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The influence of environmentally friendly actions on the creation of employer branding

Abstract

The article is an introduction to the issue of shaping of employer branding (EB). The focus has been put on the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in terms of environmental protection and its possible influence on the image of a company as a good employer. The aim of the article is to present the findings of the research, conducted by the author, concerning the assessment of particular characteristics of a desirable employer, taking into account care for the natural environment.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, employer branding.

1. Introduction

Functioning in such a dynamic social-economic environment as it is today forces organizations to constantly seek for new opportunities of gaining competitive advantages. Managers have to modify the way they think about the best and the most effective concepts of management in their organizations. Advancing globalization has led to a situation in which products of different companies are very similar in terms of their quality and price. That is why the differentiator for the organization is now constituted by the quality of human capital which is credited with growing significance in the process of building competitive advantage (Baruk, 2005).

More and more managers are aware of the fact that the real challenge for contemporary organizations is to attract qualified and talented employees, get them involved in accomplishment of the goals and retain them in the company as long as possible. That is why they combine traditional practices of human resource management with actions aimed at sensible creation of a company's image as an attractive workplace.

2. The concept of employer branding

The concept of image is defined as the imagination of a company, an institution, a person, etc. that is a biased set of impressions, not always similar to unbiased assessment of reality. Such an image forms in the minds of those in the environment in a response to the actions of an organization (or a particular person) (Knecht, 2006). One of the best definitions of image has been formulated by K. Wojcik (2009) who defines it as the imagination that one or more audiences have about themselves, the

company or institution. However, this picture is not real, accurately defined and in detail, but it is rather a mosaic of many details, accidentally, fragmentarily seized and with blurred differences. One of the greatest authorities of marketing, Philip Kotler (2005, p. 42), adopted a similar definition: *the set of beliefs, ideas, and impression that a person holds regarding an object*. The results of contemporary research indicate that the image does not comprise of single realities concerning individuals but it is an aggregate of numerous elements-pictures and imaginations in the minds of these individuals. They are interconnected and can be interpreted (Oliver, 2006).

According to B. Rozwadowska (2002), gaining a positive image provides an organization with higher stability of operating and lowers risk, as well as possible costs of eventual crises. The quality of image is of great importance for the human resource policy. Reputation of an organization attracts the most valuable job candidates and motivates already employed personnel to improve their skills and gives them satisfaction. Proper image has a strategic value, enhances building relations with the environment, building up trust to the institution.

Employer Branding (EB) is connected with the image of a company. The concept of EB was created in the 90s of the 21st century and S. Barrow, the author of *The Employer Brand. Branding The Best of Brand Management to People at Work* is considered to have created it. S. Barrow (2005) defines employer branding as an aggregate of functional, economic and psychological advantages of being employed and identifying with the organization. According to A. Mayo (2001) employer branding means everything that is communicated (awarely or not) to any current or future employee. A different approach to this issue is proposed by K. Backhaus, S. Tikoo (2004), according to whom employer branding is a process of building recognizable and unique identity of an organization as an employer, that distinguishes a company from its competitors. M. Kozłowski (2012, p. 13) has a similar view, defining employer branding as *all actions undertaken by an organization, aimed at its current and potential employees, which are to build its image as an attractive employer and supporting the accomplishment of its strategic business goals*. Kozłowski divides employer branding into two categories: internal and external. The first one is aimed at the employees of the company whereas the second one — at the potential candidates for a job in the company.

The main objective of the actions mentioned above is creation of an employer brand in such a way that the stakeholders (present and potential employees) regard the company as a great workplace (Minchington, 2006).

Building an employer brand is a response to the changes that have been occurring on the market of the consumer and the aspiration of companies to provide the highest standard of services. The task for companies is, on one hand, to absorb appropriate employees who understand these changes and are able to work in contemporary conditions, and on the other hand — retention of best employees in the company. It is especially difficult in terms of people who have unique, highly desirable competencies. Acquiring such candidates for a job leads to so-called wars for talents. Such talented people can decide where they want to work and seek for companies that offer the best working conditions. For them, the brand and reputation of the company matter a lot as well (Dąbrowska, 2014).

The employer brand is a means that ensures the employment of proper personnel who appreciate what the company has already achieved and who will do their tasks with engagement. The companies that make an effort to build the employer brand aim primarily to (Wojtaszczyk, 2012):

- facilitate the recruitment process,
- enhance the engagement of employees,
- better motivate the staff,
- improve the performance of a company.

Having a coherent and positive employer brand (amongst current and potential employees) brings additional benefits for an organization, such as:

- the increase in trust to the organization,
- better relations between the organization and its employees, customers, business partners and other stakeholders,
- higher level of loyalty, satisfaction and engagement of current employees,
- greater interest of potential candidates in seeking employment in the organization,
- reduction of recruitment and selection costs,
- reduction of operational costs,
- higher stability of functioning on the market,
- more effective introduction of new products on the market (Szostek, 2011).

