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EMPLOYER BRANDING IN BUILDING EMPLOYEE RELATIONS

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Purpose: The aim of the article is to determine the importance of employer branding in building external and internal relationships with employees and candidates. The article indicates the components, tools, and benefits of a strong employer brand.
Design/methodology/approach: The research involved a study of specialized literature on employer branding, dedicated to the development of the concept as well as its theoretical and practical aspects. A total of 45 publications, including monographs and scientific articles, were used.
Findings: The article emphasizes the importance of various areas in shaping a strong employer brand and identifies tools used in employee relations, which contribute to achieving economic and social benefits. It also affects attracting and developing talent, thus shaping the organization's current and future competitive ability.
Research limitations/implications: Undoubtedly, it is worth continuing research on companies and employees in the future, verifying the importance of individual tools and their practical application. Employer brand identification can be conducted by industry, taking into account the specific conditions of the labor market.
Practical implications: Effective employer brand management can bring tangible benefits to companies and other organizations, not only by improving their position in the labor market but also by enhancing their competitiveness through the acquisition and development of top candidates. This is particularly important in growth industries that require educated employees whose competencies are sought-after.
Social implications: The theory and practice of employer branding relate to the management of organizations and shaping the attitudes of employees and candidates seeking employment. These areas undergo constant changes that require continuous recognition.
Originality/value: The results of the analysis have both cognitive and utilitarian value, especially in the context of developing and implementing a strategy for building a strong employer brand.
Keywords: employer branding, employees, talent acquisition.
Category of the paper: General review.

1. Introduction

Contemporary organizations emphasize how valuable a skilled and committed team is. Talented and dedicated employees contribute not only to achieving exceptional goals but also to developing a competitive advantage to outperform rivals in the market (Nawracaj-Grygiel, 2019). Therefore, attracting the best candidates for employment has become a strategic goal for most companies. The conditions prevailing in the labor market can be described as a "war for talent" (Pauli, 2016). To win in this competition, achieving competitiveness against other employers is crucial. A key tool in achieving this goal is employer branding.

Employer branding (EB) is an English-language term used in foreign publications that lacks a direct Polish equivalent. It is most often translated as the employer brand or image (Muszyńska, 2020). EB is a relatively new concept that officially appeared in 1990 at a conference organized in the UK by the *Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development* (Wojtaszczyk, 2010). The concept of building the image of an organization was first described in 1996 by S. Barrow and T. Ambler as a collection of functional, economic, and psychological benefits offered by the employer, through which the company is identified with these benefits (Ambler, Barrow, 1996).

In 2001, McKinsey, in the *The War For Talent* magazine, characterized employer branding as the need to develop an organization's identity as an employer in order to attract the most valuable job candidates, referred to as talents (Dąbrowska, 2014). In a more detailed view, employer branding is also defined as a long-term strategy for managing the perception and awareness of an employer in the eyes of three key groups: employees, candidates-potential employees, and other stakeholders (Mandhanya, Shah, 2010).

2. The process of creating employer branding

Taking all stakeholder groups into account, employer branding becomes two-dimensional. One part of their activities is focused on internal actions within the organization – referred to as *internal employer branding*. The other part refers to *external employer branding* (Kampioni-Zawadka, 2014). The former is primarily aimed at the company's current employees.

Activities within the organization include *internal branding*, which refers to creating a brand inside the company. This term was highlighted by Berthon, Ewing, and Hah, who assigned the actions taken to three key areas (Berthon, Ewing, Hah, 2005):

- effective brand communication directed towards employees,
- convincing employees of the value of the company's brand,
- connecting the work performed for the employer with delivering the so-called essence of the brand.

Considering the challenges organizations face in terms of attracting and managing talent, strategic actions that build a positive brand and reputation present an extraordinary opportunity to achieve competitiveness. Therefore, building the employer brand has become one of the top strategic priorities, aimed not only at more effectively attracting the most valuable candidates but also at building employee loyalty, so that instead of leaving, employees choose to grow within the organization (Nawracaj-Grygiel, 2019). In addition to increased loyalty, a strong employer brand can also positively impact employee motivation. Table 1 presents the benefits of an organization having a strong employer brand.

Table 1.
Benefits of a strong employer brand

Personal benefits	**Benefits of building a brand**
Improving the quality of human resources – talented employees	
• Increase in employee motivation. • Reduction of employee turnover. • Easier and shorter recruitment. • Lower costs.	• Stronger brand of the organization. • Stronger brands of the products or services offered.

Source: Wojtaszczyk, 2010, p. 21.

