

Employer branding: A new approach for the hospitality industry

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The Western hospitality industry experiences a shortage of skilled professionals due to a poor image and competition from other sectors. Employer branding, which is used as a human resources strategy to differentiate brands, has the potential to deal with some of the problems. An employer brand is closely connected to a company's corporate and customer brands. Elements include attractiveness to outsiders, engagement and retention of talent. For this research, 23 senior hospitality decision makers were interviewed. The interviewees acknowledged the current problems in the hospitality industry. The majority had heard about employer branding but only a few had started to implement it. Some conceive employer branding as 'job advertisement pimping' instead of being a strategy. Based on the interviews and the literature, a number of suggestions were formulated to implement employer branding.

Keywords: employer branding, hospitality industry, human resources management, strategy

Employer branding een nieuwe aanpak voor de horeca branche

Door imago problemen en concurrentie van andere sectoren heeft de westerse horeca branche te maken met een tekort aan geschoolde professionals. 'Employer branding' (het merken van werkgevers) biedt mogelijkheden voor een aantal van deze problemen. Het wordt gebruikt als human resources management strategie om te differentiëren. Een 'employer brand' is nauw verbonden met het merk van de overkoepelende organisatie en de bedrijfsnaam als merk zoals de consument deze kent. De aantrekkelijkheid voor buitenstaanders, betrokkenheid en het behoud van talent zijn hier onderdeel van. Voor dit onderzoek werden 23 senior horeca professionals geïnterviewd, die dagelijks belangrijke beslissingen nemen. De geïnterviewden erkenden de huidige problemen binnen de horeca branche. De meerderheid had eerder gehoord van 'employer branding', maar slechts enkele zijn daadwerkelijk begonnen met het uitvoeren ervan. Sommigen zien 'employer branding' niet als een strategie maar als een manier om een vacature aantrekkelijker te maken. Op basis van de interviews en de literatuur zijn een aantal suggesties geformuleerd om 'employer branding' uit te voeren.

Trefwoorden: employer branding, horeca branche, human resources management, strategie

酒店业的新理论之雇主品牌

由于形象问题和其他领域的竞争，西方酒店业经历了专业技术人员短缺的问题，雇主品牌因此有可能面临一些问题，它被用来作为人力资源管理策略加以区分。雇主品牌紧密地连接着公司的企业和客户品牌，原理为：对外界的吸引力，培养和留住人才。这项调查采访了23名高级决策者，受访者们承认酒店业目前存在诸多问题。虽然多数人听说过雇主品牌理论，但只有少数人开始运用该理论。一些人认为雇主品牌是“招聘广告拉皮条”而不是作为一个策略。因此在这根据一些访谈内容建议和一些资料整理确切地阐述雇主品牌。

关键词：酒店业，形象问题，竞争，雇主品牌，人力资源管理，策略

Introduction

Human resources management (HRM) has been facing many challenges. Innovating concepts are becoming ever more important to deal with these challenges. In the hospitality industry the concept of employer branding as

a core approach to human resources management ought to be considered. Although employer branding has been implemented in other industries and in some parts of the hospitality industry worldwide, it is only recognised as 'a

label' by human resources (HR) managers in the Netherlands; even then, it is not yet really used. This research suggests that employer branding needs to be treated as a strategic concept in a company's management philosophy. It should be closely connected to the corporate and customer brands. Good service delivery is driven to an enormous extent by the quality of human resources. Fully incorporating the concept of employer branding in a labour-intensive service business such as the hospitality industry will have a major impact on the overall service delivery. Further research is needed to define the specific aspects of implementation employer branding in the hospitality industry. Universities of applied sciences offering hospitality management programmes could also give more attention to research on this topic.

Literature review

Google, number one in 'Fortune's 100 Best Workplaces' is one of the most valuable companies in the world. Google's core values start with the statement 'we want to work with great people'. Google attracts people by the power of their brand and the opportunity to work with talented people. Their philosophy is to get the brightest people in and to create an environment that enables people to perform. Employees are committed to the organisation. In the early years of the organisation, the founders were busy recruiting the best talent when many other organisations were busy letting them go: 'Input control in Google is so strong that even today each employee's profile and interview comments go to one of the founders before he or she is recruited' (Hattacharya, 2007). Free meals, on-site medical care, laundry facilities in the office and a trendy company culture have made Google an attractive employer. With around 10 000 employees globally, Google receives 1 300 job applications each day in the US alone. Google is not the only employer who is known for their good employee benefits. Other well-known employers are Nike, Shell and Philips. Most of these companies also participate in elections to become known as top-employer. Examples of these elections are the 'Best Place to Work' election and the 'Great Place to Work' election. Most of the companies in the top 10 of these lists are multinationals with a large budget for HRM, but what about HRM in the hospitality industry? In the past, HRM in the hospitality industry has suffered a poor image.

