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EMPLOYER BRANDING AS A TOOL FOR EMPLOYEE LOYALTY: THE CASE OF MOROCCAN COMPANIES LISTED ON CASABLANCA STOCK EXCHANGE

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Abstract

To attract qualified profiles, known as talents, and to retain them, many enterprises are actively leveraging on employer branding. The objective of this research is to shed light on the role played by the concept of employer branding, defined as the set of brand image assets with respect to employees and their impact on human resources loyalty. Our hypothetico-deductive research method will be completed by conducting an empirical study based on a series of semi-structured interviews with 10 large companies listed on Casablanca stock exchange market. We suggest a model to articulate the employer brand around three key dimensions: low propensity to seek a new job, affective engagement and task performance. The collected and analyzed feedback led us to a

clear and obvious conclusion. The intention to leave the company, the affective commitment as well as the performance in the task are directly impacted by the attributes of the employer brand. Therefore, organizational loyalty is influenced by the employer brand. The latter is a powerful loyalty tool that allows the company to retain talent. Further research should be conducted to explore the potential of employer branding as a powerful tool for talent retention.

Keywords

Employer Brand, Loyalty, Engagement, Task, Contextual Performance, Intention to Leave

1. Introduction

Nowadays, we live in an era where the worker is considered as a rare commodity. In fact, the war for talent has begun and companies are considering the employee as an important resource with very high added value, which will allow them to differentiate themselves on the market. In this context of talent scarcity, companies need to activate organizational levers to find, attract and retain qualified human capital. Once talent has been attracted, the main concern of companies is to retain it, while encouraging behaviors that are beneficial to the company and that promote skills' development (Guerfel-Henda, S., & Guilbert, 2008).

The scarcity of profiles, the change in employees' expectations and behaviors as well as the demand for qualified human capital are important factors that have reversed the balance of power between employees and companies. For all those reasons, companies are increasingly interested in their employer brand, as they want not only to attract talent but also to retain it.

Employer branding is a good tool to become a "reference employer" that attracts the workforce and thus fights against a shortage of talent (Chaminade, 2010). Thanks to employer branding, companies are enabled to communicate their vision, their promise, their culture and their values. Indeed, building an employer brand has become a differentiation tool (Liger, 2016).

Even if many authors consider the employer brand as a real loyalty tool (Ambler, T., & Barrow, 1996; Gaddam, 2008; Kapoor, 2010), we note that the research work related to the concept of the employer brand focuses mainly on the study of its impact on the attractiveness of talent. Some authors assert that an effective employer brand generates several positive impacts for the employer, such as an increase in employee engagement and a reduction in turnover. Despite these claims, there are few studies that examine the ability of employer branding to retain employees

(Charbonnier-Voirin, A., & Lissillour, 2018; Charbonnier-Voirin, A., Poujol, F.-J., & Vignolles, 2016).

However, if the concept of employer brand significantly and directly impacts talent attraction, we believe it is legitimate to question its influence on the process of human capital retention. In this research work, we want to explore the real influence of the employer brand concept on employee retention.

The concept of retention is defined as "the set of measures to reduce voluntary employee departures" (Peretti, 2001). It is a multifaceted notion that has undergone several theoretical developments that must be taken into consideration (Cézanne, C., & Guillon, 2013). Indeed, the intention to leave, which designates an employee's desire to voluntarily leave his or her company, is considered an indicator of loyalty, except that the best independent variable to explain an individual's behavior will be a measure of his or her intention to adopt that behavior." Moreover, the fact that an employee stays with the company is not directly correlated to a feeling of loyalty on his or her part. It is necessary to analyze the reasons that support the decision to continue this relationship (Guerfel-Henda, S., & Guilbert, 2008).

Among the relevant determinants that impact the employee's desire to stay and therefore his or her actual loyalty, we note affective involvement (MEYER J.P, 1997) and performance, which illustrates the behavioral component of loyalty (PERETTI & SWALHI, 2007).

