"Getting the Right People on the Bus": Recruitment, selection and integration for the branded organization

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A B S T R A C T

This paper examines how employer branding is used and embedded through the organizational HR practices; specifically recruitment, selection and integration. The paper adds to the growing literature on employer branding by specifically focussing upon concrete HR practices, which are often left unexplored in contemporary accounts of branding practices. Our research question is to explore the specific role that these practices play in the enactment of employer branding and assess their implications. Moreover, in order to better understand the wider significance of employer branding, scholarship needs to explore these processes in contexts where brand recognition is less prevalent. Drawing on a large multi-national organization (CollinaTrade) involved in the provision of products and services in the construction industry, the organization's minimalist focus on consumer brands makes them a useful case study for evaluating the work of employer branding outside consumer facing industries. This paper points to the significance of viewing employer branding as a management tool in terms of cultural reinforcement and symbolic representations at work and the way in which this work through HR practices. Our data shows that the logic of employer branding in contexts where the brand is less significant, is essentially contradictory, requiring both individualism and uniformity which may have a greater impact on workplace identities than previously thought.

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1. Introduction

The concept of employer branding has been defined by Ambler and Barrow (1996: 187) as "the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company." Similarly, 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" (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004: 502). Both branding and employer branding have recently emerged as growing themes in the scholarship of organization studies and Human Resource Management (HRM) with contributions within these fields attempting to further understand the meanings, practices and significance of working under branded conditions (e.g. Brannan, Parsons, & Priola, 2015, Brannan, Parsons, & Priola, 2011;

Kornberger, 2010; Land & Taylor, 2011). This work has extended the disciplinary focus beyond marketing expertise on which branding studies traditionally resides and that generally has as its main focus the relationship between the brand and its customers (Fournier, 1998; Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005). Employer branding focuses on the positioning of the organization as an 'employer brand' to attract and retain the best prospective employees (Barrow & Moseley, 2005). Whilst the concept of 'best' employee is open to interpretation, this is generally accepted to be those that align most closely with organizational objectives and values. The marketing literature on branding generally focuses on organizational attempts to increase the value of brand equity, often through consumer-brand identification (e.g. Keller, 1993; Van Osselaer & Alba, 2000). Industries that are characterised by strong consumer brands are the most obviously places to study branding processes, such 'sites' of employee branding are well represented in the literature. Recent work is also developing to explore the concept of co-creation with respect to brand meanings through the operation of brand communities (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Andreas, 2005; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Ongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011; Schau,

Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009) and wider cultural processes (Balmer, 2006; Holt, 2004).

Within the field of management and organization studies an important theme has been the intra-organizational effects of branding (e.g. Kärreman & Rylander, 2008), viewing branding as embedded within the employment relationship. Here cultural and social processes within the walls of the organization are explored, and brand symbolism is viewed, not only in its ability to attract customers and stakeholders, but also to elicit employee motivation and commitment through brand-identification. Whilst recent critical studies of branding in action are welcome, it is noticeable that studies are inevitably drawn to organizations that have a strong consumer brand (Google, IKEA, Lego, Starbucks, Southwest Airlines), and are hence easily recognisable. In addition there is an absence of empirical studies into the role of traditional HR functions such as recruitment and selection strategies and employee integration in relation to employer branding. This paper seeks to contribute to the emerging organizational branding literature by exploring branding in action for an organization whose brand is less well known. We do this though a particular focus on traditional HR practices as they relate to employer branding.

2. The brand at work

Scholarship on branding has historically been the preserve of marketers and understood as a form of organizational communication. Conceptualised in this way branding is seen as oriented externally and about the projection of images and meanings outward from the organization to an audience of customers and clients (Levitt, 1981). More recently however there is evidence of a broadened or critical scholarship of branding and this seeks to recognise the unidirectional characteristic of branding (Mitchell, 2002). A key element of this has been the recognition of the way in which organizational brands find receptive audiences both inside and outside organizations. So whilst marketers have considered the role of branding most prominently from the perspective of external recipients, more recently studies have considered the role of branding from an employee perspective. Specifically this perspective considers how organizational brands for example might broker more intense forms of employee engagement with their organizations (Edwards, 2010). An additional area of investigation relates to how the brand might become a terrain over which the control over service work might be contested (Johnston & Sandberg, 2008). Alternatively the brand is also seen as offering opportunities to bring customers and employees together to engage in co-creation of value, products, services, images or meanings (Ind, Iglesias, & Schultz, 2013).

