

MIND THE GAP: A STUDY OF CONGRUENCE BETWEEN
THE ESPOUSED AND EXPERIENCED EMPLOYER BRAND

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Mind the Gap: A Study of Congruence Between the
Espoused and Experienced Employer Brand

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ABSTRACT

MIND THE GAP: A STUDY OF CONGRUENCE BETWEEN THE ESPOUSED AND EXPERIENCED EMPLOYER BRAND

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Employer brand is an application of the branding practices to an organization's people processes. It is also a normative instrument for communicating the employment value proposition, shaping the employee experience, and driving cultural change. This expanded role enables employer brand to be a more complete and integrated mechanism for managing the overall employee experience.

Much of the current literature has focused on a single application of employer brand, that of its usage in recruiting employees. Yet, the role it can play in motivating and aligning existing employees with the organization's strategic objectives is arguably more valuable. If delivered as promised, the employer brand can be a direct method for influencing and engaging employees. If promises go unmet, however, it can distract and disengage employees. This could then affect the perceived levels of integrity of organizational leadership. Therefore, managing any gaps between the promises and the experience is essential. This notion of espoused-experienced gap management is common to consumer brand management practices, but unexplored in employer brand literature.

Understanding the intersection between employee experiences and employer brand practices is essential to identifying potential drivers of espoused-experienced employer brand gaps. Using a cross-case comparison of employee and employer groups from five organizations, this study leveraged customer satisfaction frameworks to explore the characteristics and factors affecting espoused-experienced employer brand congruence.

Four significant findings emerged from the study. First, the employer brand gap is a multi-dimensional construct consisting of four domains and five dimensions rooted in the organization's culture and requiring ongoing management. Next, data showed that employees evaluate delivery of the employer brand similar to the way customers evaluate their service experiences. This employee as customer metaphor explained the importance of expectations and past experiences in the gap and employee views. Third, the nature of the findings provides the business case for establishing employee research, employee data mining, and employee relationship management capabilities. Fourth, the data suggests that reducing the employer brand gap will positively affect employee engagement.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the employer brand is to attract, motivate and retain the right employees to deliver an organization's strategic objectives. Employer brands do this by conveying the work experience one will encounter in a specific organization. Yet, the motivation for employer brand is often only explained from the employer's perspective and little is known about how employees' interpret their experience relative to the employer brand. In fact, despite organizations' employer brand efforts, the employment experience espoused and experienced often differ as illustrated by the following tales of employer brand gaps.

During an advertised recruiting process, an applicant was complimented on his interview performance and told to expect a phone call and invitation to the next interview round. Instead, a few weeks later he received a rejection letter in the mail. Confused, disappointed and upset, the applicant contacted the organization's recruiting team seeking an explanation. Surely, there had been a mistake. A short while later a recruiting team member made an offer to him and a couple other individuals; he accepted. Over the subsequent three years, he received three letters of potential redundancy due to organizational corporate restructures. Despite this employment *roller coaster*, he believed the organization met its commitment to him. He remained motivated to achieve for himself and the organization.

In a different organization, a potential employee experienced a more straightforward process and was offered a specific position that interested him. He arrived at work two months later to find the specific role no longer existed; but, other roles were being held for him. Although there were many roles to choose from, it took him two years to overcome his underlying feelings of regret that had dampened his enthusiasm for having accepted the offer.

Like other employees, these two individuals gathered information throughout their decision making process to understand what it would be like to work for their respective employers. They joined their employers with information on the role and the company, then actively incorporated additional information to formulate their beliefs about the likely work experience. After time working in the company, their views had changed. In both cases the experience was different from the individual's expectations. The first believed that despite the problems with the process, the experience had delivered on his expectations; the second employee believed the company had not. When employees encounter experiences that differ from their expectations, they search for meaning to explain their feelings and to reconcile their different point of view. Over time, these views add up. Individually, the views affect the individual's working relationships with colleagues; cumulatively, the views affect the organizations' capabilities.

How do employees make sense of their work experience? How well does this match the experience espoused by the company? How does the espoused-experience

difference, the gap, affect the employee and ultimately the company? Were these situations anomalies, or is there something more systematic to be learned by exploring the manifestation of the gap? These are some of the questions to be investigated in this study of employer brand gaps.

What is Employer Brand?

Employer brand, a recent and evolving concept, has gained acceptance as the practice organizations use to attract, develop and retain scarce, top-quality employees by applying brand management, communications and marketing principles to strategic human resource (HR) management (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Mosley, 2007; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). From the employer's perspective, employer brand is used to align a firm's human capital, strategic capabilities, and culture to build its reputation as a 'great place to work' (Ewing, Pitt, de Bussy, & Berthon, 2002) while at the individual employee level it is designed to communicate 'what it should be like to work in an organization'. Given these two independent and at times competing objectives, employer brand's usefulness depends on its ability to align multiple stakeholders and reflect accurately the employee experience (Moroko & Uncles, 2008; Mosley, 2007).

To align stakeholder interests, employer brand needs to create a mutually desired employment experience, one which supports the organization's objectives while ensuring congruence across all touch points of the employment life cycle (Mosley, 2007; Rosethorn, 2009). Practitioners and scholars generally agree that an effective employer

brand will help organizations attract key candidates. More recently, these experts have begun to explore employers brand's role in managing the employment experience beyond hiring (Axelrod, Handfield-Jones, & Welsh, 2001; Chambers, Foulton, Handfield-Jones, Hankin, & Michaels III, 1998, Mosley, 2007) and delivering on the promised experience (Rosethorn, 2009; Schulte, 2010). While the importance of delivering on the employment promise is mentioned in the literature, the degree to which it is delivered remains underexplored.

Why Employer Brand Gaps Matter

Customer satisfaction literature and consumer brand research offer insights into the importance of minimizing “service experience gaps”. Articulation of a promised experience creates consumer expectations which are later compared to the actual experience. Similarly, articulation of the employment promise creates expectations of the employment experience as evidenced by psychological contract literature; however, once employment begins, employees begin experiencing the working reality through interactions, assignments, and relations, in other words, the culture. Differences between the actual and promised experience, similar to consumers and brands, produce promise-experience gaps which can carry serious consequences. With consumers, these gaps can lead to competitor product trials or attrition; therefore, a key tenet of brand management is the importance of reducing these gaps (Keller, 2008). Although it is obviously more difficult for an employee to switch employers than for a consumer to try a new

toothpaste, the costs of attrition and reduced engagement suggest that gap management is also a critical part of employer brand management. Neither confirmation of the employee as a customer metaphor nor the importance of minimizing a gap is currently found in the employer brand literature.

Study Significance

This qualitative study will further expand our understanding of employer brand as a multi-dimensional construct by exploring the employee's perspective and manifestation of an espoused-experienced employer brand gap. To gain a better understanding of the gap I interviewed 64 employees at five companies, of whom 17 were responsible for managing the employer brand and 47 were employees. Through this cross-case comparison I identified commonalities and differences between employers and employees to identify a set of domains which play a key role in how employees make sense of their work experience as compared to their organization's espoused employer brand. This qualitative study of employees' employer brand experience refines our understanding of how employees are affected by what their employer says versus what it does.

This study enhances our understanding of employer brand by answering four questions:

1. How do employees make sense of their work experience at their current employer?

2. How does the employee approach compare with the respective employer's employer brand practices used to shape the employee work experience?
3. Is there a gap between the employees' and their current employer's employer brand approach?
4. In what ways does the organizational culture shape the employee's experience and expectations?

Answering these four questions by exploring empirically the gap between employers' and employees' conceptualization of employer brand, how the congruence (or lack of) manifests and is managed, and the factors which drive it will contribute an important brick in the foundation of employer brand. In this way the study will improve employer brand's role as a normative instrument for aligning the employee and employer relationship, shaping the employment experience, and driving employee engagement. By considering employer brand as a multidimensional construct this study fills a reflective gap in the employer brand literature and helps organizations ensure they are delivering on the employer brand promise.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Employer brand draws its theoretical foundations from a range of disciplines including economics, strategy, marketing, human resources (HR), psychology and organizational behavior, making it a complex concept, but one which is more robust and multi-faceted than the limited application to the talent management process which dominates current employer brand discussions. At its core employer brand reduces inefficiencies in the employment relationship, facilitates alignment of people and strategy, and improves the employer-employee-customer relationship to build a sustainable competitive advantage, and company brand equity. Employer brand draws on each of the above disciplines to influence the employee experience as a logical extension of traditional branding theory.

