



Employer Branding: Fad or Friend?

*An Exploratory Study into the Factors Influencing Employer Branding
Efforts being made by Irish Graduate Employers*

By

Rachelle Keeley B.A.

National College of Ireland

Supervisor

Rosalind Beere

School of Business

NCI

A Dissertation submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the Masters in
Human Resource Management.

Submitted: September 2014

Word Count: 19,992

ABSTRACT

This Dissertation explores the impact of employer branding strategies on employers in Ireland offering Graduate Programmes. Employer Branding strategies are being increasingly utilised among Irish employers offering Graduate Programmes to attract and retain valuable employees. Current literary works offer theoretical frameworks around which successful employer branding strategies should be based, although accounts sourced from empirical research is scarce.

The exploration took a qualitative approach and 6 interviews were conducted in total. Interviews were held with 5 professionals from different companies, each participant dealing with graduate recruitment in their company. All 5 companies feature on GradIreland's Top100 Employer Brand Survey as voted for by students and graduates. A following 6th interview was conducted with Gavan O'Brien, the Commercial Manager at GradIreland.

The research found that graduate employers are seriously leveraging themselves to attract graduates, and are doing so via channels which accommodate the trends of Generation Y. Most participating companies aren't utilising quantifiable methods to measure the return on EB investment. Instead, intangible means are accessed such as feedback from applicants.

Companies also noted that in the last few years, cross sector competition for graduates means that they need to reassess their uniqueness and target it in ways which graduates from a more diverse range of academic backgrounds can access. The note for company analysis and remaining unique was also identified by participants. Digital engagement and use of peer methods to promote employer brand was identified as both a challenge and upcoming area in employer branding & graduate recruitment.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to thank a few very important people, without their help this Dissertation would not have been possible;

- My supervisor Rosalind Beere for her guidance, constant reassurance and invaluable support. Thank you
- The 6 interviewees who kindly gave me their time and provided me with their knowledge when conducting my research
- Caroline Kennedy from NCI Careers Office who gave me the confidence to overhaul my initial research idea and focus on something I was genuinely passionate about
- The lecturers at NCI who were constantly on-hand for support throughout the year

On a personal note I would like to thank;

- ❖ My family; Joan, Rebecca and Chloe. I wouldn't be the person I am today without you all. Thanks for always being there, your encouragement has meant the world to me
- ❖ The Hughes family for their kindness and support
- ❖ All of my MA classmates and particularly Elaine, Daryl, Stephen and Aimee. Thank you all for making this course so enjoyable
- ❖ My boyfriend Constantin, for always believing in me
- ❖ The German friends and family I met along the way; Vielen Dank für alles!

Finally, this Dissertation is dedicated in loving memory of my father, George Keeley who taught me to put hard work into everything;

"If you don't give, you don't get!"

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	p. 2
Acknowledgements	p. 3
Abbreviations.....	p. 8

Chapter 1 - Introduction

1.1	Opening Remarks	p. 11
1.2	Research Grounding	p. 12
1.3	Brief Overview of Findings	p. 13
1.4	Research Title	p. 14
1.5	Research Aim	p. 14
1.6	Objectives.....	p. 14
1.7	Dissertation Structure	p. 14

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

2.0	Opening Comments	p. 16
2.1	Brand	p. 16
2.2	Branding	p. 17
2.3	Employer Branding	p. 17
2.4	Organisational attractiveness	p. 19
2.5	Strategic Employer Branding	p. 20

2.6	Employer Branding and HR	p.
		21
2.6.1	Person-Organisation Fit	p.
		21
2.6.2	Pre-Branding Considerations	p.
		21
2.6.2.1	Company Analysis	p.
		21
2.6.2.2	Creating Trust	p.
		22
2.6.2.3	Conveying the Correct Information	p.
		23
2.7	Theoretical Perspectives	p.
		23
2.7.1	Organisational Attractiveness	p.
		23
2.7.1.1	Information Source	p.
		24
2.7.1.2	Social Media	p.
		25
2.8	Employer Brand: Internal or External Focus?	p.
		25
2.9	Employer Branding Perceptions	p.
		26
2.9.1	Organisational Perspective	p.
		27
2.9.2	Potential Applicant Perspective	p.
		28
2.10	Intangible Considerations	p.
		29
2.10.1	Socio-Emotional Needs	p.
		29
2.10.2	Organisational Structure & Employee Compatibility	p.
		30

2.10.3 Corporate Social Responsibility	p.
30	
2.11 Graduate Attraction: Passive or Pro-Active Approach?	p.
31	
2.11.1 Generation Y	p.
31	
2.12 Measuring the Return on EB Investment	p.
32	
2.13 Previous Empirical Research	p.
33	
2.13.1 Attractiveness	p. 33
2.13.2 USP	p. 34
2.14 Empirical Research: An Irish Context	p.
34	
2.15 Concluding Comments	p.
35	

Chapter 3 – Aims and Objectives

3.1 Research Grounding	p.
36	
3.2 Research Aims & Objectives	p.
36	
3.3 Additional Comments	p.
37	

Chapter 4 – Methodology

4.1 Introduction	p.
38	
4.2 Research Philosophy	p.
38	
4.2.1 Epistemology	p.
38	
4.3 Quantitative Research	p.
39	

4.4	Qualitative Research	p.
	39	
4.4.1	Qualitative Research Rationale	p.
	40	
4.4.2	Alternative Considerations	p.
	40	
4.5	Interviews	p.
	41	
4.5.1	Empirical Grounding	p.
	41	
4.6	Sampling	p.
	41	
4.7	Initial Dissertation Proposition	p.
	42	
4.8	Sample Group	p.
	43	
4.9	Interview Style	p.
	44	
4.10	Interview Themes	p.
	45	
4.11	Data Collection	p.
	45	
4.12	Data Analysis	p.
	46	
4.13	Participant Anonymity	p.
	48	
4.14	Ethics & Trust Issues	p.
	48	
4.15	Research Limitations and Considerations	p.
	48	
 <u>Chapter 5 – Findings</u>		
5.1	Presentation of Findings	p.
	50	

5.2	Theme 1 - Employer Branding Values	p.
50		
5.3	Theme 2 –Measuring the Return on EB Investment	p.
53		
5.3.1	Assessing Applicant Quality	p.
55		
5.4	Theme 3 – Employer Branding Strategies	p.
56		
5.4.1	Reinventing an Employer Brand	p.
58		
5.4.2	Pre-Recruitment Processes	p.
58		
5.5	Theme 4 – Graduate Attraction: Passive or Pro-Active Approach?	p.
59		
5.5.1	Graduate Engagement	p.
59		
5.5.2	Brand Ambassadors	p.
59		
5.5.3	Curricula Integration	p.
60		
5.5.4	Social Media	p.
60		
5.6	Theme 5 – Graduate Market Changes	p.
61		
5.6.1	Generation Y Expectations	p.
61		
5.6.2	Employer Expectations	p.
62		
5.7	Theme 6 – Employer Branding Challenges	p. 62
5.7.1	Competitiveness	p.
62		
5.7.2	Budget	p.
63		
5.7.3	Transparency	p.
64		

5.7.4	Social Media	p. 64
5.8	Theme 7 – Upcoming Trends for Employer Branding & Graduate Recruitment	p. 65
5.8.1	Digital Engagement	p. 65
5.8.2	Interns	p. 66

Chapter 6 – Discussion of Findings

6.1	Opening Comments	p. 67
6.2	Objective 1 – How are Irish Employers Promoting themselves to Graduates?	p. 67
6.2.1	Internal Focus	p. 67
6.2.2	Uniqueness	p. 68
6.2.3	Identifying Competitors	p. 68
6.2.4	Social Media	p. 69
6.2.5	Active Engagement	p. 69
6.2.6	Organisational & Role Analysis	p. 71
6.2.7	Philanthropy	p. 72
6.3	Objective 2- Are employers measuring the return on EB investment? .	p.72
6.3.1	Assessing Applicant Quality	p. 73

6.4	Objective 3 –Challenges facing employers conducting EB?.....	p. 74
6.4.1	Social Media	p. 74
6.4.2	Self-Deprecation	p. 75
6.4.3	Generation Y Expectations	p. 75
6.4.4	Indirect Publicity: A Lack of Control	p. 76

Chapter 7 – Conclusion

7.1	Opening Remarks	p. 77
7.2	Objective 1.....	p. 77
7.3	Objective 2.....	p. 79
7.4	Objective 3.....	p. 79
7.5	Areas of Future Research	p. 80

<u>Bibliography</u>	p. 81
----------------------------------	-------

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Interview Question List	p. 90
Appendix 2 – Sample Interview: Company D	p. 92

ABBREVIATIONS

1. **EB:** *Employer Branding*

Throughout this Dissertation, EB will refer to the ongoing efforts by companies to promote themselves as a desirable employer. In this case, the Dissertation will be looking at EB in terms of Irish employers promoting to potential job applicants, primarily in the context of graduates.

DECLARATION

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for the assessment of the programme of study leading to the award of Masters in Human Resource Management

is entirely my own work. Any works within have not been taken from the works of others and to the extent that any such work inspired from others has been acknowledged and correctly referenced within the body and text of my work.

Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

National College of Ireland

Research Students Declaration Form

(Thesis/Author Declaration Form)

Name: _____

Degree for which thesis is submitted: _____

Material submitted for award

(a) I declare that the work has been composed by myself.

(b) I declare that all verbatim extracts contained in the thesis have been distinguished by quotation marks and the sources of information specifically acknowledged.

(c) My thesis will be included in electronic format in the College Institutional Repository TRAP (thesis reports and projects)

(d) *Either* *I declare that no material contained in the thesis has been used in any other submission for an academic award.

Or *I declare that the following material contained in the thesis formed part of a submission for the award of

(State the award and the awarding body and list the material below)

Signature of research student: _____

Date: _____

CHAPTER 1 – Introduction

1.1 Opening Remarks

The bleak economic period post 2008 saw huge changes both for organisations and employees. Companies had to re-examine their strategies to attract and maintain the talent required to sustain their organisation. HR and recruitment were no exception to this, and major changes were necessary to remain competitive. Hieronimus, Schaefer and Schröder (2005) suggest that emerging worldwide demographic trends are making it more difficult to replace lost or retired employees. Companies are increasingly competing on a global scale, and need to ensure that they leverage themselves in terms of valuable assets in order to remain competitive (Kim, York and Lim, 2010).

Situations of shortages in the world labour market (coupled with the tendencies of employees to change job more frequently) are adding to the intense focus which companies are placing on attracting the right talent (Cable and Turban, 2003; OECD, 2006 as cited in Linn and Peter (2014).

Ireland produces graduates whose education standard is ranked 11th in the world (Donnelly, 2012). The fact that the number of Irish graduates emigrating after obtaining university degrees has doubled in just four years is worrying for (Murray, 2013). A recent survey showed that 63% of emigrants who had left Ireland by 2013 had a university degree. The fleeing talent resources has added to a situation where companies are competing for remaining talent yet require better calibre (Vasagar, 2012) and graduates are becoming choosier as to who they work for.

This “brain-drain” effect resulting from the economic downturn has had a large impact on how graduate employer secure valuable talent. Companies are blatantly promoting themselves as an employer of choice, and are going to greater lengths to establish their corporate image in the minds of both consumers and potential applicants alike. Similarly, if taking into account that Ireland is an ageing population, there will be a substantial talent deficit in future years if current emigration trends are anything to go by (Murray, 2013). To facilitate this increasing need for talent, rigorous emphasis is being placed on sourcing talent via EB strategies (Botha, Bussin and de Swardt (2011).

Today’s graduates, particularly Generation Y, are becoming more aware and conscious about the type of company they are seeking employment from. ‘Generation Y’, or else commonly referred to as “millennials” refer to babies born after the late 1980’s. This cohort is reputed to be more demanding about their working conditions (Main, 2013). This war for talent means employers are having to adapt how they

represent their organisation's employment experience to fit in with what these young professionals want.

The attraction of young talent which can stay with a company long-term is an objective of many organisations. The struggle to attract young professionals is becoming increasingly difficult, particularly given the tendencies for young professionals to stay with firms for only a very short period of time (Meister, 2012). Companies are wakening up to the necessity of a strong employer brand to both attract and retain talent. As a result, companies are striving to reach talent by an array of different channels which will aid in conveying the superiority of employment in their firm.

1.2 Research Grounding

The context in which the research is set involves looking at employers operating within Ireland offering Graduate Programmes. Each participating company in this study is ranked in the top 50 of GradIreland's Top 100 Employer Survey, as voted for by students and graduates. These employers therefore act as a great example to other firms wishing to establish effective EB strategies to attract graduates.

The research aims to explore the efforts that employers are going to successfully position their brand to potential applicants. Turban and Cable (2003) make the argument that firms which possess a strong employer brand not only generate an increased level of interest among job-seekers, but that a strong employer brand can actually attract a higher calibre workforce to begin with. The theme of increased applicant numbers stemming from EB was therefore looked at, along with investigating how these companies rate "quality" talent.

Oladipo, Iyambo and Otubanjo (2013) suggest the need for further research regarding EB and firms whose operations is defined by changes in the environment. In this case, the firms' operations are being defined by the demographic changes brought about by emigration trends, the economic downturn and the increasing tendency of employees to leave an organisation after a shorter period of time.

1.3 Brief Overview of Findings

Although talent is naturally accepted necessity in achieving organisational success, definite real-life attraction strategies remain unclear (Botha et al., 2011). In order to conceptualize effective methods of conducting such strategically focused strategies, one must appreciate the principles associated with achieving effective EB efforts.

The concept of utilising EB strategies to raise the awareness of potential applicants regarding a uniquely superior employment experience is widely discussed by academics (Martin, Gollan and Grigg, 2011; Sullivan, 2004; Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). This awareness will increase the likelihood of job seekers applying to an organisation (Moroko and Uncles, 2008). This increase in applicants gives the company the luxury of having a larger selection pool to recruit from (Cable and Turban, 2001).

Although EB has, for larger companies, been commonplace, it hasn't always been so prevalent and rigorous as it appears to be today. The colossal task of sourcing, developing and retaining the right talent requires as much attention as other areas of running a successful organisation, for example product development or project management (Kaliprasad, 2006).

The research found that although companies are largely replicating the theoretical perspectives suggested in the literature, there are no generic steps which companies can take to create or maintain a strong employer brand. Companies need to assess their own identity prior to EB and consider various pre-branding strategies. Companies varied by way of graduate engagement levels, campus activity, application requirements, assessing quality, and even how they prioritised EB values.

The ways in which companies are measuring the return on EB efforts proves inconclusive of solid metrics. Participants were basing their perceptions of positive EB investment return via intangible methods such as improved applicant quality and feedback from successful and unsuccessful applicants.

Social media is becoming increasingly utilised to engage potential applicants, but particularly effective as an appropriate channel to connect with graduates.

The findings demonstrated that there are certain challenges facing EB which need to be considered by companies prior to commencing branding efforts. These include pre-recruitment formal HR processes to minimize scenarios in which dissatisfaction

among employees may arise if the advertised role isn't reflective of the job vacancy. Pre-branding company analysis is also necessary, along with an equally balanced internal and external EB infrastructure to support organisational strategies.

1.4 Research Title

The title of this Dissertation is "An exploration into the employer branding efforts being conducted by employers in Ireland offering graduate programmes.

1.5 Research Aim

The researchers aim is to explore the strategies which popular graduate employers are conducting to attract Ireland's talent in a time where rigorous competition is happening between organisations to entice talent. The researchers aim is also to determine current trends in the field of employer branding.

1.6 Objectives

The research objectives for this study are to identify:

1. How are Irish employers promoting themselves to graduates?
2. Are employers measuring the return on their EB investments?
3. Are there any challenges facing employers conducting EB?

1.7 Dissertation Structure

This Dissertation is comprised of seven chapters.

Chapter One offers an introduction into the proposed research and the demographic context in which it is set. This is important as it informs the reader why employer branding is becoming increasingly important for organisations.

Chapter Two offers an overview of the literature surrounding the topic of employer branding. The relevance of employer branding is discussed, along with theoretical perspectives which provide frameworks to organisations seeking to establish a strong employer brand.

Chapter Three sets out the researchers aims and objectives in response to the available literary works regarding EB.

Chapter Four discusses the methodological approach undertaken by the researcher to explore the aims and objectives stated in Chapter Three. Justifications for the chosen approaches are included, along with details of the data collection, sample and analysis. Chapter Five will outline the key findings retrieved during the data collection process.

Chapter Six will discuss these findings in terms of the literature presented in Chapter Two.

Chapter Seven will see the researcher draw conclusions and make suggestions for areas of future research.

CHAPTER 2 - Literature Review

2.0 Opening Comments

This chapter examines literature on the subject of EB. The concepts of basic brand and branding are discussed, following into an overview of EB. References within to “potential applicants” refer to today’s graduates. Academic work throws light on factors which partially contribute toward effective EB. Judging from the literature, a range of activities ought to be considered by companies both prior, during and post EB efforts.

2.1 Brand

Brand and brand associations are often intangible, yet one of the key assets that a company possesses (Elving, Westhoff, Meeusen and Schoonderbeek, 2012; Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). The concept of brand and branding fund derives from the marketing sector, and successful brand/branding strategies have been defined as the persuasion of all desired stakeholders that you (or company or product) are the sole provider/s of what they are looking for (Lake, n.d.) The allure of a brand must be strong enough to entice parties to the brink of availing of the product/service, but also stimulate an emotional reaction in the desired stakeholders;

“A great brand is a story that’s never completely told. A brand is a metaphorical story that’s evolving all the time... stories that create the emotional context people need to locate themselves in a larger experience” (Peters, 1999, n.p.)

There are 5 dimensions of a brand which aid in attracting consumers;

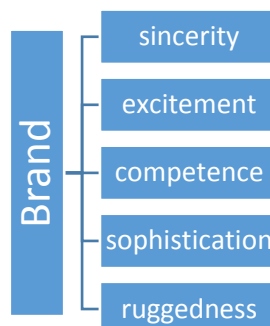


Figure 1. Brand Dimensions (Aaker, 1997, p. 354).

A mutually advantageous aspect of establishing a well reputed brand exists for both sellers and consumers as it simplifies decisions for both parties, (Garner, Erhardt and Martin-Rios, 2011). These scholars argue that brand recognition can aid in increasing profit by raising both organisational and product awareness which increases the likelihood of purchase/use of service(s). Additionally, they discuss the idea that brand awareness reduces consumer doubt, thus making them feel confident about buying into the brand. Brands can also act as a time saver.

A well developed brand will naturally instill confidence and loyalty among consumers when choosing a product/service, therefore it is a highly important increment in the stages prior to purchase/use of service. It can also affect consumer decisions by reducing doubt and instilling confidence in their choice to buy a product or service (Collins and Stevens, 2002).

2.2 Branding

The term “branding” implies the ongoing efforts to raise or maintain awareness of an idea, theme, product or service offered by a company among a predetermined target market (Davis, 2010). The aim of branding is to convey the uniqueness of a particular offering via a set of advertising campaigns or consistent theme(s). Branding aims to establish an awareness among a cohort(s), and in doing so, attract and retain loyal consumers (BusinessDictionary, n.d.) The concept has however developed into the method of projecting the awareness of both tangible and intangible assets, inclusive of people, places and organisations (Peters, 1999 as cited in Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004).

