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Employer branding: strategy for improving employer attractiveness

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Abstract

Purpose – To examine the organizational attributes that attract final-year management students towards organizations. The paper aims to study the already adopted employer branding strategies and the preferred channel through which organizations should promote employer attractiveness. Based on previous studies and current findings, a conceptual model on employer branding process has been developed and presented.

Design/methodology/approach – This article is based on semi-structured interviews, survey results and review of academic employer branding models.

Findings – It was found that among the students, most preferred organizational attributes were organizational culture, brand name and compensation. Students rated job portal to be the preferred channel for employer attractiveness. The study showed that there exists a significant and positive correlation between strong brand image and likelihood to apply.

Research limitations/implications – The survey sample was limited to private business schools only.

Practical implications – One of the sources for hiring on which corporate rely heavily is private business schools. This study provides the employers an insight to make their strategies for employer branding more effective. In the process, it benefits the prospective employees as well.

Originality/value – The study provides valuable inputs for formulating effective employer branding strategies. The novelty of the study is the conceptual model on the process of employer branding. One of the highlights of which is preferred communication channel for effectiveness of the strategies.

Keywords Strategy, Employer branding, Campus recruitment, Channel, Management students, Talent attractiveness

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

In today's era of boundary less, technology driven, rapidly changing business environment, one of the major corporate challenges is to meet the increasing demand for executive talent. The survival and success of organizations depend upon the quality of its workforce who can face the above challenges. The challenge with the corporate lies in identification and attraction of talent and such workforce is scarce in today's competitive environment.

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It has been projected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics that there labor shortage would continue until sometime between 2015 and 2015 with around 10-16 million fewer workers than there are jobs (Herman Miller Inc., 2006). Therefore, it is important for the organizations to develop adequate and appropriate plans and put efforts to attract the best pool of available candidates and to nurture and retain the current employees. Rucci *et al.* (1998) have posited that, companies that see employees as their first customers, keep their external customers more satisfied as front line employees take better care of them (Ambler, 2000). According to Kotler (1994) "The task of successfully hiring, training and motivating able employees to serve the customer well is defined as internal marketing". "One component of internal marketing that is still underdeveloped is employer branding and specifically employer attractiveness" (Berthon *et al.*, 2005). Harris (2007) emphasizes that internal investment is rewarded with consistent, quality customer exchanges. Staff actions should reinforce the promises a brand makes to its customers. It is commonly accepted that internal characteristics are transferred to the external environment via the employees of the organisation.

The study proposes to identify organizational attributes looked by prospective employees and also identify the preferred channel for promoting brand's image as an employer. Also, a new model has been conceptualized on the process of employer branding from the potential employees' perspective.

2. Employer branding as a strategic tool

India is a fast-growing economy with surging demand for talented and skilled workforce. In today's era of boundary-less, technology driven, rapidly changing business environment, one of the major corporate challenges is to meet the increasing demand for skilled and talented workforce. As important it is for organizations to look for the right candidates equally important is for the applicants to be attracted to those organizations. Today managers are employing employer branding techniques to retain and attract the current employees and potential employees, respectively.

Sullivan (2004) has defined employer branding as "a targeted, long-term strategy to manage the awareness and perceptions of employees, potential employees, and related stakeholders with regards to a particular firm" (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). According to Backhaus and Tikoo (2004):

[...] the term employer branding suggests the differentiation of a firms' characteristics as an employer from those of its competitors. The employment brand highlights the unique aspects of the firm's employment offerings or environment.

In a similar vein The Conference Board (2001) proposes that employer brand by establishing the identity of the firm as an employer covers the firm's value system, policies and behaviors toward attracting, motivating, and retaining the firm's current and potential employees. These definitions indicate that employer branding involves promoting, both within and outside the firm, a clear view of what makes a firm different and desirable as an employer (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004).

