



WHAT MAKES AN EMPLOYER ATTRACTIVE? A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF EMPLOYER BRANDING AND JOB CHOICE

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Abstract: *In a labour market where competition for the workforce is growing, how an organisation positions itself as an employer can influence its ability to attract candidates and keep employees within the company. This study analyzes the perceptions of potential employees on the employer brand and the factors that influence their choice of a job, through qualitative research based on focus groups. The results show that the reputation of the organization contributes to its attractiveness, but the final decision depends on several criteria. Remuneration has been highlighted as one of the most important factors, along with professional development opportunities, work environment, internal communication and benefits offered. Thus, employer branding strategies should combine a positive reputation with concrete benefits and an attractive professional experience for employees.*

JEL classification: M31, M51, M54

Key words: employment brand, employee value proposition, organizational reputation

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of a labour market characterised by increased competition to attract and retain talent, the ability of organisations to differentiate themselves no longer depends exclusively on their products, services or positioning in the consumer market. How a company is perceived in the labour market can also help to differentiate it from other employers and strengthen its position in relation to competing organisations. Thus, employer branding has developed as a



strategic approach through which organizations aim to build and communicate a distinctive and attractive image for current and potential employees (Azhar et al., 2024; Kruskovic et al., 2023). The changes in the way candidates choose their job, but also in the expectations they have from an organization, have made the employer brand become an increasingly important role in the recruitment process. Currently, candidates have the opportunity to compare several organizations before making a decision, and the reputation of a company can help to form a first impression about the experience they might have in the workplace and, implicitly, to the intention of applying for a particular job (Silva & Dias, 2023). However, choosing an employer is not just about the company's reputation. Specialty literature shows that in the decision-making process, both concrete aspects, such as salary and benefits, as well as opportunities for professional development, the environment and organizational culture or professional relations (Dassler et al., 2022; Gandasari et al., 2024) matter.

In this context, it becomes important to understand how much more the prestige and reputation of an organization weighs when a candidate has to compare them with what actually gives them a job. A well-known name can make a company more attractive and increase interest in a position available, but the decision to apply is also influenced by more concrete aspects. The benefits offered and the possibilities of professional development, for example, have an important role in the formation of this decision (Gandasari et al., 2024). In addition, not all candidates look at these criteria in the same way. Professional experience can change the order of priorities: people who have already worked tend to pay more attention to the salary, while for those who are at the beginning of their career the reputation of the employer may have a greater weight (Samoliuk et al., 2022).

Starting from this, this study aims to analyze what an attractive employer means for potential employees and what comes to matter when they choose a job. The research has a qualitative approach and follows the reputation of the organization in relation to salary, possibilities of professional development, work environment, communication and value proposition for employees. Interest is directed not only on the importance of each element, but especially on how they are balanced by candidates when assessing a possible employer and reaching a choice.



2. LITERATURE REVIEW

As the employer brand has become increasingly relevant to organizations, interest in understanding how candidates form an opinion about a possible job has also grown. This perception is built from more information and expectations that the person has about the company. The reputation and image of the organization can count in the formation of a first impression, but aspects related directly to the future of the job, such as salary, career development opportunities, work environment and experience that the candidate expects to have in the company, are also taken into account. Candidates' perception is not formed on the basis of a single element, but is influenced by several factors, from the company's image and reputation to salary, professional development opportunities, the working environment and the experience that the organization offers to employees. For this reason, employer branding can be viewed as a multidimensional concept. Its efficiency depends largely on how well it fits the image that the organization builds and communicates it with the expectations, needs and priorities of the people it wants to attract.

2.1 The role of the employer brand in building organizational attractiveness.

The employer branding concept brings together elements specific to marketing and human resources management and focuses on how the organization builds its relationship with current employees, but also with the people it wants to attract in the future. Among the first important contributions in this field is that of Ambler and Barrow (1996), who analyze the employer brand in terms of functional, economic and psychological benefits associated with a job. Subsequently, employer branding began to be seen more and more as a strategic tool through which organizations build their own identity on the labor market and try to attract, motivate and retain employees (Bharadwaj, 2023).

In a competitive job market, organizations try to highlight those things that set them apart from other employers. When assessing a possible employer, candidates can take into account both what the workplace offers them, from the level of remuneration and benefits available to working conditions and prospects for professional development, as well as issues related to the identity of the organization, such as the values promoted, the internal culture and the image that the company has built on the market. From this perspective, building an employer brand does



not just mean promoting an attractive image. It is just as important that what the organization offers concretely meets the needs and expectations of the candidates it wants to attract.

