



Turning Your Organization into a Talent Magnet

By Patrick Ibarra

Jurisdictions are increasingly pursuing a more focused approach to strengthening their employer brand, working to entice and retain talent.

The composition of today's workforce is changing dramatically, with seasoned, talented professionals leaving their jobs, taking significant amounts of institutional knowledge with them. Replacing that knowledge capital — especially the ability to solve problems, make decisions, exercise prudent judgment, and ensure that services and programs are executed in a timely and effective manner — is difficult. At the same time, the public sector's traditional ways of attracting and retaining top-flight talent are not always effective, and can be seen as antiquated by younger job seekers. As a result, jurisdictions are increasingly pursuing a more focused approach to strengthening their employer brand, working to entice and retain talent. The fundamental difference between ordinary and extraordinary organizations is the collective ability of their workforce.

Consider your organization's attributes. If you were to choose one that would have the greatest influence on recruiting efforts in today's competitive markets, what would it be? Do you know the population of candidates who would find that attribute attractive? Do you know how to appeal to them so they will consider working for your organization? Understanding the answers to these and related questions is a dividing line between organizations that are able to hire and keep great talent and those that cannot.

UNDERSTANDING BRANDING

Branding is a buzzword today, but the business practice behind it isn't new. Many organizations are adopting what they call brand-building strategies, but often these are merely adopting new logos. This isn't even close. Essentially, brands influence perceptions in the mind of the public; they are living concepts that change with the organization's climate and culture. Externally, candidates perceive your employer brand as an indication of the type of employment experience they can expect. Internally, employees perceive your employer brand as how well you deliver on promises and how well they fit within your organizational culture. In short, your employer brand is your identity and reputation as an employer.

Branding is gaining so much attention today for many reasons, but one of the most important is the struggle of organizations that are losing seasoned employees to "brain drain" while also generating insufficient pools of qualified candidates. Organizations that have invested time, effort, and energy in developing their brand are finding that the advantage of building a reputation for cultivating talent is greater than they may have originally thought. In other words, these organizations are getting a "first-pick advantage" because they have the reputation for getting a "first-pick advantage." Organizations

that provide people with opportunities to learn and grow become talent magnets. By continually attracting the most promising candidates and developing them once they're hired, these organizations become higher-performing and, in turn, continue to attract the best — it's a self-renewing cycle that expands the capacity of the organization to tackle tougher and more demanding challenges.

THE EIGHT TOUCHSTONES

There are eight touchstones that influence an employer's brand: website and social media, hiring process, job announcements, new employee orientation, the first day at work, learning and development, career development, and organizational culture. Each of these is an organizational practice that, when well designed and implemented, strengthens an organization's brand. Working well independently and in combination with the others, each touchstone communicates a powerful message about your brand.

Website and Social Media. The organization's website should offer job seekers a comprehensive view of the organization and its culture in an attractive layout with easy navigation. The site should include testimonials from existing employees about why the organization is a great place to work. Use images and video, if possible, as they elicit stronger emotional responses than text alone and help candidates who are considering your organization connect their goals to the organization's mission. Organizations are using well-produced videos to tell their story and entice candidates. In fact, if you want a more appealing, modern-looking web-

site with high-quality multimedia (such as videos and podcasts), you should consider hiring a creative design firm to update your site.

Many employers still rely on traditional methods for attracting the attention of potential recruits (e.g., advertising in newspapers' print and online editions). But consider social media channels — notably Facebook and Twitter — to get noticed. A Facebook add-on application will automate the process of posting jobs listed on your organization's website onto its Facebook page. Target specific types of candidates by joining specialized Facebook groups; this allows the recruiters to engage directly with people who have the ideal skills. Use LinkedIn not only to promote your employer brand, but also to recruit potential employees — in fact, the site should be a significant part of the organization's recruitment strategy. LinkedIn profiles tend to include much more detailed work and educational histories than Facebook profiles.

Hiring Process. What does your hiring process say about you? First impressions are critical, and bad impressions during the hiring process lead to negative perceptions of your employer brand, which can drive your best candidates away. Having a web-based job application is important; candidates from all walks of life want ease and convenience when applying for positions. Timeliness is also crucial when recruiting. While many public-sector agencies require a series of written exams and performance tests as part of their hiring process, these often labor-intensive assessments need to be administered quickly if candidates are to remain interested.