In the view of Minchington (2007), in today's business environment, employer branding provides a competitive edge to acquire, nurture and retain talent. Promotion of brand within the organization will lead to an increase in employee loyalty, while the promotion of brand outside the organization will make it attractive to the potential employees. "Employer attractiveness is defined as the envisioned benefits that a potential employee sees in

working for a specific organization” (Berthon *et al.*, 2005). Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) posit that an organization’s image as an attractive employer is based to a large extent on the employer value propositions it offers to the prospective employees. Closer the attributes desired by the potential applicants to the value propositions offered by the organization, better would be the employer attractiveness towards the organization. Employer image significantly affects the attractiveness towards the organization (Tom, 1971; Belt and Paolilo, 1982; Gatewood *et al.*, 1993; Turban and Greening, 1997).

Human resource practitioner literature describes employer branding as a three-step process. The three step process for employer branding as given by Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) explains that:

[. . .] first, a firm develops the value proposition that is to be embodied in the brand. Intended to be a true representation of what the firm offers to its employees, the value proposition provides the central message that is conveyed by the brand (Eisenberg *et al.*, 2001).

Following the development of the value proposition, the firm markets the value proposition to its targeted potential employees, recruiting agencies, placement counselors and the like. External marketing of the employer brand is designed primarily to attract the target population, but is also designed to support and enhance the product or corporate brands. It is fundamental to employer branding that the employer brand be consistent with all other branding efforts of the firm (Sullivan, 1999).

Internal marketing of the employer brand is the third aspect of employer branding. This is important because it carries the brand “promise” made to recruits into the firm and incorporates it as part of the organizational culture (Frook, 2001).

The goal of internal marketing, also known as internal branding, is to develop a workforce that is committed to the set of values and organizational goals established by the firm. Employer branding is thus basically how an organization markets what it has to offer to both potential and existing employees (Walker, 2007).

Internal branding is increasingly seen as a doctrine to ensure employees’ delivery of the brand promise by shaping employees’ brand attitudes and behaviors (Punjaisri *et al.*, 2008).

Though in practice, employer branding as a concept is still evolving. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) gave a conceptual framework on employer branding which converges marketing and human resource strategies. According to the model, brand associations and brand loyalty are two by products of employer branding:

Employer brand associations shape the employer image that in turn affects the attractiveness of the organization to potential employees. The other asset, employer brand loyalty is impacted by organizational identity and organization culture. Organization culture in turn also feeds back to the employer brand. Employer brand loyalty contributes to increasing employee productivity. Brand associations are the thoughts and ideas that a brand name evokes in the minds of consumers (Aaker, 1991).

One of the major factors that influences applicant to organization is its image as an employer (Tom, 1971; Belt and Paolilo, 1982; Gatewood *et al.*, 1993; Turban and Greening, 1997):

Research suggests that organizational commitment is related to organizational culture. Organizational culture represents the basic assumptions and values learned by the members of the organization, passed on to newcomers, and evidenced by the ways in which people behave in the workplace (Schein, 1985; O’Reilly, 1989).

Employer brand loyalty results in moving employees from employment contract to psychological contract. Such brand loyal employees prefer to remain committed to the organization for longer duration even if the circumstances demand exploring other employment opportunities. Employer branding positively affects the productivity and the culture of the organization.

In the light of above points, it can be posited that employer branding starts with the analysis of the organization's values, culture, competition, HR and other policies, strengths, brand's current image, trends and the like. This leads to identification of value propositions, based on which the employer branding strategies are formulated. Once the strategies are formulated, the communication channels for internal and external marketing are identified for positioning the brand propositions in the minds of the prospective and existing employees. This leads to employer attractiveness for the potential employees and employer brand loyalty for the current employees.

As posited by Ritson (2002), some of the advantages to companies with strong employer brand are reduced cost of employee acquisition, improved employee relations, increased employee retention and offering lower salaries for comparable staff to firms with weaker employer brands (Berthon *et al.*, 2005). Employer branding contributes as significantly as corporate branding does in the sustenance and growth of an organization. It should be given equal importance while formulating corporate strategies. Since employer branding can be traced to branding literature in marketing, marketing and human resource strategies should be congregated. An organization looks attractive to potential employees through the thoughts and ideas that a brand name evokes which is a part of employer branding and known as brand associations (Walker, 2007).

