

Article

Employer Branding Applied to SMEs: A Pioneering Model Proposal for Attracting and Retaining Talent

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Abstract: Most business enterprises are small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and many of them are without a human resource and recruitment department. Thus, one of the challenges that organizations currently face is to find a strategy to retain and attract talent. To overcome this difficulty, enterprises must invest in employer branding policies and be aware of the factors that differentiate them from others when attracting employees. This study aims to develop an employer branding model applicable to SMEs, to increase and enhance the attraction and retention of talents. An exploratory approach based on a quantitative perspective was adopted to develop an employer branding model applied to SMEs, with two major reference employer branding models and frameworks used as the main support. The model of employer branding was applied to SMEs regarding four dimensions, whereby essential questions are asked, namely (1) organizational culture (e.g., do employees have a job description aligned with the corporate culture?), (2) company strategy (e.g., what is the strategy if business volume decreases?), (3) company reputation (e.g., how do you perceive and treat negative feedback?), and (4) reward systems (e.g., do you feel that your employees are motivated intrinsically or extrinsically or both?), ordered by layers based on a logical sequence. The new proposed model is expected to serve as a useful strategic tool and as a basis for attracting, retaining and managing talent, specifically in the SMEs context. This new model provides a set of strategic and competitiveness benefits for SMEs, while contributing to making enterprises more profitable. The model also contributes to SMEs having a better image and reputation, enabling them to stand out from others in the war for talent.

Keywords: employer branding; talent attraction; talent retention; employer branding; talent management; human resource decision making

1. Introduction

Reference [1] argues that talent is an embracing term that describes the human resources that organizations want to attract, retain, and develop to achieve their business objectives. Additionally, for Goffee et al. [2] talent is the set of ideas, knowledge and skills that have the potential to produce more, using the same resources available. Hence, talent represents the set of knowledge, skills, and experience that an employee has and are reflected in his or her work.

Employer branding is the concept used to define an entity's reputation as an employer and the value that employees can derive from it. It is essential that organizations stand out from competitors, and for this it is necessary that they can retain and attract the desired talents. According to Veloso, I. et al. [3], the term employer branding came up at a conference in 1990, where Simon Barrow (Chairman of People in Business) used the term for the first time. The first publication of the concept came just six years after the authorship of [3] when [4] then defined employer branding as the package of functional, economic, and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company. Reference [5] argue that employer branding is the organization's set of efforts to promote, both internally and externally, a clear vision that makes it different and desirable as an employer. According to [6], employer branding is the image of organization as a great place to work in the mind of current employees and key stakeholders in the external market (active and passive applicants, clients and other stakeholders). Moreover, Backhaus, K. et al. [5] claim that the concept of employer branding is applied in business but underexplored by universities. Thus, the underlying theoretical basis for the employer, "the brand", has not been fully developed. Therefore, companies do not always receive the expected returns. Employer branding can also be designated as a company's multiple efforts to communicate to current and potential employees that it is a desirable workplace [7]. Moreover, Joo, B.-K. et al. [8] defined employer branding as the process of identifying and creating the company brand, applying marketing tools and principles to achieve the status of employer of choice, the employer branding philosophy uses aspects of organizational identity, reputation and image that are transmitted to potential employees. It can then be said that employer branding is a tool that, when used well by companies, helps them to disseminate and present "their" brand, values, and position—as an employer in a more attractive and sustained manner as well as to gain an advantage when hiring trained employees. The importance of this tool is enhanced by Edwards, M.R. [9], who states that employer branding strategies regarding segmentation are more likely to differentiate human resource practices based on the true needs of employees rather than the ones just based on perceived talent.

Employer branding is a relatively new concept in small and medium enterprises (SMEs). SMEs are continually undergoing a lot of changes, whether due to globalization, flexicurity or even due to the way new generations think, who are entering the job market. Given all these challenges, the need for organizations to create strategies that answer these demands becomes a reality. Thus, the concept of employer branding emerges, which essentially consists of a tool for retaining and attracting talent for companies. Although it seems easy to implement this tool, there are many underlying processes which need to be considered for this practice to be beneficial.

The main objective of this investigation is to create an employer branding model aimed at SMEs, with the intention that it can be used as a management support tool, to retain and attract talent to companies of this dimension and at the same time helping this kind of company to identify the assumptions to be developed in order to create an employer brand.

This study is divided into three parts. The first part corresponds to the literature review on employer branding, as well as on human resource decision making and talent management. The second part is the methodological development of the employer branding model proposal applied to SMEs in Portugal (a relatively low-income country). In the last section, the main conclusions are highlighted, which integrate the research and methodological contributions, the implications for management, the limitations of the research, as well as suggestions for future studies.

2. Literature Review

In this section, with the purpose of contextualizing the issues addressed in our investigation and its interconnections, we present the current state of the art on employer branding, the main trends and perspectives, strategies, applicability in attracting and retaining talent, and also on human resource management, giving special attention to people and talent management in SMEs.

2.1. Organizational Culture

According to Edwards, M.R. [9], companies are mainly made up of people, these being the greatest asset that the company has, with each company having to aim for developing the best organizational culture most suited to its needs. Although some companies are unclear about their culture, it is from this same culture that employees are oriented towards the achievement of their tasks. There are numerous definitions of organizational culture. One of the most referenced authors in multidisciplinary studies of the area, Schein, E. [10] defines culture as a product learned through the experiences of a group. For this author, organizational culture is the set of basic assumptions that a group invented, discovered or developed when learning how to deal with their problems of external adaptation and internal integration. The organizational culture should be seen to work well enough to be considered valid and taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel, in relation to these problems. Reference [11] argues that an organizational culture should be based on three levels of depth, namely: underlying assumptions, norms and values and, finally, artifacts and behavior. Reference [12] defines organizational culture as a union of habits and beliefs, defined through norms, values, attitudes and expectations shared by all of the members of an organization.

