

Employee Research Toolkit

From the perspective of the marketing insight specialist the standard employee research toolkit appears very limited. Most organisations continue to conduct an employee survey no more than once a year. Focus groups tend to be used to throw additional light on particularly thorny issues. This ad hoc research is sometimes combined with other sources of continuous data like sickness absence, staff turnover and exit interviews. This compares with sophisticated marketing research users like Unilever who identify over twenty five different sources of insight in their standard market research toolkit, not counting the additional tools they have designed specifically to combine and distil different sources of insight into a coherent platform for action.

We are not suggesting that the employee research budget should match the customer research budget, or that the approaches used to understand employees are exactly equivalent to those used to understand customers and consumers. However, to establish the kind of insights required to develop an effective employer brand, we believe it is worth considering the use of a broader palette of research tools than the conventional employee survey.

(1) Employee engagement and commitment

For a long period of time most employee research surveys focused on employee satisfaction. The problem with satisfaction is that it is rather a vague term. Claiming you are satisfied could cover a very broad spectrum from complacency (“I’m satisfied because my job is comfortable and undemanding”) to commitment (“I’m satisfied because I’ve found an organisation I really believe in”). Clearly, most organisations would rather have satisfaction at the commitment end of this spectrum, so most employee surveys have now shifted their focus to defining and measuring more performance oriented terms such as employee ‘commitment or employee ‘engagement’. The issue in shifting the emphasis to these new measures is that they are more difficult to measure directly. While most employees are likely to have no difficulty in stating whether they are satisfied or not with the company they are working for, they are less likely to be able to respond as directly to questions about their level of engagement or commitment. For this reason, these measures tend to be composite terms deriving from a series of other more specific questions. While there is a large amount of published research covering the differences between engagement and commitment, there is still a lack of common agreement over exactly what they mean. Of the five major benchmark studies into this area that we consulted before writing this book, three focused on the term ‘engagement’ (ISR, Towers Perrin, IES) and two on the term ‘commitment’ (TNS, Watson Wyatt), but the definition of these terms covered very similar ground. Most are composite definitions, drawn from the following:

- Support for the goals and values of the organisation (ISR, TP)
- Belief in the organisation’s products / services (IES)
- Sense of pride and belonging (ISR, IES, WW)

- Satisfaction with the immediate job or career prospects (TP, WW, TNS)
- Willingness to go the extra mile (ISR, TP, IES)
- Advocating the employer to others (ISR, TP, WW)
- Intention to stay (ISR, TNS)

Engagement currently appears to be the more favoured of these two terms within the HR community. From an employer brand perspective, both terms are equally acceptable for summarizing an employee's relationship with their employer, as long as the scope of the term (in terms of the contributory factors, featured above), is clearly defined and communicated. However, it may still be worth differentiating the two terms when it comes to further analysis. Engagement is generally regarded as a more immediate state (more like the weather than the climate), whereas commitment suggests a more enduring belief in the company. It is possible for an engaged employee to lack longer term commitment, and for a committed employee to feel temporarily disengaged. My benchmark reference point for this is the BBC, where it appears typical for many employees to express a long term vocational commitment to the BBC as an institution, while feeling continual disenchantment with the way the BBC works as an organisation.

(2) Benchmarking

Once you have defined and measured employee engagement within your organisation, the first question that the senior management team will generally ask is: "How good or bad is that compared with other organisations?" Many of the large, well established employee research agencies, like ISR, have developed an impressive databank of normative benchmarks, and can tell you how your scores compare with your industry peer group, and the more general, but also more testing, index for high performing companies.

Another approach to benchmarking is to take part in one of the many 'Best Employers' surveys that have been established over recent years. The two most popular are: The Sunday Times '100 Best Companies to Work For', and The Financial Times 'Best Workplaces' (in the UK and EU). These surveys provide the opportunity for your organisation to enter a league table of employers, all of whom are rated according to a short employee questionnaire, and a separate management submission, usually completed by the HR team. Whether you make it onto the league table or not, every organisation that takes part receives a customized benchmark report showing how you compare in relation to the others.

