DIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS OF EMPLOYER BRANDING PERCEPTIONS OF CURRENT EMPLOYEES

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ABSTRACT

Employer branding is an interesting topic among entrepreneurs and researchers, as it is considered a new instrument for helping companies gain strategic advantage over their competitors. Therefore, determining the main components of positive employer branding perception in order to adequately manage it has become a real challenge. This study aims to investigate employer branding components of current employees. The data for the study has been gathered through a survey of 200 white-collar employees of a well-known information technology (IT) firm in Turkey. The results show that employer branding perceptions of current employees mostly develop around symbolic attributions of the firm rather than typical human resources practices such as wages or job safety. This result supports related research, but it is unexpected given the high unemployment rate in Turkey.

Keywords: Employer Branding, Corporate Reputation, Human Resource Policies, Talent Management.

İŞVEREN MARKASI BOYUTLARININ, ÇALIŞANLAR TARAFINDAN NASIL ALGILANDIĞI ÜZERİNE BİR ARAŞTIRMA

ÖZ

İşveren markası kavramı, kurumlara rakiplerine karşı sağladığı avantajlar nedeniyle hem akademisyenler hem de girişimciler açısından oldukça önemsenen bir kavram haline gelmiştir. Bu çerçevede kavramı oluşturan unsurları tanımlanması, analiz edilmesi yöneticiler açısından işveren markasından sağlanacak faydaları artırmak ve yönetmek açısından oldukça önemli bir konu haline gelmiştir. Bu noktadan hareket ile çalışmada, içerdekiler ve dışardakiler ayrışımından hareket ile hâlihazırda işletmede çalışan mevcut iş görenlerin çalıştıkları kurumumun işveren markasını oluşturan parametrelere ilişkin görüşlerini incelenmek amaçlanmıştır. Araştırma bir saha çalışmasına dayanmaktadır. Bu kapsamda çalışmada, Türkiye'de faaliyet gösteren, sektörde iyi bir üne sahip olan, iletişim teknolojisi firmasının 200 beyaz yakalı personelinin

görüşleri alınarak, içerdekilerin çalıştıkları kurumun sembolik ve araçsal işveren markası parametrelerini nasıl değerlendirdikleri incelenmeye çalışılmıştır. Araştırma bulguları, mevcut çalışanların (içerdekilerin) işveren markası algılamalarının insan kaynakları uygulamaları (ücret, iş güvencesi vb.) gibi araçsal unsurlardan ziyade kuruma ilişkin sembolik unsurlardan oluştuğu saptanmıştır. Söz konusu bulgu yabancı yazınla paralellik gösterir iken Türkiye gibi işsizlik oranının yüksek olduğu bir ülke için şaşırtıcıdır..

Anahtar Kelimeler: İşveren Markası, Kurumsal İtibar, İnsan Kaynakları Politikaları, Yetenek Yönetimi.

INTRODUCTION

The stiff competition resulting from globalization has led to changes in business conditions. The main problem faced by the modern organization today is how to cope with this intense competition. Entrepreneurs, Human resource managers and academics have been seeking to develop new approaches for identifying how firms gain sustainable competitive advantage through people, for determining the role of the state HR department in developing intellectual capital, for effectively managing talent or human capital, and for analyzing today's workforce competencies and integrating them into the knowledge base and market value of the firm. However, there are some issues, such as generational factors among the workforce, global competition, and the rise of "knowledge workers" and their new expectations from employers, that cause difficulties for managers as also for entrepreneurs (Barney, 1991; Hubschmid 2013).

These challenges aside, some authors claim that firms can cope with these issues with the help of well-qualified and skilled employees. They assume that present competitiveness and general performance of the firms depend, to a great extent, on their workforce. Organizations are naturally very competitive for qualified employees; some authors define this as "talent competition" or the "War for Talent" (Ulrich, 1997;Chambers et.al, 1998; Pfeiffer, 2001; Beecler & Woodward 2009). Accordingly, it is important for firms not only to be attractive to well-qualified, talented job seekers, but to be attractive to the current work force in order for them to stay with the company.

Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) defined employer branding as organizational identity and organizational culture, which provide employer attractiveness and employee productivity. Within this context, employer branding serves as a positive signal to employees about working for specified companies. It is a kind of image formed by an employer, emphasizing positive messages about the work environment and convincing people that the firm is a great place to

work. Gatewood et al. (1993) and Cable and Turban (2001;2003) find that perception of an organization's image is a significant predictor of decisions to pursue employment with that company. From this perspective, firms must give reasons to applicants regarding "why they should work with them, and why they should spend their lives with them." Employer branding is a "value proposition," which is the true representation of what the firm offers to employees (Eisenberg et al., 2001). Or it could be defined as the information "package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company" (Ambler & Barrow, 1996, p. 187). Hence, employer branding identifies the value of the employer among the workforce.

In the related literature, researchers largely focus on employer branding's influence on firm attractiveness to applicant employees. In other studies, however, researchers investigate its effects on job seekers' employer choice. These studies mostly discuss the concept as a kind of corporate branding, and they try to analyze its positive effects on recruitment policies or performance of the firm. These studies show that a strong employer brand attracts better applicants (Collins & Stevens, 2002; Slaughter et al., 2004) and it shapes expectations of the employees about their employment (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Lievens 2007). Likewise, these studies show that employer branding has a positive effect on current employees.

The perceptions of applicants about a firm are mostly formed through corporate communication and branding strategies. On the other hand, evaluations of current employees about the firm will be different from those of outsiders. Perceptions of insiders are shaped by their experiences, whereas perceptions of outsiders depend on public relations activities and the general reputation and performance of the firm. Thus, based on the differences in information sources, employer branding evaluations by insiders and outsiders will differ. This is why researchers must investigate current employees' perceptions, which we call "insiders' perception parameters about employer branding components." In the relevant literature, the majority of studies focus on the general corporate reputation components or firms external image effects on current employee performance based on general framework(Barber, 1998; Fombrun 1996; Saks & Ashforth, 2000; Wilden et.al 2010; Dutton & Dukerich 1991; Dukerich et. Al 1994; Mael & Ashforth, 1992;1995;). However, a few studies existing that make use of employer branding components to analyze perception differences of insiders and outsiders about employer branding parameters (Lievens et al., 2007; Lievens &

Highhouse, 2003; Hoye et al., 2013; Alniacik & Alniacik, 2012a, 2012b). Thus based on this limitation main aim of this study is to identify insiders' evaluation parameters regarding a specific Turkish IT firm that accepted as a high attractiveness in its sectors, to investigate insiders' employer branding parameters and components. We assumed that insiders' perceptions are important topic for entrepreneurs and for HR managers. Researchers mentioned that outsiders give more priority to insiders' speech about their current employer than corporates general hiring speech. For example Zappos well-known American firm used an interview model for its potential applicants to talk freely with current employees in social media about company and working life of Zappos. (Harvard Business Review 2014) Hence it's important to analyze insider's employer branding evaluations about existing employer (Hubschmid 2013).

1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Today, organizations are overwhelmingly of the opinion that the human factor is the fundamental element of the struggle to survive in a competitive atmosphere. In line with the increasing economic value of the information, however, obtaining and using information, and producing new information from old, are considered the main problems of organizations. Information is recognized as the underlying most valuable asset in facing opponents (Drucker, 1995, p. 59-60). Likewise, the individual capital provides more advantages to the competition. Most of the researchers consider it a competitive advantage in this century (Kaplan & Norton, 2004, p. 5; Barney, 1991, p. 11; Pennings et al., 1998, p. 425). Chambers et al. (1998) define this century as a "war for talent" to draw attention to the severity of the "talented and skilled labor force" problem. However, recent studies show that the new generation has developed some new parameters as opposed to the old ones in the job application process. The expectations of the new generation are changing, and there is a visible trend of fewer work hours in the same jobs (Cable &Turban, 2001, p. 294). The new generation, or the potential labor force, cares more about the mission, vision, human resources, and social responsibilities of an organization (Edwards, 2005, p. 267). With respect to the effect of economic crises on labor markets, some authors claim that candidates are affected by different recruitment strategies, such as interviewer attitudes, the staff and advertising tools, promotion and sponsorship activities, information spread through word of mouth, campus visits, and so on (Robertson &

