were conducted telephonically/online. Telephonic/online interviews are favoured medium of collecting data due to being both, cost-effective and time-effective (Block & Erskine, 2012; Dinham, 1994; Fidler, 1994; Sobo, Simmes, Landsverk, & Kurtin, 2003; Taylor, 2002). Conducting telephonic interviews also provides access to geographically distant participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Telephonic interviews are sometimes criticised for not being able to develop a rapport with the participants (Taylor, 2002). In this study, telephonic interviews method was initially used due to time and cost concerns. Later on, it was the only feasible way to collect data during the ongoing pandemic and lockdown. Most of interviews lasted for an average of 40-45 minutes. All the telephone/online interview calls were recorded using a voice recording app. Verbal permission to record the interview call was sought from the participants before turning the recording device on. In interviews, using a recording device is recommended over taking the notes during the interview (Lee & Lings, 2008). Taking notes instead of recording the interview conversation can unnecessarily restrict the information that is actually retained for data analysis (Gummesson, 2000). Moreover, not worrying about writing notes frees interviewer’s mind to concentrate on the progress of the interview, enhancing the ability to build rapport, and react to interesting information (Rutakumwa et al., 2020).

During data collection phase, a challenge was encountered in form of Covid 19 lockdown. With onset of the lockdown, it was assumed that collecting data would be easier as the prospective population may have more time to be available for a conversation. On the

contrary, it turned out to be busier than normal times for the prospective participants due to the nature of the industry this study is based at. Data centre industry became the backbone of the online work set-up, and the industry was booming at its highest during the lockdown period. It became almost impossible to request a time for the interview with the participants. Moreover, the prospective candidates this study needed were the key decision makers in their respective organisations. Hence, after collecting 13 interviews before the lockdown, the data collection was almost halted for 6 months until the unprecedented situation was little bit streamlined and under control.

4.6.2 Recruitment of participants

4.6.2.1 Purposive Sampling

First few interview participants for the study were selected purposefully based on the initial understanding (as discussed above in the section 4.6.1). These participants were considered as relevant case for this study (Gentles, Charles, Ploeg, & McKibbon, 2015). Purposive sampling is subject to the researcher's judgement that selected sample would be the best representative sample for the study (Bell et al., 2018). Hence, purposive sampling was used in this study to appoint the participants initially. Purposive sampling has been, sometimes, criticised for being prone to researcher's bias when compared with other probability-based sampling techniques (Lee & Lings, 2008). However, such bias has been mitigated in this study, since the purposive sampling was based on the researcher's judgement which was driven by a clear criterion drawn on theoretical understanding and clearly defined research context.

4.6.2.2 Snowball Sampling

Access to further participants was enabled through snowball sampling. Snowballing is another method of sampling, where interviewer would request respondents at the end of the interview for further relevant contacts who would be interested in participating and could provide appropriate information regarding the research (Saunders et al., 2009). Snowball sampling combined with purposive theoretical sampling supports a comprehensive sampling strategy (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Emerging relationships during initial interviews and contextual processes helped to get further access to the participants for this study (Lee & Lings, 2008). Snowball sampling offers advantage when it is difficult to reach certain target population that are relevant and extremely important to collect meaningful data (Bell et al., 2018; Saunders et al., 2009). Snowball sampling is criticised for not being supportive in research where representation of population and generalisation of research outcome is

important (Stake, 2008). However, this research is not aimed at producing generalised findings and statements, hence, snowball sampling did not compromise the usefulness of adopted research methodology in this study. Nevertheless, it has helped in gaining access to certain participants (such as CEO of a certain organisation, EMEA lead of an organisation or associate director of a trade body) through references, which might not have been accessible otherwise.

4.6.3 Semi-structured interviews

In this study, 31 semi-structured interviews (refer Table 4.1 for details of participants) were conducted for qualitative data collection. These interviews were collected from the data centres, industrial bodies, and consultancies working for data centres in the UK. A total of 29 such organisations were approached for data collection, out of which there were nineteen data centres, seven consultancies and three industrial bodies. In two instances, two participants each were interviewed from a single data centre organisation. Hence, a total of 31 participants were interviewed from 29 organisations. A pilot study was conducted to make the interview questionnaire and the overall data collection more relevant. Pilot study with first 4 participants helped to make questions more relatable to the participants. The language of the questions asked, needed to be adjusted to make it more relatable for the participants and in-line with the research objectives. For example, instead of asking “what are the HR practices implemented by your organisation to make it more attractive for potential candidates”, after pilot study the questions were changed to “How do you get closer to potential candidates to get them apply for the job vacancies”, changed the orientation of the answers received and made it more relevant to the research objectives. Discussion on interview questionnaire with dissertation supervisor and a researcher from the industry also helped to make questionnaire more effective in line with the research objectives. The changed language and more focused questions were helpful in getting participants talk about the initiatives for reaching out to candidates with a targeted approach rather than just providing an overview of general attractive features of their organisation.

Participants were asked open-ended questions to capture and understand their viewpoint on the research questions (Weller et al., 2018) . Semi-structured interviews can be compared with other available formats such as highly structured and unstructured interviews. Highly structured interviews are driven by a positivist perspective and are focused on asking close-ended questions (Opdenakker, 2006). This approach eliminates subjectivity from the collected data as participants have very limited opportunity to disclose other relevant facts

about the research question during the interviews (Kendall, 2008). Highly structured interviews, however, are helpful in eliminating researcher bias (Opdenakker, 2006). On the other hand, unstructured interviews are used for a social-constructivist approach where researcher assumes that even a basic structure may impose a particular world view on the research participants (Brinkmann, 2014). This may have a prejudiced impact on participant's internal views, feelings and experiences. Semi-structured interviews are particularly useful when there is already a clear theoretical appreciation of the research topic (Galletta, 2013). In such scenario, a structure to the interview works as a good topic guide. Hence, semi-structured interviews were best suited for this study. While collecting data from number of participants, having some structure is essential to make sure all the interviews are comparable (Wengraf, 2001). Choice of structure in this study was dependent, both, on philosophical and practical considerations. Semi-structured interviews usually produce non-generalisable results as these pertain to certain sample group. However, these interviews enable to gain more in-depth understanding about participant's view on the particular research issue.

Table 4.1 List of participants

<u>Participant's pseudonym*</u>	<u>Gender**</u>	<u>Age***</u>	<u>Organisation type</u>	<u>Designation</u>	<u>Years worked in the industry</u>	<u>Previous industry****</u>
IB1	Male	50+	Industrial body	Managing director	20+ years	Data centre
DC1	Female	41-50	Data centre	Operations director	Less than 5 years	Other industry
DC2	Female	41-50	Data centre	HR director	11-15 years	Other industry
C1	Male	31-40	Consultancy	Director	11-15 years	Data centre
DC3	Male	50+	Data centre	Managing director	5-10 years	Other industry
DC4	Male	50+	Data centre	Managing director	5-10 years	Data centre
DC5	Male	31-40	Data centre	Global talent acquisition manager	11-15 years	Other industry
IB2	Female	50+	Industrial body	Director	16-20 years	Other industry
DC6	Female	30-40	Data centre	HR business partner	Less than 5 years	Other industry
DC7	Female	50+	Data centre	Sr Manager - Talent acquisition	Less than 5 years	Other industry
C2	Male	31-40	Consultancy	Director	11-15 years	Data centre
DC8	Female	31-40	Data centre	HR business partner	Less than 5 years	Other industry
C3	Male	50+	Consultancy	Operations director	20+ years	Other industry
DC9	Female	41-50	Data centre	HR director	5-10 years	Other industry
DC10	Male	50+	Data centre	Operations director	20+ years	Other industry
DC11	Female	31-40	Data centre	Talent branding manager	Less than 5 years	Other industry
C4	Male	50+	Consultancy	Managing director	11-15 years	Other industry
C5	Male	41-50	Consultancy	Director	5-10 years	Other industry
DC12	Female	20-30	Data centre	HR business partner	5-10 years	Other industry
DC13	Female	31-40	Data centre	Director	5-10 years	Other industry
DC14	Male	41-50	Data centre	Chief operating officer	11-15 years	Data centre
C6	Male	31-40	Consultancy	Director	5-10 years	Other industry
DC15	Male	41-50	Data centre	Director	Less than 5 years	Other industry
DC16	Female	41-50	Data centre	HR business partner	Less than 5 years	Other industry
DC17	Male	31-40	Data centre	Chief operating officer	11-15 years	Data centre
C7	Male	50+	Consultancy	Managing director	5-10 years	Other industry
DC18	Male	41-50	Data centre	Global talent acquisition manager	Less than 5 years	Other industry
DC19	Male	50+	Data centre	Managing director	5-10 years	Other industry
DC20	Female	50+	Data centre	VP HR	5-10 years	Other industry
DC21	Male	41-50	Data centre	Partner & Co-founder	5-10 years	Other industry
IB3	Male	31-40	Industrial body	Director	11-15 years	Other industry

*Pseudonyms are given to anonymise participant's identity. IB=Industrial body, DC=Data Centre, C=Consultancy.

**More male than female participants confirms that industry is male dominated.

***Age numbers confirm that current workforce in the industry is aging.

****Most of the participants have started their career in another industry before moving to data centre confirms lack of awareness about the industry.

While conducting the semi-structured interviews for this study the first few questions were asked as a warm-up question and to build a rapport with the participants (which counters the drawback of using telephone calls for data collection). While answering these initial questions, participants shared their journey about how they landed (accidentally) in the industry, indicating and confirming the lack of awareness about the industry as an employer. This also helped to create a foundation to base the further conversation upon. Before closing the interview, participants were requested to provide further contacts within the industry (snowball sampling). With their own conversation, they could also visualise the scope of the study and, thus, suggested the most suitable candidates for further probing.

Semi-structured interviews in this study were directed by a more detailed topic guide (interview questionnaire – refer appendix III), which contained some fairly specific questions to ask and likely ways of probing. Interview guide essentially worked as a memory prompt for the researcher and ensured that the interviews went well. Semi-structured interviews consider research participants as an active partner in the interview process rather than passively responding to pre-set questions (King, 2004; Knapik, 2006). Semi-structured interviews as a data collection tool served two purposes: a) Semi-structured interviews provided a guideline while probing questions with the participants, which the researcher could refer to during the interview. This ensured that specific questions were asked of each participant. b) At the same time, semi-structured interviews provided flexibility during the interview, which enabled new insights to emerge during the interview.

This latter point also enabled the researcher to decide whether data saturation had been reached. Data saturation point has been achieved when there are no new insights revealed by the participants during the interview (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Saunders et al., 2018). In this inductive study, data collection and interpretation were happening simultaneously. Using an iterative and continuous process of transcribing and analysis, enabled the researcher to judge a point of theoretical saturation and stop collecting data. Theoretical saturation is reached when no new information about the concept is revealed in repeated cases, and there is a very clear idea about what the concept actually is, how it varies and relationship between it and

other concepts are well defined (Saunders et al., 2018). When no new themes emerged out of data analysis, it was an indication that the data saturation has been reached. Moreover, with an interpretive approach the objective is not to seek generalisation and hence, there is less focus on the sample size and more on sampling adequacy (Bowen, 2008; Charmaz, 2014). Apparently, the sample size for this study was not selected before the research design, but it developed originally as the research progressed. After collecting and analysing 27 interviews, the saturation point was achieved. However, to ensure this assumption, 4 more interviews were collected and analysed. At this stage, it was confirmed that no new themes were emerging, hence the data collection was stopped at 31 participants. This also confirms that sample size was not driven by any pre-conceived guidance rather was driven by the data saturation and research objectives (Charmaz, 2014; Mason, 2010).

In terms of number of participants for this study, other than theoretical saturation, saturation point was also supposedly achieved in terms of participants interviewed. This study is focused on data centre industry in the UK, which is a small emerging industry and as participants claimed that mostly “everyone knows everyone” within the industry. As snowball sampling was used to gain access to participants, a point was arrived when referred participants were already approached and interviewed. This was an indication that this study has covered the important participants from the population.

4.6.4 Transcription of interviews

As mentioned above, all the interviews were recorded using a voice recording app. These recordings were then transferred to the researcher’s personal laptop, which is password protected. This ensured that only the researcher had access to the recordings of the data as well as information about the participants. All the recorded interviews were transcribed manually to capture the full narrative account of the participants. Transcribing the transcripts manually also provided an opportunity to familiarise the researcher with the data and get immersed in it (Byrne, 2022). Clean transcripts in the form of whole verbatim transcription facilitated detailed coding of participant’s views before drawing themes out of these codes. While transcribing the interviews paralinguistic details such as expressions were omitted, as these did not add any value to the content captured. Interpretation of the content was deemed important to the study rather than the structure of the interviews. Moreover, most of the interviews (except two) were conducted online / telephonic, hence these paralinguistic details would not have captured any emotions of the participants during the interviews.

Transcription of the interviews by the researcher also facilitated being reflexive in the process, which is an important feature of an inductive approach (Davidson, 2009). Transcription of the interviews was not seen as a straight conversion from audio to content. Rather, it was approached as an interpretive process to affirm reflexivity, which led to understand the transcription subjectively (Bucholtz, 2000). This subjective understanding facilitated the inherent inductive analysis where the data was transcribed, understanding was extracted from the interviews and shaped by the researcher simultaneously (Oliver, Serovich, & Mason, 2005). Transcription process produced overall 547 pages (single spaced) of data to be analysed.

4.7 Data analysis

This section explains and justifies the data analysis process adopted in this study. It explains how the volume of data of 547 pages was handled using a qualitative data analysis software – Nvivo. The section further explains and justifies using thematic data analysis approach over other qualitative data analysis approaches available. Next, there is a detailed discussion on coding, creating themes, reviewing and refining themes for the final themes presented as findings in findings section (Chapters 5-7).

4.7.1. Data analysis software

Nvivo, a data analysis software was used to organise, manage and analyse the collected data. This software was selected due to multiple data analysis functions available within the software. Unlike other data analysis software which analyse data for its users, Nvivo does not analyse the data (Joffe, Yardley, & Marks, 2004). Instead, Nvivo software assists an efficient data management and sorting, multiple data presentation tools to analyse data in several ways, recording of the analytical thinking, maintaining a record of the whole data analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This data analysis software also has built-in tools for generating results of data analysis (as directed by its users) in form of diagrams and word-clouds etc. While this software provides many built-in functions to analyse data in multiple ways, prime control still remains with the user, providing flexibility as well as ease of usage during data analysis process (Edhlund & McDougall, 2019; Jackson & Bazeley, 2019)

As discussed above (in section 4.6.4) all the recorded interviews were transcribed in the whole verbatim form manually. These transcripts were then imported into the Nvivo software. Each of the interview transcript files were given a pseudo name before importing these files into the data analysis software. All the possible identifying details such as name of

the participants, employing organisation and any other organisation or person detail that could reveal the identity of the interviewee or their employer were also anonymised within the transcripts before uploading the transcribed files to the data analysis software Nvivo. This ensured participants' anonymity, in line with the ethical considerations of the research (discussed in detail in section 4.8). To maintain confidentiality of the participants and security of the data, all the data analysis process was done in the researcher's personal laptop, which was password protected.

4.7.2 Thematic data analysis

There are many approaches available to analyse qualitative data such as narrative analysis, discourse analysis, phenomenological analysis, grounded theory approach and thematic analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Selection of most appropriate data analysis approach is not a random selection, rather it is a careful choice conducive to the philosophical assumptions of the study.

Phenomenology is generally applied to understand personal experiences by giving voice to the participants where researcher has no input in the data generation or data analysis while gaining in-depth meaning of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Whereas, content analysis is more focused on identifying patterns and frequency, which is inherently positivist rather than an interpretive approach (Lee & Lings, 2008). Grounded theory approach, on the other hand, looks for the dominant themes within the data through a circular process of tests and revisions of questions asked while developing the theory, where new questions may be added during the data collection process which may also shift the focus of the study (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Thematic analysis is a process of looking for patterns in the large data while grouping the data according to the strong similarities, known as themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis in addition to looking at participant's experiences also explores their views and opinions on the researched phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). In exploring participant views, thematic analysis can take an inductive, deductive or abductive approach. Understanding participants' views on research problem explores the possible solutions that participants may suggest over and above their experiences. While adopting an inductive approach in thematic analysis, the researcher looks for patterns emerging from the data without implementing any theory, making it a flexible and versatile data analysis approach (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). However, thematic analysis has been criticised for producing only naïve account of data by coding and analysing textual interviews (Roulston, 2001). Braun and

Clarke (2006) also agreed on few weaknesses of using thematic analysis where data analysis may only present specific content of the data without being analytic. This may lead to lack of clarity between different codes and the themes thus generated (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Roulston, 2001; Vaismoradi et al., 2013) . This lack of clarity may also generate from absence of compelling examples supporting emergent themes and hence, weaker interpretation of the data. This drawback can be managed by adopting three Rs (Reductionism, Reflexivity, and Representation) while analysing the data, allocating codes and drawing themes, as explained below.

The adopted thematic analysis process in this study, which is a six-step process (discussed in detail later), is conducive to three Rs (Reductionism, Reflexivity, and Representation) of the interpretive approach (Lee & Lings, 2008), which enables to counter the weaknesses of thematic analysis (refer Table 4.2). Reductionism rejects the simplification of the data using a simple cause and effect relationship and insists on focusing unique viewpoints in context. This is in line with steps 1-3 of thematic analysis where a researcher looks for themes by familiarising with data by reading transcripts and generating unique codes from the data initially. Reflexivity is in line with step 4 & 5 of thematic analysis, where generated themes are reviewed to ensure that these themes accurately represent the generated code and the entire data set, overall. A further analysis of themes comprehends theme’s contribution to understanding of data and produces a thematic map of analysis. Representation corresponds with step 6 of thematic analysis - writing up. Writing up or representation is an important step in interpretive research where findings are presented by providing multiple views arising out of the data which also takes context, bias and other inherent characteristics into consideration while reporting the findings. Hence, adopting thematic analysis method for data analysis also supports overall interpretive research paradigm adopted for this study.

Table 4.2 Comparison of three Rs to six step process

Thematic analysis		Three Rs
Step 1	Familiarising with data	Reductionism
Step 2	Initial coding	
Step 3	Generating themes	
Step 4	Reviewing themes	Reflexivity
Step 5	Defining and naming themes	
Step 6	Writing Up	Representation

Like thematic analysis, all other data analysis methods (phenomenological analysis, grounded theory, discourse analysis) may also have certain potential weaknesses, if a robust approach

is not adopted by the researcher during data collection and data analysis phase. Mitigating measures need to be taken to counter the weakness of any approach adopted in the data collection and analysis phase to make it an effective process (Bazeley, 2009; Charmaz, 2014; Silverman, 2015). Hence, thematic data analysis approach is considered to be appropriate for this study as it extends a flexible approach in the data analysis phase which is conducive to the overall research strategy. The inductive thematic analysis aptly captures participant's viewpoint, a critical discussion of which reflects the unique reality in relation to the current study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Next section presents a detailed step by step discussion of thematic analysis of the data in this study –

Step 1 – Familiarisation with data

In qualitative research, the subject of the research – the interviewee – transforms their experience, views and opinions into words, which are then uttered to the interviewer (Silverman, 2015). The process of transforming a raw set of qualitative data (transcribing an interview recording) provides the researcher an opportunity to get immersed in the data and get a fair appreciation of the inherent meaning of the data (Byrne, 2022). In this study, as a first step of thematic analysis, manual transcription of the data provided the researcher an opportunity to read actively, analytically and critically. While transcribing, some initial familiarisation notes from the data and analytical observation were also made alongside in the word document and highlighted in colour for a later reference when allocating codes as a step 2 of the data analysis process. The interviews were transcribed as soon as possible and within 5 days of conducting the interview. This also helped to make note of any special remarks that the researcher may have regarding the interview or the participant, as these were still fresh in memory. In case, two interviews were conducted on consecutive days, the attempt was to note down any special comments about that particular interview on the same day, so that the notes or other observations were not mixed up. These notes were then inculcated in the respective interview transcript at the time of transcription.

Step 2 – Coding the data

The second step of thematic analysis is to code the interesting facts of the data across the entire data set. In a qualitative inductive study, it is recommended to start data analysis as soon as a few interviews are conducted (Bazeley, 2009; Guest et al., 2012; Silverman, 2015). This is due to the fact that the researcher could get closer to the data and start an initial interpretation and analysis (Boeije, 2009). It also provides the researcher an opportunity to be immersed in the collected data, and look for answers to the question that arise during initial

analysis in future interviews (Silverman, 2015). This process makes the study more focused and enables in-depth data collection (Guest et al., 2012). It is to note that this process is slightly different from the grounded theory approach, as new questions do not change the focus of the study in further interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 2017). New questions can only be added for an in-depth analysis of the research questions. Braun and Clarke (2006) advise to make explicit choices before carrying out thematic data analysis as well as throughout the analytic process. Hence, another important decision in this phase was to determine the unit of analysis (Symon & Cassell, 2012), the views of individual participants were the unit of analysis, as each individual had their own views and experience of employer branding initiatives in their organisation.

In this study, data coding started after first 8 interviews were conducted and it helped to identify key words and patterns. There are two approaches of analysing the data based on the type of the study. The coding can be done driven by a priori ideas based on literature review or conceptual framework in a deductive study, whereas in inductive study codes emerge from the data (Boeije, 2009; Miles et al., 2014). Since, this is an inductive study, the codes were assigned according to the researcher's initial interpretation of the data. At this stage, coding was done comprehensively and systematically. Codes were assigned to each highlighted text and none of the statements were ignored in this initial phase of coding (refer appendix VI for sample highlighted coding). The gap period in data collection process (as discussed above) due to the ongoing lockdown provided an opportunity to analyse the initial interviews conducted. Initial coding was a time-consuming and extensive process as the researcher read through every single line of the interview transcript and tried to interpret the underlying meaning. In this first phase of coding, all the 13 transcripts were uploaded as pseudo files in the Nvivo software and relevant codes were assigned to the different parts of the text. Since, Nvivo has a built-in feature of allocating different colours to the codes, visually differentiating codes was very convenient. Nvivo feature also allows to view collated data as per the allocated codes in one place and allows easier viewing for interpretation (refer appendix VII for screen shot of codes generated). When the second phase of data collection started after a gap of approximately six months, relevant codes were available, and it was comparatively easier to code the new transcripts. There were some new codes added for new information revealed in the later interviews. The data transcription and coding process ran parallel until the data saturation was reached by analysing data and generating themes.

Step 3 - Generating themes

Generating themes is an interpretative and active process where themes don't emerge from the data, rather the researcher looks for it by clustering similar codes together (Braun & Clarke, 2006) (refer appendix VIII for multi-level coding). A potential thematic map was generated to assess whether it represents the data accurately and as interpreted by the researcher. The initial notes (as mentioned in step 1) were also again referred to in this phase for in-depth analysis of the data and putting labels on analytical observation.

This first stage of generating potential themes and thematic map revealed the initial impressions of the elements of HR practices that surround the process of employer branding. The thematic map also helped in collating several codes in a tree structure, where parent codes and child codes were created. The parent codes represent the cluster of code with similar characteristics. The thematic tree structure was in two levels, where codes were clustered in the nodes and these nodes were clustered together that represented an overarching relevant theme. Since, the data analysis was a parallel process to data collection, any gaps in the understanding informed further questions. These questions were included in further interviews to understand the process deeply and seek more focused information from the subsequent participants.

This step also triggered fourth step where researcher started to think about relationship between themes, distinct themes creating part of the larger whole, and the overall underlying story. The actual implementation took place in the fourth step of the thematic analysis, however, there was an overlap between third step and fourth step in the analytical process. All the collected data was coded at this step before proceeding to the next stage.

While analysing the data, the attempt was to avoid prematurely categorising the empirical data to look for overall meaning or holistic point. Instead, the empirical data was carefully analysed to look for patterns arising out of the data comprising of unitary meanings, contradiction or confusions. The interpretative approach in this qualitative study is looking at the process aspect of employer branding that addresses the specific research questions mentioned in the introduction chapter (Chapter 1). This stage of interpretation is a vital stage in thematic data analysis. Preunderstanding and familiarity with theory, undoubtedly, had an effect on carrying out the research and making sense out of the collected and transcribed data (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). Nevertheless, the interviews carried out with participants and

subsequent data analysis were not reliant upon on a pre-structured or literature-based anticipation of their ideas and talks.

Step 4 – Reviewing and developing themes

An overlap from the previous step, in this step actual themes development takes place. Reviewing themes is an iterative process that helps to cluster these codes together and identify potential overarching themes. A potential thematic map is generated to assess if the map accurately represents the whole story that the researcher can see in the data. There were some important questions asked while reviewing themes - What is the meaning of theme? What boundaries have been set for the themes? Is theme supported by enough data? Does the data accurately or concisely represent themes or is it too diverse and wide-ranging?

