THE ROLE OF LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT IN EMPLOYER BRAND PRACTICES

Ann Elizabeth Schulte
A DISSERTATION
in
Work Based Learning Leadership

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education 2010

Supervisor of Dissertation:

Jonathan Supovitz, Associate Professor of Education

Dean, Graduate School of Education:

Andrew C. Porter, Dean

Dissertation Committee:

Jonathan Supovitz, Associate Professor of Education
Douglas Lynch, Vice Dean
Matthew Riggan, Senior Research Associate
Patricia Williams, Associate Professor of Marketing
The Role of Learning and Development in Employer Brand Practices

COPYRIGHT

2010

Ann Elizabeth Schulte
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank everyone in the CLO program at UPenn…

Matt Riggan for seeing that I can be pushed…

My Marys for being with me every step of the way…

My children for altering their expectations…

And, my husband, Kevin, for the great discussion.
ABSTRACT

THE ROLE OF LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT
IN EMPLOYER BRAND PRACTICES

Ann Elizabeth Schulte
Dissertation Supervisor: Jonathan Supovitz, EdD

Employer brand represents a unique value proposition about what individuals might receive as a result of working for a particular employer. This proposition, if delivered as promised, also contributes to a firm’s positive reputation as a workplace. However, much of the literature on employer brand focuses on the attractiveness of an organization in the eyes of potential employees. The importance of engaging existing employees and influencing their commitment to advance organizational objectives can be argued as an equally critical purpose of employer brand. In practice, this notion of applying employer brand management to the employee experience is a more recent focus and may be considered under explored.

Building organizational commitment and influencing workplace behaviors that drive employee engagement and high performance are often addressed by the learning and development function in a firm. Using a cross-case comparison method, this qualitative research study examined how learning and development activities are leveraged in firms with strong workplace reputations to fulfill the employer brand expectations of both individuals and companies in the employee phase of the employment
lifecycle. Three significant roles for the learning and development function emerged from the data in this study. First, learning and development stimulates engagement by providing promised opportunities for professional development and career growth. Learning and development also builds required workplace behaviors, including the knowledge and skills necessary to deliver customer satisfaction (onbrand training) and the management skills necessary to create and sustain the working conditions promised as the employee experience (manager training). The third role for learning and development that emerged from the data was that of a reinforcer of the identity and values of the organizational culture.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 1

What is Employer Branding? ......................................................... 1

Why Employer Brand Matters .................................................... 2

Study Significance ....................................................................... 5

Research Questions ...................................................................... 7

Organization of this Study .......................................................... 8

Chapter 2 LITERATURE REVIEW .................................................. 10

Evolution of the Employer Brand ................................................ 10

Consumer Branding .................................................................... 10

Corporate Branding .................................................................... 15

Employer Branding .................................................................... 16

Factors Affecting Employer Brand .............................................. 19

Reputation .................................................................................. 19

Signaling ...................................................................................... 20

Resource Utilization and Development ..................................... 22

Identification, Commitment and Engagement ............................ 23

Organizational Culture ............................................................... 27

The Role of Learning and Development .................................... 29
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shifting Conceptualizations of Employer Brand</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5 EMPLOYER BRAND MANAGEMENT</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer Brand Messaging and Alignment</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message Strategy</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods as Messages</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles and Responsibilities for the Employer Brand</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of HR/Talent Management</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role for Communications</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of Learning and Development</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Importance of Leadership</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aligning Employer Brand with Corporate Brand</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success Measures</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges in Employer Brand Management</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Challenge of Alignment</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Challenge of Consistency</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Challenge of Customization</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6 THE WILDCARD OF CULTURE</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Revealing Role of Everyone</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpredictable Impressions</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Tables

Table 1: De-Identified Company Data of Case Companies

Table 2: De-Identified Data About Participants

Table 3: Code Families

Table 4: Reference to Specific Employer Brand Attributes by Industry

Table 5: Bases of Employer Branding Segmentation
List of Figures

Figure 1: Core EVP Attributes Across All Major Talent Segments...........4

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework for the Role of Learning and Development in Employer Brand Management........................................32

Figure 3: Revised Conceptual Framework of Employer Brand Management..120
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The employer brand philosophy is generally concerned with building a distinctive image in the minds of recruits and existing employees that a company, above all others, is a “great place to work” (Ewing, Pitt, deBussy, & Berthorn, 2002). A young and developing theory, employer brand has more recently been purported to also provide a new framework for the business of Human Resources (HR). Employer brand is about “deciding what kind of employer a company needs to be” and “provides a consistent framework for management to simplify and focus priorities, increase productivity, and improve recruitment, retention and commitment” (The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited, 2001, p. 2). As such, employer brand has tremendous power to serve as a platform for defining culture and designing talent strategies to increase performance.

What is Employer Branding?

The term employer brand appears to have first been used in 1996 and defined as “the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company” (Ambler & Barrow, 1996, p. 187). In the last decade, many variations of this definition have appeared in both the academic literature and the popular press, such as “the image of your organization as a ‘great place to work’ in the mind of current employees and key stakeholders in the external market” (Minchington, 2006) and “how a business builds and packages its identity, from its origins and values, to what it promises to deliver to emotionally connect
employees so that they in turn deliver what the business promises to customers” (Sartain & Schumann, 2006, p. vi). Helen Rosethorn has presented a concise collection of the most predominant definitions of employer brand and a thoughtful analysis of the similarities and differences in her book, *The Employer Brand: Keeping Faith with the Deal*. She recognizes that the notion of employer brand as a *package* of attributes is a consistent theme in employer brand definitions and generally relates to rewards, opportunity, people or work conditions. Often these attributes are referred to as an *employee value proposition* (EVP) that is directed to existing and potential employees.

The notion that an employer brand will not be sustainable if it does not serve the organization and improve employee satisfaction at the same time is a missing element from many of these common definitions. Employer brand is best viewed as consisting of two elements: the “value proposition” about what people might receive as a result of working for a particular employer, and the “employee experience” which represents the reality of the delivery of the deal (Rosethorn, 2009, p. 20).

**Why Employer Brand Matters**

It has been suggested that companies with strong employer brands can potentially reduce the cost of talent acquisition, improve employee relations, increase employee retention and even offer lower salaries for comparable staff (Ritson, 2002). Practitioner authors agree that long-term corporate success and an organization’s prosperity depends on how well the firm is able to target, manage, motivate and develop talented people (Cheese, Thomas, & Craig, 2008). Most companies understand the fundamental
importance of engaging employee commitment in delivering customer satisfaction and
loyalty. To this end, companies must create a work environment in which employees feel
a sense of pride, accomplishment and unity. Engaged employees (especially those in
customer-facing roles) project a positive corporate image, which enables their
organization to succeed. In this way, employer brands also support an organization’s
ability to deliver a consistent customer brand experience. Furthermore, organizations
with strong workplace reputations have an easier time attracting, developing and
retaining quality people, leading to increased performance and sustained success
(Barrow, 2005).

Employer brand can actually be used to define, manage and deliver all the
elements that encompass an employee’s experience at work. Whether labeled Human
Resources or Talent Management, people management involves a wide range of
processes that can be described as employee touch points. These touch points occur in a
relatively predictable sequence that comprise the employee experience and provide the
avenue for delivery of the employer brand attributes: recruitment, onboarding, employee
communication, shared services (such as benefits administration and facilities), rewards,
measurement (i.e. employee engagement surveys), performance management, and
employee learning and development (Mosely, 2007). No one in the corporation knows
more about these touch points in the employee lifecycle than the HR management, but
being included in designing the strategy of a firm, which will drive consumer/corporate
brand success and define what is required for employer brand success, is a role that HR is
still trying to earn (Barrow, 2008). In most companies, a variety of functions must align their activities to manage what represents the employer brand.

**Characteristics of Employer Brand**

A strong employer brand is thought to increase an organization’s ability to not only attract, but also to retain and engage people (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Ambler & Barrow, 1996). According to the Corporate Leadership Council (CLC), there are core attributes for employee value propositions (EVPs) provided by an employer brand that drive attraction, others that drive commitment, and three that influence both.

*Figure 1: Core EVP Attributes across All Major Talent Segments (Corporate Leadership Council, 2006)*

Academic literature about best employer studies is aligned with the CLC research and suggests that the key attributes to be *an employer of choice* can be reduced to a few common factors: learning and development opportunities, career growth opportunities and culture and work environment (Joo & McLean, 2006, p. 252). In
general, it seems these employer brand attributes, if delivered as promised, contribute the most to a firm's positive reputation as a workplace.

**Study Significance**

Historically, many companies have allowed their employer brand to evolve passively and inconsistently, thus operating with what can be known as a *default* employer brand. In fact, a recent study by Watson Wyatt entitled *The Power of Integrated Reward and Talent Management* examined more than 1300 organizations in 24 countries, and found only 36% of organizations reported even having an organization-wide EVP. Of those with an EVP, 70% primarily use it for recruiting purposes (Watson Wyatt Worldwide, 2009).

As well, much of the interest and literature on employer brand has focused to date on the attractiveness of an organization in the eyes of potential employees. "It has been too much about recruitment and not enough about life beyond on-boarding" (Rosethorn, 2009, p. 23). The importance of engaging existing employees and influencing their commitment to advance organizational objectives can be argued as an equally critical purpose of employer brand, but applying employer brand management internally, to the employee experience, may be considered underexplored.

Building organizational commitment and influencing workplace behaviors during the employee experience are often addressed by the learning and development function in a firm. Learning and development practices support employer brand management at multiple touch points and can have a positive impact on workplace reputation, and
thereby organizational performance, by increasing a firm’s ability to attract, engage and retain employees. Most obviously, ongoing learning and development offered for employees to further their professional growth and career development is a significant driver of distinction in employer brand messages, influencing both attraction and commitment. Learning and development supports strategic management of organizational culture and change management initiatives. The learning and development function also trains customer facing employees to deliver on-brand behavior and teaches managers how to create and sustain the working conditions promised as the employee experience.

This study examines the employer brand practices in firms with strong workplace reputations, focusing specifically on how learning and development activities are leveraged in these firms to fulfill expectations of both individuals and companies in the employee phase of the employment lifecycle. For the purposes of this work, I considered a strong workplace reputation to be equivalent and or representative of a strong employer brand. The study relied on Helen Rosethorn’s definition of employer brand because it reflects the expectations of both the employer and the employee, specifically references the employee experience and recognizes the importance of stakeholder communication for influencing reputation:

An employer brand is in essence the two-way deal between an organization and its people—the reasons they choose to join and the reasons they choose…and are permitted…to stay. The art of employer branding is to articulate this deal in a way that is distinctive, compelling, and relevant to the individual and to ensure that it is delivered throughout the lifecycle of the employee within that organization. (Rosethorn, 2009, p. 19)
Research Questions

Four research questions were explored through qualitative interviews to uncover practices that drive successful employee experiences:

Question 1: How do companies with strong workplace reputations include learning and development as part of the employer brand promise?

Question 2: How is learning and development leveraged in the various touch points of the employee experience, and to what extent?

Question 3: What measures are used to assess the effectiveness of learning and development practices against employer brand success?

Question 4: How do internal functions (corporate communications, human resources, learning and development) interface and align to support the employer brand?

The literature review for this study first explored the management and marketing literature on brand strategy to understand the similarities and differences between consumer branding and corporate branding as antecedents to employer branding. I also looked for literature particularly relevant to this study; that is, literature that addresses the importance of engaging existing employees and influencing their commitment to advance organizational objectives. The literature provides substantial evidence of the usefulness of applying employer brand management to the employee experience. Focusing on the importance of the employee experience, as opposed to the recruiting phase, provides an opportunity for this study to fill a gap in the literature by empirically examining the role
of learning and development processes as likely enablers of both stimulating engagement and building the required workplace behaviors that deliver an organization’s productivity and profitability.

**Organization of this Study**

This dissertation is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 has provided an orientation to the concept of employer brand, its importance to organizations and the significance of this study’s goal to explore the role of learning and development in employer brand practices. Chapter 2 summarizes the review of the literature on the evolution of branding as well as major factors affecting employer brand including reputation, signaling, resource utilization and development, identification, commitment, engagement and organizational culture. Chapter 2 ends with the introduction of a conceptual framework that suggests the role of learning and development in employer brand practices. Chapter 3 describes the methods of data collection and analysis for empirically identifying how, and to what extent, learning and development practices are leveraged for employer brand success in 14 case companies. Chapter 4 presents research findings and discussion on the employer brand promise and the delivery of the promise in the case companies studied. This includes attributes of attraction and descriptions of unique learning and development experiences that are leveraged in the various touch points of the employee experience and in the context of the organizational objectives. Chapter 5 presents research findings and discussion of the various organizational roles and responsibilities in employer brand development and its ongoing management,
including challenges and opportunities for increased success. Chapter 6 presents research findings and discussion on the role of culture in mediating the relationship between the company's efforts to manage the employer brand and what employees actually experience and ultimately conclude. This chapter also presents a revised conceptual framework that incorporates the role of culture. Finally, chapter 7 summarizes the research into conclusions and recommends how organizational leaders can strategically manage the ideas and practices that emerged from this study to stimulate engagement and build the required workplace behaviors for high performance.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Evolution of the Employer Brand

The term employer brand appears to have first been used in 1996 by Simon Barrow, an advertising executive who assumed responsibility for a human resources assignment and quickly saw parallels between applying classic marketing principles to products and applying the same to recruitment advertising for potential employees (Barrow & Mosley, 2005). From the existing literature, it is evident that Barrow's notion was on target and that the concept of employer brand shares theoretical foundations with both consumer and corporate branding (Moroko & Uncles, 2008). Employer branding is emerging as another tier in a firm's brand architecture and serves to bring alignment and purpose to the role of employees in the creation of value.

Consumer Branding

Modern brand management is generally thought to have emerged when brand messages, in the form of words and pictures, were applied to packaged goods in the 1930s in an attempt to influence housewives that one commodity item, with the same price and quality as any other, seemed different and desirable (Olins, 2003). As symbols within popular culture, brands can position a product in terms of its unique, functional benefits (Aaker, 1991). Branding allows buyers to identify products that might benefit them and also infers consistency of product quality. Sellers benefit from branding also in
that a brand name can become a basis to build a story about a product and the brand name and trademark provide legal protection for the unique product features (Kotler & Armstrong, 2009).

The role of brands in developed societies is pervasive and conventional marketing wisdom suggests that branding is a strategy that effectively provides differentiation. However, marketing scholars see the role of brands evolving away from a functional focus toward a more experiential role in the societies in which the product brands are consumed (Baskin, 2009, Schembri, 2009). Reporting on more than three years of ethnographic research focused on the customer experience of the iconic brand of Harley Davidson, Sharon Schembri has shown that in many instances, choosing a brand is not as much about selecting a product or a set of features as it is selecting the meaning the brand brings to the consumers lives (Schembri, 2009).

With this point of view, brands constitute a form of identity and demonstrate or signal to others who the users are or aspire to be. In this way, brands consumed become part of our extended selves (Belk, 1988). To differentiate their offerings, marketers must go beyond thinking of branding as simply a visual identity and a method for communicating features and benefits, to creating and managing the experiences customers have with their brands.

Much has been written about how consumers gain personal meaning through their consumption of and relationships with brands, including iconic brands such as Harley Davidson, Nike, Apple, Mountain Dew and Volkswagen (Holt, 2003). Marketing
communication that reinforces the experiential view of brand consumption builds on this brand-consumer relationship and confirms that the consumer is the central focus of brand marketing efforts (Schembri, 2009). As a good example, the priceless campaign for MasterCard Worldwide has run for more than ten years and translated effectively into multiple languages and various cultures. The message promises that whatever you buy, whatever it costs, how you feel about the outcome always matters more (Baker, Broadley, & Simonet, 2009). The priceless brand, per se, does not promote the buy now, pay later service of using a credit card but instead offers a universal, emotional and resonant experience that can be had with each and every purchase.

Similarly, the city of Las Vegas has positioned itself as a luxury destination and created a brand experience for visitors. Market research revealed to the city marketers that people who travel to Las Vegas often stay up all night and do things they wouldn’t normally do in their own hometowns. A brand slogan of “Only Vegas! What happens here, stays here” provides consumers with a symbolic meaning of freedom rather than specific amenities of the services provided on a visit (Kotler & Armstrong, 2009).

However, in today’s real-time networked world, the power and relevance of branding as an influence on consumption may be diminishing, or at least changing, because of the many variables that can make consumer/company interactions unique. Buyers have many more ways to interact with business and numerous ways to switch their interactions between providers (Baskin, 2009). This reality effects both product brand and service brand marketing.
Services are “a form of product that consists of activities, benefits or satisfaction offered for sale, that are essentially intangible and do not result in the ownership of anything” (Kotler & Armstrong, 2009, p. 234). There is a substantial difference between a product brand and a service brand. Product brands are consistent and messaging can be repeatable. A consumer product (like a candy bar) “doesn’t answer back, doesn’t get tired, isn’t anxious and always tastes the same” (Rosethorn, 2009, p. xxiv). Dealing with service brands often involves longer, unpredictable processes because services are essentially intangible and are created through direct interactions with customers (Kotler & Armstrong, 2009).

In a service business, the customer and the front-line employees interact to create the service. From the prospective of a service provider, adopting an approach to brand management is much more complex than managing product brands because of two principal dimensions: operational complexity and interpersonal complexity (Mosely, 2007). Operational complexities can involve a number of different components that must be brought together under the same brand name, as well as the number of steps, or the length of time that is involved in the presentation and fulfillment of products offered in relation to a service. The interpersonal dimension presents an even greater degree of complexity because it involves the personal interactions of both customers and the service provider employees. These can include a number of different people with varying amounts of knowledge, behaviors and relationship skills, all which impact the
effectiveness of service delivery and presents significant challenges to providing a consistent onbrand experience (Mosely, 2007).

Using 28 years of Harvard Business School research on 200 companies, James Heskett has created a model known as the service-profit chain that establishes relationships between profitability, customer satisfaction and employee satisfaction. Heskett contends that highly satisfied customers drive growth and profitability in service businesses and leading up to this outcome are the following links in a chain:

- Enhancing internal service quality (equipping employees with the skills and power to serve customer) raises employee satisfaction, which fuels employee loyalty and productivity, which boosts external service value—which then increases customer satisfaction and loyalty. (Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 2008, p. 120)

This type of success relies on a practice referred to as *internal marketing*, meaning that the service firm must orient and motivate its customer-contact employees and supporting service people to work as a team to provide customer satisfaction, presumably through communications and learning and development activities. The service-profit chain provides a clear association between employee satisfaction and customer satisfaction and may be considered as validation for the practice that has come to be known as employer brand management.
Corporate Branding

As consumer brands proliferated in the early 1990s, advertising agencies and marketing experts began to focus on the *maker's mark* as the name of the corporation behind a product or service and the value a parent company's identity conferred (Ackerman, 1998). At first, corporate branding efforts emerged with a narrow set of elements such as slogans or taglines crafted to tell a unique story and strategies for how the name of the corporation should be promoted (design, advertising, sponsorships, etc.). Brand strategist and author Larry Ackerman asserts that "more than the name of a company, or a description of its business, the corporate brand is a synonym for the unique persona of the organization. It is a description of who the company is, spelled out in a single, integrating idea or concept" (Ackerman, 1998, p. 34). According to Ackerman, in this way, the corporate brand differs fundamentally from a product or service brand. A corporate brand is defined as much by the culture of the organization as anything else and can serve as an organizing mechanism to educate and align employees around a business strategy. Ackerman suggests that the force behind a successful corporate brand is the internal work it takes to discover the organization's identity, as in "what makes us tick, what are the distinctive characteristics of our organization, how do we make a difference to the people with whom we do business and the world in which we live" (Mahoney, 2000, p. 5). In a business environment where brand, identity, mission, vision and other terminology is used frequently and yet hard to distinguish, Ackerman maintains that a "corporate brand is the expression of a competitive advantage, but organizational identity is the source of the advantage" (Mahoney, 2000, p. 5). In this way, organizational
identity is "the bedrock of how an organization creates value – the proprietary
collection it makes to the marketplace" (Ackerman, 2010, p. 40) and any successful
brand building, communication or organizational learning efforts must start with this
organizational self-awareness.