Khatibi, 2013; Cable &Turban, 2001, p. 294). Koys's survey, which was conducted on companies in the Fortune 500 list, shows that employees assume that reputable companies demonstrate more honest practices (Koys, 1997, p. 97); hence, the reputation of an organization has a definite influence on successful recruitment of talented employees (Fombrun, 1996; Cable and Turban, 2001;2003).

Human resources departments need to improve their efforts in finding skilled labor, and they must widen their candidate pools. However, this recruitment process is not as easy nowadays as it was before. In this sense, the employer branding practices will enhance the new strategic advantages of human resource managers to attract skilled employees and keep them within the company (Maxwell & Knox, 2009; Franca & Pahor, 2012; Martin et al., 2011; Wilden et al, 2010; Davies, 2008; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Lievens, 2007).

2. WHAT IS EMPLOYER BRANDING?

Employer branding is defined as information "package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company" (Ambler & Barrow, 1996, p. 187). Ambler and Barrow provide a strategic framework based on marketing and HR issues and they claim that organizations can attract, retain, and motivate employees with this concept. Employer branding is a process that builds an identifiable and unique employer identity. The employer brand is also a concept of the firm that differentiates it from its competitors (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, p. 502). According to Sullivan, employer branding is a targeted, long-term strategy to manage the awareness and perceptions of employees, potential employees, and related stakeholders with respect to a particular firm (Sullivan, 2004). For Lloyd(2002), the employer marking process should result in a workplace that is desired by the available personnel of the firm, and it encompasses all efforts in communications (Berthon et al., 2005, p. 153). According to Dell and Ainopon, the employer marking application is a tool that defines the practices of employees whereby higher quality employees are channeled to the better firms (Edwards, 2005, p. 266). Employer branding is a "value proposition," which is the true representation of what the firm offers to employees (Eisenberg et al., 2001). Based on these prior definitions, we define employer branding as the "firm's strategic features that typically consist of its human resources identity and corporate branding communication activities targeted to the existing and potential labor market." Another study deals with the concept from the marketing point of view and

defines it as a kind of corporate branding type. The essence of their definition sets forth that employer marking, as in the case of product marking processes for customer benefits, can be defined as the sum of all activities performed to create a good image of the firm in the market through promises, assets, applications, and human resources processes (Aggerholm, Sophie & Christa, 2011, p. 108–109). The authors assume that corporate branding involves multiple stakeholder perceptions that emerge through personal relations or communication interactions with the firm. Hence employer branding is a kind of sub-corporation branding, which is formed between employees through stakeholder interactions with the firm (Maxwell & Knox, 2009; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Foster et al., 2010). Other researchers claim that employer branding is a competency of the organization and therefore has to be managed with a strategic and branding effort supported by a marketing perspective (Berthon et al., 2005, Sehgal & Malati, 2013; Sivertzen et al., 2013).

