

Inspire to Hire and Win the War for Talents

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ABSTRACT In the context of a highly dynamic labour market, with the entry of the Y and Z generations in the active workforce and the shift of power balance from employers to employees, the corporate employer brand becomes a strategic element and part of the non-material capital that each company can use to attract and retain top talents and, consequently, to get business performance. This paper proposes a modern vision of leadership and talent management, in which collaboration, empathy, democratization of decisions, development of emotional connections and increasing the level of freedom for employees contribute to building an effective, attractive and sustainable Employer Value Proposition. By integrating Human Resources and Marketing management principles, objectives, activities and tactics, companies should focus on authenticity in their communications, in order to win employees' minds and hearts in the contemporary very intense competition for talents. We suggest updating the traditional Marketing Mix to 15 elements, in order to support Employer Branding Strategies and to reach the Employer of Choice status. The essential objective is the development of a deep relationship between employees and companies, in the form of a transaction with dual value, financial and emotional at the same time. Loyalty is seen as superior and consecutive to solidly applied retention, adding emotional value to the material benefits offered by the companies to their employees.

KEYWORDS:

Employer branding; Loyalty; Retention; Marketing Mix

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1. Introduction

Nowadays' organisations are increasingly competing to attract highly skilled personnel in various sectors and professions (Mahroum, 2000; Dabirian et al., 2017). Competition for the best employees is already as fierce or even more intense as competition for customers, in some sectors like Information Technology or space engineering, and this is expected to expand to other industries. Organisations able to attract the best creative minds will have a powerful competitive advantage not only in the labour market but in the marketplace as well (Harari, 1998). Managers must focus now not only on how they can meet the needs of employees whose skills are crucial to the firm's survival, especially in highly competitive labour markets (Boxall and Purcell, 2000) but on how they are able to actively attract new candidates having those skills. Skills shortage is a global trend that affects many advanced sectors in the economy, caused by economic rapid expansion and technology evolution. As a consequence, challenges in recruitment, selection and retention follow an ascending trend. Companies' consistent investments in training and development are perceived by employees as a differentiation factor in terms of recruitment and retention (Holland et al., 2007). Labour is changing from a sellers' to a buyers' market (Petkovic, 2007), especially in new sectors of the economy that need highly skilled employees, as the availability of high-value jobs is higher than the suitable job seekers (Grobe, 2003). The gap between supply and demand for skilled labour is most visible in technology-related sectors, where specialists possessing the desired skills are very rare (Hiltorp, 1999).

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Employee turnover is one of the most dangerous effects of skills shortage and qualified specialists' scarcity, and it refers to the number or percentage of workers who leave an organization and are replaced by new employees or is defined by some scholars as the rate at which people leave an organisation (Hall and Taylor, 2005; Noe et al., 2006). Employee turnover can be disruptive and costly. CIPD (2008) estimates that the average cost per one employee leaving a British company is £5,800, going up to £20,000 for managers or directors. The termination rate for employment contracts in Romania was 16.4% in 2014, 2% higher than EU average, and Information Technology is one of the few sectors having zero unemployment since more than a decade (Romania Insider, 2015). 60% of companies in Romania declare that the most important strategic challenge in HR is the retention of high-potential and high-performance employees (Alexe, 2017). There are cases when employees' yearly turnover rate in Information Technology is bigger than 25%, especially in big cities like Bucharest, Iași, Brașov, Timișoara or Cluj-Napoca, where global companies often come to open new offices. According to a survey conducted in early 2018 in Romania (NNC Services, 2018), 88.1% of Romanian employees in Tech sector would be interested to change job if the monthly earnings were higher than the current ones. According to the study, over 55% of employees believe they would receive more money for the same position in competing companies. Only 33.4% consider that they are paid according to the company's possibilities and more than would have been paid in other companies.