Answering these questions while reviewing the themes and their relationship helped to refine the themes. In this process, some codes were merged or discarded to make the themes more precise and concentrated that represented the data accurately. The initial thematic map was consequently reviewed and finalised. A continuous reflexive approach adopted by the researcher made the thematic analysis effective. Although this study adopts an inductive approach, the Signalling theory has guided the data collection and data analysis. Hence, the data analysis and refinement of themes were based on the guided theory. The combination of being reflexive and answering the questions as mentioned above helped to refine the themes and develop these themes as more accurate representative of the data. After the reviewing process, a thematic map was generated with some changes which was closer representation of the codes and their relationships.

Step 5 – Refining, defining and naming themes

This step is extension of the previous step, where the themes were again reviewed in light of the overall story that the data tells. The themes names were also revisited to ensure that these accurately represent the child nodes under each theme. A relationship was also established between themes which represents overall picture of the data analysis. After all the sub-themes were clustered together, three main themes were generated which, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), is an optimum number. Too many themes are an indicative of fragmented and under-developed analysis. Hence, being within the limit as suggested in thematic analysis process, confirms that the analysis was carried out in an effective manner. The final themes and the link between these themes, is presented in the Figure 4.1 below. The figure clearly represents the themes, subthemes and the relationship between these.

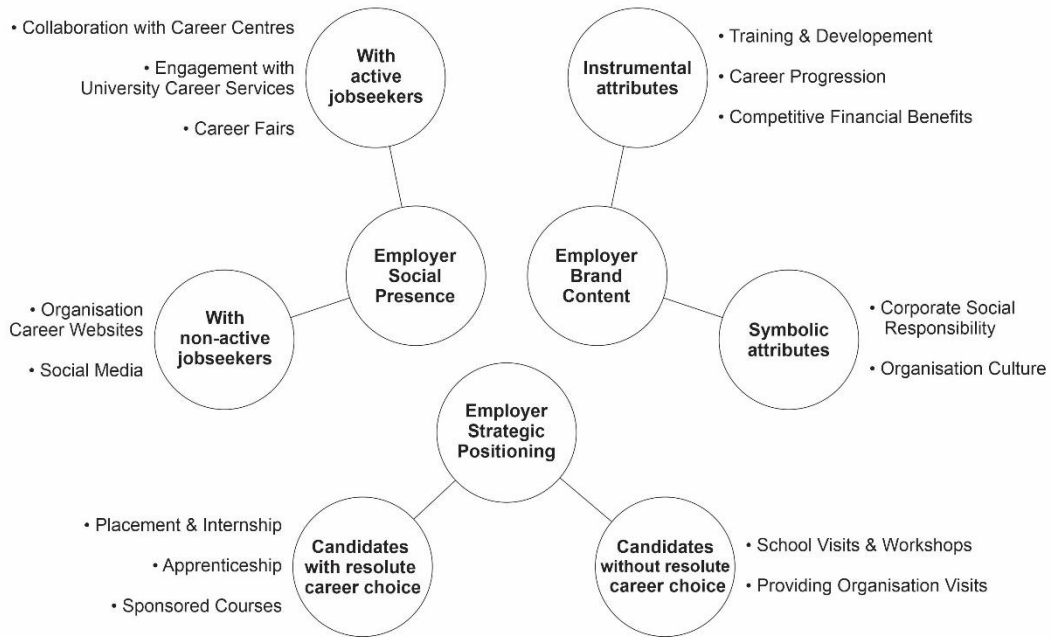


Figure 4.1 Three overarching themes of the findings

Step 6 - Writing up

The last step in thematic analysis after data reduction is – data display. Display can simply be selection of text (like quotes). It is often helpful to draw a parallel with quantitative information. Not all quantitative data is displayed in numbers, often charts and other visual displays are used to help understanding of the data. The concept is exactly the same with qualitative data. Compelling examples were selected to write the final analysis report. While writing the scholarly report, a reference was made to the research question to stay focused and maintain consistency. The detailed findings with quotes and examples are presented in the next chapters (Chapters 5-7).

4.8 Ethical considerations

The process of approaching potential participants and the data collection were started after ethics approval was granted by the ethics monitoring committee in the university (refer appendix IX). Out of the four principles of ethics mentioned by (Bell et al., 2018), two principles – informed consent and protection of privacy through confidentiality, were relevant to this research due to the social nature of this study and all steps were taken to ensure that these principles are followed. The information sheet (refer appendix II) shared with the participants clearly stated that the participation in the research was entirely voluntary and the participants were free to withdraw participation at any point before the data analysis. Moreover, it was also assured to participants that all collected data would be used for

academic purpose only. A document was prepared on informed consent (refer appendix IV) keeping all the question in mind that a participant may have. This was also in-line with the university research ethics review. A brief write-up on research topic was also prepared to give participant an introduction of the research undertaken, the contribution their participation may bring to the research and a statement to answer any further queries that they might have. The signed informed consent was collected from the participants before actual interview could take place. On the day of the call, a verbal permission was taken from each participant before switching the recorder on.

With all the above-mentioned steps, it was ensured that the principles of informed consent were followed. However, later on it was realised that there was an unintentional gap in following the ethical process. For a few participants, the interview time was underestimated for the call, which, according to Bell et al. (2018), is not consistent with the principle of informed consent. However, the participants did not object if the calls went on longer than expected as they had relevant information to share and they stayed longer on the call willingly.

After the data collection and as assured to participants, all the identifying information of the participants was saved with the researcher only. No one else other than the researcher had access to the recording and original transcripts. Transcripts were uploaded in the data analysis software only after anonymising all the identifying information. Hence, ethics regarding participants identity were strictly followed.

There was one more confidentiality concern identified during data collection, which was “commercial confidentiality”. Commercial confidentiality suggests that the confidential strategic information shared by the participants about their organisation should not be disclosed to other participants. Although these concerns were not directly raised by the participants (other than one), the ethical responsibility to maintain participants commercial confidentiality was also an important aspect. With one participant, a non-disclosure agreement was signed to meet ethical requirement of participant before the data collection could take place.

4.9 Justifiability and Trustworthiness

Reliability and validity of a research reflect the overall quality of the research. In a qualitative study, reliability and validity have been replaced by trustworthiness and justifiability (Franklin & Ballan, 2001). As opposed to seeking generalisation in a positivist study, an

interpretivist seeks trustworthiness (including dependability, confirmability and credibility) within the context instead of looking for generalisation (Charmaz, 2014). Trustworthiness in a qualitative study is established through rigour and consistency in the data collection and data analysis methods used, accurate representation of population studied and reporting of the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). As a substitute for reliability and validity, qualitative study also needs to confirm the justifiability. The researcher should be able to justify the choices made throughout the process, the options selected or dropped out in the study should be justifiable (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative data collection is not inherently unreliable or invalid, nevertheless concerns are surrounded towards data analysis. Whether the conclusions can be justified from the raw data justifies the trustworthiness of the qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Trustworthiness in a qualitative study is concerned with the rigour through which raw data is collected and transformed into analysable form. In this study, data collection was rigorous as the questionnaire was discussed with academics as well as with the industry researcher to make sure it was relevant. Actual data collection can also be called trustable as it encompassed participants from all the key position holders within the data centre industry which enabled to get a wider perspective on the research topic. Trustworthiness in data analysis, involves transcribing the interviews and coding. The verbatim transcription ensured that no text was missing while analysing the data. Whereas, reporting of findings and write-up of report was based on consistent methods and including extended swathes of raw data making the findings and analysis more trustable (Bryman, 2008; Silverman, 2015).

Trustworthiness can be external as well as internal. External trustworthiness refers to whether the study can be replicated by another researcher, which is a complicated idea in qualitative research, as this is highly dependent on the context and the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). However, a clear reporting of methodology may enable replication, given that all the research circumstances remain the same. On a contrast, if we consider that social world is constantly in flux and ever-changing as it has been said, then it is unreasonable to prove trustworthiness of methods since they can never be truly replicated in a qualitative study (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Internal trustworthiness is not relevant to this study (single researcher study), as it is relevant in cases where different researchers agree about the same piece of data (Franklin & Ballan, 2001).

Justifiability in qualitative research is concerned with how well the conclusions reflect the data that it was drawn from - how justifiable is the conclusion of the study (Lewis, Ritchie, Ormston, & Morrell, 2003). Whether these conclusions reflect some kind of external justifiability, is a philosophical question, which may or may not be relevant for qualitative studies, but concern for internal justifiability (credibility) is very important in qualitative data analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). External justifiability is similar to generalisability. However, as discussed earlier, qualitative studies are not looking at generalisability, hence, the concept of external justifiability is not applicable to this study.

The biggest threat to internal justifiability (credibility) is Anecdotalism – it refers to the tendency or urge to draw conclusions based only on a small number of quotes representing only the key points from the data (Miles et al., 2014). It lacks a thorough investigation of the data that examines different perspectives shared by the participants before reaching any conclusions (Bryman & Burgess, 2002). In this study, efforts were taken to ensure reporting varying perspectives presented by the participants on the research topic. As it is described in the findings chapter (Chapters 5-7), reporting of the findings also includes any contrasting views or statements given by the participants. Conclusion were drawn based on the in-depth analysis which included rounded views of the participants rather than only looking at major key points. The following data findings chapters are an accurate representation of what is happening in the research and the participant's perspective. Moreover, the critical steps of data analysis - coding and allocating themes were visited in an iterative manner to ensure that codes and themes accurately represent the data.

Although efforts were also taken to ensure that the data collection and analysis remain unbiased. The nature of the exploratory research may lead to the biased analysis as the interpretation of the data is subjective and is subject to biased analysis according to researchers' viewpoint. These findings cannot be generalised and may be susceptible to researcher's bias.

4.10 Summary

This chapter has delineated, presented and justified all the steps taken during this research. From clarifying and justifying the philosophical positioning, to adopting qualitative, inductive approach clear choices were reported supported by the reasons for these choices. Data collection methods, sampling techniques, process of designing and refining the semi-structured questionnaire were presented. Moving forward, the chapter also discussed the

transcription and data analysis process, why thematic coding technique was adopted for data analysis, and how it was implemented with rigour and reflexivity to achieve reliability and credibility. The chapter has also discussed the problems encountered during the data collection phase and how it was handled to achieve maximum efficiency in the given concurrent circumstances. The three overarching themes that emerged from data analysis are discussed in the next findings chapters.

Chapter 5 Findings of the study – I

5.1 Introduction - HR practices as employer branding content

As discussed in previous chapter, three overarching themes (as depicted in figure 5.1) a) Employer branding content, b) Employer social presence, c) Employer strategic positioning, emerged from the thematic analysis of 31 semi structured interviews. Findings suggest that participants utilise HR practices to design the attractive employer branding content. Thus, designing employer branding content using HR practices emerged as one of the three main themes from the data analysis. This main theme comprises two sub-themes – symbolic attributes of the employer brand, and instrumental attributes of the employer brand (highlighted section in the Figure 5.1). Each of these sub-themes have sub-categories, as discussed below –

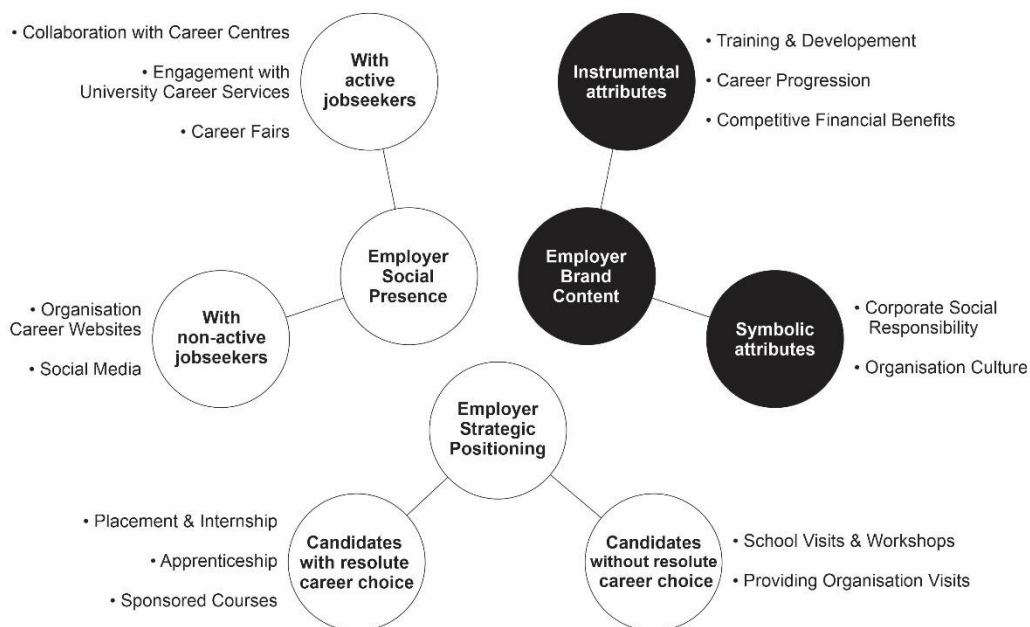


Figure 5.1 Employer brand content

5.2 Symbolic attributes of the employer brand

Symbolic attributes of the organisation play a major role in designing the employer brand content. Participants suggested that symbolic attributes form a distinguished image of the organisation and contribute to position it as an attractive place to work. Wherein efforts of the organisation towards corporate social responsibility present the organisation as an employer which is socially responsible too.

5.2.1. Corporate social responsibility

A socially responsible employer can position itself as an attractive employer in comparison to the employers that do not come across as responsible towards society. This responsibility could be towards various issues prevalent in the society at large. Participants mentioned issues such as being environment friendly and promoting diversity and inclusion are two most important factors that are highly sought after by the potential candidates in their potential employer. Participants advocated that HR practices focusing and supporting these causes are most likely to present their organisation as an attractive and responsible employer. Multiple CSR initiatives adopted by the organisation serve diverse needs of target audience. While extant literature narrowly links CSR to charity activities (see for example (Bhattacharya et al., 2008)), participants in this study see their organisations presenting themselves as a socially responsible employer beyond mere charity. For example, reducing waste heat, upcycling waste heat, procuring electricity from green sources, providing equal opportunities to different age and gender groups, are part of the CSR initiatives and an attractive addition to employer branding content. These concerns are highlighted in the following sections.

a) Sustainability efforts and its role in employer branding process

Sustainability efforts of the organisation form an important part of the CSR image of the organisation and play a significant role in designing the employer branding content. Participants mentioned that organisation's sustainability efforts ought to be an element of their employer branding content to align their approach addressing young generation's environmental concerns. While designing and including various sustainable initiatives in employer branding process, consideration should be given to the needs of different demographics of target segments such as age and gender. There were polarised views about the environmentally poor image of the industry and its impact on attracting young graduates. Most of the participants agreed that poor image of the industry can dissuade young generation to work for an industry that is not seen as green and environment friendly, as IB1² (managing director) shared:

“... they're [younger generation] not attracted because they don't know about it. They're not attracted to it because even they do know about it, the jobs don't sound attractive. They're not attracted to because it's perceived to be very, very environmentally unfriendly.”

² Pseudonyms are given to all participants to anonymise their identities.

Whereas minority of participants suggested that although environmental efforts taken by the organisation can be a concern and need to be addressed, but it is not a challenging issue in terms of talent attraction, as shared by DC6 (HR business partner):

“we're always looking at ways to improve the environment. And I would say that it's not a ... it's not ... It's not a huge deterrent for people to join in the industry. But obviously, they want to know that we're doing what we can and we have a Yeah, we have a commitment to that. But I don't think people would say I don't want to join them because of the environmental factor.”

Those who confirm the fact that environmentally friendly image has an impact on their appeal as an attractive employer, have included their sustainability initiatives in employer branding content, whereas others just prefer to address these concerns as and when raised by the applicants, as DC8 (HR business partner) explained:

“I don't ... well, it's difficult, I don't think that [environmental issue] has necessarily come up in a reason why someone doesn't want to join us... when people ask, and we're able to demonstrate that we are, it is something that concerns us, it is something we're working on, you know, we're doing things with renewable energy, we donate heavily to environmental charities. And I think the fact that we're not ignoring the issue is very attractive to people.”

These participants insisted that inclination towards contributing to sustainability efforts is highly dependent on individual desire to create significant impact through their employment, as C5 (director) mentioned:

“... a lot more around that to be more sustainable. But I do ... I don't think ... I've not heard of anyone? Well, I don't know, I don't know if they would even apply if they don't believe that they want to work for environmentally friendly organization”

Hence, including organisation's efforts towards sustainability in the employer branding content may not always appeal as an attractive feature of the employer branding content. Moreover, no sustainability efforts may not make the organisation less attractive. This is due to individual candidate's inclination towards sustainability.

Nevertheless, there is a consensus on the viewpoint that young generation is more conscious about environmental impacts of the industry and the green issues overall, whereas those in the later stages of their career are not deeply concerned about this issue, as DC14 (chief operating officer) shared opinion:

“It's, you know, that might be the way to get people's interest especially, especially the younger people, because I think it's probably fair to ... fair to ... fair to say that

younger people are kind of a lot more concerned about the environment. You know because, because it's going to affect them a lot more, you know, lot more of their life to live ... if you like. So ... so, it might be ... it might be that, you know, younger people look at it from the point of view of how can I make data centres more efficient.”

With these statements participants suggested that designing employer branding content around the target audience environmental concerns would appeal to them more profoundly and place the organisation as an attractive place to work.

Another similar view of a participant suggested that although sustainability could be a factor in attracting young generation of workforce, however they may want to join the organisation to make contribution towards sustainability, in case organisation was not fully contributing towards this cause, as DC12 (HR business partner) expressed:

‘I think if anything ... it would attract more people that are keen on ... on sustainability, because they maybe come with ideas on how things can be done better. So, I don't ... if anyone was interested in sustainability, and ... and they ... and if they had that viewpoint that we weren't doing a good job, I think actually, that would probably encourage people that were ... that were interested in that field, because they would come with new ideas and new ways of doing things.’

Consequently, the potential candidates may perceive this as prospect in the organisation and might get attracted to it seeing an opportunity to contribute towards the cause and make a difference. The overarching viewpoint of the participant suggested to include their green and sustainability efforts as the content of employer branding to attract young generation talent, as DC3 (managing director) mentioned:

“I think it is green in a lot of ways, but make it even more green. That will then, that will, that will then enable, you know, will make it more attractive to younger people, because at the moment, say that one, why would younger person be attracted to the industry?”

In creating employer branding content for their organisation, the attempt is not only to send out positive signals about the sustainability efforts of the industry, but also mitigate any negative perception about it. To achieve this, participants suggested to include different attempts made towards energy saving and utilisation caused by the organisation in the employer branding content. Participants unanimously agreed that the industry has poor image in terms of high energy consumption and emitting lots of waste heat, only nearly half of them want to raise this issue while designing their employer branding content. Those who want to

address this issue, have suggested presenting sustainable efforts made by the organisations to target young graduates or even earlier. Participants also proposed to adopt a strategic approach towards presenting sustainable and environmental focus as an employer branding tool, as C1 (director) shared:

“... to, to someone just go and tell ...so you know what guys ... this swimming pool is heated by a data centre. Data centre does x, y and Z will affect your daily life? Rather than just, um, but so I think, I think you need to demonstrate it because I think, I think younger people are not attracted to ... the ... what they're not attracted because they don't know about it.”

Participants also seemed to have attempted to demonstrate these initiatives to early age candidates so that the awareness can be raised, and their interest can be captured. This strategic step brings two-fold advantages for the participants – 1) mitigating the negative image (signals) about the industry, 2) generating curiosity in students at a younger age towards the employer to create a sustainable talent pool.

Despite the divergent views on including sustainability efforts in the employer branding content and its effect on the attractiveness of the organisation as an employer, all participants showed agreement towards presenting sustainability efforts and environmental benefits of the organisation to the potential candidates to present themselves as socially responsible. Organisations also invested in efforts to ensure participation of its employees in their sustainability efforts for their active involvement and to earn employee advocacy more effectively. A strategic approach to sustainability efforts and employees' involvement makes employees co-creators of CSR initiatives of the organisation.

b) Diversity and Inclusion and its role in employer branding content

Focus on “Diversity and inclusion” emerged as another dominant factor to be included in the employer branding content and for organisations to be known as socially responsible employers. Raising awareness towards diversity and inclusion by participating in different trade events promoting women talent, visiting girls' schools for brand promotion, showcasing a diverse leadership team, creating a diverse recruitment panel, are some HR initiatives adopted by organisations to be seen as a socially responsible employer interested in creating a diverse workforce. Organisations have dual objectives in promoting diversity and inclusion through their HR policies – 1) it presents them as a socially responsible employer, 2) it attracts young target audience to the organisation. To get placed as an attractive organisation among the target audience, participants suggested to include these efforts in the employer

branding content. The target audience for the participants in this study are concerned about diversity and inclusion strategies implemented by their potential employer. As DC11 (talent branding manager) shared:

“When we’ve surveyed candidates and reports recently, the main thing that candidates are concerned about diversity, inclusion and belonging, strategies and policies. So, we ... that is the main thing we sell our employer brand on.”

Designing the organisation HR policies to promote diversity and inclusion has an important place in employer branding content. Diversity does not only mean creating a balance between male and female numbers, it also includes different religious backgrounds, different racial backgrounds, different genders, different age groups too as mentioned by DC1 (operations director):

“... so certainly. So, there's so CSR, careers page ... so when we talk about diversity and inclusion, it's not just about the obvious things, you know, gender and whatever, it is age as well as the various other stuff.”

Various HR practices are designed to drive awareness about this cause. Participants claimed that flexible work practices that are suited to accommodate needs of female employees such as providing maternity leaves, paternity leaves, work hours suited to childcare duties and so on. These practices apparently benefit the organisation to counter the current image of the industry, that is very male dominated, as DC20 (Vice President HR) mentioned:

“...the industry is ... is quite traditional, so, you know, so for example, it's fairly male dominated, and there's not many females. So, you know, a) you need to be attracting females through flexible working, improved maternity cover, etc. but also looking at paternity leave for guys. So, you know, now a days a man can share the maternity leave with his partner. And they can take time off either together, reduce time or, you know, still, if the wife is the main bread earner, she can go back to work and the male can can take the take the paternity leave.”

In the same vein, a few other examples of promoting diversity and inclusion such as offering industrial placements to girl students, being involved with trade organisations that work towards diversity and inclusion in the industry or enrolling memberships with special groups such as Women Engineering society. These accreditations, memberships, and affiliations bring recognition to the employer as a socially responsible organisation driven towards bringing change on social issue, as DC7 (senior manager – talent acquisition) shared:

“I’ve got activities organised around International Women’s Day, to get girls in from schools to do a tour and do some activities and try to organise stuff around

international data centre day at the end of March, we are a member of the women's Engineering Society. So, I'm quite involved with stuff that they are doing."

Such initiatives also bring awareness among young potential candidates (who have not yet decided their career) about organisation's initiatives towards diversity and inclusion. Participants realise that their organisation's HR practices may not be able to bring an equal (50-50) balance, but they are positive that their HR efforts are leading them in the right direction and hence, establishing them as a socially responsible and attractive employer, as C1 (director) shared:

"There are huge efforts, you know, across the industry to encourage, you know, more females into engineering more females into technology. And, you know, there's lots of digital initiatives as well, which can overlap. And so I think, you know, absolutely, you know, it's not necessarily 50-50, and it probably won't be for a long time. But it's certainly been going in the right direction."

Largely, the data suggest that efforts focused to bring positive change on diversity and inclusion issues are a significant contributor to employer branding content. Nevertheless, these efforts need to be implemented continuously to make an impact in the organisation and, eventually in the employer branding content.

There were a minority of participants with different views from above as they mentioned that organisational efforts are not helpful in creating an identity as a responsible employer, as these issues are not at organisational level, rather these are rooted in the social set-up. Similarly, another participant attributed educational choices of girls that eventually drive the gender imbalance in the employment market, and HR policies focused on these issues are unable to make any difference to organisation's employer branding efforts, as C2 (director) shared:

"I know the industry is trying to attract more women into the, into the the, the workforce ... into ... into ... into data centres, but honestly, it goes back goes to school. And this is my opinion, of course. Because the school level, you know, if the girls don't want to study construction, or they don't want to study engineering, then then or they're not choosing to study those courses."

For these participants, including diversity and inclusion efforts in the employer branding content would not make any significant difference to the organisation's image as an employer. However, these efforts can attract the untapped diverse potential candidates who are unaware about the career choices available within the organisation, as DC5 (global talent acquisition manager) mentioned:

“...we're trying to, you know, we have an inclusive ... you know an inclusive policy and procedure. And, you know, we've ... we've not, you know, I think we've actually got a number of females in very senior construction roles, you know, and we are, you know, trying to have a positive influence on that. And being mindful, I think that we do need to encourage more females to, to apply to engineering roles.”

