Employer Brand Management –

Investigation on how to become the Employer of Choice for Generation Z

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Abstract:

The Gallup Engagement Index shows in recent years that the emotional bond with the employer has been at a consistently low level, with a slight increase of 2 percent being observed in 2020, presumably due to the pandemic. Nevertheless, loyalty to the employer is low, which is reflected in a significantly increased willingness to change (Gallup, Inc., 2021, representative survey of 1,000 workers 18 years and older between November 19 and December 18, 2020 in Germany). Numerous studies state that a high level of emotional attachment to the workplace is reflected in productivity and ultimately in corporate success. Therefor the author investigates what motivates and what prevents potential applicants from applying for a technical apprenticeship in the automotive segment.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction: Phenomenon Under Study and Research Question

Not only the generally more pronounced willingness of employees to change jobs, but also the shifting of requirement criteria in the direction of the increasing importance of soft factors such as corporate social responsibility and work- life balance, increase the pressure on companies to understand and retain employees as an important asset to differentiate themselves sufficiently. In particular, well-qualified candidates can choose from several job offers at the same time, so that differentiation from competing companies with the help of a strong employer brand offers a decisive advantage in the competition for employees (Roj, M., 2013). The peculiarity of the labor market, compared to other markets, is that the labor force is inextricably linked to the per-son of the worker. Relationships in the work context are always social relationships. Two promises are exchanged on labor markets: the provision of knowledge and skills for a limited period of time and the payment of wages. It is important to remember that labor is not a good with constant properties (Gerlach, P., 2014). In the area of recruitment, the existence of imperfect information and information asymmetries plays a role, because despite the search and information effort, it is almost impossible for the potential applicant to get a realistic insight into the corporate culture or all extraordinary employee offers. It is also impossible for the employer to fully fathom the applicant's attitudes, skills and subsequent performance in advance. These information asymmetries inevitably lead to wrong decisions that need to be minimized (Gerlach, P., 2014). Jobs are complex bundles of services that are characterized by intangibility and go beyond the pure requirements profile.

Recruitment is more successful the more successful it is in aligning the characteristics of the job with the company-specific requirements on the one hand and the needs of the applicant on the other (Hartmann, M., 2015). In addition, the cultural fit is important because it indicates the degree of agreement in values, norms and behaviors between the applicant and the company (Verhoeven, T., 2020). The corporate brand is often used as a point of reference for the corporate culture (Kowalczyk, S.J./Pawlish, M.J., 2002).

There is consensus in science and practice that a strong employer brand is a significant differentiator and competitive advantage when positioning as an employer of choice (Von Walter, B.; Kremmel, D., 2016). Employer branding is therefore a central success factor, since brands are not only of particular importance in the competition for customers, but also in the competition for

employees. The employer brand takes over at least part of the information gathering, reduces the risk by building trust and the possibility of identifying with the company. The potential applicant absorbs, processes and interprets the information about stimuli. The reputation of the company, and thus the employer brand, are exposed to additional influences from the media, discussions with current and former employees, experiences with the products or services of the company (Böttger, E., 2012).

The aim of the present work is to uncover what motivates potential applicants to apply for a vocational training position and to determine what prevents potential applicants from applying.

The purpose of the investigation is to provide answers to the following research questions:

- What motivates potential applicants to apply for a vocational training position?
- What prevents potential applicants from applying for a vocational training position?

Existing studies often have a quantitative approach to the topic of employer attractiveness and cluster items into factors. However, the author assumes that there are deeper facets that cannot be quantified, since a interviewer has to dig deeper intuitively to really find out what is important to Gen Z. Studies also focus on the previous Generation Y or have not defined a specific age group at all. However, the present study relates specifically to Generation Z secondary school students who are or at least should be interested in an apprenticeship. It is important to find out whether training as a career entry has generally lost importance and whether there are also empirical indications of an academic trend.

2. Methodology

2.1 Logic of Study Design and Study Sample

For this purpose, focus group interviews were conducted with a total of four entire school classes and four groups of secondary school students. The selection of the participants is of particular relevance, because their statements represent the data of the survey and thus determine their information content (Kitzinger, 1994). The selection was made on the basis of relevant criteria (Burrows & Kendall, 1997) in order to ensure additional knowledge (Richardson & Rabiee, 2001).