In this article, we will first present a literature review of our key variables, which are employer brand and organizational loyalty as well as a theoretical analysis of the impact of employer brand on organizational loyalty. Secondly, we will present the results and analysis of our semi-structured interviews with employees of ten Moroccan companies listed on the Casablanca Stock Exchange. The last part of this work will be dedicated to a discussion of these results as well as to a presentation of the limits and research avenues opened by this study.

2. Employer Branding and Organizational Loyalty: Theoretical Perspectives

2.1. Employer Brand: Definition and Components

The war for talent has led to the emergence of the concept of employer branding, which is at the crossroads of marketing, communication and human resources. It therefore belongs to a new discipline known as human resources marketing. In this way, the human resources' function uses marketing and communication techniques to attract candidates, but also to retain the best

profiles(Liger, 2016; Panczuk, S., & Point, 2008). According to (Zakia, M.R., & Pritasari, 2018), the role of structured human resources is important. The authors cite that “a Human Resources Division is not only for the administration but also for company strategy to improve the employees’ performance by identifying the culture attributes of the company in order to make a succession plan.

The concept of employer branding has developed into a strategic tool for the company. Its importance is explained by the realization of companies of the value of their human capital in achieving performance.

The founders of the concept (Ambler, T., & Barrow, 1996) define it as "the set of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by the job that identify the company as an employer" (Berthon, P., Ewing, M., & Hah, 2005). Over time, some authors have developed this basic definition by adding other concepts to its composition. (Backaus and Tikoo, 2004) and (EDWARDS B.D., BELL S.T., ARTHUR J.R., 2008) state that the employer brand is composed of tangible and intangible elements but also elements related to the company such as its identity and values.

Other researchers continued to add other dimensions to its definition. (Panczuk, S., & Point, 2008) define it as "a process by which employees internalize the desired brand image and are motivated to project this image to customers and other organizational parties. It is a brand image and identity that the company takes on in the minds of employees. They then project to external stakeholders, such as potential employees and customers. In addition, the employer brand must be internally and externally coherent, as the messages communicated by the company about its value proposition and its added value compared to its competitors must be coherent with its organizational practices (Charbonnier-Voirin, A., & Lissillour, 2018). From this prism, we can consider the employer brand as a promise formulated by the employer to attract talent. Moreover (SOULEZ S., 2011) defines it as "a clear idea of what makes the company different and desirable as an employer",

In the same framework of definition, other authors define it as a "unique (exclusive) and attractive promise"(Viot, C., & Benraïss-Noailles, 2014). A holistic definition that encompasses all the dimensions that outline the concept was proposed by (Viot, C., & Benraïss-Noailles, 2014) for whom "the employer brand is a unique employment promise to current and potential employees that is based on the benefits and on functional, economic and psychological advantages that are

associated with an organization as an employer. It creates an identity and a distinctive image of the organization as an employer".

The main challenge of employer branding is to increase organizational productivity by improving the recruitment, retention and engagement of human capital. This identity of an advantageous company that offers its employees a unique work experience (Charbonnier-Voirin, A., Poujol, F.-J., & Vignolles, 2016) is only possible through the three dimensions around which the employer brand is set. We note the functional benefits, namely the usefulness and interest of the work and the development activities for the employee; the economic benefits, which include financial and material benefits; and the psychological benefits, related to the feeling of belonging and control (Charbonnier-Voirin, A., Poujol, F.-J., & Vignolles, 2016).

2.2. The Components of Organizational Loyalty

The fact that an employee does not leave the company is not directly a synonym of his loyalty. It is necessary to understand the motives that pushed him or her to stay within the company, in order to distinguish between the real will of the employee to belong to the human capital and the forced will (Giraud, L., Roger, A., & Thomines, 2012). The retention process is triggered before the employee develops the will to leave the company (Peretti, 2001). This generates a real desire to stay with the company. It is in this case a conscious and personal choice expressed by the employee.

