Article

Leveraging the Corporate Brand to Attract and Retain Talent in South Africa and Other Emerging Economies

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Abstract

With critical global talent shortages, the compounding effect of socio-economic challenges and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, companies in South Africa and other emerging marketplace economies are struggling to attract and retain the talent required for organisational success. The literature supports the use of employer brand-building practices to attract talent and internal branding to retain talent. The corporate brand plays a central role in both talent attraction and retention as it navigates the employer and internal brand and aligns all stakeholders, including talent. A lack of insight into talent attraction and retention through brand building in South Africa fuelled the need for a qualitative study in companies rated as top South African brands. Interviews with cross-functional strategic leaders provided data for thematic analysis. Notably, the dominant theme, which accounted for more than half of the cumulative content data, indicated the prominence of the corporate brand in talent attraction and retention. In this article, we discuss the significance of this finding in context of the current business landscape in emerging economies such as South Africa, in which widespread disruption continues to change the reality within which talent is attracted and retained. Ten leading practices are presented, along with five related management implications, which provide human resources and talent management with guidance on leveraging the corporate brand to attract and retain talent. Research limitations related to the sample of top South African brands inform recommendations for further research into brand building for talent attraction and retention in other emerging economies.

Keywords: talent, talent attraction, talent retention, corporate brand, employer brand, internal brand

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Introduction

This article is based on a research study that was conducted in companies rated as top South African brands to shed light on the ways in which these companies attract and retain talent through practices pertaining to employer, internal and corporate brand building. The significance of the study's findings is discussed in the context of the current disrupted talent and brand landscape in emerging economies such as South Africa. In particular, leading practices with related managerial guidelines are provided to guide managers in leveraging the corporate brand to enable strategic brand building that attracts and retains not only talent, but also all corporate brand stakeholders.

Literature Review

The War for Talent

Talented employees add significant value to the organisation based on their top performing track record, potential for further development (Charan et al., 2018; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Keller & Meaney, 2017; Pawar, 2020), personal attributes, experience and scarce or critical skill sets (Barriere et al., 2018; Keller & Meaney, 2017; Manpower Group, 2020). Top performing talent have been found to be up to four times more productive than the average employee (Keller & Meaney, 2017; Keller & Shaninger, 2018). Companies that are effective at attracting and retaining talent consistently outperform competitors with regard to financial performance, customer satisfaction and employee engagement (Andrianova et al., 2018; Barriere et al., 2018; Keller & Shaninger, 2018; Mercer LLC, 2021; Mosley, 2019).

It is therefore understandable that the attraction and retention of talent is a business priority and that companies are competing against each other to attract and retain the services of talented employees in a high-demand, short-supply talent marketplace (Mercer LLC, 2021; Noutel et al., 2021; Randstad, 2021). The "war for talent" predicted more than two decades ago by seminal authors Chambers et al. (1998) is raging stronger than ever with a predicted shortfall of 85.2 million skilled, talented workers by 2030 (Korn Ferry, 2018). The Manpower Group's 2020 Global Talent Shortage Survey revealed a record high in global talent shortages, with 54 per cent of companies surveyed reporting that they are unable to find the talent they need for organisational success (Manpower Group, 2020). One year into the Covid-19 pandemic, not only have talent shortages persisted (Randstad, 2021) but the global talent marketplace has also been disrupted by an unprecedented annual spike in unemployment of 33 million people worldwide (ILO, 2021) and has exposed critical shortages in skilled workers in technology and other essential services such as healthcare (Mercer LLC, 2021; Randstad, 2021). In addition, the pandemic necessitated the rapid introduction of remote, flexible work via technologically enabled platforms, which saw talent literally leaving the building to work from remote locations (Hancock & Shaninger, 2020), blurring geographical lines and introducing new, flexible work contracts that open a global talent marketplace (Frankiewicz & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2020; Mercer LLC, 2021; Randstad, 2021).