This can be an easy and cost effective way of establishing your engagement and employment performance ratings, particularly for small to medium sized organisations that may lack the financial resources to employ one of the major employee research agencies.

(3) Correlation analysis

One of my favorite research quotes is: “I don’t drink Guinness because of the advertising; I drink it because it’s good for me”. (The advertising tagline for many years was ‘Guinness is good for you’). While this quote may be apocryphal, it illustrates one of the central truths of good research, that people are often unaware (or unprepared to admit) what drives their behaviour. Another classic example is the political polling question: “Would you vote for the party that raises taxes to support greater investment in health and education?” The answer to this question is invariably ‘yes’, however, the results from party elections would strongly suggest that people’s behaviour when it comes to casting their votes is somewhat different. The point is that to understand the factors that attract people to an organisation, motivate them to perform at their best, and explain why they leave, you often need more than direct answers to direct questions.

Correlation analysis seeks to identify the factors driving ‘key performance indicators’ such as employee engagement, commitment and loyalty, by establishing their statistical correlation with other questions (confidence in leadership, good internal communication etc.). In simple terms, if 90% of the employees expressing strong commitment to the organisation also claim a high degree of confidence in the leadership team, and similarly, most people expressing low commitment claim low confidence in the leadership, then it is fair to assume that leadership is an important factor in driving employee commitment.

We will cover some of the results from recent benchmark studies in the next chapter on the employer brand proposition.

Some of the most pioneering work in this field has been conducted by the employee research consultancy ISR. In a global study involving 360,000 employees from 41 companies (2001), ISR identified the four major factors driving organisational commitment as being: quality of leadership, opportunities for development, empowerment and the people management skills of employee’s immediate managers.

(4) Continuous research

Since it is now commonplace for employees to be described in terms of human capital or assets, it is surprising how many organisations conduct an employee survey only once a year, biannually 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? We suspect this is because employee research is seldom regarded as business as usual. It is regarded as an additional effort, no doubt necessary, but nevertheless a potential interruption to everyday business, involving a large input of data that needs to be collected, analysed, digested and responded to. It feels more like an initiative than a regular feature of the way the organisation is managed. This is not how most businesses research their customers and consumers. The great benefit of adopting a more continuous approach is that you can develop a far better understanding of how employees are responding to events over

time. Change is a constant feature of most organisations, and taking an annual snapshot of employee opinion can be rather a hit and miss affair. The context within which an ad hoc survey is conducted will seldom match the conditions of the previous survey. An organisation can never be sure of the degree to which it is recording employees' response to changes since the last survey or the more immediate context within which the survey is taking place.

When the views of employees are being sought on a more continuous basis it also enables the senior team to identify and respond to issues much faster. When levels of employee engagement begin to fall the effect on performance is sometimes delayed. By the time the problem shows up in the financial numbers, the issues driving the downturn have often taken root, and are far more difficult to rectify. Rather than disrupting the business, this approach makes employee research a regular feature of business as usual, enabling the management team to pick up and address issues as they arise and avoiding the indigestible backlog of issues often associated with less frequent surveys.

The other more specific benefit of continuous research is that it makes it easier to match employee data with customer satisfaction and sales data. Many organisations have found that establishing the link between employee engagement, customer satisfaction and sales / profitability can be an extremely valuable exercise in that it helps to quantify the return on the organisation's investment in people management. As we mentioned in the last chapter, this linkage has become a regular feature in many retail businesses, and is now being picked up across a wide range of other industry sectors.

(5) Culture mapping

Employee surveys tend to be used to measure the people management performance of the organisation and in conjunction with correlation analysis can provide a good indication of the factors most likely to be driving employee engagement. However, conventional surveys tend to be less effective at identifying the longer term cultural characteristics of the organisation. You may find from a conventional survey that your score for teamwork is generally low. What it is less likely to be able to tell you is whether this is the result of a specific management intervention (like performance management), a training issue (poor team management skills), or a more deeply rooted cultural characteristic ("this company has always favoured individualism").