Actions undertaken in terms of employer branding require the application of tools that are typical for human resource management, marketing and widely understood communication (Wojtaszczyk, 2012).

The tools applied from the field of *marketing* are related to:

- a) employer brand, such as:
 - corporate social responsibility,
 - events for local communities,
 - charity projects,
- b) promotion, such as:
 - advertisements in media,
 - a website,
 - a profile of the employer on social media,
 - employees' blogs.

In the area of *communication* there are both tools of internal communication (aimed at current employees) and external communication (aimed at future employees) in use, such as:

- Intranet, electronic newsletters,
- website, “career” section,
- profile of the company on social media and in recruitment social network services,
- internal publishing,
- bulletin boards, wish and complaint boxes,
- information materials,
- helpline for employees,
- employees' meetings and discussions,
- advertisement in media,

- participation in rankings of employers,
- open days and job fairs.

In the area of *human resource management*, the tools that are connected with performing particular functions are applied, in particular:

- a) procedures of internal and external recruitment,
- b) remuneration system,
- c) programme of additional benefits,
- d) system of non-material motivation,
- e) programme of personal development,
- f) work-personal life programme,
- g) programme of outplacement,
- h) management style and organizational culture.

Employer brand can be shaped in many ways. It is important to skillfully combine various tools, particularly with active promotion in different kinds of media. Nowadays it is necessary to possess a well configured and constantly updated website with references to publications about the company along with the source of the publications and proper links for internet browsing and conducting an active dialog with the ones who are interested in the information about the company (Kopeć, 2013). What is the point in undertaking a number of actions in terms of employees' development if the information about them only goes to the ones that are directly involved? However, if such announcements appear on the company's website, in an easily accessible place for the employees and potential candidates to work, they might become an effective tool of shaping the image of a desirable employer (especially for young people, who find self-development opportunities very important).

Numerous factors can affect the employer brand. They may originate both from the inside and from the environment in which the company functions. Such exemplary determinants of employer brand can be indicated (Bukowska, 2009):

- a) external (industry, legal regulations, situation on the labour market),
- b) internal (general image of the organization, organizational culture, management style, strategy of the organization, organizational structure, performance of human resource management and the quality of this resource).

3. Corporate social responsibility for natural environment

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a concept according to which the responsibility of a business means more than generating profits for the shareholders (owners) (Reyes, 2005). The idea of corporate social responsibility combines accomplishment of corporate goals having regard to welfare of employees, customers, local communities etc (Borkowska, 2005).

According to the European Commission companies voluntarily undertake actions aimed at the improvement of their stakeholders' standards of living and environmental cleanliness. It is the result of growing awareness amongst businessmen that appropriate behavior leads to stable business success (European Commission, 2001).

World Business Council for Sustainable Development defines corporate social responsibility as an obligation of businesses to contribute to sustainable economic

development throughout work with employees and their families, local community and society as a whole in order to improve the standard of their lives (www.wbcscd.ch).

More and more often entrepreneurs are required not only to obey legal and moral rules but also to fulfill expectations of the stakeholders (e.g. employees, customers, shareholders, local community, etc.) In order to improve effectiveness of social responsibility actions undertaken by entrepreneurs, various initiatives have been proposed.

One of the initiatives for corporate social responsibility is *Global Compact*. This is the name of ten principles in the area of human rights, work conditions, environmental protection and struggle against corruption. These principles were announced at the World Business Forum in 1999 by the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

Another initiative of a global range is *Global Resources Initiative* (GRI). It was created from cooperation between Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economies (CERES) and United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). GRI created and published in 2000 GRI Sustainability Reporting Guidelines that include economic, environmental and social indicators. GRI is an important step towards the establishment of unitary reporting rules in terms of corporate social responsibility (Reyes, 2005).

European Union has also dealt with corporate social responsibility. European Commission encourages to follow UN outlines but it also enacted European directives that refer to the labour market and environmental protection. In the *Green Paper* European Commission defined four main features of CSR:

- a) voluntary obligation to act according to CSR outlines,
- b) recognition of CSR as a tool for constant growth of competitiveness,
- c) complexity and multilateralism of actions,
- d) orientation towards a balance of interests between all stakeholders, based on multilateral social dialogue (Borkowska, 2005).

Additionally, respect for the human rights or regulations concerning environmental protection is recognized as obligatory.

According to the concept of corporate social responsibility, every company pursuing its own economic goals ought to contribute to achieve social welfare — be active in the field of sustainable development. Accomplishment of pro-environmental strategy requires balancing social and economic goals. Balancing ecological benefits and economic costs, a company ought to take into account these costs that the society, local residents and employees have to bear as a result of failing to undertake some actions (e.g. pollution, forest losses, extinction of animals, climate changes, respiratory diseases, cancer, etc.). Conducting of eco-balances is required by some recommended EU procedures.