The study focuses on employer attractiveness with focus on campus recruitment. Amongst various internal and external sources of recruitment, the expenses incurred on campus recruitment form a major portion of the total recruitment costs. Although no data is openly available for Indian organisations, Rynes and Boudreau (1986) estimate the average cost of campus recruitments at 16 percent of the total human resource budget for *Fortune* 500 firms:

In spite of such high costs, corporates consider campus hiring to be strategically important as campus hires are more eager to learn and have been found to socialise more easily into an organisation's norms and culture compared to traditional hires (Loughlin and Barling, 2001; Van Vianen, 2000) as cited by Agrawal and Swaroop (2009).

As important as it is to have well chalked out value propositions equally important it is to communicate it to the potential employees. Channel selection for communicating should be strategically chosen to tap the target audience. Digital era has opened avenues for newer and swifter communication channels. The corporate are managing attraction, recruitment and selection in a digital world which has its own nuances. As potential candidates can look for information on Google, job boards, social networks and the like, it is very important to manage these channels well to manage their visibility in a proactive way. There is no down time in the world of employer branding and employer brand and its visibility must be managed proactively (Wilkinson, 2009).

One of the most important themes that stem out of various definitions of employer branding is the significance of unique aspects or organizational attributes that an organization promotes. Organizational attributes are a key factor in applicant attraction (Rynes, 1991) and an applicant's positive first impression of an organization increases

the likelihood of post-interview attraction (Turban and Greening, 1997) and offer acceptance (Powell and Goulet, 1996) as cited by Srivastava and Bhatnagar (2010). In a study by Terjesen *et al.* (2007), done on university students, the five most important organizational attributes that attracted them were “invest heavily in the training and development of their employees” “care about their employees as individuals” “clear opportunities for long-term career progression” “variety in daily work” and “dynamic, forward-looking approach to their business”. In the graduate recruitment process, the potential graduate applicants evaluate the organization based on its attributes and take a decision whether to apply or not. This decision is influenced by the values and image that the organization communicates through publicity and advertisement (Terjesen *et al.*, 2007). In a study of 175 business undergraduates conducted by Rynes and Miller (1983, Study 2), job attributes influenced overall job attractiveness; perceptions of how well company treats employees; willingness to attend second interview and to accept offer. In another field survey on 200 graduating students conducted by Powell (1984), the results showed that perceptions of recruiter were not significantly associated with acceptance intentions when perceived job attributes were controlled (as cited by Rynes, 1991). As can be inferred from these studies, organizational attributes have held importance and played a vital role in decision for acceptance of job even before the concept of employer branding was formally introduced and studied. Therefore, communicating the organizational attributes to the target market is pivotal. Two of the main objectives of the study are to identify the organizational attributes that attract the postgraduate management students and the most preferred channel of communication for branding awareness.

Despite various strategies being identified for retaining existing employees and attracting prospective employees, retention and attraction still remain to be the two biggest challenges. Many firms are cultivating employer brand for maintaining visibility and communicating the right image to current and prospective employees (Moroko and Uncles, 2008). Though the strategists had been working on employee engagement and retention plans but employer branding emerged as a new strategic tool only in the late 1990s as a solution. The 1990s saw demand for talented workforce to drive the IT propelled global growth strategies of the corporate (Anonymous, 2005). With improved employability and scarcity of the right talent, future may see companies fighting over the best employees as fiercely as they do for the customers. Organizations that can attract the best minds will have a distinct edge in the marketplace (Harari, 1998). Employer branding has since been gaining importance. Intelligent employer will not only attract new talent but will also retain existing workforce. In order to compete globally by attracting the best available and required talent, organizations must focus on the organizational attributes and integrate them into their employment brand (Berthon *et al.*, 2005).