If you are setting out to strengthen the employer brand it is important to understand not only the immediate 'climate' of employee opinion, but also the longer term culture of the organisation. Culture, like personality, is often a difficult concept to pin down precisely, because it describes general patterns and tendencies rather than a reliable objective reality. Nevertheless, like brand personality, the notion of organisational culture can be very useful in getting a handle on how people generally perceive things work within an organisation. What do people regard as normal within the context of the organisation? What kind of behaviour tends to be rewarded or frowned on? What kind of people tend to do well within the organisation or struggle to fit in? These are particularly useful questions to ask if you are trying to define and develop the employer brand, because the

culture of the organisation is a good way of describing the current brand reality, as opposed to its value statements which define the brand vision. More simply put, culture is descriptive (the way things are); values are aspirational (the way things should be).

One of the commonest ways of researching organisational culture is to present people with a series of bi-polar scales describing the general preferences of the organisation. The employee is asked to provide an opinion on the collective tendency of people within the organisation to think and act in certain ways, rather than how they themselves tend to think and act. (Asking for both perspectives can be valuable in providing additional insight into the level of fit between employees and the organisational culture).

There are a number of standardized cultural frameworks that can be used for this purpose. Two of the most widely used are Geert Hofstede's 5-D model and Fons Trompenaars' seven dimensional model. The main focus of both these models is cross-cultural diversity within multi-national organisations; nevertheless they can still provide a useful starting point for mapping any organisation. The following summarises some of the most common dimensions used in models of this kind.

| | | |
|---------------------------------------|-----|-----------------------------------|
| Inner directed / organisational focus | vs. | Outer directed / customer focus |
| Past / stability | vs. | Future / change |
| Risk averse / incremental | vs. | Risk taking / creative innovation |
| Short term / operational reality | vs. | Long-term / strategic vision |
| People / relationships | vs. | Performance / transactions |
| Individualism / stars | vs. | Collectivism / team |
| Rules / process | vs. | Flexibility / results |
| Hierarchy / title | vs. | Meritocracy / task |
| Control / top-down | vs. | Empowerment / involvement |
| Rational / analytical | vs. | Intuitive / "gut feel" |
| Formal / reserved | vs. | Informal / emotive |

The purpose of this mapping exercise is to provide the organisation with a more explicit framework for measuring the cultural tendencies of the organisation. This can help to identify the potential gap between where you are (brand reality) and where you need to be (brand vision) to achieve your organisational goals. It provides a valuable context for reviewing current values or developing new values by identifying the degree of resonance or dissonance with the current culture. It also helps to determine the degree of cultural consistency across geographies, divisions, and operating units. Does the organisation have widespread commonalities? Where are the dividing lines? This exercise is particularly useful in the context of a merger or acquisition where two potentially different corporate cultures are being brought together.

(6) Brand roots

Mapping the broad cultural characteristics of the organisation will only take you so far. This exercise may help you to determine the 'type' of organisation you have, but not what makes it unique. If you think of it in terms of understanding a single employee, knowing that they are extrovert, intuitive, thinkers and judgers (following the Myers-Briggs dimensions) could be very helpful in working out how best to manage them, but it won't be enough to define them as a unique individual (9). If you were describing a colleague to a friend, you'd be a lot more specific. You're more likely to say something like: "She's a real northerner, down to earth, calls a spade a spade, spends a lot of time up mountains, and despite her slim build, she never stops eating". In other words, you'd focus a lot more on what makes her different. Where's she's from. How she tends to express herself. The kinds of things she likes doing, From an employer brand perspective it's useful to understand both the type of culture you have (for the purpose of general positioning), and the specific elements of history and 'personality' that differentiate your organisation from every other.