Ecological actions ought to go beyond legal regulations regarding the environment. That requires great awareness of both management (from the members of the board of directors to low-level managers) and ordinary employees of a company. Nowadays significant marketing benefits circumstantially resulting from promotion of own products and creating image of a responsible company while supporting eco-friendly programmes have been noticed. Therefore more and more companies have been involved

in environmentally friendly issues, reducing negative impacts on the environment and at the same time undertaking actions to improve its state (Rybak, 2004).

Entrepreneurs fear to undertake environmentally friendly actions mainly because of the risk of higher costs that may lead to poorer performance and lower competitiveness of the company. Especially when the competitors do not have to bear the costs of advancements and ecological modernizations. As a result of globalization and uneven development of the regions, such a risk exists. That is why it is necessary to accept the rules that promote equal competitive conditions not only domestically but also on the international level.

The decisions and actions of an organization always have an influence on the environment, regardless of the location of the organization. Such influences may be related to exploitation of resources, location of a company's operations, emission of pollution, production of waste and the influence of a company's operations on natural habitats. In order to reduce a company's impact on the environment it is recommended to apply an integrated approach that takes into account direct and indirect economic, social, health and environmental outcomes of a company's decisions and actions.

In Poland corporate social responsibility is still a domain of large companies (often with foreign capital), but best practices of these firms lead to a greater interest in CRS among small and medium enterprises. Moreover, companies are more and more eager to inform about their CSR actions. Taking ecological steps within CSR is also a result of better awareness of both the entrepreneurs and stakeholders (employees, customers, local community, etc.), who put public pressure on companies by means of raising their expectations. However, will these actions be an effective tool of shaping an employer brand? The answer to this question was searched for during the research conducted by the author.

3. Research findings

The research was conducted in Gdańsk School of Higher Education (*Gdańska Szkoła Wyższa* in Polish) at its faculties in Gdańsk, Tczew, Słupsk, and Olsztyn. Data was collected through an individual survey. The respondents were both unemployed and employed students of the School. The majority of research respondents were women (74%), under 35 years old (71%), having job experience no longer than one year (25%) or more than 10 years (31%). Questionnaires were filled in anonymously and voluntarily.

The research resulted in 200 properly filled questionnaires in which the most significant features of a potential employer were set together. The respondents assessed, according to their personal views, the importance of particular features (supposedly if they were looking for a job). The assessment was conducted on the basis of a five-level scale on which 1 means "totally unimportant" and 5 means "very important". The results are not statistically representative but allow to diagnose the situation in a general way. The research findings provided the opportunity to identify some trends and introduce corrections into the research tool in order to use it in further research. The research findings are on the graph below.



Fig. 1. Features of a potential employer — research findings

Source: own work on the basis of research findings.

Among the features of a potential employer, employment stability (4.64 points) is the most desirable. The atmosphere at work is also very important (4.58) as well as stable situation of a company (4.54). Young people want to have an interesting job (4.54) but at the same time maintain balance between work and personal life (4.43). Salary is not much less important (4.38).

For the respondents such features as high quality products and/or services (4.11), convenient location (4.08), distinctive image (4.06) or company value (4.00) also turned out to be important. Below 4 points (but still significant) were: flexibility of employment (3.97), dominant position on the market (3.96), high quality trainings (3.96). The subsequent places were occupied by strong management (3.93) and company's innovativeness (3.90).

Undertaking eco-friendly actions by a company received 3.83 points and took the 16th (penultimate) place. Professional development abroad turned out to be the least important for the respondents (only 2.92 points).

Summarizing the research findings, almost all the features of a potential employer listed in the questionnaire turned out to be important for the respondents (grades from 3.83 to 4.64 on the 5-level scale). In the majority of cases people want to work in a stable, well prospering company that guarantees an interesting job and a high salary. The majority of respondents were women, that is why is not a surprise that the atmosphere at work and possibility to combine professional occupation and household duties turned out to be significant. That is why the location of a company is also quite important. Young people want to self-develop, that is why they value good trainings offered by the employer (but not necessarily abroad, that requires great mobility).

Unfortunately, eco-friendly actions undertaken by a company are of little importance (in comparison with the other features). Such a situation can be especially

astounding because it seems that the awareness of corporate social responsibility is constantly growing, both amongst the employers and employees. Treating western companies as benchmarks, more and more Polish organizations implement CSR programmes in terms of environment protection (that was mentioned before). However, as a tool to shape the image of an employer, care for the environment turns out to be not fully effective. Perhaps there is insufficient information about these actions and both current and potential employees are not fully aware of the significance of these actions. It can be concluded that environmentally friendly actions can be a tool of employer branding only if combined with other tools, especially good internal and external communication. This matter will be examined during further research.

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