Branding implies the ongoing strategy, or way(s) in which a product or service is being represented to stakeholders. In addition to the more physical and basic brand connotations i.e. symbols or designs, branding efforts may also be subliminally interpreted by consumers through their own experience with the organisation (Franca and Pahor, 2011). Such experiences will naturally be alerted by such physicalities and images, however consumer’s subconscious linkage of their own interaction with the firm will substantiate their perceptions of the brand more so than purely symbolic branding imagery (Franca and Pahor, 2012).

2.3 Employer Branding

One of the initial discussions regarding EB by Ambler and Barrow (1996) classed the phenomenon as the way in which companies publicly differentiate themselves from others in terms of employment experience. Their definition outlines a combination of overall factors which ultimately contribute to the creation of a strong employer brand;

“The package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company”

(Ambler and Barrow, 1996, p. 8).

Collins and Stevens (2002) note that the impact of brand and branding efforts are also applicable to EB. Brand image plays an important role in a consumer’s decision regarding the use of a product/service, as awareness will be pre-existing.

Similar to the persuasional aspect of branding, EB additionally incorporates the perceptions of current and potential employees as their desired branding targets (Edwards, 2010). Although Moroko and Uncles (2008) argue the inconsistencies between basic consumer branding theories and EB; Gardner et al. (2011) dispute this. They maintain that theoretical frameworks between product/service brand knowledge mirror the factors involved with employer brand knowledge.

The “brand” in EB consists of varying intangible factors, inclusive of perceptions and attitudes that exist in a current or potential employees mind regarding the employment experience in a company (Hays, 2010.).

In essence, the term “employer brand” can be interpreted as an organisation’s differentiated attractiveness with regard to functional and psychological advantages of employment within their firm (Ambler and Barrow, 1996).

The goal of EB is to project information regarding an organisation’s superior working environment, along with emphasizing the company’s values and/ or company culture (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). This conveyance of a superior employment opportunity can be projected via a series of communicated information (messages and/or images) that the company has intentionally provided to the employment market. The EB is thus the strategic and ongoing ploy to promote a company from an employment perspective.

2.4 Organisational Attractiveness

EB aids in creating organisational attractiveness which can be defined as follows;

“An attitude or expressed general positive affect toward an organisation and toward viewing the organisation as a desirable entity with which to initiate some relationship”, (Aiman-Smith, Bauer and Cable, 2001, p. 221).

Research has shown that companies possessing a strong employer brand are generally preferred by job seekers (Srivastava & Bhatnagar, 2010; Cable & Turban, 2001) therefore increasing the probability of application. This will ultimately generate a larger talent pool for the company to choose from, ensuring that the adequate talent is sourced. Furthermore, firms which hold a superior reputation as an employer will generally attract higher quality applicants in the first place (Turban and Cable, 2003).

In addition to smoother recruiting, EB offers additional benefits internally by way of internal attractiveness. Seghal and Malati (2013) discuss the capabilities of an effective employer brand to attract and retain talent who will work efficiently. This superior product/service provision can perpetuate the awareness and interest of potential future candidates, customers and key stakeholders, creating a cyclical nature between EB and organisational success.

This is represented in Figure 2 by an illustration compiled by the Dissertaton’s author;

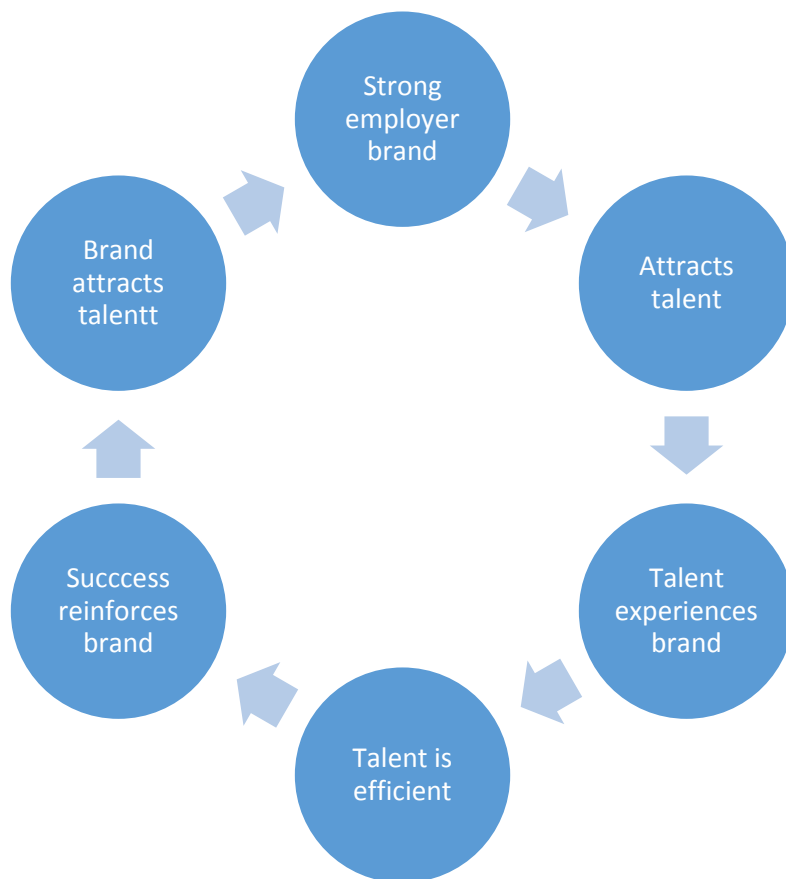


Figure 2. Employer Brand & Superior Service Model (Dissertation author).

2.5 Strategic Employer Branding

The pursuit and execution of EB is often viewed in strategic terms, with a long-term view to promote awareness among a firm's key stakeholders. The evolution of HR in strategic terms is somewhat recent. The connection between effective EB is synonymous with HR, and successful EB involves harmonisation between marketing and HR strategies (Edwards, 2010).

Sullivan (2004) discusses the idea of EB specifically in terms of increasing the awareness of all current and potential employees. In addition to encouraging the knowledge of such stakeholders, the strategic focus of EB acts primarily as a signal point of reference to all existing and future employees that the firm is a desirable environment to work in (Moroko and Uncles, 2008). To achieve branding success however, an organisation mustn't simply apply conventional techniques to build their brand, rather the intended branding efforts must closely tie in with the company's

overall brand strategy. This needs a deeply strategic focus which is best to examine prior to conducting any EB efforts.

EB strategies aim to convey such messages from an employees viewpoint with the hope of depicting an ideal working environment (Mason-Jones, 2005). Identifying an organisation's employment experience may be difficult to determine however due to the array of aspects that formulate an employee's experience (Edwards, 2010). Firms must therefore appreciate the multiple ways in which employees may be satisfied in the workplace, and position themselves to attract the perfectly suited candidates. This requires integrated internal strategic HR approach to coincide with the company's external EB strategies.

2.6 Employer Branding & HR

Love and Singh (2011) associate the power of branding to HR practices. A plethora of factors can contribute to a strong corporate image, and each require the internal support of HR.

2.6.1 Person-Organisational Fit

Personal values greatly affect potential applicant's decisions to apply. Lievens, Van Hove and Schreurs (2005) and Turban and Keon, (1993) signalled that organisations possessing similar values can offer great worth in terms of potential applicant interest. Elving et al. (2012) summarises values as being inclusive of a supportive working environment, the organisation's ethical principles, salary, working culture and progression opportunities.

2.6.2 Pre-Branding Considerations

Purely transactional employment opportunities could initially entice applicants, however long term retention requires extra focus (Edwards, 2010; Hieronimus et al. 2005). The execution of EB strategies will only be effective if they are created in the correct context. The following steps could be taken into account prior to branding efforts;

2.6.2.1 Company Analysis

Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) suggest that EB involves several stages. Initially, a firm will need to identify the current situation of their company culture. This diagnosis can

include anything from organisational culture, management style, current employee profile, and if possible, the current employment image associated with their company. This overall identification is referred to as the “value proposition” (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004, p. 502).

Sullivan (2004) outlines that in order to achieve an effective branding strategy, the employer brand itself must be consistent with any other branding efforts that the firm is undertaking. Once this is done, the company should then decipher their intended branding targets. Externally marketing to recruitment agencies and potential employees is primarily designed to initially attract the desired applicants, but additionally functions to promote and enhance the corporate brand image internally (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004).

2.6.2.2 Creating Trust

The literature primarily emphasizes the relevance of organisational uniqueness in the communicated message (Kainulainen, 2014), but a feeling of legitimacy must also be perceived by recipients. Cornelissen (2011) as cited in Kainulainen (2014) argues that in order for a company to reach and convince their branding targets, a sense of familiarity in the branding strategy must be conveyed.

Companies could achieve this by remaining relatively within the parameters of what is held normal for the product/service that they are advertising. This will reassure relevant stakeholders that the company in question is legitimate and not completely isolated in terms of how they operate. In the case of EB, this could mean offering similar (albeit superior) perks in comparison with other firms. A survey conducted by Hays (2010) investigated what constitutes as effective EB. In one question, investigating the importance of trust in employer branding, 79% of employees and 83% of employers deemed trust to be one of the main pivotal agents (Hays, 2010 p. 7).

Companies which are prevalent in people’s minds are argued to have much less obligation to convey similarity to maintain their brand (Cornelissen, 2014 as cited in Kainulainen, 2014). Subsequently, these firms are in a position to portray a higher level of individuality without jeopardising attracting potential stakeholders. Overall, while it is mindful to remember that although an employer’s USP is important, this shouldn’t stray too far from what job-seekers will be expecting to hear.

2.6.2.3 Conveying the Correct Information

Correctly conveying a company's employment experience is mentioned in the literature (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Cable, Aiman-Smith, Mulvey and Edwards; 2000). These findings indicate that misconceptions among potential or recent recruits may lead to detriments for the company during, or post-recruitment processes. The provision of purely positive and blatantly desirable traits to a job seeker may prove disappointing if these traits do not match the reality of the employment experience (Jonze and Öster, 2012; Cable et al. (2000). Such disappointment may lead to insufficient satisfaction levels, potentially damaging the long-term retention of desirable human capital (Judge and Bretz, 1991). Although publicising a company's specific strengths will naturally raise the likelihood of attracting desired talent, it would be wise to ensure that the extent of these strengths does in fact match reality.

2.7 Theoretical Perspectives

Certain factors which help to strategically position an employer brand presented themselves upon literary examination. The most recurring factors are listed below, and comprise of mostly intangible factors.

2.7.1 Organisational Attractiveness

Elving et al. (2012) and Aiman-Smith et al. (2001) refer to organisational attractiveness, arguing that opinions held by potential applicants are formed by projected branding strategies such as job-advertisements, websites and brand-advertising. It is also put forward here that indirect branding such as word-of-mouth from employees or indeed people related to the organisation may affect a potential applicants' perspective. Hays (2010.) argues that among others, job seekers consider pay, work-life balance, benefits, career progression and working culture when looking for a new job. These attributes (but only when positive) will be associated by the job seeker when considering applying to an organisation (Hays, 2010).

The following points can affect the way in which an organisation's attractiveness is perceived by EB targets:

2..7.1.1 Information Source

Cable and Turban (2001) comment on the variance in perceptions among job seekers deriving from the way they hear the information regarding the employer. Employment information mostly comes directly from the company, or via alternative information sources such as word of mouth or peer information (Cable and Turban, 2001). Information from peers is deemed to be more trustworthy in comparison to information provided by companies (Knoblauch, 2014; Van Hoyer and Lievens, 2009). Bazaar (2012) and Knoblauch (2014, n. p.) says that “Millennials Trust User-Generated Content 50% More Than Other Media”

“When it comes to trust, it turns out millennials almost always choose their peers over professionals” (Knoblauch, 2014, n.p.).

Collins and Stevens (2002) add to the argument about the source of information, and suggest focusing on a series of EB strategies to be conducted prior to recruitment phase. Such strategies include investing in sponsorships and advertising.

LinkedIn (2012) illustrated the effectiveness of EB via the following viral channels;



Figure 3. Viral channels of EB information. LinkedIn (2012, p. 16).

If what LinkedIn (2012); Cable and Turban (2001) suggest regarding the variance in perceptions arising from information sources is correct, companies would be wise to invest in a number of advertising platforms.

2.7.1.2 Social Media

Previous empirical study has shown that social media massively contributes to EB strategies (Sivertzen, Ragnhild and Olafsen, 2013). Sivertzen et al. (2013) posited that incorporating social media into recruitment or EB strategies will contribute considerably more if the organisational attributes are of interest to potential employees. This could be relevant in the case of graduate job-seekers seeking feedback from peers. This is in response to the argument above by Knoblauch (2014) stating that peer information may be more valued by interested graduates as opposed to company information.

Heavy reliance on the most prevalent sites to conduct recruitment or EB strategies may not be advisable either. A recent report cited by De Baere (2014) shows that the online engagement levels with the 10 most commonly followed brands on Facebook have declined by 40% year-on-year. This is surprising given the increase of 20.1% in the amount of activity conducted by these brands (De Baere, 2014).

These trends seem to be outweighed by positive attributes associated with social media in recruitment Collins and Stevens (2002) found that easily accessible information such as online, via publicity or word of mouth strategies can greatly improve the attractiveness of an organisation. Using social media in a recruitment context is a phenomenon not yet widely examined (Kaiulainen, 2014), but it is worth noting that there is an increased degree of interactivity associated with social media platforms when promoting or recruiting (Sivertzen et al. 2013).

2.8 Employer Branding: Internal or External Focus?

The relevance of EB has arisen from somewhat obscurity in the last decade or so (Edwards, 2010), with previous EB initiatives focusing largely externally. Older EB perceptions saw firms striving to elicit efficiency and commitment from employees with the hope that a strong brand would manifest from within and radiate outwards to other stakeholders (Oladipo et al. 2013; Schlager, Bodderas, Maas and Machelin, 2011). The realisation soon dawned that firms also needed to attract such willing employees in the first place, and this needed an additional external, recruitment-

orientated focus (Oladipo et al. 2013). The effect that internal efforts can have on a company's branding strategy shouldn't be underestimated however.

Foster, Punjaisiri and Cheng (2010) posit the connection between a corporate brand, an external employer brand and internal branding strategies. Internal EB refers to how the company portrays the company culture to their employees, and how this image is perceived (Sivertzen et al., 2013). Contrastingly, external EB encompasses how an image is portrayed to external stakeholders and how they perceive the organisation as an employer (Martin, Beaumont, Doig and Pate; 2005 as cited in Sivertzen et al., 2013). Foster et al. (2010) suggest nurturing internal efforts which can greatly aid in achieving successful external EB efforts.

Kotler (1994) as cited in Seghal and Malati (2013) regards internal marketing as beneficial because it help to develop and motivate of competent. Internal marketing can reinforces the employer brand's promise to new and existing recruits (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). This body of staff can help to ensure a distinct and sustainable competitive advantage (Harari, 1998).

Internal branding can aid in reinforcing the intent of promises made to recruits when they applied (Seghal and Malati, 2013). This enhances the organisational culture, and reinforces to the employee that they made the right decision in applying. Seghal and Malati, (2013) suggest that primarily focusing on nurturing an employer's brand within a company before projecting it outwards is a more feasible way to achieve a sustained employer brand.

This contrasts to Arachchige and Robertson (2011) who suggest equally balancing internal and external EB. Firstly, existing employees can radiate the brand outwards, and these messages can aid external EB efforts. Secondly, this talent will be more likely to remain committed and loyal to working for their employer as they feel positive about the employer prior to commencement.

Korpi, Laine and Soljasalo (2012) as cited in Kaiunulaien (2014) acknowledge the two-tiered side of branding, but note that internal and external EB are actually interlinked as the external image impacts on the image internally.

2.9 Employer Brand Perceptions

Perceptions regarding an organisation's image as an employer are strongly associated with an organisation's general reputation. The company's image as an employer derives directly from the overall reputation that a company holds (Arachchige and Robertson, 2011). This product/service reputation then feeds back into the perceptions that people have regarding the company as an employer. This cyclical nature between reputation and employer brand largely aids the recruitment process as job seekers will have a substantially higher level of brand awareness when applying for positions (Cable and Turban, 2001).

Turban and Cable (2003) completed research investigating the effects of company's public reputation on the typicality's of job applicant's characteristics. The research was indicative of the fact that not only do firms who have a better corporate reputation attract a higher number of applicants; the number of quality applicants also increases. The underlying reasons as to why this occurs was not found, although it was suggested within the publication that a social identity aspect could be linked with job applicant numbers increasing.

Subsequent scholarly findings (Collins and Han, 2004) re-examined the relationship between corporate reputation and applicant numbers. These authors suggested that a good corporate reputation alone was not sufficient in enticing job applicants, rather a mere factor within a plethora of reasons as to why a job seeker will be attracted to a firm. There are two opposing viewpoints to consider when considering the strength of an employer brand;

2.9.1 Organisational Perspective

The need for a correct conveyance of a company's employer brand is mentioned in the literature (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Cable et al., 2000) with the view that misconceptions among potential applicants may lead to detriments for the company during, or post-recruitment processes.

Communicating the correct information to potential recruits regarding a company's employer brand is something which may prove difficult if the employer has a clouded view of what their employment experience is in reality (Knox and Freeman, 2006 as cited in Arachchige, and Roberston, 2011). If recruiters view the organisation in a more positive light in comparison to potential applicants, dissatisfaction or misalignment of expectations and reality may result in grievances;

”Employee dissatisfaction may relate to employer treatment, demands, expectations, or any other enactment of the contractual relationship which is perceived to be unreasonable, inequitable or illegitimate” Pilbeam and Corbridge (2006, p. 463).

In this instance, correct identification on behalf of the employer in terms of their employer brand would prove beneficial in minimizing grievances and misunderstandings among recruited parties.

2.9.2 Potential Applicant Perspective

Johnson and Roberts (2006) as cited in Arachchige and Robertson (2011) illustrated perceptions of job seekers compared to employers. They showed that only 29% of job seekers viewed quality of an organisations products or services as linking with the organisation as an employer. 40% of respondents regarded an organisations’ treatment of their employees as signs of a good employer. This leaves room for 31% of job seeking respondents who cited other intangible factors as contributory when determining if an organisation is a desirable employer.