Regarding turnover intentions, (Tavassoli, Sune, 2018) state that lack of work life balance may influence turnover intentions because employees may find difficulties to equally enjoy all life roles. The researchers state that "in some cases finding a new job might be perceived as an option to better balance their life.

This differs from retention, which is an action aimed at keeping the employee, because the latter is afraid to take the risk of losing advantages that he cannot find elsewhere (Chaminade, 2010). Thus, we retain that loyalty leads the company to implement management actions to obtain the loyalty of employees. This loyalty can be defined as "The set of measures to reduce the voluntary departures of employees" (Peretti, 2001). Loyalty can be tackled through three approaches: attitudinal, behavioral or mixed (Cézanne, C., & Guillon, 2013).

In terms of the attitudinal approach, "loyalty is a psychological disposition like commitment" (Jeanneney et al., 2013). Affective commitment is defined by an emotional attachment to the organization through an identification with the company, (Charbonnier-Voirin,

A., Poujol, F.-J., & Vignolles, 2016; Giraud, L., Roger, A., & Thomines, 2012). Researchers measure this variable through qualitative assessments. Several grids to measure engagement (Cézanne, C., & Guillon, 2013) are available in the literature.

Commitment is a measure of loyalty. It is defined as a force uniting the employee and the company. The latter has a positive impact on the satisfaction of the worker, which increases his desire to stay with the company (Giraud, L., Roger, A., & Thomines, 2012). For (Bankar, 2020), employee commitment level depends also on employee's perception about their privacy at workplace. This perception is influenced by management practices such as organizational policy and prevention of misuse. However, the intention to leave may result from a feeling of dissatisfaction or disengagement. It is a cognitive process by which the worker perceives job alternatives. This fuels in the employee the desire to leave his employer. It is a relevant indicator to study in the context of organizational loyalty (Giraud, 2015).

Regarding the behavioral approach, it considers loyalty as "an observable phenomenon, materialized in the relationship between the employee and the organization" (Cézanne, C., & Guillon, 2013). We retain the "Staying late at work" as an indicator of this approach that reveals constructive and active behaviors generating performance (PERETTI & SWALHI, 2007). The willingness to stay late for work is correlated with the desire to perform at the task level, and thus improve the functioning of the organization.

A loyal employee is then seen as someone who provides continuous effort and does not disrupt the functioning of his organization. He must fulfill the requirements of his position (performance in the task), and also exceed the expectations of the employer by working on projects and topics beyond his usual scope of intervention, (PERETTI & SWALHI, 2007). Organizational loyalty can be defined by a low tendency to seek work, affective commitment and contextual performance (PERETTI & SWALHI, 2007).

According to (Agagiotou, 2020) there is also a significant and positive relationship between the sample's on-the-job training and their productivity and thus, training constitutes a predictive factor for the employees' productivity and performance. In their recent research, (Roswald M. Tugonon, 2022) investigate loafing or unauthorized absenteeism which is another performance issue of employees. They show different solutions to address the issue. The objective is to act with compassion and justice to ensure no repetitive action that may happen in the future

2.3. The Influence of the Employer Brand on Organizational Loyalty

Employer branding is an employee loyalty tool. It is illustrated by actions implemented by the company to communicate to potential future employees (external employer branding) and to its current employees (internal employer branding), on the advantages they have or would have by working for the company, by emphasizing its added value compared to its competitors. Through the employer brand, the company seeks to show that it is an attractive and pleasant place to work (Charbonnier-Voirin, A., Poujol, F.-J., & Vignolles, 2016). We note that beyond attracting candidates, employer branding helps to retain them through an increase in satisfaction, an increase in commitment and a decrease in the intention to leave (Charbonnier-Voirin, A., Poujol, F.-J., & Vignolles, 2016).

In this research, we question how a positive evaluation of the employer brand impacts an employee's intention to leave the organization.