3. Methodology

Selection of management institutions was done from 32 private All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) approved management schools in Delhi with 3,700 seats. Delhi was divided into four regions and randomly four institutes were chosen from South Delhi and three from rest of the regions. Sample was drawn from final year management students of Post-Graduate Diploma in Management (flagship program) course of these institutions. A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed; 200 were returned giving a response rate of 57 percent. In phase I of the study, semi structured interviews were conducted among the final year students of management schools

in Delhi. Fifteen common organizational attributes were identified that attract them towards organizations. A short list of seven attributes was carried forward towards phase II of designing the questionnaire and collection of data. The data was tabulated appropriately and analysis was carried out in accordance with the purpose of the study.

4. Analysis and findings

(a) Analysis of the preferred organizational attributes

This analysis meets the first objective of the study.

Figure 1 depicts that the most preferred organizational attributes are organizational culture (31 percent), brand name (30 percent), and compensation (15 percent). It may be inferred from the given data that even by today's workforce, compensation (third preferred organizational attribute) is still considered as a hygiene factor. It is also evident from the data that while evaluating or defining their preferred employer attributes the prospective employees may not be clear about the concept or significance of (a) employee empowerment (1 percent). Employee empowerment is the process of enabling employees to take decisions and appropriate actions regarding their jobs up to certain pre defined levels. Organizations that use empowerment as a strategy to keep employees engaged should work upon communicating the same to prospective employees, as it can give a competitive edge in increasing employer attractiveness.

(b) Analysis of relationship between strong brand image and likelihood to apply

In order to test the relationship between the above two variables, Pearson's correlation coefficient technique was applied.

Table I shows that there is a significant and positive correlation between strong brand image and likelihood to apply. The correlation between strong brand image and likelihood to apply is 0.307.

(c) Analysis of preferred channel for promoting brand's image as an employer

This analysis meets the third objective of the study. Figure 2 shows that prospective employees prefer job portals (32 percent) and company presentations/visits (29 percent).