2.2. Talent Attraction and Retention in Employer Branding

Reference [13] (p. 440) author of the attraction-selection-attrition (ASA) model, proposes that “different types of organizations attract, select and retain different types of people”. Reference [14] also support this theory, proving which perceptions of people looking for jobs/future candidates are influenced by characteristics that they have in common with the organization, such as its values. For entities to improve their attractiveness to potential employees, they must show an attractive and desirable external image [15]. Currently, retaining and attracting talent is one of the main challenges that human resource management departments face. According to [16], employer branding can be applied either externally, to attract future employees, or internally to increase the loyalty and commitment amongst current employees. The main objective of employer branding is to highlight employers in the job market and truly support them in their approach, to retain and acquire the most talented employees. Alniacik, U. et al. [17] claims that attracting and retaining talented human capital becomes one of the main sources of competitive advantage in the information age. To attract better employees, organizations began to use branding principles and practices in the human resource management area, and the application of branding principles to human resources is called employer branding [18]. Employer branding, in addition to playing an important role in attracting talent [19], is also a tool that makes employees aware of the advantages of belonging to an organization. Employer branding also enhances the development of organizational pride as well as reinforces the organizational culture and its symbolic representation, thus supporting talent retention [20].

Talent retention can be designated as a set of continuous efforts made by employers to promote and build a good work environment and to retain existing employees—in order to get them to work in the company for a more prolonged period [21]. Effective retention management involves conducting an analysis of the causes and nature of employee turnover and is a strategic approach to define which factors have the greatest impact on organizational success [22]. Therefore, it is the responsibility of organizations to retain their best talent, so they are not lost to the competition [23]. Employee satisfaction and retention must be distinct elements for an organization’s success [24–26]. According to [24], the factors that influence retention should be grouped into three major categories: physical,

mental, and social. Retention is influenced by several factors within companies and with regard to company management, special attention should be paid to aspects such as: remuneration and rewards; career progression; the working environment; organizational culture; training; safety and hygiene at work; exchange of opinions; and communication; among other factors [24,25,27,28]. References [27,29] argue that companies should use all of the techniques and tools of human resource management at their disposal to improve the sense of commitment of employees and promote their retention. In all talent retention models key factors such as compensation and remuneration (especially in lower income countries where workers find it hard to achieve acceptable income levels to make possible a minimum level of quality of life); a sense of belonging and trust (more so in collectivist cultures); progression opportunities; the nature of work; as well as working and training conditions are mentioned [30]. On the other hand, ref. [31] state that there are other relevant and enriching factors for retaining talent, such as personal factors. These factors refer to the level of employee culture and education, the ability to deal with pressure, their learning and experience, as well as their ability to lead. To sum up, in Mitchell's perspective [32], it is important to consider five aspects so that organizations can retain and attract high performing employees: (1) adopt a talent-oriented mindset; (2) develop a job value proposal; (3) redesign the employment communication strategy; (4) invest in developing people; (5) differentiate the environment and work experience. Therefore, employing companies have a constant need to define and implement new strategies for retaining and attracting talent in the job market, implementing competitive and attractive job proposals in their communication that awaken the talent's desire to stay and develop their career at the company.

2.3. Employer Branding Strategy and Action

According to [33], for any company to succeed, it is essential to be able to attract good professionals. One of the essential elements in building employer branding is employer attractiveness. Reference [34] defines attractiveness as the benefits that a potential employee expects to gain from working in a specific organization. For [15], the employer's attractiveness can be associated with a general manifestation of positive affection about an organization, seeing it as a desirable entity in which to perform professional activity. The attractiveness of the employer is an important concept, in the context of intensive knowledge, where attracting people with superior knowledge and skills is the main source of competitive advantage [35]. According to [36], for the creation of organizational employer branding, the involvement of senior leadership is essential, to reflect on the organization's position in order to retain existing talents and attract new ones. A key aspect for the company to be valued, as an employer, is to strengthen its employer brand through the management of its own corporate brand for the job market and for its employees [37].

If, on the one hand, employer branding develops the corporate brand and places the firm on a level where it is seen as an attractive company in the market, on the other hand it creates a strong relationship with qualified candidates, for them to be recruited and retained in the organization [5,38]. Reference [37] also argues that the corporate brand of a company must be aligned with the target audience for which it is intended. It is important that the employer's brand is appealing and innovative, but at the same time there must be a balance between the real brand and the promised brand [39]. For an organization to have the ability to recruit potentially talented employees, it needs, as an employer, to develop a strong brand in the market [40]. According to [7], companies, by betting on employer branding, manage to get the best out of their employees, making the goals attainable, while perpetuating through talents the employer's successful brand.

Given the growth of the employer branding concept and its applicability in companies, [41], the CEO of Employer Branding International defends that there are ten actions that must be developed or reviewed: (1) define the brand experience, the purpose and how it impacts people; (2) set the focus and priorities, an uphill task, focusing on excellence, while always focusing on strategy; (3) review the business model and the organizational structure; (4) position employer branding at the company's leadership level; (5) expand networks and businesses; (6) involve sales and the business development

area; (7) reduce duplication and bureaucracy in people's work and at the same time remove all practices that hinder hiring and productivity time; (8) review how resources are allocated, considering that companies must have freedom of choice, in how, when and where people work; (9) put talent in the right job at the right time to get the best return, and (10) develop close relationships with partners and suppliers, ensuring that there is engagement with them and an experience aligned with the company's employer brand. In addition, ref. [42] conceptualize the importance of companies having a strong strategy and what benefits can be derived from it, such as: new sources of recruitment; increased employee commitment; differentiation from the competition; and increased prestige and social responsibility.