As far as affective commitment is concerned, few studies have examined the impact of the employer brand on affective commitment. The latter represents the emotional attachment to the organization, (MEYER J.P, 1997). The work of (Priyadarshi, 2011) revealed that affective commitment was significantly impacted by the attributes of the employer brand. The research of (Charbonnier-Voirin, A., Poujol, F.-J., & Vignolles, 2016) mentions a positive correlation between the internal employer brand and the affective involvement of employees. In the context of this work, we wondered how a positive evaluation of the employer brand impacts the affective dimension of loyalty.

Research studies have affirmed, based on the theory of social exchange (BLAU, 1964) that employees who perceive benefits from their work, adopt productive behaviors towards the organization and demonstrate contextual performance behaviors. Some authors have mentioned the positive link between the relevance of the task performed by the employee, the professional development prospects and the performance in the task (BORMAN W.C., 1993). Other researchers show that the characteristics of the work organization mode, notably autonomy, rich and non-repetitive work, have a direct and positive impact on organizational citizenship behaviors.

In the same logic of research, (KAHN, 1990) confirms that several characteristics of work, such as the variety of tasks, creativity and social support influence the degree of investment and involvement of employees in their tasks, (performance in the task). An employee who perceives his work positively would tend to increase his efforts and improve his task performance.

The work of (Charbonnier-Voirin, A., & Lissillour, 2018) reveals that the employer brand positively influences task performance. In this research, we wonder how a positive evaluation of the employer brand impacts task performance.

3. Employer Branding as a Retention Tool: An Empirical Study

3.1. Sample of the Study

As we mentioned in the theoretical part, studies that examine the capacity of the employer brand to retain employees are rare despite the fact that several authors affirm that an effective employer brand generates several positive consequences for the employer, such as an increase in employee involvement and a reduction in turnover (Charbonnier-Voirin, A., & Lissillour, 2018). This is why we decided to look at the relationships that could exist between the attributes of the employer brand and the loyalty of employees.

To examine the relationships between its variables, we opted for a qualitative study method. We want to explore how the employer brand impacts loyalty. In this context, we built our interview grid around two main axes.

The first axis concerns the attributes of the employer brand. We questioned the respondents about their expectations in terms of functional, economic and psychological benefits from the company. Moreover, we created our questions based on the scale of (Charbonnier-Voirin, A., Poujol, F.-J., & Vignolles, 2016). It is composed of 9 items and 3 dimensions, and then we added open-ended questions in relation to each dimension in order to bring out the criteria that define the employer brand among employees.

The first functional dimension is related to the interest of the work, for example we asked a question about the possibility of taking initiatives, the second psychological dimension is related to the work atmosphere felt, it is measured by questions such as the quality of relations with colleagues and then the last economic dimension is related to the financial and material advantages offered by the organization, such as benefits and bonuses.

The second axis concerns the indicators of loyalty selected in this research, namely the intention to leave the company, the performance in the task and the affective commitment of the employees. Our selection took into consideration indicators that are easy to interpret and that could define organizational loyalty (PERETTI & SWALHI, 2007). In order to measure organizational

loyalty, we designed the questions of our interview guide based on the questionnaire developed by (PERETTI & SWALHI, 2007).

The following table shows key parameters used for our study:

Employer Brand Dimensions	Employer Brand Components	Loyalty Indicators
Functional benefits	Usefulness and interest of the work	Intention to leave the company
Economic benefits	Financial and material benefits	Performance in the task
Psychological benefits	Feeling of belonging and control	Affective commitment

Table 1: *Employer Brand Dimensions and Loyalty Indicators*

(Source: Authors' Own Illustration)

Once our data collection tool was finalized, we conducted three interviews in order to test it and identify whether or not adaptations were necessary. We then interviewed management employees, who are considered to be the company's best resources (Guerfel-Henda, S., & Guilbert, 2008) and therefore a relevant target for evaluating the influence of the employer brand on loyalty. Thus, we mainly interviewed employees with management status.