In the _European Journal of Marketing_, John Balmer has also explored the concept
of the corporate brand and distinguishes clearly the differences between product brands,
corporate brands and corporate identities. The key difference between a product brand
and a corporate brand lies in the fact that the corporate brand tends to be grounded in the
values of the firm’s founders, owners, or senior leaders, while product brands values tend
to be _contrived_ as the invention of marketing communicators (Balmer & Gray, 2003).
Balmer also calls out the level of concern within the organization as a key difference
between product brands and corporate brands. Product brands are generally managed by
marketing personnel, at a middle management level. The economic benefit, strategic ties
and opportunity for competitive advantage that is represented by a well-defined corporate
brand make it a decided concern for the senior levels of management in the organization.
As a third difference (actually citing Barrow and other early employer brand researchers),
Balmer gives credence to the role of employees as crucially important for transmitting the
corporate brands values through their interfaces with customers (Balmer & Gray, 2003).

**Employer Branding**

It is the key role of employees in brand delivery that makes building and nurturing
the employer brand as critical to success as promoting the consumer or corporate brand,
according to Libby Sartain and Mark Schumann, who helped build successful employer brands at Yahoo! and Southwest Airlines (Sartain & Schumann, 2006). Sartain and Schumann describe an interesting evolution in the relationships between businesses and employees in their book *Brand from the Inside*. For many years, the relationship between a company and its employees was clearly one-way: employees were simply expected to do as they were told. As time passed, businesses began to consider employees as partners in executing business strategy that gave rise to the notion of an exchange of value, or *deal* between the business and the employees. But, Sartain and Schumann claim this relationship was no more than a financial transaction or a functional relationship. What has really been the impetus for formalizing employer brand management is that “employees began to demand a relationship that reached for something more: an emotional connection” (Sartain & Schumann, 2006, p. 24). As suggested in the empirical work of Lara Moroko and Mark Uncles on the successful characteristics of employer brands, this is a parallel to the emotional experience that consumers seek from consumption of their chosen brands and suggests that employees can be considered as “consumers of work” (Moroko & Uncles, 2008).

While each level of branding has a separate and distinct purpose, companies do benefit from creating a synergy between their brands. Talented, motivated employees strengthen an organization’s products and services and this, in turn, attracts promising people to the organization (Barrow & Mosley, 2005). Developing motivated and customer-oriented employees who can provide customer satisfaction relies on employees understanding the consumer brand promise and their role in delivering an onbrand
customer experience (Sartain & Schumann, 2006). The values presented in employer brand messages should not deviate from those presented in the corporate brand, as employees, especially customer-facing employees, will recognize the disconnect and it will impact their commitment to perform and deliver, which will eventually impact the bottom line success of the organization. In this way, various aspects of the branding process that are regarded on the fringe of consumer branding take on central importance for employer brand management and brand alignment (Rosethorn, 2009). For instance, the accuracy of internal communications and the consistency with external communications is a prime opportunity for employees to evaluate the inferred promises of a company's brands (Moroko & Uncles, 2008).

Because candidates cannot readily assess a prospective employing firm prior to experiencing employment, they often rely on the reputation of the corporate or consumer brand to fill in gaps in their knowledge. If the employer brand, the corporate brand and consumer brand are aligned, then this supports the employee experience. But, if a prospective employee transfers perceptions of the consumer brand that are not supported by the employment experience, then dissatisfaction could result (Moroko & Uncles, 2008). In fact, another characteristic of a strong employer brand is one that is able to actually transcend the consumer-led image of the organization. Regardless of the type of work performed, the true objective of an employer brand is to transmit that the company represents a remarkable employment opportunity, so a company involved in a possibly less appealing business (such as waste disposal) may in fact offer a terrific employer brand and truly be a great place to work (Goold, 2007).
Factors Affecting Employer Brand

In addition to brand management and marketing theories, other constructs including reputation, signaling, the resource-based view of strategy, and the psychological concepts of identification, commitment and engagement all contribute to employer brand success. The first three concepts represent factors that companies seek to influence through their employer brand management strategies. The psychological concepts refer to how employees receive, interpret and respond to the types of inputs or messages in the context of what they know from their experiences with the company. As well, the sum of these influences must also be considered in the context of culture. A brief review of each of these constructs follows to facilitate the connection of these factors to the employer brand concept.

Reputation

It has been established that an employer brand is essentially a two-way deal between an organization and its people. The reality of the delivery of the deal is the aspect of employer brand that most closely aligns with the construct of corporate reputation. According to The Reputation Institute, a global research organization dedicated to advancing knowledge about reputation measurement, valuation and management, the specific difference between brand and reputation is this:

A brand is a promise. Making a relevant and distinctive promise helps to build a brand. A corporate reputation is built by fulfilling the promise to stakeholders. A company therefore owns its brand, but stakeholders own its reputation. (The Reputation Institute, 2009)
Charles Fombrun, founder of the Reputation Institute, maintains that a company has both a corporate reputation and a workplace reputation. The difference lies in the nature of the attributes and the dependent variable, which is reputation as a place to work, instead of reputation overall (The Reputation Institute, 2009). The stakeholders that own the workplace reputation, according to this definition, are the employees of a firm.

Fombrun actually began his work in the reputation field as an academic examining the extraordinary impact of the Business Week ranking of U.S. business schools in the mid-1990s. Since that time there has been an explosion of rankings and lists which have lent credibility to the discipline of managing reputation (Martin & Hetrick, 2006). Ratings and rankings are shorthand descriptions of how stakeholders feel about a company, and these rankings influence stakeholder support for the company’s activities. Firms have latched on to rankings and lists produced by various publications and research institutes in an effort to benchmark the captivating attributes of their companies. Appearing on a best employer list is a method that allows firms to signal recognition of their employee experience to both potential candidates and employees.

**Signaling**

Signaling is an important component of building a strong workplace reputation and in a business context it means that a company with favorable information about itself will ‘signal’ that information to others. Since the emergence of the internet, which creates a public forum for signaling, signaling theory has been applied to the use of company websites (Joyce, 2003). Hodes research reports that 95% of all job seekers’
first experience with a company comes from a visit to the careers section of the firm’s website. In relation to employer brand, this means that before a candidate even walks into the door, s/he has met the firm and formed a first impression about who the company is and what it stands for (Bernard Hodes Global Network, 2006). As applicants have incomplete information about the actual employee experience in organizations, they often interpret this website information as a signal about an organization’s working conditions. A positive workplace reputation, such as recognition on a best employer list, becomes a source of information in the labor market that reduces the organization’s search costs and the training related costs associated with labor turnover, providing meaning for signaling theory in the relationships of talent management, workplace reputation and financial performance (Joo & McLean, 2006).

Tamara Erickson and Lynda Gratton claim in their 2007 *Harvard Business Review* article “What It Means to Work Here” that companies who successfully communicate the employee experiences that make them unique (called signature experiences) can dramatically improve employee engagement and performance:

These organizations excel at expressing what makes them unique. They know what they are, and it’s not all things to all people. They understand their current and future employees as clearly as most companies understand their current and future customers. They recognize that individuals work for different reasons and accomplish tasks in different ways. And they demonstrate what they are vividly, with stories of actual practices and events, not through slogans on the wall or laminated values cards on every desk. As a consequence, these companies hire people who easily and enthusiastically fit in, and thereby cultivate a more committed workforce. (Erickson & Gratton, 2007, p. 107)
Of course, the seemingly most reliable source for signals about workplace conditions is current employees. So signaling internally about external recognition is also influential. Besides leveraging a firm's external website and participating in market studies and surveys, companies can signal commitment to an employer brand and key differentiators by addressing them in the company's annual report and key internal publications such as newsletters, employee emails and internal websites/intranets (Van Dam, 2006). Companies with strong employer brands find additional ways to signal their brand values internally, utilizing opportunities such as receptions, employee meetings, social events and even facilities design to create distinctive experiences.

**Resource Utilization and Development**

The advantage of applying employer brand to the experience of current employees is grounded in a theory known as a resource-based view (RBV) of a firm (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Joo & McLean, 2006; Martin & Hetrick, 2006; Mosely, 2007). The strategy came into prominence in the early 1990s, about the same time as the rise of service-based firms and consultancies. Inspired by economist Edith Penrose, RBV frames the view of a firm as a bundle of resources including both tangible and intangible assets. Proponents of RBV theory believe that a company "develops a competitive advantage by not only acquiring but also developing, combining and effectively deploying its physical, human and organizational resources in ways that add unique value and are difficult to imitate" (Barney, 1991).
Most RBV arguments are rooted in human resources, such as the combination of skills, knowledge and behavior of employees, or organizational resources like the control systems, routines and learning mechanisms available in an organization. These combinations are the result of complex social structures, built over time, and thus are difficult to understand and imitate (Joo & McLean, 2006). In effect, if a company can create a distinctive culture and leverage its learning and development function to develop unique capabilities in its employees, this strategy is the most sustainable route to competitive advantage because everything else is subject to inspection and copying. The evidence clearly suggests that employees are key in developing sustainable differentiation and that the intangible characteristics of an embedded brand ethos is far more difficult for competitors to copy than the operational components of a business (Mosely, 2007).

**Identification, Commitment and Engagement**

The essence of employer branding is to ensure employees identify with the organization, and its brand and mission, to produce desired outcomes for organizations (Martin & Hetrick, 2006). As such, the employer brand philosophy relies heavily on aspects of the psychological constructs of identification, commitment and engagement and these are especially critical in the employee phase of the employment lifecycle. Identification matters because it is the process by which people come to define themselves, communicate that definition or image to others and use it to make decisions about their work and their lives (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008). Much of what has been written about social identity theory suggests that an initial motivation for individuals
to identify with an organization is self-enhancement. People identify to provide a basis for thinking of themselves in a positive frame. Like the consumption of an iconic brand, people often choose firms based on attributes that provide symbolic benefits related to perceptions about things like the prestige of a company and the social approval they imagine they will enjoy if they go to work for such a firm (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Being associated with a firm publicly recognized as a best place, for example, enhances one's sense of self. After self-enhancement, individuals will often include other motives, such as self-consistency as important conditions, and choose a job on the basis of how well their aspirations and values fit with those of the organization (Erickson & Gratton, 2007).

Perhaps a broader construct, organizational commitment speaks to how people feel towards the organization that employs them in terms of: pride in working there, loyalty to the organization (such as feeling hurt when others criticize the company), identification with the organization (seeing the organization and the self as sharing the same values and goals) and being willing to extend oneself in ways that promote the good of the organization (such as feeling that long hours for the good of the organization are worth the discretionary effort) (Macey, 2008). In most of the practitioner research and resources, this construct of organizational commitment is referred to as employee engagement.

Any business must create an experience that engages employees before it can expect those employees to deliver the brand to customers. Employee engagement is one
of the most widely discussed topics in organizations today because it is directly linked to employee satisfaction, which leads to discretionary effort, improving organizational performance and impacting bottom line business results.

Just as with employer brand, a multitude of definitions for engagement exist and all relate to the employee experience. Towers Perrin defines engagement as involving both emotional and rational factors relating to work and the overall work experience. Emotional factors relate to people’s personal satisfaction, such as a sense of inspiration or a job well done. The rational factors relate to the relationship between the individual and the broader corporation, such as the extent to which employees understand their role, and their team’s role, relative to the company objectives. “Full engagement demands both. Employees need the will: the sense of mission, passion and pride that motivates them to give the all-important discretionary effort. And they need the way: the resources, support and tools from the organization to act on their sense of mission and passion” (Towers Perrin, 2003, p. 5).

Many studies have been conducted over the past few years to determine the factors that contribute to employee engagement. In fact, DSI Quarterly reports that 12 major research studies have uncovered 26 drivers of employee engagement. Each study emphasized that emotional drivers, such as pride in one’s work and a positive relationship with one’s boss had five times greater impact on one’s discretionary effort than other factors such as pay (Howland, 2008) which highlights the importance of learning and development delivering a robust management development program so that managers and
other agents of the corporation understand their influence and role in employee engagement.

Major practitioner research studies by global consultancies like Towers Perrin, Mercer, ISR and Watson Wyatt Worldwide present similar statistics about the factors that influence employees to engage with their work and stay with a firm. Regardless of the individual factors emphasized, employees who are more engaged, perform better and miss fewer days of work are those that rate their companies effective on promise and delivery of the employee experience (Watson Wyatt, 2009).

In today's recessionary environment, retention is less of an issue than attraction, which may be attributed to a stronger need for security. During times of economic uncertainty, fewer vacancies are likely to be posted and employees may be reluctant to change jobs. But smart companies take advantage of difficult downturns to focus on engagement of current employees to ensure that top talent stays with the organization when outside opportunities begin to appear again (Bos, 2009). If employees were attracted to a firm based on a promise of professional development, and these activities are cut from the budget during difficult economic times, employees may consider the deal off as soon as exiting to another firm is possible. Rather than curtailing learning activities, using internal resources and programs such as cross-training, mentoring and job shadowing to provide the valuable and promised professional growth can be a smart strategy and offer an incentive to employees to stay with an organization and be actively engaged (Lyman, 2009). Studies show that it costs an average of two and a half times an
employee’s salary to replace him or her. It is much more cost effective to retain employees and invest in programs that mean the most to them and will maintain commitment (Bos, 2009).

Organizational Culture

The notion suggested by Sartain and Schumann that employer brand development must begin on the inside is aligned with Ackerman’s idea that a corporate brand is defined as much by the culture of the company as anything else. This makes understanding anthropological themes associated with organizational culture and brands both relevant and vital. Tying marketing best practices and brand-building to culture and anthropological studies is the focus of the work by Jonathan Schroeder of the University of Exeter, who maintains that “neither managers nor consumers completely control branding processes—cultural codes constrain how brands create value” (Schroeder, 2009, p. 123). Schroeder explains that brands can be considered communicative objects and brand management is often about the brand owner communicating specific messages in support of the brand’s purpose. But this view fails to take into account the context that a surrounding culture adds to the communication message and the idiosyncratic meaning-making of each individual who receives the brand message (Schroeder, 2009).

The process of sense-making is informed by many things that occur in the culture of the organization, including interactions with others and both formal and informal messages or signals. These experiences are combined with individual subjective
assumptions and values regarding what are important. In a 1997 critique of organizational culture in *Human Relations*, culture is defined this way:

"Culture is a multifaceted phenomenon that frames our meaning-making, influences our behavior, is enacted in our organization rituals and evolves through the gradual shifts in enacted, emotional and verbal discourse." (Hawkins, 1997, p. 431)

According to this anthropological view, brands of all types become one of the symbols or sources that people draw on to create their own worldview. Dennis Hahn, of a Portland-based brand agency has authored a white paper on what he refers to as brand culture. He posits that a brand, like culture, is essentially a meaning-making system which generates a set of values that is embraced by its target audience (Lowell & Hahn, 2010).

So creators of employer brands can extend this line of thinking to portray a process where employees receive multiple inputs or brand messages, including deliberate attempts by the organization to shape their impressions. But, these messages are filtered by the meaning-making influence of organizational culture which is a combination of individual cognition and the values of the collective group (Hawkins, 1997). The result is uncontrollable aspects of the interactions between messages and behaviors and this reality must be acknowledged in employer brand management.
The Role of Learning and Development

Learning and development is vital to the employer brand offering because beyond influencing the attractiveness of a firm to candidates, the learning function has an ongoing operational ability to maintain high levels of performance and engagement by focusing on building and reinforcing behaviors required for success. Connecting this capacity with communications efforts creates the opportunity for a culture to develop in which employees have a total understanding of who the organization is, what it stands for, what it provides to the larger society and what it offers to each of them in return for their contribution.

A firm that has successfully built such a culture and embedded appropriate workplace behaviors is JetBlue Airlines. JetBlue has managed to turn what has become a commoditized service by other airlines into a successful consumer brand. As a service-provider, JetBlue has multiple customer/employee interactions that could make or break their brand promise, but for JetBlue the most important ingredient for success is having a values-based culture and a strong employer brand. Every single employee at JetBlue is trained to base his or her actions on these shared values: Safety; Caring; Integrity; Fun; and Passion (CMO Conversations, 2009).

All JetBlue candidates, regardless of position, are screened against these values during the hiring process and go through extensive training when they join the firm. Communications, learning and talent management programs constantly and consistently
emphasize these values to employees throughout their careers. "The end result is that everyone at JetBlue feels part of a big team, single-mindedly focused on improving the customer experience, and by proxy, the JetBlue business" (CMO Conversations, 2009). By aligning their HR policies with a values-based approach, reinforced by training, JetBlue has created a self-enforcing culture that has built-in organizational learning.

To illustrate, the firm has embraced social media as a marketing strategy, since 80% of their tickets are sold online. Accordingly, Twitter is an especially successful tool for JetBlue and they use the channel for both trials and customer service. Engaging with unhappy customers who are tweeting, the marketing department must make sure that they don’t undermine the decisions made by empowered front line employees. "Fortunately, this is where the values-based culture comes back into play—they can predict 99% of all decisions made by front line employees and reinforce those decisions where needed on Twitter without having to check with the decision makers" (CMO Conversations, 2009). JetBlue is also dedicated to the importance of transparency in forming a cohesive workforce and demonstrates this commitment to by briefing employees on how the business is doing as often as shareholders are briefed.

The JetBlue approach exemplifies the two-way nature of the employer brand deal—employees are trained to deliver consistent on-brand service that benefits the business—and at the same time have distinctive, compelling and relevant support from the corporation in their employee experience. The role of learning and development in this
process at JetBlue is recognized and integral in both living brand values and developing
desired behaviors.

**Conceptual Framework**

Research suggests that learning and development practices support employer
brand management and can have a positive impact on workplace reputation, and thereby
organizational performance, by increasing a firm’s ability to attract, engage and retain
employees.

However, much of the literature about employer brand has underestimated the
organizational behavior agenda required to enable delivery on the employer brand deal
(Rosethorn, 2009). There is a crucial integration between business strategy and people
processes that becomes an obvious measure for employer brand credibility. If the credos
espoused about company’s values by corporate communications are not aligned with HR
policies then employees are left with trying to make sense of mixed messages, such as:
“People who try to understand the underlying message of customer delight when no
attempt is made to provide them with the skills necessary to deliver this delight”
(Gratton, 1999, p. 171). When faced with contradictory messages, employees will key in
on which behaviors are rewarded, which skills are promoted and who is developed
(Gratton, 1999).

The conceptual framework created for this study is intended to provide a high
level representation of the elements involved in employer brand management and the
influencing roles of the corporate functions of HR, corporate communications and learning and development. A visual depiction of this framework is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework for the Role of Learning and Development in Employer Brand Management

The framework begins with the assumption that a strong workplace reputation is equivalent to having a strong employer brand, whether or not that employer brand position has developed by default or been purposely created. The organization signals its brand in various ways to both potential staff and current employees and the distinctive, compelling and relevant attributes help to attract, retain and engage employees.
Regardless of how it has developed, the employer brand includes elements of a value proposition for employees and the most common factors promised include the opportunity for learning and development and career growth, as well as a supportive work environment. Whether or not the promise is delivered can be assessed by examining the employee experience and the alignment of the brand messages received with the HR or talent management processes associated with each touch point.

This conceptual framework also suggests that in between the promise and the delivery of the deal represented by an employer brand is an organizational behavior agenda that is influenced by both the learning and development and communications functions of the organization. Communications controls what the company signals and learning and development can make its greatest impact by promoting the individual and leadership behaviors that are consistent with these signals. The functions of communications and learning and development must be aligned to develop the mindsets and behaviors that help employees connect the dots between their individual needs and behaviors and the organizational needs and behaviors, including how to think about their environments and understand why they do what they do as individuals and agents of the corporation.
Chapter 3

RESEARCH METHODS

The previous chapter provided a comprehensive review of the literature and a conceptual framework suggesting that learning and development processes support multiple components of successful employer brand management. This section is meant to provide a description of the research approach and methods of data collection used to conduct the study. As described in chapter 1, the overarching goal of this study is to explore how employer brand is operationalized in companies with strong workplace reputations, and to empirically identify how, and to what extent, learning and development practices are leveraged for success. Specifically, this research focused on four questions:

1. How do companies with strong workplace reputations include learning and development as part of the employer brand promise?

2. How is learning and development leveraged in the various touch points of the employee experience, and to what extent?

3. What measures are used to assess the effectiveness of learning and development practices against employer brand success?

