European Journal of Interdisciplinary Research and Development
Volume- 57 November- 2026
Website: www.ejird.journalspark.org ISSN (E): 2720-5746

INNOVATIVE DIRECTIONS AND STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENHANCING EMPLOYER COMPETITIVENESS THROUGH HR BRANDING

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Abstract:
The thesis provides a theoretical substantiation of the concept of HR branding (employer branding) and its role in ensuring employer competitiveness in the labour market. Innovative directions of HR branding based on digital technologies, data analytics and employee experience management are systematised, their impact on attracting and retaining talent is assessed, and strategic recommendations are developed for enterprises of Uzbekistan.

Keywords: HR branding, employer brand, competitiveness, employee value proposition (EVP), employee experience, digital recruitment, HR analytics, labour market.

Introduction

Today, competition between companies is intensifying not only in markets for goods and services but also in the market for qualified personnel. The transition to a digital economy, the international mobility of highly skilled specialists and the changing expectations of the new generation of employees (Generation Z) require employers to manage their reputation and attractiveness purposefully. The "Uzbekistan – 2030" Strategy sets the development of human capital, the expansion of the private sector and the creation of decent jobs as priority tasks, and the ability of employers to attract and retain staff is of great importance in achieving them.

The concept of the "employer brand" was first defined by T. Ambler and S. Barrow as the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing company (Ambler and Barrow, 1996). Later, K. Backhaus and S. Tikoo described employer branding as the process of building a distinctive employer identity in the eyes of internal and external audiences (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). Therefore, research on this topic is particularly relevant in the context of Uzbekistan, where the labour market is changing rapidly.

Main part

In this study, employer competitiveness is understood as a company's ability, relative to its competitors, to attract employees with the required skills and values faster and at lower cost, to retain them over the long term and to motivate them to perform effectively. The HR brand is an intangible asset underlying this ability, and its core is the Employee Value Proposition (EVP). P. Berthon and co-authors proposed assessing employer attractiveness through five dimensions: interest, social, economic, development and application value (Berthon, Ewing and Hah, 2005). Research confirms that a strong employer brand increases the flow of

applicants, reduces recruitment costs and strengthens employee commitment to the organisation (Cable and Turban, 2003; Lievens and Slaughter, 2016).

Contemporary literature views HR branding as a strategic tool at the intersection of marketing and human resource management; based on the brand equity model, it affects company performance through the chain "employer knowledge – attractiveness – employee behaviour" (Theurer et al., 2018). Our analysis shows that, alongside traditional HR branding tools (job advertisements, career fairs, corporate websites), innovative directions based on digital technologies are developing rapidly. They are systematised in Table 1.

Table 1 Innovative directions of HR branding and their impact on employer competitiveness

Innovative direction	Key tools	Impact on competitiveness
Digital and social media HR branding	Career page, LinkedIn, Telegram and Instagram channels, video content about employees	Wider candidate reach, higher brand awareness
Employee advocacy	Brand ambassador programmes, referral systems, employee blogs	Greater trust in the brand, lower recruitment costs
Artificial intelligence and HR analytics	Chatbots, automated CV screening, eNPS and attrition-risk prediction models	Shorter time-to-hire, data-driven decisions
Employee experience management (EX)	Digital onboarding, hybrid and flexible work arrangements, individual development plans	Lower staff turnover, higher labour productivity
Gamification and university partnerships	Case championships, hackathons, internships and "student-to-employee" programmes	A stable pipeline of young talent
ESG- and social responsibility-based brand	Inclusive policies, "green" projects, employee well-being programmes	Attracting values-driven candidates, reputational stability

Source: compiled by the author based on a review of the academic literature and the practices of foreign companies.

The table shows that the innovative directions of HR branding form a mutually complementary system: digital channels and employee advocacy ensure the external visibility of the brand, while employee experience management and ESG principles ensure its internal credibility. As R. Wilden and co-authors emphasise, candidates judge the credibility of an employer brand by the consistency between the promises communicated and the actual experience of employees (Wilden, Gudergan and Lings, 2010). For this reason, HR branding focused on external communication but not reinforced by internal corporate culture produces only short-term effects.

A study of practice in Uzbekistan identified the following problems hindering the development of HR branding. First, the lack of a strategic approach: in most companies HR branding is treated not as a separate strategy but as an occasional advertising activity, and the EVP is not formally documented. Second, the absence of a performance measurement system: indicators such as cost-per-hire, time-to-fill, staff turnover and eNPS are not monitored regularly. Third, underuse of digital opportunities: many small and medium-sized enterprises

have no career page, and social media is used mainly for product marketing. Fourth, insufficient marketing competencies among HR specialists: there is a shortage of professionals skilled in brand communication, content creation and HR analytics.

International experience shows that aligning HR branding with corporate strategy and applying marketing methods to people management is effective (Barrow and Mosley, 2005). In leading companies, the HR brand is managed through an "EVP – communication – employee experience – measurement" cycle, and the results are regularly reported to the company's governing bodies. This approach turns HR branding from a cost item into an investment that increases company value.

Conclusion

The results show that HR branding is a strategic factor in enhancing employer competitiveness, and that its effectiveness depends on the alignment of external communication with internal employee experience. On this basis, the following strategic recommendations are proposed: developing an EVP based on target audience research and integrating it into corporate strategy; introducing a KPI system for assessing HR brand effectiveness, comprising cost-per-hire, time-to-fill, staff turnover and eNPS; gradually applying artificial intelligence and HR analytics tools to recruitment and retention processes; encouraging advocacy and referral programmes that turn employees into brand ambassadors; expanding internship, case championship and targeted training programmes with higher education institutions; and organising professional development courses for HR specialists in HR marketing and digital communications. These measures will enable companies to reduce the cost of attracting qualified personnel, increase employee loyalty and ultimately achieve a sustainable competitive advantage in the labour market.

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