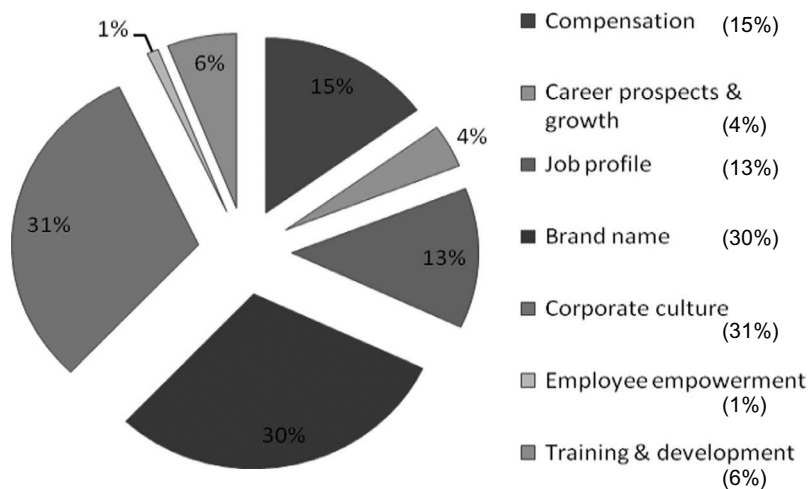


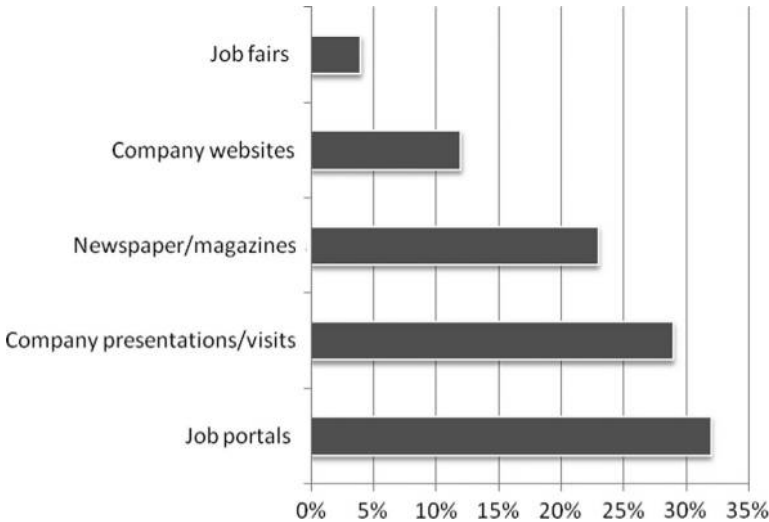
Figure 1.
Graphical representation
of preferred organizational
attributes

Table I.
Relationship between
strong brand image and
likelihood to apply

| | | Correlations | |
|--|------------------------|--|---|
| | | Company with strong brand image will be an attractive employer | Likelihood to apply with attractive employer |
| Company with strong brand image will be an attractive employer | Pearson correlation | 1 | 0.307 * |
| | Sig. (one-tailed) | | 0.000 |
| | <i>n</i> | 200 | 200 |
| Likelihood to apply with attractive employer | Pearson correlation | 0.307 * | 1 |
| | Sig. (one-tailed) | 0.000 | |
| | <i>n</i> | 200 | 200 |

Note: Correlation is significant at: *0.01 level (one-tailed)

Figure 2.
Preferred channel for
employer attractiveness



It can be said from the above data that final year management students rely more on the job portals for exploring the employment opportunities. The fact that prospective employees also strongly prefer company presentations as employer brand promoting channel (29 percent), it is inferred that company presentations/visits help in creating a psychological bond with the company which improves employer attractiveness.

It is recommended that companies should work towards creating an urge in prospective quality workforce to visit company websites (at present meager 12 percent) regularly to explore the opportunities. Through this channel both parties come face to face and it gives them an opportunity to evaluate and assess company strengths and weaknesses, just the same way as company evaluates the prospective employees. This is an effective channel which strategists should strengthen further.

(d) Analysis of employer branding strategies

Table II confers to the fourth objective of the study. Four diverse companies (a) McDonald's Restaurants (b) Barclays Bank (c) Fujitsu Services (d) London & Quadrant Housing Group, were evaluated for the purpose. This diverse sample emphasizes the universal significance and usage of employer branding in current times.

Organization (1): McDonald's Restaurants. The data depicts McDonald's efforts in rebranding its employer strategies. These include conducting surveys in order to understand the perceptions of the prospective employees and adopting right channel for its promotion. The same resulted in 9 percent increase in customers considering applying to McDonalds.

Organization (2): Barclays Bank. The data pertains to Barclays bank's endeavor to be one of most preferred bank to work with. It adopted strategies like creation of new visual identity, advertising, innovative mission statement, internal marketing with the objective to enhance its attractiveness as an employer. As a result it reached top 20 *Sunday Times* Best Big Companies to Work For list.

Organization (3): Fujitsu Services. In order to create its value as employer brand, Fujitsu adopted strategies like highlighting its "honest and straight forward" culture, took upon promotion and internal marketing. These efforts resulted in it being in the top league.

Organization (4): London & Quadrant Housing Group. The data of London & Quadrant Housing Group shows that in order to improve employer attractiveness, it started with internal marketing, designed recognition schemes and additional staff benefits for great service. The result was that it improved its rank as preferred employer from 67 to 12 in *Sunday Times* best companies to work for list and got recognition as one of the best work place.

5. Discussion

There is a paradigm shift in the way in which human resource is valued and managed today. Employer branding has emerged as a strategic tool to retain and attract talent. There is a difference in the choice of preferred organizational attributes between current generation and baby boomers.