Contrary to appearances, the essence of employer branding is not to legitimize the organization with a strong employer brand, but rather to support it in its efforts to create value for specific stakeholder groups by meeting their expectations and needs. The positive recognition of the organization in the labor market represents an intermediate goal (Wojtaszczyk, 2010).

The literature outlines four types of approaches to achieving this intermediate goal: strategies related to human resource management, methods for building the brand, the internalization of the company's goals and values, and the company's reputation as an employer of choice (Wojtaszczyk, 2010).

The process of building an employer brand is divided into four phases, constituting one full cycle (Muszyńska, 2020):

- Phase 1 is analytical in nature. It involves diagnosing the current state by examining the present image, awareness, and consistency of the employer's message. It usually begins with determining the current identity of the organization, followed by creating a vision of the desired image. The effect of this procedure is to compare and define the image gap.
- Phase 2 is conceptual in nature. It involves selecting and creating tools, projects, or communication channels that will be used to bring the organization closer to its intended goal.
- Phase 3 focuses on implementing and executing previously planned actions.
- Phase 4 includes tasks connected with control and evaluation. The actions taken earlier are monitored and assessed for their correctness and effectiveness.

Consistency is an extremely important value in the process of building an employer brand, both in terms of overall branding activities (including external and internal communication) and alignment with the company's business strategy: its mission, vision, and development goals. The lack of integrity between the message and business decision prevents achieving a positive and authentic outcome. Communication and branding actions must be true, genuine and connected to the organization's activities in other areas (Kampioni-Zawadka, 2013).

In addition to ensuring authenticity and consistency in communication, the key components in building a strong employer brand include (Born, Kang, 2024):

- developing a distinctive, up-to-date, and unique message,
- selecting appropriate communication channels,
- providing a clear message about the organization's values, culture, and business goals,
- measuring the effectiveness of actions in attracting talent and meeting employee needs,
- using the most authentic method of promoting the organization - employee advocacy - i.e. encouraging employees to share their opinions, to recommend the organization and stand up for it,
- continuous evaluation and improvement of the Employer Value Proposition (EVP).

The Employer Value Proposition is an integral part of the employer brand and is considered a key factor in the decision-making process of prospective and current employees regarding joining and staying with the company (Pham, Vo, 2022). It determines the attractiveness and competitiveness of working in a given organization.

EVP allows to determine which employer offers more attractive conditions, and consequently, which one is considered more desirable. Changing jobs has become increasingly common when the current employer does not offer sufficiently attractive work conditions. This is confirmed by the results of a study from April 2024, in which 46% of respondents declared the offer of better financial conditions from another employer as the reason for changing jobs. 30% indicated receiving a more favorable form of employment from another organization, while 36% of respondents stated dissatisfaction with their previous employer as the reason for the change (Randstad Research Institute, 2024).

EVP serves as the foundation of the employment offer and a statement from the employer regarding the expectations it meets, while also providing information about the costs (investments) required to take full advantage of the offer. Due to the increasingly intense competition for talent, companies are trying to offer more favorable conditions, making EVP an attractive calling card. To ensure that the value proposition meets all stakeholder expectations and can serve as a competitive element of the employer brand, it should be based on five pillars: sincerity, stability, attractiveness, emotionality, and uniqueness (Wojtaszczyk, 2010).

The process of creating an attractive and convincing employer image is unique and complex. The literature identifies five key elements without which an employer brand cannot be considered complete. The first component is the strength of the organization's brand in relation to its products or services. Products of a strong brand are more positively associated and additionally more desirable than those of competitors. This psychological mechanism also applies to the labor market, where an employer associated with a strong product brand is more attractive than one with lesser recognition and reputation (Stuss, 2016).

Organizational culture is the second essential component. It is defined as the set of principles and values adopted within a given organization, referring to three elements: the environment, the organization itself, and its participants. The main factors influencing organizational culture include the impact of dominant leaders, legislation and the organization's environment, customers, the company's history and traditions, organizational structure and resources, technologies used, products and services, expectations, the applicable information and control system, the system of rewards and penalties, together with the goals, values, and beliefs of the team members (Serafin, 2015).

The third element of a strong employer brand is work-life balance, which refers to the balance between professional and personal life. Work-life balance is defined as the ability to fulfill professional obligations without compromising responsibilities in other areas of life, such as family (Delecta, 2011). In the modern labor market, a company will not attract employees if it is not able to ensure that their personal life remains unaffected.

The fourth component is the work environment and conditions, which relate not only to issues of workplace health and safety but also to the atmosphere and attitudes promoted by key members of the organization, including management and HR department (Stuss, 2016).