In this process, an important role is played by the attractiveness of the employer, namely the way in which an organization is considered by the candidates to be a suitable option for their professional future. Berthon et al. (2005) addresses this attractiveness from the perspective of the advantages that a person believes they could gain if they chose to work within a particular organization. Although employer branding and employer attractiveness are interdependent concepts, they are not synonymous. Employer branding refers to the strategic process by which the organization builds and communicates its identity as an employer, while employer attractiveness reflects the evaluation of this offer from the perspective of current or potential employees (Silva & Dias, 2023).

Specialty literature shows that the attractiveness of an employer is influenced by several elements, which are evaluated differently by candidates. These include the organization's reputation, work environment, reward system, training and professional development opportunities, and how the organization communicates. In the case of young people looking for a job, salary and opportunities for professional development seem to be of particular importance in assessing a potential employer (Dzhulai et al., 2022). Poloski Vokic et al. (2023) also identifies the company's image and reputation, working environment, reward system and constant access to training and development opportunities as factors contributing to a favorable perception of the employer. Another important aspect is communication. Fernandes et al. (2023) shows that the way an organization communicates internally and manages its human resources practices contributes to the construction of the employer brand. Therefore, the attractiveness of an employer is built by combining several characteristics of the organization and the professional experience it can offer to potential employees.

2.2 Employee Value Proposition and Job Choice

A central element of the employer branding strategy is the Employee Value Proposition (EVP), which brings together the benefits and experiences associated with the work relationship and contributes to the differentiation of the organization in the labor market. In this context, an employer branding strategy can start from identifying the categories of employees that the organization wants to attract, followed by building a value proposition for employees (EVP)



and communicating it through the right channels (Kuchеров et al., 2022). For this proposal to be relevant, the organisation needs to understand what candidates want and appreciate, as the criteria by which a job is assessed may differ from one group to another. Samoliuk et al. (2022) highlights that priorities differ according to the profile of candidates, so the same characteristics of an employer may have greater or less influence on the decision to work in a particular organization.

The EVP can include both concrete aspects and elements related to the overall experience offered by the organization. Salary and benefits are important components, but candidates also take into account the possibilities of professional development, work-life balance, job security or the organizational environment. According to Samoliuk et al. (2022), the way in which candidates value an employer is influenced by a combination of factors, including remuneration and benefits, job security, work-life balance, development possibilities and characteristics of the working environment.

What the organization provides can also influence the willingness of a person to apply for a particular job. Gandasari et al. (2024) analyzed the role of the employer brand along with the benefits and possibilities of professional development, and their results show that each of these components significantly contributes to the intention to apply. The opportunity to learn, acquire new skills and evolve in careers can be viewed by candidates and as a sign of the interest the organization gives to long-term employee development. A similar perspective is presented by Bharadwaj (2023), which emphasizes training and professional development as ways to strengthen, over time, the relationship between the employee and the organization.

Choosing a job often involves comparing several features of the available offers. From the perspective of the decision-making process, Kahneman (2011) shows that individual judgments can combine intuitive reactions with more careful processes of analyzing alternatives. Reported on the choice of an employer, this perspective suggests that the image of a company can create a favorable first impression, but when the candidate starts to compare more offers, concrete aspects such as salary, benefits or opportunities for professional development may end up weighing more in the final decision.

For this reason, a competitive EVP must mean more than the promise of an attractive professional experience. It is important that the organization provides a credible combination of benefits that meet the priorities of the candidates, especially since they are not the same for



everyone. Samoliuk et al. (2022), for example, found that people with professional experience tend to attach greater importance to remuneration, while for inexperienced candidates the reputation of the employer can count more. The choice of an employer can thus be seen as a process in which candidates balance the image and prestige of the organization with the concrete advantages offered by the workplace.

2.3 The role of the Employer's Reputation in choosing a Job

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To complement this perspective, the principles of influence described by Cialdini (2021), in particular social proof and authority, can help to understand how prestige and social recognition influence the perception of an employer. A well-known company, associated with good performance or appreciated by others, can benefit from a more favorable perception from the beginning from the candidates. In the same direction, the pre-suasion concept proposed by Cialdini (2016) shows that information and associations existing before a decision can influence how further information is interpreted. Thus, the reputation that a company has built over time can become an initial reference point for the candidate, subsequently influencing the way he looks at the salary, benefits or professional opportunities offered.