Figure 4 illustrates the contribution of both recruiter and potential recruits’ perceptions to the internal and external employer brand image;

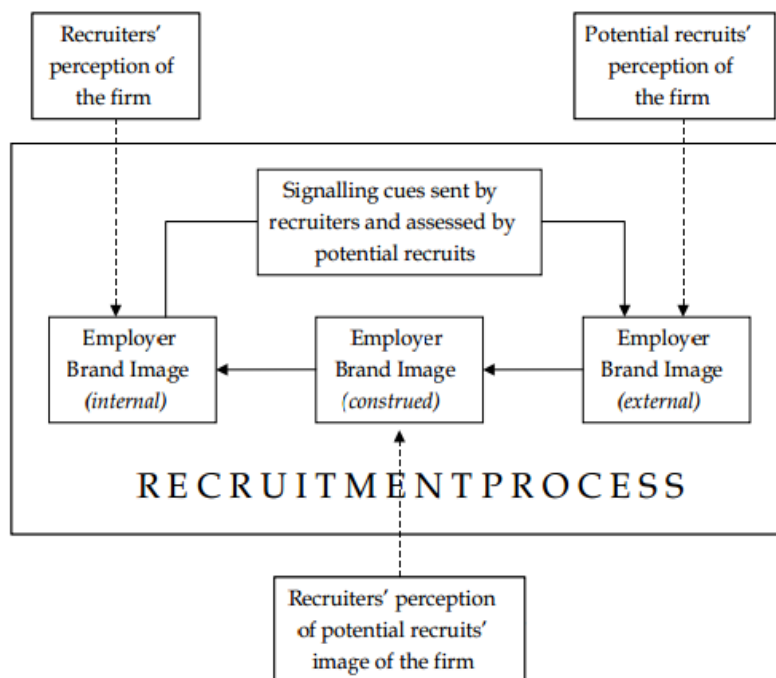


Figure 4. Employer brand recruitment process model (Knox and Freeman, 2006, p. 700).

2.10 Intangible Considerations

Definitions of EB offered by Ambler and Barrow (1996) mention communicating a “unique” employment experience. This experience could include financial offerings such as job security or compensation, but should also ideally incorporate a social aspect of the employment. A reasonable allocation of socio-emotional needs may help to entice potential applicants (Ambler and Barrow, 1996). Intangible factors may include progression opportunities or training support. On a wider level, sponsoring participation with charities or offering sabbaticals may help to entice applicants (Hieronimus et al. (2005); Collins and Stevens (2002).

Luscombe, Lewis and Biggs (2013) outline that although job-seekers appreciate tangible aspects, they are more likely to remain working if other, non-monetary employment conditions prove adequate. Overall, consideration of the following intangible factors may prove useful;

2.10.1 Socio-Emotional Needs

A personal sense of fulfilment, for example working for a humanitarian cause may also contribute to the psychological satisfaction of employees. The establishment of a strong employer brand can be supported by conveying a set of morals and values that reflect a potential stakeholder’s own moral grounding (Arachchige and Robertson, 2011). The theory of potential applicants gravitating to (perceived) similar-minded companies is set out by Backhaus and Tikoo, (2004). These authors reiterate that a better match between organisations and their employees’ emotional values will prove fruitful long-term in attracting and retaining worthy employees.

If a company can communicate their stance on particular subjects to attract like-minded job-seekers; it will give the impression to job-seekers that the employment experience holds more substance. This would be in comparison with an employment experience perceived by potential applicants to be purely transactional (Martin and Beaumont, 2003).

2.10.2 Organisational Structure and Employee Compatibility

An important increment of effective EB involves matching the values of stakeholders. With recruits, this is important as they feel confident when recommending the firm, therefore perpetuating EB efforts (Matrin et al., 2011). An employee may feel more comfortable working in a professional culture which is similar to their previous job experiences or current job expectations. Organisational cultures enticing applicants may vary by way of internal communication systems, progression opportunities or even the company's stance on an appropriate work-life balance (Tews, Michel and Bartlett, 2012).

With this in mind, realistically providing an environment in which organisational values are perceived by employees as being superior will help to enhance competitiveness.

2.10.3 Corporate Social Responsibility

Other factors which may tap into the value systems and morals of potential stakeholders (and increase application likelihood) include Corporate Social Responsibility. CSR entails the integrative mix of environmental/societal issues into an organisation's strategy or their dealings with key stakeholders. An effective CSR approach will sufficiently meet the expectations of key stakeholders and achieve an adequate balance between economic, social, and environmental imperatives (UNIDO, n.d.). Not to be confused with *implicit* CSR in which a company fulfils their basic legal duties, *explicit* CSR entails additional voluntary participation which surpasses minimum obligations (Moon and Matten, 2008). Greening and Turban (2000) examined the correlation between an organisation's CSR compliance and job applicant numbers. It was concluded that an increased level of candidates were more likely to seek employment from a firm deemed to be socially responsible. This was in comparison to firms reputed to be less active in CSR activities. Judge and Bretz, (1991) note however that individuals will generally only take more heed of an organisation's CSR activity if the activities are aligned with an individual's personal values.

2.11 Graduate Attraction: An Irish Recruitment Context

Ireland is renowned for its education standards, ranking 11th place worldwide (Donnelly, 2012); however the availability of talent has been deeply affected by recent demographic trends. A survey conducted by UCC indicated that in the year up to April 2013, a staggering 63% of emigrants had graduated from university with a degree. It would appear that remaining graduates have greater choice regarding employers, given that the talent pool is somewhat limited.

This power shift doesn't necessarily mean that employers are submissive in the selection stakes however. 76% of graduate employers in 2012 were requesting applicants with a 2.1 degree, up from just 52% of employers in 2004 (Vasagar, 2012). This illustrates the high demand for talented employees, and employers are going to every length possible to access this talent.

Certain employers in Ireland prove popular among Ireland's graduates, and feature on GradIreland's Top 100 Employers Survey conducted annually and voted for by students and graduates. These employers are for some reason proving desirable among Ireland's graduates, and are possibly acting as a solid reason for graduates to stay in the country.

2.11.1 Generation Y

Generation Y's age classification isn't definitive, but most sources cite the age group as babies born between the early 1980's and early 1990's (Mannion, 2013; Bazaar, 2012; McGinnis, 2011). The effect that Ireland's flailing prosperity had on Generation Y in the period post 2008 saw many critics vocalising their scepticism regarding the diligence and hardworking nature of Generation Y during these turbulent times. Narcissistic, selfish, lazy and the "Me, Me, Me Generation" wouldn't be uncommon associations with this age group. Main (2013) summarised descriptions of Generation Y which view the cohort as being "deluded", "trophy kids" who are "civically and politically disengaged".

Although many sceptics have offered their opinions on this generation, an equal amount have praised the age group and what they represent. Randolph (2008) merits the generation for being outspoken,

“They're used to questioning authority - their parents and teachers - and would rather work in a meaningful job and contribute to the company than receive a fancy title and corner office” (Randolph, 2008, n.p.).

Kropp (2012) defends the labels of Generation Y as “trophy kids” who need praise, associating this need for praise as Generation Y merely seeking recognition for their hard work. Kropp (2012) argues that by seeking recognition, the opinions of managers/senior staff are valued by Generation Y.

Attracting and retaining young talent gives organisations an extended value as graduates will naturally be working for longer than a Generation X member entering the workforce. Muller (2011) outlines a reason why the generation is much desired by today's companies;

“The biggest distinction for Generation Y is that it's the first age group that can claim a lifetime of exposure to computers” (Muller, 2011, n.p.).

This exposure will obviously prove superior in business, however the life time aspect can be assumed in a general sense also. Konig (2008) warns of a looming talent crisis in which, for every one person entering the workforce in 2016, six people will be leaving it. By attracting and keeping talent long-term, organisations may improve competitiveness.

2.12 Measuring the Return on Employer Branding Investment

Love and Singh (2011) discussed the increasing reliance of firms to monitor the effect which EB has on their organisations via publicity surveys illustrating their superior employment provision. A report by LinkedIn (2012) noted that although companies appreciate the value of EB, there is a “disconnect between awareness and action” (LinkedIn, 2012, p. 18). This report depicted that only 35% of companies surveyed are monitoring the effectiveness of their EB strategies via feedback from candidates;

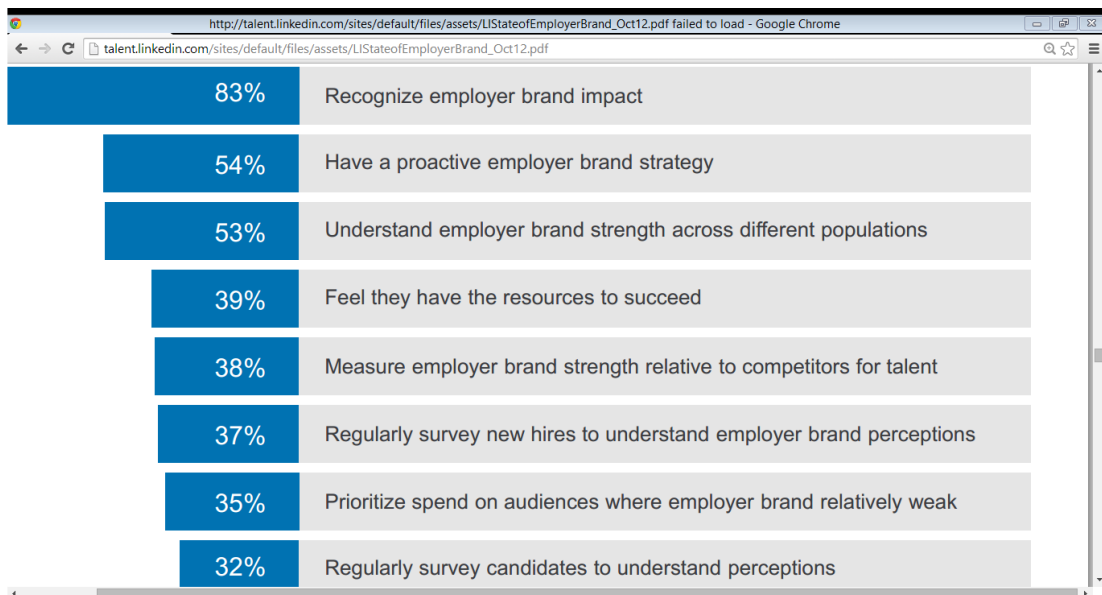


Figure 5. Employer Branding Measurement Awareness. LinkedIn (2012, p. 19).

The seeming lack of focus placed on measuring EB efforts is worrying, considering the heavy investment both time-wise and financially.

2.13 Previous Empirical EB Research

Previous research has established qualities which contribute to a company's image (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Cable and Turban, 2001). Lievens et al. (2007) as cited in Srivastava and Jyotsna (2010) explored the reasons as to why employees are attracted to an organisation and subsequently feel connected.

2.13.1 Attractiveness

Although Slaughter et al. (2008) as cited in Srivastava and Jyotsna (2010) noted that symbolic attractiveness contributed to applicants applying; however this wasn't a widely accepted theory. Collins and Stevens (2002) concluded that individual company's employment experience had a deeper effect among job seekers versus specific role specifications.

2.13.2 USP

Research conducted by Hieronimus et al. (2005) into varying firm's employer brand strategies indicate that employers who specifically focus on their USP's are more effective in yielding positive results when recruiting the right people. This strategy is discussed in contrast with companies who employ a more "scattered" effort when communicating their brand image to potential recruits (Hieronimus et al. 2005, pp. 13). This research source discovered a company who was particularly poor at conveying that their company was desirable to potential recruits. They managed to identify this weakness and alter their strategy accordingly. The company held interactive events, demonstrating their ideologies and the employment offering available at their firms.

2.14 Empirical Research in Ireland

The researcher yielded no results when examining EB efforts to attract graduates in an Irish context. Srivastava and Jyotsna (2010) and Berthon, Ewing and Hah (2001) added to the researchers' opinion that the literature reveals scarce research on the development of EB theory in general.

A 2012 survey by GradIreland showed that a few trends were beginning to emerge in Irish graduate recruitment as a result of the economic downturn. We saw that employers were recruiting less, but recruiting better by way of requesting that graduate applicants held better degrees. This idea of employers becoming more selective was also evident as 48.8% of employers in this survey stated that they felt graduates in general lacked in IT and computer skills.

Johns (2013) mentions an array of skills thought to be welcomed by employers such as presentation skills, communication skills and team-building skills. Adams (2013) compiled a list of what employers are reputed to view as "skilled" workers. These traits include skills such as organisational, analytical and the ability to influence.

It is clear that employers are becoming increasingly aware of what talent they want, as are graduates regarding the employers they work for. The ability to attract Ireland's graduates, which largely consist of Generation Y (ie. "overly ambitious, self entitled

dreamers who don't pay their dues and are only concerned about higher pay and more time off" (Mannion, 2013) isn't an area presented in the literature.

Kainulainen (2014) suggests that the theoretical foundation of EB hasn't fully developed yet; commenting on the incomplete understanding when applying the theory of generic branding strategies in a real life context. Key literature on the similar topic of Organisational Branding for example is primarily psychological in nature, and offers very little empirical insight into the field of successful EB (Edwards, 2010).

2.15 Concluding Comments

Considering the research that has been done on employer brand and talent acquisition, few attempts have been carried out to ascertain rigid employer brand concepts by means of a particular model (Minchington, 2010; Armstrong, 2007; Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). The inability of firms to develop and maintain their employer brand among current and potential recruits may render them vulnerable and less likely to remain competitive in the long-term. Although intangible factors are likely to aid EB strategies by informing potential recruits, we can only take these perspectives as theoretically based.

Additionally, considering the level of investment spent on EB efforts, it is important to monitor the return on such investments. The literature suggested robust metrics to measure returns, however the broad scope of additional benefits achieved by EB may not be measurable quantifiably, and would need an empirical investigation.

The market in which Ireland's graduates are entering the workplace is decidedly different compared to timeframes in which previous studies (non-Irish based) were completed. The dynamic strategies necessary to attract new graduates is a topic which no one source can irrefutably define, and needs a cross-sector empirical approach to explore the contemporary ways in which companies today are enticing Ireland's young talent.

CHAPTER 3 – Aims & Objectives

3.1 Research Grounding

The importance of adequately attracting talent is a key priority for many businesses today. The literature outlines theoretical perspectives regarding what constitutes as effective EB, and argues contributory factors to hopefully yield better alignment between the organisational strategy and employees. The scope of perspectives regarding factors influencing EB strategies were so broad that empirical research of EB in a real-life context needed to be considered.

Attempts to establish previous research into the area provided little by means of EB in a graduate context, and what appeared to be nothing about the Irish market.

The lack of sufficiently rigid sources exploring EB influences and the efforts being conducted by graduate recruiters encouraged the researcher to initiate research into EB in an Irish graduate recruitment context.

3.2 Research Aim & Objectives

The main objective of this Dissertation is to explore the influencing factors for EB efforts among Irish graduate employers.

The researcher is mindful of the broad range of factors which can contribute to a company's success in EB strategies, so in order to wholly investigate this main research question, a number of objectives were formulated;

1. How are Irish employers promoting themselves to graduates?
2. Are employers measuring the return on their EB investments?
3. Are there any challenges facing employers conducting EB?

These objectives stemmed from the ambiguity experienced by the research while examining the literature. No research has been done into EB perceptions of companies in Irish companies deemed the most popular among graduates. Upon literary reflection, the researcher noticed a wide array of theoretical perspectives to utilise EB to attract graduates, although the efforts being made by successful Irish employers in real life wasn't available. Finally, the awakening of employers to the relevance of EB

in general means that companies are scurrying to find the most appropriate avenues to promote themselves to graduates. The researcher wanted to ascertain any potential challenges are employers facing with EB, and what should be taken into consideration.

The researcher felt that while these objectives act as umbrella questions, a number of further themes within the data collection process ought to be explored in order to fully investigate the objectives and main research question. These themes have been briefly summarised as follows;

1. EB values held by employers
2. Measuring EB- How are employers measuring the return on investment from EB strategies?
3. Successful EB strategies- What are popular graduate employers doing to promote themselves among graduates?
4. Graduate attraction; Passive –v-Pro-Active Approach?
5. Changes in the graduate market from an employer’s perspective
6. Challenges facing EB / graduate recruitment
7. Upcoming trends within EB/ graduate recruitment

3.3 Additional Comments

The researcher proposes that the aforementioned objectives were entirely exploratory and inductive in nature with no bias or previous assumptions held by the researcher. These objectives derived purely from the ambiguity experienced by the researcher upon examining the available literary works regarding effective EB in an Irish context. The researcher had no idea prior to the empirical research regarding future findings which were later retrieved during the research process.

CHAPTER 4 – Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological approach conducted by the researcher during the research process. A justification for selecting the methodological approach is included, along with an explanation of the sample group, interview style, data collection and data analysis. Ethical considerations of this research are discussed, followed by acknowledgements regarding potential limitations of conducting this research.

4.2 Research Philosophy

A number of factors influence a researcher's choice of data collection and analysis techniques. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009) used the metaphor of an onion, comprising of many layers, to explain the process of peeling away different factors and determining the most appropriate research strategy.

The methodology step of writing a thesis/report plays a vital role in determining data. The chosen approach will need to be appropriate and sufficient in terms of yielding accurate findings (Saunders et al. 2009).

4.2.1 Epistemology

Epistemology refers to what constitutes as “acceptable” knowledge in any area of research (Saunders et al. 2009), and looks at how best to investigate a topic. Collis and Hussey (2003) discuss the topic of epistemology as being concerned with what we can reasonably accept as being valid and reliable knowledge, and that this acceptance therefore impacts on the approach taken when researching. Within epistemology, there can be a “resources”, or “feelings” orientated researcher. The resources-orientated researcher would typically embrace a positivist position while developing knowledge, whereas the latter would possess an interpretive perspective (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007, p. 103).

This researchers' epistemological philosophy is based on the interpretivist perspective inspired by Orlikowski and Baroudi (1991). Although the literature indicates EB can greatly enhance the success of an organisation; the execution of successful companies' strategies in real may vary. Variances in influential factors could impact on the awareness of graduates regarding Graduate Programmes.

4.3 Quantitative Research

Quantitative research can be beneficial if conducting research substantial in scale, or statistically-focused. Quantitative research is widely accepted as useful for gathering definitive "facts", or definite numbers provided by the cohort or subject. Quantitative research is particularly useful if the researcher is attempting to scientifically prove/disprove a hypothesis.

Quantitative methods include questionnaires, surveys and experiments (Creswell, 1994, p. 10). Researchers can test their hypothesis by making experiments relating to their topic. The researcher noted the efficiency of conducting questionnaires to generate primary data, Overall it was concluded that research objectives required perceptions and elaborative responses and the required data wasn't fit for representation via quantifiable means.

4.4 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is concerned with determining perceptions or interpretations among desired recipients. This type of research offers a deeper insight into perceptions, understandings, ideas, feelings and behaviours of individuals. Pending on qualitative method, it can allow researchers greater flexibility when conducting research. Qualitative research can also help to generate ideas or hypotheses which can aid in establishing the contributory factors to such perceptions or behaviours (Rugg and Petre, 2007; Flick, 2006). The most frequently adopted qualitative techniques include interviews and group discussions, where the researcher can work with questions designed for the study (Blumberg, Donald and Pamela, 2005).

Qualitative is advantageous if the collection and analysis of data isn't designed to coincide with numerically focused objectives. The personalisation and in-depth level of data obtained via qualitative methods could be interpreted by some critics as biased (Creswell, 1994). Although this may be true, this would be subject to the researcher

who would ideally maintain a level of neutrality when collecting the data, and, (unless trying to prove/disprove a hypothesis) the researcher should remain unbiased.

An obvious merit of adopting a qualitative approach would be the opportunity for the researcher to capture subtle body language or to interpret information in the way it was offered by the respondent/ interviewee/ participant. Again, this interpretation would ideally remain unbiased and the researcher shouldn't 'read between the lines', per se.

