



# A great place to work!? Understanding crowdsourced employer branding

Amir Dabirian<sup>a,\*</sup>, Jan Kietzmann<sup>b</sup>, Hoda Diba<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Royal Institute of Technology (KTH), Stockholm, Sweden

<sup>b</sup> Beedie School of Business, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada

<sup>c</sup> Luleå University of Technology, Luleå, Sweden

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**Abstract** The benefits provided by employment and identified with a specific employing company are referred to as *employer branding*. We argue that when employees use IT to share and access work-related experiences openly across organizations, their expectations and assessments of workplaces change. We collected 38,000 reviews of the highest and lowest ranked employers on Glassdoor, an online crowdsourced employer branding platform. Using IBM Watson to analyze the data, we identify seven employer branding value propositions that current, former, and potential employees care about when they collectively evaluate employers. These propositions include (1) social elements of work, (2) interesting and challenging work tasks, (3) the extent to which skills can be applied in meaningful ways, (4) opportunities for professional development, (5) economic issues tied to compensation, (6) the role of management, and (7) work/life balance. We clarify that these value propositions do not all matter to the same extent and demonstrate how their relative valences and weights differ across organizations, especially if institutions are considered particularly good or bad places to work. Based on these findings, we show how employers can use crowdsourced employer branding intelligence to become great places to work that attract highly qualified employees.

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## 1. Employer attractiveness: A matter of public opinion

Companies have always cared about what their employees think and say about them. Collective

employee opinions shape not only the loyalty, engagement, and retention of existing workers, but also how firms are seen publicly and how they are able to attract new talent. In this regard, firms both can benefit and suffer tremendously from the word-of-mouth their employees create and share (Kietzmann & Canhoto, 2013). However, until recently, managers did not have access to many of these stories as they developed; narratives were

\* Corresponding author

E-mail addresses: [amir.dabirian@indek.kth.se](mailto:amir.dabirian@indek.kth.se) (A. Dabirian), [jkietzma@sfu.ca](mailto:jkietzma@sfu.ca) (J. Kietzmann), [hoda.diba@ltu.se](mailto:hoda.diba@ltu.se) (H. Diba)

either naturally shared among peers behind closed doors or they were purposefully withheld by employees for fear of negative repercussions. In either case, a comprehensive, collective, experience-based, and easy-to-access account of employee opinions did not exist.

In the last few years, new technologies have brought these employment stories to the fore and shed a brighter light on *employer branding*, defined as “the functional, economic, and psychological benefits that are provided by employment and identified with the employing company” (Ambler & Barrow, 1996, p. 187). Not only can individuals tell and access these stories online at any time and from any location, but also because employees can now remain anonymous, they have no reason anymore to hold their tongues. And while such publicly available information can be beneficial for job seekers who want to learn about potential employers, the risk is that frustrated employees may start exaggerating or telling outright lies and that good businesses will end up being portrayed as terrible places to work.

To circumvent the spread of unreliable and unrepresentative data, specific social networks have been created. In line with the revised definition of crowdsourcing (Kietzmann, 2017), these social networks invite former and current employees to volunteer their employment-related stories. The advantage of these crowdsourced employer branding platforms is that they can rely on strength in numbers. If they succeed at attracting many employees and their stories, the voices of a few disgruntled employees will be silenced by the accounts of the many who praise the same company, and vice versa. When successful, these crowdsourced employer branding platforms enable job seekers to separate good employers from bad. The public nature of the information on these platforms also presses firms to listen to the stories of their employees, both former and current, or otherwise lose their best recruits to better firms without being able to attract new high-value individuals.

In short, employer branding is changing. The resulting crowdsourced employer branding presents new opportunities for former and current employees to share their employment experiences, allowing job seekers to learn more about potential employers. This means that firms need to understand this brave new world of crowdsourced employer branding so they can provide the benefits that a current or prospective employee desires in working for a specific organization (Berthon, Ewing, & Hah, 2005).

With the goal of unpacking crowdsourced employer branding, Section 2 presents a brief review of the literature related to employer branding and

crowdsourcing. In Section 3, we describe our study of the employment attributes employees use when they talk about their workplaces. To arrive at a well-rounded conceptualization of crowdsourced employer branding, we needed to decide which companies to analyze. We also needed to select a crowdsourced employer branding platform from which we could access stories about these organizations. For both of these we turned to Glassdoor.com, a website via which current and former employees anonymously review companies and their management and which also ranks the best and worst employers based on the crowdsourced employee-generated data. In Section 4, we describe how we analyzed the stories we scraped from Glassdoor.com using Watson, IBM’s natural language processing and machine learning tool. In Section 5, we present our findings in the form of seven employer branding value propositions before discussing the importance of their relative weights and valences in Section 6. In Section 7, we deliberate the managerial implications of our work. Finally, the limitations of the study are acknowledged and avenues for future research are identified.

## 2. Employer branding: Then and now

Employer branding refers to an organization’s reputation as an employer and its value proposition to its employees (Barrow & Mosley, 2011). The term suggests that a firm benefits from employer branding when it is perceived as a great place to work in the minds of current employees and key stakeholders in the external market (Minchington, 2010).

Great work environments do not emerge by happenstance, but rather result from deliberate and strategic initiatives aimed at attracting, engaging, and retaining employees. Indeed, employer branding is the product of the “sum of a company’s efforts to communicate to existing and prospective staff that it is a desirable place to work” (Lloyd, 2002, p. 65). But, of course, an employer brand cannot be controlled by the firm; its beauty lies in the eye of the beholder. In this regard, the degree to which a firm’s intended employer brand matches its employees’ experiences with the company culture and values determines the employer brand’s impact in the market.

Much has happened since the term employer branding was first coined by Ambler and Barrow in 1996. The then-new IT choices, far superior to the analog alternatives they replaced, allowed interaction among people in altogether new ways. Memories of early technology advances remind us of just how big a difference IT did make, starting with the

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