Lievens (2007) conceptualizes employer branding as a package of instrumental and symbolic attributes of the firm. Instrumental or functional (utilitarian) attributes include the pay, location, opportunities for advancement, job security, and the firm's career programs, which are mostly related to human resources policies. The author also argues that these attributes on their own cannot explain the perceptions of applicants about the firm as an employer, and that some symbolic factors have an effect on selection of the employer. Symbolic attributions refer mostly to subjective, intangible evaluations of the firm, such as innovativeness, competence, and prestige (Lievens, 2007; Ong, 2011). Based on these suggestions, the authors claim that branding perceptions of employees take shape from both visible and invisible traits of the companies. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) develop an employer branding process with such components as organizational identity and organizational culture, which provide employer attractiveness and employee productivity. Also, Maxwell and Knox (2009) argue that human resources practices such as work environment, type of employee rewards, manager/workforce relations, general organizational performance success, external image, and quality of products or services generate employer branding perceptions. On the other hand, some authors prefer a unique measurement instrument to identify employer branding components. Davies identifies employer branding components with a corporate brand "personality scale" and finds that similar sorts of skills provide positive employer branding perceptions: agreeableness, ruthlessness, excitement, style, prestige, etc. Some researchers claim that companies' reputations, which are

linked to employer branding activities and use of social media, have positive effects on the branding perception of potential employees (Sivertzen et al., 2013). On the other hand, Biswas and Suar (2013) propose five value systems related to employer branding: interest value, social value, economic value, development value, and application value. Researchers notice that these values are the main factors in employer branding. Turkish researchers have investigated this framework and found that social value is a prime evaluation parameter among current and potential employees (Alniacik & Alniacik, 2012a, 2012b).

In the relevant literature based on these assumptions, most of the studies tackle the usefulness of employer branding or its consequences for the firms. The benefits earned by the positive perceptions of employer marking or branding applications can be classified into two sub-groups or interfaces: first, employer branding effects on cordial employees and firm markets, which will be defined as the external face of employer branding; second, the internal influence of the concept, identified as "internal marketing" or "internal branding." (Berthon et al., 2005)

Researchers who analyze the external context of employer branding find that positive employer marking applications appeal to the skilled labor force and increase the attractiveness of the firm (Franca & Pahor, 2012; Berthon et al., 2005; Gatewood et al., 1993; Judge & Cable, 1997; Ong, 2011). They also expand the job application and candidate databases, enhance institutional values, create positive perceptions in the minds of customers and service providers (Mosley, 2007), and yield more advantages over competitors (Edwards, 2005, p. 272; Miles & Mangold, 2005, p. 543; Collins & Stevens, 2002, p. 4; Cable & Turban, 2001;2003, p. 2245; Collins & Han, 2004, p. 688; Wilden et al., 2010).

Several studies identify the effects of corporate prestige or reputation on work outcomes of current employees. However, only a few studies focus on employer branding's internal consequences, which are actually used as measurement mediums of employer branding. These studies show that positive employee branding attitudes provide commitment to an organization in the form of low turnover intention (Casio, 2014), enhanced employee productivity (Sehgal & Malati, 2013), and increased employee satisfaction (Davies, 2008). Robertson and Khatibi's study, involving 369 workers, reports that employer branding activities (employer brand and employee branding strategies) are positively related to organizational productivity outcomes (Robertson & Khatibi, 2013).

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

The objective of our research is to identify the employer branding components among current employees in the Turkish context. With this in mind, the data used in this study have been taken from 200 white-collar employees working at a well-known Turkish IT company. We chose this company for our field study because it was this company which started GSM-based mobile communications in Turkey in February 1994.

In the Turkish context, there is no acceptable employer branding index among academics. On the other hand, in our literature review we find two indexes, which rank firms based on their employer branding positions. One of these indexes is called "Turkey's Most Popular Firms." It was compiled by Bloomberg Business Week Turkey, together with Realta Consulting firm, and it includes assessments of firms by 10,330 university students. The other index, "Turkey's Most Admired Companies," is prepared by Capital journal; parameters of this index focus mainly on the reputations of the firms. The firm we chose for this study was ranked among the top five chosen by these two indices since 2010. Another research study based on the "Turkey's Most Popular Firms" list, consisting of instrumental and symbolic components' effects on Turkish applicants, used this ranking for analyzing the external employer branding ranking (Van Hoye et al., 2013). Therefore, we accept these two indices as the participants' external perceptions of employer branding rank.