In addition to capturing more complex aspects when collecting the data, the researcher can appreciate the entire social situation rather than only examining the quantifiable part of a research project (Robson, 2002). The data presented through a qualitative research approach is often descriptive, therefore possibly extending the depth, and increasing the value of data. Parahoo (2006) concludes that qualitative research generates descriptive data, and has certain attributes which quantitative research wouldn't possess. Examples of these include participant interaction, and the inductive or flexibility aspects associated with qualitative research.

4.4.1 Qualitative Research Rationale

For this research, there was no necessity to quantify any measurements, scales or numbers to satisfy any objectives/hypotheses. An entirely qualitative approach was thus selected as the most appropriate way to further examine the available literary works regarding EB, but in the context of real-life companies. Interviews can allow for greater flexibility overall as the researcher will be in a position to tailor/further expand on questions mid-interview should the interview throw light on unprecedented responses. In this case, participants could offer their own perceptions regarding EB. These objectives aren't quantifiable, therefore qualitative is the most appropriate in yielding reliable findings.

4.4.2 Alternative Considerations

Other research avenues were considered, surveys in particular. A detailed survey would offer some benefits such as the opportunity for interviewees to elaborate (versus questionnaires). The researcher felt that this may not have offered the same in-depth findings as interviews. Also, due to time constraints, distributing surveys may

not ensure the return of a sufficient number of completed surveys required. The researcher felt that survey wouldn't contribute to this research compared to in-depth interviews predominantly sought perceptions. Scheduled interviews were therefore the best way to ensure that a sufficient number of participants would be accessed. The researcher felt participants would elaborate further if asked the questions in person. This was also tactical as the researcher felt interviews may be perceived to take less time, possibly enticing participants who were apprehensive to fill out a tedious detailed survey.

Triangulation, (or a mixed approach) can be appropriate in some cases, although using both paradigms may prove inefficient, costly and unnecessarily time consuming (Creswell, 1994). Pending on the research, using a lesser appropriate research paradigm may prove damaging in terms of data collection and subsequent analysis. Creswell (1994) advises to only avail of one research method if conducting small to medium sized research projects. This was another factor taken on board by the researcher.

4.5 Interviews

As a primary data source, the researcher chose to hold in-depth interviews with individuals from 5 companies who feature in the upper half of GradIreland's Top 100 Graduate Employers 2014 Survey. This qualitative method of interviewing participants was selected as the researcher felt that interviews would provide access to hearing participants' accounts, perceptions, beliefs and opinions first-hand. On a broader note, interviews can provide a greater depth of information versus a conversation. Interviews involve a degree of previous understanding by one or both parties in relation to the topic (Denscombe, 1983 and Silverman, 1985 as cited in Denscombe, 2010).

4.5.1 Empirical Grounding

This view that interviews offer a richer insight into cultures/behaviours is discussed by Whitehead (2005) in the context of ethnography. Although ethnography is traditionally concerned with the study of communities, behaviours or populations; the methods are frequently employed in the research of more constructed cohorts, such as organisations, institutions, meetings, or industry/work settings (Whitehead, 2005, p.

14/15). This type of approach is again, non-numerical and mirrors the nature of this study and what was needed to explore the overall research question.

4.6 Sampling

Purposive sampling was employed by the researcher, in where specific interviewees were requested to take part as they would hold pivotal information for this research question. Purposive sampling is beneficial when information held by specific persons will be the most valuable when conducting research, particularly when;

“...the researcher specifies the characteristics of a population of interest and then tries to locate individuals who have those characteristics”

(Johnson and Christensen, 2012, p. 231).

Purposive sampling refers to the mindful selection of participants given the value they can add to research (Denscombe, 2010). The researcher wanted to access the relevant persons involved in dealing with their organisation’s Graduate Programmes. For that reason, purposive sampling proved useful as the featuring participants were undoubtedly the most insightful for this particular research due to their roles in the organisation. Participants were selected across the board from a wide range of different sectors, yet all participants were asked the very same questions*.

(*These exceptions will be discussed in the “Data Collection” section further below).

The featured participants are naturally knowledgeable regarding their firms’ EB strategies which are used to attract and recruit applicants, therefore the most appropriate candidates for purposive selection.

4.7 Initial Proposition

The initial thesis proposition was to examine the impact of EB on a graduate prevalent employer. The researcher intended to focus on Google but was informed by Google HR that the company doesn’t participate in such activities. The researcher then looked to focus on another well-known employer (also featuring in the current study), but ultimately decided that focusing on just one company may be restrictive.

The idea was formed to examine a range of companies popular for graduates (which not only increased the likelihood of participation) but the data would be representative from broader, more varied industries. This would help to enrich findings, as opposed to focusing on one particular company. The researcher decided that the best way to source the most popular graduate employers was via the GradIreland Top 100 Employers 2014 Survey, as voted for by students and graduates. Upon researching the individual companies, it was noted that each company featured in the Survey offered Graduate Programmes. This helped contribute to the overall research question.

Selected companies were emailed with a list of the thesis title and research objectives, along with proposed interview questions and requesting participation. Willing respondents responded to arrange phone/in-person interviews.

4.8 Sample Group

The interviewee sample group included the relevant persons from 5 organisations who deal with Graduate Programmes and recruitment. These interviewees work within a range of industry sectors, with each company ranking in the top 50 of the GradIreland Top100 Employers 2014 Survey. The employers featured in the survey were voted for by students and graduates, therefore serving as a reliable source when the researcher was identifying a number of prominent (and popular) employers among graduates. Additionally, a 6th interview was conducted with Gavan O'Brien, the Commercial Manager for GradIreland. This was to gain an expert yet neutral perspective into the area of EB and graduate recruitment. The researcher found that, by the 5th interview, the data was reaching saturation point and information was becoming very repetitive. It was thus deemed that 5 company interviews along with Gavan's were sufficient to draw key findings for this research.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Sector</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Interview Method</i>
Gavan O' Brien	Commercial Manager	GradIreland	28 th July 2014	In-Person
N/A	Recruitment Coordinator	Professional Services	24 th July 2014	In-Person
N/A	Talent Development Manager	Telecommunications	1 st August 2014	Phone
N/A	HR Specialist & Graduate Recruitment Manager	Professional Services	6 th August 2014	In-Person

N/A	Graduate Programme Manager	FMCG (Fast-Moving Consumer Goods)	7 th August 2014	Phone
N/A	Graduate Programme Manager	Financial Services	11 th August	Phone

Figure 6. Interview Schedule.

4.9 Interview Style

Interviews were semi-structured, allowing the interviewer to question, further probe, and clarify any vague/inconsistent responses (Parhoo, 2006). This ensures the responses are clear/fully answered when the researcher goes to analyse the findings. Denscombe (2010) also lists the benefits of semi-structured interviews, stating that they allow the interviewer to ask a set list of questions while remaining flexible. Researchers can have a clear idea of the topics they want covered in the interview yet adapt the questions and dialogue flow accordingly.

4.10 Interview Themes

The interview explored the themes outlined in Chapter 3. The literature pointed heavily to the advantages of companies raising awareness of their employment offerings among potential applicants, however no strategies from a real-life context in today's Irish firms were clarified. The researcher explored this with participants and asked which strategies *they* found sufficiently effective, along with asking participants how EB has impacted on graduate recruitment in their companies. The interview sought perceptions of EB from professionals working in the sector as there was such a huge scope of theoretical perspectives available in the literature. The researcher felt that retrieving an insight into real-life perceptions would prove worthy of inclusion in academia.

Some questions featured asked about how the participants' companies measured if EB was indeed impacting on their companies' graduate recruitment processes. The literature also indicated an overwhelming shift in the interests of young professionals, (referred to as Gen-Y, or millennials by participants). In response, the researcher investigated if participant's have seen a difference in the demands of these cohorts in comparison to before, (possibly pre-Graduate Programmes/branding efforts). Participants were also asked their views on any challenges facing EB. Finally, the topic of emerging trends within EB was explored, along with requesting advice for companies who weren't particularly strong in promoting their employer brand among potential applicants.

*Please see Appendices 1 and 2 for the full interview question list and sample interview.

4.11 Data Collection

Interviews were conducted in person and via phone. Interviews lasted circa 25-35 minutes and questions were open-ended. Open-ended questions allow for greater elaboration, thus enriching response quality (Goodrich, 2008). Questions were generic (irrespective of the interviewee's company), meaning the researcher could explore the exact same topics across varying sectors. The interviews were also semi-formal which facilitated a more natural flow of information. In some cases the interviewee unknowingly answered a question further down on the list, so the researcher made a mental note to omit the following question to save unnecessary repetition. In other cases, certain questions didn't apply to their organisation, such as when the researcher asked company;

"Has the company always tried to promote themselves as an employer of choice?"

If the participant said "yes", then the following sub-questions regarding applicant numbers and quality increasing since a specific point of initiating the branding efforts didn't apply. This changed the number of questions asked in each interview, although the topics covered were the same.

The researcher used a Dictaphone which facilitates better engagement with the interviewee versus taking notes, which is inefficient both time-wise and quality-wise. The reliability of audio recording was taken on board by the researcher;

“Audio recordings offer a permanent record and one that is fairly complete in terms of the speech that occurs” (Denscombe, 2010, p. 195).

On another note, audio recordings allow researchers to efficiently listen back to the recordings multiple times in order to properly understand any findings.

Following the interviews, typed transcripts were sent to requesting parties. This was to confirm their satisfaction with the final transcribed material. Upon the go-ahead from participants, interviews were coded to further protect their anonymity.

4.12 Data Analysis

Creswell (1994) suggests that the collection and analysis of data should both coincide with a qualitative approach, meaning the production of any findings should also be qualitatively produced. Post recording, the data was transcribed which made for easier analysis. The researcher had made mental notes during the interviews regarding recurring or contrasting information, so had an idea what was going to be produced in the findings chapter. Upon transcribing each interview, the researcher read each interview and noted common trends, such the increasing trend in EB toward social media.

The interviews contained a lot of information, so it was important to condense the material offered to keep in line with the stated research objectives. Cross examining the interview transcripts ‘question by question’ allowed for the emergence of key findings (Bryman and Bell, 2007). Kane and O’Reilly De Brún (2001) also discuss the narrowing down of key information in a 4 step approach, represented in Figure 7;

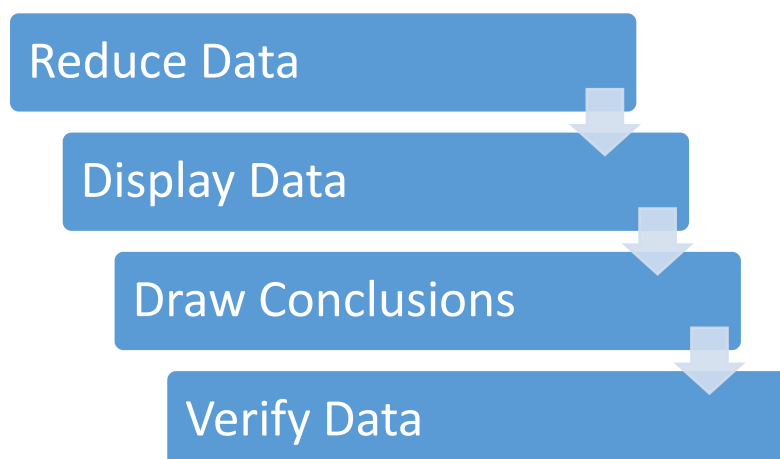


Figure 7. Adapted from Kane and O'Reilly De Brún, (2001, p. 287).

This framework for analysing the data was completed by the researcher, in terms of condensing data, noting recurring or contrasting themes, interpreting these themes (and summarising them). Finally, the verification of conclusions occurred with the researcher. Creswell, (1994) discusses this process in which the researcher should investigate the overall validity of data retrieved;

- Internal validity, i.e., when the accuracy of information is examined by the researcher to see if it matches reality. This can be done by trying to find mutuality between data sources.
- External validity. This ensures that the context and focus in which the research is set is clearly communicated by the researcher, helping to create a crystal clear understanding of events by any reader.
- Reliability. The fact that a study is completed under a very specific set of circumstances and agents prevents against the replication of a future duplicated study in the *exact* same circumstances. It is worth noting that the unlikelihood of this researches' future duplication under identical circumstances renders it non-imitable, therefore worthy of academic consideration.

The researcher referred back to the stated themes as outlined in Chapter 3, and cross-analysed the responses to these themes in order of the participating companies.

4.13 Participant Anonymity

Several participants requested anonymity, therefore for interviews were conducted on company grounds, and for publication purposes all interviewees (with the exception of Gavan O'Brien) were coded as "Company A-F".

The anonymous companies were listed alphabetically in order of interview participation date. In conjunction with their requests, the researcher did her best to code any information likely to make participating interviewees' companies identifiable.

4.14 Ethics & Trust Issues

Ethical considerations should be considered by all researchers prior to commencing research (Blaxter, 2008). The researcher adhered at all times to the ethical guidelines as dictated by NCI. The researcher had no prior knowledge of participants, and each willingly participated in the research. Any data obtained was used solely for the stated cause.

As a gesture of thanks, the researcher offered to send a completed copy of the Dissertation to any interested participants which each interviewee accepted. This was a genuine goodwill gesture, but also to reassure participants that only information which they approved would feature in the research.

4.15 Research Limitations & Considerations

The researcher chose to contact an array of organisations which would hopefully throw light on the impact of EB on Graduate Programmes in their particular organisation yet from different sectors. If participants were all sourced from the same sector, the researcher would have run the risk of selecting rival companies who had imitated or copied their counterpart's EB strategies or Graduate Programme structures.

It would have been useful to interview several participants from each sector to establish successful strategies in *their* organisations, however this wasn't feasible time-wise or access-wise. The researcher contacted roughly thrice the amount of employers featured in the study. Many employers simply didn't reply, and for others who did reply, the researcher couldn't use all of their information. Due to busy schedules, certain employers responded to emails requesting interviews and containing the proposed interview questions, yet only partly filled in the questions attached in the document. This, to the researcher, rendered the information void as it wasn't equally representative or insightful as other participants' information.

Information regarding EB in the interviews began to emerge repetitively, therefore 5 company interviews were deemed sufficient by the researcher. The researcher also felt that overall, participants were satisfactorily representative of different sectors. This ensured an insight into a range of EB strategies conducted by employers highly ranked in the GradIreland Top 100 Employers 2014 Survey.

CHAPTER 5 – Findings

5.1 Presentation of Findings

This chapter presents the key interview findings. The intention to focus on the 7 themes discussed in Chapter 3 was maintained, and themes were explored via interview questions (see Appendix). The chapter is structured in cross-findings format, and participant's responses are grouped under thematic headings.

The author fully acknowledges that any information provided and presented within this chapter are possibly part of a larger series of activities being conducted by Companies A-E. Included findings were identified by the researcher as *key* findings from the research, and aren't intended to imply that companies aren't conducting a further range of EB activities not mentioned during the interview process.

In some cases, companies offered similar responses. These are presented accordingly.

Additional or unprecedented information mentioned by participants are labelled as sub-headings.

5.2 Theme 1 - Employer Branding Values

When asked regarding their views on EB, Each company mentioned the process of projecting a pre-stated series of messages, although different companies mentioned projecting messages particularly emphasising various factors unique to the value held by their organisations;

Values are illustrated below in Figure 8, in which Companies A-E are labelled as;“(A), (B), (C) etc;

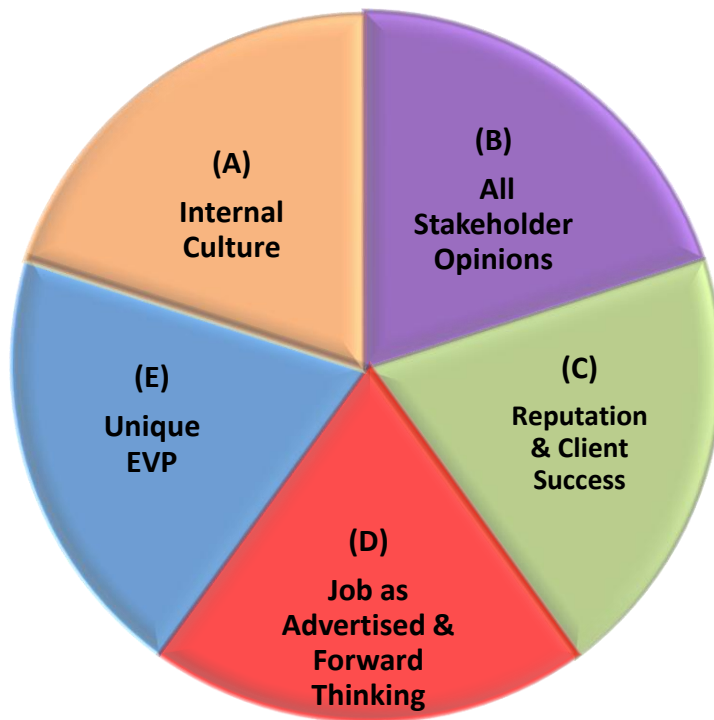


Figure 8. Participant’s Employer Branding Values.

Among other factors, Company A strongly viewed the identification of the internal organisational culture as being a trigger to continue the employer brand within the company. This respondent claimed that a big reason that the firm has always seen such a steady applicant number is due to the organisation’s working culture, and that selected applicants themselves go on to project the employer’s brand outwards;

“Before going to promote your brand...you need to think, ‘is what we’re promoting actually true of what’s going on internally?’ because it needs to feed in to what people believe internally, so then it can be believed externally. It can’t just be buzz words”

(Company A).

Company E is similarly aware of publicly distinguishing themselves as a unique employer, and noted the value in identifying an organisation’s EVP (Employee Value

Proposition. Company B discussed the necessity of promoting themselves as a progressive company, and also by way of career progression opportunities. This participant viewed EB on a slightly different note however, suggesting that their organisation's EB efforts aim to target both potential customers *and* employees. In general, Company B viewed EB to include the viewpoint of a larger number of stakeholders, versus the other firms who primarily utilise EB to communicate with potential applicants.

Company C suggested that their corporate brand was aided by the success of their clients, something which could be indirectly validating their reputation as an employer. Although acknowledging basic EB principles such as standards and reputation, Company C's clients are core to their reputation, something which generates graduate interest. As a result, their focus maintaining a standard of professionalism when providing their services.

Company D is aware of ensuring that candidates understand the company culture, and also ensuring that the attraction campaigns mirrors the real-life company culture;

“Employer branding, for us, is ensuring that the candidates, or graduates, understand what we offer and that when they come in, the message that we give out is how they see us. Basically that the attraction campaign that we have, very much mirrors what life and culture is like within the company” (Company D).

Company D also noted that it is important to demonstrate that they are a forward thinking brand at all stages of the recruitment process, something pivotal to maintain the number of similarly forward thinking applicants,

Company E is also conscious to ensure that potential applicants understand what Company E provides, meaning that applicants will see the same values which were originally communicated to them. The company is aware to recruit like-minded graduates who understand the nature of the financial services sector they operate in, and aren't under illusions that the company culture is similar to other high profile social media and communication sites.

5.3 Theme 2- Employer Branding: Measuring Return on Investment

This theme explored if companies are actually monitoring the effects on applicant numbers generated by their EB strategies by way of metrics or information sought.