4. How do internal functions (corporate communications, human resources, learning and development) interface and align to support the employer brand?
Research Design

A useful way of understanding the successful outcomes of employer brand is to study companies who have been deemed credible in fulfilling the deal as promised in employer brand messages. This fulfillment is determined in the employee phase of the employment lifecycle (as opposed to the candidate or alumni phases). Firms that are considered to be faithful to the deal can be identified by measuring the reputation of the workplace in the eyes of the employees.

Workplace reputation is comprised of the various perceptions held by current employees of the company about the distinctive economic, functional and psychological benefits of working for the firm (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). According to the Reputation Institute, a company has a both a corporate reputation and a workplace reputation. The difference lies in the nature of the attributes and the dependent variable, which is reputation as a place to work, instead of reputation overall. The Reputation Institute suggests that workplace reputation is measured by the degree people would: like to work for the company, be proud to work for the company, recommend employment with the company and find it attractive to work for the company (The Reputation Institute, 2009).

Similarly, the Great Place to Work Institute, which publishes several reputation rankings for FORTUNE magazine, among others, says a strong workplace reputation (great place to work) is one in which you “trust the people you work for, have pride in what you do, and enjoy the people you work with” (Great Place to Work Institute, 2009).
To accurately consider how employer brand promises are delivered in the employee experience, this study focused on a purposeful sample of firms whose strong workplace reputations are granted by a survey of their employees and signaled by their inclusion on the 2009 FORTUNE Magazine’s list of the 100 Best Companies to Work for in America.

**Sampling Criteria**

Each year since 1984, the Great Place to Work Institute has produced a list of Best Companies that is published in FORTUNE Magazine. Interested companies often ask to be included on the list. To qualify for inclusion, a firm must have at least 1000 full-time and part-time US employees. Anyone can nominate a firm by contacting the Institute.

Companies are selected for the Best Companies list primarily on the basis of their employees' responses to the Great Place to Work Trust Index®, a proprietary employee survey developed by the Great Place to Work Institute. For the 2009 FORTUNE 100 Best Companies to Work for in America, more than 81,000 employees from 353 companies responded to a 58-question survey created by the Great Place to Work Institute. Employees indicated how often each survey statement was true of their experience in the workplace on a five-point scale. Scores were calculated by the percentage of respondents who indicated that the statement was *often true* or *almost always true* which represent the top two positive responses (Levering & Moskowitz, 1993).
Two-thirds of a company’s score is based on the survey, which is sent to a minimum of 400 randomly selected employees in each nominated firm. The goal is to sample enough employees so that there is reasonable confidence that the results for the sample are representative of the company as a whole. Statistically, companies who receive results from the Great Place to Work Institute are told they use an 85% confidence level with a plus or minus five point margin of error. This means that for each company participating in the survey, the Great Place to Work Institute is at least 85% confident that if all employees in the company participated in the survey, the results would be within the range of five points lower to five points higher than the results for the sample (Levering & Moskowitz, 1993).

The remaining third of a company’s score is based on an evaluation of materials submitted by the company, including its response to the Great Place to Work Culture Audit, which includes detailed questions about demographics, pay, and benefits, and open-ended questions on philosophy and communication. Each company is also asked to provide documents such as recruiting and onboarding materials and other publications that provide insight into how the workplace is positioned and communicated to be desirable (Great Place to Work Institute, 2009).

The results of this survey, and the winners on this list, can clearly be called a measure of workplace reputation and employer brand. In fact, on the Corporate Eye website, which provides information and insight into best practice in online corporate communications, leadership author Ed Konczal writes about the Best Companies list:
If you make it to this list you have an effective Employer Brand. The companies on this list realize that it is the intellectual capital, what is in the minds and hearts of people — rather than the buildings, the tools, the financial capital — that has the power to truly differentiate and grow a business — and beat the competition. Therefore, they do what is needed to attract, grow and keep their people. Benchmarking how these got to the list makes sense. (The Corporate Eye, 2009)

*Company Selection.* The power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry. This sampling strategy is aimed at generating insight about the topic of interest, not generalizing from a sample to a population (Patton, 2002). Inclusion on this Best Companies list presumes a strong workplace reputation for the reasons outlined in this chapter, and so provided the criterion or logic for the initial consideration.

In line with this thinking, the 100 Best Company organizations on the 2009 list were analyzed to select case companies for the study. The sample selection allowed for variation in company size, US geography, industry, ownership, and position on the Best Companies list, all of which could reveal differences in learning and development practices, employer brand practices and their interplay. Once allowing for this range of variation, companies were chosen if a personal contact could be leverage through networking. Eighteen firms were contacted to participate, of which four declined and 14 accepted. De-identified data about the 14 firms in the final sample, as reported in the FORTUNE rankings, is shown in the Table 1. Seven industry-types were represented. Three of the firms were considered small (less than 2,500 employees), three were
medium size (2,500 – 10,000) and the remaining eight were large firms (more than 10,000) according to the size categories published by the Great Place to Work Institute (Great Place to Work Institute, 2009). The final sample included a near even split of public and private firms as well as geographic variety across the US. To further disguise the identity of the firms, the ranking on the Best Companies list was converted from the actual rank to a TOP, MID or LOW placement designation by thirds, and the sample included five firms who placed in the top third of the list, four in the middle third and five in the lower third.

Table 1

De-Identified Company Data of Case Companies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company Reference Number</th>
<th>Best 100 Rank by 1/3</th>
<th>Headquarters Region</th>
<th>Ownership: Private/Public</th>
<th>Industry Type</th>
<th>Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>MID</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Management Consulting</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>TOP</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>MID</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Health Care</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>LOW</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Management Consulting</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>TOP</td>
<td>Northwest</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Retail – Foodservice</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>MID</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>TOP</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Financial Services</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>LOW</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Higher Education + Health Care</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>TOP</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Health Care</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>LOW</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>Small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>LOW</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Health Care</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>TOP</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Financial Services</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>LOW</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Retail – Entertainment</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>MID</td>
<td>Southwest</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Small</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interview Participants. Because the literature indicates that responsibility for employer brand management varies, this study sought to conduct interviews with representatives from the learning and development function, the HR or talent management function and the corporate communications function in each case firm to reflect the cross-functional influence in practices. Data was collected from 23 individual interviews in the 14 firms. Eleven participants were male and 12 were female. De-identified data about the participants is shown in Table 2.

In every case firm, the person who identified his or her role as being responsible for learning and development was interviewed. Thirteen actual interviews were conducted with participants who identified themselves as head of learning and development as their primary role. The study also used what Patton refers to as snowball or chain sampling to locate additional key interview participants (Patton, 2002). This effort resulted in five interviews with heads of HR or talent management and five interviews with participants responsible for internal communications. Additionally, as shown in Table 2, five participants identified multiple responsibilities as included in their job scope, including one person who claimed organizational responsibility for talent management, learning and development and internal communications.

Within the final sample of 14 organizations, one person was interviewed in seven of the firms, two people with different functional responsibilities in five of the firms and in two firms, someone in each of the three main functions was interviewed. This variety
allowed for a triangulation in that participant perspectives were compared from different points of view.

Table 2

*De-Identified Data about Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Number</th>
<th>Participant Gender</th>
<th>Company Reference Number</th>
<th>Functional Responsibility (boldface indicates primary role)</th>
<th>Interview Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Company 1</td>
<td>Comm</td>
<td>1:03:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Company 2</td>
<td>Comm HR/TM L&amp;D</td>
<td>0:26:36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Company 3</td>
<td>HR/TM L&amp;D</td>
<td>0:46:07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Company 4</td>
<td>L&amp;D</td>
<td>1:04:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Company 1</td>
<td>L&amp;D</td>
<td>0:44:16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Company 5</td>
<td>L&amp;D</td>
<td>0:51:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Company 6</td>
<td>L&amp;D</td>
<td>0:40:17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Company 7</td>
<td>L&amp;D</td>
<td>0:50:42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Company 4</td>
<td>HR/TM</td>
<td>0:46:48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Company 8</td>
<td>L&amp;D</td>
<td>0:30:15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Company 8</td>
<td>HR/TM</td>
<td>0:36:28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Company 9</td>
<td>HR/TM</td>
<td>0:48:10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Company 3</td>
<td>Comm</td>
<td>0:44:59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Company 9</td>
<td>L&amp;D</td>
<td>0:21:27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Company 4</td>
<td>Comm</td>
<td>0:44:50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Company 6</td>
<td>Comm</td>
<td>0:43:26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Company 10</td>
<td>HR/TM L&amp;D</td>
<td>0:54:20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Company 11</td>
<td>HR/TM L&amp;D</td>
<td>0:46:36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Company 8</td>
<td>Comm</td>
<td>0:41:47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Company 13</td>
<td>HR/TM</td>
<td>0:43:03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Company 12</td>
<td>HR/TM L&amp;D</td>
<td>0:55:59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Company 13</td>
<td>L&amp;D</td>
<td>0:38:35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Company 14</td>
<td>L&amp;D</td>
<td>0:47:20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Collection

To address the study goal of generating knowledge about effective employer brand practices across different types of companies who are perceived to do it well, the data collection plan employed one primary method for collecting data, supplemented by some secondary sources. Interviews can provide important information as a data gathering strategy (Maxwell, 2005), so open-ended interviews were conducted with participants from companies on the 2009 list, using a purposeful sampling strategy. Secondary data sources, such as the data reported in FORTUNE magazine along with the rankings, was used in the sample selection and the corporate websites of each company who agreed to participate were reviewed.

Each interview was approximately 45 minutes in length (actual average 44:47 minutes). All but two interviews were conducted over the phone, but the opportunity to interview face-to-face was taken when possible. In accordance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, participants were advised that their comments would be held in strict confidence, destroyed at the conclusion of the study, and that any reference to their comments would be de-identified before inclusion in the final report. Each participant signed an informed consent. The consent form is included as Appendix A of this report.

An open-ended interview protocol was used in order to discover the influences of learning and development and how they are involved in employer brand practices. The interview guide outlined a set of issues to be explored with each participant and served to ensure that the same basic lines of inquiry were pursued with each person interviewed.
Using an interview guide, as opposed to a structured interview protocol, “allowed the important analysis dimensions to emerge from patterns found in the cases under study, without presupposing in advance what these dimensions will be” (Patton, 2007, p. 56). The interview guide is included as Appendix B of this report.

The guide included orienting questions and those that collected information on demographics of the interviewee and the function/organizational structure. Otherwise, the questions focused on the expressed or implicit EVP, its alignment with other corporate brand messages, the attributes presented for competitive differentiation at the various stages of the employee lifecycle, the measurements used to assess effectiveness, and the overall culture of the company. Specifically, the employee touch points influenced by employer brand messages, any unique experiences provided, and the specific methods of learning and development used to enable positive experiences were probed.

The interviews were fairly predictable in that most participants were eager to share their stories and successes. Participants tended to talk more about the aspect of employer brand management that was closest to their personal responsibility. For example, the communications executives spoke in more depth about actual message strategies and visual identities. Learning and development leaders focused on the role of leadership and the HR/talent management participants tended to talk “process” such as onboarding and performance management. All spoke about the culture in their firms and what it was like to work in the case companies.
Data Analysis

The study interviews were conducted over a period of 10 weeks, from December 2009 through February 2010. Each of the interviews was digitally recorded and sent to a transcription service for processing immediately upon the completion of the event. This provided a steady stream of data for initial review. Upon receipt, each transcript was reviewed and compared with hand-written notes to make connections back to any initial observations. These observations were noted in a journal. The protocol was adjusted and modified slightly three times, generally to be less suggestive and more open, as a result of reading the transcripts as they returned. As an example, the original protocol asked if the employee brand was implicit or explicit in terms of messaging. I soon realized I was imposing these labels on the participants and they did not have relevance or meaning to all. By adjusting the question to simply ask about how the employer brand was messaged, I provided the participants a better opportunity to describe their practices based on their own concepts and understanding.

As a cross-case comparison, a case analysis method was used and involved organizing the data by specific cases for in depth study and comparison. The unit of analysis was the organization. As Patton suggests, the first responsibility was to “do justice to each individual case” (Patton, 2002, p. 449). Case data from each company (primary and secondary) was put together to create an individual case record for content analysis. Distinctive language and unique experiences that were special to the people in the settings studied were also noted and coded, as a form of emic analysis (Patton, 2002).
Coding and analysis was completed using *Atlas.ti* qualitative data analysis software. The program tools helped to locate, code, and annotate findings in the primary data material and to visualize relations between them. The literature review for this study helped to reduce the data and provide a direction to look somewhat deductively for patterns and analytical categories that were identified in the conceptual framework. In this way, elements of the conceptual framework were used as sensitizing concepts in the case analyses. “Using sensitizing concepts involves examining how the concept is manifest and given meaning in a particular setting or among a particular group of people” (Patton, 2002, p.456).

These concepts, coupled with my prior experience with the fields of learning and corporate communications, produced a coding structure intended to provide “for both an explanatory and/or confirmative stance of the multiple cases compiled and considered” (Huberman & Miles, p. 185).

The code family functionality in *Atlas.ti* was used to represent major concepts expected to appear in the data, based on the conceptual framework, interview protocol and literature review. With the families created, and deductive codes assigned, a second review of the transcripts allowed additional specifics to emerge. Open codes and in vivo codes provided more granularity. As a result, the code families developed into not only a necessary way to organize the codes but also became a heuristic device for discovery. A list of the code families and their descriptions is shown in Table 3.
Table 3

*Code Families*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Family</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brand Alignment</td>
<td>Descriptions of the ways in which the employer brand is purposely tied to the consumer/corporate brand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Development</td>
<td>Descriptions of the career development elements included in the employer brand position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td>Descriptions of the challenges in managing the employer brand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Methods</td>
<td>Descriptions of communications techniques used in employer brand practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptions of Employer Brand</td>
<td>Descriptions of the employer brand, how it is labeled and how it is communicated (implicit v explicit)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distinctive Language</td>
<td>Language used by the participant that is unique to the firm (i.e. employees are called associates)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer Brand Development</td>
<td>Descriptions of the manner in which the employer brand was developed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer Brand Attributes</td>
<td>Descriptions of specific elements or attributes of the employer brand position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer Brand Management</td>
<td>Descriptions of the responsibilities and roles in managing the employer brand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee Data</td>
<td>Descriptions of the personal demographics and experience of participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Quotations</td>
<td>Quotations that specifically address research questions or other key findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Techniques</td>
<td>Descriptions of learning techniques used in employer brand practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management-Leadership</td>
<td>Descriptions of the roles, responsibilities and development of managers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing Techniques</td>
<td>Descriptions of marketing techniques used in employer brand practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onbrand Training</td>
<td>Descriptions of the way employees are trained to provide a specified customer experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Behavior</td>
<td>Descriptions of expected behaviors for employees and managers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Culture</td>
<td>Descriptions of the organization’s culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles</td>
<td>Descriptions of the roles played by learning and development, communications, HR/talent management and leadership in delivering the employer brand promise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touch Points of Employee Experience</td>
<td>Descriptions of key touch points when employer brand promises are delivered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique Experiences</td>
<td>Descriptions of significant or unique experiences that participants describe as compelling and distinctive to their firm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Utilizing the coding structure in this fashion allowed the identification of patterns and ensured that emergent categories and discovered themes were grounded in the specific cases and their contexts (Glaser & Strauss in Patton, 2007, p 57). A comparison between the cases, discovering and confirming patterns and linkages, allowed themes to be aggregated and informed a creative synthesis of the findings, which follows in the next chapters.

The actual analysis process, after this extensive preparation of the data, was assisted largest through utilization of the query tool in Atlas.ti. By varying the code families and individual codes selected, network views of each code family were created to begin a content analysis and get a high level understanding of the number of quotations in each. Next, with the printed network view as a summary, the associated quotations, comments and memos were printed and arranged in a tabbed binder categorized by how the content mapped to the research questions and other major themes that had been identified in open coding (such as organizational culture or unique experiences).

My memory of each interview was strong and case notes helped me to recall which participants had expressed definite opinions or provided good examples of practices. This was reinforced through review of the printed reports which allowed for the identification of patterns and the notation of depth of evidence available for each of them.

Early in analysis it became clear that case companies in the same industry had common approaches as well as common challenges. Using the scope functionality in the query tool, my next round of queries in Atlas.ti produced industry specific reports for
confirmation of these similarities. Cross-classifying the data by the functional role of each participant produced some interesting patterns as well.

The core meanings found through content analysis are often called patterns or themes. This analysis took more of a pattern analysis approach as matrices of descriptive statistics were built to address the research questions. Beginning with a surface look at the data by count not only suggested where to look for patterns but gave an idea of how strong a pattern was by indicating its magnitude (the proportion of the sample that made similar comments or statements) (Berg, 2007).

For example, one matrix (included in chapter 4 as Table 3) detailed references to specific employer brand attributes by industry. Counts of references were tabulated in a spreadsheet which showed clearly that employee learning and development was mentioned most frequently as an attribute of employer brand. As confirmation of the comments, the career sections of each case company website were analyzed and the attributes promoted by the organizations compared with the data provided by the interviewees.

Once descriptive statistics about the data were tabulated, I moved into an interpretative mode to search for meaning. A list of analysis questions was created and through a process of asking the data these questions, I began to understand what the participants were reporting.
As Patton (2002) said, “purpose guides analysis and report writing” (Patton, 2002, p. 503). Interview data from these 23 interviews provided me with much more data than was actually relevant to the purpose of the study. Many of the tangents discussed were interesting, but focus on the purpose resulted in approximately 13 preliminary findings. To confirm the conclusions drawn from the patterns apparent in the data, I carefully retraced the analytical steps taken and asked my dissertation chair and two uninvolved researchers to review the findings and data displays for a verification check. Finally, I consulted the literature and considered my patterns and findings in light of the previous research and existing theory as suggested by Berg (2006). For example, an interesting concept emerging in the analysis, but not planned for in the conceptual framework, was the manner in which organizational culture contributes informal messages and signals that combine with formal employer brand messages to create impressions with employees. By returning to the literature, this role was confirmed to have significance and the conceptual framework was revised as a result.

**Study Limitations and Threats to Data Validity**

Limitations existed within this research study and are worth noting given the threats to data validity they represent to the overall study and its outcomes. A number of factors were introduced in order to mitigate these limitations ensuring a rigorous approach across the study’s data collection and analysis plans. However, the threats to validity include the fact that the single criterion indicating a strong workplace reputation was inclusion on the 2009 FORTUNE 100 Best Companies to Work For in America list
and this ranking was also assumed to be a designation for a strong employer brand. As well, once variety amongst company factors was considered, the companies approached for the study were selected based solely on personal contacts. Plus, since the researcher is the instrument in a qualitative study (Patton, 2002) my previous marketing, communications and learning leader experience is acknowledged and recognized as a potential for bias in interpretation and analysis. Additional validity threats include the manner in which the study’s qualitative codes were defined and applied. Analyzing patterns using more than 500 pages of transcripts required considerable consolidation and reduction of data. To mitigate this, I engaged an unassociated researcher familiar with Atlas.ti to review my code structure and its logical applicability to the transcripts.

Finally, the assumption that the selected participants adequately represent their organization’s perspective and position on the topics discussed is an acknowledged threat to validity. My purpose in analysis is to present case data and cross-data descriptive comparisons aimed at enhancing understanding by identifying and articulating best practices that can build knowledge. “In reporting and communicating findings, it becomes important to emphasize and clearly delineate the purpose and limitations of the sample studied and be careful about extrapolating (much less generalizing) the findings to other situations, time periods or people (Patton, 2002, p. 563).

This chapter has described the methods of data collection and analysis for empirically answering the study research questions about the role of learning and
development in employer brand practices. The next chapter begins to detail the findings and results of the study.
Chapter 4

THE EMPLOYER BRAND PROMISE AND DELIVERY

The previous chapter highlighted the approach utilized for this research study, the issues associated with its methodology, and the study demographics including case company and participant information. Chapter 4 presents research findings and discussion on the employer brand promise and the delivery of the promise in the case companies studied. The chapter opens with a discussion of participants' perceptions of employer brand, focusing on how the concept is manifest in each case company. It then examines how learning and development shapes both the employer brand promise and the delivery of the employee experience.

To situate the role of learning and development in employer brand practices, it is first necessary to understand how the practice of employer brand was described and discussed by the various participants, which reflects the insider's, or emic, perspective of each firm.