Origins of Employer Brand

Employer brand is the most recent incarnation of the brand concept. Ambler and Barrow (1996) were the first to recognize the applicability of branding to the employer/employee relationship and are credited with originating the term. Employer brand is often defined from a product and customer branding perspective (Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2009) and implemented by applying brand practices with requisite substitutions directly to HR processes (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Over time the thinking evolved to incorporate thinking from the service industry and the role of the employee in delivery of

the customer relationship (Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 1994). Unfortunately, this focus on the product or service brand application omits the broader organizational association with corporate values and culture that ultimately drives employer brand. Thus, to operationalize employer brand and understand its fullest application, it is important to understand employer brand's origins through the historical evolution of consumer and corporate branding.

Consumer Brand

While consumer branding practices have evolved, brand's basic purpose remains intact. Scholars and practitioners commonly agree that in essence a brand is "a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct" (American Marketing Association, 2010). These purposes have remained consistent since the earliest examples of brands: medieval guild trademarks on products, signed works from the fine arts, and cattle brands (Davies, 2008). Each example fulfilled two basic brand requirements: 1) the need to differentiate (Akerlof, 1970; Ewing, et al., 2002), and 2) the need to assure quality and consistency of the desired goods and services (Akerlof, 1970; Kotler, 1991).

Brands applied mainly to consumer goods and focused primarily on differentiation until late in the 20th century (Barrow & Moseley, 2006). Repeated delivery of perceived quality helped to establish the brand promise in consumer minds. It was this constant "living up to the promise" that gave the brand its power and value. The

perceived consistent delivery of quality also met needs of both buyers *and* sellers.

For buyers, product brands addressed consumers' emotional, psychological, social, physical, or economic needs and aspirations. It was the brand's ability to meet this range of needs and aspirations that demonstrated the brand's ability to create additional value and the seller's ability to live up to the promise. Product brands also made the purchase process more effective and efficient by creating, shaping, and fulfilling the customer's perception, expectations, and experience.

Brands also benefitted sellers by providing an opportunity to differentiate from competitors, to attract profitable customers, to enhance and adjust the corporate image, and to develop intangible assets in products overtime. These opportunities also enabled companies to reposition the product in the buyer's mind. This power to reposition product brands gave companies a useful tool to respond to competitive challenges, changing customer preferences, and evolving business' strategies (Kotler, 1991).

Toward the end of the 20th century, service brands took branding practices to a new level. The role of employee involvement in delivering customer satisfaction (Heskett, et al., 1994) changed the organization's view of the value of its human assets, leading to expansion of marketing activities such as internal communications inside the firm.

Internal communications (IC) such as internal branding and marketing have become important brand delivery mechanisms to shape the customer experience through

an organization's employees. Some scholars argue that IC motivates employees to achieve firm goals and objectives (Backhaus, 2004). Internal branding reflects the "insider role" employees have and communicates three key concepts: 1) effective understanding of the brand; 2) brand value and relevance; and 3) job links to delivery of the brand experience (Berthon, Ewing, & Hah, 2005). In fact, Watson Wyatt (2009) found firms that develop IC as a core competence outperform those who do not by 24%. Other scholars argue IC is important in creating the intellectual capital required to build emotional commitments between an organisation and its employees to fulfill the organisation's brand promise (Thomson, de Chernatony, Arganbright, & Khan, 1999). However, while most scholars agree that IC provides critical information and signals, not all agree IC is sufficient. For instance, Ambler and Barrow (1996) argue that internal marketing is unidirectional in that it accounts only for messages sent, not received, thus, ignoring the potential discrepancies between espoused and experienced communication.

It is through this evolution of consumer brand theory from products to services that employees have become a focal point for delivering the consumer experience. This change has shifted the communication processes organizations use as well as employees' involvement with the brand.

Corporate Brand

The importance of two-way communication and message consistency intensifies as one moves up the brand architecture from consumer to corporate brand. Corporate

branding differs from consumer branding in that it describes the corporation behind the product or service offering (Aaker, 1996) and involves aligning consistent messages and experiences across multiple stakeholder groups who interact with each other (de Chernatony, 1999). Employees become one of the most critical stakeholders in corporate branding as they often provide the glue between the business, its components and the customer's experience. Employees are also critical contributors to the brand values as transmitters of the organizational culture. Internally, employees signal the desired culture (de Chernatony, 1999); externally, they signal what it means to have a relationship with the company. In either case, employees become a co-creator of the customer and employment experience. The representation of the organization behind the product or service and interaction across multiple stakeholder groups ties organizational culture directly to the corporate brand. Consequently, to be effective, corporate branding should be able to operate at each of culture's three-levels, artifact, values, and beliefs/assumptions (Schein, 1985).

Alignment of the corporate brand at each of these levels of culture is important to optimizing gaps between the espoused and experienced corporate brand. Occasions where employees' perceptions, values and behaviors run contrary to the desired brand intentions can lead to gaps for the consumer (de Chernatony, 1999). Brand gaps call into question the consistency and quality that the company promises to deliver. Under the traditional view of brand management any noticeable gaps between the brand identity or

the image, and the customer's experience trigger the need for change in the brand, the practice, or the product/service (de Chernatony, 1999). Thus, corporate brand alignment of messages, experiences and stakeholders is not dissimilar from the challenges that many companies face with employer branding.

Employer Brand

Employer brand, the most recent addition to brand architecture, is the logical extension of consumer and corporate branding to the employment experience. Employer brand builds on the influential role internal resources play in the external expression of the brand (Barney, Wright, & Ketchen Jr, 2001; Heskett, et al., 1994). Ambler and Barrow (1996) define employer brand as “the package of functional (developmental and/or useful activities), economic (material or monetary rewards), and psychological (feelings such as belonging and purpose) benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company”. Sometimes referred to as the employee value proposition (EVP), “what it means to work here” (Gratton & Ghoshal, 2005), “the employment deal” (Rosethorn, 2009), or “the employment promise” (Ready & Conger, 2007), employer brand is an adaptation of the traditional concept of brand, turned inward on the organization. Employer brand is also described as the embodiment of the organizational culture (Keller, 2008).

Originally, employer brand gained notoriety by improving recruiting effectiveness during the extremely competitive period known as the war for talent (Axelrod, et al.,

2001). More recently scholars expanded the discussion to include employer brand's role across the entire employment experience. Barrow and Moseley (2006) refer to employer brand as "the company's image as seen through the eyes of its current and potential employees [which] is closely linked to the tangible and intangible elements which comprise the employment experience." Martin and Hetrick (2006) further refine the notion of the employment experience by applying the concept of *customer touch point management to people management* in their definition of employer brand as "a promise made and kept in every strategic, marketing and human resource activity, every action, every corporate decision and every customer and employee interaction intended to deliver strategic value to an organization."

Expansion of the employer brand view to include the entire employment experience is changing the way we look at the employment relationship by recognizing that acquiring talent is only one part of the equation. For internal resources to be a source of competitive advantage (Barney, et al., 2001) they must come together in a way that provides differentiation and quality consistently over time (Barney, et al., 2001). The ability to deliver consistently over time relies heavily on an organization's culture. An interdependent relationship between the employer and employee is required to accomplish this (Mosley, 2007). Culture and the notion of interdependence are critical to understanding the employees' employment experience. Rosethorn (2009) best describes the essential elements of employer brand for the purposes of this study:

An employer brand is in essence the two-way deal between an organization and its people - the reasons they choose to join and the reasons they choose - and are permitted - to stay. The art of employer branding is to articulate this deal in a way this is distinctive, compelling and relevant to the individual, and to ensure that it is delivered throughout the lifecycle of the employee within that organization. (Rosethorn, 2009)

In essence, this definition comprises three of the key elements of employer brand: 1) a clearly defined proposition, 2) delivery of the proposition throughout employee experience, and 3) the notion of a two-way deal, or, in Ready, Hill & Conger's (2008) words *promises made* and *promises kept*.

How one defines employer brand is more than just an academic exercise. The definition determines the scope of influence, business processes for inclusion, and signals driving assumptions. Terms such as “whole employee experience” and “throughout the lifecycle” imply HR processes, strategy, marketing, decision making, customers and employee interactions, and other factors which can affect the motivation or engagement of individuals in their work, in other words, culture. The description also signals the fundamental assumptions of the employment relationship between the employer and employee. When looking at it this way, it is easy to agree that language matters.

The notion of a two-way deal being constructed and experienced at two different levels, as an individual and as a group, is important to understanding the congruence between employees and employers. Any lack of congruence will create a gap on some

dimension. It is this gap that organizations need to better understand and manage, and on which this study is focused.

Employee as a Customer. If we apply marketing and branding concepts to HR processes, we must address the appropriateness of the employee as customer metaphor. Significant differences exist between employees and customers, the most relevant of which include freedom of choice, access to disconfirming information, and economic control. By accounting for these differences and adjusting as necessary, customer satisfaction research and models may have more to offer employer brand than has been explored thus far.