Worsfold (1999: 340) found that, in hotels, HRM was low down on the order of priorities. They concluded that the main function of the manager who had the responsibility of personnel management was to attract and select personnel. In bigger hotels the situation was somewhat better. Still the results were not different from other research about personnel management in the service industry. Although Worsfold's survey is already outdated and the quality of personnel management in the hospitality industry may be similar to other branches, the hospitality industry still faces difficulties in the attraction and retention of good employees. The image of working in the hospitality is poor, 'in so far as they represent low pay and poor conditions of employment' (Lucas, 2002: 209). For a company it is very important to have a pool of talent. The value of this pool depends on the company's ability to attract, engage and retain the best people. But what is talent? The *Oxford Advanced Learner's*

Dictionary defines talent as 'a natural ability to do well'. Thorne and Pellant (2007) state that talent remains almost undefinable. They argue that we can only wonder at what makes someone talented. For a company it is important to keep talent in the organisation and therefore talent should be managed and developed. 'An organization should engage with the hearts and minds of individuals. The organizations that are most successful at this are those where the vision and values of an organization are aligned with the individual's' (Thorne & Pellant, 2007: 8).

The first step to establishing a pool of talent is attracting high quality staff. Organisations should start with their own clear definition of a good employee. Every company has different values and requires different employees. There are several ways to find new employees such as at other companies or universities (Wels, 2007: 12–13). Other sources are, for instance, online channels or recruiters. However, finding new employees should not simply occur outside the company; internal sources also need to be looked at: 'Inside the company there can be well-motivated employees who could become star performers' (Wels, 2007: 13). The second step is to motivate employees. 'Motivation is the driving force (desire) behind all actions of an organism' (Wels, 2007: 17). Motivation is also called the key to employee performance. An approach towards motivation is simply asking workers what they want from their job, resulting in a nice work environment, a clear job description and a satisfying compensation package (Wels, 2007: 20). This is recognised by Thorne and Pellant (2007) who confirm that satisfied staff perform better and stay longer with a company. Sirota (2006: 3) states that there are three sets of goals that the great majority of workers seek from their work: respect (to be treated fairly in areas such as pay, benefits, and job security), achievement (to be proud of one's job, accomplishments, and employer) and camaraderie (to have good, productive relationships with fellow employees). Besides this, companies do not have to motivate their employees, but they have to stop de-motivating them. This de-motivating is caused because many organisations treat employees as disposables. Furthermore management does not recognise and reward employee successes, but rather criticises poor performance.

The third step to establish a pool of talent is retaining them. DeBare (2007) presents the notion that the 1990s have completely changed the rules for how long employees stay at their jobs, and how long employers expect them to stay. Employees realise that their employers may dismiss them at any moment when the results are disappointing or when there is a merger. Barrow et al. (2007) confirm that scarcity puts power into the hands of the supplier. This means that in the future, the empowered workers will have the power. Employee loyalty is no longer a given, employees no longer work with the thought that they have a job for life. They act as consumers in a crowded market. Retaining employees can be secured by building a relationship with them that lasts (O'Malley, 2000). Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler (2005: 182) define relationship marketing as the evolution in which an organisation's relationship with its customers will be enhanced as customers move further along this relationship continuum. When the relationship with the customer improves, the provider is more likely to pursue a closer relationship. Thus,

the goal for relationships is to attract, engage and retain committed customers to the organisation who are profitable for the organisation. The internal marketing concept defines the organisation's personnel as the first market of a company. The main objective of the internal marketing function is to obtain motivated and customer conscious personnel at every level (Ewing & Caruana, 1999).

The term 'employer brand' was first used by Ambler and Barrow (1996: 8), who defined it as the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company. Many other definitions of employer brand have since passed in review. Some examples are provided in Table 1.

In this paper, we define employer branding as a strategy a company could use to differentiate its brand as employer from those of their competitors, with the purpose of ensuring good applicants, and maintaining talent within the organisation.

A product is something that is made in a factory, a brand is something that is bought by a customer (Ambler & Barrow, 1996: 8). The thinking behind the benefits a brand can bring is not new. Brands make people want to buy something and feel good they have bought it for a long time afterwards (Walker, 2007: 10). As a result, these customers will tell others about their positive experience and the brand will create recognition,

trust and admiration. The power of a brand is that it can summarise the meaning of an entire business in a few words. Every business has an employer brand. When someone talks, writes, thinks or remembers a company as a place to work, they think about the employer brand. The integrated brand model (Figure 1) shows that there are three brand propositions which the company should manage.

In the approach of many service organisations, the customer perspective dominates despite the fact that employees experience the brand in a different way than the customer and are motivated by different types of benefits (Barrow & Mosley, 2006: 35). An organisation should not focus only on the consumer brand, but also ensure that the three brands of an organisation are interrelated (Minchington, 2007). This means that the value proposition that the business articulates is reflected by actions of all people, at all levels, at all times.