So where do you look to find what makes your organisation unique? To begin with we suggest you conduct a bit of desk research. Brand managers tend to start their stewardship with an induction into the history of the brand. This helps them to understand the brand's roots, the story of its origin, and the key milestones in its history. I recently picked up a leaflet celebrating the 75th anniversary of the tea brand PG Tips, and learnt that the "Tips" referred to the top two leaves and bud of the tea plant from which the product was originally derived. I also found out that blue and green have been the brand colours since it was very first introduced in 1930 and that the chimps advertising, first screened in 1956, was the longest-running TV campaign in the UK. This kind of information puts the brand into context. It helps to identify what is deep rooted and authentic, and provides important insights into the character and personality of the brand. This kind of exercise is equally valuable for employer brands. What's the organisation's story? Where and how did it start? What significant events have shaped the organisation over the course of its history? For some long standing organisations there are published histories. Weighing up the differences between the official, authorized versions and unauthorized, "inside story", accounts can be particularly revealing. For most others you will have to do some digging. If there is no official archive, the best place to start is talking to the 'elders' within the organisation, long serving employees 'who remember the early days'. It's surprising how often you can find an unofficial archivist, if you can't locate an official store of historical memorabilia. While we would not suggest you need to write a full history of the organisation, establishing some of the key dates, personalities and 'moments of truth' for the organisation can provide valuable depth to your understanding of the current employer brand, and some useful material for your induction process.

(7) Projective and enabling techniques

The second route we suggest in identifying the unique characteristics of an organisation is to conduct workshop-style employee focus groups. The focus in this case is not their views on more immediate issues such as the latest business strategy, the quality of their local management or their personal needs, but more general observations about the organisation as a whole. It is often useful to divide these sessions between recent joiners and longer serving employees. Recent joiners can offer a relatively fresh perspective on the way the organisation seems to work, as well as insight into the gaps between their early experience of the organisation and their external expectations as candidates. Longer serving employees bring a wider range of experience, and are generally more able to differentiate between the official line (“this is what we’re meant to say”) and the inside story (“but this is the way it really works”).

In consumer research it is common to use what are called projective and enabling techniques (such as personification and role playing) to explore thoughts and feelings that people often find difficult express in response to direct questioning. We have found these to be extremely useful in the context of employer brand research, as people often find it difficult to provide a full and rich response to direct questions about the personality or culture of the organisation they work for. One of the reasons for this is that culture tends to be assumed and implicit, and it is often difficult for someone within a culture to describe it objectively. For long serving employees especially, the way in which things work appears self-evidently normal, and it is difficult for them to describe what it different or unique about it. The other great benefit of using these techniques is that people find them a lot more energizing and stimulating than your average focus group.

The following represents a selection of the exercises that we have found useful in providing both great insights into how people perceive the employer brand, and a rich and stimulating source of outputs for illustrating the key findings of the research.

Sunny side up

- Best of: What would you put in the advert to present the very best of what the organisation can offer?
- Heroes: Who would appear in the organisation’s hall of fame and why?
- Legend: How would Disney tell the organisation’s story if they made it into a film?
- Greatest hits: The records you’d choose for a celebratory party album?
- Perfect day: Describe a perfect working day?

The shadow side

- Rough guide: What don’t they tell you at induction that you need to know to survive and prosper?
- Villains: Who are the black sheep of the organisation and why?

- Obituary: What would be written on the organisation's tombstone if it went out of business in the next few years?
- Hell: What would be the key characteristics of a typically hellish day?

Personification

- If the organisation were represented by a single person, what type of person would they be? (It often helps to start with a few iconic examples like Marks & Spencer, Nike or the Bank of England to warm people up). Once people have entered the spirit of this exercise you can also ask a series of more specific questions like: What kind of car would they drive? What kind of paper would they read? What kind of pets would they keep? Etc.
- Employer vs. customer brand: If the employer brand name is the same as the product / service brand, divide the group in two, and ask one sub-group to focus on the employer brand, and the other the customer brand (as they would expect customers to see it).
- Brand party: Repeat the above exercise for a number of your main rivals, and then describe what would happen if they all met up at a party. Describe how they would behave? Who would get on with whom? Who would dance all night? Who would spend the whole night talking in the kitchen? etc.
- Celebrity: Who would be the most appropriate celebrity to represent the organisation as it would like to see itself? And as it actually is?
- Organisational stereotypes: How would you describe a typical cast of employees from the organisation?