A contradictory view completely discards using HR practices in employer branding content that are focused on bringing equality. According to this view, these efforts sometimes drive them negatively and leading into positive discrimination. and it should be the right person gets the job regardless of age, race, gender, ethnic background, as DC3 (managing director) shared:

“We don't use as part of employer branding strategy, because I think that can be taken a little bit too negatively. Some of our customers do. And, and we've seen positive discrimination going the other way, right. Where it's ... it's not about the right person gets the job, if you get the job if you're a certain ethnic, ethnic origin, or female or whatever it says that you should always be about the right person getting the job. I think in our business, we have a very balanced view to those things.”

Despite contradictory views, an overall picture suggests that participants favour to use HR practices driving balance in Diversity and Inclusion as a significant feature of the employer branding content. It ostensibly helps them to position themselves as an attractive employer among the potential candidates, reach out to yet untapped diverse talent and position amongst those who are yet to decide their career.

5.2.2 Organisational culture

Organisation culture emerged as an important factor in presenting the organisation as an attractive employer. Although organisation culture has been a dominant theme in achieving competitive advantage against the competitors for participants in this study, definition of organisation culture varies for participants. Some participants are in favour of providing a family like environment for their employees, while others are in favour of involving employees in defining and creating the culture of the organisation. According to the latter group, organisation culture, that is people driven will be more attractive to potential candidates.

Participants indicated that creating a unique organisation culture has a strong influence on organisation's image as an attractive employer. As stated by these participants, their organisations have also worked towards creating an organisation culture that can, sometimes, compensate for any financial benefits, as DC2 (HR director) shared:

“As data centres, you know, we're privately owned, so we don't have share ... share options and things like that. So, when we are just a tiny bit behind, we have very good benefits, but we need to make up the difference somewhere. Culture is the area that we make that up, you know, they're very family orientated, you know, they're very output focused, they, they all, you know, we all collaborate together, [organisation name] is a company full of nice people that are good at what they do, that want to work towards a common goal.”

Apart from complementing financial benefits, organisational culture seems to be serving two-fold purpose. First, organisational culture is used as a distinct feature which is not easily replicable and hence provides a competitive advantage to the organisation. Second, it also displays what it would be like to work in the organisation on day-to-day basis. By presenting organisational culture to the targeted audience organisations attempt to create their unique identity as an employer. Moreover, organisations also use culture as a metric to assess a potential candidate's fit into the organisation. Transparency is another important feature of organisation culture. Several participants suggested to have a clear and continuous communication with their current and potential employees, since organisational culture is as fluid as organisations are. Hence, it is imperative to create a participative work environment where employees can freely communicate and provide open feedback. Including employees' voices in designing the organisation culture presents organisation as a transparent workplace environment. It also makes employees feel that their voices are heard, as DC19 (managing director) shared:

“You know they telling us that what the brand is. We are the sort of the next evolution from ... they to create that as a ... self-creation of an employer brand. They believe that we reflect so ... that's what we've got ... that's our next ... our next move in that which is going to be interesting. It's interesting already, but I haven't ... I have seen this sometimes you know very often ... your employees create, you know, self-create the brand.”

Transparent organisational culture also means that employees are always welcome to talk to management about any issues. This is referred to as “*open door policy*” by a participant, who believes that this has a huge positive impact on their organisational culture.

Participants have also insisted that reinforcement of culture and values within current employees should also be a part of the employer branding initiatives. Creating and reinforcing culture to internal audience through HR practices is equally important as communicating it to the external audience. Communicating the organisational culture and values through current employees is only possible when current employees have embraced

the organisational values and can demonstrate through their own behaviours and verbal communication. Employees who have identified with the organisational values will also be a source of positive employer branding through feedback on social media (discussed in detail in the social media section 6.3.1), word of mouth. Authentic demonstration of organisational values will have more employer branding impact than mere advertising. Participants in this study displayed their keenness in making organisation culture an important part of employer branding process. Attracting candidates who identify with organisational values would also have willingness to contribute towards the organisational culture by living the employer brand, if recruited, and would potentially become the future advocates of the employer brand. Promoting organisation culture to find best brand - fit candidates, strengthens the employer brand. Participants also advocate to protect the organisation culture from any mis-fit element. Any single candidate that does not fit in the organisational culture not only may leave the organisation but may drive out a few other good employees too, hence further impacting the image of the organisation, as DC5 (global talent acquisition manager) mentioned:

“... you know, we need to protect that we can't bring the ..., you know, taking risks, bringing in people that don't share our values, that don't collaborate, because, you know, if you get one bad person in the team that might drive two or three, you know, excellent people to leave, and we can't risk that. So, you know, that, that, that culture and that lifestyle when, you know, experience, that's what we want for everyone and, you know, that was a big sell for me coming into [organisation name] ... [so] yeah, we ... we trade very heavily on culture and environment.”

Including organisational culture as an important part of the employer branding content presents organisation as an attractive employer while also communicating the criteria for candidates to assess where they can best fit-in. This results in organisations attracting best-fit candidates, which may also have a positive impact on their employer image in future.

Several HR practices can have an impact on organisation culture, however, participants in this study have stressed upon creating an appealing workplace environment and providing work-life balance as two most important factors that have an impact on their organisational culture and positively impact their appeal as an attractive employer.

a) Workplace environment and its role in employer branding content

Environment provided to employees at workplace was perceived as an important feature to make an organisation attractive. Participants have pointed that the potential candidates have a keen interest in knowing the kind of workplace they would be working in. From

organisation's point of view, participants believe that physical workplace is a good way to demonstrate organisation culture and behaviour, as IB1 (managing director) quoted:

“... so, they've got to make it (physical workplace) more, more sexy, more and more attractive to younger people to be part of the industry.”

Modern and up-to-date workplace reflects that organisation believes in keeping pace with changing work conditions. It reflects organisation willingness to adapt to and fulfil the needs of target audience that it is trying to attract. Physical workplace in the organisations is a reflection of organisation culture such as providing table tennis at work or break-out areas promote organisation as an employer that supports physical as well as mental well-being of employees, as C7 (managing director) suggested-

“a company that is at the forefront of social communication. It could mean a number of different things. In addition to that, it could mean a company, first thing that comes into your mind a place where people go to work, casually dressed, you can take your dog with you...”

Majority of the participants agree that providing attractive workplace – a physical place where employees work, is an attractive feature for potential candidates. To present themselves as attractive workplace, organisations have invested in making their workspace appealing to the demands of potential candidates. Paying attention to small features such as providing gym facility at work, snooker or table tennis at work and offering extended lunch break for a quick run, may seem insignificant, but participants believe that these factors enhance the attractiveness of their organisations. Designing workplace environment also includes assessing what potential candidates may expect from their potential employer and designing the organisation workplace that suits their expectations. Expectations from employers have changed substantially in recent years. It also emerged that physical workspace also has an impact on the employment experience that potentials candidates / employees expect from their employment. Hence, employers are willing to keep adapting and updating themselves both in providing physical workspace as well as work experience, as DC9 (HR director) stated:

“... well, I think first we have to know what, early career people in early career expect from a company ... an organisation because that has significantly changed over the last 10 years. You know, ... [how] sustainable an organization is, in terms of what and how they go about their business, all of that has become way more important than it was even five years ago. So, it's kind of understanding what those

employees expect. But it's also making, making those individuals aware of what is our employee experience.”

To display their workplace features, organisation like to showcase these features through their videos and photos on websites or other social media engagement with their target audience (discussed in detail in Chapter 6). As DC20 (Vice President HR) stated:

“... we now have a LinkedIn page where we're showing pictures, glass door where we're showing pictures of people having fun, you know, showing that, you know, there is, you know, there's a social aspect to work as well as, you know, the hard, hard work that we expect people there's a social element.”

A minority of participants have also emphasized the importance of language used in their organisation to form the foundation of the organisation culture. Slogans or the strap line are the visible example of their physical workspace, work values and tradition. As stated by DC1 (operations director):

“...what we're kind of hoping is that by making it look more cool, which is our Strap line Making the Data Centre world more cool, and it makes kids think, you know, as our ... our young people here did, yeah, well, this is something that I want to be part of...”

Choice of words used in promoting the organisation reflects organisation’s values, vision and culture. Special attention towards language can become an attractive feature in placing organisation strategically among potential candidates. Overall, organisational physical workplace environment has emerged as an attractive factor for potential candidates and employees alike.

b) Work life balance and its role in employer branding content

Work life balance was identified as an important factor in creating an attractive organisational culture. Participants are unanimously in favour of providing work-life balance to their employees/ potential candidates to position themselves as an attractive employer. With the changing economic scenarios, participants suggested that it is imperative to become more flexible towards employment pattern. However, there are multiple views on the implementation of this attractive feature in their organisations. While one perspective is to be flexible towards individual needs, the other perspective suggests being flexible based on the needs of gender or age.

To achieve work life balance in their organisation, some participants are of the view to implement “management by objectives”, where focus is on achieving objectives, and

employees have flexibility to achieves those objectives whether by sitting in the office working 9-5 or work from home, go on a holiday but still deliver their targets and meet set objectives on time. As DC3 (managing director) expressed:

“... because if ... if you're managing people to objectives, and they've achieved their objectives in the set timeframe, you shouldn't care about with how, what they do. It shouldn't matter. Even if they are sailing a boat in the Mediterranean but still achieve the objectives. The question is can you set the objectives from start, firstly? Secondly – if yes - well done then, crack on.”

Such an approach to achieving work objectives demands a flexible work environment and results in satisfied employees. Satisfied employees in turn rate organisation positively and provide good feedback both, personally and on social media platform. Hence, an organisation achieves employees' advocacy as an attractive employer by supporting flexibility in work life. Participants also suggested to make this approach more personalised by adjusting work practices according to employee's needs. This personalised approach apparently helps organisations to present themselves as an inclusive employer where female employees' or parents' needs are also looked after, as DC20 (Vice President HR) stated:

“... It's about how it ... how you can work around your, you know, your life commitments to your job. So, you know, somebody who, whose wife is a nurse, say for example, you know, somebody could do, you know, days or nights etc, to to, to work off their partner's shift rota as well. But you know, having that flexibility to allow people to take a time off for childcare arrangements and things like that is becoming, you know, more and more increasingly more important...”

Some employers / participants even believe in going an extra mile by adjusting to employee's needs where the flexible approach to work helps employees maintain good mental health or support family responsibilities. This may also have positive long-term impact on their productivity and relationship with the employee, as DC21 (partner & co-founder) shared:

“We had a guy who's a fine guy ... who said, I'd like to take six months off, you know, to look after my kid. And, you know, that was probably quite ... quite new. We also what the other thing I had at XXXX was that a guy wanted to take a sabbatical. And when I went to XXXX to say, look, we'd like to arrange this sabbatical for this person, will keep his job open, you know, he's not going to get paid during the, the, you know, the eight months he is off, but, you know, keep it open and then he comes back he needs that ... he needs this break...”

Such adjustments in work-life balance, places organisation as an employer willing to accommodate according to its employees needs and supports them to face varied challenges

of personal lives. Participants also cited their personal example where they opted to work for their current employer because they could balance their personal life and responsibilities alongside their work life in a much efficient way. Their personal examples were cited to emphasize the value of flexible work practices adopted by an employer in attracting potential candidates. Providing flexible work-arrangements, especially designed towards the needs of female employees makes the organisation appear an inclusive workplace too. As shared by DC11 (talent branding manager):

“... we try to recruit more women ... we try to make it a much more inclusive environment for women. It shifts work within the ... within the data centres. And so that is contend to exclude a certain, you know, we are ... we ... we're a very flexible organization. I'm a working mom, I've got two young boys, and it's absolutely brilliant for me.”

Although majority of the participants have talked about adjusting flexible work practices according to gender-based needs. A minority of participants proposed to adjust work practices according to the age of employees, as they believe that different age -groups have different personal needs, hence adjusting work-practices according to age of the employee can prove as an attractive feature for the organisation and places organisation as an inclusive employer among different demographics. As IB3 (director) stated:

“... people say you've got to enjoy your work life balance, and absolutely my work life balance is to finish working as young as I can. So, I could go off and travel the world. I'd rather work ... I'd rather forego any kind of gym membership, I don't actually want any sleep pods, just give me hard work, pay me well, for me to finish it early. That's what I wanted. But that's my generation, the younger generation tend to want more of that flexible working hours that the whole, the whole sort of working ... whole generation of ... just let me work when I want to work and I'll be more efficient and more effective. But for me that's just non-sense, just get on with the job.”

Overall, it is observed that a personalised approach to work-life balance is required to make organisation appear as an attractive employer sensitive to various needs of different demographics and attract potential candidates to the organisation. Including flexible approach to work has appeared as an important content to be included in the process of employer branding.

5.3 Instrumental attributes of the employer brand

Besides symbolic attributes, instrumental attributes offered by the organisation as part of employment also have an influence on the attractiveness of the organisation. Participants

suggested three major instrumental attributes (discussed below) that should be given importance while creating the content of the employer brand

5.3.1 Training and development

Investing in the professional skills development of their employees through training has emerged as a significant contributor to the employer branding process of the organisations. Majority of the participants mentioned that a training focused organisation is seen as an attractive employer. Potential candidates would prefer to work at such places as they get an opportunity to enhance their employability by learning professional skills provided by the employer through various training programmes. However, to reap full benefits of this feature participants suggested to be open and fearless³ in providing training to their employees. As DC21 (partner & co-founder) stated:

“You're always going to have, you know, you've got to go (employees do leave and move on), but if you create the right working environment, they will stay, right. Yes, you're going to lose someone. But you know, the issue is not not training, you know, I mean, the same question remains if you don't train someone, the answer is the same. You got to be bold enough to but that's, that's, that's the same in any organization as a graduate type program where all will spend all this money and train them and they leave. Yes, you know, but if you get it right within your organization, hopefully they will stay.”

Providing opportunities for training and development may further result in gaining competitive advantage among early-career candidates or freshers and retaining them further, who are contemplating to choose their potential employer and a long-term relationship with their potential employer.

As suggested by participants, industry accredited on-the-job training is a primary training tool among various learning and development tools available with the organisations. Providing industry accredited on-the-job training may serve two-fold purpose – first, it places organisations in an advantageous position to prefer to select candidates based on person-organisation fit (as mentioned before) and later provide on-the-job training to candidates to develop them according to particular organisation’s operational needs. Such candidates are already culturally fit for the organisation. Second, it also places organisations as an employer

³ By being fearless, participants meant that organisation should not refrain from investing in training their employees thinking that they might leave or move onto next promising career after they are better skilled.

that is supportive of candidate's growth by providing them appropriate training which is not only organisation specific but also confirms to industry standards. Training programmes that comply with industry standards are more attractive to candidates as these programmes provide them with an opportunity to be more eligible industry wide. As shared by DC1 (operations director):

"...yeah, we pay for all that. And that's, you know, we want them to have accredited training and industry recognized training. And yeah, well Certainly, flag up on the website that, you know, we train everyone on the industry standard training."

This positions organisation as a place supporting overall professional growth of the candidates helping them achieve their wider career goals. Since some certified training courses are industry recognised, the skills thus acquired may help employees to take their career to an advanced level and place organisation as a place where employees' growth is imperative.

Investing in employees by supporting them to acquire certified training programs enhances employees' employability value. This adds a prominent feature in the employer branding content, as early-career candidates are always focused on their career-growth. Organisations also collaborate with external training providers to design training programs that would suit the organisation requirement as well as meet the industry standards too. As shared by DC6 (HR business partner):

"... we worked very closely with them (training providers) on designing the courses so that they could have a certification at the end of it."

Investing in the training programmes also creates a sustainable talent pool for the organisation to fulfil their long-term talent needs and presents them as an attractive workplace. Training is used as a way of career development, such as picking employees for internal movement for the next bigger role which assists career growth of employees. This eventually places the organisation as a growth friendly employer, as DC8 (HR business partner) mentioned:

"... I think we are all trying to support, you know, improving our employer band, which I think we've got a good employer brand. You know, I think in the industry, like the training and development opportunities that we provide ... even though obviously, we, as an employer want to, you know, advise employee, potential people joining the business that, you know, we are an organization where you have that opportunity for

internal mobility and career development, and, you know, we ... we provide really good level of training on our ... on our systems.”

Training and development are not only seen as a way of attracting candidates and promote the organisation as a growth- oriented organisation. Participants also view it as a way of reinforcing the organisational culture as DC2 (HR director) mentioned:

“... the young graduate. Yeah, I think it's all about us doing the training internally. So, I think a lot of it needs to be more about the ... the right attitude and aptitude. And being able to then put the training into ... and training into play for them to be able to take that on and move that forward and progress within their careers. So yes, yes, I agree to certain degree, but I think, you know, if we're bringing in people that are, you know, at the more at the early stages of their career, then we can help if they've got the right attitude and aptitude, we can help shape them.”

As mentioned earlier, participants view organisation culture as an important feature of the attractiveness of the employer, utilising training efforts to promote and maintain organisation culture makes organisations efforts coordinated and leading towards same organisational goal. Such training efforts also provide flexibility to organisation in choosing candidates with right attitude over skills. Participants from the organisations, where there is a lack of investment and efforts in training programmes, recognise it and propose that they need to work towards it, to be able to present themselves as an attractive workplace. As DC13 (director) expressed:

“...but it's, we need to kind of put more money into training people up.”

Overall, investing in growth of employees by providing training and certifications (industry recognised) is an important feature in presenting organisation as a growth friendly place and an important feature of the employer branding content.

5.3.2 Career Progression

Investing in the career growth opportunities of the employees and presenting these growth prospects to potential candidates is seen as an important aspect of the employer branding content. Participants suggested that organisations should remain constantly involved in designing career progression for their employees to make it an important feature of their attractiveness. Providing career growth opportunities has various benefits such as creating employee ambassador for the organisation, improving retention rate of employees which consequently becomes another attractive feature of the organisation.

Earning employee advocacy through showing them different career paths, that may be available to them as an employee, is a key factor in attracting candidates. Presenting career progression opportunities and implementing those, after a candidate has joined the organisation has a positive impact on the attractiveness of the organisation. Participants stressed the importance of being continuously involved with employees' career growth throughout their career journey, as DC9 (HR director) insisted:

"I think it's important that employer brand isn't just what about what you do at the, the attraction and the hiring stage. And then it's also about what you do throughout an employee's career journey with you."

Being constantly involved with employees in designing their career path earns organisation some real examples of the growth opportunities that are part of the employment journey, as DC8 (HR business partner) emphasised:

"...and it's that whole analogy of you can't, you've got to see it to be it. And so really showing people the true examples of people that work within the organization, the career opportunities, or the pathways that they've had, and you know, what, what we're all about what we do, what it's like, making it real for people, and very ... and more personal."

Employees that have progressed in their career with the organisational support prove to be the ambassadors for the organisation and endorse the employer supportive of progression and growth.

Citing the importance of career growth, a participant pointed that they were losing their valuable employees and were not seen as an attractive place of work as the organisation failed to present career progression opportunities to their employees. Consequently, the solution was to develop a system where career progression opportunities could be presented to employees by recognising their efforts and abilities, and DC20 (Vice President HR) devised a solution as suggested below:

"... we were losing people because they felt there wasn't a career progression for them. So, we introduced employing grading so that you know, somebody who joined us would be a level one engineer... [and] there was a list of you know, the competencies and skills that they needed to be able to perform at level two, and to be promoted to level two, then to level three, and then level level four ... [we] started putting them through sort of Management Development and and leadership type, management, training etc, and the softer skills. So, we put in place some sort of grading and and skills skills assessment and know where the gaps were ... [we] needed to train them on, so that they could become more, you know, could could

could progress ... [we] wanted to make sure that you are offering career development and career progression.”

As suggested above, organisations need to make career progression more visible by recognising the skills & efforts, aligning them with organisational objectives and rewarding employees through internal mobility, promotions and financial rewards respectively. Majority of the participants approve the concept of showing some real examples of career progression and career options available in their organisation. As DC11 (talent branding manager) shared:

“... that we tried to show a few different examples of how people have gone in different directions. And then when people start in the company, they get a mentor, who will be able to talk them through all their different career options, because sometimes in data centres, it's seen more as a job than a career. And that's something we've really been addressing over the past couple of years that we want to make sure that we're supporting our technicians into developing a long-term career.”

In addition, internal movement appears as a dominant feature for career progression, and it forms a cyclic process where vacant junior positions are created because of internal movement to senior positions. Candidates are attracted to fill-in these vacant positions at junior levels, and the promoted employees are advocate of the career progression opportunities in the organisation. Stressing the importance of internal movement, as DC5 (global talent acquisition manager) quoted:

“...that happens fairly regularly. So, as I think there's been about eight or nine instances in the last year, where we've, you know, we've promoted people into director level roles. And, you know, we've had three or four more internal moves to backfill those roles, and then fill them again, at a junior level. So, you know, we do work with existing employees, and people come into the business to map that out.”

Growing higher in the career path within the organisation is an attractive feature for the employees at junior level and to those who are promoted. Participants have supported career progression through internal movement as employees who have progressed in their career in such way, become the goodwill ambassador for the organisation. Another participant had similar views on the importance of internal movement and career progression in the employer branding content. As DC7 (senior manager – talent acquisition) shared:

“... developing some creative assets to use in external advertising. But we know we also need to put more focus on internal movement. So, you know, making sure that when we have a vacancy, we're encouraging people within the business to apply and take that next step. You know, not just focus on bringing in fresh talent because you

know, actually, you want to retain and develop the talent that you've got just as much as having to ... to bring fresh, talent in."

For junior level employees, internal progression represents the opportunities of career growth. In both the instances, organisation presents itself as an attractive place to work. Moreover, the employees, both at junior and senior level would leave positive feedback on various platforms or through word-of-mouth, making organisation's employer branding appeal more genuine and realistic.

An important suggestion by participants is to actively involve employees in deciding their career progression. This makes career progression more meaningful to employees and attractive to potential candidates, as a sense of accountability and ownership is displayed. As suggested by DC9 (HR director):

"...one of our differentiators that stands out as part of our EVP is about the accountability and empowerment that people have for their own careers and for the roles that they do. So, it's the model in which we work. And that is a big selling point for us."

Providing ownership to employees in their career progression presents organisation more attractive as employees can choose the direction where they would want to progress in their career. Employees can also seek respective support from their employer. Citing the importance of providing mentoring DC19 (managing director) quoted:

"They are then ambassadors for what we do... [We] have a separate mentoring screen where we could ... we ... it doesn't matter what level you are in a business that you can reach out for mentoring from a more senior staff that's not your line manager. If you want help with anything sort of ... sort of mentoring stream."

Career progression is also presented as a means of sustainable career growth for employees. Employers have adopted several practices such as internal mobility, management training, and succession planning that creates a sustainable talent pool for the organisation as well as feeds into the sustainable growth of their employees, hence adding an attractive feature into employer branding content. As DC4 (managing director) pointed out:

"Well sustainability covers not only product; it covers a multitude of other things around the sustainability of the business ... [that] feeds into sustaining the growth of the individuals through a management training plan."

Organisations design their HR policies not only to attract candidates at an entry level, by investing heavily in employees' career progression organisations also attempt to create a

sustainable talent supply. Similarly, another participant suggested to promote and achieve diversity and inclusion by encouraging female talents to attend training programs focused at their career progression. As it was quoted by DC7 (senior manager – talent acquisition):

“I think from a diversity point of view, there's certainly more focus being put on that globally. So, we now have women in leadership, network that holds a series of ... you know, events and training opportunities to encourage ... you know ... more ... more sort of internal movement that encourage, you know, females to think about furthering their, their career within XXXX XXXX.”

While majority of participants have supported the concept of helping potential candidates in their career progression by providing several opportunities, a contradicting view was also reported, as C5 (director) expressed:

“...It's up to you as an individual to push your own career, you know, you can't just rely on the employer.”

Although there was a contradictory view, most of the other participants have positive views on employer's role in career progression of employees and suggested to focus on including it as an attractive component of the employer branding content.

5.3.3 Competitive financial benefits

Competitive financial benefits are a major attractive feature for the potential candidates as well as for existing employees. Hence, this was unanimously suggested by all the participants to include competitive financial benefits as part of the employer branding content.

In this study, majority of the participants work towards attracting younger people into their organisation. According to these participants, young people get attracted to better financial remuneration and benefits provided by an organisation. Including the competitive financial benefits as part of the employer branding content can position employer more attractive amongst young potential candidates. As it was quoted by DC13 (director):

“And, you know, when you look at younger people, a lot of them want to earn a lot of money, and they certainly can. But but not, not without knowing about it. They just don't know about it. They just don't know about the industry or what the opportunities are?”