The question is not whether an organisation has an employer brand, but if that brand is working for or against the business (Sartain & Schumann, 2007). How does an organisation know if it needs to work on its employer brand? Employer brand management does not replace anything that an organisation is already doing, it just brings it all together to greater effect (Minchington, 2007: 47). An organisation can use the brand to create a bond with the right people, and at the same early

Table 1: Overview of Employer Branding definitions

Ambler and Barrow (1996)	The package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company.
Sartain and Schumann (2007)	How a business builds and packages its identity, from origins and values, what it promises to deliver to emotionally connected employees so that they in turn deliver what the business promises to customers.
Walker and Higgins (2007)	A set of attributes and qualities, often intangible, that makes an organisation distinctive, promises a particular kind of employment experience, and appeals to those people who will thrive and perform to their best in its culture. It is used to gain customer loyalty and therefore increase profit or success through market differentiation.
Minchington (2007)	It is a long-term strategy for the attraction, engagement and retention of talent.

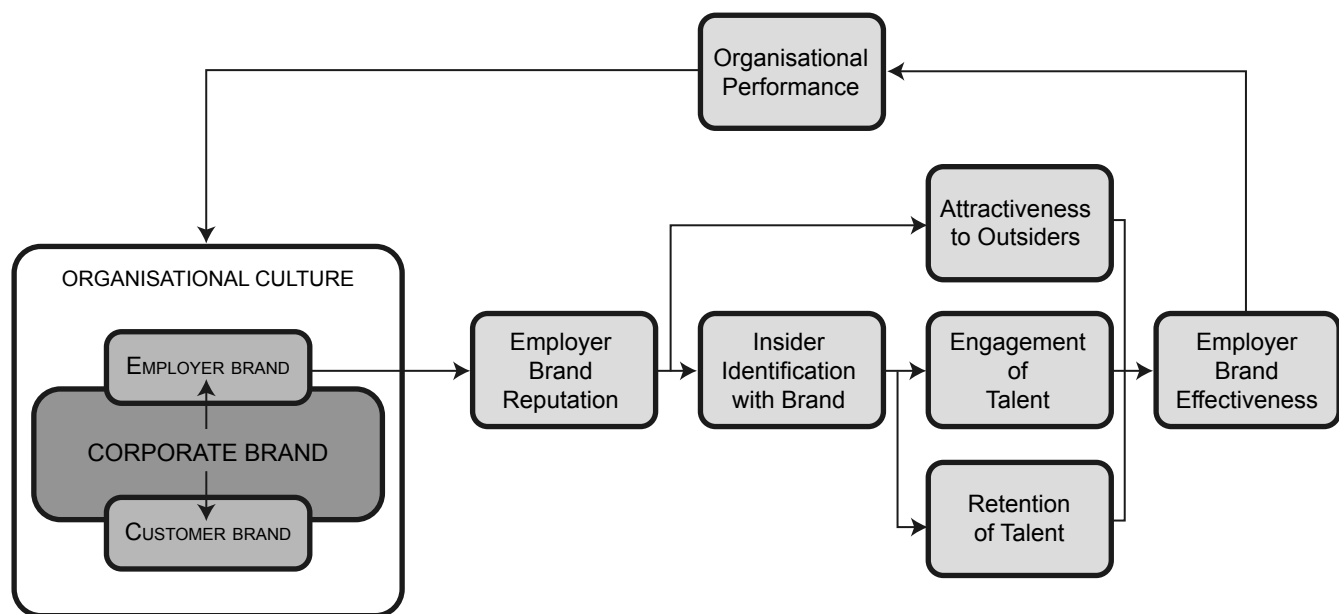


Figure 1: Integrated Brand Model

stage, the brand can also help to gently bounce off the 'wrong' people.

The process of emphasising and explicitly implementing employer branding is a big investment for a company. It is important that the process is managed correctly and that the branding strategy is effective. Measuring can give organisations an indication of the effectiveness of the branding strategy. According to Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), employer branding creates two principal assets: employer brand associations and employer brand loyalty. The most important issue is, however, that employer branding helps companies to realise better performance. The effect of the process of employer branding on the behaviour of employees should be determined (Wright et al., 1994). Relevant measures are employee retention, employee productivity, employee turnover and employee satisfaction. In order to really see if an employer brand is working, a company needs to assess itself as a place to buy (customer experience) and a place to work (employee experience) (Sartain & Schumann, 2007: 228). Measuring the customer experience is important because the ultimate result of the employer brand is the difference it makes to the customer (Sartain & Schumann, 2007: 228). A company should periodically review information about customers and invest periodically in customer research. It is also important to measure the employee experience and look at ongoing engagement data, pulse surveys, recruitment surveys and employee focus groups. Organisations should also investigate the reputation of their CEO and leadership team in the media and among employees. Many authors suggest that the responsibility for employer branding cannot be attributed to one particular department, but that the responsibility should be shared by the marketing and HRM departments (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Minchington, 2006; Barrow et al., 2007; Thorne & Pellant, 2007). Interestingly, Davies et al. (2002) plead for a new role in organisations: a reputation manager. This manager should be responsible for the coordination of all communication (branding) to all stakeholders.