Participant Perspectives on Employer Brand

While the data suggests that all the participants were familiar with the employer brand concept, the language and labels used to discuss it varied broadly. No predominant label was used when referring to the employer brand. The term employee value proposition (EVP) was used by three companies. Other labels such as brand positioning,
internal brand, people strategy and employer brand were terms used within the case companies when referring to the employer brand. In three of the case companies, when asked specifically, the participants categorized the employer brand concept or label as none. A chief learning officer in financial services gave an explanation that reveals an understanding of the importance of providing an employment promise to attract, retain and engage employees, but clearly stated that applying the notion of branding to the process was not used in his firm:

It's just funny to think of an employer brand...I'm not knocking it though, I'm just saying in my world, people don't really think of it that way. I think they get to the same place. Again, we know the reason people value jobs [at our firm]. We're an attractive job. That's because people know we invest in training, they know you can run something at an early age, they know you'll get lots of feedback to grow, they know you'll be around important people... we can explain why people come to [the company], we can explain why we win the Best Places to Work, but we just don't think of it as a branding kind of issue. (Participant #8, 2010)

The Employer Brand Promise

A total of 15 different attributes of an employer brand promise were mentioned in the 23 interviews. The descriptive statistics shown in Table 3 provide an indication of frequency and demonstrate that employee learning and development was the most mentioned attribute of the employer brand promise for the 14 case companies included in this study.
Table 4

Reference to Specific Employer Brand Attributes by Industry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>% of interviews mentioned</th>
<th>Fin Svs</th>
<th>Prof Svs</th>
<th>Construction</th>
<th>Healthcare</th>
<th>Higher Ed</th>
<th>Tech</th>
<th>Retail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employee Learning &amp; Development Manager Training</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Environment</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development Opportunities</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reputation</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rewards &amp; Recognition</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaningful Work</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Career Opportunities</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate Social Responsibility</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager Quality</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Stability</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worklife Balance</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education/Tuition Assistance</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Employee learning and development was the most prevalent attribute of an employer brand promise mentioned by the participants in this study. The attribute represents ongoing professional development training through the employee lifecycle. Providing management development and an opportunity to learn leadership behaviors was another attribute of the employer brand thought to provide significant value to
employees. A host of other attributes were also mentioned in the interviews by representatives of the case companies, and these are shown in Table 3.

**Employer Brand Attributes by Industry**

In Table 3, shaded attributes represent the core attributes from the literature that were mentioned by participants; the non-shaded attributes were emergent. An “X” in the industry columns indicates that the attribute was mentioned by at least one participant in the industry. In each column, the first and second most frequently mentioned attributes are indicated by a 1 and a 2. Employee learning and development was either the first or second most mentioned attribute of the employer brand promise by participants representing companies in financial services, professional services, construction, healthcare and technology. Some of the comments indicating commitment to providing learning and development include:

And, you know, our corporate university was just ranked by the American Society of Training and Development as one of the best in the country. (Participant #12, 2010)

And I mean and, of course, I head up [Name] University and that is also an extraordinarily strong component of who we are. I mean our CEO’s always talking about it; it’s part of our recruiting, it’s, you know, it’s on our website and, in fact, we did a little survey, in terms of recruiting, and we said, you know, to what degree if all things being equal to, you know, to what degree did [Name] University kind of tip the scales and of all of our new employees in 2008, 56% said it was a differentiator. (Participant #17, 2010)

You have to come in with an innate ability and drive; but we will teach you everything else you need to know. (Participant #8, 2010)

We feel bad for the organizations that, you know, because of their business models are laying off people. We have a different business model and it
includes development...our typical investors have long-term goals, there’s
the regulatory environment, etc. We need to remain committed to learning
to keep [our employees] tooled so that they can meet our clients’
expectations. (Participant #22, 2010)

Exceptions by industry were higher education and retail. The higher education
industry participants (three interviews/one case company) mentioned reputation as a
leading employer brand element, followed by work environment. To illustrate, a learning
leader in higher education elaborated on the pride associated with her organization’s
reputation and work environment:

Some of the highlights that people emphasize consistently about working
here is they love working at an academic institution and at an academic
medical center where research and cutting edge knowledge is what’s
happening here. And that comes up consistently. People take a real pride
in the quality of the University, and the quality of the faculty, and the
quality of the medical center, and the recognition the medical center gets,
and the quality of the research that’s done here. And so at many levels in
the organization, I’m not going to say at every level, but at many levels
people recognize the importance of the work that’s done here and are proud
to be affiliated with it even if they don’t do that kind of work themselves.
( Participant #10, 2010)

In the retail industry (three interviews/two case companies), work environment
was the most mentioned attribute followed by rewards and recognition. The head of
learning at Company #5 said, “and I think the other [aspect], which is it probably not as
stated as much, but is about a great work environment with respect and dignity” and the
learning leader at Company #13 described the emphasis on recognition:

So, you know, our [employees] are paid probably about the same as other
people in the mall. We don’t have commissions, but they get it in the
reward recognition. We have a [recognition] program out there so each
store gets a pool of dollars that they can reward and recognize their folks
individually or collectively, you know, in creative ways. You know,
whatever works for their store and we certainly encourage them to do
that...it’s that it’s constant; it doesn’t cost you anything, but it is creating an environment; we appreciate you being here. (Participant #21, 2010)

The importance of finding meaningful work was raised by many interviewees. Interestingly, the head of HR for a financial services firm felt as if they made what has more recently been viewed as a greedy business into one that truly does help employees feel they are making a difference. He explained:

[Our] typical client...is not a high net worth person, they’re saving for important life events like retirement, buying a house, putting the kids through school. We do a better job...we think we do a better job than anyone else in the world in terms of managing for the people that really need their money. (Participant #22, 2010)

Perhaps more predictably, many interviewees in the health care industry referenced meaningful work as an attractive element of their employer brand promise. As may be expected from employees in a care business such as hospitals, a learning leader in a health network explained that a passion for caring was both a requisite and a draw for her company:

I believe that what we do absolutely touches the patients. And if I didn’t believe that, then I wouldn’t, you know, I wouldn’t put in the hours that I put in, I wouldn’t make the sacrifices I make. I mean I do this because I care about the people that are our patients. (Participant #18, 2010)

**Learning and Development in the Employer Brand Promise**

Employee learning and development was the most frequently mentioned attribute of employer brand. A chief learning officer for a leading management consultancy described an expansive and pervasive approach that characterizes learning and development in many strong companies today and may be an appropriate descriptor of
the expectations of employees with regard to the offerings promised to promote professional growth:

I would say we have really evolved our training in the last few years...we still have what we call our core skills; the things that make someone a [company name] professional. You know, we’ll teach everything from our core values, to our methodologies, to how we manage projects...much more of a focus now on building deep, specialized skills in people. Yeah, and when we think about that, it's much more than just classroom experience. If you think about the things that you're an expert in, I would guess probably a lot of that expertise came from on the job doing that.

So it gets into, you know, when we look at how we develop people, you know, part of...we’ve got what we call our continuous learning model, which is made up of formal learning, which is whether that’s classroom or computer-based training, but where they stop doing what they typically do, they go train for a while and then they go back to their job. We’ve got informal learning, which is everything from participating in communities of practice to having a mentor, or using our internal intranet to pull documents to read, those types of things. And then the third piece is job experience. So it ties in to we need to make sure that we understand the skills our people have and how that goes into our staffing process. Especially those that are in the project-based work that we staff them from one job to the next, we want to make sure we’re staffing them strategically to be growing our skill set as a company. (Participant #4, 2010)

As a means of making employee learning and development available as promised, many companies provide learning curriculums for their employees to self-manage the learning and development related to their careers. One learning leader offered that his firm calls these types of curriculums roadmaps:

What we call them are roadmaps and it’s the roadmap to how you build deeper skills and in both the core areas and in the specialized areas and on the roadmap you will find recommendations related to formal training, to informal training, and to job experience. And so, we might say you know if you’re not in a community you practice in this domain area, you need to get in a community of practice. If you haven’t taken this specific course, you should take the course. If you don't read this periodical on a regular
basis, you should be reading this periodical because that's what people who are in your industry read. (Participant #4, 2010)

Both of these previous comments illustrate an empowering approach to development that emphasizes a partnership between the organization and the employee and represents facilitating learning rather than simply delivering it. This common development approach broadens the frame of learning beyond formal classroom training to include day-to-day experiences and interactions on the job, and also references the benefits of organizational learning.

A strategic communications leader at a management consultancy described a more prescriptive and structured approach for career development based on career transitions within her organization. Some companies have structured programs depending on employee level within the organization:

We have what we call "[Name] Schools." For example, when someone reaches a new level, like they reach the manager level or the senior manager level or the director level, they go to a new manager or a new senior manager school that lasts for a week or something. (Participant #1, 2009)

A chief learning officer mentioned that sabbatical learning or executive on loan programs can often provide employees and managers with much needed learning and hands on experience that benefits the organization. This type of program can also be considered under the realm of corporate social responsibility:

We also have a very active sabbatical program where we allow individuals, you know, once you've been with us for a couple of years, to basically take periods of time off from anywhere between a couple of weeks and several months. If it's four weeks or less, it can be paid. If it's more than four weeks up to six months, then it's a fraction of your salary; it could be 50%
of your salary or so forth. But individuals can apply to go on sabbatical to go work with another company and we honor those requests. We have loaned executives. And so you know I think a lot of companies do that; where we loaned executives to you know the United Way... (Participant #5, 2010)

A talent management practice leader in another professional services firm also expanded his discussion of learning programs to include corporate social responsibility, with strategic reference to appealing to a new generation of workers:

We are trying to provide, obviously, a broad base occurrence for people in terms of the learning opportunities to work for all these different clients, rapid promotion and all these sort of things. But they also increasingly became around things like yeah, but that's not the only thing that you can do, right? That you have opportunity to go work on you know the sort of CSR type programs and we started to make much more of that (p. 6).

The technology firms share this focus on corporate social responsibility programs and their appeal to the generations now entering the workforce. The learning leader at a software development firm articulated a company-wide policy that allows employees one half day a month to spend time on charity work of some sort. She explained that they specifically tie this type of offering to their promise:

Yeah because the brand promise is once you get in the door you’re going to get that half day a month off and you can bundle those if you want to. And what I think, I think millennials like this in particular because their lives haven’t been quite complicated yet with families in some cases. They can bundle the days and for instance...I know of one woman who bundled the days off and flew down to South America for a week’s worth of foundation work. And she came back higher than a kite, you know, going down to Guatemala... (Participant #7, 2010)

Getting in the door is the intent of the employer brand promise. All of the previous quotes describe programs, process and structures meant to be attractive to
candidates. The next section presents findings and analysis of how interviewees at the case companies described the experience once the employee is in the company.

**Employer Brand Delivery: The Employee Experience**

Learning and development practices are most frequently leveraged in employee experience touch points of onboarding, onbrand training and manager training. As mentioned in chapter 2, the employer brand can be used to define, manage and deliver all the elements that encompass an employee’s experience at work. People management involves a wide range of processes that are described as employee touch points and occur in a predictable sequence: recruitment, onboarding, employee communications, shared services (such as benefits administration and facilities), rewards, measurement (such as employee engagement surveys), performance management and employee learning and development.

When comparing these touch points with the learning techniques used, the data showed learning and development practices to be most leveraged in efforts to assure employees and managers are aware of behavioral expectations. These lessons are addressed with various techniques via learning programs such as onboarding (learning the culture), onbrand training (learning to deliver a consistent customer experience), and manager training (learning to act as an agent of the corporation).
Onboarding

The manner in which employees in the case companies are oriented plays a large role in introducing employees to the organizational culture. These experiences vary from a day-one orientation to a 90-day or longer onboarding process. In most organizations, participants reported that every employee no matter what attends the orientation process. The vice president for human resources at a Midwest healthcare system described an onboarding program that was much more extensive than just a day-one welcome:

We have a program we call [name]. It is a program that extends from the first time that you put in an application through your first 90 days of employment. It’s sort of a step-by-step process for us to get you hired, oriented, trained and get you engrained in our culture... at the end of that 90 days, we have sort of a ceremony where you come in and we congratulate you on making it through orientation and we ask for your opinion about what you learned and between our orientation and that ninety day plan that we have in place for every associate, you sort of...you get a chance to get a performance evaluation, you get a chance to learn about the expectations of service and culture and you get a chance to meet other associates and have a mentor that talks to you about the expectations of being an employee here. (Participant #12, 2010)

This description of a holistic program, complete with introduction opportunities and ceremony, illustrates how a planned program can not only say, but show, the type of culture an employee has joined through its design and execution. In the same fashion as this healthcare provider, the learning leader of a technology firm called his company’s orientation a “week-long party” and introduction to their “beer and ping pong” culture:

Senior leaders are involved and they talk about the different areas of [company name]...our different products, our different services and it’s fun, but it’s educational. Every, every bit of it... is very, very focused and very targeted and has a very clear message, right?...We’ve gone out of our
way to make these presentations fun and to, to really get people involved and interacting very, very quickly. (Participant #23, 2010)

These firms had very different cultures to introduce, but demonstrated similar objectives and programmatic learning approaches to integrate employees and give them an opportunity to quickly feel as if they belong. Clearly, onboarding employees goes beyond new hire paperwork and benefit selections. The programs described by the participants are designed to “set the foundation” (Participant #22, 2010) for a successful experience for both the employee and the organization.

The notion of values was mentioned quite frequently in conjunction with descriptions of onboarding programs, culture, and the expected organizational behaviors associated with working at a particular firm. Thirteen of the 23 interviewees specifically mentioned the core values of the organization as a guiding mechanism for both acceptable behavior and decision-making. These participants represented every industry included in the study, but were most predominant in the service businesses of healthcare, retail, and financial services. A talent management leader shared this perspective linking core values to employer brand:

I think when you start to explore [learning the] culture you see a lot of parallels or overlap with this idea of employee brand promise. So we started to connect the two ideas very strongly [in our firm]...and to articulate the culture...you often start with ‘What are the core values?”’ (Participant #9, 2010)
From one of the retail organizations, the head of HR said "There is an employee proposition contained within our mission statement as well as...we have a separate...we call it a creed, that also contains some of those values and core competencies that we work towards." (Participant #20, 2010)

A representative from the healthcare industry also suggested the importance of inculcating values in a hospital environment:

This has been going on probably almost 15 years now to get those deeply instilled in the organization...it is elements of privacy, respect, involvement, dignity, and empathy. And those are translated from providers to the patients and their families and also between people laterally in the organization. And people are held accountable to these expectations in their performance evaluations. (Participant #18, 2010)

Stated values were described as a mechanism for guiding organizational behavior and peer-to-peer accountability by yet another participant in the healthcare industry:

The medical center actually has a credo, so value statements that they live by and that, I think has made a difference for employees. Because if there are behaviors among colleagues that people see that they feel are inappropriate, they have something that they could call them on and say, "No, that's not what our credo says." (Participant #10, 2010)

As the first, critical touch point after a candidate has transitioned to an employee, the learning programs associated with onboarding and their emphasis on organizational values and culture indeed establish the foundation for understanding the norms of the company and the expected behaviors for success.
Onbrand Training

Many times the onboarding program was indicated to be the first step in helping employees learn the culture and thereby the expected behaviors for working at the company. The learning leader in a construction management firm explained:

Well, I think...first of all we have a very, very strong onboarding component where the values and the history of the company is given. The whole notion of ...exceeding client satisfaction ...it’s absolutely the end all and be all at [company name] and we’re very pleased that we have 81% of repeat customers...in this business that’s quite good. (Participant #17, 2010)

The consistency of experience for customers, and educating employees to live the brand was a concern to nearly all participants. Referenced as onbrand training, this was clearly the responsibility of the learning and development function. Companies in the retail, health care and direct customer-service based firms had more emphasis on behavioral-based training than did professional services and technology firms.

In the retail space, a learning vice president raised the concern that learning and development must work in concert with communications to help employees isolate their role in representing the brand and create something “actionable for the employee to learn and then also be able to share with the customer.” She suggested using “talking points” for understanding the brand positioning “because time and time again, we have done a lot of consumer research and it’s not surprising, but it just validates that the number one most influential factor in the customer’s buying decision, is the employee” (Participant #6, 2010).
The data also showed a distinct tendency in the health care case companies to be very prescriptive in the training on behavioral expectations of employees. An HR leader explained: “The training is not different from site to site, it’s the same stuff. We have the same standards that apply to all of our facilities so [the learning] is delivered at an organizational level” (Participant #12, 2010).

A hospital system learning and development director further elaborated on the critical nature of this type of training:

We do spend a lot of effort on customer service not only training, but putting programs in place that allow our folks to deliver the kind of service that are patients expect and that’s the whole point that we are working very hard on “systemness” even though our hospitals are individual care sites that have their own customer loyalty group because they’re spread out around whole community. So the people on the west tend to go to this one, the people on the north side tend to go here. But the brand awareness is setting the expectation that you can go to any [name] facility and receive the same level of care.” (Participant #14, 2010)

The communications director from another hospital system used the following to illustrate:

So, one of the major training pieces that we did was a system that they had that’s called “AIDET” and it’s an introduction kind of thing in that when I walk into the room, I’m going to:

A: Acknowledge everybody in the room,

I: Introduce myself,

D: Talk about the duration and what we’re going to do,

E: Explain everything, the processes that are happening, ‘I’m going to touch you here; you’re going to feel a stick…’

T: Thank them
Quite similarly, the chief learning officer of a leading hospital articulated that:

...one of the reasons why we moved service under HR was because we defined what a great service experience looks like for patients and families and we defined a set core of behaviors called, "smile, greet, own, and thank" and we teach that to all of our front-line caregivers. (Participant #3, 2010)

Perhaps because the case companies in the healthcare industry are faith-based organizations and/or claim to subscribe to *servant leadership models* these firms are very forthright in setting behavioral expectations for all employees in their interactions with others. One senior healthcare leader asserted,

So there is no place or time in our organization for you to treat somebody poorly. Based on the sort of power that they hold, if they talk down to or poorly to a secretary or a housekeeper, um, that individual could find themselves getting some fairly negative feedback... (Participant #12, 2010)

In one of the most concrete representations of the *employee promise*, the head of marketing and communications in a hospital provided the following text that every employee signs at his company:

...relationships and team work will create a positive environment for everyone. We should laugh together. Sometimes we may cry together and we believe that because we view employees equally as persons and as professionals at [company name] ...Therefore, we encourage employees to believe that a child’s well-being and future define a higher purpose for our work. We need employees to diligently pursue excellence in every activity and seek and accept accountability. We ask employees to be ever mindful that children and their families put extraordinary trust in us and that we cannot let them down. We trust that employees pursue more than a job more than a career, but a passion about providing the healthiest childhood possible for children. Children need us and through our commitment to each other, we’ll make this promise real. (Participant #13, 2010)
While firms in the technology, professional services and financial services industries hold core values and treating others with respect as a behavioral expectation, the role of learning and development in training employees to *live the brand* is less structured. The communications lead from a software development firm said,

I would say we train our employees to sell our products, but we are right now getting to this place of looking at how do we make every one of our customers a customer for life....as we continue to grow, we have to figure out what is that, what does that relationship look like and, who makes the best customer for us and then how do we keep them? (Participant #16, 2010)

An exception, and a confirmation, as seen in the data collected was put forth by the learning leader in a technology firm, when he clarified his company’s unique brand positioning in the technology industry. He said,

...as an organization, I assume you probably researched this a little bit, but what makes [company name] unique in the IT world is that we focus on customer service. Most IT companies don’t do that, right? So, that’s what really sets us apart...[most IT companies] they focus on...just the technical aspects and, you know, it’s you as a customer, you need to be savvy enough to, to use our product.

So, when we want to provide [slogan] support, that’s our theme... we enforce their phone etiquette... I mean we have scripts... we want them to answer the phone a certain way. When they wrap up the call once they’ve solved the problem, we want them to answer or to respond a certain way. (Participant #23, 2010)

What these discussions and descriptions of leading practices illustrate is the important role employees play in translating the organizational strategy into a customer experience that forms the company’s brand, and how learning and development programs that feature repeatable and predictable behaviors contribute to success.
Manager Training

The responsibility for teaching manager behavior is clearly assigned to the learning and development function by the participants in this study. All of the participants eagerly described their leadership and development programs and the vital nature of making sure managers are held accountable for the quality of their behavior. An HR executive commented on its importance with a sentiment that was echoed by many when she said, “I think that’s a very, very critical component. I’m sure you’ve heard, people don’t leave organizations, they leave managers” (Participant #11, 2010). As an HR professional, she asserted clearly the criticality of helping managers understand their role as agents of the corporation when interacting with employees.