A company's reputation may influence the candidate's image of it, but it is not the only aspect that matters when a concrete employment opportunity arises. When considering an offer, people tend to compare what they receive immediately, such as salary and benefits, with the development prospects, working conditions, and experience they think they might have in that organization. Neither reputation has the same weight for each candidate. Samoliuk et al. (2022) shows that professional experience can change the order of these priorities, with differences between people who already have experience in the labour market and those at the beginning of their career.

In this regard, a differentiation can be made between „perceived attractiveness of the employer” and the choice that the candidate actually makes when facing several employment opportunities. A good reputation can attract attention and give the candidate a certain degree of confidence in the organization, but this does not automatically mean that the company will also become the preferred option. At the time of the choice, the prestige of the employer is balanced with the concrete elements of the offer, such as salary, benefits, development opportunities or working conditions. Analysing this difference is relevant to understanding how the positive perception of an employer brand turns into a real preference for a particular job and, subsequently, into a hiring decision.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research was exploratory and aimed to analyse potential employees' perceptions of the employer brand and to identify the main factors influencing job attractiveness and employer choice. For this purpose, a qualitative focus group was conducted in May 2024.

The participants were recruited from the students of the Transilvania University of Brasov, and the fulfillment of the criteria necessary for the participation in the study was verified through a recruitment questionnaire. Finally, 11 people participated in the focus group, aged between 22 and 45 years. Before the start of the discussion, they were presented with information on the audio recording of the session and how the data obtained were to be used. At the same time, the consent of the participants for the processing of personal data was obtained.

The guide used in the focus group was built on research objectives and combined open questions with several projective and interactive techniques. Participants completed exercises based on interval scale, completing sentences, analyzing a hypothetical situation, role play,



projective association, as well as sorting and classification activities. They aimed to surprise the way participants perceive the employer brand, the elements they associate with an attractive job and the criteria they take into account when choosing between different employers.

After the end of the session, participants' responses were transcribed, selected, and organized into a content array. The analysis was carried out in two directions. At the horizontal level, the common ideas and trends that emerged in the participants' responses were followed, and the vertical analysis focused on each participant to better capture individual perceptions and preferences. Analysing the responses from both perspectives allowed identifying the issues that mattered most for participants when assessing an employer and discussing job selection.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the answers aimed, on the one hand, to highlight the ideas and preferences that were found at the level of the entire group, and on the other hand, to observe the individual peculiarities related to the way in which the participants look at the employer brand and set their preferences for a particular employer. To this end, the data was interpreted from two perspectives. „Horizontal” analysis allowed to compare responses and highlight themes and preferences that were repeated at group level. Instead, „vertical” analysis focused on each individual participant, following their individual profile and how the different criteria of choice were combined in shaping their preferences.

4.1 Horizontal Analysis

Horizontal analysis of responses shows, first of all, that participants attach great importance to the employer brand when assessing a possible job. For most of them, the employer brand is not limited to the image of the company, but also includes aspects such as organizational culture, seriousness, way of work, mission, vision and promoted values. When asked to directly assess how much the employer brand matters in the decision to apply, the responses were generally at the top of the scale. However, there were also participants who, although they consider it important, do not see it as a decisive criterion.

As regards the attractiveness of a job, the salary was among the most frequently mentioned aspects. Alongside this, the participants focused on the team, the relationships with colleagues



and the atmosphere at work. Opportunities for advancement and working hours also appeared in their responses. Therefore, the image of an organization matters, but it is not enough for a job to be considered attractive. Candidates seem to balance financial advantages with social and professional development prospects.

Another topic that arose in the discussions was how organizations communicate their employer brand. Participants considered that active promotion can help attract and retain employees, and cited events, job fairs, and open-door days as examples of potential candidates coming into direct contact with an organization. However, the communication was not seen by all participants as decisive. From their answers it turns out that the visibility of an employer can attract attention, but the communicated image must also be supported by what the company actually offers.

Discussions about known employers have also shown how reputation contributes to the formation of expectations before a person actually works in an organization. Google has been associated with flexibility, benefits and possibilities for advancement, but participants also mentioned possible disadvantages such as high stress levels or monotony. In the case of Ipsos, the activity was perceived as interesting, diverse and demanding, while mentioning possible negative aspects, such as program rigidity or staff turnover. When comparing the two situations, most participants felt that Google employees would be more satisfied, with the salary and benefits being among the main explanations offered.