At the same time, the pay level has seen high growth rates within the last decade, so salaries in Tech industries in Romania are now at same level with those paid in Dublin, Berlin or any another important European tech-related big city. As an example, the net salaries of software developers with more than three years of relevant experience in the field reaches 4,000 € per month (Somanescu, 2018). Sometimes, for niche jobs, recruiters repatriate Romanians who work in other countries, offering to pay salaries similar to those abroad. In the given circumstances, developing smart and effective strategies of employer branding, in order to attract specialists and to create new reasons and tools for employees' retention and loyalty is absolutely urgent. At the same time, there is a powerful shift in the lifestyle that need to be properly approached. A study published by Unlock Market Research (IQads, 2018) shows that Romanians want to earn more personal time than money, and are no longer satisfied with what their employers usually offer. 55% of Romanians are willing to accept a less paid job but to have more free time to spend with their families. At the same time, 65% of the professionally active Romanians desire to slow down the alertness of life, want to recover their personal time, truly enjoy it, and seek to do just the things they like, including at work.

2. Company reputation: a valuable asset and a strategic continuous objective

Any entity on this planet has a brand, a reputation. A smart management of a company's reputation is necessary for multiple purposes, as is credibility and effectiveness in the relationship with customers and all other stakeholders. Some scholars overlap reputation management with public relations (Hutton et al., 2001), but a more complex and strategic perspective is needed, to understand differences between corporate image and long-lasting identity as a brand. A Public Relations campaign is just a tool of communication used to build reputation, and is only a small part of a larger strategy meant to define and affirm a company's identity, its brand as an employer in a specific labour market. Our view is that organisations should focus on becoming employers of choice, must compete for talents, not just for attracting, but engaging and retaining talents as well. Employers Of Choice have ratios of candidates to open positions of minimum 20 to 1, and some much higher, 100 to 1 (Branham, 2005). To become Employer Of Choice, an organisation has to articulate a convincing Employer Value Proposition (Elias and Scarbrough, 2004; Lenaghan and Eisner, 2006; Mackes, 2005; Wickham and Donohue, 2009).

Reputation, sometimes named "brand capital" (Choi, 1998), is the way people perceive a company, and includes awareness, credibility, positive appreciation, attractiveness, prominence and the status of "employer of choice" (Sutherland et al, 2002). The capital of a brand is a set of active and passive assets, directly related to the name and its visual symbol, which adds value to the relationship with its audience. In Aaker's (2009b) interpretation, the main brand capital components are awareness and name recognition, level of trust, loyalty of the target audience, perceived quality, common mental associations, and trademark's assets (such as patents, marks, and relational capital). Moroko and Uncles (2008) note that successful reputation involves two fundamental dimensions:

attractiveness and accuracy. Attractiveness includes awareness, differentiation and relevance, while accuracy is defined as verified consistency between the projected and the real image, or between the employer brand and the real employment experience. Collings et al. (2018) have a slightly different perspective and mention that employer branding capital (especially employee advocacy and status of employer of choice) and Reputational capital (prominence and differentiation) are the main outcomes of correctly executed employer branding programs.

Company image is a strategic factor in retention (Armstrong and Taylor, 2014), but employer image is distinct from employer awareness and employer reputation (Lievens and Slaughter, 2016). Familiarity or awareness is limited to the cognitive evaluation of whether or not individual job seekers are aware of the organisation (Cable and Turban, 2001; Collins and Kanar, 2014). Reputation is a global, temporally stable and enduring, evaluative judgment about an organisation that is shared by the general public and differs from image, which is individual, subjective and localized in time (Brown et al., 2006). A positive reputation among the general public but a negative image for a specific individual who experienced difficult interactions are possible simultaneously (Highhouse et al., 2009a, 2009b; Lievens and Slaughter, 2016). Reputation is a corporate asset with tremendous impact in all HR activities, and employees' commitment refers to attachment, loyalty, and the feelings of employees about the organisation (Armstrong and Taylor, 2014). Hamel (2007, 2008) confirms that firms able to keep valuable employees respect three essential rules: have strong principles, innovate continuously in response to market signals and rely on strong communities of own employees who have full autonomy.

