

Rethinking Employer Brands

If a talent brand can authentically represent the positive characteristics and shared values of the workplace, it should also serve as an inspirational platform for other human capital initiatives.

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Employer brands have become hot topics in the talent marketplace today. They are commonly crafted from any of several diverse methods. Some approaches aim to frame a clever premise for outreach based on modest research; others do deep-dive research into the talent marketplace, often homing in relentlessly on the habits and preferences of the recruiting segments they address. Despite their commonalities and differences, all but a few seem to fall short when it comes to embodying the compelling personality and shared values of the workplace as reported by current employees. Still fewer approaches factor in the longer-term human capital strategy of their respective enterprises.

In this article I advance a more ambitious conception of the employer brand. I'm not the first to redub it a "talent brand," but as I see it, this more inclusive title can serve to underscore a shift in focus away from the traditional marketing and outreach orientation of most employer brands to one more in keeping with a corporate culture and strategic management outlook. This discussion asks a question that goes to the heart of what an "enterprise talent brand" can represent for a company: if a talent brand can authentically represent the positive characteristics and shared values of the workplace, why shouldn't it also serve as an inspirational platform for other human capital initiatives in the enterprise?

Configured in this way, a talent brand need not lose its core connection to the recruiting and engagement disciplines, including web and online outreach, advertising, and social media. But expanding its reach and importance in this manner opens a new range of strategic possibilities, along with a spectrum of new audiences, including internal stakeholders and industry opinion-leaders. Under this broader perspective, the potential viral energy of the

brand is reinforced by its conscious grounding in the authentic attributes and shared values of the workplace. This in turn makes an enterprise talent brand ideal as an organizational platform for many other human capital initiatives, from retention to inclusion to organizational development, and beyond.

The most important activities in building a compelling talent brand for engaging potential recruits don't change under this broader definition. The development team should

set out to capture an authentic snapshot of the workplace culture in its most inspiring aspects, and then to portray it compellingly against the industry backdrop of the enterprise. The goal in developing this value platform, of course, is to attract job candidates who are likely—by reason of skills, temperament, and personal inclination—to

thrive in the enterprise. At the same time, an authentic talent brand should also aim to appeal to the current workforce and leadership. Defined with accuracy and creative resonance, this more extensive and inclusive banner to march under can inspire potential recruits, employees, and leadership alike.

Viewed in this light, it's not hard to see the emergence of this more comprehensive talent brand—one serving both inside and outside interests of the enterprise—as a natural evolution of brand theory and its application to human capital practice.

A corporate brand encapsulates what the organization stands for in the public eye.

How the Recruitment Function Came to Embrace Branding Practice: A Thumbnail Summary

Until the mid-1980s, most people associated brands and branding primarily with the consumer marketplace. Coca-Cola was a brand; so were Marlboro, Oldsmobile, and Sears. Few conceived of institutions or organizations as brands in

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this traditional, market-driven connotation of the term. In the last two or three decades, however, corporate and institutional brands—many of them entirely independent of the consumer marketplace—have attracted widespread strategic and even popular interest.

The outcome: every organization has its own brand, whether it has consciously crafted it or not, and the value of its brand is embodied in the qualities and associations that comprise its reputation. In simple terms, a corporate brand encapsulates what the organization stands for in the public eye, and especially what it means to its stakeholders and interested observers (who may or may not be “customers” in the traditional sense).

Again, the attributes and overall configuration of a corporate brand may not be cultivated consciously, but they are there just the same. And it’s more than reputation, or even the values that the enterprise is perceived to stand for: it’s the lingering imprint of all the organization’s public actions and, of course, its interactions with stakeholders, buyers, members, observers, and so on. What’s more, these impressions are amplified by media attention and word-of-mouth transmission. The reach and influence of both consumer and corporate brands are boosted further by the shared loyalty and enthusiasm of the *ad hoc* communities of brand adherents who gravitate to the brand. A given brand can “scale up” in prestige and influence virtually overnight when mass media and social relationships—computer-aided and otherwise—add their weight to the reputation mix.

Employer Brands Emerge

In the last dozen or so years, we have seen a refinement of this understanding. Prompted at first by an expanding economy and accelerating hiring imperatives, organizations have looked increasingly to branding techniques for help in recruiting new employees, effectively extending brand awareness into the realm of the talent marketplace. And so the

notion of an employer brand has come into currency, spawning the ubiquitous *employer of choice* self-designation, among other outcomes. As recruiting strategists have discovered the candidate appeal of a resonant employer brand, the workplace brand-wagon has rumbled inexorably onward, even as the economy has slowed. For many organizations, framing out an employer brand or employer value proposition, as it’s also sometimes known, has come to be viewed in some circles as critical to keeping recruiting pipelines full, even if the need for sheer numbers of new hires is no longer as great as in the boom years around 2000.