The employees interviewed had an average of five years of experience in different departments in ten different companies. The interviews were conducted in French and were recorded using online video conferencing software, for which the interviewees gave their consent. We stopped the interviews when we stopped hearing new information, i.e. when we reached theoretical saturation (Flick, 2009).

3.2. Results Analysis

3.2.1. Employer Brand

The responses collected in our interviews revealed converging conclusions regarding respondents' perceptions of employer brand attributes.

In terms of the functional dimension of the employer brand, all of the employees interviewed agreed on the ultimate importance of the content of the work, the usefulness of the work, as well as the autonomy and versatility. We quote: "I consider the relevance of the tasks I

perform as part of my mission to be the primary motivating factor, my tasks are not routine and are varied and deal with current issues", "In the context of my work, I like to be empowered by my supervisor and to have freedom of action and decision", "Working on various themes and participating in cross-functional projects is what drives me every day in my job", "I need to work in a climate of trust and to feel that I have the right to make my own mark on the organization's projects".

On the subject of the psychological dimension, the employees questioned expressed themselves clearly and directly on its great importance in their well-being at work. They mentioned the driving role that the work atmosphere, the relationship with colleagues and the respect for the balance between private and professional life play in their choice of recruiter as well as their daily productivity. We quote: "I like to work with people with whom I have affinities, moreover I like my colleagues very much and I certainly don't want to change them", "the climate and atmosphere at work directly influence my performance and here I am at the top of my productivity because the work environment is warm and the management is participatory. I like my work", "I like working in companies where I feel like a member of a big family, and that's why I am loyal to my employer", "My employer respects the balance between my family and professional life through the flexibility of working hours and nothing in the world can compensate for that".

Concerning the last dimension related to economic benefits, we note that the employees mention it as a crucial element sought by the employer and a source of satisfaction. The exchanges reveal that the employees attach importance to the fairness of the remuneration scale as well as the prospects for development. We quote: "The fact that I am compensated in line with my contribution is a factor of motivation and satisfaction", "My employer recognizes our efforts and our involvement by paying us exceptional bonuses when we exceed our objectives", "I like my job and also my comfortable and stylish company car".

3.2.2. Organizational Loyalty

Organizational loyalty was measured through three main indicators, which are the intention to leave the company, the performance in the task and the affective commitment of the employee.

The answers of the respondents show that affective commitment is closely linked to the content of the work, they explain that by carrying out rich tasks that add value to the organization.

They feel indispensable for the achievement of organizational performance. It is by playing a vital role in the daily life of the company that they develop a sense of commitment and affective attachment. We quote, "I occupy a key position and I am an indispensable talent for the company, through my usefulness I am fulfilled on a daily basis, and I consider this company as a part of me, which I cannot abandon, because it really needs my knowledge".

The employees also make a link between the atmosphere at work and the quality of the relationship with their colleagues and their emotional commitment. They reveal through their answers that the warm work environment, where an atmosphere of calm and collaboration reigns, develops their involvement and commitment to the company. We quote, "We are a family, we help each other, and we work in an environment where joy and good humor reign, over the years we have become attached to each other and therefore we are loyal to our company".

According to the employees, the company's compensation and benefits policy is also a factor that favors their loyalty, since they agree on the importance of the employer's recognition of their efforts. They explain that compensation and benefits is not only a way of rewarding the employee's effort, but it is also a tool for expressing recognition for the employee's commitment and loyalty. We quote "Before joining this company, I had left my previous position in a large multinational organization, where I held a position that I liked very much, I was attached to my work and my colleagues, except that I was not satisfied with my salary package. My salary and the bonuses I received did not reflect my degree of commitment and my performance. Each year I developed a feeling of frustration and lack of consideration, and then one day, I decided to prioritize my mental well-being and to leave an employer who does not recognize my work at its true value. I find that compensation is an essential tool of retaining talent".