The War for Talent in Emerging Marketplace Economies

Companies in emerging economies face additional challenges that exacerbate the war for talent (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Noy et al., 2020; Oxford Economics, 2021). Found in developing countries across Africa, Asia, the Middle East and South America (Enderwick, 2020; Oxford Economics, 2021), emerging market economies are typically characterised by high economic growth fuelled by increased entrepreneurial activity, a rise in privately owned businesses, rapid urbanisation, large investments into infrastructure development and high population growth (Cavusgil, 2021; Enderwick, 2020). However, although companies in South Africa stand to benefit greatly from the proven value that talent adds to the organisation (Meyer & Xin, 2018; Scullion & Mullholland, 2020), their attempts to attract and retain talent are marred by socio-economic country factors ranging from political volatility and economic instability (Cavusgil, 2021; Enderwick, 2020; Song et al., 2020) to poor education systems, low levels of skills development, high unemployment and pervasive poverty (Enderwick, 2020; Oxford Economics, 2021; Scullion & Mullholland, 2020) . The globalisation of the workforce and remote work connectivity in response to the pandemic furthermore positions companies in emerging markets such as South Africa in a competitive war for talent against powerful global multinationals (King & Vaiman, 2019; Mercer LLC, 2021; Oxford Economics, 2021; Scullion & Mullholland, 2020).

Given the socio-economic challenges at play, companies in emerging economies are hard-pressed to find the talent they need to build strong brands, to gain a competitive advantage, and to improve local market share (Pranjal & Sarkar, 2020; Song et al., 2020), which will provide a foothold from which to drive global expansion (Oxford Economics, 2021; Scullion & Mullholland, 2020; Song et al., 2020).

Brand-Building Practices for Talent Attraction and Retention

Emerging economies such as South Africa would need to deploy focused talent attraction and retention practices, tailored to the local context (King & Vaiman, 2019; Oxford Economics, 2021; Scullion & Mullholland, 2020). Globally, brand and brand building have become central to the attraction and retention of talent (Allas et al., 2019; Keller & Brexendorf, 2019; Keller & Meaney 2017; Mascarenhas, 2019; Merrilees et al., 2021; Mosley, 2019). The literature holds that talent attraction and retention is enabled by three brand-building platforms: the employer brand, the internal brand, and the corporate brand (King & Vaiman, 2019; Merrilees et al., 2021; Mosley, 2019; Pawar, 2020). The main talent and brand constructs are summarised in Figure 1, which also shows the relationships between these constructs.

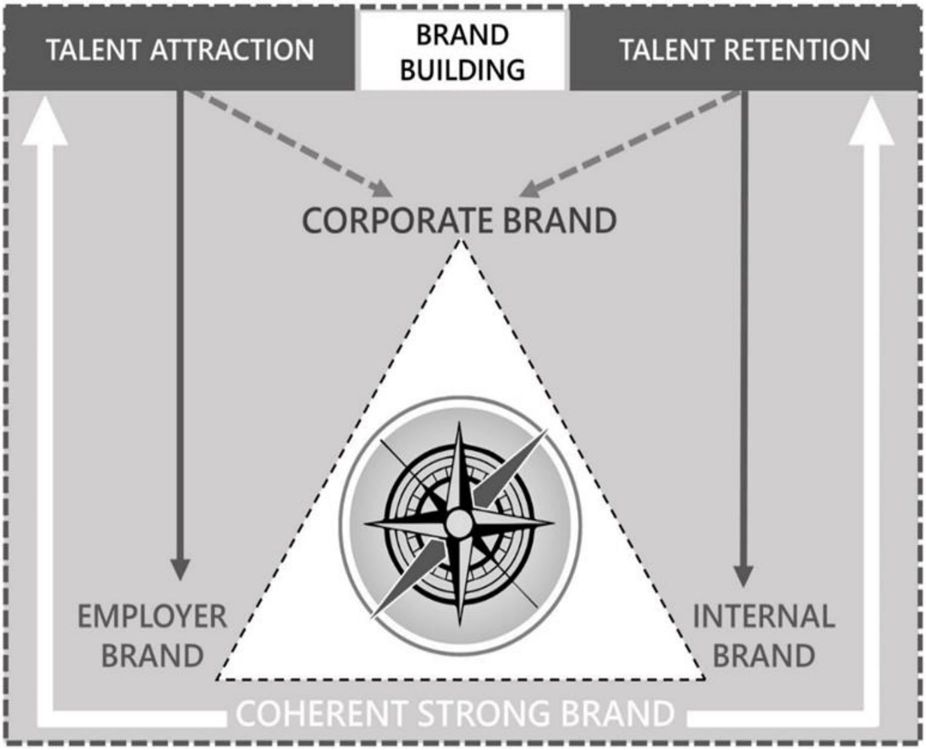

Figure 1: Talent and brand constructs in relation to each other (Source: The authors)

The top of Figure 1 shows the construct talent attraction, which is a set of practices used to evoke positive, favourable responses that appeal to prospective talent (Noutel et al., 2021; Pawar, 2020), draws their interest and encourages engagement with the brand (Keller & Meaney 2017; Mascarenhas, 2019). Ultimately, talent attraction entices talent to apply for employment with the brand (King & Vaiman, 2019; Pawar, 2020).