The notion of employees as customers has been developed previously in employee satisfaction literature (Rust, Stewart, Miller, & Pielack, 1996). Despite important differences between the customer/provider relationship and the employee/employer relationship, the attraction of patronage to satisfy needs and wants remains constant across employees and customers, meaning managing employees is often similar to managing customers (Rust et al., 1996).

Customer needs and wants are satisfied when the value of what they receive in exchange meets or exceeds their expectations. Similarly, employee needs and wants are satisfied when their needs and wants are *met* or *exceeded* by their employer (Rust et al., 1996). The highest levels of satisfaction have been coined *delight* and represent

something not represented by satisfaction scales (Oliver, 1989; Westbrook & Oliver, 1991).

By extending this to employees and treating satisfaction as two groups, *satisfaction* and *delight*, we can divide employee satisfaction into *dissatisfied*, *satisfied*, and *delighted*. In this case, *satisfaction* and *dissatisfaction* considers needs and expectations, where *delight* involves desires and emotions. This approach is helpful when considering the different needs, wants, and desires of the various psychological, culture, organizational behaviors, and HR models.

Employer Brand Congruence

The conceptual framework (Figure 1) identifies and integrates the major constructs of employer brand identified in the literature; however, unlike other models, it does not assume that the employer brand is experienced in the same way it is communicated. In fact, four constructs appear to be relevant to explaining employer brand congruence: espoused employer brand, culture, experienced employer brand, and the employer brand gap. I will discuss the current literature on each of these concepts in turn.

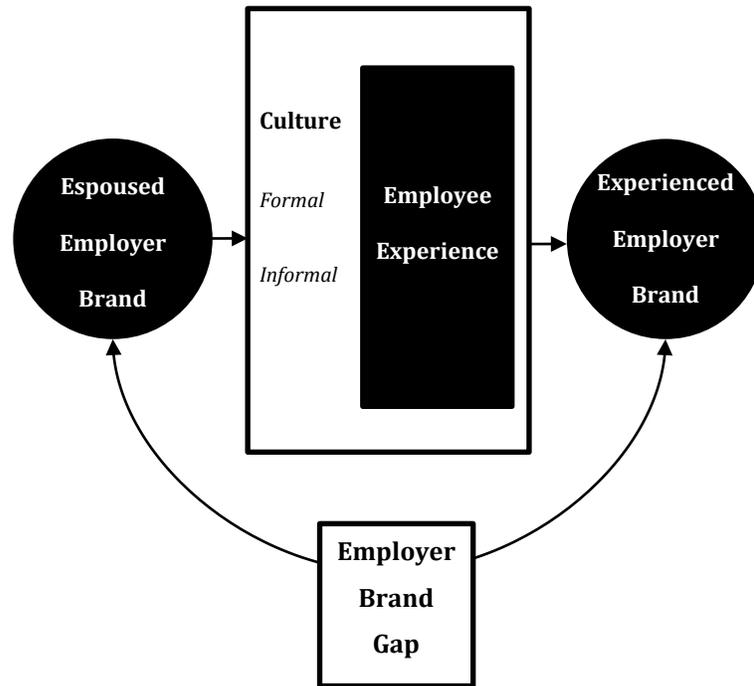


Figure 1: Employer Brand Gap Conceptual Framework

Espoused Employer Brand

The first construct in the model, the espoused employer brand, represents what the firm believes the employment experience *should* be. In other words, the espoused employer brand is the normative tool used to describe the intended employment experience. The organization uses image, identity, and reputation to paint a picture of benefits of being associated with the organization. These three traits play an important role in the organization's ability to attract, develop and retain employees and build the

company's employer brand. These factors also are important in communicating what it would be like to work in the organization to potential employees.

Employer brand should be firm specific and reflect the organization's industry, size, resources, and values. Such a tailored approach forces organizations to take into account their organizational design. For example, good employer brands should include a reward system that attracts and keeps the right people and reflects the firm's values. This is not easy. Organizations have difficulty aligning systems, people, and values (Lawler, 2005). Having an organization-specific employer brand is better than having a popular one poorly aligned with the organization's culture.

Other Influencers. There are three main influencers of the espoused employer brand: image, reputation, and identity. I will start with image first, followed by identity and reputation.

Organizations use images to build associations with the desired employment experience in employees' minds. These images help communicate attributes and benefits (Keller, 2008), functional and symbolic, which reside in an employee's memory and can be intimately linked to the employment experience (Kimpakorn & Toquer, 2009). Symbolic representations help customers fulfill their need for social approval or personal expression (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). Employer brands are able to connect these symbolic benefits which hold incremental value over and above instrumental and organizational job attributes (Leivens & Highhouse, 2003). The associations make a

difference. By creating a favorable brand image in prospective employees' minds, organizations increase the likelihood of being chosen over similar opportunities at competitors (Cable & Turban, 2001). Image also matters to employees' influence on customers. It can impact employees' motivation to internalize and project the desired organizational image through their demeanor, appearance, and manner while interacting with customers (Miles & Mangold, 2004).

Identity influences employer brand at two levels, the organizational and the individual. At the broadest level, organizational identity is the set of cognitive associations resulting from the external perception of the organization's characteristics. Organizational identity results from employees' interactions with internal and external constituencies to communicate to the marketplace.

At the most personal level, the individual, identity is an extension of organizational identity to the employee. The external organizational identity is important because according to social identity theory, employees seek identity enhancement from association with attractive or unique organizations (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994) making it beneficial for the organization to be viewed positively. If individuals derive self-identity from their employer, they are likely to look to their employer to find meaning; the identity association can be a powerful motivator.

Individual identity differs from brand image in that identity reflects the self-beliefs and values one holds more permanently. As an individual's sense of identification

with the organization increases, so does the individual's motivation to serve the organization's interests as their own, otherwise known as organizational commitment (Backhaus, 2004).

The cumulative effect of the symbolic associations made from images and the organization's identity contribute to an organization's reputation. Reputation represents knowledge and emotions accumulated by individuals about a product, service, or organization promised and experienced over time. Corporate reputation has been defined as a perceptual representation of a firm's overall appeal as compared to leading rivals (Fombrun, 1996). Reputation contributes to a defensible position because of the time involved in building fame and esteem (Hall, 1992). In general, a firm's reputation is influenced by financial performance, company size, media exposure, advertising expenditures, and type of industry (Cable, Aiman-Smith, Mulvey, & Edwards, 2000; Fombrun, 1996). Employees play a key role in corporate reputation as a promoter and custodian of the reputation of the organization which employs him/her (Hall, 1992), thus making the relationship between corporate reputation and employer brand a circular one.

Employee Expectations. Employee expectations depend on the employee's internalization of the signals from the espoused employer brand and key influencers. Psychology scholars have written much about the psychological contract (PC), a collection of experiences, messages, images, reputation, and other perceptions which a candidate assimilates into a set of expectations in his/her mind. These expectations

become the basis of a set of unspoken expectations, the psychological contract. The PC is part of the foundation of the individual employee's beliefs, expectations, and behaviors in the workplace (Rousseau, 1995) and more importantly, the part uncontrolled and least understood by the employer. From the recruitment stage of an employee's work life to retirement or resignation, the PC can have a profound effect on the attitudes and well-being of an individual (Rousseau, 1995). Of less focus in the literature are the triggers for reformation of these beliefs and other aspects such as previous work experience, personal experience, or personal benchmarking that influence an employee's employment expectations. Adoption of this psychological perspective in the workplace is useful because the workplace has become less predictable, increasing people's need to make sense of that around them (Rosethorn, 2009). Violations of the psychological contract have been shown to correlate positively with intentions to quit, actual turnover, reduced job satisfaction, reduced organizational trust, and decreased job performance (Robinson & Morrison, 1995; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Recognition that the espoused employer brand is actively creating expectations from several sources, some explicit (organizational communications, EVP) and some implicit (PC, past experiences), is critical to managing congruence between espoused and experienced employer brand.

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is the second major construct in the proposed framework. It provides the context for employment and is gaining recognition for its role in the

employer brand (Schulte, 2010). When a person joins a company, the person joins a culture (Goffee & Jones, 1998). Culture is a critical component of employer brand because of its reinforcement of the day-to-day employee experience (Goffee & Jones, 1998; Gratton, 2000; Schein, 1985). It boils down to a “common way of doing things” (Gratton & Ghoshal, 2005). Culture is the way people relate to each other in an organization, the underlying social architecture of common assumptions, beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, customs, and values, which are often implicit (Goffee & Jones, 1998; Hall, 1992). In fact, Goffee and Jones (1998) identify culture as the single most powerful force in the modern organization.