Although these employers provide good and competitive financial benefits, yet they find it challenging to attract young candidates due to non-awareness about the organisation as an employer. Hence, participants suggested that including financial appeal in the positioning of the employer brand can work as an attractive feature.

Incidentally, the industry under study is also growing and is in flourishing phase (as mentioned in methodology section that the industry was declared as essential services during pandemic, COVID-19). There are very high prospects of huge financial growth for these organisations. As participants indicated, these profits would eventually be passed down to their employees. Hence, participants not only suggested to include current financial benefits available for the employees in the employer branding appeal, but there are also views to make candidates aware with future financial prospects that may be available to them with the financial growth of the organisations, as IB3 (director) commented:

“I don't I also don't think they are, because a lot of the tech companies they don't advertise salaries, they don't advertise the compensation, the rewards, you know, they don't realize that, you know, people at higher level in this industry earning more than, you know, stockbrokers and things like that. So, I don't think it gets that same level of attraction and interest. And I do think that there is a huge factor in that.”

Mentioning financial benefits in the employer branding content can place these organisations at par with good-paying employers (even from the other industries). While designing the financial package / pay structure some participants suggested to be consider different needs of different employees and be flexible. This flexibility is extended to the employees to pick and choose various benefits from the pool of benefits available within the organisation to suit their individual needs, as DC16 (HR business partner) cited an example:

“So, we offer things like improved maternity and paternity pay. And we look at ... we're trying to look at our cultures and stuff benefits that we offer bonuses and perks and things to try and attract the younger population.”

Making financial benefits flexible makes it even more attractive component, as candidates would have the option of designing their pay structure according to their individual needs. Similar to providing flexible working time, providing flexible financial benefits gives freedom to employees to choose the benefits that suit their individual circumstances. This added financial flexibility presents organisation as an attractive place to work for, as quoted by DC18 (global talent acquisition manager):

“...we have a very flexible benefits package because we accept that, you know, people are very different places in their life. So child care support for someone is more important than pension payments for another person. So, we create your ... your pot money can be used in many different ways if you don't want that you can have that. So again, a very, very flexible benefits package as well.”

Taking a more inclusive approach towards sharing financial benefits of the organisation with employees, some participants suggested to provide more frequent bonuses, making employees share-holders and offering long-term incentive plans, example cited by DC15 (director):

“And we have a very, very competitive remuneration scheme and bonus scheme, which is paid half yearly. We're moving to quarterly bonuses as well. And we also have a long - term incentive plan, which allows us to pay out profit related bonuses to long-term, long-term holders of shares. And for people like I ... there is a senior Eltek program which ... which takes a certain percentage of the value of the business and pays it to us. So, the compensation package is also very good. It's market leading.”

This approach makes employees feel valuable and brings a sense of ownership towards the employer. Potential candidates may also find it attractive to work at a place where they are considered as part of the organisation even while distributing profits.

There were also concerns expressed by participants where they realize that their organisations have not been able to pay competitive salaries and it may be a deterrent in attracting younger people. According to these participants, competitive financial benefits are a major attraction for younger potential candidates. Not being able to present these benefits may present them as less attractive employer. Concern expressed by DC10 (operations director):

“As a youngster, the key is to pile in as much money as you can before getting a long-term career. I don't know but certainly looking across the industry that I don't think that we offer the same salary as other organizations. So, we have a different problem.”

In this scenario, providing competitive salaries and other financial benefits can provide a competitive advantage to the organisation as an employer. However, there was one contradictory view, where the participant suggested that financial benefits are used by those organisations that do not have any other attractive features / competitive advantage and use money as an alternative to attract candidates by offering to pay huge money. As DC19 (managing director) mentioned:

“The other thing that we see in the market is that those who can't become an attractive brand, tend to try and use money as a lever ... so they attract talent just by paying, you know, big, big money rather than ... which I think is a short term and not sustainable.”

The above view suggests that offering money to candidates is not a sustainable approach in presenting itself as an attractive employer. Financial benefits can work as a complementary

and short-term attraction, however, to attract employees and to retain them for long-term organisations need to develop other attractive features too. An overall picture suggests that including competitive financial benefits in the employer branding content presents organisation as an attractive place to work, especially amongst the young potential candidates.

5.4 Summary

The integrating discussion of participants views suggests that organisations need to develop an employer branding content which suits the needs and expectation of their target audiences. To design such employer branding content both, symbolic and instrumental attributes play an important role. Neither of these attributes can be ignored while designing the employer branding content using HR practices of the organisation, as different candidates may have different expectations from their potential employer. Moreover, these attributes appear to be closely intertwined and cannot be treated as separate organisational attributes. Participants also suggest using these symbolic and instrumental attributes wisely in a way that one attribute can enhance the effectiveness of the other and vice versa. At the same time, these attributes are also utilised to mitigate any negative image the organisation may (unintentionally) have in the employment market. Apparently, an employer brand content thus designed can appeal to a diverse range of candidates from various demographics, backgrounds, career stage and presents organisation more attractive as an employer.

Chapter 6 Findings of the study – II

6.1 Introduction - HR practices for creating social presence of the employer

This is the second overarching theme that emerged from thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews data. This theme discusses about participants' views of creating and maintaining social presence of the organisation (highlighted section in the Figure 6.1). The objective of this non-targeted attempt is to be always visible in the eyes of those candidates who are actively seeking new job-opportunities or who are present in the employment market and may be looking for new job opportunity, as discussed in the following sections. By maintaining a social presence via several communication platforms, organisations endeavour to create an ongoing presence in the mind of potential candidates.

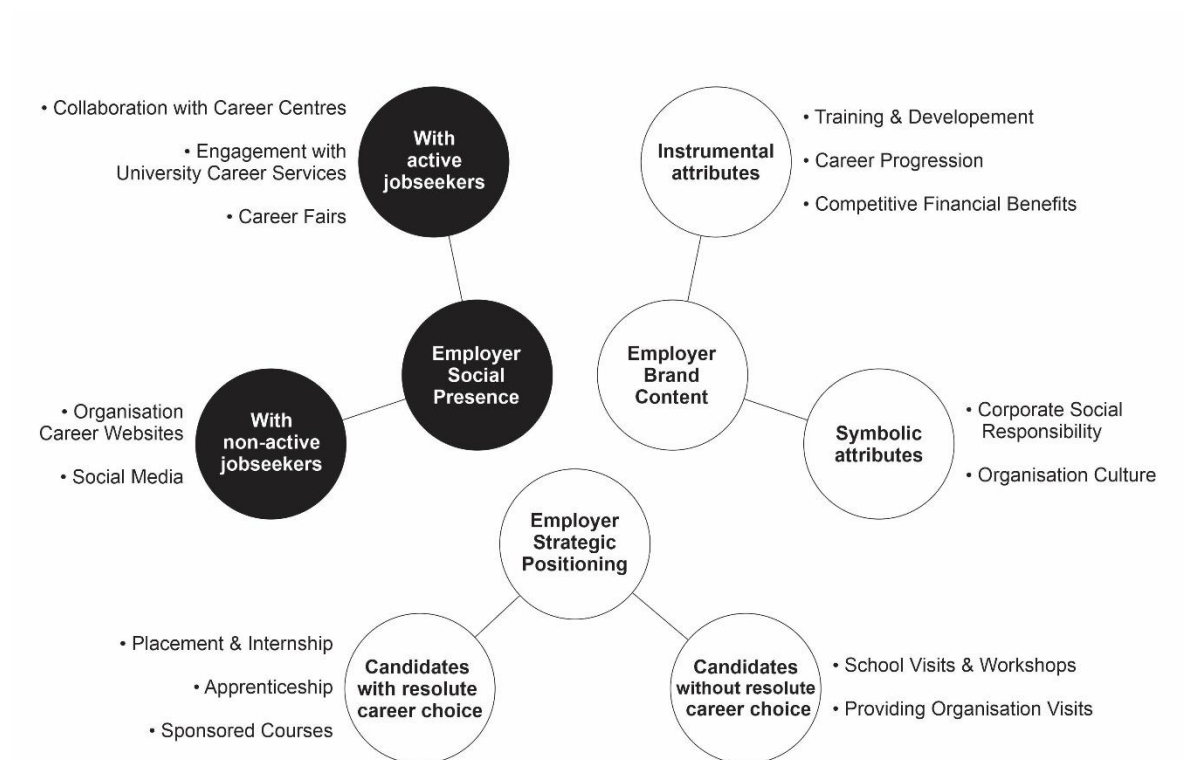


Figure 6.1 Employer social presence

6.2 Social presence amongst active jobseekers

Communication with potential candidates has emerged as a vital factor in the employer branding process. Participants shared their views about various HR practices employed in communicating with potential candidates, reaching out to them and disseminating information about the organisation as an employer. It emerged from the data analysis that these communication methods were selected based upon the organisation's need to either

communicate with active jobseekers to fill an ongoing vacancy or simply being visible in the employment market. As quoted by IB2 (director):

“Obviously we have a sort of ... we are trying to address the short, and long-term skill shortages. So, my main thing is to present the industry as a career destination of choice. So, we do that in publications. And so those kinds of things...”

Communication methods focused on active jobseekers are apparently helpful in reaching out to candidates to fulfil near future work-force requirement whereas being visible and keeping constant touch with potential candidates creates a sustainable supply of talent pool. However, all the efforts have been focused towards communicating the employer image created through various HR practices as discussed in previous chapter (Chapter 5). Detailed findings on role of creating social presence in the employer branding process to strategically attract different demographics is discussed next.

6.2.1 Career fairs

Participants have stressed upon the need to reach closer to the potential candidates who are actively seeking job opportunities. Being visible among such candidates is an important and effective method in the process of employer branding. This social presence is helpful in immediate interaction with the candidates that are actively looking for work. By presenting the organisation as an attractive potential employer to such candidates, organisations attempt to attract and fulfil immediate work-force requirement.

To attract potential candidates to fulfil near future work-force requirement of the organisation, participants have adopted communication methods and sources where they can reach out to potential candidates who are actively looking for work. To reach out to such candidates, participants prefer to design and drive HR efforts in such a way that employer branding efforts can attract those active jobseekers. For participants in this study, such target audience are recent graduates, visitors to the career fairs, candidates looking for job-change, and ex-employees from the industries negatively impacted due to recent pandemic.

Participants have suggested to utilize various communication platforms to reach out and being visible among active jobseekers. For example, doing career stands at various trade events where they could attract candidates who may belong to similar background. As DC12 (HR business partner) stated:

“... and I'd like to do like a careers roadshow, I don't know if you have heard of them. So, where we would go to the career centres, and have ... have a XXXX stand, that's where we can advertise what we do.”

Such close communication with potential candidates is preferred for immediate attraction and recruitment, and dissemination of information regarding organisation as an employer.

Participants have also suggested attending career fairs (at universities and trade fairs) to reach out to fresh graduates and candidates actively looking for work and enter organisations as early career candidates. To attract such candidates, organisations tend to present various career opportunities, and competitive financial benefits offered by the organisation. All these attractions combined together work as the employer branding content (as discussed in Chapter 5) for participants and assists in the creating a social presence during the employer branding process. As C6 (director) shared:

“I think doing things like career fairs and giving ... showing ... showing students that there's ... there are careers within this industry that fit with their skills. And there's a huge gap there. And there's lots of opportunities where it's going to be less competitive than some of the other industries that people are flocking towards.”

Communication with active jobseekers also gives an opportunity for organisations to be able to influence their decision-making process at early stages. This platform not only brings the employer closer to candidates, it also provides an opportunity for the employer to communicate the organisational values to the recipients, which is an important attribute of employer branding content, as already been discussed in Chapter 5.

Career fairs and graduate days at universities provide a platform for organisations to come closer to the target audience and communicate the employer brand personally. It also provides potential candidates an opportunity to seek information, make enquiries about the organisational culture and make an assessment of their fit with the organisation. Such communication extends an opportunity for target audience to engage with the potential employer. The closer communication with prospective candidates helps the organisation to initiate a conversation with them regarding their career choices or career path. This conversation also provides a platform for organisation to promote their advocacy as a prospective employer using their current employees as goodwill ambassadors. As DC9 (HR director) shared:

“... those (career fairs) sorts of things so that we actually get our brands known throughout those people and, you know, and then they get to meet us, know a bit more

about us and then hopefully might want to sort of engage with us when they're looking for a career”

Hence, closer communication with active jobseekers serves two-fold purpose for the organisations – first, it explicitly encourages potential candidates to apply for vacancies in the organisation, and second it provides an opportunity to potential candidates to get associated with the organisation in some form and materialise these connections later on. Thus, it provides a platform to target audience to engage with the employer brand through live communication and continue the relationship, in case they wish so.

Participants also believe that career fairs are a more appropriate place to reach out to active jobseekers for immediate attraction, since audience at such places are the people who would be actively engaged in the conversation as there is a willingness. Willingness of participants to interact works positively in the favour of organisations presenting and promoting themselves as a potential employer at these events. As DC4 (managing director) shared:

“... we advertise that through the various forums and conventions we sit on, you know, which includes Cambridgeshire chamber of commerce, as a guide. So, we talk about all these to an audience that wants to listen.”

Accordingly, attending these career fairs and various other recruitment forums enhances the visibility of the organisations among active jobseekers and communicate the employer branding content. Participant also find these platforms an opportunity to educate audience about the less known industry that they are a part of (data centre industry is not very well known among jobseekers). As DC19 (managing director) quoted:

“Data centre industry is not well known to ... to people and, you know, we go into universities a lot, you know, we were trying to do the various careers fest to attract people in ...”

Participation in career fairs brings visibility to the organisation, especially in this case where the industry is less known in the employment market. Communication with active jobseekers at these fairs facilitates a platform to audience for their queries to be answered about the industry, its operations, and decide if they want to be a part of it. As DC3 (managing director) mentioned:

“We attended a number of technology events, that's we call them that locally, and around the region of Cambridge or in London. And they generally advertise it to their graduates of what the event is about, and the company's going to be there. We then advertise that on social media and various other platforms to say we are at these

events. And if they want to come and talk about a career in digital infrastructure, we are part of it.”

Participants have also advised to use current employees as advocate of their employer brand to communicate the employer brand more effectively at these career fairs and trade events. Involving current employees in the branding efforts is another important strategic tool because current employees who advocate the employer brand are the ones who identify themselves with the organisational culture and values. Hence, employee advocacy is a good source to communicate the attractive features of the employer brand such as organisation culture and values, career progression opportunities to the prospective candidates through employer branding process. Various HR practices (as discussed in Chapter 5) have been strategically utilised by these participants to create employee ambassadors for the organisations. Communicating employer brand via these employee ambassadors presents employer brand more authentically. It also reflects and verifies consistency in organisations' message about themselves disseminated through various communication sources. As C7 (managing director) stated:

‘we can ... the best message we spread that is we take people from the company ... the organisation... when we go out. So, if we go to a careers fair, and we take some of the graduates that we've currently got, and we get them to tell people (to talk about our culture). There is ... there's no point I, consider, as the leader of the business, and tell people that.’

Hence, employer branding supported through lived experiences (employee ambassadors) strengthens the organisations employer branding efforts by presenting it an authentic place to work.

Strategically choosing the communication platform further impacts the image of the organisation as an employer of choice. Apart from going to career fairs and industry trade events, participants have suggested to take part in special purpose events. This brings visibility to the organisation among the candidates who are willing to contribute to a purpose while being employed. As DC18 (global talent acquisition manager) shared:

“... and what we're doing on the back of that is looking again the last few months, we started advertising women in technology. We built up ... create pages on the diversity groups. We've sponsored events. We've done promotional activity on International Women's Day; we did a countdown to International Women's Day and for a whole week showcasing female talent within data centres.”

Sponsoring or attending these events promotes the organisation as a contributor to such cause for example, an organisation supporting diversity and inclusion or sustainability. For a more impactful demonstration, participants also suggested to take their employees at these events as ambassadors to gain employee advocacy. As DC17 (chief operating officer) suggested to have female speakers from their organisation talk at these events:

“...and that is an opportunity where we bring in speakers to talk about their journey. Then, how they ... yeah ... for example, female speakers about what they've done with their journey ... with their ... what challenges and obstacles they face and how they've overcome them.”

While most of the participants have only mentioned about traditional methods of career fairs. There are participants who have also explored the feasibility of virtual fairs, that have been helpful in the difficult and challenging times, such as current pandemic. The virtual methods are also helpful in extending the range of such programs by reaching out to those candidates who may feel disadvantaged for reasons such as their location of residence or study. As DC9 (HR director) mentioned:

“... just as the COVID pandemic, how much it's affected the, the younger generations. And I guess that was a lot of the topic, for example, that we did the host in Ireland webinar on....”

Covid had a huge impact on branding initiatives of organisations and reaching out to candidates. In contrast to traditional ways where individual interaction could make a difference, organisations are now also looking at other options such as webinar, online events to achieve proximity with potential candidates.

6.2.2 Engagement with university career services

Attending graduate days and engaging with career services at universities is a viable approach, as students attending these events are certainly going to look for work and may want to start working soon. This platform provides an opportunity for the organisations to communicate the employer brand to these potential candidates, as suggested by DC8 (HR business partner):

“There was also I think there was like a special kind of graduate day where graduates ... you know who had shown interest were invited to come to this careers day at XXXXX. So then, they could meet different people of the senior leadership team, as well...”

Interaction with potential candidates at this stage is not only a way to present organisation as a potential employer. Participants also see it as an opportunity to develop continued relationship with the candidates and encourage them to get further involved with the organisation. Interacting candidates at these events are invited to visit the representing organisation for further involvement.

Participants also seem to utilise the opportunities of communicating with active jobseekers to filter out the candidates at an early stage that would fit better in their organisation. To achieve this, participants have employed skills and behaviour assessments to carry out career mapping. Collaboration with career centres at universities plays an important role in carrying out such assessments. A DC9 (HR director) suggested:

“... but sometimes, we also partner with universities, where we're supporting them with sort of career coaching, we might use some of our behavioural assessments that we use for recruiting people within data centres”

Thus, the communication platform is strategically utilised to filter out the candidates and make communication process more effective. Further communication is carried out with the candidates who match positively with organisation's needs assessment ensuring a fruitful partnership going forward.

Engagement with universities in various forms is widely popular with the participants to reach out to potential candidates and to fulfil their varied work-force requirements. This engagement results in enhancing visibility of the organisation by presenting different career choices, career progression opportunities, skills enhancement programs and growth prospects available within the organisation. As DC1 (operations director) explained how their university engagement was designed to augment their presence among the potential candidates:

“... It's like now, we need engineers ... [so] we spoke to the, the University again about how to ... kind of target people ... really in mechanical engineering and computer science. So, we went in and spoke to, gave a short presentation about what we're doing to ... students in engineering ... [what] we did then was or what I did was to advertise a series of insight days, or insight session, should I say, which was run, which ran through February last year, so we run them on Wednesday afternoon. When you know, students have some time on timetable and we got ... we just got loads of people in.”

While communication at career centres, career fairs and other trade events may bring visibility among active jobseekers who may be in their early career or experienced, both.

Engagement with universities in form of conducting insight sessions, attending SIG groups with universities and educational institutes is mainly targeted at bring visibility among students recently graduated or to be graduated soon. These engagements result in a continued partnership with potential candidates where participants have guided them through various career and growth opportunities available within the organisation along with giving insight about organisation's culture and other financial benefits. These efforts have been helpful in establishing the organisation as an attractive place to work. DC16 (HR business partner) shared the benefits of universities partnerships and accelerating their employer branding efforts through this source:

“They (university partnerships) do work for us really. So, we have links with different universities, XXXX is my strongest link, really, because our CEO went to XXXX University. So, he's got close contacts there. And as I said, a group of XXXX which I can't name University right now, because there's quite a few of them. But it's, we meet with one of their representatives...”

Participants have suggested to take advantage of university partnerships via institutional links that have been developed over a period of time through various collaborative efforts. For example, alumni of the universities could be a valuable source in communicating the employer brand, since they represent themselves as the brand ambassadors for their organisations. This results in reinforcing the career opportunities presented as part of the employer branding content and organisation's communication is seen as more authentic. Positive results gained through engagements with universities have motivated participants to intensify their efforts in that direction and enhance their relationship in different forms. DC2 (HR director) suggested that university partnerships have been a great source in attracting young people as prospective candidates for their organisation:

“... so, we're taking that option as well, in terms of, you know, making sure that we can get our name out there and try and raise our employer brand in that area. And, and in terms of, for about young people perspective, as well, I guess you're asking, it would be about try to enhance the relationships at universities and colleges. So that's something that we'll be moving moving forward to do more of next year.”

Social presence created through such employer branding efforts is a product of prolonged relationship with educational institutes, organisations also attempt to transfer their values and distinctive employer image onto the potential candidates through different initiatives. Participants have attempted various communication methods to attract women in the organisation and present the organisation as a “diversity and inclusion friendly” place.

Attempts such as - *presenting women employee ambassadors to share their career journey, STEM women engineering ambassadors speaking to graduates, membership of a network that empowers and encourages women, running a diversity and inclusion committee with sourcing groups in universities, running STEM graduate training courses especially for females.*

Hence, participants have attempted to intertwine the communication efforts with the employer branding content to communicate the organisation's attractive features as an employer. In some instances, these partnerships have been more fruitful than running traditional job-adverts to fulfil ongoing vacancies in the organisation. DC18 (global talent acquisition manager) shared the experience of unsuccessful attempt of attracting suitable candidate by posting a job-advert, while being able to attract candidates through university partnership:

"...there were the adverts and obviously, not successful. So, we've been engaging with the different universities, it's a little bit different. So, you have to write to the professors and write individually to each of the universities and obviously, we've COVID it's slowed down our ability to physically go to some of these places and engage. But again, it's a big ... it's a big issue."

Although the long-term partnerships with universities have been fruitful in attracting potential candidates to the organisation, it requires a more strategic approach to produce effective results. To make these university partnerships more effective, participants have suggested to strategically link academic strength of the potential candidates with the career choices available within their organisation. As IB2 (director) mentioned:

"... but in terms of actually linking, you know, path finding how you link the career choices available within a sector to the aspirations and academic strengths of individuals."

Strategically linking the career choices with academic strength of the candidates results in employer branding communication that is more focused, and results driven. Moreover, it essentially helps organisations to meet their various talent requirements at different stages in the business. A university partnership that links with career options available in the organisation, can attract potential candidates to fill-in entry level roles, whereas career path and growth opportunities presented to the candidates create a supply of talent pool.

Participants have further suggested to make these partnerships more effective by offering two-way communication during these university partnerships and bringing the potential

candidates closer to the organisation. Several methods have been implemented to enable two-way communication. Guest lectures by industry experts is seen as a feasible method by many participants to enable closer communication with potential candidates. As C6 (director) stated:

“... doing things like requesting on today's lectures from, from these people, from leaders within the industry to go in there, giving ... giving the presentation on what they do, what they do within the industry, the effect it has on ... on the industry, and then having questions...”

Communication at these platforms by industry experts, addressing several queries, sharing their own career journey with potential candidates also earns employee advocacy and presents organisation as a more reliable place for career growth. The two-way communication is not only limited to delivering guest lectures, but participants have also suggested to conduct career coaching sessions, providing behavioural assessments to university students by industry experts, developing research and development partnerships with universities, to develop reciprocal communication. This provides an opportunity for deeper interaction and more meaningful conversation with the potential candidates about the organisation as a potential employer. Potential candidates also have more trust and feel more confident about joining such organisations, as summarised by DC13 (director):

“... and then you ... been in touch with ... being ... keeping in touch with people throughout their education, then, I think, kind of constantly within the viewpoint of people, there's more likely that they will gear towards that career. But yeah, in terms of ... the other thing visibility is the key thing.”

Adopting various communication method and being flexible in utilising these communication methods in-line with the organisation's requirement makes the partnership with universities more effective and fruitful.

6.2.3 Collaboration with career centres

While career fairs or engaging with educational institutions provide an opportunity to communicate with students, collaborating with other career guidance platforms also extends their reach further to the professionals who may be seeking new opportunities in other industries to advance their career. As DC11 (talent branding manager) shared:

“We have a very strong relationship with the military. And so, we go for a lot of military events, we have a military award for being really supportive of ex-servicemen. And so, a lot of the people that come to us from outside datacentres come from the military. So, we are also building one with the athletes. I can't remember

what it's called. It's called athletes transitional ... athlete transitional program, I think for ex athletes, they often also have a lot of transferable skills."

These initiatives bring visibility about the organisation as a prospective employer among candidates from other industries and provide an opportunity to connect with wider audience. However, these candidates have to be brought into the organisation using a special career transition program that promotes the organisation as a place of several career opportunities.