Figure 1 also presents talent retention, which is a set of practices aimed at optimally engaging, committing, supporting and aligning current talented employees with the business brand and goals (Mosley, 2019; Pawar, 2020; Singh, 2019). In this regard, talented employees continually experience the value and benefits of employment so that they remain engaged with and employed by the company (Keller & Meaney, 2017; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2017; Singh, 2019).

The link between talent attraction and the employer brand in Figure 1 depicts the direct relationship between the two constructs. An employer brand consists of a unique and compelling brand appeal (Noutel et al., 2021; Pawar, 2020) which proclaims the functional, financial and personal benefits offered by the employer to prospective talented employees (Keller & Meaney, 2017; Pawar, 2020). Employer branding differentiates an employer in the marketplace and aims to evoke positive associations with the employer that will ultimately attract talent (Charan et al., 2018; Keller & Schaninger, 2018). As part of the employer brand, the employee value proposition holds an appealing, clear, relevant, and distinctive proposition of the promised value that employees will experience as part of their employment (Mascarenhas, 2019; Noutel et al., 2021).

The relationship depicted between talent retention and the internal brand in Figure 1 is well supported in the literature (Charan et al., 2018; Merrilees et al., 2021; Singh, 2019). The internal brand builds the brand from within, by engaging current employees (Pawar, 2020; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2017; Singh, 2019) with organisational brand practices that reinforce the brand's unique purpose and values and that increase positive brand experiences (Deloitte, 2020; Pawar, 2020; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2017).

Figure 1 depicts the relationship between the corporate brand and both talent attraction and retention as a brand orientation that sees the company's brand speak holistically on behalf of the company as a whole (Balmer, 2017; Greyser & Urde, 2019; Pranjal & Sarkar, 2020). Corporate brands are built from the inside, with the brand purpose, vision and mission and values providing strategic direction to the way in which the brand performs, communicates with and engages all stakeholders (Aaker, 2018; Balmer, 2017; Keller & Brexendorf, 2019; Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). Talented employees are seen to be central brand stakeholders, who should experience the brand positively as they come into contact with the brand (Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Balmer, 2017; Mosley, 2019). The corporate brand aims to build relational or emotional bonds with prospective or current talent so that they are drawn to the brand and remain engaged with the brand (Merrilees et al., 2021; Singh, 2019; WEF, 2020).

Talent also stands central to corporate brand building, considering that corporate brands are built from the inside and rely on people to embody and portray the brand's purpose and values outwards (Aaker, 2018; Mosley, 2019; Winter & Germelmann, 2020; Yohn, 2020). As the earlier definition of talent highlighted, talent should fit the brand, aligning with the brand's purpose and values (Barriere et al., 2018; Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Merrilees et al., 2021). This brand fit in turn informs the ways in which talent will behave to positively portray the brand and to reinforce the brand's value (Merrilees et al., 2021; Pawar, 2020; Yohn, 2020). An engaged, talented employee, aligned with the corporate brand's purpose and values is therefore a strategic asset in bringing the corporate brand to life and sustaining its performance over time (Manpower Group, 2020; Merrilees et al., 2021; Punjaisri and Wilson, 2017). As the triangle (informed by the work of Foster et al., 2010, p. 405) in the centre of Figure 1 therefore suggests, consistent alignment of brand-building efforts across the employer, internal and corporate branding platforms creates a triangle of brand strength.

Scholars and thought leaders agree that strong brands are built through strategic alignment of internal and external brand platforms (Aaker, 2019; Beverland, 2021; Iyer et al., 2020). Coherent branding sees the aligned and constant portrayal of the corporate brand's purpose and values to different brand stakeholders as they experience the brand through contact points across different brand-building platforms (Greyser & Urde, 2019; Iyer et al., 2020; Keller & Brexendorf, 2019). Coherent, strong brands positively influence, attract and retain all brand stakeholders, including prospective and current talent (Balmer, 2017; Beverland, 2021; Greyser & Urde, 2019; Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Keller & Swaminathan, 2020; Mosley, 2019).