The application of employer branding has advantages for companies, as it reinforces confidence in leadership, it retains talent, creates stronger ties between employees, across organizational management and teams, while reducing turnover as well as costs with recruitment as it improves the organizational culture [17,18].

Companies that want to be successful should invest in their employer branding. Reference [38] states that it is essential that employer branding contains eight elements: (1) a culture of sharing and continuous improvement; (2) a balance between good management and high productivity; (3) obtaining public recognition; (4) proactive employees; (5) "being spoken of"; (6) being a benchmark company; (7) increasing candidates' perception of the organization's good practices; (8) utilizing brand assessment metrics.

The first and most important step in the employer branding process is the determination of an employer value proposition. According to [38], an employer value proposition is a set of offers and associations provided by an organization in exchange for the skills, experience, and capabilities that an employee brings to the company. Reference [42] assigns five dimensions to the employer value proposition: (1) rewards; (2) career; (3) work environment; (4) organization's image and reputation; and (5) company support. According to [3], the employer value proposition includes numerous factors that the worker values, in addition to the monetary issue. The employer value proposition should be based on the needs and preferences of the workforce that you want to attract, and may vary with culture, age, demographics, social status, among others. For [33], the development of the strategic employer value proposition has as its main objective to help companies to be more successful and to be able to compete and to recruit the best talent. Organizations that have an employer value proposition plan are more likely to retain and attract talent, making it easier for the company to achieve its goals. In addition, the employer value proposition also influences the commitment of employees, improving hiring quality and helping to reduce employee turnover in organizations.

2.4. Employer Branding Models

For [5], Backhaus, K. et al. of the first employer branding model, there are three main assets (value proposition, organization identity and organizational culture), that promote brand loyalty and brand associations. By creating this model, the authors presented a conceptual framework based on the aim of helping the understanding of all the dynamics associated with the concept of employer branding and the relationship between marketing and human resources. This relationship, for the authors, is strongly associated with the value they add to the organization, even becoming the main source of competitive advantage. The authors also argue that through this relationship it is possible for companies to improve their productivity levels, while attracting the best candidates in the recruitment process and promoting the commitment and retention of existing employees in the organization.

The employer's value proposition must be aligned with its organizational objectives. Each organization develops its value proposition according to the position it intends to occupy in the market vis-à-vis its stakeholders (either competitors or potential candidates). The employer's value proposition should be in line with its culture, management style, the qualities of its employees and the associated product/service that develops the concept of the organization's value proposition.

The benefits that stakeholders receive are also considered value propositions, including wages or even the projects in which employees are involved [43].

After this process, the company's brand is externalized through marketing tools, to support the internal culture. The company's brand should be aligned with the target audience and with the culture itself, presented in the company strategy to publicize its practices. The benefits and advantages of belonging to the company should be clear. Finally, the company's brand ends up being internalized, becoming part of the organizational culture through the human resource department, with the aim of improving the workforce, evidencing talent retention. The company's brand turns out to be the strategy adopted by the organization to disseminate and promote its own culture, the rights and duties of employees, perks, activities, as well as career progression with a view to retaining employees. These assumptions reinforce the premise that human capital adds value to the organization—in which branding aims to ensure the psychological contract with regard to training, career and personal development. Brand value is a result of the employer's activities making the organization's culture solid [44]. We can see employer branding as the distinction in terms of features of each organization compared to its competitors. The way employees perceive brands is decisive for creating a long-term link between the organization and the consumer. For this reason, building strong brand associations is a priority for many companies today [45].

The construction of an employer branding model applied to companies should not be universal. To build a model, it is important that several factors be considered [46]. To help organizations create and manage the employer brand [46] developed a model and two structures to guide and focus leaders: (1) the employer brand ecosystem model, (2) the employer branding business model, and (3) the structure of the employer's brand excellence. In the employer brand business model, Minchington aimed to help leaders position the employer's brand as a commercial function. This model can be used to stimulate the discussion with executive leaders about how the employer's brand is aligned with the company's strategy. In addition, the model can be used to understand the actions a company needs to adapt to trends in the workforce that could lead to changes in the company and the industry itself in the next three to five years. Furthermore, in this model the author recommends carrying out an audit with business leaders in order to better apply the model, and which will allow assessing the state of the company, in order to determine the organizational gaps that limit the strategy of connecting customers, resources (candidates, employees, freelancers, contractors and workers on demand) and profits.