A powerful employer brand is generally confirmed, in our opinion, by a winning Employee Value Proposition that generates strong interest in working for the company. Companies with good reputation do not hire skilled people then motivate them, but hire already motivated people by inspiring them, if companies don't give to enthusiastic individuals something to believe in, something more important than their job, brain drain will appear, employees will find another story to be passionate about (Sinek, 2009). Schwaiger (2004) affirms that corporate reputation is not one-dimensional but has two fundamental components, which are interdependent: competence and sympathy (understood as likeability). While competence is basically cognitive and related to performance, numbers and a transactional approach, likeability is affective, operates mainly at the emotional level and expresses the quality of the human connection between individuals and organisations. "Performance aspects drive competence but dampen sympathy, whereas responsibility items have positive impact on sympathy and negative impact on competence", notes Schwaiger (2004, p. 46). He considers that managing corporate reputation is difficult and problematic because of this cognitive-emotional interdependence and because it is based on perceptions more than on real knowledge, so reputation should be primarily (but not only) under the control of a very capable corporate communications department.

3. Building Reputation via Employer Branding: a strategic contemporary mission

Reputation does not live forever in the same shape, we consider it perishable. At the same time, market context is continuously changing, generations evolve, flows of information invade people's minds, so a fresh and vivid identity is mandatory to stay relevant. Employer Branding is a natural consequence of increasingly competitive labour markets and strategic investments in attracting skilled employees are mandatory (Wilden et al., 2010). Within the last decade, scholars brought employer branding out of the shadow, recognized its contribution and started to point out that this discipline and its tactics are essential for contemporary HR management (Collings et al., 2018). Skills shortages, war for talents and tough economic environment put organisations in a fierce competition, so using marketing techniques to address prospects, attract employees and maintain their loyalty after joining delivers results (Mosley, 2005). Xie et al. (2015) prove that company's identity and reputation are strategically decisive when candidates evaluate the opportunity of applying to a job, because applicants try to identify a congruence between their social identity and cognitive values and those assumed and expressed by the company. If this matching check confirms the compatibility, the chances for the candidate to prefer the company and apply to an open position are significantly higher. As a consequence, managers should persistently communicate the real identity of the company, its

values and culture, and to help potential candidates to easily evaluate their identity compatibility with the organisation.

Employer branding is becoming increasingly important for all types of organisations, impacts corporate reputation, talent management and employee engagement, but some organisations still don't realize its importance, don't allocate proper resources for this purpose or have problems in applying it (Kryger Aggerholm et al., 2011; Schlager et al., 2011; Sivertzen et al., 2013). Main benefits of employer branding are efficient use of resources in recruitment, reduced layoffs, and increased volume of appropriate candidates (Khalid and Tariq, 2015). Though, creating and communicating a stronger employer brand is still not very often indicated between the core strategies for good engagement and retention (Mitchell et al., 2001; Christensen Hughes and Rog, 2008). For some scholars, employer branding has a limited role, seen as the creation of a brand image of the organisation targeting only prospective employees (Armstrong and Taylor, 2014; Claydon and Thompson, 2017). One component of internal marketing (employees are the first market of the organisation) is employer attractiveness, a concept that is underdeveloped and limited in meaning, considering marketing only as advertising, not as complex science. Employer attractiveness is the "envisioned benefits that a potential employee sees in working for a specific organisation" (Berthon et al., 2005, p. 151) but this is another limited perspective, not taking into consideration the existing employees. Employer Branding is limitedly defined as a "package of psychological, economic and functional benefits that potential employees associate with employment with a particular company" (Wilden et al., 2010, p. 57).