Simply put, coherent, strong brands attract and retain talent, while talent, in turn, contributes to building coherent, strong brands (Merrilees et al., 2021; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2017; Wolfswinkel & Enslin, 2020). Figure 1 therefore proposes a dynamic brand-building ecosystem that attracts and retains the right talent to build strong, coherent brands that deliver value to all stakeholders (Andrianova et al., 2018; Barriere et al., 2018; Keller & Meaney, 2017; Merrilees et al., 2021; Mosley, 2019; Noutel et al., 2021).

Research Design

Informed by the literature review insights, the objective of this study was to explore the talent attraction and retention practices pertaining to employer, internal and corporate brand building in companies that are top South African brands. The need for the study was informed by scholars, who advised a deeper exploration of the local, South African context, in which there are unique local socio-economic factors at play (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; King & Vaiman, 2019; Scullion & Mullholland, 2020).

An exploratory study was conducted from the interpretive paradigm, using qualitative methods. Five companies participated in the study, each of which featured as a top South African brand in the 2018, 2019 and 2020 surveys of the Sunday Times Top Brands. These companies are brand leaders in their respective industry categories of telecommunication, health and medical insurance, banking, motor vehicles and life insurance. Purposeful sampling of research participants in each company involved three strategic-level leaders who play an equally important role in talent through brand building: brand management, human resource or talent management and line management (Charan et al., 2018; Foster et al., 2010; Keller & Meaney, 2017; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2017). Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants in the three identified strategic-level leadership positions across five participating companies. The interview guide encouraged these experts to share their subjective views, experience and practices in talent attraction and retention through brand building. The transcribed interview data were analysed with thematic content analysis.

The thematic analysis was consolidated in March 2020, before the onset of the global Covid-19 pandemic. It is serendipitous that the pre-pandemic research study could be contextualised in the light of the impact of the pandemic on the talent landscape in emerging economies. The study's findings are therefore synthesised in this article in tandem with current literature featuring scholarly research, industry reports and thought leadership.

Findings

The prominent role of the corporate brand in talent attraction and retention emerged from more than half of the data collected across all companies and participants. This finding is of particular significance for two reasons. First, the literature indicates that employer and internal brand building are direct drivers of talent attraction and retention, whereas the corporate brand engages a wide range of stakeholders with its unique purpose and values (Balmer, 2017; Charan et al., 2018; Keller & Meaney, 2017). In fact, the research study furthermore revealed that companies that are top South African brands have not paid the same strategic attention to crafting competitive, appealing employer and internal brands as they have done in developing and driving their corporate brand. The second reason that corporate brand prominence is such a significant finding is related to the research participants' view that talent is interested in a corporate brand that is both commercially successful and purpose-driven. This perspective is not explicitly evident in a review of South African literature.

The study found that South African talent is drawn to a commercially successful corporate brand that can offer job security and financial stability, as this quote from a participating brand manager indicates:

> I think that commercially the brand does very well and has a very good reputation of being stable and I think that in a world where things are . . . quite chaotic . . . people are looking for safe havens.

This attraction to commercially successful corporate brands may be a result of the South African socio-economic context in which high unemployment and poverty are fuelled by economic volatility, sudden business closures and widespread job losses (Barkhuizen et al. 2017; Hevia & Neumeyer, 2020; Mazibuko & Govender, 2017), all of which are compounded by the impact of the recent pandemic on emerging economies (ILO, 2021; Oxford Economics, 2021).

Research furthermore indicated that South African talent are attracted to and retained by the corporate brand's purpose and values, especially when they are offered opportunities to contribute to this larger purpose through meaningful work. A participating strategic-level line manager stated the following about the importance of the corporate brand purpose:

> It attracts talent when we say this company doesn't just take away from the world, it's giving actual sustainable things that can change people's lives. And people want to be part of something like that, something that gives them that purpose that's bigger than them . . . they can contribute to this.

Interestingly, some previous studies indicate that a new generation of South African talent is likely to be drawn to the purpose-driven corporate brand and thrives in contributing to this purpose with meaningful work (Potgieter & Doubell, 2018). However, earlier studies suggest that talent may regard social and community investments as wasteful (Moloi et al., 2014) and are likely to be more interested in the financial compensation and benefits offered by employers (Barkhuizen et al., 2017). In addition, the literature at the time held that the alignment of cross-functional leadership behind a common corporate brand purpose and values was being tripped up by poor South African leadership, as they grapple with the rapid racial and cultural diversity of the new South African workforce and the challenges related to building an organisational culture that engages and retains talent (Mazibuko & Govender, 2017; Theron et al., 2014; Tladinyane, 2016).