This focus on attracting job candidates is central in mainstream employer branding today. Still, for many of us, the nearly exclusive preoccupation of the conventional employer brand with the external recruiting marketplace only takes us part of the way. This standard approach, as I have pointed out, often ignores the interests of individuals already inside organizations. In our reconfigured methodology, an enterprise’s workforce and leadership loom much larger in importance. They are arguably the most important driv-

What if Segments of Your Workforce Are “Morale-challenged”?

Creating authentic and compelling talent brands for flawed or dysfunctional enterprises always introduces serious complications for the brand development team. The foregoing statement may sound like a laughable understatement, but some organizations with less-than-ideal workplace morale and productivity have turned to this approach as they attempt to reverse declining engagement and morale.

Turning your ship around in this way usually calls for a shift in emphasis from “lived” workplace values to “aspirational” workplace values. In this circumstance, interviews, focus groups, and surveys take on more of a diagnostic cast, and conversations and workshops with leadership center on frank reporting and discussions of their aspirations for the enterprise’s working culture. We’re squarely in the realm of change management here, but the dual inside-outside focus of the value platform methodology behind a talent brand can provide a useful and progressive framework for improvement, as well as an honest premise for maintaining recruiting outreach during enterprise transformation.

Occasionally, companies confronting morale challenges have opted to develop talent brands for a single operational component within the larger enterprise—generally their most productive and engaged unit. This approach can also succeed, in that it models success and provides a benchmark/exemplar for continuous improvement company-wide.

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ers of how the talent brand is conceived and crafted. They inspire the attributes of the brand and ultimately become the first—and ideally most vocal and enthusiastic—of an enterprise talent brand’s concentric communities of brand evangelists.

Anchoring the Talent Brand in the Living Values of the Workplace

Enterprise talent brands should be grounded in the value (and shared values) esteemed by current, high-performing employees. A good start on this value platform is to seek to discover what consultant Tamara Erickson calls the “signature workplace experience,” which is essentially what it means to work at Company X as perceived and validated by the individuals who live the experience every day.

Conversely, some employer brands start (and often finish) at the opposite end of the branding cycle. They tailor their brand promise to what they consider—or have discovered—to be prevalent career search preferences among the outside segments they are targeting. There’s a kernel of validity in this approach, descended as it is from consumer brand research. Still, for many of us, this approach falls woefully short when applied exclusively, because it often ends up front-loading compelling attractors in the brand promise but failing to deliver on these promised attributes in the real-world experience of the workplace. In a nutshell, it doesn’t complete the engagement circuit, because the qualities it highlights may not be authentic to everyday experience at the organization.

In our view, like that of Police Chief Brody in *Jaws*, we need a bigger boat. Energizing the talent brand with compelling truths discovered in the workplace itself—and later buttressing them with learnings from the marketplace—provides a much more reliable platform for engaging potential recruits. This more comprehensive approach yields another critical—and often inexplicably ignored—advantage. An enterprise talent brand can now serve double duty as an outward-facing engagement platform *and* as an internal creative foundation for many (if not all) of an organization’s human capital programs.

An Enterprise Talent Brand Can Be Your Value Platform for Workplace Culture

In the experience of my brand imagination teams for scores of corporate and institutional clients, paying close attention to six core principles will help any enterprise that

embraces this expanded approach to employer branding:

1. Build the brand’s foundation in what current team members value most about the workplace and culture.
2. Concentrate first on the reputation of your working culture rather than counter-programming against the competition.
3. As you develop the brand, encourage involvement and consensus at all levels of the enterprise.
4. Focus on authenticity and creative resonance in the value platform you refine.
5. Extend your enterprise talent brand beyond recruiting initiatives.
6. Introduce the talent brand to your internal population with creativity and fanfare.

Rolling out a talent brand based on these principles requires many parallel activities: inspiring and involving your leadership; discovering how core segments of your workforce feel about your workplace and the work; accurately identifying important shared attitudes and values; and boiling down your findings in an expressive and accurate brand platform, among a range of other factors.

1. Build the brand’s foundation in what current team members value most about the workplace and culture. The first step in successful talent branding is to learn from productive, engaged team members and management. Although it may seem to run counter to marketing-influenced branding approaches, you will benefit by crafting your enterprise’s talent brand from an “inside-out” perspective. By crystallizing the value of your signature workplace experience from the perspectives of current employees and managers, you establish a template for attracting candidates who are likely to succeed and thrive in your enterprise. Executed skillfully, an “inside-out” employer brand will prompt optimally desirable candidates in the talent marketplace to self-select.