As a talent management practice leader in a consultancy that has provided opportunity and a view into many types of companies around the world, this participant spoke most clearly and most passionately about the need for manager training, manager quality and tied it directly to the success of employer brand:

The reality of most people in any business is that their exposure to what that employee brand promise is, is through their manager. It’s the manager who will go back and say, ‘you can’t go on training anymore because I’ve decided I can’t afford it.’ And yet, that was part of the brand promise. And all other very obvious examples, like you are going to give me regular feedback and I’m going to know how to develop my career and I’m going to get coaching and counseling. Well, again, if the manager is not able to do that or understand it or see that it is important, and they themselves have been measured on that and see it coming down their lines of reporting, then you are never going to have a brand value that’s pervasive though the organization.

…to deliver on the promise, you have got to train your managers at every level. Because [employees] have been promised all these things and they
come into the organization and say, but my manager doesn't get this. I've been told I would get these career opportunities and learning opportunities and every time I sit down with my manager, they don't get it. So often the breakpoint is not necessarily because HR, as a function, is not trying to deliver these things. It's because the organization as a whole, and the managers down at the first lines of supervisory levels, are either not trained or not sufficiently aware of it themselves. So to deliver on the stuff, you've got to train all your managers at every level. (Participant #9, 2010)

This participant's comments highlight several ways in which the actions and behaviors of managers can impact the employee experience. If the employee's experience of the employer brand promise is through the manager, and the manager must be thoroughly trained on how to represent the organizational expectations, model the required behaviors, and interact respectfully with the employee as an agent of the corporation. These actions are highly likely to influence employee perceptions of whether the employer brand promise is being delivered.

Yet, some participants were honest about the difficult reality of providing this level of both awareness and skill training for all managers, as admitted by this interviewee:

We have a better developed executive education and education for our emerging leaders than we do for our middle managers and right now, we're still doing that online and I don't think it's the most effective way, but you know, with constraints, that has to do. (Participant #17, 2010)

This admission led back to the comments made by the talent management practice leader who questioned the amount of time and money spent just developing high potentials and senior leaders in so many organizations today, including the case companies in this study. He challenged:
Well, actually I’m sorry, the top 100 people do not manage the majority of the organization. The CEO’s got how many reports, right? The people, the first-line supervisory roles, they’re the ones that are managing the people. And how much time are we spending with them to develop their skills and understanding? (Participant #9, 2010)

Clearly, when the manager is considered the conduit for so much of the employee experience, the emerging best practice is an strong emphasis on front line supervisory skills and new manager training, so that the awareness of the manager role is clear and can be leveraged appropriately in support of the employer brand.

**Unique Experiences**

A final segment of findings related to the role of learning and development in the promise and the delivery of employer brand refers the unique experiences that participants in the case companies of this study eagerly described as having an impact on the engagement and retention of their employees.

As defined in chapter 1, an employer brand seeks to be distinctive, compelling and relevant to both recruits and employees alike. While many of the attributes apply to recruits, what the interviewees described as the most unique experiences in the firm were experiences provided for existing employees. By count, 24 distinct experiences were described and the majority focused on corporate social responsibility, rewards and recognition, or learning and development.

As just one best practice example, the chief learning officer of a technology firm listed a litany of unique experiences staged for the benefit of her employees:
We do things like corporate storytelling, we do an annual report about people, we ... we do breakfast meetings with our executives, we have executive insight sessions where executives are doing like leaders teaching leaders. We do internal employee trade shows...one of the things we realize is that most companies participate in trade shows, but not all employees get to go and so one of the things that we do is ... to have an internal employee trade show where all of the materials that you would use for an external trade show are actually turned inside the organization and we have different people manning booths and we have them share with employees what we would share if we were at an external trade show. People walking around sharing what’s going on, showing new projects, showing new technologies, showing what project teams they’re working on and we have thousands of employees that attend to actually see products and what project teams are doing across the organization. (Participant #2, 2009)

Whether as extensive as a trade show with thousands of attendees, or as personal as the invitation to join a book club, the elements of the unique experiences supported in the case company organizations are reflective of Lynda Gratton’s description of signature experiences referenced in chapter 2. Regardless of whether labeled as part of a promise these experiences communicate what it means to work here in a compelling fashion and generally support the development of the employee.

Shifting Conceptualizations of Employer Brand

The data clearly suggests that learning and development, in various forms, plays a key role in the employer brand promise and the elements of attracting talent. This is consistent with the bulk of the literature on employer brand. However, the findings and results presented in this chapter also showed learning and development to play a fundamental role in several elements of the employee experience, as described in the previous sections.
Inspecting beyond the litany of processes and programs described by the participants, the overwhelming point of interest that has emerged from these findings is the shift in how participants talk about employer brand with reference to the stage of the employee life cycle.

Recruiting materials and websites promote what the case companies believe will be distinctive and compelling to recruits in their markets, including recognition as a Best Place to Work. The study participants, as senior leaders, hiring managers and professionals in the HR/talent management field were clearly versed on these elements and easily conceptualized them as promises. However, as the data has shown in this chapter, when recruits enter the employee stage of the employee lifecycle, the manner in which the employer brand was considered and discussed shifted. Less language was about the delivery of the promise, and more talk concerned learning the company culture and what it means to work at the firm.

In other words, to reference Helen Rosethorn’s definition of employer brand as quoted in chapter 1, the elements of an employer brand constitute reasons why an employee chooses to join a firm. The discussion once they join the firm doesn’t sound as much about how the firm will deliver on those promises, but what behaviors will be required to allow the employee to stay.

Another fascinating facet of the way in which the participants spoke about their employer brands was revealed when analyzing if they were speaking about attraction of recruits or engagement and retention of existing employees. When asked to explain their
employer brand in the context of attraction, the participants easily related elements or attributes to the notion of a promise. However, it is noteworthy that the same participants talked less explicitly about delivery of the promise when addressing the employee experience, and instead described the organizational culture. One participant explained that “we don’t use employer brand. The term that’s thrown around is just our culture.” (Participant #19, 2010) Another interviewee made the same connection:

Yeah, we don’t have anything that I would label. I guess the only word that we use systematically is culture. It’s the only word that we use...I don’t believe that we brand anything more than our values. (Participant #12, 2010)

A chief learning officer explained that the employer brand internally “is built around making sure we’re building employees that live out our core values” (Participant #4, 2010) and another learning leader was emphatic that the culture was a reflection of the employer brand:

Well, I think the point of that is that, we have a very strong culture. We have a culture that people can describe consistently from one person to the next. And I think the culture is an earmark of how strong the brand is, what’s inside the organization. (Participant #7, 2010)

One reason that this shift might occur can be related to the perspectives of Chris Argyris and Donald Schön who contrast theory-espoused versus theory-in-use (Argyris & Schön, 1977). When communicating an employer brand promise to recruits, the signals are received and can be compared to reputation, but are without benefit of experience. Once employees enter the workforce of a particular firm, their everyday experiences can be combined with the messages they receive, and even be tested for validity. Perhaps the
language of the leaders shifts in recognition that delivering the idiosyncratic elements of a promise that are important to an individual employee is a hard reality to manage, and so more collective language promoting the notion of joining the group is selected instead.

With this interpretation of the results, the employer brand becomes more a measure of fit than a deal. This is a paradigm shift for the employer brand purpose. When the brand is seen as a promise, it constitutes a sort of psychological contract because for the promise to be real it must be delivered. Employees who enter a firm with the notion that they are waiting for promises to be delivered might have a distinctly different attitude than employees who uses the employer brand attributes as an assessment of fit between themselves and the culture that exists in the organization. The concepts of both fit and culture will be explored in more depth in chapter 6.
Chapter 5

EMPLOYER BRAND MANAGEMENT

The previous chapter presented findings and discussion on the elements of the employer brand promise and the touch points of the employee experience through which the promise should be delivered. This can be considered the *what* of employer brand practice. This chapter presents findings and discussion about the *how* of employer brand management by examining the methods in which companies seek to manage, manipulate and reinforce their employer brand image. The challenges that participants discussed with regard to ongoing efforts in managing their employer brands are cited at the end of this chapter and discussed in relationship to the most current literature.

Employer Brand Messaging and Alignment

Message Strategy

While employer brand is distinct from consumer and corporate brand, many of the tactics for implementation are shared. Generally these include a visual identity and a messaging strategy designed to reach the target audience. As shown in the conceptual framework, a firm's employer brand has two distinct audiences: potential hires and existing employees. In this study, the strategy used to communicate the employer brand position to employees varied, but could be classified as either explicit or implicit in approach. Explicit strategies are direct and implicit strategies are more indirect. To illustrate, an explicit messaging strategy may promote a community action day for an
employer and report on the agencies served, the number of employees granted time to participate and the end result of the effort. An implicit strategy may be to feature a profile of a family helped by the employee volunteers. Both approaches signal that a firm includes volunteerism as part of their employee experience.

Six of the 14 companies studied had an explicit employer brand *slogan* tied to their employee experience. There was a pattern by industry in that the most of the healthcare, construction, and management consultancies mentioned specific slogans representing their employer brand. The financial services and technology firms did not. One of the retail firms did have a slogan, but it was being revisited and the plan was to move away from the slogan and to use a more implicit approach going forward.

The firms with specific employer brand slogans also tended to describe the inclusion of a visual identity for the employer brand and then use the visual identity in multiple ways. A learning leader in construction management said about her employer brand slogan and visual identity, "[It is] ev-ver-ry-where. Everywhere. It’s on our bulletin boards, it’s on some stationary, it’s on our PowerPoint, it’s just everywhere" (Participant #17, 2010). Describing the launch of a new employer brand, a healthcare executive said:

You know, our ID badges were changed to include the brand and the new logo. The signage is throughout the hospital...and we’ve got new brand pins so, wherever you go, you will see the logo and the brand in the organization and visibly on the people and around the people...and we have a new employee orientation process; it’s included in that. We do an onboarding process for managers; [the employer brand message] is the opening of nearly everything that we do. And we have monthly leadership
meetings with all of our leaders and every slide has the logo on it and [slogan]. So, it is, it is up front and center visible for people. (Participant #18, 2010)

Also, as noted in the conceptual framework for this study, firms that have a good story to tell about their company as an employer want to convey this externally to attract potential hires and internally to reinforce for employees the attributes and values of the organization that are provided in the employee experience. As such, the rationale for choosing an explicit messaging approach is obvious and relies on the belief that the employer brand is supported by providing frequent and consistent message impressions to the target audience.

When using an implicit messaging strategy firms do not actually use a slogan in communications. Nor do they put a tagline on badges, or slides, or on the walls in conference rooms. Instead, the participants described a process where the communications teams work strategically with a guiding brand vision that the firm wants to signal and then looks to identify actions and behaviors of the organization that will demonstrate the vision to the target audience. These are called proof points and worked into communications such as bulletins, newsletters, executive speeches, and the like. The head of strategic communications at a leading professional services firm described a planned multi-year employer brand campaign that relied on this type of approach:

We prefer to create word of mouth by the things that we do. When it comes to internal branding or employer brand, we believe that what we try to do is create proof points of why we are [slogan] and that is our brand position globally and nationally... We have language that we embed in all of our communications. There is no [slogan] campaign, but we do use a certain vernacular when we talk about certain things that happen inside the
firm and the [the same] when it’s reported outside the firm (Participant #1, 2009)

The rationale for this approach seems to be based on the fact that employees have access to tremendous amounts of information that helps to shape their views. By employing a strategy that focuses more on the show and less on the say the participants explained that they hope to increase the impact of their employer brand messages by allowing employees to interpret what they see around them as evidence of the employer brand position. Companies who select an implicit strategy believe this approach sends strong signals about the employee experience, as actions speak louder than words.

Employees are, indeed, far more likely to believe and buy into the fact that the values of a firm and the requisite behaviors are authentic if these values and behaviors are reflected in their own experiences in the organization (Barrow, 2007). It was interesting to note that, perhaps as an effort to manage these perceptions, seven of the firms used video as a communications technique to highlight things like employee heroes, values in action, and personal testimonies of employee engagement or commitment. These videos are not high-production, but rather you tube style products. Participants indicated that video provided a credible tool for showing their employer brand in action. In one healthcare company, video was used to reinforce organizational values:

The toolkit involves a video. We went around and actually filmed stories ...we had someone ask, “What does it mean to you when I say I’m committed to my colleagues?” Or what does it mean to you when I say to you that, “I’m giving you my highest priority.” So, what do they say and then people would tell those stories and then what we found out of those stories is that people would say oh my goodness, you’re obviously James from the cafeteria. James is there and he is loading the silverware every
single day in the cafeteria, but a person just can't walk by him without him saying hello to you. So, then we get these other insights about people who are living these behaviors. (Participant #19, 2010)

A learning leader in a technology firm described using video specifically for learning purposes in a management development program and explained, “we are using it in the class that we use for our managers and we posted the testimonials on our learning website so that people can access them” (Participant #7, 2010).

The effectiveness of an employer brand is clearly related to the strategies and tools used to signal the brand vision to both candidate and employee audiences. The choice of messaging strategies sends signals that can be interpreted along with the message content. While many of these examples of video stories are initiated by those managing the employer brand, two companies put the video cameras in the hands of the employees to tell their stories. The learning leader in a retail firm described the role of video in their employer brand development:

Well, we’re actually embarking on some survey work where we’re looking at the overall experience of the employees and also our employment branding team did focus groups. And also one of the very cool things that they did actually using digital media so using Facebook, we actually had a contest for people to submit videos on why they work at [Company Name]. (Participant #6, 2010).

The communications leader in a professional services firm explained a similar project to ask employees to explain why they liked to work for the company:

We did all the right things that people usually do, but we wanted to do something out of the box that would break through the clutter and we came up with this idea of a film festival. It was based upon the idea that
our own people should be the best…for what working at [Name] is like. It was pretty wide open.

We came up with this idea of providing video cameras and training to tell people quickly get them up to speed on how to make a little movie and we had 4-5 minute movies. Thousands of people participated; I think there were 500 different teams and each person had 4-5 people on it from all over the US. This was just a US project, not a global project. We had an overwhelming response and we never thought… like our people are so busy serving clients; I was really not sure we would get the level of response we needed and, yet, we got more teams than we ever counted on….People were able to post their videos on an on-line platform for other people to view and vote on and people started making campaigns. Lobbying for their own films and they got creative about their lobbying and campaigning and it became wildly viral and took on this life of its own that we never imagined. We thought the server was going to crash. (Participant #1, 2009)

The participant added how trying something like this was a significant move on the part of the organization, and said: “It’s interesting when I do presentations on this now I start out the very first slide with what if you were basically a risk-adverse culture and you decided to give everybody a video camera and let them tell their story and post it on YouTube?” (Participant #1, 2009). Employees who were invited to participate in this initiative had not only the assignment to consider when making sense of the effort but the added meaning that the company trusted them and their opinions enough to allow unfiltered and undirected expression.

Both of these companies experienced success by engaging their employees in helping to co-create the meaning of the employer brand. This is similar to consumer brands that have gone beyond thinking of branding as simply a visual identity or a method for communicating features and benefits and moved into the realm of inviting customers to help define the experience of the brand in ways that are meaningful for
them. Trust is an important underlying factor in capturing and creating an effective employer brand, but not many participants discussed trust specifically as an element of their practice.

**Methods as Messages**

Just as communications techniques become part of the interpretation of a brand message, other tangible choices employers make with regard to policies, processes, facilitates and methods of fulfilling employee needs can also signal alignment or misalignment with the employer brand promise. As an example, the communications lead at one of the technology firms made a comparison between his external brand and the impact of HR processes and learning programs that were not aligned:

When you look at a company like ours, we are innovative, and [have] unique products, and when we look at that brand positioning associated with it, you know, what benefits or learning opportunities do you have in the organization? And when those learning opportunities or benefits are compared, does it represent an innovative experience? ... generally a disconnection...let’s put this into a benefits perspective...if you’re an innovative company and all you have is an HMO plan, where’s the real innovation in that experience, right? You’ll probably want to look at something like a consumer driven health plan or house savings account or, you know, those sorts of things are a little bit more “now” than HMOs that were more, you know, in the 80s, early 90s, very popular. (Participant #16, 2010)

While these comments use benefits as an example, other inputs such as facilities design and the way that internal systems are set up should also be considered for alignment with employer brand messages as these are all parts of engaging with the employee and creating an employee experience. If a company signals an innovative brand, and positions itself as a cutting edge firm in the field, but then issues outdated
technology or asks employees to work in bland, beige environments, these inputs will be weighed against the words employees are hearing from their leaders and their learning programs.

The manner in which all these decisions contribute to the work environment as experienced by the employees harkens back to the discussion of touch points in chapter 4 and the resource-based view alluded to in the conceptual framework and chapter 2. The unique combinations of skills, knowledge and behaviors of employees and organizational resources like the control systems, routines and learning mechanisms are difficult to understand and imitate (Joo & McLean, 2006). Firms that are able to align their services and environments to the brand enjoy not only the benefits of this reinforcement but create conditions that are not easy to duplicate by competitors, which leads to competitive advantage in attracting, engaging and retaining employees.

One of the health care providers described the creative and supportive use of an employee advisory council to elicit recommendations for services that will have meaning for employees:

And we do the same thing with corporate services. So we have what we call a benefits advisory council where we pull 30-40 associates from across the system and we ask them to participate in the development of a benefits plan in terms of giving us ideas about things that would help them in their personal lives. We talk to them about stresses that are going on in their lives. That’s why we have a concierge program. One of the things we heard years ago was, “geez, I’m a nurse and I’ve got to have dinner on the table for my family but if you keep asking me to work over…it’s tough for me.” (Participant #12, 2010)
Another noteworthy point about the role of facilities, and the role of learning and development, was presented by the chief learning officer at a professional services firm. In this firm, there is no headquarters location, so the common physical experience for employees is provided by visits to the training centers. Used as a reflection of the employer brand, the physical design of these facilities and their amenities remind employees where they work and how they are being continually development:

You know one of the things that, you know, makes us a little bit different from most companies is we don't really have a world headquarters. And so, you know, I think a lot of companies can kind of leverage their world headquarters as kind of the heart and home of their employee brand. You know let's go to headquarters and you kind of feel the brand. For us in many ways, that's our training centers. Those are the places that people come back to throughout their career and that's why...if you walked into any of our centers, or even our virtual training centers online, the look and feel is the same. (Participant #4, 2010)

An HR executive of one of the retail firms described her corporate office as a fun place with bright colors, and permission to bring your dog or your kids to work. She said, “We have a fun office environment. It doesn't mean that we don’t work hard.” She also relayed a story with a caveat related to the importance of alignment between the message and the method:

I remember quite a few years ago a company came and met with [our president] and me and said, “Wow, you know, this is really an amazing place!” And at the end of the day this other CEO said ‘we’re gonna go back and we're gonna paint our office walls a brighter color and we're gonna have dogs come to work and we’re gonna let people bring their kids’ and [our president] looked at him and she pointed to her heart and she said ‘I'm gonna tell you something. You can do all this stuff, but if it's not what's inside of you, Mr. CEO, it's not gonna make a bit of difference.’ And so, that's why I said there is no magic pill; it really does
start with the leadership and, you know, how we speak and interact with each other. (Participant #20, 2010)

Her point illustrates the criticality of the authenticity of any method chosen to support the employee experience.

Roles and Responsibilities for the Employer Brand

In addition to the what and the how of employer brand management, there is the question of who is responsible for the oversight and implementation of employer brand strategies. While this study set out to explore the roles of HR/talent management, communications and learning and development, the role of organizational leadership was also central in managing the employer brand.

Role of HR/Talent Management

In all of the case companies, the bulk of the responsibility for execution of employer brand management lies with the HR/talent management function. This is consistent with the literature and the practice to date, suggesting that employer brand is a platform for designing the business of HR or talent management in a firm. Positioned as the key stakeholder, HR was described as being ultimately responsible for the manner in which programs, policies and support from functions like internal communications and learning and development come together to define the reality of the entire employee experience.

