

ELEVATING TALENT ACQUISITION

The Rise of the Employer Branding Professional

The concept of employer branding traces to the 1990s, however, the job didn't formally exist until roughly a decade ago. Today, there's major demand for experienced employer branding professionals, attributed in large part to ongoing economic expansion in the United States coupled with global hiring needs. While talent acquisition technology will undoubtedly change how employer branding professionals work in the coming years, one aspect that will stay the same is the profession's unique role in elevating talent acquisition practices.



1997: A PIVOTAL YEAR FOR EMPLOYER BRANDING

For those too young to remember, 1997 was the year that Buffy began slaying vampires, the U.K. was home to pop music royalty—*Spice* was the best-selling album—and a James Cameron movie about a gigantic ship sailed straight into box office dominance. It was also a year characterized by low U.S. unemployment, averaging 4.9% and declining.

For workers seeking new opportunities, times were good (even if they couldn't yet apply to a job using their phone). And an important shift was underway, reflected in the emergence of the phrase “the war for talent.” Coined that year by management consultant Steven Hankin in reference to a McKinsey & Company study, the phrase signals the need for organizations to rethink their view of talent in a knowledge economy when, according to McKinsey's ongoing research, “high performers are an astounding 800 percent more productive” than average performers.

This new way of thinking about talent includes the realization that high-performing individuals will always have options, particularly those in professions where persistent worker shortages exist. As such, an organization's reputation as an exceptional place to work is crucial to effective talent attraction and retention outcomes.



FROM AGENCY TO IN-HOUSE: EMPLOYER BRANDING TAKES HOLD

Employer branding took hold as the world emerged from the Great Recession. Amid increased competition for talent, organizations implemented employer branding strategies to improve awareness. Initially, employer branding specialists worked for professional services firms, as most organizations outsourced these initiatives to recruitment, and even consumer, marketing agencies. Specialists oversaw employer brand development processes that reflected practices long used by traditional marketing teams, including market research as the foundation for messaging and creative direction.



As larger organizations recognized the long-term benefits of employer branding, many began hiring in-house talent, from entry-level positions focusing on a specific area, such as social media, to vice presidents possessing the breadth of experience required to manage all aspects of employer branding globally.



EMPLOYER BRAND MANAGEMENT: CORE COMPETENCIES SNAPSHOT

MESSAGING/CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT	Understand market research principles and how to translate findings into key themes and messaging strategies that fuel creative development and the art of storytelling
MARKETING STRATEGY/IMPLEMENTATION	Apply expertise in channel strategy and execution to connect with current and prospective employees across a broad range of media and communications
AUDIENCE ANALYSIS	Keep a pulse on job seeker and employee attitudes, perspectives and preferences to continually refine messaging and marketing strategies
CANDIDATE/EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE	Map out the entire employee journey to identify touch points that inform strategic communications and marketing programs
CANDIDATE RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT	Use nurturing and engagement tactics to foster future conversions among passive candidates
REPUTATION MANAGEMENT	Manage the organization's reputation as an employer within the context of an audience-driven (social and review sites) environment
MEASUREMENT	Apply traditional metrics and advanced measurement strategies (eNet Promoter Scores, candidate resentment calculators, etc.) to demonstrate employer branding ROI and uncover areas requiring improvement
CROSS-FUNCTIONAL COLLABORATION	Collaborate closely with marketing, public relations, internal communications, organizational development, and diversity and inclusion for cohesive messaging that rolls up to the organization's consumer or corporate brand strategy



THE FUTURE OF EMPLOYER BRANDING

Nobody can predict exactly what the employer branding profession will look like a decade from now, yet trends already underway will surely impact the discipline. First, there's a new generation entering the workforce, one whose members are true digital natives with expectations for quick response, 24/7 communications and self-service options. Employer branding specialists will be the ones to guide their organizations in evolving the candidate experience to meet rapidly-evolving expectations.

Arriving alongside Gen Z is the application of artificial intelligence and automation to all phases of the hiring process, from sourcing and assessment to candidate outreach and engagement. Specialists will need to know how to adapt messaging for emerging channels, such as chatbots that answer common candidate questions to automated communications and candidates sourced through AI, both internally and externally, on a global scale.

The work will also involve fostering trust and transparency among both candidates and employees who are ambivalent about the use of AI for hiring, performance and retention efforts that, while well meaning, can seem like Big Brother. Negative employee experiences won't just cause workers to quit; they can also damage the brand these individuals have worked tirelessly to cultivate for years.





FINDING A PERMANENT HOME



As organizations increasingly hired employer branding talent directly, they began to question where the profession should be housed. Most specialists have been placed within talent acquisition, but with greater involvement from marketing in employer brand development, speculation arose that perhaps the area should be owned by marketing.

Some companies adopted this approach, though for now employer branding remains firmly housed within talent acquisition, which makes sense due to the expertise required. Strong collaboration with relevant partners, such as marketing and internal communications, is a must for successful employer branding results. But so is keeping employer branding inextricably linked to talent acquisition as this is where a deep understanding of target audience attitudes, perspectives and preferences, as well as labor market dynamics—the foundation of effective communications—also resides.

Further, employer branding specialists have demonstrated their ability to apply proven consumer and product marketing approaches to their discipline. Candidate personas are commonly used to shape messaging and marketing strategies, while sophisticated measurement efforts demonstrate the benefits that employer branding delivers to hiring and to the business itself.



Given these factors, it appears certain that with this foundation in place and an always-changing industry to keep things exciting, employer branding professionals are well poised to continue to elevate the practice of talent acquisition and ensure their organizations attract and retain the world's best talent.