While ongoing pandemic has negatively impacted utilising traditional employer branding communication platforms, it has also created opportunities to extend branding initiatives to potential candidates who might be looking for new job opportunity as a result of pandemic. To attract such candidates, participants have adjusted their communication strategies and presented career transition opportunities to potential candidates explaining how their professional skills could, gained from previous industry experience, could be utilised in the new opportunities available in a different industry. As DC7 (Sr. manager - talent acquisition) stated:

"So, within the last six months, we've started to connect into the career transition Partnership, which is the main resettlement program in the UK for men and women coming out of the armed services."

Such communication is helpful in raising candidates' confidence in the organisation and make career transitions process smooth.

As suggested above, the key idea of communicating the employer brand is to be constantly in touch with the potential candidates via various communication methods and increase the visibility of the organisation amongst potential candidates through several platforms. Participants have suggested to conduct open days at their organisation where potential candidates were invited to visit the organisation and were offered an opportunity to understand the relevance and infrastructure of the business, make queries about various benefits provided by the organisation, talk to current employees for a realistic understanding. As C4 (managing director) stated:

"No doubt, my sales and marketing guy will contact all of the local colleges. And perhaps we'll have open days where students can come and see what working data centre looks like ... the series of kind of short introductions on the skill sets..."

During these interventions, organisations put efforts to ensure maximum utilization of the opportunity to interact with potential candidates. All these communication efforts are focused at disseminating information about the organisation as well as provide opportunities to

potential candidates to make queries, enabling them to make an informed decision and at the same time present organisation as a potential attractive employer. These communication efforts are focused on creating and maintaining social presence of the organisation as a potential employer by attempting to constantly interact with potential candidates. Participants also suggested to make more concerted efforts at industry level to raise awareness about the industry overall as a potential place for work. Reaching out to candidates and creating a social presence through various communication channels has a significant role in employer branding process, making the process more interactive and effective.

Overall, participants have suggested to strategically select communication channels to create a social presence amongst the candidates who are actively seeking job-opportunities. Attending career fairs, attending and sponsoring special events, efficiently using event speakers and employee ambassadors, designing and presenting career transition programs; all these attempts have helped participants to promote themselves as an attractive employer to the candidates actively looking for employment opportunities.

6.3 Social presence amongst non-active jobseekers

Creating social presence amongst prospective candidates is an important step in the employer branding process. In this phase, both the audiences - who are not actively looking for new job opportunities are equally as important for participants as active jobseekers. While creating their social presence, organisations need to adopt different communication mediums (from the ones mentioned in the section above) to interact with non-active jobseekers.

6.3.1 Social - media

Several social media platforms provide organisations an opportunity to reach out to non-active jobseekers. Non-active jobseekers may not be actively looking for a prospective employer; however, communicating with them on social media may leave an image about the organisation as an attractive prospective employer. This is due to wider outreach of audience that social media platform provides for the organisations to share the employer branding content. Participants in this study are apparently using many social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn to engage with their audiences, which may turn into prospective candidates, as epitomised by DC1 (operations director):

“LinkedIn, Twitter, you know, we ... not Instagram. You know, we've got a YouTube channel as well. I think the thing that's made a difference really kind of raising awareness of what we were doing.”

Since posting various organisational content on various forms of social media channels brings overall awareness about the organisation as an employer, it helps organisations to reach out to the audience, that organisations may not be able to interact with individually. DC8 (HR business partner) stated to have even utilised the radio stations for the employer branding communication of the organisation.

"[organisation name] is responsible for the recruitment there, you know, I got roughly around kind of 25 open jobs at the moment, whereas [organisation name] has maybe like 60. So, he's doing education or like advertising, like on radio stations, you know..."

Communicating through social media platforms helps participants to enhance the visibility of their organisation, particularly in this case where (data centre) industry is less known in the employment market. Various posts on social media platform facilitate signalling about the organisation's attractive features as an employer. Through capitalising on social media communication, organisations attempt to transfer the image of organisation by sharing employer branding content such as organisation culture and CSR activities (as discussed in Chapter 5), as explained by C3 (operations director):

"... and it's certainly something that we ... we sort of have a theme (sustainability) within a lot of our LinkedIn posts and things like that."

Participants employ these social communication platforms as an employer branding tool to share different employer branding content about their organisation on rather regular basis. These platforms enable an ongoing communication with the audience and allow raising employer brand awareness. Using social media platforms to share various organisational activities including current employees' views reflects their organisation's culture, as DC2 (HR director) explained:

"...it would be about taking that externally, and sharing that with the external market. I'm trying to raise our brand awareness at ... through our activity. We've got ...if you look at life at [organisation name], on Twitter, or, you know, life at [organisation name]... [...] So, it's about, you know, what our people think about working for us, what is important to them? Why are we a good place to work? It's all the cultural piece. So that is something we'll be absolutely driving more of, and try to drive that brand awareness."

Organisations use social media platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn to share their employer branding content as well as to gain employee advocacy in the process of employer branding. These social media platforms provide advantage over traditional mode of communication

such as websites. Circulating employer branding content through various social media posts, sharing employee's videos, their views about the employer, are the most commonly used methods by the participants. While communication through graphical representation demonstrates different aspects of an employee's life in the organisation, employee's voice shared through videos also provide even greater testimony about the organisation. As DC20 (vice president – HR) stated:

“...and so we now we now have a LinkedIn page where we're showing pictures, glass door where we're showing pictures of people having fun, you know, showing that, you know, there is, you know, there's a social aspect to work as well as, you know, the hard, hard work that we expect people there's a social element.”

Along with providing wider outreach, these employer branding contents reflect the organisation culture, which also enables potential candidates to be selective about an organisation that suits the most to their expectations about their potential employer. With active jobseekers, focus is largely on communicating career growth and advancing opportunities, communication with non-active jobseekers includes other organisational attributes such as diversity and inclusion, sustainability efforts. While communicating with non-active jobseekers, main focus is to reach as far and wide as possible, as DC18 (global talent acquisition manager) suggested:

“We share it on platforms like LinkedIn. We share on our websites and and it's about networking. And you'll be surprised that message ... the engagement of that conference, people share ... they were sharing posts on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn. And it's not just to their friends and family, whereas while they're not just XXXX employees. So, it certainly had a further reach. I think we did some tracking and we had something like 50,000 hits on some messages. Yes. I think that's combined on some of our LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram.”

Although, communication through social media platforms provides wider outreach to the organisations, it is less interactive as compared to the communication with active jobseekers. However, communication through social media has more updated content since social media platforms are updated regularly. The main purpose of communication through social media is to make the employer brand as perceptible as possible. As DC11 (talent branding manager) mentioned:

“... and then we do things like we do social advertising. So, we tap them into them Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, oh gosh we do loads, we do specific campaigns ... that we work with, we partner with, for example, and we partner with the Institute of Engineering and Technology, we've written articles for them, we advertise our jobs on

very niche job boards, it is just about getting that brand name out there at the moment.”

Organisations also invest in ensuring current employees’ involvement as well as keeping potential candidates informed about organisation’s initiatives by adopting various ways and not miss any opportunities to connect with them. Social media has been utilised by the organisations in the employer branding process as a platform to give employees a voice, which represents organisation as an open and transparent organisation where employees’ voice is given due consideration.

Social media has also been utilised in the employer branding communication, where employee leave feedback about the organisation as a working place. Promoting employees to share their employment experience on different forms of social media also facilitates employee voice, which sends out a message that the organisational culture allows and facilitates freedom to employees to raise their voice and the organisation is keen to hear and act upon these voices. Moreover, use of social media presents the employer brand as more authentic. It encourages greater participation of employees in the employer branding process by sharing employees’ voice on different social media platforms and social networking sites and earns employees’ advocacy at the same time.

While participants are themselves involved in promoting employer brand through social media (as they have claimed), they also believe in increasingly capitalising on involvement of employees and their social media network. Motivating employees to share their positive experience on social media is a helpful tool in the employer branding process. Some participants also believe in developing an internal social media platform where employees could communicate with each other on social platform and share their experiences, as explained by DC19 (managing director):

“We're always driving communication through the business of what we're doing. We use a lot of internal tools, you may have used or heard of a tool, Microsoft tool called Yammer, which is basically like electronic notice board, so that we encourage people to constantly share information amongst everyone about ... not just about work-related projects and stuff, but personal stuff. And you have been doing something like charity or whatever, so making sure that we know ... there's a constant communication.”

Promoting communication within the employees presents the organisation as a transparent workplace, winning trust of potential candidates considering the organisation as their potential employer. Participants agreed to use this platform as a medium to give their

employees a voice and create employee ambassadors for the organisation. They also find this platform useful to publish organisation's voice out and share their values, efforts and actions through this platform.

6.3.2 Organisation career website

Participants place a separate focus on developing a career website. Since there are different audience for these career web sites, the content of these web sites should be focused on those audience. While the audience for corporate websites are usually customers or clients, the career websites have potential candidates as their audience. Hence, articulating the employer branding content on the career websites that feeds into the information seeking requirement of the potential candidates supports the process of employer branding, as explained by C6 (director):

“I would say the branding of the company is geared towards clients rather than the employees and I think you need to separate those, because websites are very ... very client focused and not driven towards bringing ... bringing people on board and create pages can be updated and more use of social media, those kinds of standard key areas which ... which needs to be addressed if you think about creating your employer branding.”

While the corporate website of the organisation may have more information for its customers, and other stakeholders, career website mainly focus on publishing employer branding content that organisations may want to share with their prospective candidates. As DC20 (vice president – HR) stressed upon:

“...one thing that you would, you would hope that on your website, you know, I mean, obviously, sustainability, green energy and all those things are really, really important. But they're also important to customers. So, you know, you should make sure that your, your, you know, your website really sells those things. So, if you're, you know, if, if you're using renewable energy and 100% you know, data centers, then they should be things that you know, are highlighted on your, on your website anyway. But again, those things are important in attracting people they should ... they should be very prominent on your website.”

As suggested above, the attractive feature of the organisation need to be clearly highlighted to capture the attention of the prospective jobseekers. Theses information on career web sites reflects the organisation's culture for example the diversity of work force structure. As shared by DC16 (HR business partner):

“We try to make sure that there's plenty of photos of a wide range of our staff on the website so that we can see that there is that split of the workforce, so that we are very open to men, women, everything really.”

Along with displaying an overall organisational image, participants also promote publishing employees' testimonials on their career web sites. These endorsements from current employees on organisation's web site present it as more authentic place. As DC12 (HR business partner) suggested:

“... your employer page would, you'd have your overall brand, on your employee page ..., you would have testimonials, you'd have day in the life of, you would have pictures of people from the company that are doing different roles.”

There were participants that have expressed concern about their career websites not being updated content wise and visually appealing for their audience. Thus, their career websites have not been fully utilised in communicating the employer branding content. DC7 (Sr. manager - talent acquisition) shared:

“So, our ... our career site is now quite dated. I think there is general recognition that that does need a refresh at some point, the content is actually quite limited.”

Regularly updating the content on career website communicates current position of the organisation as an employer. Along with updating information about the organisation, websites also need to be updated according to the changing demographics of the target audience, as stated by DC18 (global talent acquisition manager):

“I think our website needs to be revamped, I think we can be better on that. I think we can be show ... showcase and case study more about talent from different backgrounds and different age demographics, and to show what it's like it. So that ...that's reinforcing for the future.”

While participants promote sharing employer branding content on career websites and social media platforms, they do not undermine the trusted employer branding gained through word of mouth. Word of mouth is the most authentic form of communication; however, its reach may be comparatively limited to other social media communication methods. As DC9 (HR director) explained:

“It's making sure that you know, if we've got, you know, teams of people that love working for us, enjoy what we're doing, you know, that they're also that that's a huge way in which we can promote our brands. And, and so it's just making sure that we've got a great employee experience that we are and, you know, our employees are

helping to spread the message as well, whether that's through their sort of family and friends' networks or whatever it might be."

Employee's networking may be only limited to friends and family, which may not be the targeted audience of organisation's employer branding needs. However, it is the most trusted form of employer branding as organisation's reviews from a family or friend group may be more reliable while recommending their employers. Participants utilise "word of mouth" employer branding as a way of reinforcing organisation culture, as the below statement suggests that it attracts similar minded people. As DC11 (talent branding manager) stated:

"...employee advocacy is a massive one for us. So, we are trying to get our current employees to refer people to us. We get them to share ... I think we've got various tools that we can help them share central posts about what it's like to work for us, because obviously that networks are going to have the kind of people that we might want to ... want to employ in the future. They ... the people that already work for us know the right people. So, we trying to tap into those networks as well."

According to the participants, their current employees are a right fit for the organisation culture and thus tapping into their current employees' network could help them in attracting the potential candidates suited to fit in the organisation culture. Utilising the current employees' social network to attract potential candidates can help reinforcing the organisation culture. Hence, word of mouth could produce better results when attracting best suited candidates for the organisation.

6.4 Summary

To summarise, participants have suggested to implement HR practices that may create and maintain social presence of the organisation in the employment market. While creating this presence, organisations use the employer branding content created through HR practices. This presence keeps organisation's employer image alive in the potential candidates' minds using different platforms and provides an opportunity to potential candidates to interact with their potential employer. The purpose of creating social presence is to keep the organisation's presence alive in the mind of both, active and non-active jobseekers. These potential candidates may have different expectations when they are looking for their potential employer. Hence, using differentiated employer branding content while communicating with these candidates through different communication channels can play an important role in the process of employer branding.

Chapter 7 Findings of the study – III

7. 1 Introduction - HR practices for strategic positioning of the employer brand

Positioning of the employer brand emerged as one of the most crucial as well as challenging step in the process of employer branding. Since all the recruiting organisations in this study are competing for the same and limited talent pool, positioning of the employer brand with the prospective candidates at the right time and through the right mode is crucially important for participants. As highlighted in Figure 7.1, strategic positioning of the employer brand is targeted at engaging with candidates who are at the initial stage of making their career choices. A step ahead of raising awareness about the organisation, positioning of the employer brand is a more focused and targeted approach where organisations invest in engaging with potential candidates at their education level and beyond. This engagement is an attempt to influence the candidates' decision about the selection of their potential employer, as discussed in the following sections. A well planned and executed employer brand positioning strategy clearly demonstrates what the organisation is looking for in the prospective candidates and what it has to offer against the prospective employment (by utilising well defined employer branding content and communication as discussed already in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 respectively). A well planned and executed employer brand positioning strategy also explains who could be the right fit in their organisation, resulting in attracting the right fit talent.

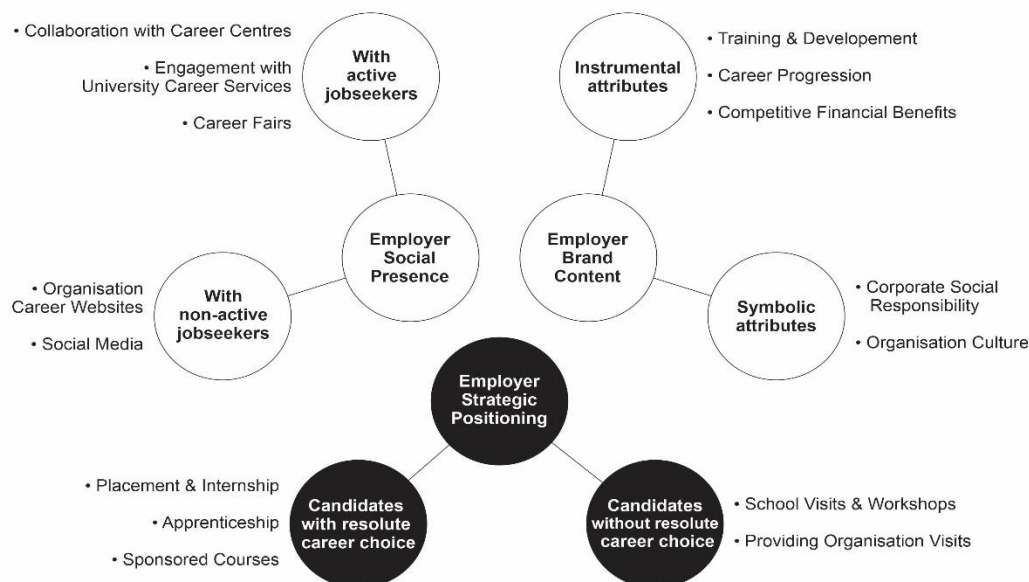


Figure 7.1 Employer strategic positioning

Strategic positioning of the employer brand at the education level, raising awareness about the employer brand through building the education i.e., by sponsored courses and university partnerships, reaching out to students even earlier – at school level. These are some measures that participants have suggested to start strengthening the roots of employer branding by reaching out to potential candidates well before they have started exploring career options or the potential employers. Reaching out to potential candidates at such early stage can produce better results at employer branding efforts since these target audiences are less exposed to the employment market and can be influenced about their career or potential employer choices. As DC2 (HR director) mentioned:

“Yeah, I think in terms of our employer brand, we just need to find the best ways of targeting the right people, obviously. I'm raising that awareness. So, some of that is going to be education at schools, universities, and colleges, you know, from a young people perspective.”

Although employer branding content and communication method play an important role in the employer branding process, participants suggested that when the employer brand is positioned in the mind of target audiences, it can make a significant impact on the overall employer branding process. Majority of the participants have similar views on the time when the target audiences is approached. One such comment by DC10 (operations director):

“That’s really early ... yeah. Because if you start attracting people that are school leavers, a lot of people have already made their choice what they want to do. If they're 16 - 17, they've already made a decision about what they want to do and where... what they wanted. So, we will look at it from ... a kind of ... how ... how do you attract youngsters?”

Since the employer branding efforts are targeted at both short-term and long-term organisational goals, strategic positioning of the employer brand through education level results in generating and attracting a sustainable talent pool while other communication methods (as discussed in Chapter 5) are answer to the short-term goals. However, while strategically positioning the employer brand and creating a sustainable talent pool, participants have suggested to keep promoting their organisation culture simultaneously, for example, by placing a special focus on girl students or visiting a girls’ school to promote various career options available with them to promote themselves as a diversity friendly employer. DC1 (operations director) shared such organisational efforts:

“And ... the visit this afternoon ... we are developing partnerships with the local university Training College to get a pipeline - they are all girls that are coming in as

well. So, you know, we want to be offering them work experience, we want to be offering them industrial placements... [...]. I've got activities organised around International Women's Day, to get girls in from schools to do a tour and do some activities and try to organise stuff around international data centre day at the end of March, we are a member of the women's Engineering Society.”

7.2 Candidates with resolute career choice

Positioning the organisation as a potential employer amongst the candidates who have just finished university or are in the process of finishing higher education, is the main focus for the participants in this study. According to the participants, candidates at this stage have largely decided what career they want to go into; however, they would now be looking for a prospective employer that fulfils their career and other relevant expectations. While interacting with these candidates, the main focus of the participants is to present the organisation as a prospective employer by presenting multiple career choices, growth options and other symbolic attributes (as discussed in Chapter 5). The reason this stage is important for participants, is due to the fact that these candidates are still unexposed or have very little exposure to various job attributes available with certain employers. Influencing candidates' decision at this stage and before other competing potential employers, can be instrumental in attracting best suited talent with a targeted approach. Participants have mentioned various stages where they can influence the decision of potential candidates.

7.2.1 Placements and Internships

Participants have suggested to offer these fresh candidates to interact with the organisation during placement and internship, and its representatives (such as guest lecturers) and experiencing the organisation's culture beforehand. This offer extends an opportunity to provide first-hand experience to the target audiences about various offerings of the organisation such as career options and career progression opportunities, workplace environment, work-life balance options, organisation's culture (as discussed in Chapter 5). This live interaction with organisation makes information consistency more rigorous and extends an opportunity for employer to provide the target audiences a positive organisational experience beforehand. The experience thus gained, presents organisation as a more authentic place to work for. Organisations may utilise this interaction as an opportunity to eliminate any negative perception about themselves since it is a platform inviting potential employees to have a first-hand experience of the organisation and raise queries, if there are any inconsistencies.

Influencing potential candidates' decision in this interaction period is a sustainable approach to employer branding process. This interaction may result in attracting the candidates and retaining them as long-term employees, which generates a positive word of mouth too. Eventually overall positioning of the organisation as an employer is improved. In combination with the general approach of spreading the word about the organisation as an employer through various communication mediums (as discussed in Chapter 6), participants have proposed to reach out to the concentrated places such as educational institutes and universities for a better targeted approach. In addition to offering ease of access to organisation information, these mediums extend the reach of the organisations to the candidates who may have been unaware of the organisation as a potential employer.

By presenting a clearer picture of the organisation, participants make effort to extend social reach of the organisation with better targeted approach and amongst those audiences who are certainly going to look for their potential employer in near future. An opportunity to know the organisation inside out by offering placements and internships, participants put effort to achieve two-fold objectives – a) getting closer to the target audiences and, b) offer them an opportunity to explore the organisation. This opportunity provided to the target audiences helps them to make an informed decision. It also facilitates better concentration of the organisation amongst potential candidates and the upcoming talent pool. Brief involvement of the candidates with the organisation also develops an emotional organisational connection through positive experience. While positioning at this stage, participants also want to utilise this opportunity to transfer the desired organisational image on to the interacting candidates. As DC9 (HR director) finds the employer brand positioning an opportunity to present the organisation as an inclusive employer:

“... we are an inclusive employer. We are ... also I think... we also getting a more of a diverse mix of through placements and internships, we are being able to attract more female talents, more ethnically diverse talents, etc. And also, diversity through people's, you know, social and economic backgrounds as well. And so not necessarily, you know, teams that have or people that have gone to university. And it actually gives us, you know, much, much greater, diverse mix of skills, backgrounds, experience, on a site where we can bring people in through different routes. The apprenticeship system is definitely helping with that”

As the above statement suggested, participants want to explore opportunity to present the employment attributes along with attractive symbolic attributes of the organisation and provide the candidates an opportunity to experience their potential employer beforehand. The

early interaction provides higher level of transparency for both the parties involved in this interaction.

Internship and placements offered by the organisations also encompasses an opportunity for the potential targeted candidates to further decide their career at the advanced roles in the organisation. Providing exposure not only with the organisation culture, but also to different career options available within that organisation may help the candidates to choose their career path too. Participants suggest helping candidates choose a career during placement period by providing exposure in different business functions, as quoted by C1 (director):

“..So if companies sort of, if students have a placement year, or a gap year or, you know, postgraduate, perhaps companies are, you know, consciously making the effort to engage with these people to offer them, you know, six months or 12 months, you know, access to projects and exposure to projects that they can then take back to their academics to finish off, or if they've just finished their studies, you know, there are placement opportunities for people to come in and have a very, very kind of generic career path. So they might work in, you know, three or four different departments within a business, you know, they might work in operations, they might work International, they might work in design, and for three or four months at a time, you know, to give early careers and emerging talent, that exposure to say, you know, you might not know what you want to do, but let's give you exposure for 12 months to four different departments, and then that might help them to make that decision.”

The enhanced engagement with the candidates during their brief interaction period in form of placement or internship presents an opportunity for the participants to present a stronger case of the organisation as a potential employer. Moreover, participants in this study, also suggest getting engaged with the potential employees in designing their career by providing them an opportunity to explore different business functions and guiding them to choose one that would suit their skills and future career aspirations.

Getting involved with the university students by offering placements and internships is seen as a strategic move by the participants to stay in their audiences' mind right from when they start making career choices to when they start looking for jobs. This strategic move places the organisation as a potential employer for the candidates by reaching out to them even before those potential candidates start reaching out to competitors. As DC4 (managing director) mentioned:

“You know, we have operational business. Now we do a lot, as already said, with universities where we see the potential of the next generation coming into that digital infrastructure world”.

While targeting at this segment of audiences, participants have identified skill set that they are looking for in the potential candidates. There is also a career development plan in place to offer to candidates who are going to take first step of their career through participant's organisation. At this stage, employee ambassadors who have grown and developed career within the organisation are very resourceful. Carefully designed employer branding content and strategic mix of communication methods (as discussed in previous Chapters 5 & 6) is of utmost important to be successful and get desired results at this stage. It is an opportunity to reinforce organisation's image and various attributes that were offered during the communication stage. DC5 (global talent acquisition manager) mentioned:

“but a lot of ... a lot of companies are not ... are not investing at the early stages. And I think that that's been a been a real key issue.”

As suggested by participants, offering placements and internships increase visibility of the organisation as a potential employer.

Overall, participants suggest offering and utilising placements and internships opportunity to bring potential candidates closer to the organisation and provide a platform to target audiences to have a first-hand experience of the organisation as an employer. This strengthens the positioning of the organisation as a potential employer amongst their target audiences.