Obviously the question remains as to whether the concept of employer branding will work in practice. Although many authors put forward that it works and many organisations who set up an employer branding strategy admit that they achieve better results, no one can respond with 100 per cent certainty to this question. There is not much evidence on employer branding beyond cases of so-called best practice. The weakness of this evidence is that the cases are often short on evidence. This study provides an extension of the current debate in the literature by looking specifically at the hospitality industry in the Netherlands. The labour intensive nature of the hospitality industry makes it a very interesting field in which to study the feasibility of employer branding.

Methodology

The epistemological grounding for this research lies within the tradition of constructionism (Crotty, 2003). Constructionism accepts that there is no objective truth waiting to be discovered and that meaning is constructed. Reality is determined by the people rather than by objective

and external factors (Easterby-Smith et al., 2006). We as researchers are not just collecting facts and measuring patterns, but foremost valuing the different constructions and meanings that people have. Knowledge is seen as being constructed in a process of social interchange between the researcher and the managers being researched (Gehrels, 2007: 18).

The method used for this research was semi-structured interviews to understand both the problems faced and the HR tools used by hospitality businesses in the Netherlands in attracting and retaining talent. Another goal of the interviews was to obtain managers' opinions of employer branding. Employer branding (EB) was explained to the managers and they were asked whether they find it a sufficient method for attracting and retaining talent in their organisations. There were some limitations to using semi-structured interviews, because they are very time-intensive. Furthermore the outcomes cannot be generalised which was not the intention of the authors. The outcomes provide greater understanding on a very specific topic in HRM that can be of use for practitioners in that field.

The sample in this research consists of three groups of people. The first is those responsible for the human resource strategy in their organisation or who have a relation with the field of human resource management. The majority of this group is in the management team in hotels or hotel chains. They are responsible for the strategy of their organisations. The second group includes people from the Sector Hotels of Koninklijke Horeca Nederland (KHN) and an account- and product manager of Horeca Branche Instituut (HBI). The third group is made up of Stenden Hospitality Management lecturers.

The selected sampling type was snowballing, which involved participants that were selected by the researchers. These participants were then asked to recommend their peers as other participants who could provide valuable information. The number of interviews to be conducted was difficult to establish exactly. The usual premise among qualitative researchers doing semi-structured interviews is that enough interviews are held when similarities and saturation occur, the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data, and when no new information is to be obtained. In total, 23 respondents were interviewed in May, June and July of 2008. Most of the respondents agreed that the interview could take 30 to 60 minutes. In four interviews, the anticipated time of 60 minutes was exceeded. The interviews were recorded with a voice recorder and transcribed to be analysed with the help of NVivo8. Some of the questions were asked through e-mail to authors of papers or literature about employer branding.

The analysis of the interviews consisted of reading and re-reading the transcripts from the digital recordings. NVivo8 was used to file and structure the data. Interesting elements from the text were coded in the program and interesting quotes were saved as free nodes. The free nodes used for this research are all pieces of text that were considered interesting for the analysis of the data. After analysing a few interviews, many free nodes could be changed into tree nodes. Tree nodes were created from the answers on the main questions. In this way it was easy for the researchers to compare the different answers to the main questions. The results in the free nodes were organised into tree nodes

and copied into MS Word. From there on we compared the different answers and constructed from them a clear and coherent story.

Results and analysis

The study and analysis of the data revealed 11 key findings.

Finding 1: What do respondents know about employer branding?

The majority of respondents (15 out of 23) had already heard about EB. Only a few indicated that their company was in fact using employee branding (EB) in their HRM strategy. One company assigned a consultancy firm the task of researching on corporate level what EB could mean for the hotel chain. Another company decided to take a look at the HRM strategy with a marketing view for the new personnel advertisement. An organisation with a strong EB strategy is Starwood. The CEO, who came from Coca-Cola, found that within Starwood there was no clear difference between the various brands. This finding motivated him to start branding both the customer brand and the employer brand. The main point in this branding campaign was to determine the different core values and to train the personnel in these values. Another company that recognised the importance of (employer) branding is Park Plaza Hotels and Resorts that has its personnel trained in the company's core values. Although all managers agreed on the importance of EB, there were also some respondents who stated that it is not always good to retain their employees.

Take the case of young persons who want to work for my organisation. When they are 25 or 30, the majority of them want more salary and more stability. This is difficult for a hospitality employer to offer. I don't know how a dynamic organisation which runs seven days a week, 24 hours a day, could offer the stability that a family asks.

Therefore they should ask themselves if they really want to retain talent.

Finding 2: When managers think of EB, which company comes to mind?

Remarkably, only a few managers named their own company. The company that was named the most is McDonald's (five times). McDonald's focus their strategy on teenagers in the age category of 16 to 20 and is one of the few companies that offer people of this age category a career path. Other companies that were named more than once are NH Hotels (three times), Ahold (three times), Nike (twice) and Philips (twice).