We suggest that these techniques are used to elicit people's open and spontaneous perceptions of the organisation before any pre-prepared stimuli are introduced, such as recruitment materials, proposition statements, or values. The reason for this is to clearly differentiate between the employer brand reality as it currently exists in people's heads, and the more formalised statements represented by the current or potential employer brand vision. When you do prompt people on the values of the organisation, a useful technique is to ask people to consider 'moments of truth' for each value. To take an external example, a typical moment of truth for a service brand is when something goes wrong. Your baggage doesn't turn up at the airport you're flying to. The air conditioning isn't working in the hotel you've booked into on a stifflingly hot day. How does the company offering the service respond? That is the moment of truth. For an organisation that states 'transparency' as a value, the moment of truth comes when something has gone wrong and you want to find out what's going on. For an organisation that claims 'respect' as a value, it is how the organisation deals with an operationally successful manager who is consistently disrespectful to their employees.

One further line of enquiry which can be very useful in diagnosing the underlying dynamics of the employer brand is to ask how people perceive the organisation to be changing over time, through questions like:

- What symbolises the past? What seems to be on the way out?
- What most represents the “here and now”, or “the flavour of the moment”?
- What are the emerging signs of the future? What seems to be on the way in?

What you’re looking for from these exercises are the significant stories that people tell about the organisation, the language and metaphors they use, aspects of the corporate body language they believe to be symbolic of the way things work. You’re also looking for the characteristics of the organisation that employees are most energised by or proud of, the ‘passion points’ that strike an emotional chord with people. You’re also looking for the tensions between corporate rhetoric (the way things are supposed to be) and the everyday reality (the way things really are), particularly at those moments of truth when a key value or corporate belief is put the test.

(8) Observation

One of the simplest forms of organisational research is to take an outsider’s perspective and simply observe the way in which the organisation goes about its business. This will generally require a trained, external observer; however, there are a number of simple techniques that you could try for yourselves. The first of these techniques is to try and describe what you see as if you were an anthropologist recording the habits and rituals of a strange tribal culture. Before you start, try this exercise. Take off your watch and put it in your pocket. Then draw the face of your watch in as much detail as you can. Despite the fact you have probably looked at your watch hundreds of times, most people find this task quite difficult. That is the difference between looking and actively seeing. With this in mind, here is a short checklist for taking a fresh look at the organisation around you. In each case describe what you see and then try and draw some conclusions about what you think it signifies about the organisation.

- Public spaces: External architecture. Reception areas.
- Working environment: Arrangement of space. Expressions of hierarchy. Shared vs. private. Open vs. closed. Neat vs. cluttered. Use of wall space.
- Comfort zones: Coffee facilities. Canteens. Toilets.
- Dress codes: Formal vs. informal. Degree of conformity. Expression of hierarchy.
- Meetings (both large and small): Time keeping. Allocation of time to telling, listening, discussing, generating ideas, making decisions.
- Social events: Seasonal celebrations. Ad hoc celebrations. Leaving parties.

(9) Segmentation

Most of the approaches we have described above set out to discover what is common among employees, their shared needs, motivations, perceptions and values. However, most organisations are diverse, and generally seeking to become more diverse. In addition to finding the common ground it is therefore also necessary to determine an effective way of responding to this diversity. Segmentation is a tool used to identify the most significant and meaningful way of dividing people into groups who can be catered for differently according to their specific needs. 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. This is an important factor to consider in the context of employees, where the potential criteria for segmentation (age, sex, level, function, region, psychographic profile etc.) can often appear as numerous as the employees themselves. In some obvious respects, some form of segmentation is already inherent in such common features of employment as pay scales and job grades. However, a number of companies have begun to push the concept of segmentation further (see the Tesco case study), and we believe the application of this technique is likely to grow in both frequency and sophistication over the coming years.