To assist leaders in South Africa and other emerging economic marketplaces that face similar socio-economic challenges in applying the insights from this study, managerial implications are presented in context of literature. These managerial implications are based on a set of 10 South African leading practices in talent attraction and retention through brand building that were thematically extracted from the research data. Table 1 presents these leading practices in order of importance, based on the strength of the research result data to which the leading practice relates.

Table 1: South African leading practices

Leading practices in talent attraction and retention through brand building	
1.	Corporate brand for talent attraction and retention To attract talent, the corporate brand is positioned as commercially successful and driven by a larger purpose that adds value to all stakeholders.
2.	Talent as corporate brand stakeholder Prospective talented employees are regarded as important stakeholders of the corporate brand that should be positively influenced by corporate brand building.
3.	Talent requirements Human resources and leadership co-create and articulate the specific requirements that talent would have to meet to ensure optimal brand fit and organisational success.
4.	Talent assessments Psychometric and other assessments are used to evaluate talent's ability to meet the specific requirements.
5.	Employer brand supports corporate brand The employer brand serves to support the corporate brand, offering talent opportunities for learning and development.

Leading practices in talent attraction and retention through brand building	
6.	Talent brings the corporate brand to life Talented employees are provided with opportunities to bring the corporate brand's purpose and values to life through meaningful work.
7.	Talent as corporate brand ambassadors Talented employees are deployed as brand ambassadors, with their word-of-mouth testimonies adding to the strength of the corporate brand.
8.	Leadership owns and drives talent internal brand Leadership owns and drives employee engagement and talent retention, ensuring that current talented employees are positively influenced by the internal brand.
9.	Internal brand supports corporate brand The internal brand serves to support the corporate brand in retaining talent through leadership practices and communication, and through reputable people practices that drive employee engagement.
10.	Strategic leadership aligns for talent and brand The alignment of cross-functional leadership is a priority that is driven from CEO level downwards, uniting the company's leaders strategically for talent and brand.

Implications: Leveraging the Corporate Brand for Talent Attraction and Retention

To provide deeper insight into leveraging the corporate brand for talent attraction and retention, the discussion that ensues considers the leading practices presented in Table 1 in relation to each other, as shown in Figure 2.

After that, managerial implications are presented in support of the leading practices and the way in which they collectively relate to talent attraction and retention through brand building. The implications are informed by the analysis of practices of companies that are top brands in South Africa and literature related to the current talent and brand landscape in the wake of the recent pandemic, particularly as it pertains to the reality of the marketplace in emerging economies.

Figure 2: Leading practices in talent attraction and retention through brand building, shown in relation to each other (Source: The authors)

The research results from the thematic analysis inform leading practice 1, the corporate brand for talent attraction and retention, which heads up Figure 2. On the left of Figure 2, leading practices 5 and 9 depict the shaded areas that contain practices related to employer and internal brand building respectively. As the leading practices reveal, the employer brand and internal brand play a supportive role to the corporate brand. The participants who are leaders in South African brands concede that their employer and internal brands are not fully developed, and that the corporate brand is the primary vehicle driving talent attraction and retention initiatives. However, the employer and internal brand are informed by the corporate brand, and it stands to reason that both depend on a purpose-driven corporate brand that clearly outlines the way in which the brand aims to add value to and co-create value with all stakeholders. The internal and employer brand furthermore depends on a corporate brand leveraged for talent attraction and retention and therefore that the leading practices and managerial implications shared in this article are heeded and upheld.

Implication 1 for Management: Leverage the Commercial Success of the Corporate Brand

The corporate brand should celebrate commercial success while taking a socially and financially responsible approach, sharing and reinforcing the brand vision, purpose, achievements, growth and/or marketplace support with prospective and current talent.