Reference [47] designed a model aimed at leaders on the topic of strategic structure. The objective was to develop and perfect the strategic structure with a focus on also developing, implementing and managing the employer's brand strategies. This model [47] is aligned with the employer brand business model, where guidance is available to companies about the key elements for evaluating, auditing, and developing the employer's brand plans. For ten years, this structure was applied by [47] in audits in different countries and the results were excellent, and as such this tool helped leaders to adapt an employer's brand strategy and ensured consistency in the long-term implementation at the management level. The eight main elements of the employer brand excellence framework [47] are described below. Thus, we have (1) employer value proposition (EVP), which includes tangible factors, such as career progression or salary as well as intangible factors such as the work environment or company reputation. When employees consider the EVP of an organization attractive, they create higher commitment to the company and make less demands such as at the wage level. As concerns (2) the employer brand strategic platform (EBSP) involves the company's mission, vision and values as well as the type of leadership, involving also corporate responsibility and people management policies. The EBSP defines their strength/weakness vis-à-vis internal and external members. Regarding (3) and the employer's brand employee platform (EBEP), it is based on seven practices that have proven to be relevant for the employees' perception about the organization as "a great place to work". In (4) we have the corporate brand, that is, all elements of the employer brand, from the name to the design, passing by the logo, which must all be aligned in order to communicate a clear message about what it

is like to work in the organization. (5) considers market forces. In order to develop an employer brand strategy, it is very important to carry out an analysis of the external environment of the organization, considering various factors that can affect the business, such as political, economic and legal factors, among others. In (6) we have customers—when talking about external customers, the most successful brands are those which know their customers well; on the other hand, the best employer brands are defined when organizations invest in getting to know their employees well. Item (7) is about potential employees, and it is important to ascertain the perception of current and/or future employees about the company as a great place to work, in order to perceive the attractiveness of the sector. In (8), about stakeholders, we ascertain that, just as employees, stakeholders are aware of the employer's brand and the way in which employees act on a daily basis. Thus, their contributions and perceptions are important in defining the employer's brand.

2.5. Human Resource Management in Small and Medium Enterprises

Human resource management is essential in companies regardless of their size. To allow companies to grow sustainably, following a defined strategy, the human resource department must motivate and give conditions to workers to achieve the best results possible. One of the potential dangers of questionable human resource practices is that the emphasis tends to be on human resource management as a set of practices and not as a general process that incorporates human resource decisions at the strategic level [48]. This makes us reflect on the integrated approach to strategic human resource management used in practice. For [49], human resource management in SMEs is less formal when compared to larger organizations. As a result, these informal standards tend to be reflected in human resource management practices [50].

It is assumed that SMEs are organized informally through human resource management practices [51,52]. In terms of the formalization of the concept, ref. [51] states that there seems to be no universally accepted definition. For the authors, in a context of human resource management practices, formalization was operationalized in many ways, the authors thus concluded that formalization in human resource management refers to practices labeled as formal, sophisticated, or innovative. In general, labels are associated with human resource management practices whose purpose is to encourage employee competence and commitment [53].

According to [54], the concept of formalization in the context of human resource management practices is often associated with a measure in which a rule or procedure is written. Empirical studies reveal that smaller organizations usually do not have formal human resource management departments and do not adopt specific practices [50]. Reference [52] concluded that smaller companies tend to be informal compared to the systems and practices of larger companies, and curiously they continue to be managed by the owner-manager. According to Khan, H. et al. [51], formality in human resource management functions is an important dimension in the way human resource practices are adopted.

Reference [50] found that, generally, the size of the company is positively related to the incidence of formal human resource planning and management, as well as to the level of global sophistication. For [55], assessments and management advice that are carried out in SMEs, mainly consist of bookish advice that require the adoption of formal management procedures more appropriate to larger companies. Frequently, consultants are unable to assess the degree of formality already existing in the company as well as the impact on the company's competitiveness before advising changes to be made to existing practices. This is often found in human resource management when applied to SMEs [56]. Even though most SMEs use informal human resource management practices, it does not make the approach more effective. Recent research work on human resource management in SMEs has shown that there is a positive relationship between the size of the company and the degree of formality of human resource practices [51]. Reference [57] recognize that the formalization of human resource management policies becomes important as companies grow, but for such a change to occur it often depends on the owner/manager's recognition of the need to delegate and later on the need to delegate a certain task to someone who has the necessary skills. Therefore, in order to explain the non-conformity

patterns of human resource management in SMEs, some authors claim that a less formal approach is more suitable for small companies [50]. In short, [54], conclude that although the size of the company presents itself as an important factor in determining human resource management practices, it is not the only factor given the strong variation in formalization of management practices and human resources found in SMEs.

2.6. Talent Management and Human Resource Decision Making

The recruiter's behavior or recruitment activities are related to the perception of the employer's characteristics [58]. According to [33], talent in organizations means people, those who get involved, think, interpret, evaluate, decide, act, and lead the organization in this new era, where knowledge has become the most important resource, an intangible and invisible wealth fundamental to success. At present, one of the most used techniques by companies is to become an employer of choice—an employer whose offers and organizational culture attract and retain above others. It is a differentiation method used by employers to provide clear signals about the company when employing. In addition, authors showed the mediating role of positive affective climate linking employer branding orientation to organizational performance rather than to recruitment efficiency [59]. One of the key elements of the employer choice model is the notion of employer branding. When companies invest in human capital, performance improves, and human capital adds value to the company [5]. In effect, employer branding practices can offer better results than other talent attraction methodologies and, therefore, make the difference in attracting talents that will adapt quickly and better to organizational cultures.

Currently, corporate budgets are under pressure, and so it is important now that human resource departments, traditionally seen as a cost, justify the return on investment for the employer's brand. To overcome this challenge, human resource departments need to be in tune with other departments in the company and impress the organization with the long-term benefits of the employer's good brand and the significant impact on overall efficiency [60].

A very recent model of strategic talent management was developed by [61], which consists of a model applied to innovative companies. This model is made up by the external environment, the innovation strategy, technical functions, the essential talent position (potential for contribution and impact on adding value) and by strategic talent (valuable, rare, and irreplaceable). The management style, the reward system, the commitment to training employees, the standards of behavior and attitudes, the personal/professional life relationship are characteristics that influence the recruitment of talented professionals. The capture of talent for the organization can, and should, be done internally and externally [62].