7.2.2 Sponsored Courses

For a deeper engagement with the target audiences, participants have recommended sponsoring the relevant courses at university level. This has dual advantage for the organisation in their employer branding process. Sponsored courses bring an awareness about the industry in which the organisation operates, and it also prepares students with tailored courses for the industry before-hand. While the sponsored courses bring awareness about the organisation's operations, participants suggested to take advantage of delivering guest lectures to bring extra focus on the particular organisation and its functions. As DC20 (vice president – HR) suggested:

“And making sure that we're getting out there we partner with a lot of technology led universities. We also partner with some of our clients and the bigger known brands with universities. So, we're at the moment with, for example, partnering with the, the [university name] University in [location] with ... along with [organisation name], to prioritize those courses for ... for women that want to work in technology. And but we're ... we are ... we are ... one of the along with [organisation name], we are the

main sponsor of the particular course around data centres with the university, so that we can kind of showcase the industry along with their own brands. And then we work with particular partners within the industry as well”

Running sponsored courses in partnership with universities or other educational institutions prepares potential candidates with tailored courses. Sponsored courses are offered to the students where they want to specialise while studying about a certain industry. Participants have cited examples of other similar industries which have offered sponsored courses such as Automobile engineering, Aeronautics engineering. With these sponsored courses students can specialise in the specific industry according to specific needs of the organisations and get employed by the employers operating in this industry. It is seen as a gap in the employer branding initiative by the participating organisations and the industry overall, that lacks the aggressive and strategic attempt to reach out to university students for introducing themselves as potential employers. DC19 (managing director) compares the organisation’s employer branding initiatives with other industries:

“Getting involved in with universities in terms of how can you support core courses, they've got there... you know. If you are on mechanical, electrical engineering course in a university. What's your focus ... your focus is in going into automotive engineering or aviation engineering. You know... well ... therefore, you've got to get in as individuals and as organizations unless people know about the data centre industry.”

Sponsored courses are not only used by the participants to introduce themselves as an employer, but also to bring awareness about the industry they are operating in. Since the industry, the participating organisations are operating in, is very little known in the employment market; running specialised courses or specialised modules in collaboration with universities prepares the students for the industry right from the education level. As DC3 (managing director) mentioned:

“So yeah, we're looking to sponsor, we're definitely gonna sponsor what's going to happen very soon. We can take it further for a sponsorship to a formal training program that sits alongside the course they're on to develop workforces that is datacenter ready.”

Sponsoring courses at university level is an attempt to align students’ interest and learned skills with the career options available in the organisation. Participants have seen this as the most efficient way to attract talent and create an employer brand awareness. As commented by DC16 (HR business partner):

“And partner with colleges to include it in part of the syllabus. That's, again, what we do with some of the universities. As far as SAT comms are concerned is we ... we work with them to make sure that there ... there is relevant information in their courses, that links to us, I think that's probably the most ... the easiest way.”

Moreover, for the employer branding purpose, certain organisations operating within that industry have also offered scholarships for students. This effort attracts special focus on the organisation as an employer for two reasons – first, it attracts attention of the potential candidates and second, it places organisation as an employer that invests in their potential candidates’ learning and growth. C3 (operations director) stated:

“I mean, I think, really, the forward planning to develop talent to be useful for the market is something that really needs a bit of focus on so I think maybe there are ... there's a potential for universities perhaps to be lobbied to bring more mission critical engineering, and data center engineering into their courses, so that people have experience or relevant training prior to going into the labor market and obviously if that can be done with practical experience built into the course.”

For more concentrated employer brand positioning effort at university level, participants have also suggested to develop a partnership with students and involve them in research and development projects. This partnership can result in two-fold benefits – a) use the talent within the university and provide students a platform to share their ideas, b) students are attracted to such research focused organisations that may align with their future career interest. Early exposure through these collaborations provides an opportunity to get involved with organisation. DC3 (managing director) emphasised the use of knowledge partnership:

“So, XXX university, because its much more a practical based thing. So, we think that the tech colleges are may be a better place to go for the talent that we need. We will obviously be forwarded to university product development and electronic engineering department where we get a bunch of people.”

With these efforts to collaborate with university and get involved with students through various channels, the main purpose of the participants is to increase visibility, generate interest, and spread the word about the company as a potential employer and connect with potential candidates. As C6 (director) shared:

“I would reach out to ... to early, early stages and ... and be in kind of a part of people's education, I think. It would be that would be the key one. And either whether that's in formal, kind of classes or, or through other sponsored programs and things like that. I think, I think I think those kinds of things. And then you ... been in touch with ... being ... keeping in touch with people throughout their education, then, I think, kind of constantly within the viewpoint of people, there's more likely that they

will gear towards that career. But yeah, in terms of ... the other thing visibility is the key thing.”

While implementing these efforts, participants do have an awareness that not everyone interacted with them at university level would choose them as their potential employer, but this definitely would have a positive impact on the quantity and quality of talent pool attracted towards the organisation. It also results in better prepared candidates, since there is already an awareness about the business functions and the industry skills requirements. As DC10 (operations director) explained:

“So, if the education piece about what is a data centre, complexities of the data centres, let it be a book of data centres. Then once you start to educate about what a data centres is and the complexities of data centres, then you generate the interest and then you start the targeted page or recruitment process.”

Another medium, suggested by the participants, to create a distinctive employer identity among university students is through offering scholarship to students. In this effort, participants have looked at offering scholarships to deserving students to attract them towards the organisation. As DC19 (managing director) suggested:

“... from right across the industry, but they're doing things around scholarships, and trying to support scholarships for people to get to university or anything like that to, to be able to study things like IT, technology or or whatever in ... in a data centre industry”

This strategic investment in students' education creates an identity for the organisation. Eventually potential candidates gain knowledge about the organisation long before they are ready to look for their potential employers. The emotional bond, thus, created can also earn loyalty towards the employer and these candidates may want to earnestly contribute to their sponsoring organisation. As DC3 (managing director) pointed out:

“And we've just started a program with one of the local universities to say, what can we do in terms of investing people through a university program because of all their theoretical knowledge, and then bring them on out on job training program, which could be up to six months of all the skills, because it also helps with loyalty. You know ... you get good loyal people, if you've invested in their career, invested in their education. And that's really key. It's a good social responsibility. And then ultimately, we just get good talent for the business.”

Being invested with the university students and promoting their talent through various mediums is a strategic step towards positioning of the organisation as a prospective employer. From reaching out to the target audiences by sponsoring courses to staying involved till the

time they have graduated, the idea is to keep in constant touch with the target audiences, so that employers are always alive in their memory and can be placed at the forefront in the list of potential employers.

7.2.3 Apprenticeship

Moving onwards from being involved with the university students, participants have a keen interest in offering apprenticeship to the school-leaving students. IB1 (managing director) mentioned:

“So not just targeting universities, I think you're missing a huge talent pool by generally targeting degree educated people.”

The targeted approach of offering apprenticeship, is a strategic move by the organisation to reach out to the untapped talent which may not have reached the university level for various reasons. Participants have suggested to keep a broader perspective while inviting candidates for apprenticeship. This broadens the reach of the organisation to the candidates who may not have any knowledge about the organisation or the careers available within. Eventually, the broad perspective brings positive impact on the organisation image as an employer. As C6 (director) stated:

“...look at the colleges so people that go into electrical apprenticeships, for instance don't go to university, they have no desire to go to university, going forward to go to university. They have no desire to go to university, they can't afford to go to university, there is a huge variety of reasons people don't go and shouldn't go. I mean, I think they should be targeting the earlier stages, high school, colleges, [...] they should be targeting, getting onto an apprenticeship within either within data centre or, or taking people off college courses as ... as part of their course, as an apprentice or doing electrical skills, qualifications, those kinds of things.”

Offering apprenticeship is a strategic step taken towards bringing the targeted audiences into the employment by investing in their skills. By offering apprenticeship, organisations offer opportunity to provide them work experience, and at the same time increase awareness about the careers available within the organisation. Although there is no constraint on the candidates to stay in the organisation after completing apprenticeship; however, by presenting a clear and progressive career path, organisations can attract these candidates as employees and retain them eventually. As C5 (director) shared:

“And what you get is a push through of students. So, they will be coming on us for apprenticeship, we pay them a relatively decent wage for an apprenticeship. 26000

pounds a year. [...] and what they would get is a constant stream of students coming through that they can pick and select whether they want to keep them or not.”

Apprentice programs are more targeted approach as these apprentice trainees are being trained according to the requirements of the organisation. Hence, this investment by the organisation results in producing better prepared candidates who are ready to join as employees and start contributing towards their employer. As DC7 (Sr. manager - talent acquisition) mentioned:

“I think it's ... it's making sure that we're investing in those technical skills. Because I mean, some of the skills that we need particularly on site, you know ... here are actually core engineering skills, mechanical and electrical engineering. And we don't have enough supply of those skills within a lot of the ... the markets that we operate in. So, what should we be doing and actually what are some datacenter businesses doing, but we're not quite there yet. It's probably investing in technical training programs, apprenticeships, for example, I think has ... has to be the way forward.”

Apprenticeship is seen as a sustainable approach to employer branding process as organisations cultivate their own talent by investing and growing skills of their candidates and training them according to the particular organisation's requirements. As DC21 (partner & co-founder) expressed:

“I think individually, there's some companies sometimes trying to grow their own talent. So, there's company called XXXX, they provide a lot of the mechanical electrical engineers, you know, the running apprentice program apprenticeship programs.”

Cultivating the talent through apprenticeship is seen as a practice to generate better quality and quantity talent for the organisation. It is also targeted at training the candidates in specific skills needed by the organisation, hence after completing the training period, organisation has human resources tailored according to their specific needs. C3 (operations director) stated:

“I think we ... we as an industry need to think about cultivating that talent and specific job engineering through apprenticeships, I think as a business we ... I guess it ... it will be to do with trying to create more, more resource.”

Participants have viewed positioning of the employer brand as a sustainable effort towards employer branding process of the organisation. For these participants, it is a sustainable source of talent supply, which could also prove beneficial when there is a bigger requirement of talent to meet future talent requirements of the business such as in case of expanding the business. DC11 (talent branding manager) mentioned:

“... so, the apprenticeship program is something that we're just ... we're sort of future proofing. Because we know as we expand, we're going to need to tap into that talent pool.”

While creating the pipeline of the talent through apprenticeship, organisations adopt the strategy that aligns with their employer brand image created through their HR practices. For example, an organisation that is focused on “Diversity and Inclusion” creates partnership with schools where they can find right mix of candidates. As DC9 (HR director) shared:

“We are an inclusive employer. We are ... also I think... we also getting a more of a diverse mix of talent through apprentices and apprenticeships, we are being able to attract more female talents, more ethnically diverse talents, etc. And also, diversity through people's, you know, social and economic backgrounds as well. And so not necessarily, you know, teams that have or people that have gone to university. And it actually gives us, you know, much, much greater, diverse mix of skills, backgrounds, experience, on a site where we can bring people in through different routes. The apprenticeship system is definitely helping with that.”

Investing into apprenticeship is a comparatively lengthier process as there is gradual learning until the candidates are fully trained and developed to be absorbed in the business. Hence organisations may need to wait until they start seeing the results on their investment in apprenticeship. As C5 (director) stated:

“They do at school these days, they should be brought in on an apprenticeship, where the first year is about learning about what the fundamentals of the data centres are – in the first year of their apprenticeship. And then second year and third year should be about learning how to put the data centres together, operate it and run it, manage it etc.”

Hiring from apprenticeship feeds into the fresh talent requirement of organisation. However, it may not be suitable for the organisations or positions where organisation’s need more experienced and mature professionals for certain roles. As DC17 (chief operating officer) shared:

“... we do get from time to time, and companies that run or offer apprenticeship schemes, trying to contact us to say is that a route that we want to go down? And the problem for us is because we have this heavy focus on providing good levels of support, we do tend to find that there's, that's where ... that's where perhaps, someone out of ... out of school at 18, or whatever they've done, whether being an apprenticeship or the entry level or whatever. They're not going to have that maturity and widely knowledge to be able to feel confident having a conversation with a client.”

With this strategic positioning of the employer brand among targeted audiences, participants have emphasised upon the need to get closer to the targeted audiences and engage with them by investing in their skills. Target audiences' direct communication and engagement with the potential employer helps to get closer to the organisation. Cultivating long-term relationship with potential candidates can bring strategic advantage in employer brand positioning.

7.3 Candidates without resolute career choice

At this stage, participants' main objective of the employer branding efforts is to raise interest in the organisation, and the business that it is operating in. Their main focus is on aligning the organisation's business and its different activities with the target audiences' current knowledge and interest. Participants also pay attention to present the relevance of the industry to the target audiences and how does it play an important role in their present and future (if feasible). Communication with audiences at this stage is important for the participants as they want to position themselves in the target audiences mind even before they have started thinking about their career. Hence leaving an impression at this stage can significantly attract these audiences to the organisation. As DC18 (global talent acquisition manager) explained:

“You can do ... can drive diversity up. You can do more engagement with young talent, you know, attending schools to pick before people choosing their options about what they want to do and talk to them about a career in data centres. And, and this is how you would do it because I think if you try and engage people after they've left school or college or university, or joined apprenticeship, if you could get to them earlier to make them start thinking of this as a career choice.”

7.3.1 School visits and workshops

Visiting schools and conducting workshops with school students is seen as a step towards simply raising awareness about the organisation by the participants. The main purpose at this stage of interaction with their audiences is to create an understanding about the organisation, its business, and its larger relevance to them. As DC7 (Sr manager - Talent acquisition) mentioned:

“...go to local schools to try and kind of get people understanding more about data industry.”

Interaction with students at this level may branch into different results. These students may either go further into higher education at university or they may choose taking up an apprenticeship. In both the scenarios, raising an awareness about the industry can produce

positive results for the organisation as an employer. These students may either study further to get specialisation through sponsored courses or start apprenticeship with the organisation. As DC2 (HR director) stated:

“Yeah, I think in terms of our employer brand, we just need to find the best ways of targeting the right people, obviously. I'm raising that awareness. So, some of that is going to be education at schools and colleges, you know, from a young people perspective, or may choose to do an apprenticeship with us.”

Participants also suggest being continuously involved with students through their life at school via their different course works. This would bring more visibility about the organisation as an employer and generate interest towards it. It was suggested that being involved with students through their course books will aid to better place the relevance of the industry in context. As DC4 (managing director) explained:

“I think exposure to it would certainly help at the school ... at the school level. [...] and to explain something about data centre is not a single visit to ... to a store that's transpired about what data centres are, and all the support services there. It needs to be there... you know on a weekly basis ... and have a one-hour slot with students from let's say 13, 14 to 16. Explain data centre and see if they have an interest in doing it. Going there and just saying that a data centre is a big building with lots of computers in it for an hour, will not address an issue.”

Alongside using the coursework, majority of the participants have also suggested to present the relevance of the industry by showing how it is associated with them. These examples could be picked up from their daily activities and showing how it can have an impact on their daily lives. As DC21 (partner & co-founder) advised:

“You need to make it relatable. I think just talking about data center, doesn't really mean anything, but if you if you relate it to how it impacts them. You know, like when you're playing on an iPad, when you're watching TV on BBC iplay, then you sort of make that connection back to the data center. You know, when when when daddy's car is you know, using the SATNAV...”

Or as DC9 (HR director) shared:

“... way we explain it is to make it relevant to them. And so, you might do something like you take a picture of the group. And obviously, with their permission, you post it on Twitter, or Instagram, or whatever their preferred social media outlets is, and then it hits ... it hits their account, because you've tagged them, and then use that to explain what has happened to that info ... to that photo. And what's ... what I think ... what is it gone through ... through that data center within those two seconds, or whatever it was that it uploaded. And then that really intrigues people to think, ah,

okay, this is ... this is really cool, I want to be a part and then you can use that sort of lifestyle and that process of what happened there to explain the different aspects of a data centre.”

However, interaction with these younger audiences needs a customised approach. The communication tools to be used should be interesting and interactive to keep them interested throughout the interaction period. As DC3 (managing director) shared:

“So, if you take... if I take an augmented reality ... virtual reality products into a school and had 20, say, 14-year-old, 15-year-olds, I could put headsets onto them, and explain what digital infrastructure and data centres and cloud really mean, in augmented reality, I'd get more from that in an hour, that I would sit in there for hours and hours and hours preaching to them about coming into the digital infrastructure industry. They could see... they could see ... this is what it is, and something they understand.”

Engaging with audiences at this level may not start producing the results immediately. However, participants suggest that this may be very useful with a long-term perspective. Creating awareness at this level and generating interest in the business functions through various activities may place them in a better position as an employer. As DC6 (HR business partner) expressed:

“I think I mean interacting with school students at their early age, you know, that's, I know, it's a small step. And that's not going to change. It's not going to change overnight. But I think it's one way to ... to consider getting your brand out there.”

Participants advise that all other communication channels may bring immediate attraction. However, these channels won't help in attracting the talent by increasing awareness in youngsters and creating a sustainable talent supply. As C5 (director) stated:

“I'm very aggressive about the going into the schools part of that. I think that's the best opportunity for us to increase awareness of the industry. You know, putting adverts on TV won't help, putting articles on social media won't help. People aren't interested. I think you've got to get them at an early age, they are the building blocks of it. Generate interest...”

7.3.2 Providing organisation visits

Conducting visit for school students to the actual work site and showing them the infrastructure is another step towards raising awareness about the industry among the students at an early age. Although, taking this initiative is, sometimes, challenging, but participants are still keen on conducting such visits as this can produce very positive results in terms of generating awareness about the organisation. As DC12 (HR business partner) shared:

“Obviously, security ... security is a big concern in the data centre industry. But it's (school visits at site) definitely something that we would look at in the future.”

Arranging these visits is very difficult and needs a lot of logistics work to make these visits happen. But participants suggest that this is the most effective way to make the whole employer brand positioning process more interactive, interesting and effective. As IB2 (director) mentioned:

“How we to get to just pick one of those ... before we actually go out and look at a data centre and they say “what it is?” It takes a bit of effort to make it interesting. I mean, it's interesting because, you know, it is such an important environment and interaction interacting and make it work and make it function.”

As per participants, personally visiting and seeing the facility and the work environment could make it more interesting to the school students. It can generate more interest while making things simpler to understand as they can actually see the whole function and understand it in a more elaborate way. As DC9 (HR director) explained:

“A part of our role within the team is to provide that information, which is simple, easy to use. They can ... they can use it in very interactive, it's very engaging, and actually, you know, engages the people that they're talking to. I mean, obviously, we previously did take lots of students around our data centres. But that's all on hold at the moment. So, it's finding other ways which we can do that and bring it to life.”

The effectiveness of the site visits has been very positive for participants. In the pandemic time, it has not been feasible to conduct such site visits, hence now they need to be looking at other options such as virtual tours to the site as an alternative.

Participants have cited examples of places like museums where audiences of that age get enthused and it aroused interest in various things that they get to see. Hence, a visit to data centre can get the similar interest aroused and attract the younger generation as future potential candidates. As DC10 (operations director) cited:

“... get a couple of groups of school children around the exhibit of Data Centre World. Because if you will see how enthused, I mean it's happened on several occasions that I've been round, you know, museums and stuff. You see how enthuse children of that age get on. I don't know ... take the technology museum, for instance, they get really excited about 150-year-old steam engine.”

Providing personal experience can make a significant difference towards bringing awareness about the physical workspace where the whole infrastructure is based. This is largely relevant

to attracting the target audiences towards the actual site where the whole infrastructure for the participants' organisations is based. Participants suggest that this would bring awareness about the functions of the industry and give an insight about how it would be like to be in that physical work environment, and what kind of functions they may be required to work as an employee in that workspace. As DC14 (chief operating officer) explained:

“... what will probably help is kind of showing people you know ... showing people what data centres are, you know, because it's, it's a case of ... unless someone has actually seen one and, you know, asked a few questions about ... about one. How can they make up their mind as to whether that's the type of job they want ... [...] ... when it's a data centre, and it's, it's kind of a, you know, a bit of a black art because a lot of people will ... will kind of experience ... will not experience going in a data centre in their entire life? Where if you take ... you take some other professions, even ... even if you take a surgeon, you know ... people will know what that is because a lot of people have had surgery ... or know someone had a surgery.”

An understanding of the infrastructure, its functions and its relevance to their lives can make a significant difference towards bringing awareness about the organisation as an employer and by generating interest in target audiences. DC15 (director) suggested (in below quote) to maintain a long-term association with schools for continuous interaction with students and involve them in the whole development phase. This would provide them an understanding of the entire process that converts basic elements into the final product of business functions.

“... it might be a longer-term program of (school students) visiting the data centre through its construction through its operational life.”

For an extended association, DC16 (HR business partner) has proposed (in below quote) to provide very brief work experience to students as per their availability. This would get them understand the organisation, interact with the current employees and generate interest to work there in future.

“We've linked with ... with quite a few of the secondary schools. We also do work experiences, they can come onto site, we used to have five or six students at a time doing work experience per week. Together, so that is... that is what year 10 ... isn't it? So, 14-year-olds, we also worked with primary schools, getting them on site and making sure that they're ... they're interacting with us and understand what we do.”

Providing site visits to the potential candidates is an attempt to make them aware of the business infrastructure, its functions and make it interactive. These initiatives will generate interest amongst the audiences at an early age. A continuous interaction may generate positive results for the organisation in their employer branding initiatives.

7.4 Summary

An integrated view of the above discussion suggests that for an effective employer branding process, organisations need to direct their efforts in engaging with potential candidates. This engagement takes place either with students, who are yet to make their career choices or with candidates who have just finished their education and have not been exposed to vast employment market. Engaging with candidates at these stages, no doubt, requires investment in terms of time, planning and resources, however, it results in gaining effective results by creating a bond with candidates and earning their loyalty. Carefully designed employer branding content and communication strategies have an important contribution in positioning of the employer brand among such candidates. This long-term perspective on the employer brand can provide sustainable employer branding results and position the organisation as an attractive employer.

Chapter 8 Discussion of data findings

8.1 An overarching framework of the employer branding process

As set out in the introduction chapter, this study focuses on exploring the process of employer branding from the organisation's perspective and understands the use of HR practices in implementing an effective process of employer branding. To gain this understanding, this research applies signalling theory to explore how organisations can effectively initiate and undertake the process of employer branding by effectively utilising the HR practices. An interpretation of the findings leads to the proposed framework for the process of employer branding that encompasses employer branding content, communication of employer branding content and strategic positioning of the employer brand. Figure 8.1 provides a visual representation of the proposed framework.

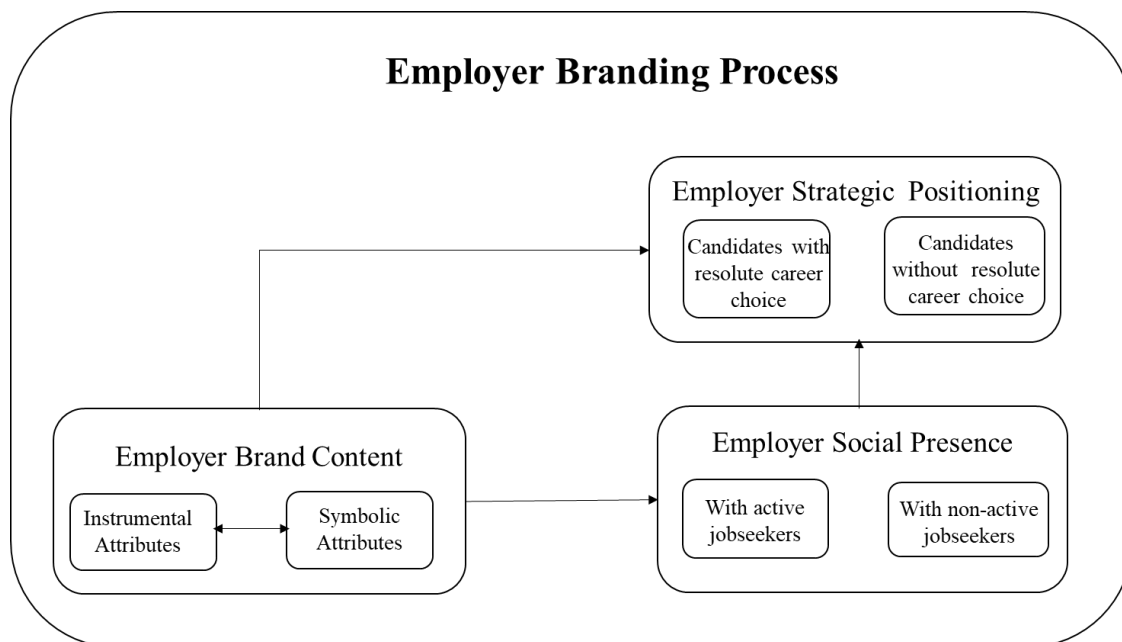


Figure 8.1 Employer branding process framework

The proposed framework (in Figure 8.1) extends the employer branding phenomenon to the process perspective while building on the existing employer branding literature. The findings of the current study suggest using the employer branding content and communication strategies from the existing employer branding knowledge and combining it with the strategic positioning of the employer brand to implement an effective employer branding process. The main findings of the study are listed below which will be discussed in detail in the following sections –

- I. There is a constant interaction between symbolic and instrumental attributes of the employer branding content. While implementing an effective employer branding process, organisations utilise this interaction to enhance the effectiveness of attributes and overall effectiveness of the employer branding content, consequently. Employer brand content is also aligned and designed to address the talent needs of the organisation. For example, to attract women candidates, organisations include diversity and inclusion in their employer branding content, or to attract younger generation, organisations include their sustainability efforts or flexible work practices in the employer branding content.
- II. Communication of the employer brand using various communication channels merely maintains a social presence of the employer brand among active and non-active job seekers. However, these communication channels are utilised by organisations in promoting two-way communication with the potential candidates and remove information asymmetry between the employer and potential candidates. With internal branding of the employer brand, organisations reinforce the brand promise and create employer brand ambassadors who are, subsequently, utilised in communicating the positive employer brand through various sources such as word of mouth and, feedback on social networking platforms.
- III. Employer brand positioning is an important and strategic step in the process of employer brand. Undoubtedly, positioning of the employer brand utilises the employer brand content and communication strategies. However, major focus in this phase is to proactively engage with potential candidates long before these candidates start looking for their potential employer and make decisions about their career choices. Engaging with potential candidates at this stage creates an opportunity for organisations to influence the decision of potential candidates about their career and potential employer choices.