With respect to job performance, employees' responses converge on its positive correlation with the three dimensions of the employer brand that we measured through our questions. Employees express that the nature of the task, its relevance and also their ability to make decisions and act freely within their scope are factors that favor their performance and their creativity. They explain that the intellectual challenge is a driving force for them to bring out ideas and exceed the expectations previously defined by the employer, within the framework of their job descriptions. We quote "I want to outperform when I am trusted, to show my employer that I am trustworthy", "My work thrills me, drives me and makes me want to outdo myself". The work atmosphere and perceived benefits are also elements that contribute to performance on the part of

employees. We quote, "I work in a serene environment and that allows me to be productive", "Our company pays more than the sector average and that pushes me to increase my productivity, because I consider myself lucky to be part of its human capital".

Regarding the intention to leave the company, this indicator is significantly impacted by the financial and material benefits offered by the organization, such as bonuses, and thus the economic dimension of the employer brand. Employees agree that the major reason for their decision to leave the company is obviously the compensation policy. They also agree on the importance of the job and the work atmosphere as important factors that reduce the desire to leave the company. However, they insist on the basic condition that should be fulfilled by the employer, which consists of defining a fair compensation policy that rewards contribution. We quote, "The atmosphere at work, my position and my tasks are obviously important, but in order not to leave my employer, I must evolve and feel this progression in my career on the financial and material level.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of our research is to explore the relationship between employer brand and organizational loyalty. In order to study this causal link, we have broken down the two variables into several indicators that we have selected from the literature review.

First, in order to study the employer brand, which is the identity of an advantageous company that offers its employees a unique work experience (Charbonnier-Voirin, A., Poujol, F.-J., & Vignolles, 2016), we based ourselves on the three dimensions around which the employer brand is articulated, we note the functional benefits, namely the usefulness and interest of the work, the economic benefits, which include financial and material benefits, and the psychological benefits, related to the feeling of belonging and control (Charbonnier-Voirin, A., Poujol, F.-J., & Vignolles, 2016).

Second, in order to analyze loyalty, which can be defined as "the set of measures that reduce the voluntary departure of employees" (Peretti, 2001). We based ourselves on three loyalty indicators retained in the framework of this research, namely the intention to leave the company, the performance in the task and the affective commitment.

All of the statements we have collected and analyzed lead us to a clear and obvious conclusion. The intention to leave the company, the affective commitment as well as the performance in the task are directly impacted by the attributes of the employer brand. Therefore, organizational loyalty is influenced by the employer brand. The latter is a powerful loyalty tool that allows the company to retain talent.

Moreover, from the statements of our respondents, we have found that the relevance of work, the work atmosphere and the financial benefits have a direct and positive correlation with job performance and affective commitment. These attributes of the employer brand, which are "the set of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by the job that identify the company as an employer" (Ambler, T., & Barrow, 1996), were found to be very important for employees in order to increase their performance and form emotional attachments with the company to which they belong.

In contrast, a negative and highly significant correlation exists between employer brand attributes and intention to leave the company, according to employee responses. They all affirm that the diversity of tasks, the versatility and the margin of decision-making freedom granted by the employer, had a negative impact on the intention to leave and fueled the desire to remain within the company.

Moreover, a good working atmosphere and a fair and satisfactory remuneration policy had a negative influence on the intention to leave the company. We also note that the economic dimension of the employer brand, which is related to the financial and material benefits offered by the organization, such as benefits and bonuses, are mentioned as a crucial criterion influencing the decision to leave the company.

This research has limitations. Firstly, we mention that this is qualitative research, which is based on the analysis of the statements of the respondents, and that it would be appropriate to carry out a quantitative study through a questionnaire, whose answers could be statistically processed. Secondly, it would be relevant to integrate intermediate variables between the employer brand and the different components of loyalty. For example, work motivation could be generated by the employer brand (Gaddam, 2008) (Mandhanya and Shah, 2010), and then study the impact of motivation on organizational loyalty.

In conclusion, this work contributes to the understanding of the impact of employer brand on employee loyalty through social exchange theory. Further research should be conducted to explore the potential of employer branding as a powerful tool for talent retention.

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