Finding 3: What is the biggest challenge in work related to the HR element?

There is no clear difference in challenge for the different managers. For four out of six HR managers, the biggest challenge in their work is to attract and retain people. 'Also the creation of brand awareness is a challenge', just as 'pushing back the sickness absence'. Furthermore, one of the HR managers said that 'another challenge is to convince young people that they should execute a certain job for a minimum of two years'. A lot of young people want too much in a short

amount of time. The HR managers working at the corporate offices had the same challenge: 'My biggest challenge is to attract enough people, and not only enough but also people who could share our company's philosophy'. These managers were also concerned with the development of people, and building consistency in what is practiced by the employees. For the general managers, the most important challenge in work is to retain people and to make people enthusiastic, 'to make people grow'. They all find a good working atmosphere important for the balance in the organisation. Furthermore it is a challenge to 'deliver a continuous quality. You work with so many different people on different days', and 'to keep them satisfied, particularly happy. That is really important for the filling-in of the function'. The hospitality industry faces difficulties with the attraction and retention of talent. A major cause of this problem is obviously the demographic labour shortage in the Netherlands. There are fewer and fewer young people. The most difficult vacancies to fill are operational jobs: 'Although there is a tight labour market, we have especially difficulties with the attraction and retaining of employers working in the operation. For the management jobs we have enough candidates'. Another cause of this problem is that people in the Netherlands are better educated than in the past: '80 per cent of our personnel is working in the operation, it is difficult to find normal semi-and unskilled workers in the Netherlands'.

Finding 5: How do companies currently retain their employees?

Almost all respondents said that in order to motivate and retain employees they have good training programmes:

At Hilton every employee has a personal training programme. We are also very good at moving on employees within the organisation. I think that you do not have to create a culture to hold the best employees for yourself, but that you have to share these employees with the whole chain, only then these employees will stay in the organisation.

Salary is an important aspect in retaining people but not the most important thing. Employees also want other things, such as a challenging job, teamwork, and to hear what other colleagues want. Hotels should focus more on the employees themselves, not only for the short term but also for the long term. Not all the respondents found the retention of employees to be a problem:

For me it is not difficult to motivate and retain personnel but it is another story when you are located outside Amsterdam. I work with local people who work here for a long time. These people do not have to travel a lot for their work. A second thing is that the working atmosphere is really good.

Finding 6: What is the effect of centralisation in the hotel industry?

One of the respondents said that:

In the past every hotel had a HR manager. What happened was that the HR manager was doing all the personnel management. Even with birthdays, the HR managers had to remind the managers about birthdays of one of their employees. What happens in the new situation is that the departmental manager is

responsible for his or her team. The result is that there is a better relationship within the teams.

The department manager does not feel responsible for attracting and retaining employees at every hotel. There are a few respondents who acknowledge this:

In our hotel, department managers do not feel responsible for personnel management. The managers are only busy with the guests, and not with the way these guests are served or what is needed to motivate his team. The managers are the people who can retain employees, they are the ones who should motivate, communicate, evaluate and support the team. We as HR can provide tools but when the department managers do not use this, than it is difficult to retain people.

Finding 7: What do companies do with employees who leave?

None of the organisations has a former-employee programme. At the moment, an employee that leaves one of the organisations only gets an exit-interview to get feedback on how the organisation can improve their way of working. A lot of organisations acknowledge that they find it a very good idea to set up a former-employee strategy: 'In the past I have worked for a consultancy company, and there I organised a day for ex-employees. At that day a lot of renewed contacts were made. That was very interesting'. Nevertheless, not all respondents find this suitable for their organisation: 'I can imagine that a big organisation does this. That management asks themselves what is happening with our talent? For me this is an unimportant matter'.

Finding 8: What do managers think about the case of Wagamama where Marketing and HR fall into the same leadership area?

('Wagamama' is a British-head quartered restaurant chain, serving pan-Asian food in the style of a modern Japanese Ramen bar.) Although nearly everyone agreed that there is a large overlap between HR and marketing, most of them find this approach of Wagamama too resolute: 'putting together the marketing and HR department goes in my eyes too far, they are two different disciplines. I do think that they should cooperate, that they have to share some aspects'. One of the respondents, who gave a written response, answered: 'I don't foresee that Marketing in HR will merge, as Marketing needs to focus on the external customer while HR focuses on the internal customer. I do feel that Marketing and HR will need to be attached closely when working on their respective issues'. Another respondent, who agreed with this, also raised another related topic, the merging of marketing and sales as one department:

I think Marketing and HR are two different departments and that we should not change this. I think it is good to share each other's expertise, but Marketing is going much further than HR. Marketing has to do with all the P's and not only with personnel. I think that a lot of hotels have made the same mistake when they put together Marketing and sales, in my eyes these are also two different fields of study. When you put these two disciplines together they will lose sharpness. They are both two very important things, but the synergy should come from consultations and not because they are one department.