One of the most useful forms of segmentation is to cluster people according to the level and primary focus of their engagement. For example, the TNS commitment survey conducted in 2002 and 2004 measured commitment on two axes: commitment to the organisation, and commitment to people's career, or type of work. For example:

'Ambassadors' (41%) defined as those fully committed to their company and to their work (Tend to be mid to upper managers and high performers).

Primary commitment drivers:

Performance management/achievement

- Company has an effective system for evaluating performance.
- My ability to achieve and to move the company forward is a key reason why I work here.

Leadership

- I have strong confidence in the leadership of this company.
- I have strong confidence in my department leadership

(10) Communication Audits

It is essential for any brand manager to develop a sophisticated understanding of the range of channels available to them, and which are the most effective for different target audiences and for different types of message. In this external context, in addition to delivering a specific message or packet of information, every piece of communication the customer receives is also designed to reinforce the overall brand proposition. We believe

that an equally sophisticated understanding is required for internal channels if the employer brand is going to perform a similar role for internal communication. (A subject we will explore further in a later chapter). In auditing the current communication framework we believe that the employer brand manager needs answers to the following series of questions.

Sources

How, when and from whom is the content for internal corporate communication currently sourced? Is the current range of sources providing the information required? Do you have the right mix of sources? Too many sources? Too few? Are those providing the information clear about their responsibilities?

Content

How do you currently segment the information you communicate in terms of type (strategy, news, social etc.), relevance (corporate, divisional, unit specific etc.), importance (priority, for reference etc.) or response required (action this day! provide feedback, cascade, etc.)? Do you have the right balance of content? To what extent is the content currently aligned?

Editorial control

Who has responsibility for editorial control or message management and for what types of information? How effective is editorial control in aligning communication with a common agenda? How effective is it in filtering communication for relevance? Is there sufficient air-traffic control to avoid information overload?

Audiences

How do you currently segment your audiences? How could you segment your audiences to improve the relevance and effectiveness of your communication? What are the primary needs of each audience? Are the key audiences getting what they need and want?

Transmission channels

What channels are currently available (including face to face)? How and when are they used both in terms of sending and receiving communication? Are key audiences getting the information they need through the channels they prefer? Is the right mix of channels being deployed to get the information through?

Feedback channels

What channels are currently available? How and when are they used? Are the current feedback channels accessible, regular enough and effective enough to provide good quality response and input to decision makers?

Response / action

Who has responsibility for filtering and responding to feedback? Is feedback receiving sufficient recognition and responsive action?

(11) Additional sources

In addition to these research specific channels, there are a number of further potential sources of insight that it can be valuable to explore.

Leavers' interviews.

Well conducted and consistently reported leaver's interviews can shed valuable light on engagement and retention issues.

Performance and development reviews.

These can be particularly useful in tracking the uptake of value related behaviours. Managers should also be encouraged to report on regular patterns of response that may suggest new and emerging issues.

Sickness absence and health screening.

Indications of stress within the company can provide a useful counter indicator to positive engagement. In some cases, this kind of unhealthy stress can also exist at the opposite end of the engagement spectrum. In a high commitment, high performance culture, widespread stress symptoms and growing levels of sickness absence can indicate the need to reign in the number of hours people devote the organisation to ensure that performance remains sustainable. This was such a common issue in Japan that some years back the government introduced a major campaign to ensure people take their holidays.

Labour Market Insights

The main factors driving retention and motivation are not necessarily going to be the same factors that drive the desirability of the company to potential employees. For this reason, it is also important to conduct research into the labour market from which the company will be seeking to recruit. The phrase "war for talent" has been used to dramatise the increasing difficulty many employers have experienced over recent years in attracting people of the right quality to meet the needs of their business. This is not just a question of attracting "top talent" for management positions, but finding people with the right mix of qualities to successfully perform a wide variety of roles throughout the organisation.