You can assemble these all-important insights through group and individual interviews, as well as through focus groups. Your focus groups need not be of the traditional (and

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expensive) sort, with full video coverage and hidden observers. You can learn just as much by audio-recording both interviews and focus groups, and having them transcribed after the fact. Having transcriptions in hand when all your primary data-gathering is complete can prove enormously useful. Dominant themes and experiences will virtually jump off the page as your team reviews the transcripts.

The same is true of employee engagement surveys. You can conduct your own survey online at relatively little expense using any of several dozen off-the-shelf packages available over the Internet. But before you jump the gun on this, consider that you may not need to do an original survey. Many companies already use enterprise-wide engagement

surveys crafted and analyzed by expert third-party companies. Federal entities have the advantage of the annual government-wide survey conducted by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management. If you have resources like this available already, consider incorporating their findings in your brand discovery efforts with or without a custom online survey of your own design.

Using a broad-based engagement survey, homegrown or otherwise, gives you a significant advantage because it brings reach and scale to the discovery effort. While interviews and focus groups should certainly be at the center of these early-stage endeavors, in large and functionally diverse organizations they can quickly become a complex and potential-

“Packaging” Your Talent Brand Platform and Strategy

No matter how authentic and insightful your research and creative synthesis in refining your organization's talent brand, if you want it to mean anything in the real world, you will likely need to present it in a palatable, compelling, and actionable way to enterprise leadership. Your objective should be two-fold. One, to convince and inspire your management with the potential corporate-cultural value of the brand platform for recruiting, retention, inclusion, or engagement initiatives, and any other human capital purposes you identify. Two, to help them see how they can implement it in practical terms in any or all these contexts.

Here are a few components you might consider incorporating in your presentation to company and HR management:

- A summary of your discovery results and how they support your talent brand platform. This can be as thorough or as concise as is customary in your organization.
- A concise compilation of the brand (a page or two max) that includes, at a minimum:
 - a capsule of the brand's value in 80 words or less for brand evangelists to use in introducing the key values of your workplace culture in their social circles
 - a longer employment value proposition that summarizes in several paragraphs the advantages and compelling attractors of the workplace culture
 - a short slogan-like formula that expresses resonantly what it means to work at your organization
 - a list of the talent brand's 8 or 10 primary attributes (usually adjectives)
- A display portfolio of thumbnail renderings of creative examples in an appropriate range of options for execution and distribution (say poster designs, print brochure, screen saver, website and online newsletter design, web banners, video storyboard, Facebook “fan” page design, and so on). Because your leadership will want to see and touch how the brand will play out in many organizational and engagement contexts, provide a rich selection of creative examples keyed to the brand but addressing a sample of HR programs beyond recruiting—for example, retention, mentorship, inclusive leadership, diversity, workforce planning, training and development, etc.
- A talent brand strategy that details recommendations for “operationalizing” the brand, with attention to your primary audiences and the specific human capital operations (e.g., retention, engagement, inclusion, staff development, knowledge management, and so on) in which you see the talent brand serving as a thematic/creative platform.

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ly expensive means of reaching an authentic understanding of the values that animate the workforce. Online employee surveys can help you scale up your in-person findings, reaching hundreds and even thousands more employees than you can realistically engage with interviews and focus groups alone.

Concentrate first on the reputation of your work-culture rather than counter-programming against the competition. You should resist the temptation to tailor your talent brand around what competitors are touting, and/or around your perspective on what potential recruits on the outside are looking for in a career. These insights are useful, but of secondary importance early on. Your brand development effort should certainly not ignore what the competition is promising potential recruits; but as you look outward into the talent marketplace, you will glean more value by concentrating first on assessing your organization's overall reputation as a place to work, and then on identifying strategic best practices in engaging the attention and declared interest of job candidates among organizations with talent needs similar to yours.

I won't belabor this point by enumerating the wealth of available (and mostly Web-mediated) resources and techniques for capturing these insights. If you're reading this article, you likely know them well. My advice: use these online resources extensively to fill in a comprehensive picture of the talent landscape in which your organization is operating. Consider segment demographics and predispositions if you wish, but don't dwell on them at the expense of forging your own path. What's more, don't take specific competitor "messaging" too seriously early on.