Motivational factors, both material and immaterial, constitute the fifth and final component that an employer can offer to employees. This category includes financial benefits, non-financial perks, the position within the company hierarchy, the type and role of the work performed, and the planned career development (Ashwini, Aparna, Sudhakar, 2011).

3. Employer branding tools in shaping external and internal relations

Employer branding serves two key functions for an organization – it attracts potential employees and also stimulates the current team members, specifically their alignment with and commitment to the organization. According to the model created by Backhaus and Tikoo, the final result of employer branding efforts is to build the employer's attractiveness and employee productivity. Figure 1 presents the structure of employer branding according to Backhaus and Tikoo.

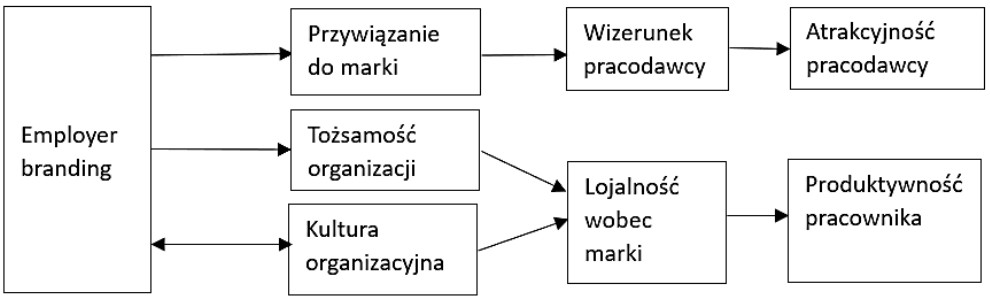

Figure 1. The structure of employer branding – Backhaus and Tikko model.

Source: Backhaus, Tikoo, 2004, p. 505.

In order to achieve the desired outcomes, employer branding efforts must successively influence brand attachment, organizational identity, and organizational culture, which in turn affects the employer brand itself. Brand loyalty is responsible for creating the employer's image, through which the organization can gain attractiveness in the eyes of stakeholders. Organizational identity and culture directly impact employee loyalty to the brand, which in turn affects their productivity (Backhaus, Tikoo, 2004). By focusing on the values highlighted in Figure 2, organizations reach for a variety of different tools.

In the literature, employer branding tools are typically grouped into three general categories: human resource management tools, marketing tools, and tools related to the broad communication conducted by the organization (Wojtaszczyk, 2012). Table 2 presents examples of tools most commonly used in practice.

Table 1.
Most frequently used employer branding tools

Tool	Type of employer branding
Financial and non-financial incentives	internal and external
Flexible working conditions	internal and external
Modern internal communication tools – intranet	internal
Participation in contests and employer certification programs	internal and external
Employee satisfaction surveys	internal and external
Developed training system	internal and external
Clear career paths	internal and external
Internal recruitment	internal
Competitions, gamifications	internal and external
Team-building activities – events, trips	internal and external
Referral programs	internal and external
Organization or participation in industry events and initiatives	internal and external
Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)	internal and external
Participation in job fairs	external
Activities at universities and colleges, including ambassador programs	external
Internship and trainee programs	external
Open days	external
Company social media	external
Well-developed company website	external
Career pages	external
Recruitment advertisements	external
Modern recruitment methods	external
Employee advocacy	external

Source: own study summarized after: Szczepański, 2013, p. 167 and Stuss, 2016, pp. 23-25.

One of the key issues in employer attractiveness is the use of financial and non-financial motivators. The first group includes all forms of financial remuneration for work, such as base salary, bonuses, awards, or commissions. As for non-financial benefits, the most commonly offered options are private healthcare, company equipment (phone, laptop, etc.), company cars, meal subsidies, private life insurance, fitness cards, gift vouchers, or points on cafeteria platforms (Szczepański, 2013).

Providing employees with flexible working conditions is another tool increasingly chosen by employers. Allowing employees to choose their working hours independently is becoming standard, and some organizations also implement non-standard working hours while ensuring task performance and efficiency (Gonera, 2018).

Shortening the workweek by several hours or even by one full working day has also been gaining popularity as a solution in this area (Łukaszuk, 2019). Some organizations opt for fully remote work, while many adopt a hybrid model, where they allow employees to work outside the office for a certain percentage of their time. Another increasingly common trend is the so-called "workation", which allows employees to work from outside the country (Sidor-Rządkowska, 2022).