Knowledge and understanding of these perceptions can help organisations to create an attractive and competitive brand, in our view. Broader and more appropriate definitions identify a complex set of activities to communicate a clear view of what makes the firm different and desirable as an employer (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004) or as "the sum of a company's efforts to communicate to existing and prospective staff that it is a desirable place to work" (Lloyd, 2002, p. 64). Employer branding is a three-step process: formulating the value proposition, exposing the brand externally and integrating the brand promise in the organisation's culture, but should be based on values co-created by the employees and management (Elving et al., 2013). The brand lives in the mind and heart of every human touched by branding signals. The brand communicates a simple and powerful meaning that people care about. In order to survive, persuade and perform, the projected brand must be totally different from other brands in the same sector (Adamson, 2007). The branding message needs to be constantly shared among the employees, and the company has to coherently educate its employees because building a successful employer brand is not a one-time event, but a continuous activity that requires constant care, time and commitment (Edwards, 2009; Cascio and Graham 2016). The organisational brand is a direct result of employer's communication activities, meant to develop "a workforce that is committed and loyal", and this projected image has to be clear, consistent and in line with the organisational values and goals (Sharma and Kamalanabhan 2012, p. 304). The organisational purpose is the specific idea, the engine and the essence of the organisation, its vision, the reason why it was born (Olins, 2008).

Marketing intended to "sell" a company to current and future employees is not a battle of the companies themselves but of the perceptions people have on these companies, in our opinion. The strategic battleground of marketing is the mind of the people, and the positioning of a company is directly related to the minds and hearts. The distance between doing branding and having a powerful brand is long and tortuous. The information trail from the transmitter (the author of branding strategy and activities) to the receivers (the target audience who decodes the signals and assimilates the brand) is difficult, and the initial information changes, is modified by adaptations, reinterpretations, deformations and transformations that cannot be avoided or anticipated (Trout and Ries, 1986). Both rational and emotional attributes are important in the relationship people have with a brand or with a company. Reputation lives simultaneously in the mind and heart of the public, so the needs and desires addressed by branding communication are both rational and irrational. Trust, integrity, pride and passion are the four emotional elements identified by McEwen (2005) as defining parts of the brand's emotional capital and directly influence the loyalty of its "consumers".

4. HRM and Marketing: parallels, intersected or integrated?

Is employer branding an exclusive HR role or a specific Marketing function? Our view is that this is a fake problem and a wrong question, because employer branding must follow a corporate strategy and be a common and major priority for all top managers. Employer branding processes are located at the intersection point of marketing and human resources disciplines. There is a need to educate marketers in order to be familiar with the details of HR discipline, and HR specialists to learn how to strategically think and act in terms of marketing and communication. Marketing is considered as being too important to be left only to marketers, so human resources management is nowadays too important to be left solely to the HR departments (Ambler and Barrow, 1996; Ambler, 2000; Ritson, 2002; Tüzüner and Yüksel, 2009). Some authors are cautious, mentioning that current theory and practice "have failed to connect this internal application of marketing and branding to the key reputational and innovation agendas of multinational corporations", mainly because of competing logics in strategic HRM (Martin et al., 2011, p. 3618). Sparrow and Otaye (2015) consider Employer Branding not just as an HRM tool, but overlap it with the core HRM discipline, because of its consistent results for all HR objectives. Managers can use Employer Branding as an umbrella, integrating recruitment, career management, learning, development and retention into a coordinated HR strategy with superior results (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). Specific marketing activities, like prospecting and market research, testing and piloting projects, planning and positioning are to be found more often on the agenda of HR departments.

Differentiation, authenticity, segmentation and customization are major keywords in any Employer Branding strategy. Collings et al. (2018) note that Employer Branding has a powerful contribution in positioning the organisation in the labour market, and especially in its differentiation. An authentic unique identity is provided and communicated to the prospects, in order to attract and maintain them in a durable and productive relationship with the firm, especially in knowledge-related sectors, technology, finance, services, and consulting. In order to differentiate on the labour market, a company has to promote attractive attributes that allow it to stand out from competitors (Biswas et al., 2017). Differentiation is difficult to achieve in a mature and crowded market, it is built by communicating clearly, coherently and consistently at least one unique attribute, ingredient, service, or program that is attractive and relevant to the public and context (Aaker, 2009a). Differentiation is essential, and being remarkable is crucial, so creativity, uniqueness, use of powerful symbols and ideas, proof of creating value and respecting fundamental values are mandatory (Godin, 2003). Sinek (2009) notes that differentiation occurs at the root of identity, when a cause, a mission or a supreme purpose is formulated.