When asked if they had seen an increase in applicants due to EB efforts, Company A responded the challenge in linking increased applicant numbers and other success factors to their EB efforts. The company is extremely well-reputed among graduates, and although the respondent said that application numbers have definitely increased annually, there was no specific point in time when the company decided to promote themselves as an employer of choice. It would be thus be entirely speculative to definitively confirm that EB efforts are solely responsible for increased applicant numbers.

Company B measures the impact of EB efforts via the exponential growth year on year in terms of applicants. This company specifically hired a Brand Manager roughly 5 years ago who directs much of the branding efforts toward the “youth” market. The company has seen a 50%+ increase in job applicants in the last 3 years alone. This success is represented in (Survey X) which publicly promotes them as a desirable place to work. According to Company B, this Survey was responsible for 80% of 200 applicants to state that their featuring in this Survey rendered them a ‘desirable’ employer. Overall, this interviewee attributed the publicity surrounding the company in Survey X as propelling their employer image among graduates.

Company B also mentioned seeking feedback from unsuccessful applicants. They look to obtain perceptions among such individuals with the hope of gaining an insight into the impressions that the company is sending out, and trying to gather information regarding how unsuccessful applicants felt about the managers they met. Company B utilises an additional method called “net-promoter score” which focuses on applicants who have been to the company and met the employees, and asks them how likely they would be to promote Company B’s products/services.

Company C was unique as they appeared to conduct indirect EB strategies, which, due to the nature of their work, sees the success of their clients as being a key performance

indicator for their business strategy. As a State agency, Company C focuses on delivering efficiencies from effective organisational EB and this success perpetuates their success, meaning that the requirement for graduates is constant. Due to their nature, Company C generates much work overseas which in turn creates jobs back in Ireland. Specifically measuring return on EB investment would be difficult to achieve, although the company prides the continued integrity and professionalism in their services as indicators that they are attracting the right candidates. Unsuccessful applicants often request to apply for the following year. This level of interest is another factor by which Company C measures their employer brand.

Company D irrefutably attributed EB efforts to their phenomenal recent growth. They went from being outside the GradIreland's Top 100 employers to being ranked in the Top 10 within a very short timeframe. This company attributes their EB strategies as a huge contributor to winning several professional awards. This prestige and award recognition is serving to perpetuate the employer's standing among graduates particularly in the last 3 years. Company D has seen a 25% increase in Facebook "likes" just in this year alone, indicating a growing interest in the company. This interest has roughly doubled their graduate intake since 2012, and dramatically upped their ranking in the GradIreland Top 100 Employers Survey.

Company E's EB efforts have been low-key in recent years. This mirrored the financial difficulty experienced by the whole financial services sector. Their EB budget is freer now, so the past year saw a substantial increase in applicant numbers in response to increased EB efforts. Not only this, the company said applicant quality has also improved as a result of increased investment. Company E monitors the real-life impact of EB in terms of applicant turnaround;

"The type of graduate you're getting through, how they get through psychometric testing and then the ratio of success at the assessment centres which we would obviously have metrics in place, what we want to achieve etc." (Company E).

Company E noted the importance of continually conveying a real account of their company to candidates, adding that this helps to attract informed graduates to

complete the mentioned formal assessments. Thus, marketing and formal processes both intertwine for Company E when monitoring the effects of EB.

Company B was the only participant to mention tangible metrics of measuring EB, although 5/5 said that applicant quality continues to improve as a result of EB efforts. This led to the discussion of how companies rate “quality”.

5.3.1 Assessing Applicant Quality

After asking participants if EB had any impact on applicant numbers, 5/5 interviewees said that they see increased number of applicants annually. When asked if applicant *quality* improved; each participant said yes.

The researcher explored how their companies rate ‘quality’ applicants, and responses varied. Although Company A operates in the professional services sector, they take a variance of factors into account when selecting talent;

“We look for well-rounded people who will have the academics but also relevant or even irrelevant work experience... if a student throughout college works part-time, that’s showing that they can take on that extra responsibility” (Company A).

In terms of recruitment, Company A hold competency based interviews, which the company has gotten feedback from applicants about. Candidates viewed the process as professional, yet slightly more informal. This participant explained that they like to show a genuine interest in applicants, versus the more robust and formal recruitment strategies that other companies adopt.

Company B developed their own in-house “hiring-for-potential” mechanism which outlines desired applicant traits, and measures all applicants against this standardised scoring mechanism.

Company C’s process of quality-assessment entails a thoroughly staged approach. Applicants initially apply online before being shortlisted based on eligibility criteria, and then undertake assessments, interviews and presentations against the company’s required functional and behavioural competencies. This company seeks applicants

from a wide range of academic backgrounds, therefore uses a combination of approaches to measure quality. The participant stated that each functional/behavioural trait which the organisation required presented themselves among the varying rating methods throughout the different stages of assessment.

Company E, although operating in financial services, also seeks candidates from a variance of academic backgrounds. This was again surprising given the nature of their sector, but their measurements of quality mirrored Company C's robust methods and include psychometric testing.

5.4 Theme 3 - Employer Branding Strategies

Company A remarked on their two-tiered approach to their organisation's social media platforms. This company have a general presence on outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, but also operate a dedicated careers platform on each of the sites, which again directly engages with applicants and informs them of the uniqueness which Company A represents. Company D was similar to Company A, and heavily invest in PR and advertising in general. In addition to the 25% increase in Facebook "likes", Company D also has a dedicated YouTube channel which informs any potential applicants about the company. The company directly communicates with bloggers also, something which provides instant access to individuals seeking advice or interested in the company.

Company C largely associate the varied work experience they offer in their Graduate Programme with the substantial interest among graduates. Word of mouth is a strong aid in Company C's recruitment strategy, something which can be attributed to the on-the-job experience and skills development which would prove invaluable to any young graduate. Along with attending grad fairs, Company C extensively utilises their corporate social media networks such as websites which feature corporate videos containing relevant information for graduates. Another strategy by Company C is the dedicated email address to answering queries from potential applicants. These efforts are all to drive engagement in Company C's Graduate Programme.

In terms of graduates, Company D is aware that the "millennials" (ie. young graduates) that they're looking to recruit tend to be constantly online and connected via social media. Company D say that these millennials expect their use of technology to be

mirrored in the companies which they want to work for. Company E also have a dedicated channel to connect with graduates, and have designed their own “microsite”, which is aimed at providing graduates with extensive information regarding the company and their Graduate Programme.

Company B added to the surprisingly heavily utilisation of technology and social media to communicate with potential applicants;

“I think this has driven the most amount of applicants to apply... Once they get the chance to hear from one of our graduates, and hear from ourselves too, and read about us, they’re much more likely to apply, and become attracted in working for us”

(Company B).

Company B is similar to the other companies by means of their attendance at the grad fairs, and their engagement with students on campus. Company B runs a specific initiative which is, in essence, a ‘hot-desk’ scenario. The initiative informs potential applicants how the organisation functions, and aims to promote such things as remote-working, flexible learning patterns. Company B argued that this upheaval from more traditional ways of working ensures the company moves away from a “silo” based working perspective. Company B was particularly unique in a sense. In general, they were one of the only respondents to incorporate the perceptions of customers as well as potential employees when conducting EB efforts;

“We’ve done a huge amount of marketing around that (company initiative) as well, which has driven an awful lot of interest in the company, both from a graduate perspective, but also from a customer perspective, because very often customers are going through the cultural transformation as well” (Company C).

Both Companies B and E noted that they had been traditionally viewed as being conservative organisations, and possibly didn’t attract graduates to the same extent as more current, contemporary or other “cooler” companies. These companies both stated that their use of social media was of course to primarily promote their employer brand and employment opportunities, but also to emphasise an element of ‘savviness’ by targeting the employees which they want, which just happens to be online.

Out of each 5 interviewees, Company B actually stated that they place *more* effort in promoting to graduates. Both Company B and E realised that their employee profile was previously reputed to consist of an older age group. They realised that they were missing out on a huge segment of the graduate talent pool that other competitors were honing in on, and strived to realign their EB focus accordingly.

Company E informed the researcher that they revise their EB strategies as often as bi-annually to remain prevalent among new or soon-to-be graduates. This illustrates the constant need to realign an organisation's EB strategy to attract the desired talent.

5.4.1 Reinventing an Employer Brand

Gavan mentioned Lidl who were ranked 134th in the GradIreland Top100 Employers Survey 5 years ago, but now rank 4th. It emerged from an initial meeting between GradIreland and Lidl that although offering an Audi A4 and lucrative salary was, in Lidl's opinion, attractive to students- the reality was different. Lidl presumed that such tangible benefits were their USP. Lidl hadn't sought information regarding what their employee graduates actually wanted.

Offering €60,000 salaries could have been perceived negatively by graduates (Gavan O'Brien) who associated high wages with an extremely demanding job. This perceived hidden agenda may have deterred applicants, and contributed to the poor Survey ranking. Gavan suggested that public message boards are often reviewed by job-seekers, something which would have negatively impacted on the company's employer brand.

5.4.2 Pre-Recruitment Processes

Gavan mentioned a two-tiered recruiting approach used by GradIreland to direct interest toward a company. Firstly, this can be done via visible online inventories such as profiles exhibiting the organisation, the student experience, Graduate Programme, and videos from current employees. These tactical brand building strategies should be completed via means designed to engage the job-seeker. Additionally, a set of identification strategies need to be completed by the company prior to brand building.

Gavan suggested that a competitor analysis be completed to coincide with any branding efforts a company is undertaking. This will help employers to establish which other companies are seeking the same applicant profile, and how they can go about increasing their chances of attracting this applicant in light of their competitors' strategies.

Gavan discussed the 'experiential' approach in which a company accurately convey certain set of standards and experience which they can expect during employment. If an employer feels they have a fantastic Graduate Programme, they need to translate that from marketing speak and buzz words into experiential opportunities. They would then project this experience to the intended target markets via the most appropriate channels applicable to that cohort.

5.5 Theme 4 - Graduate Attraction: Passive or Pro-Active Approach?

This theme explored the participating employer's level of engagement with potential applicant graduates by way of campus presence, formal curricula engagement and social media utilisation.

5.5.1 Graduate Engagement

Each participating company extensively affiliates with GradIreland and attend the GradIreland "grad fairs". Company B harnesses an integrative on-campus approach, and offers students to participate in 'on-site' tours. This company holds innovation challenges too, which is an excellent ploy for them to physically engage students with their company. Company B adopt a hands-on approach toward engaging students, and offer careers talks given by someone with a relevant technology background for the IT students. Furthermore, Company B also offers advice to students on how to be successful in assessment centre scenarios.

5.5.2 Brand Ambassadors

Company A, B and E send ambassadors on-campus to promote the company. These individuals will have completed placement stints/ internships and will likely have had a positive experience, thus spreading this message on campus. Company D noted that brand ambassadors are usually ex-interns, however their company don't have a formal internship programme as of yet therefore they don't utilise brand ambassadors.

Company C is in regular contact with universities/I.T.'s yet also don't avail of brand ambassadors.

5.5.3 Curricula Integration

Company B confirmed are on the curriculum of the majority of colleges they liaise with, and offer a range of workshops and information sessions to graduates.

Although Company D don't utilise brand ambassadors, they have a more academic presence in the academic institutions they affiliate with. They aim to add theoretical grounding to student's learning by closely collaborating with universities. Case-study questions on Company D's success is distributed in one university. Company D states that the case-study and workshop participation throughout the semester adds significant value to students' employability skills.

Company A conduct a lower-key approach in terms of being included on curricula. The company doesn't formally appear on any programme, although they maintain a strong brand presence in the colleges by way of guest lecturers or presentations.

Company E currently have plans to initiate more integration in student courses, and previous lack of integration reflected expenditure limitations arising from the financial services crisis from 2008 onwards. Company E continuously hired throughout the recession, but it is understandable that their EB efforts were relatively low-key.

Company A and C stated that they look for such a wide range of graduates; therefore integration with each academic course may prove infeasible or inefficient. Similarly, Company C has no direct association with future graduates' curricula, as they look for such a wide range of academic backgrounds. Company C's participant suggested another reason as to their low-key approach. This participant remarked on the high standards of education among Irish graduates, and felt that the output from Irish Universities and Institutes of Technologies are generally satisfactory in producing the talent Company C needs.

5.5.4 Social Media

Company A additionally attend grad fairs and engage with applicants via their company website. The participant also explained Company A's utilisation of digital engagement. Among the other avenues, Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter were mentioned here as particularly useful platforms to engage with graduates. This is in response to Gen-Y's heavy use of Facebook activity nowadays, and Company A was mindful of the appropriateness of communicating with this generation via social media rather than predominantly traditional recruitment channels.

5.6 Theme 5 - Graduate Market Changes

Gavan suggested that the most predominant changes within the graduate market have occurred post 2008 as a result of the financial crisis, meaning that a shift has occurred in the expectations of graduate and employer.

5.6.1 Generation Y Expectations

Companies A-E all indicated the need for constant renewal of their EB strategies to keep up with the demands of today's graduate (referred to by participants as Gen-Y or millennials). Each interviewee stated the relevance of social media in their EB strategies. This approach coincides with the tendencies suggested by each participant regarding millennials' heavy use of social media platforms for both personal and professional use.

Company A outlined that "Gen-Y" nowadays are more aware of what companies are offering;

"Now students are saying, 'well, what can you do for me?' They're thinking things like, 'well, are you a socially conscious company? What do you do in terms of CSR?' and things like that, which are fair questions to ask of course" (Company A).

Company B noticed first-hand (via feedback methods) the attention graduates place on social responsibilities. As a result, Company B offers several philanthropic initiatives which facilitate a number of employees to participate for a year in the charity of their choice while the company still pays them. This participant said that on a whole, Generation Y are savvier, yet also expect employers to have a heart.

Company C's participant said that CSR compliance was not an area to date that had featured strongly as a key issue arising from applicants seeking further information regarding their Graduate Programme. While CSR doesn't feature as a key target area of their EB strategy; Company C still continues to receive a good calibre applications for their Graduate Programme annually.

Company D remarked that graduate expectations coincide with company growth, and expectations have been more concerned with what the company provides particularly in the last 3 years since branding efforts have been revamped.

Company E feels that nowadays, Generation-Y wants the "real job" early on in their career. The company recognises this trend, emphasises this as their USP to accommodate it;

"Nowadays they (graduates) want to come in and hit the ground running, and be offered the 'real job'. That's what (Company E) does. That's our unique selling point" (Company E).

This participant added that Generation-Y'ers need to be constantly interested, motivated, and given feedback. As a result they revise their Graduate Programme bi-annually/annually to ensure graduates remain interested.

5.6.2 Employer Expectations

A contraction of organisational budgets to hire new employees occurred across the board during the recession. This meant that the power shifted from students/graduates and employers in terms of students choosing their employer. Gavan remarked on the increase in employers looking for a higher calibre graduate, and the tendencies for firms to request a 2.1 grade minimum. This was shown in the literature by Vasagar (2012) who stated the huge increase in Irish employers seeking applicants with 2.1 degrees.

5.7 Theme 6 - Employer Branding Challenges

Each participant was asked about possible challenges facing companies actively conducting EB strategies, and responses again widely varied. Some responses were identical. Such responses along with other key findings are included below.

5.7.1 Competitiveness

Every participant was conscious to remain aware of EB efforts being conducted by other firms. Gavan outlined the strong necessity for companies to identify what other firms are doing. He also noted that direct and indirect competitors are equally important to consider, as they may be recruiting the same applicant profile. Intel and Lidl for example may both be seeking software engineers. Lidl in this example would be wise to position their company appropriately to attract such graduates, as software engineers may not necessarily associate Lidl with engineering positions.

Company A is aware of the many similar companies operating in their sector, so try to remain ahead of the other professional services firms in terms of how they attract and connect with graduates.

Company B's response reflected the need to stay ahead of the rest and be aware of rival competitor strategies;

“Seeing is there anything you could be doing better of differently in terms of your recruitment... because you want, from the very first moment you meet them at a grad fair, you them to WANT to work for you” (Company B).

Company C responded that competing against larger companies which invest heavily in EB can be a challenge. This hasn't hindered their reputation however with the respondent adding that quality applicant numbers regularly exceed requirements. The participant noted that although their EB spending wouldn't compare to other privately owned companies, their applicants specifically merit the Graduate Programme at Company C.

Company D and E both mentioned revising their strategies often to maintain freshness in their Graduate Programmes;

“There's so much at play that, as an employer you really need to be very conscious of that, and be very flexible to know that it's not just one approach that suits all, everything needs refreshment and revision” (Company D).

5.7.2 Budget

From working in the marketing industry and regularly liaising with clients to help market their employer brand, Gavan stated that the cost of such marketing will have an impact on the effectiveness of EB strategies. An integrated approach from both a marketing aspect and physical presence to engage students on campus should be employed to attract the desired amount of interest among students/graduates. Companies should appreciate the financial cost and internal structure required to establish and subsequently maintain a strong employer brand;

“If you want to do that (reach number 1 on the GradIreland Survey), it’s not going to happen overnight and it’s not going to require a considerable amount of financial and human resource within your organisation to make that happen” (Gavan O’Brien).

Company C listed budget as a challenge for employers seeking to develop their employer brand. Although they receive adequate interest from the reputation of their Graduate Programme, the participant stated that the exorbitant cost of EB may pose challenges for some smaller firms.

5.7.3 Transparency

Another factor which Gavan suggested graduates want is job stability, and to know that the company will still be around in 5 years. This is understandable given the unsteady economic climate that the majority of today’s graduates would have witnessed throughout college. This promise is of course difficult to make as with any definitive future projections.

Company C also noted that the question of graduate permanency may also prove troublesome for some employers offering Graduate Programmes. In their case, their Graduate Programme only lasts 2 years. This partially allures graduates who, Company C say will be “market ready” after completing the 2 year stint. The employer uses this to their advantage, and markets their Graduate Programme completely transparently.

5.7.4 Social media

Although 5/5 companies and Gavan all praised the functionalities of social media in terms of accessibility, cost and relevance; Company B was the only participant to also suggest potential disadvantages. Contrastingly to posting positive feedback, Company B suggested that social media can be used as an outlet for unsatisfied parties to post negative feedback.

Company A were mindful that although they need to take advantage of the social platforms potential applicants are using; it is important to do so via appropriate channels and frequency so as not to SPAM graduates.

In contrast to the 5 participants alleging the benefits of social media, Gavan opposed this opinion, stating that social media cannot change perceptions of a company. Gavan also feels that applicant quality will not be improved if a company particularly utilises social media platforms;

“Most employers have gone through the stages of trying social media, and then realising, ‘well, at the end of the day, does it really impact on the standards of applicant we get? Does it really change the perception of my company?’ And the answer to that is no” (Gavan O’Brien).

5.8 Theme 7 - Upcoming Trends for Employer Branding & Graduate Recruitment

Due to today’s fierce cross-sector competition for talent, Company A emphasised the necessity for employers to somehow remain at the forefront of the employment market, and engage with students. This participant mentioned considering disciplines which aren’t necessarily associated with their firm.

5.8.1 Digital Engagement to Recruit

All 5 companies noted the enormous emphasis in social media efforts to promote their company and in the recruitment process. Company B, D and E suggested social media and personalised videos are becoming important in graduate recruitment. Company B along with Company D both suggested heavier utilisation of social media platforms is emerging in all sectors of recruitment, but particularly with graduate recruitment. Company B and D particularly value application videos as it can add depth to an applicant, and can help to identify suitable candidates.