According to [63], consumer decisions and employment decisions can be similar, since consumers when choosing a product must be aware of it, thus considering it as their final choice. Regarding the employment decision, candidates are now (in the digital age) more aware when choosing their employer, and even knowledge of a company's product may be very favourable for the final choice of employment. It is largely accepted by academics and managers that to compete in a knowledge-based economy data analysis accuracy is an important instrument that can minimize the risks of decision-making. Human resource analytics evolved along this path too, and nowadays we can see that human resource managers use information technology and big data analysis to decide, and with this new paradigm the human resource department can finally hope to be a part of strategy design as a real partner [64].

At the same time, the role of emotional intelligence in SME's human resource decision-makers began to be studied and the importance of using a relational approach as well as a cognitive basis to manage and decide was pointed out [65]. What seems to emerge from these different views is the importance of presenting new models that can be adequate and used as tools for talent management in SMEs.

3. Methodology

Research Model

Developing an effective employer branding strategy becomes paramount for any company that wants to be a reference in the job market, and this need is underlined with the global talent shortage that has begun to concern organizational managers and academics from different fields [16]. Currently, it is important for companies to not only communicate the services and products that they are offering, but also to communicate their organizational culture, values, and value proposition as an employer. In sum, it is essential that these are disclosed. Reference [3] argues that a company's employer branding should always be in line with the corporate brand, as well as with the company's vision and mission. The construction of an employer branding model applied to companies should not be a universal endeavor—to build a model, it is important that several factors are taken into account [46].

The development of this model culminates with what [5,46] consider to be important in the development of the models elaborated by them. The presentation of this model (in the form of a pyramid) aims to remind one of the factors that influence the needs of companies in the recruitment and retention phase. Herein, an exploratory approach based on a quantitative perspective was adopted to develop the employer branding model applied to SMEs, based on prior widely referenced studies of generic employer branding models and frameworks. The proposed questions arose totally derived from these theoretical and practical background models and frameworks explained in the literature review, as well as from the accuracy of the dimensions and variables described. Worthy of note, the methodology that was applied to validate these employer branding models and frameworks most cited in the literature is the same as with this new employer branding model.

The employer branding model directed at SMEs (Figure 1), has as its main component the dimension called organizational culture, where the values, the vision and the mission of the company must be well defined. Indeed, organizational culture can be compared to the foundations of a structure—to the support of a company. The next stage of the model is represented by the company's strategy. Notably, some companies do not define their strategy and when they do, it tends to be obsolete and out of context. The next level of the model is represented by the company's reputation, whether in terms of social networks or even in person; social and corporate responsibility are also included in this level. Finally, in the representation of the model we may find the company reward systems, often wrongly associated only with monetary issues; albeit there are many other ways to reward employees. It is also important that employees perceive that they have been justly rewarded for their efforts.

The design of this model is based on the concept of organizational culture. This topic must be analysed in-depth and grounded before being defined, also considered as being the DNA, the personality itself. The brand is considered as being intangible values, that is, that are not readily quantifiable, that cannot be easily measured in a consensual way, their main objective being to be implemented and associated with behaviors and attitudes.

For [10,11], one of the most recognized authors in the academic arena with regard to organizational culture, culture is described as something that was learned and developed by employees through experiences that ended up becoming a defense for them. Therefore, it is not valid and applicable to new members. Reference [11] understands that norms and values are the codes of an organization's professionalism, and behaviors that clearly demonstrate the values of individuals.

By analyzing [47] where the Minchington employer business brand model is represented, we see that organizational culture is at the core, strengthening the idea that it is the epicenter, considered as the starting point. Additionally, Smith, L. et al. [5] refer in their model that the creation of the organizational culture is one of the main foundations and that for that reason, the organizational culture must be well defined.