Particularly spontaneous reactions, statements or mutual stimulation of thoughts deepen the information content of a focus group (Stokes & Bergin, 2006) and contribute to the in-depth consideration of the research phenomenon (Dammer & Szymkowiak, 1998).

2.2   Method of Data Collection

Qualitative research reveals what people think or feel about certain phenomena. (Bellenger, Bernhardt & Goldstucker, 1976). Since focus groups provide a comprehensive insight into understandings and expectations (Krueger & Casey, 2015), this method is suitable for answering the research question with guided personal interviews within the focus groups. Students from three schools from the southern part of Germany, three from the central geographical area and two from the north-eastern part were interviewed. The focus group interviews last about 30 minutes and the students showed interest in answering the interviewer's questions. The number of secondary school students questioned is at N=90. 34 test persons are female and 58 persons are male, which was taken into account in the interpretation of the results. In order to assess the quality of the study, quality criteria were considered. (Kuckartz, Grunenberg & Dresing, 2007).

2.3   Method of Data Analysis

The interviews were evaluated by using a qualitative content analysis. The qualitative content analysis according to Mayring is a structured, qualitative method for evaluating text-based data. The evaluation process is, in the spirit of content analysis, characterized by a rule-based, fixed procedure (Fürst, S., Jecker, C., Schönhagen, P., 2016). This required a review and sorting of the previously generated material from the focus group interviews.

3.   Findings

The key findings of the study are concisely summarized. The automotive industry is a potential field of employment for only 15 percent of the test persons. It should be emphasized in particular that all interested parties are male. The gap becomes even clearer when determining interest in a

technical education. Female test subjects name the lack of interest in technical or manual trades, the supposedly bad working hours, the high risk of injury, the math grades are not sufficient or because they consider themselves to be untalented for a technical apprenticeship. Regardless of gender, the study provided the insight that the contact persons within the company have a large impact on the perception of employer attractiveness. This is how one test person answered the question why he had decided on a technical training position because "they were nice". Process convenience and process speed in the application process also have an impact on perceived employer attractiveness. The general image of an employer also has an influence and, according to several test persons, cannot be financially compensated. There is disagreement about the preferred company size - while some prefer a small company because of the family structure, others appreciate the advantages and security of a large corporation. The automotive industry is associated with environmental pollution, the diesel scandal, but also with e-mobility, motor sports and design, and is seen as having a future, but only with moderate growth. The students get information about their teachers, family members, especially siblings, websites and Google reviews about potential employers and fields of employment. Important motivating factors are the values of respect, fairness and equal treatment within the corporate culture. As recommendations for employers, the test persons named more presence, e.g. on TikTok, the offer of apartments and support with moving. The payment and the range of further training opportunities also play a role. It is easier for the test persons to identify with employers who offer products and services from their daily life. The study also shows that there is a large number of market participants besides the automotive industry who are also very interested in filling their technical training positions. A fundamental change in values of Generation Z, e.g. compared to the Baby Boomers, was also observed, even if this should not come as a surprise. A trend toward academization can be confirmed, as many students are considering a course of study or a dual course of study. A difference within Generation Z, depending on the type of school, was also investigated. High school students show a more pronounced political interest and look even more for a meaningful and ecologically responsible company than junior high school students.

4. Discussion

Since it is not possible to communicate all relevant information and the exchange partner cannot process all the information, it is advisable to invest in employer branding in order to build basic

trust in the employer brand. External employer branding is the basis for creating an employer image. Employer brand takes care of at least part of the information gathering, reduces the risk by building trust and increases the possibility of identification the company. The potential suitor takes the information about stimulation, processes and interprets them. The reputation of the company, and thus the employer brand, is subject to additional influences from the media, business talk to current and former employees, experiences with the products or services of the company. It should be borne in mind that image also has its natural limits as it is influenced by general industry reputation.

Based on the findings, strategies for the design and management of employer brands can be generated. The employer brand can thus be charged with attributes that match the needs of the target group and thus help companies to find suitable candidates in order to fill their training positions. In addition, ideas for personnel recruitment measures can be generated at the operational level. Furthermore, conclusions can be drawn about the optimal design of the application processes and the appropriate target group approach.

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