The attraction of talent to commercially successful corporate brands appears to hold particular relevance in the current business landscape, in which a global pandemic has and continues to cause widespread economic disruption that is likely to trigger a lasting global recession (Djankov & Panizza, 2020; WEF, 2020). The most vulnerable low-income workers in emerging market economies were particularly hard hit. The number of people living in extreme poverty increased by 68 million in 2020 alone (Valensisi, 2020), unemployment rates spiked rapidly (ILO, 2021; Hevia & Neumeyer, 2020), and retrenchments in the initial phase of the pandemic had a knock-on effect on household income, education, mental health and wellness, crime and violence (Bosio et al., 2020; Djankov & Panizza, 2020; Gómez et al., 2020; Hevia & Neumeyer, 2020). Companies in emerging market economies have less economic resilience – the socio-political and business environment is hostile and unstable and survival is a strategic challenge (Bosio et al., 2020; Noy et al., 2020). Now, more than ever, talent is attracted to corporate brands that can offer stability, job security and an inclusive approach to rebuilding commercial success in a manner that is socially and financially responsible (Cavusgil, 2021; Renjen, 2020; WEF, 2020).

Implication 2 for Management: Leverage the Purpose of the Corporate Brand

In conjunction with leveraging the commercial success of the corporate brand, leading practices also indicate that companies should leverage the corporate brand purpose and the value it aims to add to the lives of stakeholders. As discussed in the findings section, talent is attracted to and retained by purpose-driven corporate brands that allow them do contribute to this broader purpose through meaningful work. It is interesting to note that the literature supports the insights obtained from the study: corporate brand purpose is as important as corporate brand strength and commercial success (Aaker, 2018; Beverland, 2021; Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). Yet, purpose is too often regarded as a first world luxury – one that makes little sense in an economy plagued by poverty and unemployment (Borruso et al., 2020; Mercer LLC, 2021; WEF, 2020; Winter & Germelmann, 2020). The literature provides several illuminating insights about the importance of corporate brand purpose in emerging economic marketplaces, arguing that purpose lies at the heart of relational and communal cultures (Pranjal & Sarkar, 2020). Unlike the individualistic and competitive nature of people in developed, first world countries, people in South Africa and many other emerging markets do business based on relationships and trusts, and build on their deep need for shared value and meaning (Cavusgil, 2021; Enderwick, 2020; Pranjal & Sarkar, 2020). In addition, the literature holds that people in emerging marketplace economies are becoming environmentally and socially responsible, concerning themselves with the larger issues of community and sustainability (Borruso et al., 2020; Cavusgil, 2021; Enderwick, 2020; Mercer LLC, 2021).

Take time to invite stakeholders (including talent) to provide input and co-create a new purpose to drive the corporate brand and steer the business into this phase of business recovery. Position the corporate brand as purpose-driven, clearly outlining the way in which the brand aims to add value to and co-create value with all stakeholders. Include references to social responsibility and corporate citizenship, but extend beyond this to the larger purpose of the business and the positive change that the business hopes to bring about.

The journey to business recovery presents the ideal opportunity for companies in emerging marketplace economies to put corporate brand purpose under a magnifying glass, to invite talent and other stakeholders to provide their input and co-create purpose with the brand, and to unite people behind a purpose that adds value to all (Merrilees et al., 2021; O'Brien et al., 2019; Renjen, 2020; WEF, 2020; Yohn, 2020).

Implication 3 for Management: Leverage the Strategically Aligned Corporate Brand for the Talented Brand Stakeholder

Figure 2 shows leading practice 2, which is talent as a corporate brand stakeholder and comprises employer brand practices for talent attraction. As mentioned before, companies that are top South African brands are primarily using their corporate brand to fulfil the functions one would associate with a well-developed employer brand. The deeper insight that emerges is that corporate brand building is orientated to attracting all stakeholders, of which talent is no less or more important than, for instance, a customer. Consider this quote from a brand manager of a top South African banking brand:

> Everything we do for the brand, that we do as the brand, builds brand stature and visibility, and that attracts people to work for us as much as it attracts people to bank with us.

Companies that are top South African brands appear to be less invested in developing a compelling employer brand. They prefer to drive consistent branding for all stakeholders across all brand experiences, as indicated in the following quote from a strategic line manager:

> As a line manager, whether I'm recruiting or whether I'm talking to somebody inside or whether I'm looking at you know the brand that we put out there in adverts, we use the same kind of messaging and it's all about enabling people to be their exceptional best. So I think what we're getting much better, what we've improved in the last couple of years is creating alignment, otherwise there's dissonance for both internal customers, employees and prospective employees.

