EMPLOYER BRANDING: FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF HUMAN RESOURCE PRACTITIONERS IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

This research explores how human resource practitioners understand the concept of Employer Branding (EB) and factors fostering Employer brand internally in organizations. While reviewing the literature of EB, it has been noted that most of the research has considered the "recruitment" aspect of EB and focused on the perceptions of potential employees. Since there is a difference between the perceptions of current and potential employees regarding their organizational brand, it would be interesting to investigate the human resource practitioners for understanding their beliefs and perceptions of employer branding to identify whether an EB helps the firm in retaining the best among its employees. Using qualitative research methodology, I have conducted in-depth, in-person interviews with 15 Human resource practitioners representing diverse industries. The study's findings were derived from the thematical analysis and indicated that most of the participants were adequately aware of what Employer branding is and that they tend to boost employer branding in several ways. The participants also commonly identified autonomy in their job, Reputation, job orientation, power of communication, participative management, employee enculturation and socialization, two-way communication, role modelling and Decision making authority as internal brand-boosting factors. This study identified several insightful remarks to be further researched in Employer branding.

Keywords*: employer branding, human resource practitioners, interview, qualitative research*

INTRODUCTION

As a long term human resource strategy to attract and retain the talented workforce, employer branding (EB) is getting attention nowadays among human resource practitioners and academicians. Just as a brand is used to differentiate people, places and firms, employer branding mix field marketing and human resource management (Edwards, 2009). Ambler and Barrow (1996) argued that the prime role of EB is to improve the recruitment and increase retention as they defined the term EB is the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified within the employing company" (P. 187). In a similar vein, recently, Tanwar and Prasad (2017) defined EB as "a set of tangible and intangible benefits offered by the organization to attract potential employees and retain existing employees" (P.392). While reviewing the literature of EB, it has been noted that a majority of the research has considered the "recruitment" aspect of EB and focused on the perceptions of potential employees (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Berthon, Ewing, & Hah, 2005; Srivastava, 2010).

Within this background, Maxwell and Knox (2009) urge academicians to focus on studying the EB from the perspective of the existing employees and identifying its effects on employee attitudinal variables as several such research showed that EB had been associated with various attitudinal variables including greater employee affinity, satisfaction and loyalty (Davies, 2008), employee satisfaction and commitment (Priyadarshi, 2011), satisfaction and identification (Schlager, Bodderas, Maas, & Cachelin, 2011) satisfaction, commitment and retention (Ito, Brotheridge, & McFarland, 2013) and engagement (Kunerth & Mosley, 2011).

In an attempt to explore the dimensions of EB from the perspectives of existing employees, Hillebrandt and Ivens (2013) explored 12 factors as the dimensions of EB. This was the first study of its kind where items were generated from existing employees. The 12 dimensions identified were: culture, team spirit, tasks, international career and environment, benefits, reputation, work-life balance, training and development, diversity, customers, autonomy and corporate social responsibility. In another attempt to explore the dimensions of EB from the perspectives of existing employees, Jain (2013) identified four dimensions through factor analysis: management of the organization, transparency, organizational prestige, and leadership and person-organization fit. However, he emphasized the importance of exploring further dimensions of the employer brand. While studying the dimensional structure of EB, most of the research has focused on the "recruitment" aspect of EB and included the perceptions of potential employees while identifying the dimensions. Since there is a difference between the perceptions of current and potential employees regarding their organisational brand, it would be interesting to investigate the human resource practitioners for understanding their beliefs and perceptions of employer branding to identify whether an EB helps the firm in retaining the best among its employees.

Against this backdrop, this paper aims to explore how human resource practitioners understand Employer branding from a practical perspective to address the new knowledge to this field.

Employer branding in Sri Lanka

While very few studies have been conducted on Employer branding in Sri Lanka, being a global phenomenon, it is necessary to give the same platform of employer branding in a global context. A recent study addressed the topic of Employer branding in Sri Lanka by Weerakotuwa and Adikaram in 2013 revealed the employer branding strategies in Sri Lankan strategies in attracting prospective employees. However, there does not seem to be much attention to exploring the view of exiting employees' perspective on Employer branding. With this absence of specific focus on existing employees' perspective, addressing this gap, this study will address the view of Human resource practitioners' view of Employer branding as they are the existing employees in organizations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The information for the present study is derived from semi-structured, in-depth interviews carried out with 15 human resource practitioners in Sri Lankan organizations. The interviews were conducted in both Tamil and English languages and the interviews conducted in Tamil were translated to English. With the permission of the participants, interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed for analysis. The participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique through personal contacts and snowballing as it is a purposeful method of data collection in qualitative research (Naderifar, Hamideh Fereshteh, 2013). Respondents represented different industries and various organisational positions from the public and private sectors, including manufacturing, banking, insurance, and education.

A brief background of the participants is provided in table 1.