8.2 Employer branding content in the employer branding process

Symbolic and instrumental attributes have found significant attention in the employer branding studies. Undoubtedly, findings in this study have also established substantial importance of these attributes in the employer branding process. These attributes together lay the foundation for employer branding content, which is a key contributor in the employer branding process (Kumari & Saini, 2018; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Van Hoye et al.,

2013). In addition to confirming the importance of symbolic and instrumental attributes in employer branding, this study suggests below key points-

8.2.1 Segmenting the employer branding content

Suggested HR practices in this study, that form the basis of employer branding content have mostly been focused on attracting the young generation. This indicated to use segmentation approach while designing the employer branding content according to the expectations of the target audiences. Keeping the target audiences in mind, while designing the employer branding content makes employer branding more targeted and efficient approach. This confirms to earlier findings that strategic employer branding approach should use segmentation to reach their heterogeneous audience (Davies et al., 2018; Moroko & Uncles, 2009). Different segments of audience will engage differently with the same employer brand attributes, hence, suiting their needs and expectation may produce more effective results.

A segmentation approach towards employer branding content also suggests segmenting the target audience into different segments such as demographics segments, psychographics segments, behaviouristic segments and geographic segments to customise the employer brand content accordingly (Walker, 2007). Since these values differ across organisations, employers can take advantage of this opportunity to adapt it to their audiences' needs. Adopting segmentation approach facilitates designing targeted employer branding content in a way that certain attributes are designed and offered to suit particular candidates' segment that an organisation is trying to communicate with. This also helps to choose the suitable communication method that differentiates the employment offering and emphasises its value (Moroko & Uncles, 2009). Targeted message for targeted audience closes the gap between candidates' expectations and organisations' offering and enables better engagement with the target audiences.

Segmentation approach, however, does not mean to lose consistency in employment offering between different segments. Inconsistency between different offerings may bring inconsistency in employer branding of the organisation. Hence, the solution is to keep the gross offerings consistent and provide flexibility in the net offerings. For example, as cited in findings, creating "pot money" allowances which employees can use according to their needs extends freedom to the employees to be selective about the benefits they want to withdraw from an organisation. In the above example the amount of the "pot money" is same for everyone with extended flexibility to use it according to their own preferences.

Academic evidence also suggests that candidates' expectations from their employers may change over time, for example impact of CSR and sustainability efforts on employer attractiveness (Greening & Turban, 2000; Pfister, 2020). There has been a shift in attractiveness attributes of the organisations and younger generation seems to be more aware towards the management of environmental issues, diversity and inclusion, and flexible work practices offered by their potential employer. Hence, findings from this study suggest that adapting to the potential candidates' concurrent expectations while designing the employer branding content can make the organisation more effective and appealing.

8.2.2 Intertwined relationship between symbolic and instrumental attributes

The offered instrumental attributes seem to be intertwined with each other in findings of this study. For example, training programs and career progression opportunities seem to be intertwined, as participants have used training programs to train employees helping them with career progression within the organisation, as well as bringing sustainability in human resource of the organisation. Through management training program organisations develop employees that fit to organisational future needs, and it would help employees in their career growth simultaneously. Hence, training programs feed into the career progression attribute of the organisation and position the organisation as an attractive employer.

Although a segmented approach provides flexibility in organisation's offering to suit the requirements of different segments of audiences, instrumental attributes are easily replicated across organisations, hence may not provide competitive advantage to an organisation on its own (Lievens, 2007; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). In such case, symbolic attributes provide a point of differentiation for the organisation rather than instrumental attributes (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Since instrumental attributes are more generalisable (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016), a combination with symbolic attributes can make the whole employment package unique and earn competitive advantage for the organisation as an employer. Employer branding content – instrumental attributes and symbolic attributes are defined separately in literature. Most of the studies around instrumental and symbolic attributes have been carried out in isolation of each other, indicating that these attributes work independent of each other. These attributes are seen as separate package of instrumental and symbolic benefits while offering to candidates (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016). However, participants in this study view these as intertwined attributes which have an influence on each other.

Findings of this study also suggest that instrumental attributes can be utilised strategically to enhance the appeal of symbolic attributes, which makes symbolic attributes more distinguished and appealing. Such differentiated combination offered by the organisation can earn a competitive advantage for the organisation against the competitors. For an effective employer branding implementation, both the attributes should be designed, aligned and implemented in coherence and consistency. Moreover, the audience of these signals also view the organisation from a holistic perspective (Collins & Stevens, 2002). For example, literature on employer branding suggests that organisation culture (symbolic attribute) is utilised by organisations to establish themselves as an attractive employer. However, the organisation culture cannot be built and work in isolation. Findings suggest that in the process of employer branding, organisations utilise the instrumental attributes of the employer branding to support the symbolic attributes such as training and development to reinforce the organisation culture. While utilising these attributes to present employer branding content, attention needs to be paid to utilise the complex association of these attributes which requires cognitive processing. The participants have suggested to create a package of employer branding content where symbolic and instrumental attributes are intertwined and reflect each other. It creates a succinct and clear image of organisation's offering reflecting organisation's employer image and, the offered attributes complement each other.

8.2.3 Achieving consistency through employer branding content

Another well researched characteristic of the employer brand is consistency, which emphasises on achieving consistency between corporate brand, consumer brand and employer brand of the organisation (Wilden et al., 2010). Cognitive processing of these attributes by the candidates implies that a strategic approach is needed towards aligning these attributes while creating the employer branding content. Consistency between symbolic and instrumental attributes and how these are communicated to the target audience has an impact on the organisation's attractiveness. For example, communicating "Diversity and Inclusion" attribute of an organisation with an all-male employee panel, is not a consistent messaging. There is a constant interaction between symbolic and instrumental attributes that are offered to the candidates (Kumari & Saini, 2018). Potential candidates compare and contrast between different symbolic and instrumental attributes offered by the organisation to select upon their potential employer. While processing the information, potential candidates also look for consistency between different attributes, since each attribute contains a message about the

organisation as an employer. Any inconsistency can damage the reputation of the organisation's image as a potential employer. Strategically applying this interaction between attributes also brings clarity in the communication of employer branding content since all the signals sent through various attributes are synchronised and complement each – other rather than conflicting with each other. A clearer employer brand has an influence on the potential candidates' attitude towards the organisation and their job choice decision, consequently attracting better potential candidates both in quantity and quality (Ghielen et al., 2020).

Cross corroboration of these attributes suggests that there is a functional link between these two attributes. Potential candidates and employees perceive and cognitively process these attributes as complementary attributes. Finding in this study confirm this relation and suggest using these attributes to complement each-other while conveying the employer brand content. Since these attributes also feed into communication and positioning phase, these attributes need to be carefully selected and developed depending on the image that an organisation intends to present to the potential candidates. For example, findings suggest that organisations make efforts to promote female employees to sign up for various training programs to promote diversity and inclusion.

Co-existence of symbolic and instrumental attributes presents organisation as an attractive workplace. While symbolic and instrumental attributes feed into each -other, presence of one attribute does not discount for the other. On the contrary, it might be perceived as a deviation in the reputation of organisation. Offering a bundle of multiple complementary practices designed with a segmented approach present the organisation as an attractive employer to potential candidates. In this study, to attract potential candidates, training and development, and career growth opportunities combined with CSR efforts focused on sustainability and green initiatives serve as a differentiated employer branding content to attract young generation.

8.2.4 Mitigating negative image through employer branding content

One of the tenets of Signalling theory is to “hold back” or mitigate negative signals (Connelly et al., 2010). Findings suggest that employer branding content can be designed not only to communicate positive attributes of the organisation, but also to mitigate any negative image about the organisation through well designed content. For example, mitigating the “harmful to environment image” of the organisation that produces lot of waste heat, employer branding content was designed by organisations to demonstrate how that waste heat is channelled into

heating public footpaths or swimming pools. Hence, strategically designing the content to clear any negative image present in the employment market makes the overall employer branding efforts more effective and attracts quality candidates who identify with organisation's values and efforts. It also reinforces positive signals of the organisations since there are no inconsistencies found in different signals sent out by the organisation through various attributes. Authentic demonstration of organisational values will make employer branding process more effective than mere advertising (Russell & Brannan, 2016).

It would, however, be critical to consider whether positive signals or mitigating negative signals are leading to greenwashing organisation's image as an employer. Employer branding literature is basically relying on the assumptions that any positive signals transmitted by the organisation in the employment market are true and genuine. It is assumed that any negative signals present in the employment market are a result of either informational asymmetry or unintentional negative signals picked up by the receiver. Nonetheless, it would be worthwhile to consider that is it always true or do organisations sometimes lean towards greenwashing in an attempt to present a positive employer image. For a sustainable attractive employer brand, organisations need to make genuine efforts to ensure that any positive signalling about the organisation's employer branding is actually implemented as organisational practice rather than mere "greenwashing". Organisations may intentionally or unintentionally apply green marketing strategies in order to gain competitive advantage in the employment market and present themselves a socially responsible organisation. Accurately reflecting organisation's efforts may reduce the likelihoods of green marketing of organisation as an employer.

8.3 Creating social presence through the employer branding process

A well-defined employer branding content lays the foundation of employer branding process. Another important decision to be taken is to choose the communication method to be adopted by the organisation to maintain its social presence. It is critical step in the employer branding process, depending on the audience the organisation is targeting to attract. A unique and strong employer brand comprises appealing employer branding content that are clearly communicated to external as well as internal audience. For example, promoting junior level employees to senior level through well designed management development programs not only presents the organisation as a growth friendly place to potential candidates, but it also develops employee ambassadors through internal branding, advocating the organisation as an attractive employer. Communication of the employer brand facilitates transmission of the employer brand message channelled effectively to reach the target audience (Barrow &

Mosley, 2011). Employer branding literature suggests communication problem as a main issue that needs to be managed efficiently to present employer brand effectively (Mölk & Auer, 2018). Communication of employer brand is an effective way for organisations to maintain their on-going social presence among potential candidates. However, a lack of integration among various communication methods in the process of employer branding leads to inefficient utilisation of communication sources. The findings of this study have uncovered various communication channels that participants have found effective and have suggested to use in communicating the employer brand promise to its target audience. Clear and unambiguous communication of employer branding content has a significant impact on the strength of employer brand (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Ghielen et al., 2020).

8.3.1 Selecting appropriate method of communication

The main objective of employer brand communication is to facilitate an understanding about the various attributes of the organisation's employer brand. As discussed above, consistency between instrumental and symbolic attributes is important for an effective employer branding content. Similarly, choosing an appropriate and coherent communication channel is important for an efficient communication (Chapman et al., 2005; Minchington, 2010; Terjesen et al., 2007). For example, to attract younger generation, electronic communication channel through social media would be more appropriate communication channel than advertising about employer brand in newspaper. Strategically selecting the employer branding platform helps the organisations in effectively communicating the employer brand content which results in higher level of engagement with target audience. Intertwined symbolic attributes within the communication methods such as approaching candidates through D&I (Diversity and inclusion) committee is an indication of organisation's inclination to bring change about D&I. Similarly, involving current employees in the communication process shows that organisation values employees' voice, and current employees' career journey is an advocacy that organisation is a promising place for career growth. Hence, participants suggest choosing communication methods that represent the organisation as an attractive place to work.

8.3.2 Segmented communication approach

Since the effective communication needs targeted approach, findings suggest getting as closer to the target audience as possible, providing them an opportunity to communicate with the organisation. However, communication methods need to be customised based upon organisation's requirement to target the segmented audience. Effective utilisation of communication resources can be strategically employed based on category of audiences –

active jobseekers or non-active jobseekers. Being present amongst active jobseekers brings visibility to the organisation as a potential employer. Whereas, advertising the employer brand on various platforms helps the organisation to maintain ongoing presence amongst non-active candidates who may be seeking job-opportunities in future.

Amongst active jobseekers, employer branding efforts need to be directed towards maintaining a social presence via different communication platforms such as visiting careers fairs or engaging with career services at university. Such efforts promote two-way communication extending potential candidates an opportunity to be able to communicate with their potential employer. This opportunity also facilitates elimination of any information asymmetry present in the employment market, as candidates have an opportunity to directly communicate with their potential employer. Such two-way communication also helps to achieve consistency in the employer branding message and potential candidates could be assured of accurate employment experience transmitted via different communication channels. It further provides potential candidates an opportunity to seek information, make enquiries about the organisation culture and make an assessment of their fit with the organisation (Russell & Brannan, 2016). Involving current employees as employer brand ambassadors (created through internal branding) makes communication more reliable. Being able to communicate with potential employer is also found to be more memorable compared to other forms of branding initiatives such as advertising (Sirianni, Bitner, Brown, & Mandel, 2013). Hence, being able to provide a preview of these attributes through employer branding communication can help substantially in targeting more suitable candidates to the organisation.

Non-active jobseekers are equally important target audience in employer branding process. Above discussed communication medium does not facilitate reaching out to candidates who are not yet actively seeking job-opportunities but would be active in near future. In such scenario, communication through social media channels or organisation's career websites can be helpful in employer branding process. Social media platforms also provide an opportunity for two-way communications, unlike other methods such as career-websites where the information flow is mostly one-way. Providing further information, if sought by potential candidates earns more favourable attitude towards the employer brand (Sook Kwon, Kim, Sung, & Yun Yoo, 2014). Findings suggest that organisations use social media such as blogs, online posts and social networking sites to create online presence among non-active jobseekers (Martin et al., 2011). Promoting different forms of social media also facilitates

employee voice (Martin et al., 2011). It encourages greater participation of employees in the employer branding process by sharing employees' voice on different social media platforms and social networking sites (Martin & Hetrick, 2009), which feeds into creating more employer brand ambassadors for the organisation. Communication through career websites may result in effective employer branding process as it enables potential candidates to self-select out if they do not fit with the organisation culture (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Williamson et al., 2003). On the contrary, this may also attract many unqualified candidates that do not fit with the job-role or the organisation culture (Dineen, Ling, Ash, & DelVecchio, 2007). Hence, being selective about the employer branding content is substantially important for effective utilisation of these communication channels in the employer branding process.

Being able to continue the communication with potential candidates (active and non-active job-seekers) and providing them with an opportunity to interact with the organisation or its employees has a positive impact on the employer branding process (Boswell, Roehling, LePine, & Moynihan, 2003). While social media platforms extend the reach of the organisation in terms of quantity of candidates (Vik, Nørbech, & Jeske, 2018), providing an opportunity for two-way communication with increased engagement results in attracting quality candidates with a better targeted approach. Hence, our findings suggest that strategically selecting and implementing communication channels with potential candidates results in attracting better quality and higher quantity candidates, depending on organisation's talent attraction requirement.

For an effective employer branding process, a balanced combination of communication with both active and non-active jobseekers can be implemented considering the specific and divergent needs of the organisation. An online event may be attended by a number of potential candidates at a time increasing employer's presence overall, but may be less interactive (Vik et al., 2018), whereas providing potential candidates an opportunity to communicate with organisation individually, may result in better engagement with potential candidates. This would improve the quality of employer brand communication while being able to provide special attention to individual queries. Since one size fits all employer branding approach is inappropriate, in communicating the employer brand organisations can customise their approach to suit their own organisational as well as talent attraction needs. Segmenting not only the audiences based on certain observable and unobservable characteristics, but also segmenting organisation's needs for the workforce (immediate or

short-term), can immensely increase the effectiveness of employer branding process. For immediate needs communication is focused on active-jobseekers whereas for long-term needs focus is to maintain social-presence by actively communicating with non-active jobseekers as well. This strategic step is to leave an image about the organisation as a potential employer which may bring positive employer branding results in future. Both the communication methods, however, are intertwined with the employer branding content.

8.4 Strategic positioning in the employer branding process

As discussed above organisation's employer branding efforts needs to be segmented based on the organisation's need to attract talent. For short-term talent needs, organisations' employer branding efforts are focused on the non (active) jobseekers. While communicating with such audiences merely marking the presence among the potential candidates can be helpful in meeting the organisation's immediate talent requirement. However, to meet long-term talent needs of the organisation, employer branding efforts need to be focused on creating sustainable talent pool, where talent supply of required quantity of quality candidates is always maintained. Hence, employer branding efforts need to be focused on fulfilling organisation's talent needs by positioning itself amongst the candidates who would be employable in foreseeable future.

Findings in this study suggest that strategic positioning of the employer brand is an important step in the employer branding process. In comparison to communication of employer brand, where first move towards information seeking is taken by the candidates, the strategic positioning allows and enables the organisation to take the first step towards communicating the employer brand and reach out to the potential candidates. This enables to capture the attention of such candidates who may not have an information about the organisation as an employer or are unaware about the industry altogether (in this case the data centre industry).

Strategic positioning is a departure from traditional marketing approach that is more focused around products than the customers, whereas positioning is more target-audience focused than product focused. In product marketing literature, brand positioning refers to the act of placing the identity of brand in the target consumer's mind by proposing benefits customised to the target audience needs. Similarly, findings suggest that modifying employer brand appeal according to target audience enables strategic positioning of the employer brand. For example, presenting career growth opportunities to those who are just starting their career whereas a career transition plan for those making a move from other industries.

8.4.1 Parallel between product positioning and employer brand positioning

Positioning of the brand in product marketing is a central concern for organisations which enables them to utilise their core-competencies to position themselves properly to gain competitive advantage and alleviate any competitive pressure (Adner, Csaszar, & Zemsky, 2014; Kotler & Armstrong, 2010). In product marketing, product consumers are identified first and then product appeal is communicated to these consumers by strategically positioning it against competitors. Similarly, in employer branding, by identifying potential candidates an organisation aims to target and reach out to such candidates before other competing employers, thus, organisation positions itself as a potential employer against the competitors.

Similar to product marketing, positioning of the employer brand is a strategic step as this involves decisions around certain employment market segment, target audiences, various employment benefits to be offered. The strategically designed employer branding content that suits the needs of the target audience helps to attract those potential candidates towards the organisation. Hence, positioning of employer brand is an important step in the employer branding process that is focused on designing a strategy to identify and employ various resources to attract targeted audience segment. In marketing literature, an important component of developing the brand positioning strategy is identifying the “target audience”. The right positioning among the target consumer market provides competitive advantage to the organisations. Brand positioning does not provide any value if it is not relevant to the target segment. Hence, choosing the target audience wisely adds value to the effectiveness of product branding. The other components, undoubtedly, play an important role – i.e., product differentiation = employer branding content, communication ability = reaching out to the potential candidates.

Implementing above positioning concepts in study of employer branding suggests that well defined branding content and mindful selection of the target audience are main component in the employer branding process. The efforts in employer brand positioning are fully utilised if right content is communicated to the right target audience (Kapferer,1992). Communicating with the right target group using appropriate communication channels results in higher engagement with the candidates and increased satisfaction for the employer from the overall branding process. (Vik et al., 2018). For example, as findings suggest, by strategically positioning the organisation as a potential employer amongst students by offering placements, internships and apprenticeship organisations can cultivate talent for their future work force requirements. Additionally, employer branding efforts can be utilised in promoting the

organisation as a potential place to build career amongst students (future potential candidates) by showing them organisation, its culture, people and various career options available. These efforts are focused at engaging with candidates and generating interest about the organisation as an employer. Findings further suggest that generating interest is an antecedent of attracting potential candidates to the organisation. This is similar to positioning strategy in product marketing where target market segment is selected and company's distinctive strengths in comparison with the competitors are presented to satisfy customers' particular needs (Doyle, 1983).

Adopting the positioning concept from product marketing literature may allow organisations to position themselves as a distinctive and attractive employer in a highly competitive labour market. Strategic positioning helps organisations to bring themselves closer to targeted potential candidates and build the perception about the organisation by closely engaging with them. Better clarity on organisational perception is beneficial in the employer branding process as it serves one of the major purpose of employer branding process i.e. reducing the perceived risk of being associated with the potential employer (Wilden et al., 2010) . Ghielen et al. (2020) suggest that better clarity on organisational perception signals unique elements of working for a prospective employer and provides a foundation for comparison between different prospective employers, a candidate may wish to choose from. High level of organisational information makes organisation more attractive to prospective candidates and they find it more secure to work for such transparent organisation (Gregory, Meade, & Thompson, 2013). Stressing the importance of effective strategic positioning, Ghielen et al. (2020) have asserted that even in the case of lower person-organisation fit, a higher clarity about the organisation, places the organisation amongst the attractive potential employers.

8.4.2 Engaging with target audience

Merely transmitting of organisational values from the organisation to the potential candidate is not an effective employer branding (Itam et al., 2020). There is much more to the employer branding process where organisation's value as an employer is created by negotiating relationships between different stakeholders. In early stages of job search, potential candidates have very basic and limited knowledge about the possible jobs and organisations that could be their potential employer (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Turban, 2001). Findings suggest that influencing candidates' decision at as early stages of career decision as possible, places the organisation in the list of potential employers. A candidate may consider such an organisation as a potential employer when their actual job search takes places. Exposure to

the organisation and various symbolic and instrumental attributes about the employment communicated through different communication mediums facilitate a favourable positioning to the organisation as a potential employer.

Although most of the studies on attractiveness of employer branding have established the role of symbolic and instrumental attributes of an organisation in influencing applicant's perception of the organisation. However, these employment characteristics may be less relevant for candidates at early stages of the career due to limited exposure of the candidates to these traits across various organisations (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003) . Hence, organisations that are capable of influencing candidate's decision at initial stages may reap the advantage of their strategic positioning. Since initial impressions on the potential candidates play a significant role in attracting the candidates to the organisation, leaving a good impression on the potential candidates at initial stages is critical in the employer branding process (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Approaching the target audience at later stages may not produce desired results, as their decision making about the potential employer may have already been influenced. Findings from the data suggest approaching the target audience at initial stages of either deciding their career or contemplating upon their employer. Both these stages are crucial in the journey of employer branding process and approaching a candidate.

The overarching purpose of the employer brand positioning for the participant is to provide the potential candidates a unique employment experience by offering live interaction with the organisation through various channels. This supports the idea presented by Martin et al. (2005) that a successful employer branding should attempt to provide potential candidates an opportunity to experience and build the organisation's image through their own eyes and an opportunity to identify with the organisation (Itam et al., 2020). Offering internships and placements facilitates the "experience feature" about the employment. Consciously positioning the employer brand among targeted potential candidates by sponsoring courses through university partnerships results in higher quality applicant pool, which ultimately decreases subsequent recruitment related costs and brings effective outcome of the employer branding process (Dineen et al., 2007; Ghielen et al., 2020; Tumasjan et al., 2019). Strategic positioning of the employer brand attracts higher quantity of talent pool having considerable good quality attributes suited to organisation's requirement. In the employer branding process, engagement with educational institutes also addresses the skills gap that employers may be facing (Wilton, 2014). Since this association is focused on vocationally preparing

candidates before joining the organisation, the skills gap is minimised between new recruits and experienced work force. Hence, employer brand positioning through associating with educational institutes closes the skills gap in terms of talent needs of the organisation and there is minimal need of training after a candidate is actually recruited in the organisation. This strategic engagement with potential candidates results in effective positioning of the employer brand with certain advantages to the organisation.

