

# An employer brand which compels: the surprising ingredient in your Talent Strategy

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Creating a strategy to find and develop the talent you need is now an important part of HR's role. And a surprising aspect of getting talent strategy right is to understand how the company becomes an "employer brand"; how it creates and communicates a unique offering to current and potential employees. To get your talent strategy to deliver, building a compelling employer brand turns out to be a key element of success.

Research and trends show that increasingly, a brand that makes an impact in the marketplace has to be equally appealing as an employer.<sup>1</sup>

This takes HR into new territory, with opportunities to learn from Marketing on how to create and communicate something that excites people. By using insights from psychology, it's possible to understand what drives people's connection to organisations, and how to play to these key drivers.

## Why do you need a strong employer brand?

In simple terms: if you have a great brand, you will always have your pick of the best people applying to work with you. In the war for talent, your employer brand has the ability to become a major differentiator, and savvy employees will seek out the strongest and most developmental brands.

One of the best-known employer brands, Google, shows how powerful this can be. The unique perks of working there are widely known, and every role attracts huge numbers of qualified people. But getting brand right doesn't mean emulating Google; their brand is distinct to their company and circumstances.



## What does a great brand look like?

While not all of us will be able to become a Google-esque talent magnet, creating a tailored employer brand allows you to maximise the benefits of your talent strategy.

The reasons to develop your employer brand go beyond increasing your public profile. Service businesses need to think especially deeply about their employer brand, because great service depends on more than having good people. To provide the kind of service that creates customer loyalty, staff need to have positive and genuine emotional interactions with customers, which means they need to feel positively about representing the brand.<sup>2</sup> This requires going beyond the traditional measure of employee engagement into identification. In other words, creating a brand and identity which employees connect with strongly enough that they feel pride in representing it.<sup>3</sup> Even if you aren't a customer service organisation, creating a brand which people are proud to identify with helps to drive high performance and encourage positive and supportive behaviours.

The bottom line, though, is that whether you welcome it or not, you will develop a reputation as an employer. Employees and potential employees will compare you to your peers, and word will get around. Taking your brand seriously allows you to get out ahead and shape that reputation.

Thinking about employer brand can present HR and business leaders with challenges. Branding is more conventionally owned by Marketing, and can be perceived as a "fluffy" extra rather than a core aspect of strategy. So why should HR take the lead on employer brand? For the same reasons that employee engagement has become an important metric. People's relationships to work and their employers are complex and emotionally driven, and getting the best from people takes more than just providing tangible benefits.

Thinking from a brand perspective creates a framework for combining the specific benefits you offer with the emotional relationship that your people form with the company.

In essence, there are two key elements of employer brand; the functional and the symbolic. The functional aspects of an employer brand are familiar: a strong development offering, competitive reward, effective performance management. The symbolic aspects can be less tangible: does the organisation have a mission that connects with people? Does it live its values in a consistent way? Is it an inclusive employer? Is the office a welcoming and fun place to spend time?

These symbolic aspects can also be brought to life and used as part of a powerful talent strategy, especially when the organisation consciously supports them through policies and actions.

When it comes to what makes a brand attractive, one of the most important aspects is sincerity and trust.<sup>4</sup> In the age of Facebook and Glassdoor, word of mouth travels fast and is much more convincing than a managed message, which means that your brand needs to be authentic. If it doesn't keep its promises, people will notice.

Another key principle is consistency; people management touchpoints need to be aligned with the brand if it's going to have traction. It can be tempting to think of your employer brand as something aimed primarily at potential employees, but existing employees are at least as important. Not only are they the people whose talent you most need to harness, but their view of the organisation carries significantly more weight than one put forward by Marketing or HR.

The right brand, therefore, needs to tap into what is genuinely good about the organisation, and look for ways to communicate and maintain it.

<sup>1</sup> Vomberg, A., Homburg, C., & Bornemann, T. (2015). Talented people and strong brands: The contribution of human capital and brand equity to firm value. *Strategic Management Journal*, 36(13), 2122–2131.

<sup>2</sup> Mosley, R. W. (2007). Customer experience, organisational culture and the employer brand. *Journal of Brand Management*, 15(2), 123–134.

<sup>3</sup> Lievens, F., Van Hove, G., & Anseel, F. (2007). Organizational identity and employer image: towards a unifying framework\*. *British Journal of Management*, 18(s1), S45–S59.

<sup>4</sup> Viktoria Rampf, L., & Kenning, P. (2014). Employer brand trust and affect: linking brand personality to employer brand attractiveness. *European Journal of Marketing*, 48(1/2), 218–236.





One way to understand the emotional elements of employer brand is to look at our most fundamental drives.

Research has suggested that we have four fundamental drives, which motivate all human behaviour: the drive to acquire, the drive to bond, the drive to learn or understand, and the drive to defend.<sup>5</sup> Each aspect can be linked to an aspect of employer brand: the drive to acquire to reward, the drive to bond to culture, the drive to learn to your development offering, and the drive to defend to the way that performance management and job resources are managed.

DRIVE	LEVER	WHAT TO DO
<b>ACQUIRE</b>	Reward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Link reward clearly to performance</li><li>▪ Make sure reward keeps up with the market</li></ul>
<b>BOND</b>	Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Value collaboration and teamwork</li><li>▪ Support the building of strong relationships</li></ul>
<b>LEARN</b>	Job Design & Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Link roles clearly to the organisation's mission</li><li>▪ Make learning valued and central</li></ul>
<b>DEFEND</b>	Performance Management & Resource Allocation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Make processes transparent</li><li>▪ Demonstrate fairness when giving recognition</li></ul>

Source: Adapted from hbr.org.uk

<sup>5</sup> Nohria, N., Lawrence, P., & Wilson, E. (2001). *Driven: How human nature shapes our choices*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

People are best engaged when all four drives are kept in a dynamic balance. In other words, when the employer brand is consistent and comprehensive, appealing to each drive in the right way.



## Developing the right employer brand: what's next?

### 1 Be radically honest

The first step in getting brand right is to take a hard look at what draws people to the organisation; if it isn't true, it won't land. What do people genuinely enjoy about their jobs? Find and share the true stories and the values that the organisation lives authentically, not the ones it aspires to. While this isn't easy, there's no shortcut around it.

### 2 Follow the story all the way through

If your job postings are great but don't match the experience of working for you, your brand will struggle to get traction. Once your new recruits have signed contracts, is the wooing over, or are they inducted and supported in an engaging way? Your brand needs to be simple and compelling enough to work across the different people management touchpoints, which means that the mission and values at the heart of it need to be right.

### 3 Help people jump sideways

The richness of internal development opportunities is critical to your attractiveness as an employer. A crucial aspect of this is the ability to make lateral moves, because these don't just provide new stretch and challenge, but increase the organisation's collaborative capacity and drive innovation. How easy is it for people to find stretch opportunities in other areas of your business? The organisation needs to balance creating stability with allowing people to branch out and try new things.

### 4 Give your culture the respect it deserves

Your culture has a huge impact on the everyday experience of employees, and the brand needs to be compatible with this. An effective culture will help people to enjoy being at work, and it doesn't have to be expensive or difficult. Sometimes small changes in the environment or in policies and approaches can make a big difference. When people join, try to balance presenting the upsides of the culture with an honest and respectful view of the downsides and give them a chance to experience your culture and understand if it's right for them.

Taking your brand as an employer seriously gives you the ability to significantly strengthen your talent strategy. Getting the mission and values right, and placing them at the heart of that strategy, will also be the key to getting a brand that compels.

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