Job Announcements. The world is teeming with smart, skilled, passionate people who are blue-chip prospects. However, these types of people won't be remotely interested in your organization if your posted job announcement is an utterly boring job description. Replace such announcements with more of a social marketing approach. Send a powerful message: *Join our organization and be a part of something truly outstanding as you make your mark!*

New Employee Orientation. Speaking of outdated practices, stop the monthly or quarterly new employee orientation programs in which the organization administrator shows up to offer some good tidings. These reflect good intentions but often generate little, if any, positive dividends. New employees size up their new surroundings quickly, well before the compulsory meeting with the top administrator, so whatever is expressed during that meeting will have minimal effect, if any, on shaping that employee's perspective. Bringing new employees on board is a process, not an event, comprising a series of planned activities to help ease them into the organization so they can quickly contribute at a high level. For instance, give new employees a tour of all the organization's departments, stopping in each one to meet other employees. This will help them get to know their coworkers and the functions of other departments. Too often, employees are "dropped in" to their own department and left to figure out the rest on their own. Is it any wonder that many employees lack the big-picture perspective so many leaders are looking for?

The First Day of Work. Nothing turns off new employees more than showing up for their first day of work and finding that no one is expecting them. It can send a disheartening message that they're not valued, and they may regret their decision in choosing to work for you. This kind of low morale right off the bat can quickly derail performance. Your organization's brand relies on that first day for the new employee to create the necessary traction for high performance and to ensure all the terrific comments expressed by the organization's hiring team about their employer are actually true. Beyond the basics of having the workspace prepared, business cards printed, e-mail accounts set up, uniforms available, and so on, your organization should assign buddies or mentors to show new employees the ropes, introduce them around, take them to lunch, and acquaint them with the workplace and their coworkers. The buddy or mentor doesn't have to be their immediate supervisor, but someone who will have the time, enthusiasm, approachability, and credibility to help the new employee become more familiar with their workplace, including articulating expectations about performance.

Equally vital for the new employee to contribute their talent quickly is crafting a customized work plan that outlines goals and objectives to be met within the first 30 days, 90 days, and six months. Creating a clear and compelling work plan will give new employees vision, which will lead them down the road to success.

Learning and Development. Progressive organizations realize that in today's workplace, candidates and employees alike are seeking (and

usually expecting) an employer that chooses to invest in developing their skills and capabilities as a strategy for elevating employee performance and improving organizational effectiveness. Again, the employer's reputation of being an organization that makes strategic decisions to invest in its own workforce, even through tough economic times, is important because it helps attract, retain, and develop talented people. Gone are the days when training was first on the chopping block when budgets tightened. Your organization should begin linking precious training dollars with the desires of those employees who are seriously interested and committed to improving their performance trajectory. It's time to discard the idea of training as a budget expense and lean toward viewing it as an investment in the future of both employees and the organization.

**Organizations need
talented people more
than talented people need
organizations.**

Career Development. Clear and well-defined career development plans are rare. A good example can often be found in public safety departments, which have a hierarchical structure predicated on command and rank and are thus well suited for employees who are interested in pursuing the next rung on the ladder. On the other hand, many other departments do not have a structure that lends itself to such clear career paths. Consequently, it is imperative, regardless of the organization's size, to create a process involving depart-

ment directors, human resource department staff members, and interested employees in co-creating a customized career development plan for those employees. Be careful not to assume classification levels are career paths — they aren't. Instead, they're tools for compensation purposes. While at a glance this process may seem particularly onerous, it will generate positive results that benefit both the employees who participate and the organization itself.

Organizational Culture. In addition to the formal mechanisms available for building an employer's brand, another factor is hugely influential — the organization's culture. Organizational culture consists of shared beliefs and values established by leaders and then communicated and reinforced, ultimately shaping employee perceptions, behaviors, and understanding. The classic example of a dysfunctional organizational culture is one in which leaders say one thing, but do another.

CONCLUSIONS

Making a conscious decision to strengthen an employer's brand has less to do with spending dollars and more to do with creating a strategic plan toward being a modern, credible, and principled organization. ■

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