Although the development of a compelling employer and internal brand is still required to support the corporate brand, it seems that the strategic alignment of the corporate brand should be enjoying priority and focus. Bring strategic-level leaders across talent and brand together in order to examine ways in which the corporate brand is experienced by prospective and current talent. Inform this discussion with insights obtained from prospective and current talent as they come into contact with the corporate brand as a customer, a community stakeholder, an employment applicant and an employee. The experiences of talent should align with the experiences of other stakeholders. For instance, if customers and other brand stakeholders experience the corporate brand as a leader in technological and digital enablement, prospective talent should also experience a seamless application process and a strong digital or online presence.

Implication 4 for Management: Leverage the Corporate Brand through Clearly Outlined Talent Requirements and Assessments

Consistent brand experiences and alignment is a pattern linking leading practice 2, talent as a brand stakeholder, to leading practices 3 and 4. Leading practices 3 and 4 hone in on the clear articulation of talent requirements and the assessment of talent to ensure that they meet the criteria and fit optimally with the brand.

As Figure 2 shows, the articulation of talent requirements and the assessment of talent are informed by the corporate brand and form part of the employer brand process. A participating human resources talent manager states the following about articulating talent requirements:

> We do a lot of research and also work very closely with the business to understand where's the business going, what are those roles and positions that they envision their structure is going to require to support the strategic objectives of the business and then through a formal process of job profiling and competency mapping, identifying what those skills are.

A participating strategic-level leader sheds more light on the rationale for the investment of time, energy and money in the assessment of talent in the following quote:

> We need to use the best information that we have today, including psychometric analysis, in terms of your learning potential, that we can take somewhat of a risk in terms of appointing you into a role.
>
> Employees or people in an organisation are the single biggest investment you will make because if you appoint somebody to give them a career for life and appoint them straight out of university at the age of 22, you are making what we call a 43-year investment. Now to make a 43 year investment, if you have to spend R5 000 on a psychometric prognosis to understand the learning potential of an individual . . . we don't think that's a high investment to make for the return you're going to get.

These insights reveal that top South African brands are clear about the talent they need to enable their strategic goals and live their brand purpose and values. Top brands will also prioritise the investment of time, effort and money to find – and keep – the right talent.

In the light of the socio-economic challenges of high unemployment and poor skills levels faced by emerging market economies (Cavusgil, 2021; Enderwick, 2020), it is likely that companies will be flooded by job applicants who offer varying levels of knowledge, skills and experience. These companies may be more focused on the need for employment and less concerned with the level of fit between their personal purpose and values and that of the brand (Cavusgil, 2021; Pranjal & Sarkar, 2020). It is also likely that companies are so hard-pressed to find skilled, talented workers that they may omit holding talent to high standards or requirements and neglect to assess talent against these standards or requirements. In addition, companies in emerging market economies would possibly not have the financial means to invest in these measures (Bosio et al., 2020; Djankov & Panizza, 2020; Randstad, 2021; Song et al., 2020).

With a clear corporate brand purpose and values in place, backed by the strategic alignment of cross-functional leadership, management would be able to articulate the personal attributes and values that people would need to fully support and live the brand. Agreeing on the requirements for talent could be approached as an exercise in protecting and enabling the corporate brand. In as much as brand management would not pioneer a conflicting brand messaging campaign or deploy brand adverts and signs that are misaligned from the overall brand, the attraction and retention of talent should aim to procure people with a high level of brand fit. While companies may lack the financial resources to invest in psychometric and other assessments, there are ways to deploy resources to assess skills, experience and personal attributes in real-life scenarios. This could include, for instance, panel interviews with cross-functional business leaders sharing their insights and assessment of talent, challenging talent to complete presentations or assignments based on actual business scenarios, or observing the way in which talent shows up in group interactions.

Implication 5 for Management: Leverage the Corporate Brand through the Talent Living the Brand and Sharing their Experiences

Returning to Figure 2, leading practices 6 and 7 are concerned with talent bringing the corporate brand to life and talent as brand ambassadors. The relational and community-orientated nature of business in emerging market economies provides context to the importance of this personal embodiment and testimony in countries in which people are more likely to trust and do business with other people (Cavusgil, 2021; Enderwick, 2020; Pranjal & Sarkar, 2020).

A strategic line manager provides the following insight into talent living the corporate brand in their company:

> The Corporate Brand is trying to say: force for social good, that ambition for force of social good, shared value, and then bringing that back, internally to the staff, so we are living that, and we are enabling you to live that. There are tangible ways that we provide opportunities for people to live that, to make a difference.