Another idea drawn from the answers relates to the match between the person and the organization in which they work. The participants associated this compatibility in particular with the existence of common values and principles between the employee and the company. At the same time, for them, integration into an organization should not involve giving up their own values or personal authenticity.

However, the projective exercises provide a more nuanced perspective on the stated importance of the employer brand. In the role-playing exercise comparing Google and Transiris, six of the ten participants involved chose Google, while four preferred Transiris. Google was associated with a strong brand, an innovative culture and development opportunities, while Transiris offered the advantage of higher pay and opportunities for rapid growth.

The difference between the stated importance of the employer brand and actual choice became even more evident in the projective association exercise. All participants expressed interest in



Goat, the company that offered the highest salary, and it was also the first choice for most participants. Google was selected by two participants as their second choice, with brand reputation being the main reason despite lower remuneration. Transiris, which offered the second-highest salary, also attracted a significant number of choices, while BCG was not selected. In this exercise, salary appeared to have the strongest influence on participants' choices.

Finally, the sorting and classification technique highlighted a more complex hierarchy of employer brand characteristics. The development and career advancement opportunities associated with EVP took the first position, followed by internal communication and involvement, reputation and image of the organization, and benefits and compensation. Diversity and inclusion, employee experience and organisational culture have taken the following positions.

4.2 Vertical Analysis

The vertical analysis complements the results obtained previously and allows a clearer observation of the differences between the participants regarding the criteria by which they evaluate an employer. Although salary, work environment, opportunities for professional development and reputation appear repeatedly in responses, the importance given to each differs from one person to another. Moreover, participants tend to combine these criteria in different ways when outlining their image of an attractive workplace.

In the case of several participants, a focus on financial benefits and concrete working conditions is observed. The salary occupies an important place in their choices, but it is analyzed together with the working atmosphere, the team, the flexibility and the possibilities of advancement. For these participants, the company's reputation may be an advantage, but it is not enough in the absence of concrete benefits that make the offer attractive.

Other responses show a stronger interest in professional development and the nature of the work done. The ability to evolve, the diversity of tasks and the avoidance of monotony were considered important by these participants. In such cases, the attractiveness of an employer is not only related to the immediate reward, but also to what the longer-term job can offer, both from the perspective of career progression and a dynamic professional experience.



For other participants, the reputation and identity of the organization were more important. Strong brands, especially Google, have generated interest by associating with reputation, benefits and an organizational culture perceived as innovative. At the same time, the evolution of the image of a brand was considered capable of influencing the interest in employment, which indicates that the perceptions of the candidates are not static.

Individual analysis also highlights a dimension associated with the compatibility between the person and the organization. For some participants, organisational culture, mission, vision, and company values were particularly important, together with the compatibility between personal and organisational principles. The sense of belonging, authenticity and the possibility of integration into a compatible collective have been integrated in the evaluation of a potential employer.

Overall, the vertical analysis suggests that there is no single candidate profile and no single attribute that can explain all employer preferences. Salary, professional development, reputation, working environment, flexibility and compatibility of values appear in combinations and with different intensities at the individual level. This diversity supports the need for employer branding and EVP strategies to take into account the existence of different priorities among potential employees.

4.3 Discussion of the Main Findings

The comparison of the two types of analysis highlights a more complex picture of how the employer brand intervenes in choosing a job, with differences between the criteria that participants say they consider important and those that are actually reflected in their choices. Although they considered the brand and reputation of the employer important, the choices made during the projective exercises show that in practice these elements were not always sufficient to determine the final option.

One of the most interesting findings of the research is the difference between the attractiveness associated with the image of an employer and the value that participants attribute to the concrete job offer. A well-known brand can arouse interest and create a favorable impression from the beginning, but this advantage can lose importance when another company offers considerably better financial conditions. This was most clearly observed in the projective exercise, where most of the participants chose the company that offered the highest salary.



However, the results do not show that the choice of an employer is determined solely by salary. When participants assessed the principal components of the brand employment separately, opportunities for professional development and advancement were considered more important than benefits and remuneration. Communication, employee engagement and the reputation of the organization have also occupied important positions. This shows a difference between what participants say they appreciate, when they generally evaluate an employer, and the criteria that come to weigh more when they have to choose between concrete offers.