Organizational culture is also a function of the type of activity in which an organization is engaged as well as its lifecycle stage at that time (Goffee & Jones, 1998; J. Hall, 2003). If appropriately tailored, the employer brand becomes the potential instrument by which one can manage culture for focused strategic execution. Ambler and Barrow (1996) share the view of the importance of culture in employer brand, but question how it can be managed proactively as they surmise that the appropriate tools do not yet exist.

Whether managed or not, all organizations have a culture. In fact, most organizations of any size have several cultures, or sub-cultures, at once (Goffee & Jones, 1998; Schein, 2004). These subcultures are a normal part of organizational structure (Denison & Mishra, 1995; Goffee & Jones, 1998) and form as a result of size, space,

geography, time, identity and/or even work practices (Erickson & Gratton, 2007). If unmanaged or unacknowledged, “unnecessary conflicts” between sub-cultures can arise and create organizational dysfunction (Schein, 2004), difference in experience, and incongruence with the espoused employment experience.

Employer brand uses brand practices to present the organizational culture to employees. Interestingly, Ambler and Barrow (1996) narrowly define culture as the values that support the organizational purpose and strategy or corporate identity. While the “values” definition respects the importance of culture, it does not reflect culture’s complexity, range of its manifestations, or typical gaps observed between espoused and experienced values. A broader view is likely to be more meaningful to employees because employees use a range of cultural artifacts to make sense of their environment and their place within it. In the broader sense employer brand becomes an organization's mirror for evaluating its espoused and actual cultural elements.

It is commonly accepted that culture is shared and learned, supporting employer brand need for a framework which incorporates all three units of analysis: individual, group, and organization. Although learning begins at the individual level (Argyris & Schön, 1974, 1978), it is conditioned by the social context and routines within organizations (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Similarly, the social context and routines associated with culture also condition the individual and group experiences creating firm dynamics and capabilities which can be individually possessed (employee competence),

shared within groups or networks (social capital), or institutionalized (organizational capital) (Argyris & Schön, 1978). Wright (2001) calls these expansions of the definition of human capital *knowledge flow* and describes them in terms of three components, human, social, and organizational. Knowledge flow broadens the people processes beyond the typical HR ones.

Culture incorporates both the formal and informal systems of socially transmitted behavior patterns that link human communities to their environment (Denison & Mishra, 1995). Formal is distinguished from informal based on the level of control management has over the various elements. Formal elements include organization structure, standard operating processes, policies, compensation, benefits and rewards; whereas informal ones cover actual work processes, relationships, work groups, language, behaviors, social interactions, and sub-cultures. Employee experiences are shaped by their interactions with these formal and informal artifacts, behaviors and assumptions (Schein, 1985), creating “moments-of-truth” for the espoused employer brand throughout their employment experience.

Experienced Employer Brand

The experienced employer brand, the third construct in the conceptual framework, is the result of the employee’s experience on the job including interactions with key groups, manifestations of culture and interpretations of the day to day events. As these experiences accumulate, any deviations from the espoused employer brand require sense

making (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

The espoused employer brand is based on the employee value proposition and psychological contract. It is one of the key foundations for the employees' experience, but as the employee sees, hears and encounters more the employee is influenced by internal moments-of-truth such as policies, actions, stories, and behaviors. Externally, key influences such as reputation, brand, image and identity continue to seep into the employee's perceptions, thereby shaping the employment experience with the organization. In other words, the web of information, employment experiences, and social constructs begin to shape the espoused employer brand, as interpreted by the employees, into the experienced employer brand, confirming or disaffirming these expectations with their individual reality.

Touch Points. Employers commonly describe the employee interactions relevant to employer brand as touch points. Touch points include the internal tools, processes, environmental conditions, or policies that affect all aspects of the three stages of the employment lifecycle, candidate, employee and alumni (Rosethorn, 2009). Touch points provide opportunities to reward and reinforce the right kinds of employee behaviors and significantly impact the employee experience. On the other hand, they also provide moments-of-truth for employees to confirm or disaffirm the validity of the espoused employment experience. Therefore, touch points are moments of mutual interest and

importance in the employment relationship. Effective and consistent delivery of the promise throughout the touch points plays a critical role in trust building.

For the purpose of this study, Rosethorn's (2009) 12 touch points will be used to evaluate employer brand practices. These cover the three phases of the employment lifecycle including candidate (*recruitment activities, process, candidate care, selection and assessment*), employee (*introduction and on-boarding, culture and leadership, training and development, talent management and career paths, recognition and rewards, internal communication, office space, compensation and benefits*), and alumni (*exit process, redundancy policies and packages, alumni networks*) (Rosethorn, 2009, pp. 51-52). Alignment of touch points with the employer brand is essential, as are handoffs from one touch point to another. For these reasons, touch points are some of the most obvious places to look for espoused-experienced employer brand gaps.

Employer Brand Gap

When employees compare impressions of their work experiences to the espoused employer brand, they are likely to recognize differences between the two (Argyris & Schön, 1974). These incongruences are the manifestation of the employer brand gap, the fourth and final major construct in my proposed framework.

The importance of alignment is mentioned frequently in management and employer brand literature (Moroko & Uncles, 2008). Employer brand alignment is intended to increase predictability and meaning for individuals by aligning cognitive

structures such as beliefs, attitudes, values and assumptions (Schein, 2004). Congruence among the cognitive constructs is critical to engaging individuals. When employees subscribe to a collective belief about an organizational culture, the culture can act as a brand identity developer (Wheeler, et al., 2006), also known as value-goal congruence. Increasing alignment between employees and organizations increases value-goal congruence, the primary mechanism for improving retention (Wheeler, et al., 2006). Employer brand congruence implies that everything the company communicates about the brand remains clear and consistent (Barrow & Moseley, 2006), yet communications is one of the greatest areas of exposure for the espoused-experienced employer brand gap. This proves to be increasingly challenging as a result of changing technological and working practices.

While alignment is clearly critical, there is no consensus in the literature over alignment with “what”. Suggestions in the employer brand literature include internal/external perceptions of the firm (Barrow & Moseley, 2006; de Chernatony, Drury, & Segal-Horn, 2003; Ewing, et al., 2002; Knox & Freeman, 2006), people/policies/practices (B. Becker & Huselid, 1999), strategy/management/culture (B. Becker & Huselid, 1999), as well as recruitment efforts, corporate culture and business strategy ("HR Brand-Building in Today's Market. (cover story)," 2005). However, as evidenced by the proposed model, all of these are important as they affect employees' experienced employer brand, and therefore, the employer brand gap.

Thus, the importance of the employer brand gap arises from the essence of the brand as a collective and shared meaning of all the elements of “what it is like” and “what it should be like” to work in an organization. The employer brand gap represents the extent to which the organizational promises are, in fact, experienced. This difference between the espoused employer brand and experienced employer brand is unlikely to exist only at the individual-organizational level. The likely existence of sub-cultures, teams, and various groups in modern organizations (Goffee & Jones, 1998; Gratton, 2000; Schein, 1985) suggests that several perceptual gaps will exist. The direction, degree, and distribution of the gap, at any of the individual, subgroup, or organizational levels are likely to indicate the affect, positive or negative, resulting from any gap. The possibility of perceived employer brand gaps and even violations of employer brand suggests that understanding the employer brand gap is essential to ensuring positive employer brand outcomes.

Despite this, existence of the gap is not inherently bad. In fact, the gap is natural and in many situations desirable. It can result from unintentional and intentional causes. Gaps can result from a positive deviation from the espoused brand as well as from the need to stretch the organization. Over time deliberate changes in strategy are likely to create intentional employer brand gaps, whereas mergers and acquisitions and restructuring may expose unintentional and intentional gaps resulting from the cultural integration of different groups. In order to embrace these changes without continual

redefinition an organization is sometimes required to define an aspirational employer brand. This need reflects employer brand's normative nature and need for flexibility and timelessness. If either of these strategic changes occurs, an employer brand gap is unavoidable.

On the other hand, although an employer brand gap can be expected, it may have a dark side. By making the employment promise explicit, employees will have a clear reference point to hold the employer accountable. Employer brand cannot control all elements of the employee experience at all times, but recognition of employer brand gap can highlight opportunities to demonstrate organizational awareness and humility, reduce uncertainty, and reflect the desired state providing a comparator for shared understanding, reflection, and deliberate action (Argyris & Schön, 1974, 1978).

Other disciplines experienced with gap management may offer insights into understanding the employer brand gap and how it manifests. Based on the employee as customer metaphor, should the study reveal that employees make sense of their work experience similar to customers, customer satisfaction literature may provide a way to think about the gap, its characteristics, and how to manage it going forward.