The need for authenticity in branding is not a whim or something temporary, but a major component that influences the way people think and feel for several generations. Authenticity involves features such as purity, naturalness, sustainability, rejection of fake, total overlap with reality, simplicity, strong connection with origins (Olins, 2004, 2014). Authenticity is supported by a good narrative, and a good story in branding should be relevant, so it is one that is able to spread organically and inspire people (Godin, 2005), to provide models, emotions, heroes or ideas, to promote values, and create positive relationships between the source (the company) and its audience (employees and prospects). Authenticity is not the result of a specific moment, a consequence of a punctual action, but is intrinsic, it is naturally part of the company identity that naturally inspires. Authenticity means really believing in what you are doing and what you say, second by second, year after year (Sinek, 2009) and should be co-created with the employees, not only established by top management and communicated top-down (Cornelissen, 2008). Authenticity is based on transparency, consistency, accountability, clarity of strategic objectives and tactics, total adhesion and unconditional support of team members, but their loyalty above all.

Authenticity is the product of a continuous and dynamic process of monitoring, adaptation, planning and action, is directly dependent on audience and its context (Fisher-Buttinger and Vallaster, 2010) and is mandatory to build and maintain trust, credibility, sustainability, respectability, social approval, prominence and prestige (Collings et al., 2018). Tüzüner and Yüksel (2009) note that employee satisfaction will be lost and workforce turnover will increase if there is no consistency between the brand image and reality. Companies should periodically assess their brand strength in the labour market and carefully segment their audiences, in order to customize recruitment messages.

People respond differently to employer branding signals, so there is a need for adapting the communication to specific audiences and contexts, without changing the core meaning and losing coherence (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). Segmentation is relevant for Employer Branding in approaching potential employees (Moroko and Uncles, 2009), but is demonstrated as highly relevant to the context of existing employees as well (Davies et al., 2018).

5. The 15 components of the Employer Branding Marketing Mix

As in the case of a traditional marketing approach for customer-oriented value proposition, the Employer Value Proposition must be a coherent effort to integrate multiple variables that an organisation is able to use, in order to satisfy the needs and desires of its potential and existing workforce (Constantinides, 2006; Knox and Freeman, 2006; Wickham and Donohue, 2009). The Employment Marketing Mix we propose is similar to the traditional one, addressed to customers, and envisages current and potential workforce as a customer, targeted to "buy" a long-lasting relationship with the organisation. The traditional Marketing Mix focused on customers or buyers of the products and services of a company can be easily adapted to an employee perspective, by transforming the contractual relationship into the product intended to be "sold". At the same time, all elements of the customer-targeted marketing mix still impact even the employer branding framework, because elements that work in creating reputation towards external publics, if correctly built and transmitted, deliver positive image even for internal publics.

There are 15 fundamental elements (below, in bold) that can be identified in a complete marketing mix when approaching internal "customers" with Employer Branding objectives:

The **Product** is the most complex element in this Mix. It includes the company and its relationship with employees at mass and individual level, the job itself but the products and services of the company as well. The job plays the major role, and this must be designed, developed and presented as a commercial good, in order to attract, convince and convert. If the job as relationship with the organisation looks attractive, inspires, suggests trust and quality, consistency, value, responds to needs and desires and offers a long-term, stable and positive collaboration, then employees will be attracted, happy and proud to contribute with their efforts and ideas to the organisation's objectives and will have motivation, satisfaction and loyalty. A winning Employee Value Proposition can be based on having strong brands and products or being famous for delivering valuable training and development programs (Hiltoft, 1999). Having a very successful own product, involving latest technologies, is a powerful vector of efficiency in employer branding, because competitors on the regional labour market generally work in outsourcing projects with strict specifications and limited creative freedom. The chance to directly contribute to the development of a complex digital product strongly attracts professionals.