Participants’ responses landed on a continuum between “I think more than anything, its HR,” to “It is being driven by HR” to “It is definitely HR.”
Because the conceptual framework theorized that both internal communications and learning and development impact the promise and delivery of the employer brand and influence the organizational behavior agenda that lies in between these ends, these roles were explored in greater depth.

**Role for Communications**

Cross-functional teams and partnerships between HR, internal communications and learning and development were predominant and referenced by participants in this study. In the most cases, the communications function was described as assigning a representative to HR/talent management. A learning leader participant explained the support received from communications:

> Folks from our marketing and communications team are assigned full-time to work with us in HR, both an internal team and an external team. And so the internal team would help us as we’re communicating our employee value propositions to our people. They help us put together those communication plans and help develop the collateral to do that. Our external team would work with us as we’re looking to get placements to talk about what we’re doing in external publications...to help our potential, you know, future employees understand a little bit more about us. (Participant #4, 2010)

When a communications representative is provided to HR for tactical assignments, he or she also represents the marketing department, which generally is responsible for the development and alignment of brand statements and visual identities. The communications partner brings these marketing skills to bear on the HR communications plan. An HR lead at a hospital network described the partnership...
between her group and marketing communications in the development of their employer brand this way:

The brand emerged and the work was initially done by our public affairs and marketing department and the process about going and about developing the brand was to involve stakeholders from across the whole network. And so it fits, it fits totally almost like Cinderella and the slipper with what we want for our employees...they did focus groups, they did one-on-one interviews; I believe they also did some survey work. (Participant #17, 2010)

Role of Learning and Development

The literature reviewed for this study put a lot of the responsibility for efforts aimed at creating a culture and the workforce behaviors that support both the business objectives and an ideal working environment on the internal marketing or communications staff. This study suggests a more central role for learning and development. While brand messages about values and workforce behaviors can be strategically communicated, the reality of building the skills and reinforcing behaviors that are consistent with the brand position, and that will be demonstrated and evaluated day-to-day in the working environment, is more the role of the learning and development function. By connecting the employee value propositions offered by the employer brand with the behaviors required to achieve organizational objectives, learning and development initiatives help employees to mold their focus and activities around doing business in a way that will enable the organization to succeed. A communications executive said herself: “We [need to] do it not just by talking, talking, talking, but by attaching those … [soft skills]” (Participant #1, 2009).
Several learning leaders described their charge to create programs and development experiences that made the organizational values relevant and meaningful for employees, in addition to knowledge and skill building. For example:

There are really four things that go into it for us. First is the learning experience itself, right? If that’s not good, nothing else really matters. But I think a lot of times that’s where companies stop. Let’s make really good learning. The other three matter to us....we’ll specifically think, based upon the class that we’re building, what are the right cultural attributes that need to be built in here? Obviously this looks very different for a new analyst than an experienced senior executive...the third area is networking....one of core values is to make sure when we bring people together to learn together that we provide time and capacity in their schedule for them to connect with other people outside of the classroom...and the fourth is to make sure it’s an overall good experience operationally...like going to Disney. (Participant #4, 2010)

The chief learning officer at a professional services firm explained how the inclusion of components of organizational culture varies in different learning programs but always plays a part:

So from the time… if you join us as an experienced hire, you will get your very first exposure to that in what we call “Welcome to [Name].” If you come to us as a campus hire and you go to your 2 to 4 weeks of boot camp, the whole, you know, foundation level setting around the talent experience and what it means to be a colleague here begins there and is reinforced and actively taught. In technical training, it is just reinforced, right? In professional and leadership training, is actively taught. (Participant #5, 2010)

And, a communications leader from the same consultancy concurred:

They are sort of inculcated with all these new tools that they need to learn and also that’s where brand positioning shows up in what we call the soft skills of those three attributes that we talked about ...we find ways to build those in to the learning and development curriculum just as we find
ways to build those concepts into our internal and external communication. (Participant #1, 2009)

Another communications executive explained the added value that learning and development brings to making his communications genuine and authentic:

And so when you look at L&D and its interaction with employer brand, it should be designing and implementing the knowledge, skills, or abilities and the development opportunities that relate specifically to what those employer brand characteristics represent. So if you've got, let's say, strategic thinking, as one of your core elements of your employer brand, that the people here are all strategic...you should have some sort of a development opportunity that helps people know what strategy even is, how to develop a strategy, how to implement a strategy, and how to measure a strategy. (Participant #16, 2010)

Furthermore, while the learning programs and communications programs have similar objectives related to what people need to learn related to the brand, the learning and development teams are able to think differently about how the learning occurs and vary the pedagogical approaches to achieve different outcomes, based on deeper understanding of the ways in which the employees and the organization can learn. An example of this recognition was described by a learning leader in a technology firm:

We want to hire the absolute best of the best and we want to create an employment brand that will allow us to do that. So, we want, we don't want to do away with the beer and ping-pong and flip-flops, but we want to infuse in that innovation, creative thinking, diversity. We want to, we want to make the best candidates want to come to [company name] because guess what? If you have the best people, you attract the best people; at least in the IT field. These guys, the IT employees, they learn more from each other than I'll ever be able to teach them from an L & D perspective; they learn from each other primarily. So if the best people are here, then the best people want to come here because they know that's how they're going to increase their knowledge and skills. (Participant #23, 2010)
As this illustrates, learning and development has the opportunity to shape the employee experience by selecting the focus of programs and designing for outcomes that will reinforce behaviors to impact the business. Learning and development teams that understand what is known as the 70/20/10 development methodology rely on theories of adult learning and social learning to design how employees will experience learning in the workplace. The 70/20/10 model suggests that 70% of learning takes place on the job, through problem solving, project work, special assignments, and interaction with peers; 20% takes place through role modeling, coaching, mentoring, support and direction from managers; and 10% occurs through formal training, including workshops and e-learning (McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1998).

The Importance of Leadership

The participants candidly stated that the guidance of an HR team and all the work of various cross-functional groups to align and connect, must be the execution of a commitment by the leadership team in an organization. This commitment is required to create and support a culture consistent with the identity the employer brand projects. Without it, the initiatives will not receive the resource allocations which will impact the believability of the signaled identity. An interviewee from the professional services industry emphasized this criticality with these comments:

As part of your onboarding and, indeed, part of your ongoing learning so when you are developing people through the management levels and so forth, you continue to reiterate aspects of these core values. But at the end of the day, of course, it’s got to work top-down. I mean culture only works if people are behaving consistently from the CEO on down. (Participant #9, 2010)
The importance of leadership was also stressed by the HR executive of a Midwest health network with this story related to his placement on the FORTUNE 100 Best Places to Work List. He said:

When I go to the FORTUNE conference in April...most of the companies that are there are not on the list. They're trying to learn how. And they have like a project manager whose only job is to help them with the Fortune application. And what I tell those people is, quit spending so much time and energy on the application and focus on your culture because you cannot fake it. And to get the culture means you have to have an executive team...your senior leadership has to see this as valuable. HR can help with that but at the end of the day, your CEO, your COO, they have to be people that care about people because I just don't, I don't think long term, you can fake it. Maybe one year but to be on the list three, four, five, ten years in a row, I think you have to have a leadership team that really cares. (Participant #12, 2010)

This comment hints at the interplay between leadership commitment and the pervasive role that organizational culture plays in determining whether employer brand messages are aligned and believable.

**Aligning Employer Brand with Corporate Brand**

According to the literature, the alignment of brands associated with an organization is a critical component of successful brand management (Sartain & Schumann, 2006; Moroko & Uncles, 2008). As the most recent addition to the brand architecture, employer brand is distinct from other brands in that it is employment-specific, characterizing the firm's identity as an employer. Yet, in many cases, the employers in this study indicated that they have the same employer brand slogan as the
corporate brand slogan, purposely. An interviewee from a professional services firm said, “Yeah, ultimately, what drives us, you see it in our external marketing…the tagline…and also as we communicate internally to our people because we exist for the purpose of helping our clients to be successful.” The same executive also articulated the importance of alignment between brands, “as we are telling the market that we are about helping companies to be [slogan], then we sure as hell better exhibit the characteristics of what we would be regarded as [slogan] ourselves” (Participant #4, 2010). He explained further by stating:

I think that the power of the notion of employer brand is when you have very directly connected it to branding/marketing thinking, which was clearly a part of what we were trying to do. And as I always say on this topic, an employer brand is the flipside of the same coin as corporate brand. In other words, you can't have an employer brand that tries to pretend something different from your corporate brand because all of your employees and prospective employees, what they will perceive of your company first is what you will project into the wider market. (Participant #9, 2010)

A salient dimension was suggested by the head of learning and development for a well-known global retailer, who referenced companies who rely on the popularity of their product or corporate brand to attract employees. She suggested this as somewhat of a halo effect that she had learned from experience, explaining:

I actually realized that when people talked about us having a great employment brand, they were actually talking about our product brand. But I would say, you know, you can't just allow that to be the halo effect. You actually have to have, I believe, you have to have a distinct employment value proposition and you have to have a brand position. And they should be supportive of each other. So you can't just assume that one’s going to carry over to the other. (Participant #6, 2010)
This notion of the unintended appropriation of brand values was explored and explained by Moroko and Uncles (2008) as a reoccurring theme in discussions of employer brand management. Employer brands are distinctive from tangible product and services brands in that employees cannot readily assess the claims made in brand messaging regarding the promised attributes or the employee experience until they become employees. Because the risk of a poor decision when selected a place to work tends to be “far greater than those associated with a poor choice of shampoo” (Moroko & Uncles, 2008, p. 167) employees will often use the more accessible understanding of a company’s corporate or product brands as a proxy for the employer brand. If the associations and values are aligned, then this will help to bolster the employer brand. For example, a recruit that was looking to join Coca Cola today might appropriate the “Open Happiness” and “Pop Open Good Times” product slogans and hope that an employee experience would provide happy, good times. However, often times, prospective employees will transfer their perceptions of a product promise to the employee experience and any lack of alignment will lead to disappointment.

Perhaps to this end, some firms purposely create an employer brand slogan that is related, but different than their corporate brand. The head of marketing and communications at a major hospital explains that in his firm:

It related to our external brand, but was on purpose different from our external brand… but very close cousins and the differences were subtle… I think more important, it has more elements. It’s softer… anyway, the point is, if you get something in that visual package, you know it is from the
company. So that, by definition, begins to define some of the experience you might get from us. (Participant #13, 2010)

The point of acknowledgement for those who have responsibility for employer brand management is to be clear about the differences between the company’s reputation overall and their reputation as a place to work. Making sure the employer brand communications highlight the unique aspects of a firm’s employment offerings and working environment can assist anyone receiving the signals to understand that they are meant to establish the identity of the firm as an employer. This should not preclude the alignment of the employer brand to a larger corporate purpose, especially if that purpose drives a sense of affiliation with potential hires and employees who identify with it. As the literature in chapter 2 suggests, employees’ emotional attachment to their companies and the effort they put forward to advance the organizational goals, depends significantly on their belief in the alignment of the corporation’s values to those of their own.

Success Measures

A comprehensive evaluation strategy for measuring the success of employer brand was not referenced by any of the participants. As with many HR initiatives, isolating the elements that impact a strategy is difficult. Dr. John Sullivan, author of Rethinking Strategic HR (2004) suggests four specific categories to measure employer brand. The first is a count of positive citations in various media outlets, and a comparison to direct competitors. The second is getting placed on best places to work lists. The third evaluation strategy is to assess what your target audience (potential hires
and employees) knows about your employer brand and the fourth metric is to note increased flow of employment applications (Sullivan, 2004, in Sartain & Schumann, 2006).

Of the measures put forward by Sullivan, participants specifically referenced reliance on Best List placement and increased applications. The other measures discussed (employee engagement, customer satisfaction, retention, productivity measures, etc.) seemed to be offered as evidence of a successful employer brand, but not as a singular and specific measure of the practices.

Annual surveys on employee engagement and employee satisfaction are used prevalently and were discussed most frequently. In the healthcare, construction, and retail industries, customer satisfaction surveys also play a large role in helping the organization assess its effectiveness. A learning leader at a medical center related the results to employer brand by explaining how employees in the healthcare fields gain meaning from knowing they have served their customers:

We also do... patient satisfaction data, collect that. And at least, again, for healthcare, you know, serving the patient well is a big factor in an employee’s satisfaction with their work in healthcare. I mean that’s one of the things that gives them meaning; why they might take less pay in order to do work somewhere because the meaning of the work is important. (Participant #10, 2010)

Several of the healthcare providers reported using a balanced scorecard approach that blends their success measures:
We use a balanced scorecard approach to measure our success...[with] the four quadrants. For one quadrant...we have a very robust patient satisfaction survey. And again, it’s a national benchmark survey used by thousands of other hospitals and we benchmark what our patients tell us about their care here and we benchmark it nationally. We do the same thing with our quality metrics. We measure our quality output, meaning by how safe the care as been at the hospital? We’re able to measure everything. Every experience that a patient has here, we can measure. And then the last aspect is finance. And so once we put all these metrics together, we able to sort of give ourselves a grade on how we’re doing as an organization. And I would say that, particularly in that quality of work by quadrant, which is how our associates feel about us and how our physicians feel about us, we can get a really good sense of how engaged we are with our work that we are supposed to be doing. (Participant #12, 2010)

Key to this approach is the measure of experience that allows the organization to grade itself by combining the inputs that determine its corporate brand and to isolate the role that employees play in success.

Unique to this study was the evaluation of value attributed to being named to the FORTUNE Best 100 Places to Work List, conducted by the Great Place to Work Institute. As all the case companies had placed on this list, the participants commented about the worth of the designation as well as how the metrics associated had been used in their organizations. As discussed in chapter 3, every company selected for the Best List receives a report of the results of their employees responses to the Great Place to Work Trust Index©. The companies in this study referenced their results from this survey as a validation of their employer brand and selection as a “great place to work.” Several explained how they used the Best List placement in communications with their employees. The leader responsible for learning at a hospital network said:
I know some of the awards and things like that, I know a lot of people are jaded about them, but we do take them seriously and help our associates understand that we, we do these things in order to get the feedback to make sure that if something isn’t right, that we can’t fix it if you don’t know about it. And the only way you can really get better is to benchmark yourselves against other organizations that you admire and aspire to be like. And so we do communicate quite a bit when we receive these recognitions and to help our associates understand why is this important. (Participant #14, 2010)

Quite simply, the value was acknowledged by the chief learning officer at a major hospital who reported that he presents in new hire orientation as a leader/teacher and asks: “To what degree was the fact that we were on the FORTUNE list a decision thing for you? Like 90% of the people raise their hand!” (Participant #3, 2010). The same participant credited appearing on the Best List with a huge increase in applications:

After the first year, bam! Right? It’s like kaboom! Like double...one and half times the first year, two times the second year, you know, just boom! So we put an upfront pre-employment assessment process in place, you know, where we could really start to scrub out the AB candidates from the CD candidates... (Participant #3, 2010)

Another firm feels so strongly about the value of rankings that they have chosen this path as a marketing investment for their employer brand:

What you will see is we have made an active investment in making sure that every magazine that rank orders organizations from Working Mother to you know to the Fortune rankings to Talent magazine you name it, that we are on the rankings and we're very prominent in those rankings. That's where we make our investments. (Participant #5, 2010)

The data collected in this study did not show any specific measures used in the case companies to tie learning and development efforts to the success of the employer
brand. The closest was this suggestion by a talent management leader, again linking the role of the manager to a successful employee experience:

I still think that in so many organizations, the weak point of this is it is the managers because they are not properly trained and they are not properly held accountable for these dimensions of their role. They are held accountable for the delivery of numbers and customer sat scores or whatever it might be. But are they being held accountable for the engagement satisfaction of their employees based on the delivery of the promise that we gave them as an organization? (Participant #9, 2010)

The conceptual framework and the data in this study strongly suggest the importance of alignment, yet no one measures it. Findings from this study suggest that the most pertinent measure of employer brand success would be a measure of the gap between the brand vision and the reality of the experience. This type of analysis could begin with an assessment of the processes associated with each touch point. As the practice of employer brand expands, this type of evaluation should move to the forefront, providing a useful appraisal of how the overall employee experience compares to what the company claims to both stand for and offer to its employees.

Challenges in Employer Brand Management

Participants in the study were forthcoming about the key challenges they face in ongoing employer brand management. Alignment of all sorts was the leading challenge, but the typical brand challenge of ensuring consistency also came up frequently. As the practice itself is young, there are additional challenges with deciding between a singular employer brand and customizing with multiple employee value propositions for effective talent segmentation.
The Challenge of Alignment

The most frequently mentioned challenge of managing the employer brand centered on process alignment and connecting the dots for both managers and employees.

The lead for learning and development at a retail firm expressed the challenge as reflective of a common HR challenge, and said:

The challenge is to get the operating managers to understand the importance of it and to connect the dots. So many things that you do in human resources, you’re operating folks kind of say, “ok, they’re making me do this, you know, this task I have to do.” They don’t see the strategic linkage between all the things and how you’re creating a brand and creating that work experience and work environment for the whole organization. (Participant #21, 2010)

The chief learning officer in a technology firm, who perhaps fortuitously also manages internal communications and talent management for her firm, answered this challenge with a recommendation for a systemic approach, and explained:

I think you need a systemic approach; you can’t have just employee development as the only piece that really aligns with that. You can’t have just performance management; it really needs to be a holistic, systemic approach to making sure that you have the connection between employees and the organization or between the culture and the organization. The hardest part is trying to maintain the culture that you have. I think using storytelling and using information-sharing tools really helps perpetuate the kind of culture that you want in an organization. (Participant #2, 2009)

The study participants spent a great deal of time focused on discussing the necessity for various types of alignment to make employer brand management successful. Employer brand must be aligned with corporate and consumer brand. HR processes must be aligned with employer brand attributes as these signal intentions that can be
interpreted as promised. Methods must be aligned with messages to increase authenticity.

An opportunity for alignment not specifically mentioned, but clearly apparent, is the alignment of the functions in the organization charged with employer brand management. The data suggests within the different roles assumed by the HR/talent management, learning and development and communications teams there is also a variance in point of view and true understanding of the frame through which each group views their responsibilities. As an example, a learning leader gently complained about a communications colleague:

It needs to be easy, but it needs to be transparent and it needs to be real and, unfortunately, the communication filter is often, “we don't need to give them that much detail or it does look pretty so we won't do it this way”, but we're like but, but, but, but, but...So that was really apparent to me that, boy, we were really are coming from different places...so I'm like, “oh yeah, I see why she's doing this, but it's not the right thing for this audience.” (Unidentified Participant, 2010)

The critique goes both ways, as is evidenced by the following comment made by a communications participant about her experience with HR:

We have an HR department who right now, has to come more on the policing side as opposed to consulting side. So, instead of, ‘How can I help you?’ ‘What do you want to achieve?’ ‘How can we work together to make that happen?’ It's slamming down the law and the policy and it's not, it's not working. It's not working well at all. (Unidentified Participant, 2010)

A similar perspective was offered by another communications executive, “At its core, HR is all about risk management” (Unidentified Participant, 2010). Risk
management and marketing may have some natural tensions that could impact employer brand goals and execution strategies. This echoes alignment issues more generally as companies often struggle with cross-company alignment that runs counter to departmental goals and short-term interests (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2009).

What might be a road to increased success is to increase the cross-functional accountability between the functions involved in employer brand management to foster greater alignment. While HR/talent management is responsible for structuring much of the employee experience, and can use the support of communications, if they admit to lagging behind in talent segmentation planning and strategy, perhaps the communications team could share expertise from the discipline of marketing and customer segmentation. Or, perhaps learning and development could create a skill-building curriculum for HR staff development that increases exposure to marketing and branding strategies.

Whatever can assist, acknowledging that each of these functions brings expertise necessary for the process to work is key. Subsequently, role modeling an integrated (anti-silo) approach for an initiative that is as culture-impacting as employer brand would send important signals to employees, managers and organizational leaders.