The notion of employee as customer is mentioned several times in the literature. Another parallel construct seen frequently is *jobs as products*. Some believe the central purpose is same, attracting patronage (Berry 1981), but from Rust, Stewart, Miller and Pielack (1996) both individuals and organisations are involved in the exchange, satisfying

needs and wants. “Similarities can be evidenced through examination of satisfaction process. Needs and wants are satisfied when perceived rewards from the organisation meet or exceed expectations. Needs and wants not satisfied when value obtained is less than what was expected.” (Rust, et al., 1996, p. 2)

Although useful to confirm the existence of the overall gap overall, it is important to determine if a single gap should be the focus of our attention, or if there is more to be gained from looking at the facets of the gap. According to job satisfaction literature, by accounting for elements unrepresented by individual facets, an overall score provides a better measure of job satisfaction than the sum of individual facets (Scarpello & Campbell, 1983). However, Scarpello and Campbell (1983) also note that the question of single versus multiple measures depends on the purpose of the measurement. If the purpose is to guide managerial action, it is important to look at differences in the individual facets. Finally, Fishbein and Ajzen’s (1975) model of belief formation indicates that not all beliefs are likely to be equal in strength. This may indicate that some of the elements of the gap are stronger than others. Given that the purpose of this study is to suggest ways to manage any employer brand gap and significance may vary by facet, we should look for meaningful differences relevant to understanding the espoused-experienced employer brand gap.

In summary, the experienced employer brand is framed every day by every person and every contact an employee makes. These are the moments when congruence between

the espoused and experienced employer brand is tested. The existence of gaps is not necessarily bad. Gaps are needed to move an organization forward. It is the nature (direction), size (degree), and location (distribution) of the gaps as well as the manner in which an organization deals with them that matters. Without this deeper understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of the employer brand, it will be difficult to ensure the appropriate level of congruence, potentially affecting the firm's ability to deliver on its brand promise.

Employer Brand Management

The issue of employer brand congruence is one of employer brand management. Although not a formal step in the proposed conceptual framework, the likelihood of employer brand congruence, resulting gaps, and need for oversight implies that employer brand management is needed to improve alignment of the constructs. In other words, employer brand management is how one uses and continually improves the employer brand. Addressing implications for employer brand management is important. Without it, employer brand would remain a fleeting campaign and not the intangible asset it is purported to be in the literature.

Brand management's basic premise is that the power of a brand lies in the residual knowledge and feeling in a customer's mind. It considers what customers have learned, felt, seen, and heard about a brand as a result of their experiences (Keller, 2008). In considering the experiences that comprise an employment experience, these elements

sound like a description of the culture and artifacts of the day-to-day work experiences. Keller's consumer based brand equity (CBBE) model stretches our thinking to consider the need for managing employer brand on an ongoing basis. If brand equity is the accumulation of impressions and feelings about the brand over time, it is important to ensure the quality of employer brand experiences over time as well.

Keller's (2008, p. 35) four steps in the strategic brand management process provide a basis on which to identify how well the organization has identified the offer and created a distinct place in the employees mind. The four steps reflect a measure of employer brand management process maturity. The four steps are: 1) identify and establish values, 2) plan and implement campaigns, 3) measure and interpret performance, and 4) increase and sustain brand equity.

As previously mentioned, brand gaps can occur where employees perceptions, values, and behaviors run contrary to the desired brand intentions. Brand gaps trigger the need for change (de Chernatony, 1999). Despite the use of traditional brand management and measurement practices, feedback loops are limited in practice in employer brand management (Schulte, 2010). Most organizations still use employee engagement surveys or *Great Place to Work* awards as a barometer for employer brand performance. While these are useful tools in that they promote engagement, they omit the importance of aligning the firm's human capital with strategic objectives.

Some scholars have even argued for employer brand to be managed differently

from other brand management activities. Due to the daily moments-of-truth, various stages of the employee experience and changing strategic direction a special need for continuous management exists (Tavassoli, 2008). Moroko and Uncles (2008) make a case for employer brand to be managed differently from consumer and corporate brand. They propose the conceptualization of the employment experience as a product of culture, policies, and processes of the firm. Regardless of who owns and manages it, there is an advantage to managing employer brand and an inherent danger if no one does (Davies, 2008).

Relatively little information exists in the employer brand management literature on measures of employer brand. However, it is commonly accepted that employers do not provide employee benefits altruistically any more than they provide products to customers purely for customer satisfaction (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). This instrumental view does not devalue the commitment or relationship; rather it argues the importance of establishing a true link between employer brand and performance if the firm is to continue to think in the interests of the employees as well as the firm. The two-directional relationship is important for measurement as well as management of employer brand.

If employer brand is to be a tool to help shape and guide a firm's culture, people and strategic direction, as well as support change management efforts, it is important to identify opportunities to measure and improve the process of managing employer brand. Despite the expected differences between the espoused and experienced employer brand,

evidence of improvements are likely to be observed in the same metrics typically found in the employer brand literature: engagement, performance, employer reputation, and employer brand equity. Depending on results from this study some form of employer brand gap is a likely addition to this list.

Engagement. Employee engagement is a likely candidate for measuring the impact to business performance. Congruence is likely to increase employee engagement. Employee engagement, sometimes also called commitment, is described as a willingness to exert additional efforts to achieve the goals of the firm (Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2009). It is this discretionary effort that companies consistently seek. Rosethorn (2009) finds similarities among three dimensions, cognitive, emotional (affective), and behavioral (physical). Affective and behavioral dimensions help move individuals from a state of satisfied to engagement. In other words, people must believe in what they, their team and their organization are doing, or they will not provide the sought discretionary effort (Rosethorn, 2009).

Whether engagement or some other metric is most relevant, it is important to recognize there are two important employer brand gap measures, the gap itself and the resulting impact on business performance. To be successful employer brand must be able to establish and track the actual performance against the desired performance as well as its improvement and impact over time.

Limitations of Current Research

Although much has been learned from studies across a broad range of disciplines in a short period of time, five significant limitations exist in the literature: 1) focus on the attraction phase of the employment lifecycle, 2) methodological implications of a focus on the employer, 3) limited understanding of employee perspectives, 4) the underexplored role of culture, and 5) assumption of employees as customers in current employer brand models. These five understudied aspects of employer brand are critical to moving the discussion of employer brand and employer brand management toward becoming a source of sustainable competitive advantage.

First, employer brand research has focused primarily on recruitment rather than other stages in the employment lifecycle (Rosethorn, 2009); yet, the majority of employment costs and expected benefits of the employment relationship fall into the employment phase of the lifecycle. This distribution of costs and benefits suggests the employment stage is a critical lever for aligning employer/employee values, behaviors and ultimately, culture. For this reason, understanding the key elements influencing employer brand in the employment stage is important. Currently, relatively little can be found in the literature regarding employer brand performance during the employment phase. Consequently, the employment phase may be described as understudied.

The second limitation, a tendency to focus on the employer as the unit of analysis, may also be constraining our empirical understanding of employer brand. Despite the

range of those involved in the practice, most empirical studies have focused on the organization's agents' (managers, consultants, external experts) to inform understanding of employer brand. The methodologies used tend to follow the respective discipline's view of knowledge. For example, HR and psychology scholars tend to treat knowledge as an individual phenomenon; strategy and organizational behavior literatures view knowledge more broadly and organizationally shared (P. Wright, et al., 2001); while marketing takes more of an organizational approach. Organizational behavior scholars recognize the need for fluency in and unifying framework for all three understanding the need for engagement at the individual level, the importance of various kinds of subgroups, and the importance of the overall culture in performance and competitive advantage at the firm level (Goffee & Jones, 1998). Unfortunately, organizational behavior scholars have not demonstrated much interest in the employer brand discussion. Such a concentration on a single unit of analysis or employer point of view may have biased our view of employer brand's relevant constructs. This study proposes to address this limitation by constructing an integrated view of employees' and employer's perspectives to understand how the espoused-and experienced employer brand fit together.

Third, the limited empirical understanding of employees' perspectives implies critical assumptions of the employees that may affect the efficacy of employer brand management. Although some studies have identified successful employer brand

characteristics of importance to employees such as attractiveness, accuracy, and alignment (Moroko & Uncles, 2008), most of these findings are based on employer agents' or expert perceptions, not employees' views. This is problematic because employees are likely to have differing expectations (Hiltrop, 1995; Robinson & Morrison, 1995; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Rousseau, 1995) of experiences and ways of sense making (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Current employer brand models also assume that what is communicated is meaningful to and influential with employees and will lead to productive outcomes through increased engagement (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). These models are deficient in that they do not have a mechanism to understand the relative position between the espoused employer brand and the actual employee reality. In fact, little has been confirmed with employees to understand how they make sense of the employer brand in the context of their experience, how this conceptualization compares to espoused employer brand, and how employees deal with discrepancies between the two. Few empirical studies have explored factors affecting how employees access, receive, interpret, reflect, and participate in delivery of the espoused employer brand or employment experience (Miles & Mangold, 2004).