We identified common organizational attributes which were compensation, career prospects and growth, job profile, brand name, corporate culture, employee empowerment, training and development, supportive and encouraging colleagues, innovative employer-novel work practices, humanitarian organization-gives back to society, job security, recognition/appreciation, having a good relationship with supervisor, the organization is customer oriented, and acceptance and belonging. Seven organizational attributes were then chosen through focus group discussions. It was observed that the preference of organizational attributes varies with the stream of education. To mention, "compensation" factor weighs very high in importance for the students of commerce background as compared to humanities and science.

One of the significant steps in employer branding process is to communicate the employer image to the prospective employees, which makes channel selection a strategic task. The study shows that prospective employees prefer to learn about the employer brand through job portals but actually 33 percent of respondents reported to have gained information of the same by company visits/presentations. Unless employer value propositions are communicated in the right way to the right audience, time and money invested would not yield the desired results.

| Issue | Strategies | Result/achievement |
|--|--|---|
| <i>Organization (1): McDonald's Restaurants (Personnel Today, 2006)</i> | | |
| McDonald's needed to turn the negative perception about Mc Job of being an "unstimulating, low paid job with few prospects" to a positive image | <p>Launched a major rebranding campaign through In-store and national press advertising</p> <p>Held internal and external focus groups to gauge perceptions of working for McDonald's</p> <p>Commissioned research in conjunction with a leading academic from University College London into the level of employee satisfaction at the chain</p> | <p>Gained wide coverage from newspapers, magazines and television programmes, presenting the new brand to as wide an audience as possible</p> <p>In-store tests proved that 31 percent of customers would consider applying to work for McDonald's after seeing the campaign, compared with 22 percent before</p> |
| <i>Organization (2): Barclays Bank (Personnel Today, 2006)</i> | | |
| The bank had a reputation of being faceless and bureaucratic, and not a great place to work. Barclays wanted to challenge this perception by showing it had a history of being inventive | <p>Created a new visual identity for employer branding, focusing on workers' inventive spirit</p> <p>Invested in an advertising campaign in and around Canary Wharf tube station using real staff</p> <p>Launched a new recruitment strapline "thinking careers", to coincide with its "Now there's a thought" national advertising campaign</p> <p>Introduced internal promotions in Barclays offices, including coffee cups and postcards, plus workshops to reinforce branding messages</p> | <p>Almost 100 percent of staff supported the new campaign, and staff in other offices requested posters to use as motivation tools</p> <p>Reached the top 20 <i>Sunday Times</i> Best Big Companies to Work For list in 2006 – its previous entry had charted at 197</p> |
| <i>Organization (3): Fujitsu Services (Personnel Today, 2006)</i> | | |
| Fujitsu recruits an average of 45 people per week, and in addition after an acquisition in 2002 it wanted to ensure its brand values were recognized by everyone in the company and embedded in all new recruits | <p>Conducted a staff survey to come up with its brand essence, which reflects its honest and straightforward approach to its customers</p> <p>Built a "reputation model" to be delivered through a series of discussions, in induction programmes and internal communications</p> <p>Equipped 2,000 people managers across the business to deliver the message to their teams</p> | <p>More than three-quarters of employees have attended the Reputation Programme</p> <p>Secured highest ever new entry in this year's <i>Times</i> Top 100 graduate recruiters league table</p> <p>The company has improved satisfaction scores with customers</p> |

Table II.
Employer branding
strategies

(continued)

Table II.

| Issue | Strategies | Result/achievement |
|---|--|---|
| <i>Organization (4): London & Quadrant Housing Group (Personnel Today, 2006)</i> | | |
| London & Quadrant wanted to increase the profile of the sector as an attractive career option. It wanted to create a culture that attracted, retained and continuously developed people's potential | Undertook a branding exercise to increase awareness of the benefits available to staff Developed recognition schemes and additional staff benefits for great service Overhauled the induction process to include an online service and welcome packs for staff | Became an Age Positive employer champion through training schemes and initiatives aimed at graduates and over-1955s In the latest staff survey, 87 percent said they would recommend London & Quadrant as an employer Included in <i>Financial Times</i> list of best workplaces in 2005 and 2006, and boosted its ranking in the <i>Sunday Times</i> best companies to work for list from 67 to 12 |

We have built a model based on our study and seminal work done by Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) which incorporates organizational attributes and communication/promotion channels which we envisage will benefit corporate in formulating and effective implementation of employer branding strategies.