Finding 9: Who is responsible in companies for the setting up of a EB strategy?

Although marketing is traditionally responsible for the branding of the organisation, none of the respondents find the marketing department responsible. One respondent finds the PR department responsible for setting up the employer brand. This respondent also said that heads of departments should work on this topic as well. He stated that a problem at the moment in the hospitality industry is that heads of department are only involved in the result and not with the process.

Other respondents find that the whole company is responsible for the setting up of an employer brand. It should not be so that one particular department is responsible for setting up this strategy: 'It should be spread by all the departments, otherwise an employer brand makes no sense'. The majority of the respondents state that they find the corporate office responsible for setting up a good EB strategy. The main argument is that the hotel chain is so big that EB will only work if it is set up on corporate level: 'This should be a point of identification, everywhere in the world, no matter where you are'. Other respondents share this opinion. It makes no sense for an individual hotel to start working on this while the rest of the chain focuses on the customer brand. They do agree with each other that the individual hotels have to support them with this: 'You need consultation with the individual hotels. Otherwise you would have no influence and then the question is if the corporate office is making the right decisions'. A few of the general managers find themselves responsible. They argue that they are the ones who have to live the brand. They have to set a good example and make sure that the internal organisation is managed properly: 'Then we can say to our external market "This is our identity and it matches our image we want to show"'. There are also many respondents who find the HR department responsible for setting up an employer brand. It is their field of study and therefore they should be responsible for it. One of the HR managers who set up an employer brand for his company argued that he wants to be responsible for this topic: 'I do cooperate with Marketing or an external company in this case, and Marketing checks at the end if it corresponds with the corporate brand, but the responsibility should be for HR'.

Finding 10: Are there risks in setting up an EB strategy?

Only a few hospitality managers did not see any risks to setting up an EB strategy. They stated that a company should just continue with all the other programmes and that EB does not replace the other strategies. Another respondent added: 'Everything you do in cooperation with others and without any secrets can be done without a risk'. Being a big organisation is something that reduces the risk in the eyes of a another respondent: 'I believe that because we are a big player in the market, we can only strengthen our position and not weaken it'. There was also a manager who said that she does not see a risk for her organisation, but that she does see a problem for other big hotel chains such as Accor: 'I can imagine that companies as Accor have problems with branding because they have differences in standards. An Ibis is branded in a different way than a Mercure. And then it becomes difficult. We do not have this problem'.

The same problem is also mentioned by a manager from Accor as a risk. He acknowledged that for them it would

be difficult to brand Accor because Accor is as an umbrella, and beneath it are different brands. Therefore, Accor has to choose whether they want to brand the individual brands, or the general brand Accor:

When you choose for a strategy per brand you maybe will compete amongst each other. On the other hand, it will be a good start to position our different brands, we have always said that you work for Accor, but there is now one who works in an Accor hotel. So it will be difficult to make people proud at the brand Accor when they work at Mercure. You have to choose for either an Accor policy, a strategy where the employees have little affinity with the brand, or a strategy per brand, but this will contain a risk that you will compete amongst each other.

Other risks of EB are: 'That you deter candidates or that there will be a barrier for new candidates'. There are also many managers who emphasise that there is a risk to forget other activities. Therefore you may not fulfil your other obligations you have as a company.

Finding 11: Is EB a hype or the future for HRM?

One of the most intriguing questions about EB is whether it is just a trend or the future for HR. A number of authors (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Barrow et al., 2007; Walker & Higgins, 2007) wrote about the potential for the future of EB. Several respondents said they see EB as a hype because they think the phenomenon already exists. It has to do with the labour market and the need for employees. One of the employees also mentioned that it is something socially constructed: 'It depends on how important work is valued in the lives of people'. Another respondent said that it is a hype because it depends on the situation of the labour market: 'When it remains difficult to attract and retain employees it is not a hype but something for the long-run'. Although there was some criticism about EB, the majority find EB something for the long-run. It is important as employer to position oneself in the labour market, so that employees have a clear view of what kind of employer they can expect and what an organisation offers them. This is very important to attracting and retaining employees. One of the general managers endorsed this by comparing the labour market to the marketplace:

I think it is not a hype. It is also the reason why it is called labour market, it is a market with supply and demand and different target groups, with USPs and segmentation. And I think that we as employer should approach the labour market like this.

Conclusions and recommendations

The hospitality industry in the Netherlands faces a problem because every day there is a shortage of 40 000 employees. Although all respondents acknowledged this problem, the majority of them could not say which actions they undertake to solve this problem for their organisation. A labour shortage is the major cause of this problem, but other factors also play a role. Young people are better educated than in the past: 75 per cent of the jobs in the hospitality industry are unskilled jobs which make it difficult to find candidates for the operational jobs, there are 'too many Chiefs and not

enough Indians'. Moreover, many hospitality students choose to work in other branches. One of the reasons for this is that the collective labour agreement of the hospitality industry in the Netherlands is not competitive with other branches. People really need passion to choose a career in the hospitality industry. The hospitality industry has the image of being hard working for little money and poor conditions of employment. Besides, many people do not see a difference between the types of hospitality businesses. Five-star hotels are part of the hospitality industry, as is the snack bar around the corner. Working in the hospitality industry has become a student job, while this branch needs people with expertise. To attract and retain employees for the hospitality industry, it is important to improve the image of working in this branch. This is not the job of just the HR department, but that of the whole organisation.