The **Price** is composed of the salary, benefits and rewards offered by the company in exchange for employee's work, efforts, energy, and dedication. The sum of these transactional benefits must be carefully calibrated, in order to correspond to expectations and market conditions and deliver comfort, stability, equilibrium, personal safety and create conditions for engagement and loyalty. A company known in its community for an attractive, correct and motivating system of rewards will have more chances to attract and keep good quality and performing personnel. At the same time, the pricing policy related to company's products and services is relevant in the employer branding mix, because the differentiation tactics and commercial positioning strategy directly impact the company reputation, not only for consumers but for its workforce as well (Alias et al., 2014).

In terms of Employer Branding, **Placement** designates the channels of distribution used to attract and convert employees, including own and partners' recruiters, head-hunting and freelancing agencies, job fairs and similar events, all of these directly contributing in building a public image. **Promotion** includes advertising, PR, direct marketing, personal selling and many other techniques of contact and communication that help to approach targeted publics. Performing employer branding in job advertisements means providing rich, attractive, coherent, but only real and accurate information (Elving et al., 2013). **Physical evidences** and **Processes** (Procedures) contribute to the Employer Branding marketing mix through creating attractive interactions and working conditions and a pleasant professional environment: uniforms, tools, accessories, aspect and features of the facilities etc, but easy, simple, logical steps, friendly approach and transparent communication in internal

processes are important at their turn. Branding that appeals to all five human senses will be most effective, by delivering a complex and fascinating experience: the more sensory points are activated, the higher the number of memories generated, and the setting of a strong image in the memory of the individual is essential for brand equity (Lindstrom, 2005).

People (current employees) represent one of the most important vectors of the Employer Branding marketing mix because the organisation's leaders and team members are brand ambassadors. While Employer Branding focuses on how the company is seen by people with the aim of "winning the battle for talents" (Ulrich, 1997), employee branding focuses on ensuring that employees act in line with the organisation's values, to provide consistent brand experience to exterior contacts (Edwards, 2005). Employee advocacy is understood as positive and voluntary word-of-mouth communication and generally is a positive effect of engagement, satisfaction and affective commitment, when employees go beyond formal requirements of the job and show not only confidence and satisfaction, but become vectors of positive influence in their social environments (Fullerton, 2003; Caldwell, 2008; Yeh, 2014; Frank, 2015). When analysing future job opportunities, IT specialists usually discuss on online forums, on social networks or connect with local specialists, and a positive and powerful reputation within the professional community is very valuable.

Principles (ethical values) are integral to organisations' Employer Branding process (Biswas et al., 2017). These are profound beliefs and attitudes that define a collective understanding of norms and standards of acceptable behaviour for the entire organisation (Hassan 2007). For example, to differentiate from competitors and enhance attractiveness, organisations could establish an employer brand that includes sustainable HRM, which means to promote themselves as highly responsible among potential and existing employees (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005; Jabbour and Santos, 2008; App et al., 2012). The **Purpose** is a strategic parameter in the Employer Branding mix because it provides a distinctive direction. Pink (2011) identifies three essential elements of motivation in contemporary organisations: autonomy, continuous learning, and purpose. He argues that the formula of human satisfaction and superior performance includes a deep need for freedom and autonomy, but a high and profoundly human goal is essential for obtaining people's professional engagement. A profound higher purpose generates energy and motivation, activates the individual's life at maximum and brings loyalty (Pink, 2011).