An extremely important tool affecting the emotional aspects of workplace attractiveness is the use of modern and effective internal communication. Properly managed communication impacts greater trust and loyalty within the team, positively fosters the sense of belonging, and reduces the feeling of isolation. It builds understanding and integration, shapes team atmosphere, and facilitates bonding, conflict resolution, and strengthening trust and loyalty (Ober, 2018). Modern internal communication tools include (Chwiałkowska, 2012):

- use of Intranet – a dedicated closed system for internal communication within an organization, typically including features such as email, document libraries, reservation mechanisms (for office spaces, conference rooms, equipment, etc.), contact lists, address books, shared schedules, calendars, and more (Adamczyk, Gębarowski, Kandefer, 2004),
- dedicated business-related communicators, e.g. Teams or Slack,
- company social media.

The use of these tools not only facilitates simple and quick communication but also improves operations, transforms organizational culture, automates decision-making processes, and creates virtual tools and spaces that strengthen internal team collaboration. As a result, these tools contribute to increased efficiency and cost savings (Kandefer, Mazurek, 2004).

Measuring employee satisfaction and evaluating offered benefits is another commonly used tool. These activities can take the form of internal surveys or external initiatives such as polls, competitions, or audit-type programs. These activities not only help assess the company's situation, create benchmarks, and compare implemented solutions with those of other participants, but also generate positive publicity and brand recognition (Berłowski, 2013).

Tools particularly valued by young employees include: training opportunities, as well as clear prospects for future development and career paths, enabling advancement in the organizational hierarchy (Szczepański, 2013). A contemporary trend is also to provide access to partner training platforms, cover education costs (including academic education, obtaining certifications, external training, or language courses), or offer a designated training budget for employees to use throughout the year (Gonera, 2018). Presenting a sample internal development path already at the recruitment stage has become essential (Otola, Raczek, 2016). An attractive initiative for employees is conducting internal recruitment and supporting team members in migrating between various company divisions and departments (Bednarska-Olejniczak, 2015).

Initiatives that positively impact employee integration and workplace atmosphere constitute another type of employer branding tool. A traditional approach involves organizing trips and team-building activities aimed at fostering bonds and a sense of community among employees, which positively influences their loyalty to the team and the entire organization. Additionally, documented trips and events can serve as promotional materials for the company, and simultaneously act as a tool to attract potential employees (Kolasa, 2017).

The group of tools supporting integration also includes competitions and gamification, which include playful activities based on group or individual competition, scored and culminating in the announcement of a winner (Woźniak, 2015). By using the desire for competition and rewards, employers can motivate employees to complete various tasks, often aligned with the organization's values, with a level of engagement that would be challenging to achieve in another way. Examples of stimulating employee behavior through gamification include (Woźniak, 2015):

- photo competitions from shared activities, meeting specific requirements,
- awarding points for daily physical activity,
- organizing meetings of groups of participants at the same level of advancement.

Another tool that combines talent attraction and employee engagement is referral programs. The essence of these programs is to acquire new candidates for ongoing recruitment by having current team members recommend or refer friends, in exchange for additional benefits, such as financial bonuses (Karolewska-Szparaga, Kołoszycz, Wilczyński, 2023).

Participating in and organizing events or industry projects are tools that also evoke a lot of interest. Such activities help gain publicity and build recognition as an expert in a given field. Examples of such activities include participating in or sponsoring industry conferences, organizing workshops, courses and webinars, running blogs, forums or social media pages, publishing articles, hosting podcasts or organizing industry-related competitions (Nazdrowicz, 2015).

The next type of tools are those related to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Operating according to a coherent and distinctive CSR strategy and effectively communicating it in the labor market allows to build an image of a responsible and environmentally engaged

organization. This approach creates a competitive advantage in the eyes of many stakeholders (Berniak-Woźny, 2015).

Another type of activity is one typically aimed at external audiences: potential candidates and employees, including students. An increasing number of organizations are introducing ambassador programs, which involve collaboration with selected students whose task is to connect the student group with the organization. The ambassador directly promotes the company as a good employer, informs about internships, apprenticeships, or projects offered. They also recruit new talents from among students. More extensive academic initiatives may also include organizing classes, competitions, or funding specific initiatives (Sobczak, 2018).

Other popular external employer branding tools include: participation in job fairs, organizing open days, regular activity in social media, maintaining a well-developed and extensive company website, including a detailed section dedicated to working in the organization and career opportunities, carefully crafted recruitment announcements, modern recruitment methods such as the use of videos, quizzes and workshops, as well as the previously mentioned employee advocacy. All of these initiatives aim to positively stimulate the inflow of talent into the organization. The exact impact of employer branding activities has been described in the next section.

4. The impact of employer branding on attracting talent

In reference to the essence of employer branding defined by K. Wojtaszczyk, which involves creating value for specific stakeholder groups, one of the primary target groups are undoubtedly the future employees. All external employer branding initiatives largely focus on them (Kampioni-Zawadka, 2014).