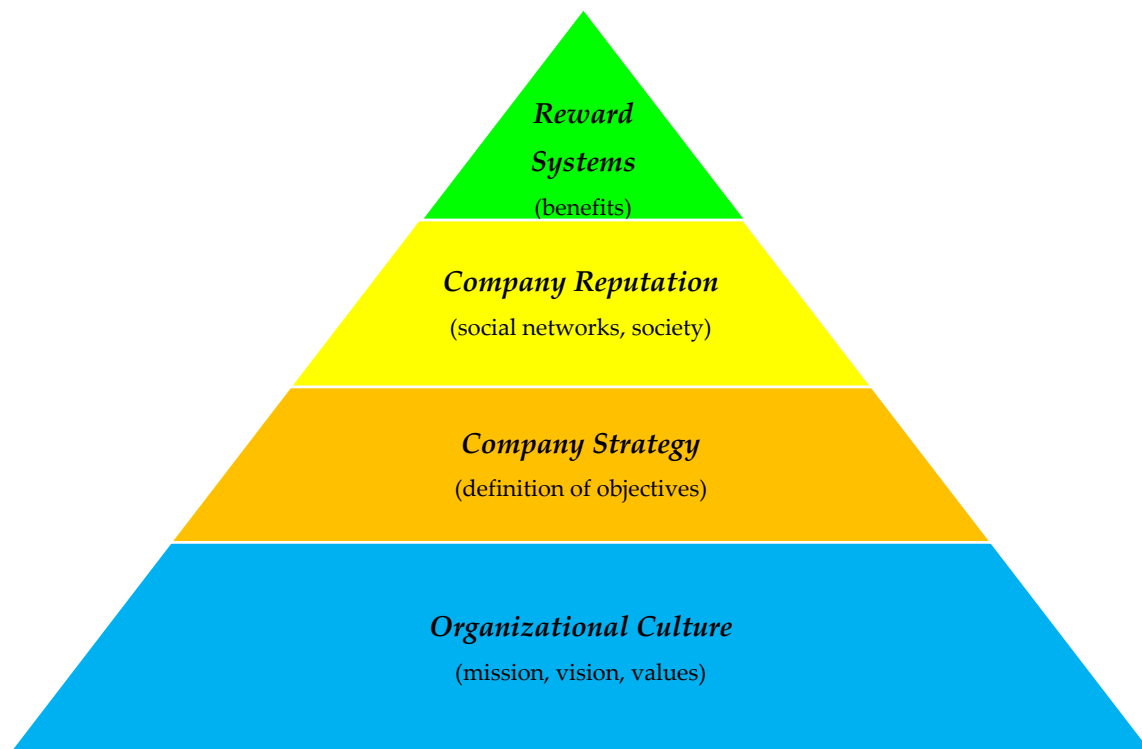


Figure 1. Employer branding model applied to small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

This model has represented, at its base, the organizational culture. As previously mentioned, and according to the cited authors, for a company to succeed the organizational culture must always be well defined, both internally and externally. It should be noted that the mission, vision, and values must be defined in all companies, regardless of their area of activity or dimension. These elements, when defined, should have as their main objective to present a purpose and not to solely be “decorative elements”. They must be coherent and one of the main objectives of the organizational culture is that all of the employees understand the purpose of the company, which direction to follow and why the company exists.

In the perspective of [33], for the company to achieve its objectives, it is important to define which strategy it will adopt. The author also states that the strategy consists of the actions that the company will take to achieve its objectives and it must be established based on the objectives to be achieved, always influenced by the mission, vision and previously defined values. That said, it is essential that the company think strategically so that it can survive the constant changes in the market and can grow in a sustainable way.

Reference [66] reinforces that the strategy is the path, or the action formulated and deemed adequate for the reaching of the established objectives and to overcome the challenges identified, so that the firm may have a better positioning in view of its environment. Reference [67] also defines strategy as the creation of a unique and valuable position, involving a different set of activities. That said, companies that do not have a well-defined strategy may have a shorter life cycle (they are born and soon grow in disarray); they may even survive, but in the long run they do not remain sustainable. In this scenario, survival requires a lot of organization, control, and innovation.

When [46] developed the model of the employer’s brand ecosystem, strategy was one of the assumptions. According to the author, although the employer’s brand strategy is limited, it should be revised. For a strategy to be well evaluated, the strategic decisions for a given company must be made in phases, the first phase being aimed at identifying possible threats and opportunities that involve the business, both in the present and in the future. The second phase consists of identifying

the strengths and weaknesses that the company has when compared to the competition. These phases allow conclusions to be reached that support the decision concerning the company's strategy.

Reference [68] linked reputation to company performance, given that the value of reputation is recognized as a differentiation tool for successful companies. It can be concluded that a good reputation adds strategic value to organizations, creating barriers to competitive threats. Following this reasoning, it can also be concluded that companies that hold valuable and rare assets such as a good reputation, have greater competitive advantage and can obtain more advantageous returns, since assets such as reputation are difficult to imitate (leading to greater customer loyalty—both internal and external). Although a firm's reputation is not transactional, its value is irrefutable, as it influences the perception of stakeholders in relation to the company, making it more advantageous to do business with it than with its competitors. Reference [68] highlight the relationship between a good reputation and good company performance, as the value of reputation is recognized as a differentiation tool for successful companies.

As Figure 1 shows, the top of the pyramid was dedicated to reward systems. Current globalization requires that companies have people who are prepared, motivated and accomplished to be able to achieve a return on strategic objectives. One of the greatest challenges of human resource management is to maximize the performance and quality of life of its employees, since the success of companies is attained through its employees. Therefore, for the success of companies to be possible, it is important that they dedicate themselves to the motivation and satisfaction of their employees. Although many companies recognize that their most important resource is human capital, not all of them develop reward systems that translate into job satisfaction, often even undermining the retention and motivation of their employees.

From the perspective of [69] (p. 339), "Reward Systems consist of the set of compensations that employees receive, for their performance and for their long-term contribution to the development of the business and for their identification with the company's values and operational principles". The author defends that a reward system attributes a reward to dedicated employees, which can be converted into a long-term "investment". Additionally, ref. [70] consider the rewards system as a set of devices created by companies to repay the contributions of their employees. Reference [71] understands by rewards everything that can be offered to employees in exchange for their work, regardless of whether it is financial or not.

Reference [72] define reward systems as a set of principles and guidelines previously defined by companies targeting their employees, whether of material or immaterial origin and in return for the work performed. These principles must guarantee internal/external equity and reward employees according to their performance. Reference [12] highlights that reward systems, in addition to encouraging employees to collaborate with the organization's growth, make for a greater degree of commitment to the company, as it is known that rewards represent costs for the organization and if they do not obtain a return, it will become very difficult to maintain business continuity. In many companies, a lack of motivation is associated with a lack of rewards—the main consequence being poor performance and poor productivity.