Company D re-emphasized the need for general engagement with graduates via social media;

“You need to be up to date, online, present, and connecting with millennial in their space, where they’re hanging out” (Company D).

5.8.2 Interns

Company D suggested the shift in focus toward reaching talent earlier by way of investing more in interns;

“These companies (names prevalent social media & communication sites) would mainly focus on internships, and that’s what they would drive. They wouldn’t necessarily have a Graduate Programme, they have an internship programme and offer the ‘strong’ interns a role” (Company D).

Company D and E both remarked on the shift in focus toward utilising interns as a way of reaching the talent at an earlier stage.

CHAPTER 6 – Discussion of Findings

6.1 Opening Comments

All 5 participants held views regarding EB strategies which somewhat reflected perspectives presented in the literary works from Chapter 2. This indicates that theoretical EB perceptions are present in the real-life awareness of professionals working to recruit Ireland's graduates. The following points incorporate the findings from Chapter 5 with the academic perspectives already presented in Chapter 2 where possible. In some cases the researcher didn't come across points made by participants during the literature review process, however the points are analysed respectfully below by way of consideration in an EB context.

This chapter consists of discussion format in which the most predominant findings are taken into consideration in light of the previously examined literature. This discussion will take into account the objectives stated in Chapter 3 and aim to contextualise EB strategies being conducted by Irish graduate employers to hopefully add empirical value to academia by way of information retrieved.

6.2 Objective 1: How are Irish employers promoting themselves to graduates?

6.2.1 Internal Focus

The relevance of external EB matching internal efforts came to light in the findings. An organisation's treatment of employees and the effect this has on external branding efforts was verbally set out by Company A. Company A, B, D and E's viewpoint was seen in the literature in terms of an organisation's employer brand originating within and in turn, beaming attractive qualities to potential graduate applicants as a result of word of mouth (Oladipo et al. (2013); Seghal and Malati, 2013). This internal workforce will likely proceed to provide superior product/service provision, thus

enhancing the company brand in general (Seghal and Malati, 2013; Lievens and Highhouse, 2003; Harari, 1998). An extra advantage of internal EB is the likelihood of existing employees appropriately interpreting and advocating the company's brand image externally (Arachchige and Robertson, 2011). This positive image can then be used to feed into any external EB strategies being conducted (Foster et al. 2013). Company A mentioned this, calling employees "indirect ambassadors".

6.2.2 Uniqueness

Participants pride their organisations on offering unique Graduate Programmes, and feel that a large component of creating their employer brand requires taking an initial step back to identify their unique USP/EV. (Kainulainen, 2014; Collins and Han, 2004; Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Ambler and Barrow, 1996) also argued that uniqueness will improve applicant numbers. Turban and Cable (2003) additionally noted that applicant quality will improve also.

Gavan noted that identifying a USP/EVP not necessarily associated with a company could be the key to attracting another type of applicant profile altogether. In the case of Lidl (a client of GradIreland) it was found that the company hadn't previously utilised all of their assets. Lidl had an advanced technology system which enabled inter-communication between stores which was operated by an IT department. They were advised to pay attention to attracting this graduate profile given the necessity to maintain their advanced IT infrastructure (Gavan O'Brien). This was seen in Chapter 2 where empirical research by Hieronimus et al. (2005) highlighted a firm who hadn't maximised their employer strengths to potential applicants. They revamped their image by hosting interactive events and communicating their employment ideologies with potential applicants.

6.2.3 Identifying Competitors

Each participant prided themselves on offering a unique Graduate Programme, and feel that a large component of creating their employer brand requires taking an initial step back to identify their USP. Gavan noted that identification of a USP/EVP which might not be naturally associated with a company is essential.

In one of GradIreland's clients, it was found that the company hadn't been utilising all of their assets to potential applicants. Lidl had an advanced technology system

which enabled inter-communication between stores, something operated by an IT department. The retailer hadn't honed in on this section in terms of attracting IT graduates, and was advised to pay attention to attracting this graduate profile, given the absolute necessity to maintain their advanced IT infrastructure. Gavan pointed out that companies are having to consider indirect competitors, who may be striving to target the same graduates as a company operating in a different sector. The researcher hadn't observed this point in the literature, however it is a huge point of interest for companies seeking to establish themselves as an employer of choice.

6.2.4 Social Media

The sheer utilisation of social media platforms wasn't anticipated by the researcher prior to interviews. Although the use of social media in Generation Y's personal lives was presumed, the extent of organisations using such sites to communicate with graduates wasn't anticipation. Participants in this research are overwhelmingly tapping into the peer aspect of social media and therefore generate an increased level of interest among job-seekers. Utilisation of peer videos and graduate blogging for example means that participating companies are correctly aligning their strategies with a generation which actually values peer information over information provided by companies (Knoblauch, 2014; Van Hoye and Lievens, 2009; Collins and Stevens, 2002; Cable and Turban, 2001). Company B viewed GradIreland as the most effective advertising platform as it taps into both traditional channels and the peer aspect, noted by Bokhaus (2014); Knoblauch (2014); Collins and Steven (2002) as particularly effective.

Students are more likely to believe people from their own peers, or commonly known as "influencers" (Gavan O'Brien). Friends and peer age group are the biggest influencers on what decisions student will actually make in relation to what company they choose to work for. Companies A, B and E each mentioned the utilisation of brand ambassadors who were previous interns/employees to promote the company image among students.

6.2.5 Active Engagement

Companies A-E obviously feature on GradIreland's Top 100 Employer Survey and are thus marketed to a huge number of graduates. Company A noted that having a corporate presence is important, however interaction it is also necessary. Barrow and

Mosley, (2008) point out the tendencies of companies to rely on purely corporate recruitment advertising to propel their employer brand, paying little heed to less formal approaches. Collins and Stevens, (2002) explored the link between pre-recruitment EB strategies and the number of applicants companies achieve. They recommend incorporating four non-corporate focused strategies prior to commencing the recruitment phase of sourcing talent. This is represented in Figure 9;

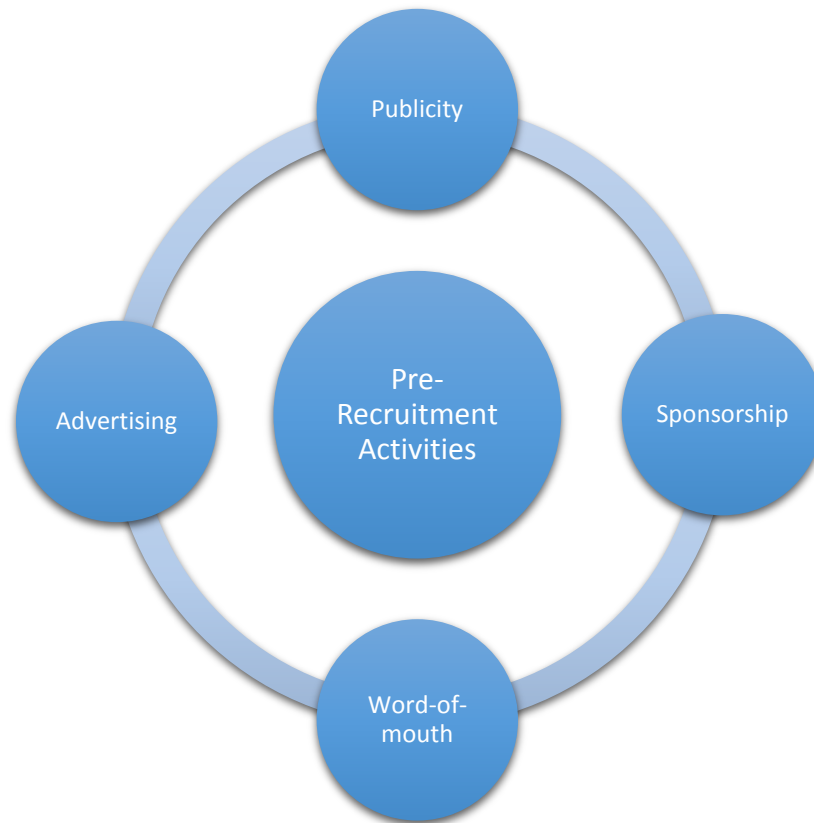


Figure 9. Non-corporate pre-recruitment EB strategies. Adapted from Collins and Stevens (2002, p. 1123).

Companies A, B and D have heavy association with the curriculum by way of academic engagement. Company D stated that they have plans to connect with graduates on campus in the near future, and dictated the targeting of talent early as a key trend in their EB strategy. Company C is in regular contact with academic institutions, but state that the level of promotion can be affected by how proactive the Universities/I.T.s are.

Company A, B and D's method of guest lecturing would help to generate awareness among students about the brand, thus indirectly promoting the employer brand. Company B prepares students on assessment centre scenarios, therefore facilitating confidence in potential future applicant who may be more likely to apply.

Company D's activity in semester workshops presumably help to retain the student's attention for a longer period of time, versus just one day at a grad fair. This is a seemingly ingenious way of extensively interacting with potential future applicants.

6.2.6 Organisational & Role Analysis

Company A, B, D and E's awareness to remain true to their organisation's values throughout the marketing side of EB efforts is seen in the literature. Their views coincide with the literature discussing the need for organisation's publicised EB information to match the internal reality (Kainulainen, 2014; Jonze and Öster, 2012; Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Cable et al., 2000). This identification can help to minimize turnover or employee grievances. Employee stress often stems from role ambiguity (Ivancevich, 1980) therefore possibly hindering internal EB efforts, so pre-branding HR efforts to identify the role in question may largely minimize such scenarios.

Companies A, B, D and E specifically mentioned correctly analysing the employment experience on offer to graduates prior to conducting external EB efforts. This analysis could help to correctly convey Graduate Programmes accurately, and therefore help to maintain the satisfaction of new recruits. This was discussed in the literature by Jonze and Öster (2012) and Cable et al. (2000).

Pilbream and Corbridge (2006) also note the importance of regularly revising advertised vacancies. These processes could prevent scenarios where new recruits are ambiguous as to the role's expectations. This can also assist in attracting talent possessing greater clarity about the advertised role, and go on to produce superior standards. This necessity to correctly communicate vacancies is reiterated by Talyor (2010), who suggests that precise job identification can aid in preventing situations where an employee could be spoken to regarding their poor performance. The employee may feel that the employer had a duty to inform them of the correct role expectations, and resultingly see the company in a negative light. This perception may

then be expressed to peers or colleagues, potentially damaging the reputation of the employer (Taylor, 2010).

Considering that effective EB can attract and retain talent, some literary works note the weak EB strategies adopted by some firms (Cheese, Thomas and Craig, 2007). This can hugely affect the HR team. Poor EB strategies can lead to the ill-matching of employees to the company (Mason-Jones, 2005). This could lead to unnecessary problems for organisations such as unhappy, unproductive or stressed employees.

Ivancevich and Matteson (1980) outline three factors contributing to employee stress;

1. Role Ambiguity
2. Role Conflict
3. Role Responsibility

Any of these situations could lead to difficulties in achieving maximum morale, or in some instances, unnecessary turnover. This would indirectly hinder EB efforts.

6.2.7 Philanthropy

Companies' participation in social responsibilities and philanthropic initiatives proved a huge factor for 4/5 companies. (This was with the exception of company C who, as a state agency, hadn't invested so much in CSR although the participant deeply recognised the relevance in "giving back"). Company B stated that the charitable initiatives they are involved with, and their generous charity programmes had struck a chord with graduates who nowadays expect graduates to have a heart. Company A, D and E added to this, with Company D pointing out that graduates wanted to work for a company that they could "believe in". This related to the literature where we saw job-seekers will be more attracted to companies who value similar socio-emotional beliefs (Arachchige and Robertson, 2011; Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). When asked regarding CSR as part of their EB strategy, no participant mentioned the notion outlined by Greening and Turban (2003) whose research concluded that CSR complicit firms impacted on applicant numbers.

6.3 Objective 2: How are employers measuring the return on EB investments?

Participating companies measured the return on their EB efforts via mostly intangible methods. Respondents explained that directly identifying metrics or quantifiable indicators that EB was impacting on the company's reputation was difficult due to a number of factors.

The lack of an exact EB commencement date for many of the companies means that current figures cannot be measured against any previous statistics or KPI's. Companies are predominantly utilising intangible measurements such as feedback from applicants regarding their perceptions, along with monitoring their ranking on the GradIreland Top100 Employer Survey. Other methods saw companies linking winning awards with their EB efforts. These companies noted that the prestige stemming from winning awards dramatically increased company awareness, and thus the number of graduates applying to the company.

Using definitive metrics to measure the impact of EB would prove beneficial for companies seeking information regarding the aspects which they are heavily investing in. Company B was one of the only companies to measure ROI via metrics. Their method mirrored that of the research by Love and Singh (2011) who discussed judging return of investment via company surveys. 80% of 200 applicants stated that the publicity surrounding the company's high ranking on (Survey X) influenced their decision to apply. These figures were compared with previous figures when the company hadn't availed of the Brand Manager Feedback was also obtained from applicants asking why they had applied to the company.. The fact that companies view EB as effective in attracting applicants with superior quality probed the researcher to spontaneously investigate a further area. All participants were convinced that EB had impacted on their organisational attractiveness, and companies B, D and E specifically stated that the calibre of applicants has improved. The researcher then asked how these companies assess "quality".

6.3.1 Assessing Applicant Quality

A huge trend for companies was to use their company-created mechanisms to rate applicant quality. The inconsistencies between what firms look for was in some cases surprising. Vasagar (2012) indicated that a huge percentage of employers request high grades in today's market, however some participants acknowledged additional and less formal factors for the selection process.

Company A's reputation in the corporate world is extremely professional, so the fact that they also appreciate less formal attributes i.e., interpersonal and intrapersonal skills versus purely academic qualifications was unexpected. In company A's case, feedback from applicants suggest that applicants very much appreciate the informal nature of Company A's competency based interviews which seek character. Applicants stated that they feel their personalities are valued. While this works for their company, other companies wishing to minimize the risk of recruiting inappropriately matched employees may think to use standardised and more formal recruitment procedures to prevent unnecessary costs.

Any new employees will require a degree of initial training. Pilbream and Corbridge (2006) discuss this in terms of administration/payroll expenses, citing previous CIPD research suggesting that losses between £5,000 and £7,000 for managers/professionals may accrue from weaker pre-recruitment strategies. These losses can stem from the time taken to select and train new recruits, along with losses from inefficiencies due to the new recruit not being adequately competent in the role. Adequate assessment of quality, induction and training processes will reinforce the employee's psychological contract, thus reinforcing the positive perception of the employer's brand.

In contrast to Company A who conduct competency-based interviews and less formal assessments, Companies B, C, D and E mentioned their robust pre-recruitment testing methods such as psychometric testing, aptitude tests and assessment centres.

More formal pre-recruitment efforts such as those conducted by Company B, C, D and E could largely help in ascertaining if the applicants possess the required traits to complete the role in question (Pilbream and Corbridge, 2006). By heeding this level of attention to applicant-job alignment; employers are indirectly facilitating their employer brand internally via satisfied and engages staff, but also externally by limiting negative word of mouth.

6.4 Objective 3: Are there any challenges facing employers conducting EB?

6.4.1 Social Media

In relation to the heavy reliance of companies using social media to promote their brand, Company B suggested the equally quick and public aspect of posting negative comments regarding an employer. Grievances could arise from unhappy customers, job applicants or even ex-employees, and would be immediately posted to the company's sites without prior screening. Undesirable comments on such a public scale could hinder EB efforts externally (Van Hove and Lievens, 2009). Glassdoor is a website where existing employees can anonymously post regarding their experiences working for an employer, and can offer as an insightful source to job-seekers (glassdoor.com). The fact that job-seekers value peer perceptions more than corporate information renders this type of website/message board a double-edged sword.

In Lidl's case, according to Gavan, offering €60,000 salaries was perceived by disgruntled employees as a hidden agenda for a demanding job. He suggested that public postings on online message boards may have been viewed by job-seekers who regularly search for accounts of employment experiences in a company they are considering applying to. Although purely speculative, this may have damaged Lidl's reputation and deterred graduates from applying.

It would be important to note in this case the efforts some companies go to by way of customer service agents. These individuals scan postings on social media sites, and aim to resolve any issues as inconspicuously as possible, inviting the disgruntled person to explain their problems via private mail.

This idea was seen in Elving et al. (2012) who noted that along with traditional methods, potential applicants have other ways of identifying an organisation's working culture, for example word of mouth, peer reviews or technological platforms.

6.4.2 Self-Deprecation

Gavan noted that an important increment of rejuvenating or promoting a company's employer brand image requires a degree of brutal honesty in which companies accept that their current efforts aren't proving sufficient, or their standards aren't high enough. Gavan commented that in some cases, internal HR will need to defer the marketing to an external specialist body. This ties in with Edwards (2010) who argues that EB will be substantially more effective if the avenues to establish a strong brand are supported internally by HR

6.4.3 Generation Y Expectations

All 5 participants and the literature suggested that graduates in this generation are more aware of what employers are providing in terms of employment benefits (Randolph, 2008).

Contrary to the perception that Generation Y are enticed by working for big brands (Lazarevic 2012) Gavan argued that graduates are actually becoming less concerned with a company's brand, and more concerned with the job on offer. He notes the transparency desired by students at all stages of the recruitment process. This adds to the insight of all 5 participants. When asked about creating an employer brand and attracting graduates, interviewees stated that providing an experience in reality which accurately matched the series of messages conveyed to them during the marketing phase was pivotal.

CSR was an area examined in the literature with Greening and Turban (2000) referring to previous research indicating that firms deemed to be more socially responsible experienced higher numbers of applicants.

6.4.4 Indirect Publicity: Lack of Control

Similar to peer worth, publicity is a huge factor valued by job seekers. Collins and Stevens (2002) maintain that publicity campaigns are more trusted in comparison with paid advertisements by companies. Although perceptions can be aided by the four stages illustrated above, these will only help to establish general perceptions (Collins and Han, 2002). More formal and traditional methods ought to be included in a company's EB efforts. Companies A-E all mentioned a degree of professionalism in their marketing campaigns such as microsites, and attendance at grad fairs. Affiliation with university curricula is also undertaken by participants A, B and D. Company E also hope to achieve this in the near future. The majority of respondents in this study employ campus ambassadors to promote recruitment in their company, thus adopting 'word-of-mouth' strategies. Van Hoye and Lievens (2009) ponder the inability of firms to control negative publicity, therefore word-of-mouth advertising strategies may prove damaging in some cases. 3/5 interviewees said that they avail of campus ambassadors to promote in universities, although these ambassadors were all former

employees who had a positive employment experience, therefore purely enhancing the company image.

CHAPTER 7 – Conclusion

7.1 Opening Remarks

This chapter contains the researchers' final conclusion regarding her research into the EB efforts being conducted by popular graduate employers in Ireland. The academic works presented in Chapter 2 offer an insight into the psychological understanding behind enticing talent. Chapters 4 and 5 set out EB strategies in a real-life context, along with the factors that influence them.