Ensuring the "right fit" is also as important as attracting high quality. Getting the employer brand proposition right is just as much an exercise in targeting the right kind of candidates for employment as ensuring that you have a large number to choose from. During an economic downturn, when there are more people competing for employment, it could be argued that employer brand becomes less important. However, in ensuring that the company stays focused in targeting and attracting the right kind of candidates, the discipline that an employer brand approach brings to the recruitment process can be more essential than ever.

From an employer brand research perspective we suggest the following steps.

(1) Clarifying the target market

Defining and segmenting the target market is often the first essential step in effective brand development and management. In the employer brand context, the overall target profile often starts with a definition of the values and attitudes that the organisation is looking for in all of its employees. If you are truly seeking to “live the brand” it helps if your employees already share the core values of the organisation. A secondary consideration, which is now becoming more common, is recruiting for diversity. This may sound like it conflicts with the agenda for shared values, but the kind of values and attitudes that most organisations are looking for tend to be well distributed across the range of different groups generally considered under the heading of diversity. This need not mean positive discrimination according to gender, ethnic background, sexual orientation or disability, but it may determine where and how you seek to advertise for candidates.

The second stage is then to segment the market according to levels of experience and the types of skills and competencies that you are looking for. This need not be exhaustive, but it helps to map out the sources of talent you are most often looking to recruit from, for example: graduates, front-line service personnel, professional managers, functional specialists (e.g. Marketing, IT, Engineering). If you are clear about the main target groups, it becomes a lot easier to conduct further research into the distinctive needs and aspirations of each group, and their awareness and perceptions of your organisation. It also becomes easier to monitor your success in attracting the right kind of recruits. What proportion of candidates match your ideal profile? What are the relative application and acceptance rates among each group?

(2) Needs and aspirations

Once you have defined and segmented your target market the next step is to identify the most important factors in determining your target groups’ choice of employer. In external marketing research you generally start with the basic ‘tablestakes’ required to attract people, and then progress to a more specific analysis of individual sub-groups. Some of the most obvious tablestakes in employment include a basic demonstration of trust and respect, but there may be a number of growing trends in that you will need to judge more carefully. For example, does the growing interest in work-life balance mean that some form of flexible working should now be offered to all employees? How should you respond to growing expectation that even the humblest of employees should be able to participate in some form of self-development? There are a great many studies to choose from in making this general assessment. McKinsey’s seminal study ‘The War for Talent’ still holds many relevant insights into attracting talented people into every level of the organisation, and if you are looking for more down to earth and acerbic commentary on the subject you should try Mike Johnson’s ‘Talent Magnet’.

Having established the base-line, the next step is to consider the more specific needs and aspirations of individual target groups. There are some published studies looking at specific groups like graduates that could provide you with a starting point, but in most cases you’re going to have to conduct your own research. The most cost effective place

to start is with your own employees. A number of organisations have begun to conduct Joiners Surveys or focus groups, which can provide some very useful insights into the criteria used by different types of employee to make their choice. Some companies, such as Warner, have taken this a step further by setting up regular under-30's staff forums to explore what modern job-seekers are looking for from organisations.

Conducting research among current employees will clearly provide only a partial view of a target group's needs and aspirations, as it will be biased towards those who were positively disposed towards the organisation. It is useful, therefore, to incorporate a number of these key questions into the recruitment process itself to identify unmet needs that may be leading to rejection. Recent research from the recruitment firm Reed claimed that two thirds of people have turned down new job offers, and with growing levels of employee confidence, evaluating rejection is becoming an increasingly critical component in understanding the competitive dynamics of the marketplace.

For particularly important, or difficult to recruit target groups, such as engineers, it may also be worthwhile conducting more targeted surveys, focus groups and individual interviews out in the marketplace. While this can be both difficult and expensive to organise, the pay back in terms of getting the proposition right for these groups can be significant.