The Challenge of Consistency

Consistency was also mentioned frequently as a challenge of delivering the employer brand. The communications executive in a technology firm expressed concern over the lack of consistency, and described his frustration and the impact on the employee experience:
I don’t think there is one employment experience in the organization. I think that we have many depending on which, which part of the business you sit in, which leads me to believe that we really don't have a solid employer brand. For instance, when we are looking at a performance management system, it should have consistency across the entire organization in terms of use of that system and compliance with that use...rather than groups kind of doing their own thing on their own timelines and just kind of, you know, making whatever system works for them in that moment...[another] a good example...you may look at benefits...the majority of our company is here in the United States...but we’re growing significantly outside of the United States. Our U.S. folks have a very nice benefits package and the non-US based employees see this and think that they’re missing out on something because we haven't necessarily invested to that length, outside of the US....that’s pretty normal in terms of a compensation structure, but it limits people in their ability then to feel like they are...like we’re all in it together. (Participant #16, 2010)

A talent management executive echoed the challenge of consistency and called it

natural challenge for the process of brand management:

The first part of it, which I think we’ve seen a lot more of in the last five to ten years of organizations trying to more clearly articulate this notion of employee brand. But we are definitely in this space, still of being able to deliver on that consistently and I think that will remain one of the biggest, you know, since that was the core of the question, one of the biggest single challenges. Because, as you know, with marketing, it’s rather easier to define what you want your product and service to be but delivering on it consistently is the problem. (Participant #9, 2010)

Consistency seems to be an outcome of alignment and may call for the appointment of a single individual, an employer brand manager, or a named department to be the guardian of the employer brand. Simon Barrow (2007) has advocated for this position in the literature, but it is slow in coming to practice. None of the case companies had given the assignment or job role of employer brand manager to an individual.
The Challenge of Customization

A third challenge for employer brand management has to do with the emerging issue of talent segmentation or customization of the employer brand for different employee populations. Graeme Martin, of the University of Glasgow, has questioned whether it makes sense to speak about employer brand in the singular when people with different issues and values assign multiple perceptions and thereby reputations to a brand image (Martin, 2007). To draw parallels with other brands again, many products and services exist within a portfolio of a consumer brand, so multiple employee value propositions could be associated under an overarching employer brand, with specific employee packages aimed at different target groups. Simon Barrow has suggested that segmentation is an effective tool for dividing employees into groups that can be catered to differently according to specific needs. He also reminds that there is a “practical limit to segmentation, since the benefit of addressing individual groups is soon outweighed by the cost if the target group is too small, or the total number of target groups too great” (Barrow, 2006, p. 100).

Very recent research by Lara Moroko and Mark Uncles (2009) has examined how market segmentation can be applied more extensively in the employer brand context. Using generic types of market segmentation, their research indicates that while the practice is still new, segmentation provides value to employer brand in helping to achieve organizational goals and will continue to grow in both usage and sophistication. Table 4 shows the bases of employer brand segmentation suggested by this research:
Table 5

Bases of Employer Branding Segmentation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Segmentation base</th>
<th>Segmentation level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Observable factors</strong></td>
<td>Examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Baby Boomers; Generation X; Generation Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seniority</td>
<td>Graduate; junior manager; senior manager; board member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Type</td>
<td>Technical (e.g. engineer, client tax specialist); client facing (e.g. customer service, sales call center); central/support services (e.g. human resources, accounting/finance, marketing); blue collar (e.g. factory, maintenance, production line, packaging, cleaning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanence</td>
<td>Permanent; contract; casual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee lifecycle</td>
<td>Applicant; new starter; current staff, alumni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenure</td>
<td>Short/medium/long term (e.g. less than 12 months, 1-5 years, 5-10 years, 10 years plus)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical location</td>
<td>Head office; subsidiary; city/country/region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unobservable factors</strong></td>
<td>Examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career focus</td>
<td>Industry (i.e. want to apply their specialization to a particular industry); vocation (i.e. want to pursue specialization in any industry); company (i.e. want to pursue opportunities associated with the employing company, e.g. travel, remuneration, professional development, flexibility in relation to industry/specialization)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outlook on life stage</td>
<td>Young single; working family member; empty nester; pre-retiree; semi-retiree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desired career benefits</td>
<td>Security/stability/predictability; change/growth/opportunity; education/professional development, remuneration, flexibility (e.g. job roles, work hours)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Adapted from “Employer branding and market segmentation” by Lara Moroko and Mark D. Uncles, 2009, Brand Management, p. 191, copyright 2009 by Palgrave Macmillan.

What seemed to be the most prominent base of segmentation in the case companies was to segment employees by age and or life stage. Several participants commented on the newest generation to enter the workforce and their changing expectations with regard to learning and development and corporate social responsibility. A talent management leader shared questions he hears frequently from new hires and how his company was responding:
When I get to that level of the organization, what I want to know is will you give me opportunities to go learn, for example, by working in the third sector for awhile? The whole CSR program...so we started to see the evolution of thinking as to what was it that graduates were looking for and, therefore, you have to start to adapt your employer brand and value proposition around that. (Participant #9, 2010)

The professional services firms have taken the lead in customization and varying the employee value proposition for employees who are entering different life stages. The chief learning officer in a management consultancy explained the options available to employees who want to build a career and still manage through life stage changes:

I’ll give you an example of the way consulting and enterprise roles are different. Part of the employee value proposition around the enterprise workforce is there is a little more stability in your role. You’re probably not going to be traveling as much, you can probably structure the rest of your life a little bit better...knowing what your work hours are going to be...but you’re probably not going to be on the same, you know, promotion schedule. You know if you come in and you want to get promoted as fast as possible, enterprise isn’t the workforce you probably want to plug into; you want to plug into consulting workforce and so there are different levers so that while all of them have career paths and training and job opportunities what specific pieces are would look very different. (Participant #4, 2010)

A learning leader in a retail firm said her company was just starting to consider how the elements or attributes of an employer brand position might be customized for different employee groups. These considerations were driven by age:

We don’t, but that’s part of the work that we’re undergoing right now...to look at it in a different element much like we look at our customers. So we look at our customers as different segments...we have a lot of different profiles. We haven’t done that with our employees. So that is something that we’re actually looking to do. [We’ve been hesitant to say] this group gets something different than another group...so you know, lots of discussions about things like even benefits. So what are the benefits that are relevant to a 21-year-old as compared to a 49-year-old? It’s different.
Or when we consider [stock grants or long term incentives] something like 85% of our population is between 18 and 25 years old and they don't appreciate the value. So that's a different value proposition. (Participant #6, 2010)

As noted by the talent management executive at a leading financial services firm and several other participants, many firms are just starting to recognize the benefit of creating different employee value propositions for different talent segments and will need to figure out how each of these can still fit into the overall employer brand: “We’re still personally not as efficient as we could be with segmented markets. And frankly as we get to generational issues…we’re just on the cusp of beginning to understand those.” (Participant #22, 2010)

A key issue mentioned in the literature, which did not seem to be on the agenda for the participants in the case studies, was the necessity of a robust employee research practice to feed an effective segmentation approach and to validate the employer brand. This continuous research is lacking in many organizations, not just the case companies, as most companies conduct an appraisal to gather data and opinions from their employees either once a year or sometimes just bi-annually. The resource-based view regards employees as human capital assets, but they are not measured and tracked with the same rigor as other assets on the balance sheet. And certainly, companies spend a significant amount of time gathering data about their customers to shape corporate and consumer brand practices. Rosethorn says, “No brand department would launch a product without undertaking solid market research in order to understand both their customer needs and the competitor landscape” (Rosethorn, 2009, p. 50).
An increased focus on employee research could address many of the challenges of employer brand management and contribute to a more comprehensive set of success measures by providing a thorough understanding of what makes employees chose to join a firm and ultimately choose to stay.

This chapter has presented research findings and discussion of the various organizational roles and responsibilities in employer brand management, including current challenges and opportunities for increased success. Guardians of the employer brand, no matter what function is tapped, need to take an evidence-based approach to their strategies and planning to make sure they continue to present a relevant and compelling offer to both recruits and existing employees. The next chapter reveals findings and discussion of the significant and often unpredictably role that organizational culture plays in the ultimate meaning given to an employer brand.
Chapter 6

THE WILDCARD OF CULTURE

The findings presented in chapter 4 illustrate employer brand attributes of attraction and descriptions of the unique learning and development experiences that are leveraged in the various touch points of the employee experience. Chapter 5 examined the methods in which companies seek to manage, manipulate and reinforce their employer brand image. Despite their best efforts, however, companies do not have complete control over employer brand process. To be effective, employer brand management must consider the dynamic and dialectic reality created by idiosyncratic person-to-person interactions in the context of a company culture. Indeed, organizational culture appears to be something of a wildcard in the employer brand management process. Workplace norms mediate the messages departments deliver during the employee experience and what employees ultimately conclude about what it means to work at the firm. This chapter explores the ways in which organizational culture shapes both management and perceptions of employer brand.

The Revealing Role of Everyone

When asked who was responsible for delivering the employee experience, five participants laid the task squarely on the manager as did this human resources executive, when she claimed the manager has the greatest impact on “whether or not anything that’s
communicated is now believable…” (Participant #11, 2010) or this learning leader who
she said, “I really do think the manager is the one who really creates the employee
experience” (Participant #7, 2010). But, as the manager can only deliver the processes
set by HR, and the managers must receive the proper training and understand their role as
an agent of the corporation, two participants held HR ultimately responsible for delivery
of the employer brand.

However, four participants felt bringing the employee brand to life was a shared
responsibility between HR and the manager, as both are in roles where they must act as
agents of the corporation. What was most interesting was that the largest majority of
participants (seven by count) put the responsibility for delivery of the promise on the
collective. “We’re all in this together,” said Participant #12, (2010). His sentiments were
echoed with additional comments such as these: “I think it is every employee.”
(Participant #2, 2009), “It’s everyone.” (Participant #23, 2010), and “[It’s] the collective
organization…the way we treat each other” (Participant #5, 2010).

“The way we treat each other” poses an interesting dimension of the employee
experience that was not accounted for in the study’s original conceptual framework. The
data presented in chapters 4 and 5 clearly suggest that employees get very deliberate
signals from the company about what it means to work in the case companies. These
signals include brand positioning statements and slogans delivered in a marketing or
communications sense and additional perceptions formed through the various message
strategies and methods chosen to convey the vision of what the company wants to
project. These signals are supported by values, credos that govern acceptable behavior, and the HR systems related to learning and performance management that seek to manage employees’ understanding of the organization’s expectations in terms of behavior and attitude. Additionally, a sense about what is means to work at a firm is also construed by how employees’ work is structured and supported by HR processes and allocated resources.

But undoubtedly, employees also interpret their experience by learning from bosses and colleagues, seeing what behaviors are acceptable, and what is rewarded or sanctioned. These influences are elements of the organizational culture. A definition used earlier in this report:

Culture is a multifaceted phenomenon that frames our meaning-making, influences our behavior, is enacted in our organization rituals and evolves through the gradual shifts in enacted, emotional and verbal discourse. (Hawkins, 1997, p. 431)

If so, then the meaning that communications seek to provide and the required behaviors that learning and development seeks to build are subject to evaluation against what people regard as normal and acceptable in the social structures of the workplace. These more hidden assumptions and beliefs about the way work gets done in an organization are appropriately referred to as the norms of the workplace environment and are another distinctive input to what employees ultimately conclude about the employee experience.

The literature on organizational culture is abundant, but understanding at a basic level can be obtained from studying the organizational model of Edgar Schein, professor
at MIT Sloan School of Management, and seeing how it relates to what has been discussed about employer brand. Schein (1992) conceptualizes culture as complex and pervasive, which makes it all the more difficult to factor into management equations. He has identified three distinct levels in organizational cultures. The first is called artifacts and behaviors. These are elements that can be observed, felt or heard by an uninitiated person. Things like slogans, visual identities, mission statements, credos, facilities, the way people dress, the atmosphere in the office, all fall into this major category.

The next level of organizational culture deals with the espoused values of the firm. These are the characteristics that are claimed to be guiding drivers and projected to create a desired image for the organization, much like an employer brand image or position. The third level is referred to as assumptions. These are the actual values that exist in the culture and they may or may not correlate to the espoused values. This level is hard to assess because it often exists at an unconscious level. There are also elements of this level that are taboo to discuss within the organization.

These informal aspects of organizational culture are seldom accounted for in onboarding or other learning programs or employer brand position statements. The learning leader in a technology firm admitted:

I think we could tell the story of our culture more clearly. I think we all know it so well, but for our new hires, we don't really coach them as much as we could on what's the specific, this is what the culture is, this is what can get you in hot water, this is how you can, you know, grow here, this is what we're about. (Participant #7, 2010)
It is interesting to note here that the need to address cultural norms more explicitly is acknowledged, but as has been shown, the learning function may be limited in its ability to do so. The unwritten rules about the way things get done in an organization are a critical part of what is means to work in the firm and a huge factor for employee assessment about an employer brand. What this makes critical for employer brand management is the recognition that companies do not have complete control over this assessment process, and must consider all the inputs employees are receiving.

**Unpredictable Impressions**

Jonathan Schroeder (2009) said that neither managers nor consumers completely control the branding process. This observation can easily be extended to this study to affirm that neither HR or communications or learning and development control the employer branding process. The idea that employees and their interactions within the corporate culture complicate the employer brand messaging is redolent of the service marketing literature review in chapter 2 of this report. The unpredictable, interpersonal dimensions of customers and service providers interacting with one another increases the complexity of service brand management. Extrapolate this interpersonal complexity from the interaction between one customer and one employee and imagine how it multiplies when trying to manage the impressions on all the employees within the culture of an organization.
As has been noted previously, employees and recruits have immense access to information that can shape their views. The internet alone represents an “unrivaled forum for knowledge-sharing, business-bashing, and score settling” (Rosethorn, 2009, p. 15).

One of the study participants from a retail firm shared the employee perceptions of her firm’s employee experience as posted on the web:

And I know this to be true. You’ll see if you go out on like [website/blog name], you know, all these places where you get to see people who are somewhat disgruntled or people who aren’t, you know, they’ll talk about that, you know, which is . . . it was great until I ran into this one manager and then that person wasn’t good and, you know, that kind of either makes or breaks a person’s experience in the organization. (Participant #6, 2010)

This example illustrates how interactions among employees have a significant impact on the employee experience that is immediate, unpredictable and clearly outside of the reach of organizational systems meant to provide parameters. What can those who are responsible for the more formal and planned inputs into the mix do to acknowledge these influences in their strategies?

For the past twenty years, successful consumer brands have recognized their limitations in controlling brand image. The entire discipline of reputation management has developed to proactively address this reality. The internet has given everyone a view into any company and “instant” word of mouth reports from people who have tried a company’s products and services (Lowell & Hahn, 2010). The idea of “managing the brand” as a “push” strategy has given way to a “pull strategy” of creating online brand communities and other personalized opportunities that provide customers the ability interact with a brand, with other brands, and with one another (Mullins, 2007). Nike is an
example of a firm spending more of its advertising dollars on services for consumers like workout advice, races and online communities. “It’s a very different way to connect with consumers,” says Trevor Edwards, Nike’s corporate vice president for global brand and category management. “People are coming into it [online brand community] on average three times a week. So we’re not having to go to them... We’re not in the business of keeping the media companies alive, we’re in the business of connecting with consumers.” (Story, 2007).

Consumers today are not choosing “the best, the fanciest, or the cheapest. They are choosing brands that have the right meaning” (Lowell & Hahn, 2010, p. 5). Similarly, employees are choosing employer brands that have the right meaning. Employees, who are also consumers, have learned that they can contribute to a culture and co-construct the meaning of a brand. Because they can do this with consumer and corporate brands that they select, they expect to have similar influence and impact on their employer brands.

So, just as other brand managers must factor in the actions and reactions of consumers to their products and services, it behooves employer brand managers to acknowledge the contributing role of employees into the employer brand process. A participant in a technology firm shared his belief that employees don’t just have an impact on culture through their peer-to-peer interaction, but in more and more cases they seek it: “You know, good, bad, or other, people are smart and creative and innovative and
they want to contribute that type of impact or their own fingerprint to the organization and the brand” (Participant #16, 2010).

The true task in employer brand development is not to create or impose a brand vision on to the culture, but to embark on uncovering what is most unique about a company culture, what makes it a great place to work, and building on these inimitable characteristics to create a competitive advantage. Participants in this study actually referred to several methods used to engage their employees in the development of the employer brand vision and the telling of a brand story. Previously referenced was the technique of asking employees to submit videos about their personal employee experiences. Additionally, a learning leader at a retail firm said, “we’re actually embarking on some survey work where we’re looking at the overall experience of the employees and also our employment branding team did focus groups” (Participant #6, 2010) and a learning leader at a technology firm acknowledged a similar discovery process: “We’re actually working up a new story on our brand; trying to simplify everything that is our promise to employees...we’re using focus groups and a task force and working with an outside firm” (Participant #7, 2010).

**Fit with the Culture**

If employees follow this line of thinking, either when choosing to join an organization, or choosing to stay, the notion of *fit* and the construct of identification move to the forefront of the employer brand discussion. Many participants in this sample
referenced the concept of fit as a purpose of their employer brand and mentioned how they try to set expectations with recruits and give a realistic preview of the organizational culture. For example, from the financial services business:

And we’d say [name] is the kind of place you can have a bad marriage and never know you're having it. Because you’d be away from home, you never find out. So four people of five people say - “Get away from me; you guys are sick.” Fifth [one] says sounds like my kinda place. (Participant #8, 2010)

And the same sort of picture is painted for recruits looking at the professional services industry:

And don’t imagine you’re going to get much time at home. So on that point it’s absolutely been clear on the expectations, so you then get the right fit so that people are already self-selecting [in or out] as they come to you and they're not under any illusion... (Participant #9, 2010)

Other firms described different types of expectations, but used the same methods to give realistic previews for candidates. As one interviewee in healthcare explained, “as a religious based organization, we also attract a certain type of individual that understands we’re here to serve,” and added, “where I think they go wrong is they hire someone who’s out of alignment with the companies’ values...and then they want to fix that person” (Participant #12, 2010). This is interesting because it ties back to the ideas of alignment discussed in chapter 5. Culture is important to applicants in making a job choice. Employer brand messages should seek to communicate accurate information about a culture so that potentials can determine if they will thrive in the organization or not.
What was a notable perspective from the organization’s point of view is that HR/talent managers do not need to assume a passive role in this dynamic either. As a healthcare provider explained, appealing to the type of person who is likely to fit with your culture, share your values and identify with your purpose is a better approach than simply recruiting for skills or training for fit:

Yeah, so I did some research to understand, you know, what is it that makes somebody successful at a place like [Name]? What is the kind of person that is? Let’s go after the kind of person instead of going after a person with a skill set. [And it worked...we [said] you are a special person because you are willing to come back tomorrow, after taking care of a kid that died.” (Participant #13, 2010)

Successful organizations use talent planning for future needs as well. Recruiting for fit with the current organizational culture is important, but companies also need to recruit employees who they can trust to shape and evolve the culture that will be needed to be competitive as markets shift. The chief learning officer at a technology firm on the west coast discussed the appeal for technology employees to work with other smart people and co-create the products that will make the company successful:

At this point it’s really creating the next generation of what we think people are going to be using from a technology standpoint so there’s some excitement around that company vision, the company business model, and where we are going as a company as far as company direction. People are definitely energized by that. (Participant #2, 2009)

This quote also suggests the employee engagement that results from allowing people to think creatively and contribute, which in turn becomes an attractive element of an employer brand.
Rethinking Employer Brand “Management”

The conceptual framework presented as a basis for this study began with the assumption that a strong workplace reputation is equivalent to having a strong employer brand, whether or not that employer brand position has developed by default or been purposely created. The organization signals its brand in various ways to both potential staff and current employees and the distinctive, compelling and relevant attributes help to attract, retain and engage employees.

Regardless of how it has developed, the employer brand includes elements of a value proposition for employees and the most common factors promised include the opportunity for learning and development and career growth, as well as a supportive work environment. Whether or not the promise is delivered can be assessed by examining the employee experience and the alignment of the brand messages received with the HR or talent management processes associated with each touch point. The findings from this study all align with the basics of this framework to this stage.

The framework also proposed an organizational behavior agenda that is influenced by both the learning and development and communications functions of the organization. Communications controls what the company signals and learning and development can make its greatest impact by promoting the individual and leadership behaviors that are consistent with these signals. The functions of communications and learning and development must be aligned to develop the mindsets and behaviors that
help employees connect the dots between their individual needs and behaviors and the
organizational needs and behaviors, including how to think about their environments and
understand why they do what they do as individuals and agents of the corporation.