3.1. Measures

In order to analyze evaluations of insiders about employer branding components of their firms, we ask them to complete a questionnaire, which is divided into two sections. In the first we seek to identify the demographic profiles of the participants, such as education level, gender, etc. The descriptive statistics of the sample show that 57% of our participants are male, 68% are between 26 and 35 years of age, 41.3% have a bachelor's degree, 32.7% have an MBA degree, and more than half of the respondents have attended occupational courses. The organizational tenure of our sample is high: 80% of participants' working tenure is between one and seven years, and 55% are classified at least as "expert" or have been working at higher positions, such as director or co-director.

In the second section of the survey, we define 37 components of employer branding, with 21 of these components related to human resources practices of the firm, such as compensation, physical

working conditions, job security, etc. With the remaining 16 items we seek to analyze general attributes of the organization, such as competitiveness, mission, vision, product and service quality, visual identity, company webpage design, etc. The majority of the components selected by relevant research studies are related to instrumental and symbolic factors identified by Lievens (2007) and by other researchers, such as Van Hoye, Bas, Cromheecke and Lievens (2013) (whose study was comprised of Turkish firms), as well as Maxwell and Knox (2009), Biswas and Suar (2013), Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), Wilden et al. (2010), Franca and Pahor (2012), and Sehgal and Malati (2013).

3.2. Findings

In order to identify priorities of our study of employer branding components, we employ mean average analysis. First, we analyze human resources practices or the influence of instrumental factors on insider employer branding perceptions. Our general findings are presented in Table 1.

Based on the literature review, we try to identify symbolic components of employer branding perceptions of the respondents. Table 2 presents the results of symbolic image dimension means of the sample.

Table 1.Human Resource Performance (Instrumental Factors)

	Means	SD	Variance
Compensation	3,6400	1,01188	1,024
Employee relations	3,9463	1,03835	1,078
Value fit between managers and employees	4,1400	1,22079	1,490
Good cv referance	4,4467	1,09014	1,188
Oversea post/career	3,5667	1,39710	1,952
Physical working conditions	3,8121	1,09895	1,208
Working hours	3,5436	1,27068	1,615
Job security	4,0933	1,12534	1,266
Managers attribution	4,1611	1,15704	1,339
Employees attribution	4,0733	1,14749	1,317
Opportunity to work between projects)	4,2886	1,13480	1,288
Competence improvement	4,3267	1,12624	1,268
Training and development	4,3467	1,11720	1,248
Promotion chance with in company	4,2000	1,22611	1,503
Employee Benefits	3,8533	1,13153	1,280

Table 2. Firm General Attributions, Symbolic Dimentions

	Means	SD	Variance
Growth rate	4,3133	1,20478	1,451
Product/service quality	4,1200	1,22019	1,489
Easily adapt creative thgouth to action	4,3400	1,08578	1,179
Financial performance	4,4027	1,05855	1,121
Innovation performance	4,3600	1,09471	1,198
Firm Competivness	4,2800	1,09985	1,210
Location of firm	3,3810	1,26780	1,607
Service variety	3,9262	1,20861	1,461
Economic addition to society	3,9867	1,15268	1,329
Social Responsibility projects	4,0800	1,14411	1,309
Eco-Enviroment policies	4,0067	1,10822	1,228
Ethical values	4,2819	1,27915	1,636
Vision	4,2800	1,26978	1,612
History	4,3667	1,19516	1,428
Mission	4,2867	1,21698	1,481
Customer relations	3,6667	1,20216	1,445
Managers attitudes	4,1667	1,10773	1,227

Findings show that the top ten priorities of the insiders about employee branding components are ranked in decreasing order from the highest to the lowest score as follows: good CV reference (4.44), financial performance (4.40), history of the company (4.266), innovation performance (4.360), employee empowerment activities (4.346), competence improvement (4.3267), firm growth rate (4.313), opportunity to work between projects (4.2886), company vision (4.2867), and ethical values of the firm (4.28).