Next, the exclusion of the employee experience risks ignoring some of the interactions that shape individuals' day-to-day work experience, corporate culture (Schein, 1985), and therefore expectations. It is this daily experience that makes culture a more likely medium for experienced employer brand than the simple employment

lifecycle reference used by many. Thus, it is critical to understand the relationship between employer brand and culture if we are to consider employer brand's potential use for managing the employee experience and cultural change.

Finally, the fifth limitation, implicit characterization of employees as customers, provides a potentially interesting lens into the espoused-experienced employer brand gap. In the literature, application of existing consumer and corporate branding models to employer brand, with necessary substitutions for the firm-employee relationship, implicitly assumes employees and consumers are similar. In other words, most employer brand theory approaches employees as customers and jobs as products, thereby advocating creation of EVPs, determining a desired message, and communicating the message to employees to shape the employees' and ultimately, the customers' experience.

This approach falls short on two counts, 1) the focus on jobs as products instead of services or relationships, and 2) the presumption of the attraction to the job instead of acknowledging a relationship with the organization. Moreover, the job as product approach also fails to acknowledge four specific differences between employees and consumers: economic dependency, extreme frequency of interaction, proximity to confirm/disconfirming data, and dependence on social benefits provided by the employer. Omission of these characteristics presumes that employees access and conceptualize the EVP, employment experience, and role of the employer similar to the way a consumer

purchases a product. However, an employee is compelled to make sense daily in the context of his/her employment relationship and culture of which he or she is part. Therefore, some of the comparisons may fit, while others may not. It is important to determine the scale of similarity and points of difference to recognize what can be learned and applied responsibly to the employee side of the employer brand equation.

By empirically exploring the congruency between a firm's espoused employer brand and the employer brand experienced by the firm's employees we can improve general understanding of these five aspects of employer brand. This deeper understanding of the congruence (or lack of), how it manifests, and subsequently is managed will help us understand opportunities for alignment, improved engagement, and employer brand management.

Conclusion

By considering the complete set of employer brand components and addressing limitations of current literature, employer brand becomes a powerful tool for employers. The experienced employer brand is framed every day by every person and every contact an employee makes. Based on the range of constructs involved as shown in Figure 1, it is likely that what the organization *espouses* differs from what the organization *does*. These comparisons are moments-of-truth, when congruence between the espoused-experienced employer brand is tested. The lower the congruence, the higher the likelihood employees will experience gaps.

Due to human nature, people need to explain differences between reality and what was expected. Drawing from customer satisfaction literature, the resulting level of satisfaction will affect the employee's motivation and view of the experience. Three states of satisfaction are possible, unsatisfied, satisfied, and delighted. Negative gaps indicate areas which may need to be improved, but positive gaps demonstrate that the existence of gaps is not necessarily bad. Dissatisfaction frustrates or erodes trust; satisfied builds trust; and, delighted builds trust and taps into positive emotional feelings typically difficult to generate in employment relationships. At the organizational level, gaps are needed to move an organization forward. It is the size and nature of the gaps as well as the manner in which an organization deals with them that matters. Without this deeper understanding of the characterization of the employer brand gap, it will be difficult to ensure the appropriate level of congruence between the espoused and experienced employer brand, potentially affecting the firm's ability to deliver on its brand promise.

Chapter 3

RESEARCH METHODS AND ANALYSIS

To determine the existence and characteristics of a potential gap(s) between the employment experience espoused by employers and the one experienced by employees, it was necessary to understand employee views and their fit with employer brand practices. Yet, understanding employee views was complex. It involved understanding the employee's perceptions and the experiences that shaped their employment experience. Since employer brand was determined to be an input into the employee view in the literature, a deeper understanding of employer's logic, approach, processes, and effectiveness in creating and communicating the desired work experience was required. This study explored employer practices and employee experiences at five companies to discover differences between the way employers espoused the employer brand and employees experienced it. A cross-case comparison was used to identify areas of commonality across the two groups of interviewees.

Research Design

Methodological choices made in this study reflected the newness of the employer brand concept and were chosen to help generate dialogue, aid in sense-making, and ensure inclusion of the relevant perspectives (Berg, 2009). The case study method provided a way to understand the varied and evolving employer brand practices used by each of the employers while also facilitating a discussion with individual employees despite their limited familiarity with the concept and language of employer brand (Schulte, 2010). A sample of five companies was used to increase data validity of gap occurrence and to mitigate some of the potential single-subject biases associated with

smaller case study samples. Due to the complexity of employer brand as a concept, multiple data sources were used to complete the employer brand gap picture (Yin, 2003). Berg's (2009) grounded theory approach guided inductive development of the codes and the findings, ensuring constant interaction with the data (Maxwell, 2005). Effects of the emerging nature of the study were evidenced in design adjustments made over the course of the study. For example, the number of interview subjects increased from 50 to 64 to reflect the empirical distribution of employer brand responsibilities in the participating organizations.

Drivers of the design choices also required exclusion of some methods. A quantitative methodology was not pursued because not enough was known about employer brand to support a quantitative review of the potential employer brand gap(s). For example, employer brand's relatively recent introduction, the limited understanding of the employee's experience, and the oversimplification of employer brand in the literature suggest that at this stage in its development employer brand gap was better suited for qualitative studies. Although a future quantitative study is a logical next step, not enough was known about employer brand gap to merit this approach. A mixed methods approach was also excluded because of the small sample size and time permitted to complete this study.

The resulting qualitative study provided rich data from which to analyze and determine the existence of congruence between the employees' conceptualization and employer's operationalization by using a cross-case comparison of five organizations from different industries that had demonstrated a strong commitment to employer brand.

The study accommodated the embryonic nature of employer brand theory and limitations of empirical understanding of employees' experiences of employer brand.

Four research questions were explored through the use of semi-structured, open-ended interviews.

1. How do employees make sense of their work experience at their current employer?
2. How does the employee approach compare with the respective employer's employer brand practices used to shape the employee work experience?
3. Is there a gap between the employees' and their current employer's employer brand approach?
4. In what ways does the organizational culture shape the employee's experience and expectations?

Company Selection

Company selection played an important role in studying the employer brand gap. To explain this role, I will first discuss the process and rationale behind the company selection and then provide a contextual overview of each chosen company.

Companies selected for participation in this study were chosen according to seven criteria: commitment to employer brand, company brand recognition, employee size, industry, geography, access to employees, and willingness to participate in the study. The first two, commitment to employer brand and company brand recognition, were considered primary factors; the rest were secondary factors. Use of the exact term employer brand was deemed unnecessary due to the range of names used in companies

using similar practices: employer brand, employee value proposition, employment promise, or employment experience (Schulte, 2010).

A meaningful way to explore congruence in employer brand practices was to study companies with employer brand management practices and whose employees had sufficient language to discuss the related concepts. Companies with experience in employer brand confirmed management's attempt to use employer brand practices and an increased likelihood of employee experience with the related concepts under observation in the study. Companies which had demonstrated exemplary outcomes were useful, but not necessary. Despite popularity of certain measures of employer brand success, practitioners and academics have not yet reached agreement on the definitive measures of employer brand success (financial returns, engagement, reputation, *Great Place to Work* ranking). In fact, for the purposes of this study, if a company had been deemed "successful", it may have already worked through some unique employer brand challenges, thereby masking factors important for consideration. Consequently, companies were required to have had sufficient employer brand experience.

For this study "sufficient" experience was likely to provide the richest source of data; sufficient experience was deemed likely to occur in companies that were in the process of working on major employer brand initiatives. Selection based on *Great Places to Work* or *Reputation Institute* rankings was permissible, but not used as main selection criteria. This definition minimized the probability of self-selection bias for which these rankings are often criticized.

The second criterion, company brand recognition, was considered important because of the influence of external brand and reputation on job acceptance rates (Cable

& Turban, 2001). It was likely that by comparing companies with strong brands and varying success with employer brand a richer understanding of the experienced employer brand, employer brand congruence, and culture's relationship with employer brand could be achieved.