Organizations worldwide, regardless of their size and industry, face challenges in finding and retaining best and most talented employees. This is why efforts to ensure attractiveness in their eyes are such an important matter. Employer branding can be seen as a field of work pedagogy, particularly in relation to career development and maintaining an optimal work environment. The main assumption in this area is taking care of employees through conscious and deliberate actions that align with the idea of partnership, while fostering a mentor-student (or mentor-mentee) relationship between the employer and the employee. By shaping the employer's image in this way, we simultaneously create and implement an image strategy while demonstrating care and attention to employees' interests (Bartkowiak, Szłapińska, 2014).

Only such attitude and the continuous pursuit to achieve an image of an attractive, engaged employer will allow organizations to attract the valuable candidates and to maintain their constant interest in the job market. This translates into easier and faster identification of well-matched profiles, as well as into reduced recruitment costs. Another effect of employer

branding activities that contributes to savings is an increase in employee retention, as well as a rise in the number of hires through referrals and recommendations, reducing the need to conduct or repeat the search for suitable candidates. All the benefits resulting from a strong employer brand and related to recruitment are listed in Table 3.

Table 2.

Recruitment benefits resulting from a strong employer brand

Recruitment benefits resulting from a strong employer brand
"higher quality" candidates
alignment between hired employees, managerial expectations, and organizational culture
increased interest in the employer
higher number of applications
higher rate of accepted offers
lower recruitment costs
higher employee retention
higher number of candidates from recommendations/referrals
higher probability of recommendations of the employer by employees

Source: Gallup, Employment Brand & Employee Value Proposition, https://www.gallup.com/workplace/215378/gallup-employer-brand-employee-value-proposition.aspx, DOA: 12.05.2024 r.

The literature indicates that a strong employer brand positively influences many aspects of an organization's life (Frankowska, 2015). The results of a 2014 study showed that the main benefits were most often associated with new employees.

The most frequently recognized benefit of employer branding activities was the ease of attracting candidates, closely followed by increased employee engagement and recognition as an employer of choice. The last mentioned benefit was the reduction in recruitment costs.

In addition to benefits directly related to recruitment, effective employer branding activities can lead to positive economic outcomes in the long term. Organizations that consistently work to be seen as attractive employers have a much greater chance of attracting the right people, and consequently, gaining a competitive advantage. This, in turn, translates into a strong financial performance. A company's good financial situation forms the foundation of a solid employer brand and also allows for covering the costs of more advanced recruitment tools and more competitive employer branding strategies (Nazdrowicz, 2015).

Talent management is another important activity in building an employer brand. It refers to all actions aimed at recognizing and acquiring talents, retaining them, and motivating them to achieve the highest goals (Morawski, Mikuła, 2005). An effective policy for managing skills and potential within an organization can positively influence its attractiveness in the labor market (Kampioni-Zawadka, 2015). Nowadays, career development involves not only upskilling but also reskilling, which means acquiring entirely new skills in a different field or even a complete career change. Employees are therefore looking for organizations where their opportunities will not be limited to just one position or even one potential area of expertise (Li, 2022).

Assuming that every individual has developmental potential, and that providing the right conditions is enough to reveal it, it can be presumed that each employee, when surrounded by proper care and support, can achieve exceptional results (Kampioni-Zawadka, 2003). The challenge for the employer is to provide an environment conducive to development, thus meeting the employees' needs while also aligning their growth with the company's strategic goals (Bartkowiak, Szłapińska, 2014).

When paying attention to many aspects of employer branding activities, it is easy to notice that, in addition to the image-related benefits, they are also a source of profits resulting from the proper stimulation of human resources. Employees themselves decide on the use of individual resources, so only through care for their engagement and dedication can the organization achieve success.

Human resources are also crucial in developing competitiveness, which, in rapidly growing industries, is the fundamental goal of every company.

5. Conclusions

The foundation of success for modern organizations lies in skilled and engaged employees. However, labor market conditions make acquiring and retaining the best talented candidates exceptionally difficult. In the face of these challenges, innovative recruitment and an attractive employer branding strategy have become a necessity.

Due to strong competition and the gaps in experienced and educated specialists, employers must ensure that their job offers are attractive and that the values and image of the organization encourage candidates to join the team.

Key decision-making factors when choosing an employer include the opportunities for development and flexibility, especially in the context of changes and remote work. In the practice of companies and employees, understanding and knowledge about employer branding seem to be insufficient, as evidenced by the high variability in job positions. In practice, the impact of both financial and non-financial tools is constantly being evaluated. The demographic situation and differences in attitudes of successive generations entering the labor market also play a significant role in this process.

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