The hospitality industry has one collective labour agreement for the whole branch. Respondents feel that four- and five-star hotels should have a different collective labour agreement to the large hotels. They state that they as hotels are more able to pay the costs than the smaller companies. They do not think it is possible to make a collective labour agreement which suits them all. Hotel chains can decide for themselves to value functions in their hotels higher and to pay their employees more than the prescribed salary. Organisations can use this in their marketing campaign to be more attractive than their competitors. Another way to improve the image of working in the hospitality industry is to promote fringe benefits. Most people are only familiar with the disadvantages of working in the hospitality industry, but working in the hospitality industry could offer many fringe benefits to employees. Hospitality organisations offer, for example, a bonus, personal development plan and the possibility to follow training and education, discounts in other hotels of the chain, international career opportunities, and so on. In working to attract employees, companies should give greater focus to these benefits.

During the past few years, EB has received a lot of airtime. The majority of the respondents had already heard of EB, but only a few indicated that their company is actually using it in their HR strategy. The image the respondents have about EB is not complete. Most respondents think EB is about 'pimping' the job advertisements and describe EB as a tool to attract employees. This is maybe also one of the risks of the term 'employer branding'. Branding makes this a trendy marketing word and, in the eyes of the respondents, there is an assumption that this is a programme about making an organisation visibly attractive for potential employees, but it is not only about the image, but also the behaviour and the identity of the organisation which is the key. EB is a way of business life. It is about creating talent strategies, and focusing on ways of recruiting, retaining and developing engaged employees. So there should not be a focus on what one calls the process, but on ensuring that the organisation is a great place to work.

In our perception, EB is not only for large organisations with huge budgets, but is suitable for every branch and every organisation. It does not matter if the company has five or over 50 000 employees. Small organisations should focus on what it means to work there and what experience they are delivering to their employees, so that their employees can deliver a consistent experience to the customers. It is about the philosophy, and how an organisation shares this

philosophy with their employees. In many ways it is easier to control in a small organisation as there are fewer people who may damage the brand. There are risks for setting up an employer brand. One of the risks is that the term EB seems to project that it is only about creating an image. Other risks mentioned were that job advertisements are not to everyone's liking. Job advertisements will not only be read by potential employees, but also by guests and suppliers. Another important risk according to one of the managers is that EB makes an organisation inflexible. When everything is so strictly managed with manuals and so highly branded, the company will lose flexibility to deviate from this. A good employer brand needs a good cooperation across all functions of an organisation. Thorne (2004) writes that this could be compared to a machine, one part cannot operate without the other. Cross-functional working breaks down the traditional divisions between marketing, sales, distribution, IT, manufacturing and HR. The research showed us that most respondents find that it is the job of the corporate office to set up an employer brand.

Setting up an employer brand

The first step in setting up an employer brand (Thorne, 2004) is to identify a clear vision. All team members should become aware of the importance of a brand. The second step is to develop a clear internal programme of engagement. This step should also define what the future looks like, how the company plans to achieve it and how the employees can help. In the third step, the communication plan is created. There should not only be a plan for internal communications, but it is also very important that there is a plan for how to share this externally. Thorne (2004) suggests that this is not just about the proposed change process, but also to celebrate history, to build the future and to create new markets. The fourth step is to declare the employer brand and to apply it. It all has to start with the commitment from the senior leadership team. The fifth step is to continuously evaluate the employer brand which will ensure that the brand is effective for the organisation and that it will attract, engage and retain the right talent.

It is very important for an organisation to stay in touch with former employees (including retirees) of the organisation. None of the organisations have a programme to follow their former employees. However, almost all respondents acknowledged that they find it a good and suitable idea for their organisation. Hospitality organisations already use their own network when they are looking for a candidate, but this will not solve the recruitment problem.

The future of HR is uncertain in many camps. HR must step up to the plate and become more of a holistic player within organisations or risk being forever sidelined or even discarded in the face of inevitable change (Donaldson, 2005: 1). HR managers who say that they do not have time for this work or spend their time on other priorities based on the immediacy of business situations rather than looking at longer term cycles, will flounder (Donaldson, 2005: 1). We have the impression that the role of HR should change. EB demands a more strategic and business-focused HR department. Organisations are changing and greater responsibilities are expected from HR. In some organisations, the responsibility for marketing and HR are already in the same leadership area. Branding has always been the domain of the marketing department. From the

research, it became clear that in none of the hospitality organisations are marketing and HR in the same leadership area. There are, however, a few organisations that have a structured cooperation with the marketing department, something which is needed to set up a good employer brand. The foundation of a good employer brand is that the employees understand what the customer brand of the company promises. If the employees understand what the customer brand means, the employer brand can be built. Only when the employees believe in the customer brand are they able to promote it. The research showed that only a few respondents are satisfied with the degree to which their employees understand what the customer brand of the company promises. This problem illustrates that the role of HR should change.