(3) Employer brand image

It is common for product or service brand marketers to use some form of brand relationship ladder that starts with basic awareness, and progresses through trial, and repeat purchase to brand loyalty and active brand advocacy. This is an interesting concept to apply to the employer brand, though it involves a number of additional dimensions. In the context of employment we suggest it would be useful to have a viewpoint on the answers to the following questions in relation to each target group:

- **Name Recognition:** How many people are likely to recognise the name of the organisation?
- **Awareness:** Of the people that recognise the name of the organisation, how many are likely to have a reasonably accurate idea of what the organisation does? What is generally known about the organisation's products or services? What is generally known about the size, scope and success of the business? What, if anything, is known about the organisation's employment record and practices?
- **Saliency:** How many people in the target group would consider your organisation if they were seeking a new employer? What are people's general perceptions of you as a potential employer? To what extent is this answer based on general perceptions of the industry sector or organisational type? Which other organisations would people include in their 'wish list' of employment preferences?
- **Trial:** What are the leading reasons for making an application? What impression of your organisation is given by your recruitment materials and activities? Your

website? What, if anything, do people hear about your organisation when they ask around?

- **Brand experience:** What are people's first impressions on joining the organisation? To what extent does it meet with their expectations? What are the most significant gaps between their image of the organisation before joining and their experience?
- **Retention and advocacy:** (in addition to the other subjects covered under 'employee insights'). How does people's image of the organisation change as they become more of an insider? What would people tell potential recruits about the organisation?
- **Alumni:** How do people describe the organisation to others once they have left? To what extent do they remain active advocates?

Brand mapping is another common technique that marketers use to understand their relative positioning in the marketplace. It involves presenting people with a variety of brand names on cards or Post-It Notes and asking for them to be grouped according to degrees of similarity. This exercise can usually be performed without much direction, and can be very revealing about how people categorise different types of employer. The exercise can also be conducted in response to a number of relevant prompts. For example, how would you group these brands according to their CV appeal, or level of care towards employees? Even though people may only have a very superficial understanding of the employment practices of each company, it is surprising how readily they can categorise different organisations into general types.

In addition to researching people's perceptions it is also valuable to conduct an analysis of the competitors who tend to turn up in your target market's salient sets. Most organisations' websites incorporate material aimed at prospective employees, and this information along with their recruitment advertising can be used to analyse their underlying proposition. It can also be used to compare more specific details about the kind of benefits employees could expect from different organisations.

Summary

1. Just as the most powerful product and service brands are founded on a multi-faceted approach to insight building, it is equally important to adopt a wide range of tools and techniques to acquire the insights necessary to develop and manage an effective employer brand.
2. Understanding the key drivers of engagement and commitment is a critical step in helping to define a powerful employment proposition.
3. The culture and 'personality' of your organisation is often the most challenging to make explicit, the most likely to provide sources of differentiation, and the most dangerous to ignore in defining your core values.
4. The best starting point for labour market research is your own most recent recruits, but you need to be mindful of the limitations of this approach.
5. Researching the external labour is generally more challenging in logistical terms than employee research, but there are a number of useful tools that can be adopted from customer research.
6. The concept of a brand relationship 'ladder' can be a useful way of integrating your labour market insights with your employee research.



The Employer Brand Consultancy

We offer brand consultancy with a difference.

Our central focus isn't brand image or design, our focus is people and leadership.

We recognise that delivering brand promises is more challenging than making them, and that this relies on the quality and commitment of your people. From back office to front line, if your own people don't buy into your brand or your leadership it's unlikely that anyone else will, but how can you ensure this happens?

We believe that in service businesses the most powerful brands are delivered from the top down and from the inside out.

We help **leadership teams**

create the kind of clarity of purpose and commitment that can transform the business.

We help **marketing people**

ensure their brand promises become 'the way we do things round here'.

We help **HR people**

to attract, retain and engage the kind of people the business needs to build and maintain competitive advantage.

We offer expertise in leadership teamwork, research, communication and internal brand management. We bring experience from over 300 engagements for some of the world's leading service brands and organisations, in both public and private sectors, from multinationals to fast growing SMEs.

**If you would like to know more about our work please contact
Richard Mosley or Jenny Davenport on +44 (0) 20 7632 5910**

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