Profession branding and industry branding represent a technique able to actively attract current students and valuable specialists from other sectors by attractively presenting projects, products, tools and benefits (Sofică, 2012; Văleanu et al., 2012). **Prospects** (potential employees) contribute to the marketing mix by defining the characteristics of the people able to become team members, and if these general human attributes look good, then identification and collaboration with this social and professional category will be of interest for many individuals. Other components of the Employer Branding marketing mix are: **Personality** of the company, in terms of brand archetypes defined by Mark and Pearson (2001); usual **Partners** of the firm (reputation and credibility of business partners is usually transferred by mental association); the **Partnership** seen as the relational framework defined by the firm in its interactions with own team members; and the additional **Profits**, meaning any supplementary and extra-contractual advantages, benefits or activities offered by the company (e.g. flexible working, group discounts, work-life balance, gifts or free access to exclusive events or offers).

6. More "human" instead of "resources". Loyalty, more than retention.

Hamel (2012) advocates in favour of the humanization of businesses and companies, and shows that employee engagement is born through the call to profound and perennial human values that have the power to rouse human souls, such as beauty, truth, wisdom, justice, charity, fidelity, joy, courage, love, devotion or honour. When businesses' vision and objectives include such fundamental human values, and concrete actions illustrate respect for these values, commitment and loyalty of the organisation's members are natural and long-lasting. The soft HRM Harvard Model regards people as the most important single asset of the organisation (Beer et al., 1984), and this should be the chosen way for companies working with highly skilled people, in general. Other authors consider employees as human capital, which consists of knowledge, skills, intelligence, creativity, energy, ideas, emotions and abilities, and constitutes a key element of the market value of a company (Armstrong and Taylor,

2014). By focusing on human values and emotions, by not considering people as resources (commodities), by creating long-lasting connections and memories of the relationship with their employees, companies will win strategic battles in attracting the right candidates and keeping valuable people for a long time within the firm.

There is an important semantic difference between retention and loyalty when talking about employees but customers as well, in our opinion. Retention generally suggests creating barriers that slow down or stop employees to leave companies, while loyalty means creating strong connections and durable and valuable relationships, that are very hard to be abandoned without important emotional loss. Retention operates at the transactional level, while loyalty operates at the personal, affective and relational level (Dragnea, 2016). There is a need to focus on loyalty, not retention. Loyal employees are more efficient and motivated, require less supervision, and are better at identifying, serving, and retaining the best customers (Reichheld et al., 1996; Boss, 2018). The more loyalty it inspires, the more potential the brand has in the long term. Loyalty is not bought, it is formed over time, through constant interactions and complex relationships based on trust, authenticity, consistency and mutual devotion (Lindstrom, 2005). Nowadays a job has to create meaning and support one's personality (Albert et al., 2000). Taking a holistic view of the key human elements of the business (processes, values, collaboration, work-life balance, recognition, coaching and support) most likely will have positive impact on engagement, motivation, attendance and retention of team members, especially in IT (Eisenberger et al., 2002; Glen, 2006).

The branding process, the building of an identity, the consolidation of a reputation and the correct positioning of an entity can be hampered by various factors, such as the huge amount of information that people are bombarded on various channels, the limits of individuals' memory, confusion in the communication process, conservatism, lack of attention and insecurity of people (Trout et al., 1996). A strong strategy, clear planning, coherent actions and consistency with core values are necessary to avoid the risks of failing in the branding process, losing authenticity, delivering disappointing messages or dishonest information. Companies need to create and maintain own platforms of transparent, continuous and interactive communication, in order to keep employees and prospects connected and to correctly transmit branding signals. Using social media for communication with Employer Branding purposes is a very effective, but risky tool, if authenticity, transparency, honesty and good skills in moderation are not in place (Foster et al., 2010; Martin et al., 2011; Sivertzen et al., 2013; Bondarouk et al., 2014).