Further investigation can be carried out on the demographical attributes like gender, previous work experience. There is scope to conduct a longitudinal study to explore if there is any change in the choice of preferred organizational attributes of respondents under study. The findings will be immensely useful for the strategists.

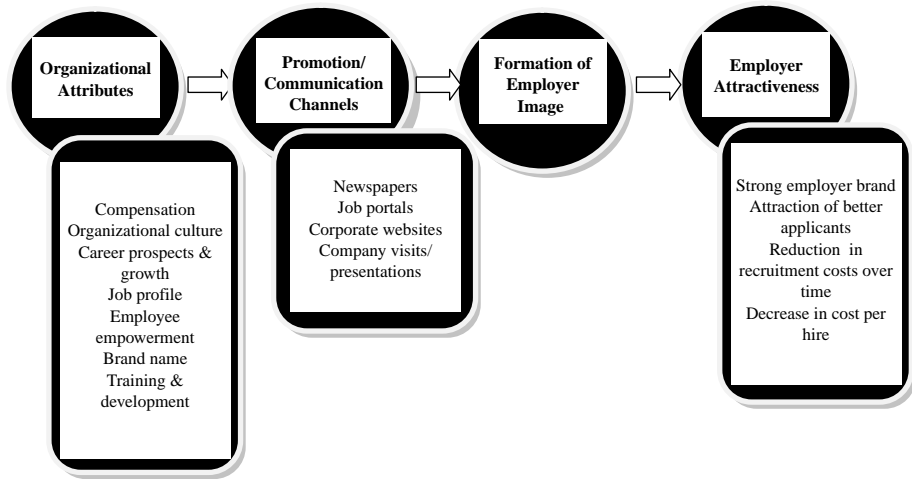
6. Conceptual model

In addition to the findings and recommendations mentioned above in the paper, authors have built a conceptual model of employer branding process (Figure 3) which is based on seminal work by Backhaus and Tikoo (2004). In their paper, they have presented a conceptual framework for understanding employer branding, using marketing and human resource concepts. Our model broadly depicts that effectiveness of employer branding strategies is dependent on the success of employer attractiveness created by the organization.

Explanation of the conceptual model

Employer branding starts with analysis of a company's values, ideologies, and policies. The value set and organizational attributes are converted to value propositions which are communicated to the potential employees. Communication at this stage is significant as without it, irrespective of a company being the best place to work, it would not be able to generate willingness to apply from the talented workforce. The knowledge about the organization value propositions will result in formation of employer brand image in the minds of the potential employees. Positive employer image will make corporate an attractive employer.

Figure 3.
Employer branding
process



Objective of model development

As per review of literature done on the subject, analysis of one of the models on employer branding depicts its two dimensions, namely, employee productivity and employer attractiveness. The conceptual model builds a framework around potential employees. It also makes an attempt to fill the knowledge gap pertaining to creation of awareness about the brand as an employer.

The model will benefit the corporate in formulating their employer branding strategies as preferred organizational attributes have been identified in the study. The preferred promotional/communication channels through which awareness and interest can be effectively generated among prospective employees have also been defined. Authors observed that in the Indian context, not much research has been done in the area of employer branding. This study is a modest attempt to corroborate the existing body of knowledge on the subject. Our future research project will empirically test the model.

Invitation of suggestions

Presentation of this model by authors here is with the objective to receive valuable inputs by the scholars/industry in order to make it effective and comprehensive.

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