In addition to the two primary factors, five others were important to identifying company subjects: number of employees, industry, geography, access, and willingness to participate in the study. The number of employees influenced many aspects of employer brand including benefits, pay, rewards, complexity, diversity, proximity to decision makers, and information. Therefore, while it was not important to guarantee similar size across all subjects, it was important to ensure companies were of sufficient size to face similar challenges. Only companies with at least 5,000 employees and 20 sites were considered. Industry, the next factor, was important to reduce bias resulting from a single industry's economics. Companies from industries with reputations ranging from most favorable to least favorable were included to control for industry reputation favorability bias (Fombrun, 1996). Geographic qualification included two sub-factors, national headquarters and proximity to my residence. Residential proximity allowed me to conduct in person interviews. Due to the country specific regulations and national culture influence on employment perceptions and practices, headquarters location was considered to provide a cultural contrast and help dispel potential cultural influences on results. Thus, three companies with UK headquarters and two with US headquarters were included in the study. Actual operational coverage s ranged from global (2) to multi-national (2) to regional (1). "Access" and "willingness" were subjective factors which were an indication of the ability to conduct the research under the timeline and

parameters defined by the study. Once qualifying for the primary criteria, company selection was determined by the secondary criteria to provide a diversified, well-balanced sample with which to explore the potential employer brand gap(s).

Based on secondary criteria and personal contacts, 12 companies were identified. Colleagues and industry contacts introduced me to key individuals in each of the 12 companies. This allowed me to conduct exploratory conversations with employer brand decision makers in 10 of the 12 potential companies. I used these conversations to further determine fit with the study and primary criteria. In two cases, network contacts carried out the exploratory conversations on my behalf. Through exploratory conversations, these 12 companies were confirmed to have established employer brand initiatives over time and most were in the middle of a revitalized initiative for several reasons. Of the 12 approached only 1 company rejected the opportunity outright; 6 considered participating, but did not respond within the timeframe allowed; 4 agreed to participate within the acceptance timeframe; and, 1 accepted just after the final deadline. Due to the importance of balancing geographic representation in the sample, the fifth company was included to allow for theoretical replication (Yin, 2003) increasing the sample from four to five for predictive reasons and to improve research integrity. Although I encountered substantial interest from all those contacted, it was interesting to note that none of the final participants came from the indirect exploratory conversations. Actual responses seemed to reflect the complexity of perspectives involved in employer brand initiatives inside the respective organizations.

Table 1
Company Profiles

Company	Size (Employees)1	HQ Location	Industry	Geographic Coverage	Public / Private
Compu Int'l.	>75,000 Nearly 200 countries	US	IT Hardware and Services	Global	Public
DIY	>5,000 employees; 200 UK stores	UK	Retailer, Home Improvement, Trade and Consumer	Domestic	Private
Drinks Inc.	>20,000 Over 180 countries	UK	Drinks	Global	Public
Media Co.	>100,000 170 countries	UK	Telecommunications & Media	International	Public
New Air	>10,000 11 countries	US	Regional Air Carrier	International	Public

Compu Int'l.

One of the world's largest computer retailers, Compu Int'l. is headquartered in the United States with at least 75,000 employees operating in nearly 200 countries. Compu Int'l. has recently lost market share and is now repositioning its business to take a new strategic direction. This is a massive change for the organization which will affect all parts of the business. Compu Int'l. is currently undergoing a major restructuring and skills rebalancing as a result of this strategic shift. Consequently, talent and organizational effectiveness has moved up on its priority list.

DIY

The retail business of a larger conglomerate, DIY is just one of a range of successful brands in the group's portfolio. The portfolio businesses are run quite

independently, except for a single shared service administrative group that supports the individual businesses (HR, IT, etc.). The DIY business has roughly 5,000 mainly minimum wage employees leading approximately 200 stores across the United Kingdom. The company is currently embarking on a new, multi-channel approach that implies proactive store employees requiring enhanced skill development.

Drinks Inc.

Drinks Inc. while headquartered in the United Kingdom sells its products directly and through distributors in over 180 countries around the world. A key component of Drinks Inc.'s strategy is growth through acquisition, leading to constant restructuring. Drinks Inc. is actively striving to become "the best place to work" in Great Britain.

Media Co.

Media Co. is a multinational media and telecommunications provider headquartered in the United Kingdom. In most of its operating markets the industry has been deregulated and privatized. The organization is structured around four lines of business and has a single shared services group that provides corporate level support for cross-business unit initiatives and responsibilities. Media Co. has experienced waves of dramatic cost reduction over the last few years and shed about 25% of its workforce. Media Co. is now very competitive in this traditionally unionized industry due to reinventing its products, services, and identity while growing globally. Media Co.'s changing customer demands also indicated a need for shift in employee skill requirements.

New Air

A relatively new airline based in the United States, New Air has quickly established itself as an air carrier of choice. The airline industry is strongly unionized, and therefore operates on a tenure basis with employees reflecting industry norms. Having already experienced boom and bust cycles despite its relatively short heritage, New Air has created a profitable business in an unprofitable industry and is known for its humanistic way of approaching air travel.

Participant Selection

On the employee side of the employer brand gap interviews, employee selection ensured a diverse range of employee perspectives. Typical studies of employer brand reviewed practices from the employer's point of view and focused on espoused employer brand by interviewing individuals responsible for introducing and/or managing employer brand. While this provided a useful perspective, it implied that the messages designed and communicated on the espoused employee experience were the same ones received by employees and were consistent with employee experiences. Such "expert" views formed an important part of understanding employer brand, but were "perceptions of" rather than "actual" employees' views. Given the importance of interpretive differences, these perspectives were unable to definitively add to the understanding of employee perspectives, employer brand congruence, or employer brand gaps. Determining existence and characterization of the employer brand gap implied the importance of understanding both perspectives (employer brand managers and employees) inside an organization.

To accomplish this, two groups of individual participants were selected, *employers* and *employees*. A total of 64 individuals were selected across the five companies to represent the employer and employee perspectives used to understand the employer brand gap. Employers were selected to cover adequately the company's individual approach to employer brand, while employees were selected to cover the range of functional perspectives.

Employers were not the main focus of the study, but were rather “official agents” of the organization who described the employer brand practices designed to shape employee experiences. A minimum of two employers were required for the study, either two individuals responsible for the main functions of employer brand, or one responsible for the business decision to initiate employer brand and one responsible for managing it. Through this purposeful sampling approach, this definition initially suggested that a total of 10 employer participants would be required to cover the employer views. However, more than two employer representatives were interviewed to cover adequately employer brand practices in two of the five companies. For example, two organizations included HR, Brand and Communications functions in employer brand management. In these cases, additional interviewees were added to reflect employer brand as practiced within the respective organization to ensure a complete understanding of the companies' practices.

Given the focus of this study was to add the employee understanding to the employer brand construct, employees were more heavily represented. A minimum of eight employees were selected from each company. A maximum variation strategy (Hoepfl, 1997) was used to incorporate the range of factors most likely to cause

differences in employment experiences. Factors determined to have the greatest potential to influence employment experience included function, level, tenure, gender, and age group. As expected, different organizations emphasized different functions. Not all functions were represented equally at the organizations' corporate table. Consequently, a variance in the employment experience was anticipated by function. Level, the next criteria, was a proxy for access to information, authority and control; therefore, covering the range of employee perspectives due to levels was considered important in making sense of the nature of the gap. To understand the employment experience at different stages in the employment experience, employees from varying tenure were included. The effects of gender were also well documented in the literature; therefore, to ensure no bias based on gender, a balance of men and women were included in the study. Finally, much had been written on the changing expectations of the various generations complicating the employment relationship and organizational culture. This suggested a range of generational perspectives was important to aid in multi-generational views of the employment experience. Interviewees were selected to cover these factors to enrich findings of the study.

In order to ensure employee anonymity and ability to share these different perspectives, I took two steps: 1) direct contact with individual employees, and 2) over recruitment of potential employee interviewees. Direct contact was successful in all organizations, thus minimizing potential bias resulting from preservation of the employment relationship between the employee and his/her employer or line manager. Over recruitment, however, was only successful in three of the five organizations.

Data Collection

A total of 64 interviews (41 face-to-face, 23 phone), Google Alerts searches, and company document reviews were conducted over a period of 10 weeks, from January 23, 2011 to March 31, 2011.

Given the young nature of employer brand practices and limited familiarity with the practice among employees, interviews provided the majority of the data collected. Emphasis on the interviews allowed exploration and rich discussion of the concepts. In line with the emerging and maximum variation strategies applied, a diverse range of perspectives resulted from the interviews Table 2 describes the number of interviews by company. Media Co. and New Air provided the most interviewees, 14 and 15 respectively, while DIY, Drinks Inc., and Compu Int'l. met the minimum interview requirement with 12, 11, and 10 respectively. Overall, the conversations included 17 employers and 47 employees, 27% and 73% respectively.