Reference [73] (p. 69), conceptualizes that, "in the knowledge society in which we are immersed, skills cannot be well managed without good reward management". In this context, a good reward system is one that maximizes the value that the worker perceives, which is attributed to him/her by the company for his/her mental and physical effort. These rewards can be material and/or immaterial, fixed and/or variable, monetary and/or non-monetary. Regardless of how the employee is rewarded, recognition for the work done, whether with promotions, with more involvement, in the form of prizes or involving other types of rewards, the most important thing is that greater importance is given to the employee's contribution for he or she to feel more motivated, involved and in turn more productive and more dedicated.

In order to facilitate the implementation of the model in SMEs, a questionnaire format was developed (Table 1) so as to better understand the internal firm dimensions. With regard to organizational

culture, it is necessary to understand what culture is implemented, whether it works, whether it is updated and aligned with the current purpose of the company, whether the vision, mission and values are being transmitted in a clear and concise manner and what is the employee’s perception when they refer to the company in general. This should be considered only when the organizational culture is solidly defined, otherwise an investment will be needed in its elaboration and later in its dissemination. It is important to note that although there are companies that may have a strong organizational culture, it may not always be up to date with the company’s purpose. In some cases, it appears that the culture may already be obsolete, either because they already have another target audience, or because they have grown and have other customers.

Table 1. Employer branding O_CC₅C_RR₅ Model Questionnaire aimed at SMEs.

Dimensions	Variables	Questions
Organizational culture	Characterization of the HR Department SME’s vision, mission, and values	Does the company have a human resource department? (e.g., or are human resource issues resolved by the owner-manager?)
		If so, what are the employees’ roles? (e.g., do employees have a clear idea of who their leader is, whom they report to?)
		Do employees have a job description aligned with the corporate culture? (e.g., regarding the role of Continuous Improvement Officer)
		What are the company’s mission, vision, and values? (e.g., have they evolved over time and/or do they need updating?)
		Do you think that the company’s mission, vision, and values are aligned with the employees’ values, desires and ambitions? (e.g., do our employees feel enthusiastic or passionate, even, about our product/service?)
Company strategy	Defining the SME Strategy: short, medium, and long term	Do you have a strategy if your business volume increases? (e.g., open up new offices or subsidiaries; venture into new markets; hire more after-sales employees)
		What is the strategy if business volume decreases? (e.g., implement the Kaizen continuous improvement philosophy with a consultancy firm)
		Where do you imagine the company to be in five years?
Company reputation	SME reputation and social and corporate responsibility	What is the perception of employees in relation to the company’s brand and strategy? (e.g., do employees know what our strategy is?)
		What is the internal and external perception of how the firm addresses corporate social responsibility? (e.g., does the firm plan for, and keep track of, its sustainability initiatives?)
		If you needed to recruit, would there be many candidates? (e.g., will we attract the best candidates available?)

Table 1. Cont.

Dimensions	Variables	Questions
		If you needed to recruit, would you attract the right type of candidate? (e.g., do we know what type of candidate we want? What values do we espouse? Do we want candidates with experience or candidates fresh out of university whom we can mould to our liking?)
		Do you follow the pages of your social networks? (e.g., how is our company perceived online? Is this in line with our offline presence?)
		How do you perceive and treat negative feedback? (e.g., do you reject criticism, or rather do you welcome problems?)
		How do you work as regards company branding? (e.g., is senior management a good example of company values?)
Reward systems	Identification of SME reward systems	Do you reward employees? (e.g., do employees <i>perceive</i> that they have been justly rewarded?)
		If so, how do you reward them? (e.g., recognition vs. financial rewards)
		How is your career progression system? (e.g., is it based on time spent with the firm or on expertise shown in the field?)
		Do you feel that your employees are motivated? (evaluate intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation)

Note: Organizational culture (O_C); Company strategy (C_S); Company reputation (C_R); Reward systems (R_S) (O_C-C_SC_RR_S).

In addition, a company's strategy must also be analysed in order to understand how short-, medium- and long-term objectives are defined. If a company has these well-defined and well-considered points, always aligned with the pros and cons, they will know how they will need to react and what measures they will need to adopt if they grow; when to recruit more employees or to consider when those who they have should be invited to do extra work. This plan must also be drawn up when results are not achieved, and in this perspective some issues must be considered—for example, the number of employees must be reduced or some of the existing functions must be revised.

When looking at the model, the next step is aimed at the company's reputation. Note that the model is aimed at SMEs, and this factor can greatly influence the entire path of the firm. In SMEs, employees often live within a radius of the firm, which makes opinions easily communicated. The reputation they have with society turns out to be truly relevant, and the opinions and experiences they have with the company can be central to retaining talent. This stage ends up not only being limited to the reputation all around, but also to what is disclosed on social networks and what measures the company takes to solve them. In this context, social and corporate responsibility must also be considered, as it is important to understand what measures the company has implemented and how it performs them.

The last stage of this model is aimed at the reward system, which is often overlooked by employers. Even though they may not be able to monetarily reward their employees, there are other ways to do so and with this there are rewards such as career progression, motivating employees with outside activities or even providing the employee's birthday as a day for rest or a day with fun activities.

For the model to be applied in SMEs, the questionnaire in Table 1 must be answered to understand the current situation of the company. Table 1 was elaborated to explain the relationship between the variables of the employer branding model directed at SMEs, with the dimensions that are intended to be evaluated, indicating which are the relevant questions to ask in order to analyze the company.

As previously mentioned, this questionnaire will serve to understand how companies are doing and what measures should be taken or implemented so that they can have a return. This model aims to attract/retain talent, a theme that is already well founded in the academic arena. Each of the variables must be measured as recommended in the model, and although all of them are covered, each must be analysed in isolation. Table 1 was designed for this purpose, that of analyzing and evaluating the situation in which the company finds itself. It should be noted that this O_CC₅C_RR₅ model can be applied to all SMEs, regardless of their area of operation.

