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November 2009

Employers of Choice: Best practices for building your employment brand

By Kevin Stoddart, Vice President, Knightsbridge Robertson Surrette

For an organization, your employment brand is your unofficial rating as a place to work. Recently, I had an opportunity to discuss employment branding with Ramsay Duff, Vice President, Finance and Operations, at StFX. He made the observation that “every company already has an employment brand. No company is creating one from scratch. If a person is aware of the company, they, by default, form a perception of the employment brand.” No matter how subjective, these perceptions have a significant effect on your ability to attract and retain top talent. In this article, I will share a few best practices from clients I have had the privilege of working with who have built their reputations as employers of choice.

Fundamentally, employers of choice develop an internal culture that truly values people as a key part of their success. This goes beyond stating that ‘employees are our most important asset’ as many companies do. Employers of choice deliver on that promise every day and at every stage of the employment experience, from the hire, through orientation throughout the person’s tenure, to eventually parting ways with an employee. Any gap or deviation from the inherent promise in your employment brand has the potential to inflict considerable damage on your reputation. The most common pitfall is when organizations terminate employees in a way that fails to demonstrate respect or without support during the transition. Organizations forget that their top performers will take note of how their departing friends and colleagues are treated and plan their careers accordingly.

Employers of choice tend to be leaders in their industry. From a talent attraction perspective, winners want to be with winners. We see this all the time in sports: the best athletes vie to be on the best teams, even if it means a cut in pay. The same is true in business. If you are the best company in your industry, you not only excel financially, you earn a reputation as the place where smart people go. And they will seek you out. When that happens, a multiplier effect takes hold: they enhance your performance and reputation, and vice versa, drawing more talent to your organization.

That being said, for individual employees the single-most important determinant of job satisfaction is the employer-employee relationship – how an employee feels about his/her immediate boss. Yet all too often, companies take leadership for granted. They select or promote individuals to managerial or executive positions based on technical competence – how well they do a job – with little consideration to their people management skills.

As Glen LeBlanc, Executive Vice-President and CFO of Bell Aliant says, 'If people execute an initiative only because you gave the order, you're in trouble.' Selecting and developing leaders with the skills to engage and inspire employees is key to individual and team success. Employees who feel valued, empowered and rewarded are more likely to stay with you. They will also share their positive experiences with colleagues, strengthening your reputation in the labour market.

I have also noticed a tendency for organizations to focus on salary as the key means to attract top talent and maintain employee morale. Though important, compensation fulfills only a short-term requirement. Candidates and employees generally place more value on non-monetary benefits, such as intellectual challenge, autonomy, flexibility and professional development opportunities. Employers who create the right environment demonstrate that they care about their employees and foster a strong sense of loyalty among staff.

Another way employers build strong brands is by giving back to the community. Current and potential employees want to know their employer cares enough to make a difference where they live, even if the organization doesn't market products locally. This part of an employer's value proposition is particularly important for Generation Y – the demographic organizations will be increasingly courting in the years ahead. If they do not see you involved in community events and charities that make Atlantic Canada a better place to live they may consider employment elsewhere.

It's one thing to be an employer of choice, but it means little if you don't promote it. There is a tendency in Atlantic Canada not to talk ourselves up when we've accomplished something of note. Such humility, however admirable, has the effect of rendering your employment brand invisible in the eyes of employees and the labour market. Meeting financial projections, opening a new office, outstanding performance by a particular employee – these are the stories you want to share and promote. You and your entire staff should be able to recite the things that make your company special. What is your company's value proposition or elevator speech? And does everyone internally believe it?

Creating a strong employment brand is a complex process without a single 'silver bullet' answer. As we emerge from the current recession, the time to start working on your employment brand is now. Take a critical look at the status of your brand. The true test of a strong brand is how well you keep your recruitment promises. Does your employee experience live up to expectations? Ask your newest employees and you might be surprised what you discover.

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