Examining competitor positioning and analyzing the derived needs and predispositions of target segments are more useful when reserved for the engagement strategy that takes shape after you define your talent brand. If you take this landscape "noise" into account too early, you run the risk of the tail wagging the dog. Unconsciously or otherwise, you might dilute or corrupt the brand value of the insights you discover inside the walls.

As you develop the brand, encourage involvement and consensus at all levels of the enterprise. The in-

volvement of all internal stakeholders in crafting the brand will pay dividends later in employee engagement and enthusiastic brand evangelism. The team that spearheads talent brand development should take pains to enlist the participation and collaboration of leadership at all levels. Our methodology, for instance, calls for a full-day senior leadership workshop about midway through the brand development project. There the team presents its "strawman" findings up to that point, soliciting participants' responses and guiding the workshop to refine, among other elements, its own versions of the EVP and its own roster of the dozen most important audience segments to engage.

Don't risk losing current employees' buy-in because they view your outreach "messaging" as forced or bogus.

The more senior the participants in "strategic alignment" sessions like this, the more buy-in and enthusiasm executive leadership is likely to invest in the brand and its execution. By the same token, the collective spirit and shared values of your workforce, as expressed through your brand, can be your strongest and most persistent attractors of new talent, not to mention the core drivers of retention and high performance. Employee evangelists are arguably the single most important assets in any recruiting campaign.

Focus on authenticity and creative resonance in the value platform you refine. Any employer brand that fails to reflect with accuracy the shared workplace experience and cultural values of the enterprise is likely to be regarded with indifference—or even cynicism—by your own employees. They're the most effective brand evangelists that your company can have. Don't risk losing their buy-in to your efforts to engage job candidates because they view your outreach "messaging" as forced or bogus.

That's why so much *inside-the-walls* discovery is important as a talent brand evolves. Your talent brand simply has to be authentic to the signature workplace experience of your company. But in itself authenticity is generally not quite enough. Although it very well may touch a universal chord of truth in your workplace community and among your targets of influence, like any brand proposition it may not have wings ... for one all-important reason.

A talent brand—even one anchored securely in workforce-endorsed shared values—has little chance of taking flight either inside the enterprise or in the outside world unless it has real creative resonance. This makes the participation

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of talented creative practitioners obligatory for transforming your value proposition into a concise, inspiring, and viral premise for attracting brand adherents within the enterprise and in the world beyond—including job candidates, their myriad influencers, and other informed audiences, as well. The same creative gifts that distinguish the efforts of ad agencies to trigger positive actions (and feelings) in consumer communities are indispensable aspects of the big picture with talent brands.

Extend your enterprise talent brand beyond recruiting initiatives. Your talent brand can become a strategic framework for continuous improvement in human capital management as a whole, supplying key elements for promoting and enriching all or many of your key employee-centered programs, from retention, to inclusion, to training and organizational development, to knowledge management, and well beyond. This is an all-important factor in a talent brand's appeal to enterprise leadership: it has strategic purchase well beyond recruiting.

An enterprise talent brand can become the thematic and creative platform on which all your human capital activities stand—from retention to inclusion to team building and well beyond. I leave it to you to connect the dots here, and to think creatively how your talent brand can serve as far more than just your recruiting engine, but a creative and compelling value platform supporting many of your strategic human capital initiatives.

Introduce the talent brand to your internal population with creativity and fanfare. Frame the introduction of your talent brand as an momentous enterprise-wide

occasion. Consider involving your organization's internal communication professionals to create appropriate live and online platforms to underscore the brand's reach and strategic value in the future of the enterprise and, just as importantly, in the continuing enhancement—through all human capital channels—of productivity, morale, and the workforce experience. Your enterprise talent brand is, after all, a concise expression of what it *feels like* to be a contributing member of your workforce. Give employees credit for embodying (and inspiring) the brand's essence, and don't hesitate to mount all these activities, live and online, in a highly visible, highly creative, and even theatrical frame.

The most important take-away from this discussion: an enterprise talent brand can be more than a recruiting enabler. It can serve as the core thematic and inspirational platform for many other human capital initiatives at your company. It can help reinforce employee loyalty, morale, and esteem for the enterprise. Through its creative expression, it can inspire potential job candidates, your own workforce and leadership, and opinion leaders in the world outside:

- To respect and esteem your enterprise's workplace culture and the shared values that animate it.
- To place a high value on their own, a potential, or even a hypothetical career in your organization, and to champion it first hand to other members of their social and professional circles.
- To spread the word about what it feels like (or must feel like) to work at your enterprise, through media and the pervasive social networks, formal and informal, that are the background engine of the talent marketplace today.

Isn't that what a brand is supposed to do?



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