8.5 Interaction between content, communication and positioning of the employer brand

Much of the extant literature on employer branding treats two components of the employer branding process i.e., employer brand content and employer brand communication independently and views it from applicants' perception of these components. The proposed framework brings the employer brand content and communication together and explores the relationship between these to be applied along with strategic positioning of the employer brand for an effective employer branding process. Additionally, this framework is also commensurate with the basic premise of the signalling theory that shapes employer branding process by filling in the information gap present in the employment market by promoting two-way communication and engaging with potential candidates. The constant interaction between different steps of the employer brand process is important as unsynchronised elements of the employer branding process may drive against the organisation image as an employer and generate more information asymmetry in the employment market.

Strategic positioning of the employer brand has evolved as the one of the most important decisions to be taken by the organisation while designing and implementing their employer branding process. Strategic positioning of the employer brand amongst the potential candidates requires significant contribution of two components: content of employer brand and communication of employer brand. This contribution needs a strategic alignment of employer brand content and communication channels selected to achieve maximum efficiency in employer branding positioning. It is apparent from the above discussion that attributes of the employer brand content can be strategically aligned to enhance their effectiveness. Similarly, a strategic combination of employer brand content with the communication channel can enhance the effectiveness of the employer brand. Following this, organisations also need to implement a strategic amalgamation of these two above mentioned components along with the strategic positioning of the employer brand towards successful implementation of the employer branding process. In light of the signalling theory and its assumption that information asymmetry is prevalent in the information exchange, the process

of employer branding can serve as a tool to reduce this asymmetry and provide as accurate information as practically feasible to the targeted audience. To achieve the information accuracy, the employer branding content, communication and positioning need to be strategically aligned. Any discrepancy in these, can create more asymmetry in the information disseminated by the organisation and deliver negative results of the employer branding process. Such carefully designed employer branding process assists candidate's decision making. Consequently, decisions taken by the candidates are based on some verified facts conveyed by the organisation and candidates' own experience rather than assumptions made on the vague information gained through some unreliable, uncertified or unverified resources present in the employment market.

8.6 Summary

The above discussion strongly pointed towards the interplay of content, communication strategies and process of employer branding, and suggests adopting a strategic contextual approach that most of the literature on employer branding does not prepare the organisations for. Similar to adopting instrumental- symbolic framework for employer branding content and using segmentation approach to communicate with potential candidates, adopting targeted strategic positioning approach from marketing literature results in making employer branding process more effective. An external placing of employer brand needs a strategic approach to become socially acceptable among potential candidates. The process of employer branding brings together different HR practices of the organisations, performed at different levels, and strategically positioning these towards creating an attractive employer brand. Findings suggest dealing with “disconnected dialogues” in the employer branding process, where many stakeholders such as HR managers, senior management and industry representatives are all heavily involved in developing and implementing strategies through their actions. A strategic approach towards employer branding process establishes a strategic link between the employer brand content, employer brand communication and positioning of the employer brand. Strategic positioning of employer brand within the targeted audience through strategic content and communication methods can ensure positioning of organisation as an attractive employer amongst potential candidates with a more focused and targeted approach. This establishes the organisation as an attractive employer as well as creates a sustainable talent pool for the organisation, which is the ultimate result organisations seek out of their employer branding efforts. Employer branding, apart from fulfilling its purpose of attracting and retaining talent” also helps organisations to build a stronger bond between

leadership and employees through individual and organisational engagement. It is, therefore, essential to pay more attention to approach employer branding as a process that goes beyond attracting talent to organisations and engages employees and potential candidates with organisation at every single step helping organisations to position themselves to win the war for talent.

Chapter 9 Conclusion

9.1 Thesis conclusion

This study has explored the role of HR practices in the process of employer branding. To answer the research question, the study was carried out in context of data centre industry, a relatively less known industry which is facing challenges of talent attraction due to lack of awareness among potential candidates. Since it was not feasible to cover all the organisations operating in the industry, this study focused on the data centre industry in the UK. This study adopted a qualitative approach to understand the perspective of the participants in an attempt to answer the research question “How do HR policies and practices support the process of employer branding in the UK data centre industry?”

A total of 31 participants from the industry were interviewed from data centre organisations, industrial trade bodies and consulting firms operating within the industry. It was essential to cover views from across the industry because this relatively emerging industry is being promoted by everyone concerned to effectively manage talent shortage due to lack of awareness about the industry. The data was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews. The huge amount of unstructured data was managed and analysed using Nvivo (data analysis) software with thematic analysis approach.

In the next section, contribution of the study to signalling theory and employer branding literature is highlighted. The section continues to explain the implication for researchers and practitioners. The chapter concludes with a discussion on limitation of this study and possible further research based on this study. Concluding remarks are presented at the end of the section.

9.2 Contribution and extension to existing literature

Two bodies of literature have predominantly helped in answering the research questions and positioning the findings of the study in the extant literature. Thus, findings from this study contribute to and extend two bodies of literature which are closely interrelated. Signalling theory has been predominantly used in the employer branding literature more than other theories used in the study of employer branding. Following is a discussion of contribution of findings of this study to signalling theory and employer branding literature.

9.2.1 Contribution to signalling theory

This research implements signalling theory to explore how organisations can effectively initiate and undertake the process of employer branding by integrating this process with other HR practices. Signalling theory in employer branding literature suggests that signal senders

send signals to signal receivers to indicate their own certain characteristics and influence their decision in an employment relationship. Current use of signalling theory in employer branding literature is limited to creating the employer branding “entity” through organisational HR practices. Implementation of signalling theory in this study extends the use of signalling theory in understanding the process perspective and answers “how” the employer brand is created. While the entity perspective has developed an understanding on what HR practices make an employer brand attractive, the process perspective suggests that the way in which a signal is communicated and presented by the sender have an important role to play in signalling process. Along with active signal receivers, active signal senders can make signalling more effective. Targeted and strategic efforts by the signal sender can make employer branding process more effective and result oriented.

This study also challenges the basic premise of signalling theory that signalling can be more effective only when signal receivers are active (Connelly et al., 2010; Ilmola & Kuusi, 2006). This study proposes that more active and rigorous efforts by the signal sender can enhance the efficiency of signalling. Hence, reduced efficiency of signalling due to less active (or sometimes inactive signal receivers) can be compensated or enhanced by an active participation of signal senders. Rigorous efforts by the signal senders (organisations), in the form of closer communication and increased proximity with the signal receiver may eliminate the effects of weak signalling. This is applicable in a scenario where signal receivers are inactive or less active in an employment relationship and organisations want to target a certain group of audiences.

Another key objective of signalling is to remove any information asymmetry present in the employment market (Spence, 1973). As suggested in the findings, the enhanced proximity and better communication strategies by the active signal sender enable to reduce information asymmetry present in the employment market. As Connelly et al. (2010) suggest that signal senders have more specific information about their product, hence active participation of signal senders (organisations in this case) can help to remove information asymmetry making signalling more effective.

9.2.2 Contribution to employer branding literature

The employer branding literature has presented a shift in the employer branding focus from using “employee brand ambassadors” to “employee engagement”, changing the focus from externally branding of employer brand to improving the internal levels of employees’

engagement (Martin et al., 2011). An overview of findings of this study suggests that the strategic approach that combines both the means i.e., externally engaging with potential candidates as well as internal engagement with current employees to prepare future “employer brand ambassadors” is the key to create a sustainable employer brand. Moreover, rather than shifting focus from one aspect of employer branding to the other aspect, employer branding process may benefit from paying attention to all the aspects simultaneously.

9.2.2.1 Contribution towards process perspective

As set out earlier, this study aimed to understand the process perspective of employer branding, the understanding currently lacked in employer branding literature. To gain such understanding, this study extended in the research direction suggested by Martin et al. (2011) by taking a process approach to employer branding by gaining a deeper understanding of the views of different stakeholders involved in creating and implementing the strategy led employer branding process.

Hence, this study contributes towards employer branding literature by exploring the process perspective of employer branding. Current employer branding literature provides knowledge on certain HR practices that make an employer brand attractive. This study suggests that employer branding process as a strategic activity is a co-creation of employer brand content, its communication and strategic positioning. Corroborating to the observation of different academics on employer branding, this study confirms that core concepts of employer branding process include strategic positioning of the employer brand (Foster et al., 2010), which is implemented with co-operation from different departments within the organisation (Aggerholm et al., 2011; Mölk & Auer, 2018). Using the employer brand content created through various HR practices in the organisation, integrating various communication channels to maintain an ongoing presence in employment market, strategically positioning the employer brand by engaging with potential candidates can make an effective employer branding process. Hence, this study recommends of adopting strategic positioning from product marketing literature same as other earlier adopted features of product marketing such as instrumental – symbolic framework and segmentation (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Moroko & Uncles, 2009). Our empirical finding draws a map of strategic approach of the organisations towards employer branding process, which is intertwined between the employer branding content, communication methods adopted for strategic positioning of employer brand for an effective implementation of the process.

9.2.2.2 Employer branding in emerging industries

Selection of emerging industry (the data centre industry) was a strategic choice to conduct this study. Earlier studies on employer branding that were based on particular industry has no specific relevance to the research objectives. However, due to specific characteristics of certain industries, it may be difficult to implement their strategies universally. For example, strategies adopted from a large multinational organisation may not be suitable for a business start – up. Hence, this study suggest that focus and careful selection of the industry is important in employer branding. Data centre industry in the UK is facing challenges in attracting candidates due to lack of awareness about the industry. It is concluded that selecting an industry in context that is facing challenges in talent attraction can get real time contextual information and as well as practical solution. Hence, this study has made a contribution is making industrial context important.

9.2.2.3 Views of employer brand creators

Unlike existing research on employer branding that have explored views of prospective candidates or job seeking candidates explores only one aspect of the employer branding. Current empirical studies on employer branding have been conducted around applicant's perception of the employer brand rather than the organisation's perspective on the implementation of the employer branding process. As signalling theory suggests that signal senders have more specific knowledge about the information to be shared, organisation's view on process perspective has enabled specific knowledge about the employer branding process. Hence, this study extends the work of Martin et al. (2011) in collecting the views of employer brand creators and confirming their anecdotal work on employer branding process through an empirical study.

Limited studies have adopted managerial point of view and explored the strategic dimension to guide the organisation on how to develop employer branding strategy to promote and drive the demand for organisation amongst target potential candidates. However, these studies have only explored the views of HR managers or employer brand managers, which provides specific department perspective of the employer brand process. Employer brand process is an activity which involves entire senior management and decision makers in the organisation for rounded organisation wide efforts. Hence, this study complements the study of Edlinger (2015) on employer branding by collecting views of different organisational stakeholders involved in the employer branding process making it more contextual and meaningful to implement. Furthermore, this study addresses the need to capture and examine the voice of

different groups of employees, managers and executives located inside as well as outside the organisation by including views of trade bodies and consultants (Martin et al., 2011).

9.3 Contribution to methodology

The methodological contribution of this study is to applying three Rs (Reductionism, Reflexivity, and Representation) to mitigate the weakness of thematic analysis. A critique of thematic analysis suggests that adopting thematic analysis approach to data analysis produces only naïve account of the data and presents only specific content of data without being analytic, leading to weaker interpretation of the data. This study has drawn a parallel between six-steps of thematic analysis and three Rs to ascertain that applying three Rs at different stages of thematic analysis makes the analysis process rigorous and more reliable.

Earlier studies have mostly taken a positivist approach (barring a few studies), only validating certain HR practices and their contribution in making an employer brand attractive. This study has taken a qualitative inductive approach and explores some unexplored phenomena of employer branding process through interpretive analysis.

9.4 Practical implications of the study

This study has made some contributions for employer branding initiatives being implemented in various industries specifically the emerging industries may possibly benefit from these findings.

First, findings of the study are directly relevant to the data centre industry currently struggling to attract talent due to lack of awareness about the industry. Implementing findings of this study suggests that data centre organisations need a strategic positioning of their employer brand among potential candidates. These organisations need to engage with potential candidates at various levels. To attract current job-seeking candidates, communication through social media platforms, job and career fairs, career centres at universities and educational institutes are best places to approach. As these candidates may be switching from other industries a career transition plan, on the job training and career progression plan can be the promising attributes of the employer branding.

Due to rapidly growing nature of this industry, merely attracting current job-seeking candidates is not sufficient. Moreover, persisting skills gap when recruiting the candidates needs a sustainable solution to their employer branding initiatives. Findings suggest to reach out to universities and school students and engaging with them in various ways such as visiting schools, delivering guest lectures in universities by industry experts, providing site

visit to school students, offering placements and internships are some suggested ways in which these organisations can engage with potential candidates and raise an awareness about the data centre industry and various career options and progression opportunities available within the industry. Finding also suggests the shift from requirement of technical and practical skills to alignment of candidates with organisational culture and values, making these an important aspect of the employer branding process.

In the ever-changing economic scenario and technological advancements new industries are emerging to support the needs of changing work environment. These changes take place at very fast pace and some organisations serve other businesses rather than serving end users directly. Consequently, such organisations may lack an awareness among potential job seeking candidates. Hence, this study is relevant for the new industries enabling them to present and position themselves among potential candidates as a potential employer. The employer branding process framework presented in this study may be useful for such organisations. Understanding the employer branding as a process may have practical consequences in the form of better-informed interventions for effective employer branding process and may provide more plausible course of action for practical execution of employer branding. The results from this study may be practically relevant for the organisations in initiating or developing an effective employer branding process and create a sustainable talent supply.

9.5 Limitation of the study

This study only focused on the data centre industry in the UK, which struggles to attract talented candidates due to lack of awareness about the industry in the employment market. The results of this research may not be generalised to the whole population of the data centre industry due to specific context of this study. In the UK, unemployment rate is quite low which could be one possible reason for talent attraction problems for UK data centre industry. This implies that results of the study may not be applicable to other well-known organisations or industries within the UK or other industries outside the UK. Hence the results may not be generalised to other industries or countries. For example, South – East Asian countries, where unemployment rate is higher and talent scarcity may not be an issue. Hence, the findings of the study may be limited to UK data centre industry only. Furthermore, the views collected through semi-structured interviews reflect organisations' perspective, however it is unsure if the target audience have the similar views. Does the added dimension of strategic positioning

actually have a role to play in influencing their opinion? This may need confirmation through dyadic exploration.

This is an interpretive study and suggests subjective findings. Comparing this study with the current empirical literature of employer branding “entity” which confirms certain HR practices are more influential than the others, this study has only managed to contribute to initial conversation of employer branding process. Hence, it still lacks an understanding and comparison between different employer branding positioning strategies and communication practices discussed in the findings section.

9.6 Possible further research

This study is an exploratory study, and the suggested results are subjective. Further explanatory research can provide explanation into finding and establishing what strategies can be most effective in the employer branding process, particularly in positioning the employer brand to the target audience. More empirical research from process perspective would enable a comparison and confirmation between different positioning practices adopted by the organisation and suggest the most effective and influential practices in employer branding process.

The data analysis and proposed employer branding framework provides meaningful insight into the dynamics of employer branding content – communication – positioning for the data centre industry in the UK to help them establish themselves as an attractive employer. Further research can be extended to other industries in different geographies such as South-East Asian geography to understand and add different perspective on this framework. Thus, further research may investigate how effectively this framework can be implemented to attract prospective candidates and whether this has an impact on the talent attraction and eventually on employer branding process, overall.

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Appendices

Appendix I Write up on research

Employer branding in Data centres:

In this age of “war for talent”, organisations struggle to attract and retain suitable talent to work with them. With the unemployment rate decreasing and changing patterns in economy (such as gig economy), organisations struggle to attract candidates to work for them. To be ahead in the war for talent, organisations try to establish themselves as an attractive and desirable employer in the employment market. Employer branding comes as a tool for organisations to position themselves in front of the candidates as a prospective employer. For this purpose, organisations use several methods such as adopting CSR, supporting social - cause, supporting employees to maintain work -life balance etc. HR practices play a major role in creating competitive advantage as an employer.

Prospective employees compare organisations on various criteria while choosing their employer. Organisation with established high reputation can easily get ahead in attracting talent. However, any emerging industry, such as data centre, struggle to attract suitable talent. Current reports on data centres suggest that the current work-force is aging and data centres struggle to attract young talent. One of the many reasons of this challenge is their “Employer branding”. Not many people know what a “data centre” is (cloud industry is rather the known name). This study attempts to understand the challenges this industry faces in attracting young talents and what steps are taken by HR to establish an attractive employer brand.

University of Huddersfield – Business School

Participant Information Sheet

Research Project Title: The role of HR practices in the process of employer branding – a case of UK data centre industry

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. May I take this opportunity to thank you for taking time to read this.

What is the purpose of the project?

The research project is intended to understand talent management challenges faced by the UK's data centre industry. It looks at the role of Human Resource Management (HRM) policies and practices in enhancing the employer branding. What are the views of HR practitioners in managing employer branding challenges at departmental and organisational levels?

Why have I been chosen?

Your role as an HR practitioner in the data centre will provide insightful inputs into the study.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Refusal will involve no penalty whatsoever and you may withdraw from the study at any stage without giving an explanation to the researcher.

What do I have to do?

You will be invited to take part in a semi-structured interview. This should take no more than one hour of your time.

Are there any disadvantages to taking part?

There should be no foreseeable disadvantages to your participation. If you are unhappy or have further questions at any stage in the process, please address your concerns initially to the

researcher if this is appropriate. Alternatively, please contact Dr Muhibul Haq at Huddersfield Business School.

Will all my details be kept confidential?

All information which is collected will be strictly confidential and anonymised before the data are presented in any work, in compliance with the Data Protection Act and ethical research guidelines and principles.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of this research will be written up in the PhD thesis. If you would like a copy please contact the researcher, ruchi.singh@hud.ac.uk

What happens to the data collected?

The collected data, that would be stored electronically, would then be changed to transcript. It would be used as appendix in the thesis to support the presented findings.

Will I be paid for participating in the research? No

Where will the research be conducted? Mutually agreed location

Criminal Records check (if applicable): N/A

Who has reviewed and approved the study, and who can be contacted for further information?

Dr Muhibul Haq (m.haq@hud.ac.uk)

Name & Contact Details of Researcher:

Ruchi Singh (ruchi.singh@hud.ac.uk)

Semi-structured Interview Protocol

Interview fact sheet Information sheet given: **Yes** **No**

Consent form signed: **Yes** **No**

Date of the interview _____

Time of the interview _____

Location _____

Questionnaire-

1. What challenges have you faced in recruiting (attracting and retaining) the right people for your organisation?
2. What are the reasons for these challenges?
3. What are the perceptions of your organisation's employer branding?
4. Please tell me how you perceive how other organisations in your sector face employer branding challenges.
5. What HR efforts / practices do you use to create an attractive employer brand?
6. How can HR practitioners enhance the employer brand?
7. What are your organisation's plans to create an attractive employer brand in the future?
8. What specific policies and practices can you implement to create an attractive employer brand?
9. What suggestions / recommendations would you make to improve the employer brand of the data sector industry?
10. Any other comments?

Participant Consent Form

University of Huddersfield – Business School

Title of Research Study: The role of HR practices in the process of employer branding – a case of UK data centre industry

Name of Researcher: Ruchi Singh

Participant Identifier Number:

- I confirm that I have read and understood the participant Information sheet related to this research, and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.

- I understand that all my responses will be anonymised.

- I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses.

- I agree to take part in the above study.

Name of Participant:

Signature of Participant:

Date:

Name of Researcher: Ruchi Singh

Signature of Researcher: Ruchi Singh

Date:

Appendix V Demographics collection form

Demographic data collection form

Name of the participant _____

Gender **Male** **Female**

Age group **20-30** **31-40** **41-50** **51 & over**

Educational qualification _____

Name of the organisation / employer _____

Designation in the organisation _____

Years worked in the organisation _____

Overall professional experience _____

Details of previous industry worked in _____

E-mail address _____

Contact no (optional) _____

Address of the organisation _____

Appendix VI Sample highlighted text for coding

Yeah. And you know, not ... not particularly warm and inviting. Not ...not kind ... It's interesting that if you go to Data Centre World, it's co located at the same time as the cloud Expo and cybersecurity, all in the same Hall and excessively huge. And, you know, I kind of did a walk around with them. And you know, at the cloud end there's all the cool, trendy younger people that are in the jeans and t-shirts... with what's and what not! And then it got a bit more serious in the cybersecurity end and then when you get to the Data Center end ... it's just and I think they might have found it a bit intimidating. But, you know, we introduced them to lots of people that we know, that are very aware of the skills gap and that we need to get new blood in and you know, very encouraging. And then we interviewed them the following week, and we just decided, well, they're all ... they've all got potential. So, we took all five of them on. So, we... we took three interns and two placement students, which was a huge risk. And, you know, we had one of our suppliers,

Yeah. And you know, not ... not particularly warm and inviting. Not ...not kind ... It's interesting that if you go to Data Centre World, it's co located at the same time as the cloud Expo and cybersecurity, all in the same Hall and excessively huge. And, you know, I kind of did a walk around with them. And you know, at the cloud end there's all the cool, trendy younger people that are in the jeans and t-shirts... with what's and what not! And then it got a bit more serious in the cybersecurity end and then when you get to the Data Center end ... it's just and I think they might have found it a bit intimidating. But, you know, we introduced them to lots of people that we know, that are very aware of the skills gap and that we need to get new blood in and you know, very encouraging. And then we interviewed them the following week, and we just decided, well, they're all ... they've all got potential. So, we took all five of them on. So, we... we took three interns and two placement students, which was a huge risk. And, you know, we had one of our suppliers,

well, partly about Data Centres ... And what we're doing within our company. So, we've got, we've got all these explainer videos that we've done. So, one of the things that schools want is for employers to come in and talk about, you know, what, you know what their ... their industry does or whatever. So we've ... we've created an explainer video for children about what is a Data Centre and that's part of the activities that we run, but primarily the messages around sustainability and renewables, and you know, the impact of the data center industry, on the environment and what we can do to make a difference. Also, to raise awareness of careers in in STEM. So what we're kind of hoping is that by making it look more cool, which is our Strap line Making the Data Centre world more cool, and it makes kids think, you know, as our ... our young people here did, yeah, well, this is something that I want to be part of. So, this is a video.

Appendix VII Screenshot of codes generated

The screenshot shows the NVivo software interface. On the left is a dark blue sidebar with navigation options: Quick Access, IMPORT (Data, Files, File Classifications, Externals), ORGANIZE (Coding, Relationships, Relationship Types), Cases (Cases, Case Classifications, Participant), and Notes. The main window has a menu bar with File, Home, Import, Create, Explore, Share, and Modules. Below the menu bar are icons for Clipboard, Item, Organize, Query, Visualize, Code, Autocode, Range Code, and Uncoc. The central area is titled 'Codes' and displays a table of generated codes.

Name	Files	References
CSR Initiatives	2	2
Instrumental attributes	0	0
Symbolic attributes	2	2
Efforts at industry level	14	36
Efforts required at senior management level	9	13
Reasons for talent shortage	0	0
Branding Initiatives	6	10
Current work-force is aged	18	23
Lack of efforts at industry level	7	13
Lack of industry awareness	24	58
Lack of relevant formal education	14	19
Lack of required skill-set	21	47
Negative perception about the industry	1	3
Recruitment is challenging	13	18

This appendix reflects that many codes were generated to ensure that every single statement made in the interview transcript was coded. However, these codes did not end up in the final themes generated from the data, as these codes did not answer any relevant research questions. However, these codes were helpful in affirmation of certain statements about the industry.

Appendix VIII Screenshot of multi-level coding

The screenshot shows the NVivo software interface. The left sidebar is dark blue and contains the following sections:

- Quick Access**
- IMPORT**
 - Data
 - Files
 - File Classifications
 - Externals
- ORGANIZE**
 - Coding**
 - Codes
 - Relationships
 - Relationship Types
 - Cases
 - Cases
 - Case Classifications
 - Participant
 - Notes

The main window has a light grey header with tabs: File, Home, Import, Create, Explore, Share, Modules. Below the tabs are icons for Clipboard, Item, Organize, Query, Visualize, Code, Autocode, Range Code, and Uncode. The main content area is titled 'Codes' and displays a tree view of codes with columns for Name, Files, and References.

Name	Files	References
Communication methods	1	1
Individual communication	1	1
Career fairs	14	23
Career guidance	16	24
Collaboration with career centres	9	12
Engagement with Universities	14	34
Open days at universities	4	6
Social media platform	7	12
Career websites	9	18
Linkedin, Twitter, You tube and Webinars	17	33
Word of mouth	12	18
Content of Branding	2	2
CSR Initiatives	2	2

Appendix IX University ethics approval

Dear Ruchi,

I have been asked to forward the following to you:

Following consideration of the two reports from the reviewers, the decision is to approve.

Professor Alper Kara
Chair of the Business School Research Ethics Committee

Attached are the comment forms from the Reviewers.

Kind regards,

Alex Thompson

Education Services Administrator (Students and Courses)

☎ : 01484 472529

✉ : m.a.thompson@hud.ac.uk

🌐 : www.hud.ac.uk

Huddersfield Business School