Employer branding has limited research coverage yet, an incomplete support in terms of evaluating its opportunities and finding a scientific explanation of its premises and results. The lack of qualification and expertise of HR professionals assuming branding functions contributes to this situation. More research needs to be made to check if Employer Branding has limits when addressed to some specific segments of public, if it works with better results for qualified professionals or some new industries, compared to unqualified workers or traditional sectors of the economy or if it is possible to have a pyramid of the employer branding tactics, parallel to Maslow's structure. Employer branding is a proactive, not a reactive discipline, exactly like traditional marketing, and is made to solve, not to create new problems. Summer of 2018 is the first moment ever when the most important private companies in the very competitive sectors in Cluj-Napoca have started recruiting and integrating experts in employer branding at top management level. This proves that, finally, the opportunity is really understood, and Employer Branding will become an important dimension in the competition for the attraction and loyalty of the most valuable and productive human brains.

7. Theoretical implications and future research opportunities

This present paper starts from the premise that, as companies use marketing strategies to approach the market with their products or services, these should begin to use the same perspective in the labour market. Companies should build relationships with their own employees, to "sell" a transactional relationship in which time and labour exchange versus money and other benefits is doubled by an emotional transaction based on empathy, collaboration, employee involvement in strategic business decisions. This is helpful in building an organization culture where employees have the most important role.

The 15 elements of the Employer Branding Mix are for the first time combined into such a formula, and their integration and the extent to which each participates in building the employer brand differs from one company to another. There are many situations in the labour market where not all 15 elements are activated and used consciously and programmed to deliver the expected outcomes in relation to employees, as there may be examples of companies that obtain the Employer of Choice status by another definition of Marketing mix or by activating a larger number of components, different from the 15 proposed here. There is a double interpretation that can be allocated to the Product within this Mix, which can also mean the contractual relationship between the employee and the employer, but also the products or services to which the employee contributes directly. Employee satisfaction and loyalty can come simultaneously from the comfort of his position in the organization, but also from the joy of actively and creatively participating in the creation and delivery to consumers of products and services that the employee is proud of or satisfied with. Also, for the other elements proposed in this Mix, new valences, interpretations and identities can be identified or other perspectives can be defined to add or remove between these elements.

Starting from this initial proposal, future research can assess the importance and ability to communicate and generate loyalty of each of the elements of the marketing mix, in order to identify the concrete ways in which the employer brand and value proposition can be covered and developed by company managers. On the other hand, the paper emphasizes the importance of authenticity in the communication of companies, given that the new generations of professionals in the labour market manifest a pronounced critical spirit, can easily identify the propaganda elements not covered by reality and, moreover, can react in public space, directly affecting the reputation of companies that use over-cosmeticized formulations and statements that do not express the truth. At the same time, the paper proposes a viable distinction between the concepts of retention and loyalty and proposes a semantic differentiation, assigning loyalty to the sphere of emotional, empathetic and sympathetic relations between companies and their employees.

8. Managerial implications and conclusions

Whatever their specialization and educational background is, today's managers can no longer yield the returns required by contemporary businesses without developing strong communication and networking skills. They should be aware of the fact that, through each action, project and interaction, they participate in the development of the employer brand and in defining the relationship between the company and the employees. And this awareness is just the first step, absolutely necessary, in developing a vision for the employer brand. Continuous, open and bidirectional communication and a more human approach to employee relationships, based on values, culture, collaboration and interaction, at the expense of a strictly transactional approach, proves today to be stronger and more effective in defining Employer of Choice status. This present paper proposes to managers to have a sustained concern for the development of emotional relationships between firms and employees, beyond the transactional elements that usually define any employment contract. Loyalty is seen as an additional, very valuable element that builds on the material contractual transaction, but goes much beyond retention, adding power to the employer's value proposition and consistently contributing to the status of Employer of Choice.

The urgent integration of the principles, objectives, strategies and tactics used in Human Resources and Marketing is considered a fundamental priority for the coherent and healthy development of the employer brand. The focus on the solid differentiation towards competitors (in the sense of being a company not only different but remarkable, for all existing and potential employees) and the need for authenticity in public communication are the most important factors to be taken into account in building public communication strategies. The future belongs to companies that understand that, as they need marketing to sell their products and services, they also have to use the tools of this discipline to secure and make loyal the most strategic capital they have, the human resource.

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