Table 1: Descriptions of participants

Participants	**Job title**	**Type of organization**	**Years of Experience**
Participant-1	Assistant HR Manager	Manufacturing	10 years
Participant-2	HR Manager	Banking	15 years
Participant-3	HR Manager	Education Administrative	6 years
Participant-4	Head of HR	Insurance	8 years
Participant-5	Reward Manager	Apparel	12 years
Participant-6	HR officer	Construction	7 years
Participant-7	HRD Executive	Training centre-Vocational	9 years
Participant-8	Senior Manager-HR	MNC-Transport	6 years
Participant-9	HR Consultant	Education	5 years
Participant-10	HR Manager	Hotel	

Participant-11	Resourcing manager	IT	3 years
Participant-12	Director	Health Sector	14 years
Participant-13	Learning and Development Manager	Education	10 years
Participant-14	HR Manager	Insurance	5 years
Participant-15	Assistant HR Manager	Hotel	7 years

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The thematic analysis was carried out for the findings of the Research. In qualitative research, thematizing meanings as one of the diverse analytic traditions helps build the reporting patterns in exploratory studies (Braun and Clarke 2006). As Braun Clarke (2006) explained, the steps of the analysis, themes and patterns have been derived from the transcribed interviews as research findings.

The understanding from the HR practitioners in organizations, this study revealed that there is a strong bond between employer branding and talent retention of existing employees. A similar understanding of employer branding concept can be noted from the response from participant two, HR manager in the banking sector, who said:

"We perceive Employer branding as an innovative technique that we should adopt to strengthen the competitive positions of employees by developing their capabilities. It creates competition among the organizations in terms of maintaining better working place".

As an HR manager in the banking sector has stated, they try to attract the outsider most to survive in customer-based business. Improvements of the internal brand is still in the traditional method. Similarly, this has been stated by the Human resource manager, respondent-14 in Insurance Sector; there are some internal branding strategies of EB

"I am working on the corporate brand platform in participative management techniques in service types of branding. This is a good sign of every organization where internal branding strategies exist".

With this understanding from the practitioners in financial service sectors, EB is a king strategy of Competent workforce in surviving. This is a common understanding of the EB as it is defined by Ambler and Barrow (1996). Most Human resource practitioners appear to believe that EB is only providing benefits to their employees. As it is stated by participants 1 and 5 it is clear that they understand

"EB is a kind of benefits that they are providing to their employees. As EB is playing important role among the generation Y where the workforce is very technology savvy. We really expect that much of technological advancement in handling organizational matters, especially use of social media for branding the organization."

Only very few participants agreed that Employer branding depends not only on tangible things but also on intangible things in the organization.

Participants who are being as HR managers in the hotels industry stated that

"We believe the real brand image can be built by creating value to our employees by keeping them satisfied and oriented with organization. It relies on employee enculturation and socialization".

For example, participant 8 presented his view as:

"Employer branding is image of our company, where we are value adding to our employees, creating corporate culture for organization which is very unique for us to feel proud about my company".

In the same context in past research, Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) further state that EB should be attractive to the target audience. It was interesting to note that some practitioners who are from the education sector, as HR consultants mentioned,

"Power of autonomy in their jobs and rights to give their suggestions will increase the brand of communication. Allowing the organizational members to the two way communication would be the best way to represent the EB internally".

As HR consultants state it in learning and development, participant 3 and participant 9 addressed,

"Where you let the wise platform for the development scope will create brand among the existing employees. Being a role model for those who are inline of developmental stage, will give strong brand personality"

It was also clear to that certain extent employer branding is shaping the self-esteem of the employees. It clarified that employer brand is different from the concept of employer branding where the former focuses on the elements, content and targeted impact of employment value propositions, while the latter focuses on the process or activities related to the process of devising, communicating and delivering (Ambler & Barrow, 1996).

However, some other Human resource practitioners explained; employer branding should consider progressive culture and behaviour. As participant 11 said,

"Branding in marketing can be built by promotions and advertisement, EB can be brightened by progressive behaviour and culture among the practitioners".

It is also noteworthy that there are some other social factors that practitioners additionally what keep reputation in their living community will urge the employees to shine in the organization. Therefore, considering those aspects will help to form an EB strategy.

CONCLUSION

This study disclosed that many factors, including autonomy in their job, Reputation, job orientation, power of communication, participative management, employee enculturation and socialization, two-way communication, role modelling and Decision-making authority as internal brand-boosting factors are the factors of Employer branding. Evidence derived from the study indicates that valuable factors boost employer

branding among the existing employees. In handling the way of implementing EB strategies from existing employees and creating the culture of the attractiveness of existing employees will brand externally.

Directions for future research

As employers branding is a triplicate responsibility of Human resources, Marketing and general management, future research could be conducted to get the views to form the marketing and communications staff on the EB concept by changing the view of looking at the HR concept from marketing practitioners. Moreover, the study could be prolonged to other industry sectors globally. However, small and middle-scale companies were also left out from our study that ought to be included in future studies.

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