While these roles for communications and learning and development bore out in
the study findings as accurate, the mediating role of organizational culture in influencing
how employees interpret messages and methods used in employer brand practices was
not accounted for in the original framework. Whether any corporate function can
determine how employees think about their environments, without considering the input
of those environments to sense-making, is doubtful.

Based on this logic, the conceptual framework has been revised to clearly include
the influence of culture on the employee experience.
This framework maintains the assumption that a strong workplace reputation is equivalent to having a strong employer brand, whether or not that employer brand position has developed by default or been purposely created. The organization signals its brand in various ways to both potential staff and current employees and the distinctive, compelling and relevant attributes help to attract, retain and engage employees.

Once a recruit moves internally and becomes an employee, formal messages from communications, HR processes and learning and development programs combine with the experiences at each employee touch point, and with the cultural norms experienced in day-to-day interaction between employees, to create a sum total employee experience.
The revised framework also depicts a decision point that reflects an expanded understanding of how employees use employer brand. Each employee evaluates the employee experience for delivery on the EVP promises made prior to joining. Each employee also evaluates the fit between the firm's purpose and values, his or her personal value system, and the meaning he or she is seeking in work. If the deal is as promised and the employee feels a fit with the culture, he or she will stay and signal back to the marketplace that the firm is a great place to work. If, on the other hand, there is not a personal fit with the culture, or the major elements of the promise are not fulfilled, the employee will exit the organization as soon as he or she is able.

This dual consideration is important for planning the approach taken towards employees in communications and learning programs that seek to reinforce the values and behaviors embodied in the employer brand. Originally conceptualized as a deal, the promise/delivery of the employer brand can create an entitlement attitude with employees whose objectives are to make sure that their deal is fulfilled. However, if instead the approach is to consider employees as co-creators in the meaning of the employee experience, what they become entitled to is the opportunity to determine if the corporate purpose, values and behaviors that surround them in their daily work are a match with personal values and goals. This inclusive approach seems to be a faster and route to uniting employees to engage in achieving organizational objectives.

As mentioned in the introduction of this report, this study relied on Helen Rosethorn's definition of employer brand because it reflects the expectations of both the
employer and the employee, specifically references the employee experience and recognizes the importance of stakeholder communication for influencing reputation:

An employer brand is in essence the two-way deal between an organization and its people—the reasons they choose to join and the reasons they choose...and are permitted...to stay. The art of employer branding is to articulate this deal in a way that is distinctive, compelling, and relevant to the individual and to ensure that it is delivered throughout the lifecycle of the employee within that organization. (Rosethorn, 2009, p. 19)

Upon completion of the study, the definition that seems most closely aligned with my findings is offered by Paul Walker, head of brand development at a UK recruitment firm and author of an employer branding guide:

An employer brand is a set of attributes and qualities—often intangible—that make a organization distinctive, promises a particular kind of employment experience and appeals to those people who will thrive and perform best in its culture. (Walker, 2007, p. 44)

Are We Talking Really Talking About Employer Brand?

As a final thought for this discussion, it was mentioned in chapter 4 that when an employee leaves the recruiting stage of the employee life cycle and moves into the employee stage, the discussion related to employer brand shifted. Participants tended to describe their corporate culture as a proxy for the description of their employer brand. The conceptual framework for this study (both original and revised) already acknowledged employer brand as an equivalent to workplace reputation, but it did not make the same equivalency for corporate culture.
Again, the true purpose of an employer brand position is to transmit that the company represents a remarkable employment opportunity. Culture is a critical component of an employer brand, but cannot represent all its elements. The way in which the participants took the question about employer brand in the employee lifecycle out of the promise/delivery discussion and into a discussion of culture, could reflect a limited understanding about the complex construct of employer brand, even in these firms noted for their strong workplace reputations.

This would not be an unlikely reality. As was revealed by the Watson Wyatt Worldwide study (2009) cited in chapter 1, only 36% of companies reported having an organization-wide employee value proposition and 70% of those reported using it only for recruiting purposes. It could be that the participants in this sample spoke of organizational culture as shaping the employee experience because of their personal experience with culture as the true key influencer of what employees conclude about a workplace. If applying the concept of employer brand to the employee experience is new and underexplored, it may have been a consequence that even these organizational leaders could not speak about it with the same clarity as when referencing attraction of potential new hires.

If this is the case, the participants can take solace in knowing they are on the right track, as Ackerman (2010) also states that any successful brand-building, communications or organizational learning efforts must start with organizational self-awareness. Accurately understanding organizational culture fosters this awareness.
This chapter brings the presentation of the findings and discussion in this study to a close. It has been shown that employer brand is communicated and supported in different ways throughout the employee lifecycle, and that construct is much more complex than just an initiative to manage. Organizational culture appears to be the interpretive framework that helps people to make sense of their surroundings and determine if the employee experience is as promised. The next chapter will provide conclusions about the role of learning and development in employer brand practices and make recommendations on how organizational leaders can strategically manage the ideas and practices that emerged from this study to engage and continually reinforce the choice employees make to commit to the firm and its objectives.
Chapter 7

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The objective of this dissertation was to empirically examine employer brand practices in firms with strong workplace reputations, focusing on how learning and development activities are leveraged in the employee phase of the employment lifecycle.

The literature review suggested learning and development practices support employer brand management in recruiting, but also at multiple touch points within the employee experience. As such, learning and development can have a positive impact on workplace reputation, and performance, by increasing a firm’s ability to attract, retain, and engage employees.

The study set out to answer four research questions:

Research Question 1: How do companies with strong workplace reputations include learning and development as part of their employer brand promise?

Research Question 2: How is learning and development leveraged in the various touch points of the employee experience, and to what extent?

Research Question 3: What measures are used to assess the effectiveness of learning and development practices against employer brand success?
Research Question 4: How do internal functions (corporate communications, human resources, learning and development) interface and align to support the employer brand?

The Role of Learning and Development

Three significant roles for the learning and development function emerged from the data in this study. First, learning and development can be an enabler for stimulating engagement by providing promised opportunities for professional development and career growth. The data showed employee learning and development is unequivocally an attribute for attraction of potential employees as part of the employer brand promise. This attribute most often referred to the straightforward offering of training and continuous learning programs during the employee lifecycle, but additional development opportunities such as mentoring, rotation assignments, education/tuition assistance, management development, sabbaticals and learning via corporate social responsibility initiatives were also offered as elements of the learning and development attribute of many employer brands.

Once a candidate joins an organization, the delivery of the employer brand attributes signaled during the recruiting process occurs through a variety of touch points in the employee experience. The second role for learning and development is to build required workplace behaviors, including the knowledge and skills necessary to deliver customer satisfaction (onbrand training) and the management skills necessary to create
and sustain the working conditions promised as the employee experience (manager training).

The third role for learning and development was that of a reinforcement of the identity and values of the organizational culture. Learning and development accomplishes this by consistently working the brand and value messages and their associated behavioral aspects into various development programs provided throughout the employee experience.

While success measures for employer brand overall were explored and discussed, the data collected in this study did not reveal any specific evaluation measures that tied learning and development efforts directly to the success of employer brand initiatives.

In answer to the final research question, the organizational departments involved in employer brand management were found to partner in various ways to deliver on the promises made to recruits. Accountability was generally assigned to HR/talent management and supported by contributions from both communications and learning and development.

Beyond these research questions, findings from this study also point to the limitations in the degree to which employer brand can be directly controlled or manipulated. Employer brand is actually a complex phenomenon because it is shaped in part by individual interactions making it a dynamic and unpredictable process. Participants spent a significant amount of time describing the organizational values and
the behaviors that were acceptable in their worlds. Organizational culture appears to be the interpretive framework that helps people to make sense of their surroundings and determine if the employee experience is as promised. In this way, all sorts of impressions, formal and intentional, as well as informal and experiential, are blended together to determine if an employer brand package truly delivers a great place to work. Acknowledging this perspective requires those responsible for employer brand management to rethink the amount of management control they have over the process and the resulting perceptions of their workplace reputation.

Relying on traditional brand management practices, many employer brand managers may be treating employer brand as something to be produced and consumed. The results of this study suggest a company's employer brand must entice and continually reinforce a choice employees make to commit to the firm and its objectives. So an employer brand may be more appropriately something that is seeded and cultivated through an organizational behavior agenda that seeks to ensure that employees have experiences that provide meaning and acknowledge their individual desire to contribute. If this is the case, then the role of learning and development as the reinforcer of consistent values and behaviors for both employees and managers is the nexus of effective employer brand management.
Implications and Recommendations

Implications to the Practice

There are several implications to the practice as a result of these conclusions, but as a learning leader I am inclined to notice first where there are gaps in education or understanding. It is important for HR/talent managers and learning and development leaders to learn more about theories of culture and anthropology. These disciplines have been part of the curriculum for marketing and communications executives for some time. In this study, notably, the communications participants demonstrated a more thorough understanding of these concepts and how individual attitudes and social structures might impact employer brand practices.

Another important gap for the practice is a thorough understanding and leveraging of employee research. According to Barrow,

...it is surprising how many organizations conduct an employee survey only one a year, bi-annually, or even less frequently. It would be regarded as foolhardy to check your organisation’s financial status no more than once a year, so why is a more continuous approach to employee research so uncommon? (Barrow & Mosley, 2005, p. 92)

Indeed, if employees are so critical to delivering what the business promises to its customers, it would behoove HR/talent managers to know as much about their employees as the company knows about its customers. Adopting a perspective of employees as “consumers of work” (Moroko & Uncles, 2008) could help HR/talent managers adopt a new frame for designing employer brand initiatives and they would be more rapidly successful if they had an enhanced understanding of marketing principles. With a realistic
view of the current brand reality in the context of organizational culture, and a focus on employee research to understand as much as possible about the current employees who hold these views, companies could design employer brand strategies to attract people with requisite skills and a likelihood of fit between personal values and the values of the firm. This is the most profitable type of hire and likely the most productive type of employee.

Perhaps as a contradiction, one of the outcomes of this study was to provide some insight into best practices for how companies with strong workplace reputations have operationalized employer brand practices. The process has been revealed to be much more complex than just an initiative to manage. While a best practice might represent something thought to be repeatable, the RBV that underlies employer brand practice, meaning the combination of people, resources, and culture in an inimitable way for competitive advantage, actually suggests that what works in one organization may be quite different from what works in another. The real effort of employer brand management is not to create a brand image, but to uncover the reality that is the employer brand and then decide if there are elements of the employee experience that the company would like to try to influence or change. After a sanction of support for whatever is discovered is granted by top leadership, the obvious route for this type of work would not begin with the employees themselves. Having employees feed back the blended set of impressions resulting from all received signals would give those charged with making an employer brand successful the best place to start. If a company develops a brand position
with the input of employees and really listens to what they say, any disconnect between brand image and brand reality can be addressed and workplace reputation enhanced.

**Future Research**

Future research should focus on comparing the reputation of a firm overall to its workplace reputation, for purposes of distinction. I believe that this study shows a tremendous overlap and a consequential lack of understanding of the differences between the two types of reputations. Many practitioners are unclear about what constitutes their corporate brand and organizational identity and what actually is needed to construct an employer brand position.

I can also conceptualize in the near future, as suggested by Lowell & Hahn (2010), that the various brands in a company's architecture (consumer, corporate and employer) will collapse together to create a singular brand culture that: 1) is built on core values that drive every organizational process (internal and external); and 2) allows those who engage with the firm to co-construct the culture and derive meaning from their interactions (both employees and customers). One only has to consider the proliferation of social media tools and the concept of co-construction becomes a *next practice* needing attention.

And finally, this dissertation began exploring the relationship between employer brand and culture, but only from the firm's perspective. Future research that more closely examines the influence of organizational culture rituals and how these influence not only
individual sense-making, but employee behavior, would be of interest and benefit to practitioners in workplace learning leadership.
APPENDIX A: Informed Consent

University of Pennsylvania

Informed Consent to Participate in a Study the Role of Learning & Development in Employer Brand Practices

Principal Investigator: Dr. Jonathan Supovitz 215-573-7209 jons@gse.upenn.edu
Investigator: Ann E. Schulte, 314-560-8157, aschulte@upenn.edu

Purpose and Description of the Study

The goal of this qualitative research study is to empirically examine the associations between learning and development and employer brand. Much of the literature on employer brand focuses on the attractiveness of an organization in the eyes of potential employees. The importance of engaging existing employees and influencing their commitment to advance organizational objectives can be argued as an equally critical purpose of employer brand. Using a cross-case comparison method, this study seeks to compare how learning and development activities are leveraged in firms with strong workplace reputations to fulfill the employer brand expectations of both individuals and companies in the employee phase of the employment lifecycle. This could help to uncover practices that drive and perpetuate success, providing learning leaders and talent managers with a business case for strategically managing the employee experience to align with brand messages.
Time Requirement

Your participation will require one 60-90 minute interview that will be conducted either in person or by phone depending on location.

Confidentiality

All information collected in this study will be kept strictly confidential, except as may be required by law. All feedback will be aggregated into an executive summary that will be given to the participants and will not include any personally identifiable information. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared whatsoever.

Benefits & Risks

There are no risks in participating in this research. The only possible discomfort anticipated is that experienced by one who is unaccustomed to being interviewed.

Alternatives to Participation

Your decision whether or not to participate in the interview will not have any negative ramifications.

Voluntary Consent

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. If you decide not to participate, you are free to leave the study at anytime. If you have questions about your
participation in this research study or about your rights as a research subject, make sure to
discuss them with the study investigator. You may also call the Office of Regulatory
Affairs at the University of Pennsylvania at (215) 898-2614 to talk about your rights as a
research subject. You will be asked to sign this form to show that the research study and
the information above have been discussed with you you agree to participate in the study
APPENDIX B: Interview Guide

Introduction

Good morning (afternoon/evening). Thank you again for agreeing to be a participant in my dissertation study. The goal of this study is to generate knowledge about effective use of learning and development practices in employer brand management by comparing the processes in companies that are perceived to have strong workplace reputations.

Your firm has been selected because of its inclusion on the FORTUNE 100 Best Places to Work in America list.

In most companies, a variety of functions must align their activities to manage what represents the employer brand. Your function has been identified as significant and I believe you will have some great insight to offer my research. This interview should take approximately 60 minutes of your time.

I have emailed you a consent form to sign and I would like to review the information to see if you have questions. All data collected during this study will be confidential and secured. At the conclusion of the study, all attributable data will be destroyed leaving only the final research report. You are assured the option to drop out of the interview process at any time.

I’d like to record our session today because I want to be able to accurately capture your comments. For the record, at the completion of this project, I’ll be destroying the
recordings and de-identifying the comments for inclusion in the research report. I intend to use only themes and generalizations to inform my research. Is this OK with you?

Thank you.

**Interview Questions**

To begin, can you tell me a little about your role in this firm?

Determine function

How many years have you been with this company?

Determine tenure

How many years of experience do you have in this field/profession?

Determine experience...any related previous experience?

Also...as we get started...I want to acknowledge that the concept of Employer Brand is called many different things in different companies. Some call it Employer Brand...others an Employee Value Proposition...others a People Promise. I am not as concerned with the name as I am with understanding how you think about the concept...or set of ideas...within your firm. What do you call it? ________________ Then that is the term we will use in this interview.

Please describe the <EB> of your firm.

FOLLOW UP: How firm is positioned as an employer and what are the
distinctive, compelling and/or relevant factors of the promise:

Note things like:
Innovative
Premier Provider
Industry Leader
Stable Organization
Code of Conduct
Corporate Responsibility
Development Opportunities
Future Career Opportunities
Manager Quality
Rewards
Respect
Other:

So, you’ve told me what the <EB> is … (repeat if slogan-like).

One of the things I am really interested in is how you make this type of concept real for employees. How does it come off the page? Can you tell me how your <EB> message is related or reinforced?

Determine if EB messages or subordinate EVPs are explicitly stated, or used as slogans? Or simply messaged into organizational behavior agendas and employee experiences. Is there any “significant” or “unique” experiences that are included?
How long has this been the <EB>promise?

Determine maturity

What is the purpose of the <EB> or What does it provide for the organization?

Discuss purposes to Attract/Engage/Retain…also reputation/recognition…are largest challenges related to recruiting in competitive market?

What’s the rationale for applying for lists like the 100 Best?

How is this impacted by the ownership structure? Do your employees speak highly of your organization? How do you know? How much emphasis is put on the employee experience? What is the importance/value of engagement and retention vs. recruitment?

Let’s talk more about the employee experience. How would you describe the culture in this organization?

Discuss the “characteristics” of the culture and determine level of respect for the individual. What behaviors are encouraged/accepted/recognized and rewarded? Are these behaviors consistent with the expectations set by the EB?

How do employees learn the culture?

How do they assess fit? Do you recruit for fit? Do you lose employees because of fit? Note if culture building/culture changing is the responsibility of L&D
What behavioral components (individual/manager/organizational) are associated with your <EB>?

Discuss what individual/manager/organizational mindsets are expected of employees...are these presented as part of a two-way “deal” between the org and its people? Who (function or process) is responsible for instilling and monitoring these required behaviors? The “HOW”

How is your <EB> tied to your corporate brand?

Discover if the EB is a separate strategy or simply an extension of the corporate brand. How does it reflect the essence of the organization’s brand? Is it closely tied to mission or advertising statements? What if the ad slogans change? Is the brand management in the firm connected and aligned?

How is the way you think about your <EB> similar or different from the way you think about your consumer or corporate brand?

Are employees trained to “live the brand?” Tell me about these efforts.

Determine how big of a focus this is for the L&D agenda.

REFERENCE IF THEY TRAIN EEs TO LIVE THE BRAND.

So, yes, branding literature suggests that employees are chiefly responsible for delivering the corporate/consumer brand promise to customers...and we call this the
customer experience. If the employee experience has an analogy…who is responsible for delivering it to your employees?

Determine if the expectation is for HR, or Execs, or Managers. If the answer is managers, discuss if L&D develops management and leadership competencies to ensure this (manager quality) and how

Ok, now I’d like to switch to talk a little bit about EB management within the organization. Who is the key stakeholder of the <EB>?

Determine if HR/TM owns the process or if brand and reputation/marketing is in control

Who is primarily responsible for <EB> initiatives?

Determine if HR/TM owns the EB or if it lies with Communications, a cross-functional team or another function

Can you tell me anything about how your <EB> was developed?

Discuss if developed with employee input? Outsource development to expert/agency? Cross-functional team? Is the EB discussed or shared in EE workshops/other channels? Was this sharing the responsibility of L&D?

What can HR learn from marketing?

Segmentation, customization, analytics…Are job’s HR’s product?
What makes a successful <EB>?

Discuss characteristics and how viewed by firm.

Most < EBs> have operational objectives, generally tied to recruiting, such as cost-per-hire, time to fill, voluntary turnover. Are these metrics tracked in your firm? By whom? Are these metrics of the Talent Acquisition department or also used to measure success of the <EB>? Are others used? Determine if these are the general /metrics and if EB activities are measured and how often they are reported, and to whom.

How are objectives related to engagement and retention tracked?

Determine if these are also metrics tied to EB activities. How often they are gathered/ reported, and to whom? What are the actions that result from things like Manager 360s, Employee Engagement surveys and retention metrics?

How do you measure organizational commitment?

Determine if there are more qualitative methods used to assess organizational commitment...volunteerism, retention, reputation, 100 Best, etc. How willing are your employees to go the extra mile to get the job done? Also discuss if learning programs and/or communications are engaged to influence individual commitment.

To what extent are these measures attributed to the <EB> initiatives?

What do you see as the key challenges of EB management?
I have come to the end of my questions. Who else in the organization would you recommend that I speak with? What would be the best way to contact this key person?

Participants will also be asked to refer the interviewer to another source within the organization (snowball)

I am very appreciative of your time. Before I say goodbye...do you have any closing remarks about the topic? Comments on the interview process?

A reminder of the confidentiality agreement will be provided and participants will be thanked for their time and insight.
REFERENCES


http://pdx.academia.edu/DennisHahn/Papers/149582/Give-Them-Something-To-Believe-In-The-Value-of-Brand-Culture


metaphorinteractive.com/files/uploaded/CircuitTalk_101907.pdf