7.2 Objective 1

The question of what renders a company successful in terms of EB is widely discussed in the literature and by participants revealing their strategies in this research. On a broad note, Lievens and Highhouse (2003) examined what they believe are the predominant factors in the recruitment process. It is suggested here that “leveraging” of the company’s brand in sync with desired talent may offer advantages when hiring. This was seen in Chapter 4 as companies are aware of positioning themselves and their EB strategies to align with the appropriate channels which Generation Y and today’s graduates are using such as social media.

The literature review indicated the array of perspectives surrounding the establishment of a strong EB which will entice a firm's most valuable asset which is their human capital. The theoretical perspectives regarding important EB values were mirrored in participants' responses seeking insight into EB values in their firms. These were illustrated above in Figure 8 (Dissertation, p. 51).

There was a lack of empirical research surrounding the topic of EB and the positioning of a brand to particularly attract young talent in the form of graduates. The colossal task of attracting this cohort is made all the more difficult thanks to Irish demographic trends and the tendencies for Generation Y to be more selective in the company they choose to work for.

Applicant calibre was perceived to have improved in the case of all 5 companies. This perception may be deemed subjective in some participant's companies, given the lack of metrics in their organisations to measure return on EB investment or applicant quality.

Participating companies are seeking a wide range of graduates from across the sector, and are having to adjust how their position their marketing. This will help to get the attention of graduates who may not necessarily associate their own academic qualifications with the advertising company. The example from Gavan O'Brien illustrated Lidl's plight to advertise to I.T. students, although hadn't leveraged their EB strategy to facilitate this. This shows that constant revision of EB efforts is fundamental to ensure the cross-sector graduates a company wants will be aware of the positions available to them.

A philanthropic aspect was perceived to play a role in organisational attractiveness, although again this wasn't an area being measured quantifiably among participants. This information is specifically sought from graduates by Company B, although is done so intangibly via feedback. This could be an important area in EB efforts, although investigative efforts in this research yielded no concrete results.

Uniqueness was seen throughout the research as a necessary strategy to entice all applicants, but particularly graduates who are much more aware of what a company is offering.

Transparency of employment prospects was discussed widely in the literature and among participants. The idea of an "end to end" process where advertising matched

reality was a huge increment for companies conducting their EB efforts in this research. Participants prided themselves on their unique company cultures, but stressed that this needs to be conveyed correctly to ensure applicants trust the company. This will help to nurture any internal branding efforts being conducted by the organisation.

Internal support from HR was noticed as a key theme in this research. Harmonisation between the marketing/ EB personnel and HR departments will allow to synchronise the advertised information to ensure correct recruitment occurs. Ensuring that recruitment procedures such as formal/informal/competency-based interviews, assessment centres, psychometric testing/online videos match are aligned with what the EB strategy suggested is key. This collaboration will help to attract appropriate staff, minimising situations of inappropriate recruiting, and help to facilitate the existing company culture.

7.3 Objective 2

Employers in this study are measuring the return on EB investment by mostly intangible methods such as the increase in the number of quality applicants however very little was being done by way of direct quantifiable metrics. This could prove worrying considering the wide array of efforts being conducted. If one strategy is proving ineffective then this could be a serious waste of resources. Thee literature and participants' suggestions regarding seeking feedback from applicants is of course to be considered however directly establishing the return by solid means will help companies to realign the emphasis they place on their various EB channels.

Participants fully realised the scope of investment both time-wise and financially required to remain at the forefront of graduate's minds. Company E experienced a dip in applicant numbers throughout the financial crisis. This was conducive to what was happening across the whole financial services sector, however the company has seen a definite increase in applicants the last year since they resumed their EB. Out of all the participants, this company were the only company to temporarily ease up and resume their EB efforts. This shows a direct correlation between EB and applicant numbers.

7.4 Objective 3

The need for correct identification of an organisation's culture is pivotal in attracting graduates, but also to retain them. Companies realised the importance of attracting today's young, talented graduates and are having to be flexible in terms of their strategies. Participants in this research suggested that this element of flexibility in recruitment methods is partially to adhere to the tendencies of today's technologically orientated graduate, but also to publicly demonstrate their progressive organisational mind-set.

The overwhelming emphasis that participants place on social media was unanticipated, and requires constantly reviewing the channels that employers are utilising. Companies were aware of this, and addressed the need for constantly realigning their current strategies in light of social media usage patterns.

Firms revealed they are looking to recruit from a diverse academic profile, so companies will also need to be aware of their indirect competitors looking to recruit the same applicant type.

The discussion chapter illustrated the need for uniqueness, and to be self-deprecating if current EB efforts aren't yielding desirable results. In some cases, a lack of supporting HR infrastructure such as weaker recruitment strategies can cause recruits to be selected for roles not quite appropriate for them. This could prove disastrous for companies financially, so the need for HR to coincide with EB efforts externally will prove better results.

Although minor challenges facing companies conducting EB efforts were mentioned by participants in the research process, an overwhelming torrent of information strongly suggests that well-thought out EB efforts have numerous advantages for graduate employers. The research threw light on participant's increasing use of social media platforms to tap into a generation which can be accessed easier by technological platforms. Not only this, the research revealed that certain non-traditional recruitment strategies yield more advantages. The assessing of quality, again via social media such as online videos, shows the flexibility that companies are displaying.

7.5 Areas of Future Research

Further research could be done into methods of quantifiably ascertaining return on EB investments. It was clear from the research that although participants did seek to establish the extent of their return on investments, only 1 participant utilised actual metrics. This could come down to ambiguity as to how to precisely measure return, so further research could focus on companies who do indeed have robust metrics in place.

Additionally, research could be done into assessing the perceptions of graduates themselves regarding EB strategies which interest them. In conjunction with research focusing on employers, the perceptions of job-seekers may prove worthy both in academia and in real-life organisations.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aaker, L., J. (1997) 'Dimensions of Brand Personality', *Journal of Marketing Research*, 34(3): pp. 347-356.
- Adams, S. (2013) 'The 10 Skills Employers Most Want In 20-Something Employees' [Online]. *Forbes*, 11th October, Available from: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2013/10/11/the-10-skills-employers-most-want-in-20-something-employees/> [Accessed 8th July 2014].
- Aiman-Smith, L., Bauer, T., N. and Cable, D., M. (2001) 'Are you attracted? Do you intend to pursue? A recruiting policy capturing study', *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 16(2): pp. 219-237.
- Ambler, T. and Barrow, S. (1996) 'The Employer Brand.' Identifier: working paper. London: London Business School. [Online]. Available from: <http://www.london.edu/facultyandresearch/research/docs/96-902.pdf> [Accessed 18th June 2014].
- Arachchige, B. and Robertson, A. (2011) 'Business Student Perceptions of a Preferred Employer: A Study Identifying Determinants of Employer Branding', *The IUP Journal of Brand Management*, 8(3): pp. 25-46.
- Armstrong, M. (2007) *Employee rewards management and practice*. London: Kogan Page Ltd.
- Backhaus, K. and Tikoo, S. (2004) 'Conceptualising and researching employer branding', *Career Development International*, 9(5): pp. 501-517.

- Barrow, S. and Mosley, R. (2005) *The Employer Brand: Bringing the Best of Brand Management to People at Work*. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
- Bazaar (2012) 'Talking to Strangers: Millennials Trust People over Brands' [Online]. www.bazaarvoice.com Available from: http://resources.bazaarvoice.com/rs/berthinvoice/images/201202_Millennials_whitepaper.pdf [Accessed 26th July 2014].
- Berthon, P., Ewing, M., and Hah, L., L. (2001) 'Captivating Company; Dimensions of Attractiveness in Employer Branding', *International Journal of Advertising*, 24(2): pp. 151-172.
- Blaxter, L. (2008) *How to Research*, 4th edition, Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Blumberg, B., Donald, R. C. & Pamela, S. S. (2005) *Business Research Methods*. Berkshire: McGraw-Hill.
- Botha, A., Bussin, M. and de Swardt, L. (2011) 'An employer brand predictive model for talent attraction and retention', *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, 9(1): pp. 1-12.
- Bryman, A. and Bell, E. (2007) *Business research methods*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Busch, J., L. (2013) 'EMPLOYER BRANDING - TAKING IT SOCIAL IN WEB 2.0: DEMOGRAPHICAL AGING, A CAUSE FOR EMPLOYER BRANDING' , 23rd April, Available from: <http://www.brandba.se/blog/employerbrandingsocialmedia-busch> [Accessed 8th July 2014].
- BusinessDictionary (n.d.) 'Branding' [Online]. www.businessdictionary.com Available from <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/branding.html> [Accessed 1st June 2014].
- Cable, D., M., Aiman-Smith, L., Mulvey, P. and Edwards, J., R. (2000) 'The sources and accuracy of job applicants' beliefs about organizational culture', *Academy of Management Journal*, 43, pp. 1076-1085.
- Cable, M., D. and Turban, B., D. (2001) 'ESTABLISHING THE DIMENSIONS, SOURCES AND VALUE OF JOB SEEKERS' EMPLOYER KNOWLEDGE DURING RECRUITMENT.' *Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management*, Vol. 20: pp. 115-163.
- Collins, J., C. and Han, J. (2004) 'Exploring Applicant Pool Quantity and Quality: The Effects of Early Recruitment Practice Strategies, Corporate Advertising, and Firm Reputation,' Identifier: Unpublished Article. Cornell: Cornell University ILR School. [Online]. Available from: <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1043&context=articles> [Accessed 12th July 2014].
- Collins, J., C. and Stevens, K. (2002) 'The Relationship between Early Recruitment related activities and the Application Decision of new Labor

Market Entrants: A Brand Equity Approach to Recruitment', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87(6): pp. 1121-1133.

- Collis, J. and Hussey, R. (2003) *Business Research: A Practical Guide for Undergraduate and Postgraduate Students*. 2nd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Creswell, J. (1994) *Research Design - Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, London: Sage Publications.
- Davis, A., J. (2010) *Competitive Success: How Branding Adds Value*. [Online]. Host (GoogleBooks): Available from: <http://books.google.ie/books?id=kTkbzu278y4C&pg=PA273&dq=branding+raise+awareness&hl=en&sa=X&ei=5Qj7U8ClKojG7Ab77oDYAw&ved=0CB4Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=branding%20raise%20awareness&f=false> [Accessed 19th May 2014].
- De Baere, T. (2014) 'Employer Branding using Real Customer Stories, Through Employee Peer-to-Peer Connectivity' *B2B Marketing Experiences*. 14th May. Available from: <http://www.b2bmarketingexperiences.com/?s=peer> [Accessed 4th August 2014].
- Denscombe, M. (2010) *The Good Research Guide. For Small Scale Social Research Projects*. 4th ed. England: Open University Press.
- Donnelly, K. (2012) 'Irish Schools are among the best in the world, says new study' [Online]. *Independent.ie*, 28th November, Available from: <http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/irish-schools-are-among-best-in-world-says-new-study-28940705.html> [Accessed 21st July 2014].
- Elving, J., L., Westhoff, J., C., J., Meeusen, K. and Schoonderbeek, W., J. (2012) 'The war for talent? The relevance of employer branding in job advertisements for becoming an employer of choice' *Journal of Brand Management*, 20(5): pp. 355-373.
- Flick, Uwe. (2006) *An Introduction to Qualitative research*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Foster, C., Punjaisiri, K. and Cheng, R. (2010) 'Exploring the relationship between corporate, internal and employer branding', *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, 19(6): pp. 401-409.
- Franca, V. and Pahor, M. (2012) 'The Strength of the Employer Brand: Implications for Recruiting', *Journal of Marketing and Management*, (3)1: pp. 78-122.
- Gardner, T. M., Erhardt, N., & Martin-Rios, C. (2011) 'Rebranding Employment Branding: Establishing a New Research Agenda to Explore the Attributes, Antecedents, and Consequences of Workers' Employment Brand Knowledge', *Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management* (*Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management*, 30: pp. 253-304.

- Glassdoor (2014) 'Get Hired. Love Your Job' [Online]. www.glassdoor.com Available from: <http://www.glassdoor.com/index.htm> [Accessed 3rd August 2014].
- Goodrich, M. (2008) 'A Coding Methodology for Open-Ended Survey Questions' Identifier: unpublished thesis. New York: Department of Politics, New York University. [Online] Available from: <http://www.qssi.psu.edu/files/PSUNF-Goodrich.pdf> [Accessed 2nd August 2014].
- GradIreland, (2014) 'Ireland's 100 leading graduate employers', [Online]. www.gradireland.com. Available from: <http://gradireland.com/irelands100> [Accessed 10th June 2014].
- Greening, W., D. and Turban, D., B. (2000) 'Corporate Social Performance as a competitive advantage in attracting a quality workforce', *Business and Society*, 39(3): pp. 254-280.
- Harari, O. (1998) 'Attracting the Best Minds', *Management Review*, 87(4): pp. 23-26.
- Haynes, P., B. (2011) 'The impact of generational differences on the workplace.' *Journal of Corporate Real Estate*, 13(2): pp. 98-108.
- Hays, (2010) 'EMPLOYER BRANDING THE IMPACT ON RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION' [Online]. www.hays.co.uk. Available from: http://www.hays.co.uk/cs/groups/hays_common/documents/webassets/hays_031113.pdf [Accessed 26th July 2014].
- Hieronimus, F., Schaefer, K., and Schroder J. (2005) 'Using Branding to Attract Talent', *The McKinsey Quarterly*, 3: pp. 12-14.
- Ivancevich, J., & Matteson, M. (1980) *Stress and work: A managerial perspective*. 1st ed. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman.
- Johns, C. (2013) 'What do employers want?' [Online]. www.irishtimes.com Available from: <http://www.irishtimes.com/business/sectors/what-do-employers-want-1.1499719> [Accessed 21st July 2014].
- Johnson, B. and Christensen, L.,B. (2012) *Educational Research: Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Approaches*. California: Sage Publications.
- Judge, A., T. and Bretz, Jr., D., R. (1991) 'The Effects of Work Values on Job Choice Decisions'. Identifier: Working Paper Series, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, School of Industrial and Labor Relations. [Online] Available from: <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1354&context=cahrswp> [Accessed 5th July 2014].

- Judge, T., A. and Cable, D., M. (1997) 'Applicant personality, organizational culture, and organizational attraction', *Personnel Psychology*, 50(2): pp. 359-394.
- Kainulainen, M. (2014) 'Employer Branding in International Recruitment Communication. Case Opteam. Identifier: MA thesis, Phillipines: Aalto University School of Business. [Online] Available from: http://epub.lib.aalto.fi/en/ethesis/pdf/13537/hse_ethesis_13537.pdf [Accessed 10th June 2014].
- Kaliprasad, M. (2006) 'The Human Factor 1: Attracting, Retaining, and Motivating Capable People', *Cost Engineering*, 48(6): pp. 20-26.
- Kane, (n.d.) 'Generation Y' [Online]. www.legalcareers.about.com Available from: <http://legalcareers.about.com/od/practicetips/a/GenerationY.htm> [Accessed 1st August 2014].
- Kane, E. and O'Reilly-De Brún, M. (2001) *Doing Your Own Research*, 2nd ed. London: Marion Boyars Publishers.
- Kim, J., York, M., K. and Lim, J. (2010) 'The role of brands in recruitment: A mixed-brand strategy approach', *Marketing Letters*, 22(2): pp. 165-179.
- Knoblauch, M. (2014) 'Millennials Trust User-Generated Content 50% More Than Other Media', *Mashable*, 9th April. Available from: <http://mashable.com/2014/04/09/millennials-user-generated-media/> [Accessed 13th July 2014].
- Knox, S. and Freeman, C. (2006) 'Measuring and Managing Employer Brand Image in the Service Industry', *Journal of Marketing Management*, 22(7/8): pp. 695-716.
- Konig, C. (2008) 'EMPLOYER BRANDING: Management Crunch. [Online]. *HighBeam Research*, 10th December, Available from: <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-190315717.html> [Accessed 1st July 2014].
- Kropp, W. (2012) 'One Voice of Generation Y'. *Frontiers of Health Services Management*. 29(1) Fall 2012: pp. 40-44. [Online]. Available from: <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1039642821?pq-origsite=summon> [Accessed 3rd August 2014].
- Lake, L. (n.d.) 'What is Branding and How Important is it to Your Marketing Strategy?' [Online]. www.marketing.about.com Available from: <http://marketing.about.com/cs/brandmktg/a/whatisbranding.htm> [Accessed 14th June 2014].
- Lievens, F. and Highhouse, S. (2003) 'The relation of instrumental and symbolic attributes to a company's attractiveness as an employer', *Personnel Psychology*, 56(1): pp. 75-102.
- Lievens, F., Van Hove, G. and Schreurs, B. (2005) 'Examining the relationship between employer knowledge dimensions and organisational attractiveness:

An application in in a military context' *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 78(4): 553-572.

- Lievens, F., Van Hove, G., and Anseel, F. (2007) 'Organisational Identity and Employer Image: Towards a Unifying Framework', *British Journal of Management*, 18(1): pp. 45-59.
- LinkedIn (2012) 'The State of Employer Branding' [Online]. www.talent.linkedin.com Available from: http://talent.linkedin.com/sites/default/files/assets/LIStateofEmployerBrand_Oct12.pdf [Accessed 13th August 2014].
- Linn, R. and Peter, K. (2014) 'Employer brand trust and affect: linking brand personality to employer brand attractiveness', *European Journal of Marketing*, 48(1/2): pp. 218-236.
- Love, L. and Singh, P. (2011) 'Workplace Branding: Leveraging Human Resource Management Practices for Competitive Advantage Through 'Best Employer Surveys'', *Journal of Business Psychology*, 26(2): pp. 175 – 181.
- Luscombe, J., Lewis, I., and Biggs, H., C. (2013) 'Essential elements for recruitment and retention: Generation Y' *Education and Training*. 55(3): pp. 272-290.
- Main, D. (2013) 'Who are the millenials?' *livescience*. 9th July. Available from: <http://www.livescience.com/38061-millennials-generation-y.html> [Accessed 27th June 2014].
- Mannion, P. (2013) 'Extract: How is Generation Y reconciling high expectations with the economic reality?' [Online]. www.thejournal.ie Available from: <http://www.thejournal.ie/readme/how-is-generation-y-reconciling-its-high-expectation-with-the-economic-reality-1098555-Sep2013/> [Accessed 16th July 2014].
- Martin, G., Gollan, J., P. and Grigg, K. (2011) 'Is there a bogger and better future for employer branding? Facing up to innovation, corporate reputations and wicked problems in SHRM', *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 22(17): pp. 3618-3637.
- Mason-Jones, D. (2005) 'Employer Branding: A Proactive Recruitment Strategy', cPublished in Human Capital, Australia. [Online] Available from: <http://journalist.com.au/HCozEmployerBranding.pdf> [Accessed 6th July 2014].
- Maxwell, A., J. (2012) *A Realist Approach for Qualitative Researchers*. [Online]. Host (SAGE): Available from: http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/44131_1.pdf [Accessed 2nd August 2014].
- McGinnis, J. (2011) 'THE YOUNG AND RESLLESS: GENERATION Y IN THE NON PROFIT WORKFORCE', *Public Administration Quarterly*, 35(3): pp. 342-362.