This model, when using the questionnaire as a working basis, would be a useful tool for all SMEs that want to attract and/or retain talent. It allows each organization, regardless of its sector of activity, to analyze each dimension of the model in detail, check if there are dimensions to be adjusted or even implemented (e.g., implementation of a reward system), if they do not exist and, from there, they can develop their employer branding naturally, increasing the possibility of retaining and/or attracting talent, always focusing on both the development of the company and the development of its employees.

4. Conclusions

Throughout this investigation, the aim was the development of an employer branding model applied to SMEs, with the purpose of attracting and retaining talent. After content analysis of the employer branding literature review it can be inferred that when developed in an SME, employer branding directly and effectively contributes to the evolution and progress of the business, both economically and in talent selection, becoming a competitive advantage in view of competitors. As stated by [74], what employees say, think, and communicate about their companies is essential to organizational success. This research made it possible to strengthen the importance of employer branding in the management of human resources in SMEs, as there are numerous advantages and benefits that can result from it, namely the attraction and retention of talent. This new theoretical model aims to support SMEs in the talent recruitment and retention phase. Using the questionnaire as a support tool for the proposed model, SMEs will be able to get information (data/results) to analyze and implement an employer branding strategy suitable to the organization, and with this decreasing their respective employee turnover while attracting the desired talent.

This study allowed us to obtain a broader view of the role and impact of the attraction of talent that integrates the component of employer branding. This perspective contributed to a more practical and a more real vision of the concept of attracting/retaining talent. Thus, this investigation seeks to promote a discussion about the necessity for increasing the need to study employer branding in a multidimensional perspective that considers the retention of talent, especially in SMEs. Scientific research on the analysis and evolution of employer branding by means of using the proposal of the employer branding model applied to SMEs may have considerable relevance.

As for the implications for management, it is highly expected that this model will be used by SMEs whenever necessary using its main tool, the questionnaire (Table 1), to better understand the path that the organization must take to have all the dimensions aligned with a strong employer brand proposition. It is also expected that, following the model, management can make better decisions when choosing reward systems that would be aligned with workers expectations and with market offers, as we know that nowadays rewards include different benefits for different generations and are linked with potential and motivation, having a nature much more than transactional as they used to have. Additionally, we expect that having organizational culture as the basis of our model, managers look to culture as one of the most important dimensions of each organization and so they can intervene there first. Management by culture is one of the main trends of our market but SMEs are, in their

majority, not aware of this and so their strategy is, most of the times, inadequate. As we know, strategy when is not aligned with culture will not have success, so we believe the awareness our model brings to the importance of the interconnection of dimensions its must important to management policies and practice.

The implementation of this model will serve to assist management to better retain and attract talent to companies. A redefinition will naturally occur in order to carry out all of the assumptions that underlie the model, be it at the level of organizational culture, at the strategic level, at the company reputation level, regardless of how it is assessed, as well as at the level of reward systems. Many SMEs, when they feel the need to recruit, focus on the company's proximity area. This factor may be beneficial, or not, for the company. Especially in these cases, the reputation of current or former employees may be an obstacle to its development. Additionally, the reward systems, despite their "weight" in the model, have some interference at the time of retaining/attracting talents, and this is because wages have little divergence, nowadays. Indeed, a company can do a lot when it focuses on this assumption, it can go via the reduction of working hours, or by providing health insurance to employees, or, alternatively, by investing in their training, among others. If companies invest in the development of these assumptions, they will certainly be able to stand out from competitors and even make the business expand to include new markets and customers.

We may thus represent employer branding in the following conceptualization, as a multidimensional construct:

$$EB = f(O_C, C_S, C_R, R_S) \text{ subject to } E_C, P_A, R_{CE}, R_{FE}$$

where:

EB = Employer branding

Will be a function of:

O_C = Organizational culture

C_S = Company strategy

C_R = Company reputation

R_S = Reward systems

Subject to:

E_C = Employee communication

P_A = Proximity area (where the firm is located)

R_{CE} = Reputation of current employees

R_{FE} = Reputation of former employees

Employer branding will be driven by O_C , C_S , C_R , and R_S ; and be subject to E_C , P_A , R_{CE} , and R_{FE} .

Hence, an effective employer branding model, applied to SMEs, and depicted in Figure 1, will also depend on employee communication (what employees say about the company), where the firm is located (its proximity area, which may change if the firm relocates), as well as on the reputation of current and former employees. Employer branding is thus a holistic concept involving direct (O_C , C_S , C_R , R_S) and indirect (E_C , P_A , R_{CE} , R_{FE}) factors. The above is a rationale for guiding SMEs along the employer branding development process.

Some limitations were also found when performing the research for this study. To carry out the literature review, the greatest limitation was related to the scarcity of scientific articles on employer branding applied to SMEs, as well as the lack of employer branding models aimed at SMEs, which resulted in this pioneering model proposal.

The application of the questionnaire was one of the main limitations felt in carrying out this study—due to the worldwide pandemic crisis (Covid-19)—which was a barrier to what was initially designed. This barrier meant that the model could not be validated in companies since no face-to-face meetings were possible with those responsible for them. On the one hand, employees and managers alike were in a layoff situation, in other situations firms were provisionally closed. Finally, it is

suggested that this model should be applied to SMEs regardless of the area of activity and core business so that its implementation can be studied and even improved if necessary.

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