In addition to these findings, we integrate the components and rank them with respect to their highest means. The ten highest means of the items are given in Table 3.

Table 3. General Results

	Means	SD	Variance	Content
Good CV reference	4.4467	1.09014	1.188	Instrumental HR-P
Financial performance	4.4027	1.05855	1.121	Symbolic F-P
History	4.3667	1,19516	1.428	Symbolic F-P
Innovation performance	4.3600	1.09471	1.198	Symbolic F-P
Training and development	4.3467	1.11720	1.248	Instrumental HR-P
Easily adapt creative thgouth to action	4.3400	1.08578	1.179	Symbolic F-P
Competence improvement	4.3267	1.12624	1.268	Instrumental HR-P
Growth rate	4.3133	1.20478	1.451	Symbolic F-P
Opportunity to work between projects	4.2886	1.13480	1.288	Instrumental HR-P
Mission	4,2867	1,21698	1,481	Symbolic F-P
Vision	4,2800	1,26978	1,612	Symbolic F-P
F-P defined as Firms Performance HR-P defined as Human Resource Performance				

RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

The most important finding of this study is that in a national environment like Turkey where the unemployment rate is very high (according to official statistics Turkey's unemployment rate is 8.8%; the unemployment rate among the population between the ages of 15 and 24 is 16.6%; and minimum wage in the country was 405.2 Euro/month in 2013), the employees attribute more value to symbolic employer components than to typical human resources factors such as wages or job safety. Similar studies done in this context have been conducted predominantly in developed countries, and their findings show that the symbolic factors have an effect on both outsiders and insiders. However, it is surprising to reach a similar conclusion in this study, which has been conducted at a single company in Turkey (this is the basic limitation of the study, and one that must be considered when reviewing the results).

When the general findings of the study are analyzed, we conclude that a majority of the respondents participating in the research define their institution with categorically symbolic attributes, such as the general performance and overall prestige of the institution

in their sectors, or they identify it based on their perception of its reputation. Within this framework, the human resources practices that are assumed to have a direct effect on employer brand perception in the institution are important. However, it is possible to say that from the perspective of general ranking, the factors related to organizational size perceptions are more salient.

Within this scope, it is possible to say that general high performance of the firm, in other words, the symbolic components of the firm, play an important role in whether respondents define the institution as a good employer. This finding is supportive of Rindova's study, which concludes that high-performing firms with a reputation for quality and prominence attract high-quality people (Rindova et al., 2005). In a study conducted in Slovakia, another emerging market country, attention is drawn to the point that opinions regarding the identity of the employer are important in employer branding perception. According to this study, the large size of an employer yields positive employer branding perception (Franca & Pahor, 2011). Likewise, in another study conducted with 45,533 student respondents in Turkey, it was found that job seekers or applicants develop employer branding perceptions based on symbolic factors and that this stems from differences in collective culture (Hoys et al., 2013).

Based on related research and the findings of this study, we can conclude that general attributions or symbolic components of employer branding have an effect on perceptions of insiders as well as outsiders. This finding is discussed in Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), Lievens (2007), and Lievens and Highhouse (2003). In this context, one can say that employer branding perception is constructed by the corporate reputation perceptions of outsiders. Based on the findings of our research we propose that employer branding, which is formed by a specific group, is a sub-type of corporate branding. Respondents used symbolic image dimensions to identify and differentiate their employer from similar others.

Another important finding of our study is the effect of the visibility of an organization on insiders. The averages of the parameters compiled from respondent replies are as follows: visual identity, 3.31; workplace design, 3.29; and company webpage, 3.13. Within this framework, while the visual identity of the institution is a factor that could be considered significant for job applicants, it is not one considered significant by the insiders of the institution. Given this fact, it is possible to assert that the insiders do not assign high values to corporate design or public relations activities.

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