A participating human resources talent leader makes a compelling case for the value of corporate brand advocacy in retaining talent, by saying:

> If you actually have to go and track the retention rate of people who we've been using as our brand ambassadors to promote the corporate brand – that itself becomes a retention strategy because they become so intimately and professionally joined to the hip with the brand. Very difficult for a competitor to take that away from us.

The purpose of the corporate brand should allow everyone to play a role. Take the time to invite the input of leaders and employees to identify tangible ways in which talent can bring the corporate brand to life. Include these in job adverts and branding, taking care to be as practical as possible – talent can and will see through elaborate, meaningless words and abstract concepts. For instance, if the purpose of the corporate brand is centred on creating health and well-being, opportunities to participate in healthy living challenges, to promote exercise programmes or to share personal experiences of their journey to health and well-being may be meaningful, tangible ways in which talent can bring that purpose to life. Similarly, talent's word-of-mouth testimonies about the way in which the workplace promotes health and well-being could be captured in written or video format and used for social media promotion. Instead of just rewarding staff for achieving their financial performance goals, a reward and recognition programme could identify annual top achievers in living the brand purpose and values.

Conclusion

At the time of writing this article, South Africa and other emerging economic marketplaces face the enduring and devastating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on individuals, communities, organisations and the economy. Considering an all-time unemployment high of 34.4 per cent in South Africa (Stats SA, 2021) and a predicted rise of up to 22 per cent in demand for skilled workers across emerging markets in the immediate future (Oxford Economics, 2021), human resources and talent management are challenged to navigate critical skills shortages, a shifting geographical talent marketplace and a volatile labour marketplace to attract and retain the talent required for organisational success.

Now is the time to apply a new lens to brand building for talent and to focus on the leveraging of the corporate brand's stakeholder orientation and purpose-driven nature to attract and retain talent and drive and inspire the company and its people. Today's talent looks beyond the money and the personal gain towards companies that are not only commercially successful (Deloitte, 2020; Mercer LLC, 2021; Pawar, 2020), but also driven by a corporate brand that adds value to the lives of others (Beverland, 2021; Greyser & Urde, 2019; Manpower Group, 2020; Mosley, 2019; Randstad, 2021). In particular, talent is lured to companies that recognise employees as key stakeholders and offer an opportunity to contribute to this higher brand purpose (Aaker, 2018; Beverland, 2021; Deloitte, 2020; Manpower Group, 2020; Merrilees et al., 2021; Mosley, 2019; Yohn, 2020) and co-create shared value that benefits individuals, business and society (Borruso et al. 2020; Greyser & Urde, 2019; Manpower Group, 2020; Winter & Germelmann, 2020; Yohn, 2020). When talent is truly engaged with the corporate brand, they will live the brand purpose and embody the brand's values in their daily work (Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Merrilees et al., 2021; Winter & Germelmann, 2020; Wolfswinkel & Enslin, 2020).

In fact, in the wake of the pandemic there is a global call for organisations to focus on purpose and stakeholder value in business recovery (Renjen, 2020; WEF, 2020). As the workforce responds to rising unemployment, a global wave of retrenchments and damaged relationships of trust between employees and employers (Deloitte, 2020; Renjen, 2020; WEF, 2020), the corporate brand purpose is more critical than ever and lies at the heart of talent attraction and retention.

Significance, Limitations and Directions for Further Research

This study is significant and valuable in that it is the first study of its kind in South Africa and presents findings obtained from a sample of top South African brands. It stands to reason that the practices applied by these top brands would present the local leading practices in talent attraction and retention through brand building. To this end, the research findings have been synthesised into a set of leading practices, with management implications providing practical ways in which a wide range of cross-functional leaders, ranging from leaders in human resources or talent management to brand leaders and strategic-level line managers, can apply these leading practices in the unique socio-economic context of an emerging economic market such as South Africa.

One overarching limitation to this study is the limited literature findings in the study field of talent and brand building in developing markets and specifically, the uniquely South African context. A further potential limitation to this study is the qualitative approach through thematic analysis, which leans heavily on gaining subjective insights from the research participants. One of the delimitations of this study emerges from the ethical considerations and the promise of anonymity and confidentiality of the participants. It is regrettable that the names of the participating brands cannot be disclosed, but the ethical code is honoured above all else.

The study sheds light on an underexplored research area, adding to the body of literature in the cross section of the fields of talent and brand building. In particular, the study's finding that talent attraction and retention is primarily driven by corporate brand building presents an interesting new avenue for further research in the current landscape of emerging economies.

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