Another aspect to guarantee the strategic role of HR is to change the role of HR. When an organisation decides to set up an employer brand, it should realise that HR should become more strategic and business-focused. Therefore, it is important to have people in HR with different backgrounds and skills. This will bring a much broader variety of knowledge into this field than the 'personnel professional' concept (Donaldson, 2005). The people in HR do not only understand financial data, but also segmentation, competitiveness and commercial issues. Furthermore, it is important that HR also starts with measuring their performance by means of quantitative, qualitative and financial data. When one of the respondents was asked if he thinks EB could make a (hospitality) organisation more successful than its competitor he replied:

Yes, most definitely. A colleague of mine who worked for a major telecommunications firm was responsible for choosing a hotel for the top sales team to have a holiday for two weeks as a reward for superior sales performance. The hotel chosen used to rotate each year until the year the team stayed in a Ritz-Carlton Hotel. My colleague threw out a pair of old shoes in the bin in her room only to discover that on returning home to Australia a hotel staff member had repaired, polished, re-packed and sent them back to her with a greeting card. Needless to say, every year since the team has visited a country only if it has a Ritz-Carlton Hotel. So yes, EB can make an organisation more successful than its competitors.

We hope this report demonstrated the importance of having an employer brand. Organisations could have a 'hip' recruitment advertisement with promising words but this will only attract people. To engage and retain these employees, the shown image should become reality, and should be the identity of the organisation. The workforce, also in the hospitality industry, is changing, not only in knowledge, but also in the expectations, wants and needs.

Increasingly, people seek an improved work-life balance which will stimulate demand in this market. The ageing population will also result in a higher demand for hospitality products and services. One of the respondents mentioned why hospitality organisations should choose EB.

While the demand in this market is increasing a shrinking and mobile talent pool will make it more difficult for the hospitality industry to attract and retain the talent when it needs to ensure sustainable growth and profits. Hotel leaders have one thing in common, they have great people and deliver

great service, you can't have one without the other. Inquire further and you will see that this doesn't happen by chance. The front end service delivery is supported by superior back end training systems, performance management, recruitment and reward/recognition systems.

Hospitality organisations should ask themselves whether their employees act as ambassadors to friends, family, colleagues and to the customers or guests. In the end, it is not the product that delivers the brand promise, but people. Only hospitality organisations who succeed in this will win the struggle for talent. EB will support them in this.

Recommendations

The discussion above wove together conclusions and recommendations. The most important recommendations, based on the analysis of the results and a comparison with the literature, are now summarised.

- The hospitality industry should seriously consider setting up a strategy to improve the image of the industry itself. The responsibility for this lies not only with the branch associations, but with the whole industry.
- Many hospitality managers acknowledged that the Collective Labour Agreement (CLA) (especially the salary) of the hospitality industry is not competitive with other branches. However, the CLA is only a guideline given by the branch associations. When a company notices that they fail to attract talent because of the CLA, they should consider paying certain functions higher salaries than the CLA prescribes.
- Employees working in the hospitality industry do not receive a laptop, mobile phone and a lease car. But hospitality organisations do have outstanding perquisites and a lot of job applicants are not aware of this. In the attraction of employees, companies should pay more attention to this.
- Hospitality organisations should, in the first place, not compete against each other for personnel, but with other branches. They have to look for other markets. The organisations have to show candidates that the organisation of a hotel in the matter of professionalism is not different from Nike or Shell, and that it is managed in the same way.
- Hospitality organisations should set up an employer brand. They should, thereby, understand that it is not about the 'pimping' of the recruitment advertisement, but that it is a way of business-life.
- Hospitality organisations should ensure that all employees understand what the customer brand promises to the guests, and that they believe in it.
- A company should realise that as soon people leave they will talk about the company in either a positive or a negative way. Therefore, it is very important for an organisation to set up an former employees programme to stay in touch with their former employees (including retirees) and to make the leaving process as fluent as possible. Furthermore, it is important that organisations emphasise to leaving employees that they can always come back.
- HR should start with measuring the results of their activities.
- HR should develop a different role, which is more strategic and more business focused. It is also important to have people in HR with different backgrounds and skills.

Suggestions for further research

Further research could be conducted into how EB functions in other economic conditions. At the moment, there is still a tight labour market. It would be interesting to see how EB will function in a labour market where there is a surplus of skilled and highly motivated employees.

Furthermore, the hospitality industry is broader than the four- and five-star market. This research concentrated only on the four- and five-star hotel market. Although it is clear that EB is suitable for every business, research has not yet been done on what other (HR) managers and owners of hospitality organisations think about this phenomenon.

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