The results therefore support the idea that the attractiveness of an employer is built through several elements that complement each other. Reputation may initially attract the attention of candidates, and the EVP can help the organization to differentiate itself, but the final decision is also influenced by what the workplace concretely offers. For organizations, building a strong employer brand requires more than just visibility and a well-communicated image. What the company transmits externally must also be found in the experience actually offered to employees. A competitive salary, real opportunities for professional development, a pleasant working environment and effective communication are some of the elements that can turn the promoted image into a positive and credible experience for employees.

5. LIMITATIONS

This research presents a number of limits to be considered in interpreting the results. First, the qualitative nature of the study and the small number of participants do not allow the generalization of conclusions in a wider population. The results capture the perceptions and preferences of the people who participated in the research and must be viewed, first of all, from an exploratory perspective.

Another limit is related to how employers were assessed. Participants mainly reported on the image they already had of the companies discussed and the information they knew about them, not a direct work experience in those organizations. At the same time, preference for a particular employer may also be influenced by issues that were not deepened in this study. The moment when the candidate is in his professional career, the experience gained previously, the field in which he is active or the evolutions on the labor market can change the criteria that he considers important in choosing a job.



6. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Building on the results obtained, future research could continue to analyse through quantitative studies conducted on larger and more diverse samples. A relevant direction would be to investigate the extent to which the employer's reputation, salary, professional development opportunities, value proposition for employees (EVP) and organizational culture influence the intention to apply and the final choice of an employer. Comparisons between different categories of candidates, depending on their age, field of activity or professional experience, could also highlight differences in the criteria they consider important.

Another direction could be to conduct experimental studies in which participants choose between hypothetical job offers, built in such a way as to differ in the reputation of the company, salary, benefits and development opportunities. Such an approach would allow for clearer observation of how candidates balance the prestige of an employer and the concrete advantages of the offer when they need to make a choice.

CONCLUSIONS

This research aimed to capture how potential employees perceive the employer brand and to identify the main criteria that influence the attractiveness of a job and the choice of an employer. The results show that the brand and reputation of an organization matter in forming the perception of candidates, but choosing a job is not based only on the image of the company. In making a decision, several aspects are analyzed, both related to the employer and the actual job offer.

For the participants, an attractive job is associated in particular with salary, working environment, relationships with colleagues, opportunities for development and advancement, but also with the flexibility of the program. At the same time, the way the organization promotes and communicates its image was considered important for building an attractive employer brand. The results thus show that the attractiveness of an employer is formed by a combination of factors. Financial benefits remain important, but they are valued along with professional opportunities, workplace relationships, and the experience that the organization can provide to employees.

One of the most relevant findings of the research is the difference between the importance that participants declare to give an employer's reputation and the choices they make when they have



to compare concrete offers. Although organizations with a strong image and reputation have been favorably evaluated, in the exercises of choice the salary has become an important criterion and in some situations weighed more than the prestige of the company. In other words, a well-known employer brand can initially attract attention and create a positive impression, but this advantage does not guarantee that the organization will also be the final choice when the candidate has more financially or professionally advantageous alternatives available.

At the same time, the importance given to opportunities for development and advancement shows that the value of a job is not measured only in terms of immediate benefits. Candidates also have the opportunity to evolve professionally and build their career in the long run, which highlights the role of the value proposition for employees (EVP) in employer branding strategies. This interpretation is also supported by the literature, in which both economic benefits and professional development opportunities are associated with the attractiveness of the employer and with the intention of candidates to apply for a job.

From a managerial point of view, the results show that the employer brand cannot be built just by promoting a favorable image. For this to be credible, there must be a link between the messages sent to the candidates and the reality they will encounter in the organization. The salary, the possibilities of professional development, flexibility, the working environment and the way they communicate inside the company become part of the experience that supports or, on the contrary, can contradict the image of the employer. Reputation can make a company visible and arouse the interest of candidates, but what it concretely offers can have an important role in the final choice.

Viewed as a whole, the results show that the attractiveness of an employer is formed by the meeting between „what the organization represents”, „the message that it sends” and „the experience that it offers in reality”. A strong employer brand is therefore more than just a good reputation. Organizations need to know the candidates' priorities and understand how they compare the company's prestige with the financial benefits and prospects of professional evolution before choosing a job.

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