- Meister, J. (2012) 'Job Hopping Is the 'New Normal' for Millennials: Three Ways to Prevent a Human Resource Nightmare'. [Online]. *Forbes*. 14th August, Available from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jeannemeister/2012/08/14/job-hopping-is-the-new-normal-for-millennials-three-ways-to-prevent-a-human-resource-nightmare/> [Accessed 3rd August 2014].
- Minchington, B. (2010). *The employer brand manager's handbook*. Torrensville: Collective Learning.
- Moon, J. and Matten, D. (2008) "'Implicit" and "explicit" CSR: a conceptual framework for a comparative understanding of corporate social responsibility', *The Academy of Management Review* (33)2: pp. 404-424.
- Moroko, L. and Uncles, M., D. (2008) 'Characteristics of Successful Employer Brands', *Journal of Brand Management*, 16(3), pp. 160-175.
- Muller, D. (2011) 'Banks trying to capitalize on younger generation' [Online]. *New Orleans CityBusiness*. 8th January, Available from: <http://search.proquest.com/docview/847063834?pq-origsite=summon> [Accessed 3rd August 2014].
- Murray, N. (2013) 'Number of graduates emigrating doubles despite improving economy' [Online]. *Irish Examiner*, 19th December, Available from: <http://www.irishexaminer.com/ireland/number-of-graduates-emigrating-doubles-despite-improving-economy-253093.html> [Accessed 19th June 2014].
- Oladipo, T., Iyamabo, J. and Otubanjo, O. (2013) 'Employer Branding: Moulding Desired Perceptions in Current and Potential Employees', *Journal of Management and Sustainability*, 3(3): pp. 55-65.
- Orlikowski, W., J. and Baroudi, J., J. 'Studying Information Technology in Organizations: Research Approaches and Assumptions', *Information Systems Research*. 2(1): pp. 1-28. [Online]. Available from: <http://archive.nyu.edu/bitstream/2451/14404/3/IS-90-04.pdf.txt> [Accessed 18th June 2014].
- Parahoo, K. (2006) *Nursing Reserach. Principles, Process and Issues*, 2nd edition, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Peters, T. (1999) *The Brand You 50 (Reinventing Work): Fifty Ways to Transform Yourself from an "Employee" into a Brand That Shouts Distinction, Commitment, and Passion!* [Online]. Host (Google Books): Available from <http://books.google.ie/books?id=c49dZi91o4oC&printsec=frontcover&dq=a+great+brand++peters+1999&hl=en&sa=X&ei=6JiZUm0Oui47AaXyYHIAg&ved=0CB0Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=a%20great%20brand&f=false> [Accessed 19th July 2014].

- Pilbeam, S. and Corbridge, M. (2006) *PEOPLE RESOURCING: Contemporary HRM in Practice*. 3rd ed. Harlow: Financial Times Prentice Hall.
- Punch, K.F. (2006) *Developing Effective Research Proposals*, 2nd edition, London: Sage.
- Quinlan, C. (2011) *Business Research Methods*. Hampshire: South-Western Cengage Learning.
- Randolph, N. (2008) 'Recruiting Generation Y'. *San Diego Business Journal*. 29(14) April 27th: pp. 19. [Online]. Available from: <http://search.proquest.com/docview/226952875?pq-origsite=summon> [Accessed 23rd June 2014].
- Robson, C. (2002) *Real world research: A resource for social scientists and practitioner- reserachers*, 2nd edition, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Rugg, G. & Petre, M. (2007) *A Gentle Guide to Research Methods*. Maidenhead, Berkshire: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P. and Thornhill, A. (2009) *Research methods for business students*. 5th ed. Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd.
- Schlager, T., Bodderas, M., Maas, P. and Cachelin, L., J. (2011) 'The Influence of the employer brand on employee attitudes relevant for service branding: an empirical investigation', *Journal of Services Marketing*, 25(7): pp. 497-508.
- Schuler, S., R. and Jackson, E., S. (1987) 'Linking Competitive Strategies with Human Resources Management Practices', *The Academy of Management Executive*, 1(3): pp. 207-219.
- Seghal, K. and Malati, N. (2013) 'Employer Branding: A Potent Organizational Tool for Enhancing Competitive Advantage'. *Journal of Brand Management*, 10(1): pp. 51-65.
- Sivertzen, A., Ragnhild, E. and Olafsen, A. (2013) 'Employer branding: employer attractiveness and the use of social media', *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 22(7): pp.473 – 483.
- Srivastava, P. and Jyotsna, B. (2010) 'EMPLOYER BRAND FOR TALENT ACQUISITION: AN EXPLORATION TOWARDS ITS MEASUREMENT', *Vision* 14(1/2): pp. 25-34.
- Sullivan, J. (2004) 'The 8 Elements of a Successful Employer Brand' [Online]. *ERE.net*, 23rd February, Available from: <http://www.ere.net/2004/02/23/the-8-elements-of-a-successful-employment-brand/> [Accessed 5th July 2014].
- Taylor, S. (2010) *Resourcing and Talent Management*. 5th ed. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

- Tews, J., M., Michel, W., J. and Bartlett, A. (2012) 'The *Fundamental Role of Workplace Fun in Applicant Attraction*', *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, 19(1): pp. 105-114.
- Turban, D., B. and Cable, D., M. (2003) 'Firm reputation and applicant pool characteristics'. *Journal of Organisational Behaviour*. 24(6): pp. 733-751. [Online]. Available from <http://search.proquest.com/buscoll/docview/224866639?pq-origsite=summon> [Accessed 28th June 2014].
- Turban, D., B. and Keon, T., L. (1993) 'Organizational attractiveness: An interactionist perspective' *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 78(2): pp. 184-193.
- UCC Survey, (2013) 'Corks 96fm' [Online] 'www.96fm.ie. Available from: <http://www.96fm.ie/News-Local-Info?ItemID=2125> [14th July 2014].
- UNIDO (n.d.) 'United Nations Industrial Development Organization.' [Online]. www.unido.org . Available from: <http://www.unido.org/en/what-we-do/trade/csr/what-is-csr.html> [Accessed 20th January 2014].
- Vasagar, J. (2012) 'Most graduate recruiters now looking for at least a 2:1'. [Online]. *The Guardian*, 4th July, Available from: <http://www.theguardian.com/money/2012/jul/04/graduate-recruiters-look-for-2-1-degree> [Accessed 12th July 2014].
- Whitehead, L. T. (2005) 'Basic Classical Ethnographic Research Methods; Secondary Data Analysis, Fieldwork, Observation/Participant Observation, and Informal and Semi-structured Interviewing.' Identifier: Unpublished working paper. Maryland: University of Maryland. [Online]. Available from: <http://www.cusag.umd.edu/documents/WorkingPapers/ClassicalEthnoMethods.pdf> Accessed 2nd July 2014].

Appendix 1. Interview Question List.

Employer Branding

- What is your role in the company?
- How would you define “employer branding”?
- How much emphasis does your company place on promoting their employer brand?
- Do you place the same effort in promoting to graduates?
- Has the company always made efforts to actively promote themselves as an ‘employer of choice’?
 - No? Have application numbers increased since the company’s branding efforts began?
 - Has applicant *quality* improved since the branding efforts began?

- Which advertising platforms do the company use?

- Which is the most effective?
- Have these advertising platforms added value/significantly helped the company image in your opinion?
- Do you use an agency to develop/promote your brand?

Graduate Recruitment

- How many graduates do you recruit per annum?
 - Has the company always made employer branding efforts specifically towards graduates?
- If no:
- When did the company begin offering graduate programmes?
 - Have application numbers increased since the company began to offer graduate programmes?
 - Have the number quality of applicants improved?
- How does your company rate “quality” applicants?
 - Has employer branding affected your graduate recruitment programmes?
 - How does your company measure if employer branding is positively impacting your graduate recruitment?
 - Have the expectations of graduates changed in recent times? (Possibly since your company began branding efforts?)
 - Do you use brand ambassadors to promote the brand on campus/university grounds?
 - Does the company have a particularly effective recruitment strategy to attract new (or soon-to-be) graduates? (ie. focusing on universities/IT's/ social media platforms?)
 - Do you try to incorporate yourselves into the curriculum that potential future candidates are completing?

Issues/Concerns/Future Trends

- Are there any challenges facing employer branding?
- In your opinion, what successful initiatives could other (non-rival) companies do to successfully promote their employer brand among potential applicants?
- Do you have any concerns regarding current brand enhancement/recruitment strategies in your company (or other companies?)
- Are there any upcoming trends for graduate recruitment?

Thank you! ☐

Appendix 2. Sample Interview

Company D

What is your role in the company?

So my role is Graduate Programme Manager and I manage the full graduate programme. So from developing the attraction campaigns that we go to campus with, all the messaging to students etc., website design, media campaign design, right through to recruitment. So when people send in their applications online, I organise the assessment centres and move them through the recruitment phase, and then into the offer phase, and then into training and development. So developing their full 5 week induction programme, to looking at their training programme once they finish their induction.

How would you define employer branding?

Employer branding, for us, it's ensuring that the candidates, or graduates, understand what we offer and that when they come in, the message that we give out is how they see us. Basically that the attraction campaign that we have, very much mirrors what life and culture is like within the company.

How much emphasis would the company place on promoting the brand?

We place a lot of emphasis on attracting the right talent to our business. The graduate programme has been in existence for over 20+years, and (Company D)'s brand has grown from being a domestic brand to an international brand over that same period. So the graduate programme (which is an international programme) has definitely led to that success. It's been an integral part of the brand's success globally.

Has the company always made efforts to promote themselves as an employer of choice?

To be honest with you we've put more of an effort on it in the last 2-3 years as we now have a dedicated Graduate Programme Manager which we never had before. We've been recruiting graduates for over 20 years now, but originally we used E.O.P. (European Orientation Programme) as a programme that we recruited through. When we moved away from EOP we brought recruitment in house and we started to focus on "who is the talent we really want here?" and focusing on the programme itself; it's structure, how long the programme was going to be, what kind of rotations we would offer etc. It's really in the last 3 years that we've upped our game, in terms of our focus.

Have application numbers increased since you started doing this?

Yeah they definitely have had an effect on application numbers. So application numbers are about 400 per annum, but prior to this, say even from 3 or 4 to even maybe 5 years ago it would have been around the (1) hundred mark.

Has applicant quality improved since these branding efforts began?

It definitely has. I mean, in the last 3 years, that's when we've seen an increase in applications because we've put increased efforts into how we're attracting our graduates and how we use our employer branding to attract the right people to our company, to our programme. So the numbers have increased and also the quality of applicants has definitely improved. Because our attraction campaign has become more rounded, more solid, and given a more "real" insight into the job of an ambassador, in

an international market, it means that graduates are more educated about what we can offer to them a part of our programme. So yeah, 100% better quality candidates.

Which advertising platforms does the company use?

We have different tiers. So, we have our PR ring, so we use that to advertise on all of the PR channels, so that would be newspaper, radio, magazines... Then we have our online piece which is through publications like "joe.ie". We have our social media piece, so we have our dedicated YouTube channel. We have our Facebook channel, and in the last year alone, Facebook "likes" have increased by 25%. And then this year we launched our Twitter account, so we're growing that at the moment as well. So basically we have our PR piece, our social media piece, and then we have our online piece where we connect with online bloggers and online applications like joe.ie.

And which of these is the most effective do you think?

If you look at our channels, for us, it's by far Facebook.

OK. And have these channels added value or significantly helped the company image in your opinion?

It just shows that we're a forward thinking brand. So we say that the graduates that we're recruiting are "millennials"; they're always online, they're always connected so they expect that the brand that they're going to work for is going to be the same. You know, what we're looking to attract is marketing graduates, so marketing graduates very much expect that from a company as a sector they're going in to. So we definitely feel that it has an effect on the (Company D) brand because we're a forward thinking brand. Also on the graduate programme, it helps us to connect with graduates in a stronger way.

Do you use an agency to develop or promote your brand?

We use a PR agency. We also use a creative agency, and a media agency. That means that for our website for example, or any ads that we do on Facebook for example, they would be developed through our creative agency. Then through the media piece, when we're looking at search engine optimisation, and the types of strategy we use in terms of online media, we use an agency who'd specialise in that as well.

How many graduates do you recruit per annum?

Before we focused I suppose on becoming an employer of choice in the graduate sphere, we would have recruited 10-15 graduates per annum. It's only since 2012 that we started to recruit more graduates. It's only really then that we started to focus on looking at ourselves to become an employer of choice for graduates in Ireland, especially among for marketing graduates. Since then we've recruited 30+ per year.

Has the company always looked at recruiting graduates?

Yes, we see the value in recruiting graduate talent and a number of our graduates over the years have gone onto Director level roles within the organisation. Graduates are an integral part of our success story over the past 20 years.

You said that applicant quantity increased, but how do you rate quality applicants?

We look for competencies. So, we look for what competencies we would expect a high performing graduate to have. Competencies such as presentation skills, communication skills, relationship building skills, influencing, negotiation, and then we look at "right, well if that's what we expect a high performing brand ambassador to have in their role, then we need to have to assess those competencies in our applicants, so we do that through assessment centres.

How has employer branding affected your graduate recruitment programmes?

It's definitely had a very positive impact on it. It's brought us from outside of Ireland's top 100 employers to (within the top 10). So in the last 3 years we've risen considerably which is amazing for us because we're the highest moving employers within that list. We've won (lists several awards) so it really has transformed the offering that we have to graduates.

How would your company measure if employer branding is impacting your graduate recruitment?

Reiterates the previous achievements and how the company standing has dramatically improved in Ireland among graduates

How do your employer branding strategies carry through to the recruitment process?

It's more around attracting the right person. For us, everything about our campaign is around getting the person who's the right fit. We don't ask for a CV when people apply, we ask for a video which is to make sure that the competencies that we expect people to have are there. We can see this even at application point. We can see even in

a video; has this candidate got good communication skills?, have they built up good relationships? Because sometimes they bring us around to where they work, their friends, lecturers, societies... So the video very much helps us to see; "has the person got the competencies we're looking for?", and then that's supported by their written application. So we really always have these competencies in mind, so like for example negotiation skills, influencing skills, we can see that through some of their working experiences etc., so these competencies are always kept in mind from the minute they upload their videos or written applications.

Have the expectations of graduates changed in recent times, possibly since the company began their graduate recruitment efforts?

They've definitely changed in the last 23 years! A lot has changed in Ireland in that space of time, too. If we look at the last 3 years since we upped our game in terms of branding our programme and being very focused in our messaging about (what Company D's graduate programme offers*), then yes, it definitely has a very high impact, so much so that, because of the success of (initial graduate programme*) we've actually launched a second programme, launched in 2012 (names programme*) and that's for science and engineering students. So we hire two graduates every year into that programme, and then our marketing graduates to go all around the world promoting our brand.

Do you use brand ambassadors on campus?

We don't at the minute to be honest, normally a brand ambassador on campus is someone who's been with the company as an intern, so they'll have an insight into the company culture, into the ways of working, but for us, we don't have a formal internship programme. So that's something that we're working at and looking to launch down the line, because it's a very important pipeline to our graduate programme to identify top talent early. We don't have campus ambassadors at the minute.

Does the company have a particularly effective strategy to attract new (or soon to be) graduates?

Yeah, well this kind of links into the earlier question when you asked about what kind of social media channels we would use. For the grad programmes, it's back to our PR

channels, our online media pieces, and then our social pieces like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube.

Do you try to incorporate yourselves into the curriculum that potential future candidates are completing?

Yeah well, we very much integrate ourselves with students in some campuses. For example we work with one college with their year 1 marketing class to present them all with a case study, on (Company D)'s success, and then the lecturer actually has an exam question on our case study. Then we work with (scheme), which is a live project going on over the whole semester, where we sit down with the lecturer and we create a live company project for the class to work on for the full semester and then I would do different workshops on campus with that class, and then at the end of it they would present it to me with their findings on the case study that we've given them, and then myself and the lecturer work to grade that. So we do that, and we've done other examples of case studies in UCD too.

Well this is a kind of indirect employer branding in a way. You're getting your name out there

Yeah and you're adding to the student's value in terms of their employability skills because there's more of an insight into how a real company works. So it's bringing the theory that they're learning into practice.

Are there any challenges facing employer branding?

There definitely is. There's a move away from, when you talk about "campus recruitment", you've got your careers fairs, which are face to face, also information stands, but students are more and more going online. So they're going to virtual careers fairs, they're looking to link up through virtual means.... So it's going to become more of a challenge. We're not going to get to meet the students face to face, and as employers, we really need to think about how we're going to do that. So as employers there's definitely a lot of challenges and it because of social media and online advancements. So as technology advances, as employers we have to as well, and we have to advance how we recruit the right people.

What could other companies do to promote themselves as an employer of choice among potential graduates?

I think, if it's learning from us, it's that we have an amazing story to tell. We only started to tell that story in the last 3 years. For me, the advice I would give is, every graduate programme has a story to tell, and that story is something that graduates will connect with. So you just need to tell your story in the most honest way, and this way you will attract the right people, the right fit. They'll be naturally attracted to that company if they see it as they want to connect with as part of their career. So just being open, and having an attraction campaign that's very honest with graduates and really gives them an insight into what they would really be doing in their role, and what the company culture is like. Obviously too, because social media is so important, this needs to be part of every graduate recruiter's campaign.

Do you think companies who are deemed more moral are more attractive to applicants?

I do think so. I think, a current graduate like yourself, you're very savvy. You want to work for a company and brand you believe in, something that you can feel that you make a real impact on, and can add value. I think that's what a graduate really wants. On top of that, it's career progression, and after that it's training and development, because they'll want to feel they're still learning in their job, and then most graduates want some international travel or international experience. The good thing about us is that we offer all that, and up till 3 years ago, that wasn't a story that we were telling. Only now that we've begun to tell that story, I think that's why people are so attracted to us and why our campaigns have been so successful.

Do you have any concerns regarding brand enhancement strategies in your companies?

We learn and change and develop every year, so the type of candidates that we're attracting changes every year, so the graduates that we would have hired 5 years ago are very different to the graduates we're recruiting today. I think that's because they're changing, the way they learn is changing, what they expect from employers is changing, how they see us as a brand is changing. There's so much at play that as an employer you really need to be very conscious of that, and be very flexible to know that it's not just one approach that suits all, everything needs refreshment and revision. Feedback from our candidates' graduates is an important part of our process every year. So we very much look to the graduates' voice and what they want, and our

ambassador's voice that we hire and what they want, and we try and deliver that to candidates and graduates that we've employed.

Are there any upcoming trends in graduate recruitment?

Yeah there's definitely a massive trend that Google are setting the way with, and Facebook and LinkedIn, and Twitter and all of those American companies. It's very much a move away from graduate recruitment and the move towards internships. These companies would mainly focus on internships, and that's what they would drive. They wouldn't necessarily have a graduate programme, they have an internship programme, and they offer the "strong" interns a role. So it's a different way of thinking about them and recruiting graduate talent, so they'd have an early engagement strategy, where they're engaging with students a lot earlier than in their final year, whereas traditionally, graduate recruitment saw companies engaging with students who were in their final year.

You mentioned a lot about social media, would that be an upcoming trend at the moment in employer branding?

Yeah it really is. You know, you need to be up to date, online, present, and connecting with millennials in *their* space, where they're hanging out.