Seen from the view point of Human Resource Management, employer branding offers a vehicle to 'engage employee loyalty and build organizational commitment' (Martin, Beaumont, Doig, & Pate, 2005:78). This is even more important in multi-brand organizations which face growing competition to attract and retain skilled, qualified employees as internal brand conflict can occur (Slavich, Cappetta, & Giangreco, 2014). The role of brand images has been stressed in the literature on HRM, thus recognising that if people identify with the brand and integrate it into their own self-concept may become aligned with it, making them more willing to stay with the organization and potentially work harder and smarter (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Reiche, 2008).

Employees consuming the products of the organization for which they work might not be particularly new, however the idea of 'living the brand' away from the workplace (Miles & Mangold, 2004) is a more recent manifestation of this phenomenon. Building upon literature that recognises the influence that employees outside the workplace have upon corporate image formation (Kennedy, 1977), the idea of living the brand has important resonance with the group popularity of roles such as 'brand ambassadors' (Thomson, de Chernatony, Arganbright, & Khan, 1999). Whilst critical scholarship points to wider implications with respect to privacy, work life balance and the regulation of conduct beyond the employment contract, living the brand calls for both display and performance, and potentially represents the brand image both within the workplace and outside.

It follows therefore that employee recruitment, selection, training and on-going monitoring is key to the alignment between behaviour and brand image, and potentially represents a new 'frontier for control' for the employment relationship. Some large organizations have enthusiastically adopted employer branding as a key aspect of their Human Resource Management (HRM) strategy (see Barrow & Moseley, 2005) and seek to promote the idea more widely to other organizations (e.g. Gotsi & Wilson, 2001; Martin & Hetrick, 2006), yet work beyond the often cited customer friendly brands is uncommon, thus signifying a significant gap in the literature.

The contribution that this paper makes lies in its focus on the concrete HR strategies of recruitment, selection and integration involved with branding. This shows how concepts and ideas that surround employer branding are put into practice. This empirical case study is useful on its own terms but the wider significances lies in our study of employer branding in conditions where the context is unreceptive for the introduction of change. Pettigrew (2012) highlighted this in his ICI study which critiques the rational and linear processes of change, and for us, highlights how the internal practices of CollinaTrade do not benefit from a strong external brand context. This is important because for employer branding to be meaningful it must be utilised and be seen to be effective outside the narrow confines of a dominant consumer logic. We also show how employers and potential recruits engaged with elements of the brand during the recruitment process and how this requires us to consider branding as a performance discourse (Martin et al., 2005). Intangible assets and intellectual capital are used as a strategic advantage and HR specialists can make a greater claim to their need to be included in the brand management process because it will contribute to sustained organizational success. HR specialists also have a role to play with building bridges to other functions within the organization, such as the marketing department and ensuring that relationships are established with clients and customers (Martin et al., 2005). Despite the weak links between HR and branding in the past, it is recognised that in a global economy, the 'war on talent' and needing to be an 'employer of choice' is a central HR and business imperative for some organizations. The organization has to attract employees and retain them which is why becoming an employer of choice is a deliberate business strategy − it drives some organizations to benchmark themselves against others in the 'Best Places to Work' rankings. The challenge that branding can bring to an organization is brand risk which stems from poor employee performance and this can be damaging to brand reputation and image.

3. The case study organization and research methodology

CollinaTrade is a global organization employing almost 20,000 people and operating in more than 120 countries. The organization is a world leader in developing, manufacturing, marketing and supplying high quality products for the construction industry. It specialises in products used in drilling and demolition, diamond coring and cutting, measuring, fire-stopping and screw fastening. The research was conducted at the organization's UK headquarters located in the North of England. The British site employs approximately 600 people of which half have direct contact with