Table 2
Number of Interviews by Group by Company

	Compu Int'l.	DIY	Drinks Inc.	Media Co.	New Air
Interviews	10	12	11	14	15
Employers	2	2	2	5	5
Employees	8	10	9	9	10

As mentioned, the majority of the additional perspectives stemmed from incremental employer interviews in Media Co. and New Air. These resulted from the companies' broader functional involvement in employer brand practices. It is interesting to note that both companies with more complex employer brand practices operated in unionized industries, but were headquartered on different continents. This suggested that the

complexity was not country specific, but may have need additional functional support due to the union specific issues. The company split of three organizations headquartered in the UK and two in the US resulted in an interviewee geographic split of 60 % / 40% respectively, with more UK than US headquarter representation. Individual respondent nationalities were not tracked.

In terms of gender, all attempts were made to find a balance of male and female respondents in the sample. The even split between men and women, totaled 51% and 49% respectively, making it fairly reflective of the adult population.

Functional responsibility was another important consideration among interviewees due to varying roles. Each of the organizations had retail sales and therefore distinguished between front and back office. Additionally, attempts were made to minimize the number of employees who may have been more sympathetic to more familiar with employer brand because of their involvement in HR or Marketing practices and proximity to information. The distribution of employees interviewed included 38% from front office (customer facing) functions such as operations, sales and customer service, 25% from Marketing and HR roles, and 18% from other administrative back office functions such as purchasing, IT, Finance and Legal. This split provided a rich set of conversations which covered the range of the organizations employee perspectives.

Responses indicated that “other experiences” played a significant role in employees’ working assumptions. Ensuring a range of experiences across employees was important. Table 3 shows the minimum number of prior employment experiences; Table 4 shows the years of service at the current employer for employees who participated in the interviews. Due to employment laws, information was included only for those who

shared the information during the interviews. Information in Table 3 was considered the minimum number of external experiences and likely to underestimate the number of previous employment experiences. A value of “N/A” indicated the number of employees who did not offer data during their interview.

Table 3
Minimum Number of Prior Employment Experiences

Number of External Experiences	N/A	0	1	2	3	4	5	>5
Interviewees	16	6	21	9	5	1	4	1
% of Interviewees	25	10	33	14	8	0	6	0

Table 4
Employees with Years of Service in the Current Organization

Years of Service in Current Organization	NA	0-1	>1-3	>3-5	>5-7	>7-10	>10-15	>15-30
Interviewees	6	3	13	7	7	6	9	10
% of interviewees	10	5	21	11	11	10	15	17

More than 80% of those who offered an indication of external experiences had at least one other organization to serve as a basis for comparing their current employer’s practices. This proved useful in understanding some of the assumptions discussed in the interviews. It also meant that employees were a bit more educated on employment relationship norms. From Table 4, interviewees were found to be reasonably experienced with more than 60% having at least three years of experience with their current employer.

As shown in Table 4, the largest tenure subgroup in the sample was employees with one to three years of experience in their current employer. A larger number of employees with one to three year may have positively biased employee perspectives of their current employer due to gratitude for having a job during the recession. This distribution may have also have resulted from layoffs and fewer opportunities to change jobs due to the current economic environment.

To structure the interviews, two separate, semi-structured, open-ended interview protocols were developed, one each for employers and employees. Examples of the interview protocols are located in Appendix 2. The protocols were designed side-by-side to ensure effective comparison of the two perspectives and were expected to take 60 minutes to conduct. Targeted questions were easier to identify for employer interviews than for employee interviews due to level of employee familiarity with the employer brand concept. Interview protocols were tested on a non-participating HR Director and non-participating employee. The protocols were then revised to improve language, understanding, and response quality prior to use in the study interviews.

To ensure all interviewees were familiar with the term employer brand, terminology was checked with each organization and interviewee to confirm meaning and practice at the start of each interview. Terms recorded in the interviews covered the range of names found in the literature previously. No new terms were identified in the participating organizations.

Upon completion of the first four interviews, recordings were transcribed to provide an opportunity to adjust the protocols a second time based on feedback from the interviews. Interviews however are subject to contextual impact, and the application of

the protocols was flexed as necessary based on the interviewees' familiarity with the subject and knowledge of a particular area. In several cases, more time was required to explore the relevant topics and questions while maintaining a conversational nature; thus, 36 interviews exceeded the expected 60 minute time frame.

To further understand the range of potential influence on employee perceptions, a separate external brand message analysis using Google Alerts during a 14 day period had been intended to identify any additional influential information that was publically available to employees. Searches were conducted for each of the companies using four search terms, employer brand, employer, employee and company name. Google Alerts was chosen because it is commonly accepted as the largest, most widely used search engine that produces the best results for common searches. The search terms were selected because they were the likely terms used by anyone trying to search for information related to the company's reputation as an employer. However, the analysis was not performed after it was deemed irrelevant to employee sense making during the employment phase. Employees reportedly used this search information primarily during the recruiting stage.

Internal and external information was a proxy for the level of control the organization has over the message. The level of formality and source also communicates additional information about the espoused employer brand. A review of internal company information was conducted on documents, websites, webpages, and other artifacts to develop a rich understanding of official employer brand communications, language, strategy, and practices. The range of company data provided varied by organization due to the varying level of formality in presentation of employer brand practices.

Integrated data collection from employer and employee interviews from the five companies prevented development of a single company bias while also providing a steady stream of data for coding. Each interview was digitally recorded and sent to one of two transcription services for processing. Back-up recordings were used to improve the quality of transcriptions, reduce inaudible references, and increase usability rate of interviews. Hand written notes were taken during each interview to serve as ongoing input and a source for refinement. In general, protocol refinements were made to balance the need to guide the conversation, yet reduce response bias. Collection of these various data occurred in electronic and hard copy, and were printed and coded for analysis.

Coverage of relevant external and internal sources was important to develop a complete view of the factors influencing employer brand congruence. This data collection strategy provided triangulation of different information sources and cross validation of findings while facilitating flexibility provided by the case study method.

Data Analysis

Using a grounded theory approach to combine the power of inductive and deductive analysis (Maxwell, 2005), etic codes were developed before the interviews to provide relevant structure followed by development of *in vivo* codes after the first four interviews were completed. Emic codes were developed by inventorying and defining key phrases, terms, and practices important to the interviewees (Patton, 2001) and the overall list of codes emically adjusted. Wherever possible, *in vivo* codes were used to reflect employee words and meanings (Patton, 2001). Etic and emic codes were reviewed by independent researchers to test for meaning and reduce opportunity for overlap. An independent reader was engaged to perform multi-rater comparison (Berg, 2009;

Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 2001) on four transcripts to check coding, agreement, and consistency. Once coding of the interview transcripts was confirmed as replicable by the independent reader, the remaining transcripts were coded. The entirety of these codes formed the basis of my pattern seeking. Each of the 64 transcripts was reviewed and the relevant passages coded electronically using the *NVivo* qualitative data analysis software tool according to the established code definitions.

To evaluate the employer brand gap dimensions and determine how the gap works, I developed two hierarchical levels of codes. Etically, I identified the main categories expected to provide structure to an abstract construct and to facilitate comparisons between employers and employees. The original set of codes included themes which were part of the standard employer brand process such as signals, processes, tools, and messages as well as study-specific themes such as employer brand factors, employer brand gap, employee sense making, and employer brand satisfaction. Emically, I evolved these major codes as I discovered other topics of importance from the data. This led to development of a code taxonomy with parent-child relationships for some codes embedded in the structure. A copy of the set of codes and definitions can be found in the Appendix 4.

Employees had not overtly considered the employer brand elements or parameters of their employment experience prior to the interviews. Therefore, they constructed explanations of their beliefs throughout the course of the interviews. Once deeply involved in the data, I realized that employees were thinking about “employer brand factors” slightly differently than expected. By analyzing the factors drawn inductively from the interview data, some parameters of employees’ beliefs grew more apparent.

Despite the novelty of the conversation, employees were fairly consistent in discussing elements important to their employment experience.

From these discussions, I developed a total of 26 employer brand factors from the 64 interviews. These emic factors were taken from a cross-section of 15 transcripts, 1 employer and 2 employees from each of the five companies. Initial coding generated 29 factors. Eight more were added in vivo while coding the remaining 49 interviews. The resulting 37 factors were reviewed for source frequency and quality of attributed quotes to determine universal and unique relevance to experienced employer brand. Due to the fluid and evolving nature of open-ended interviews, case frequency was used to evaluate factors important to employees. Factors with at least five case occurrences (interviewees) from three or more organizations were considered universal; those with six or more case occurrences in one company were considered to be unique or company-specific factors. Eleven factors were considered idiosyncratic and removed, leaving 26 to understand the employer brand parameters of importance to employees.

NVivo was also used to analyze the coded transcripts and help identify and evaluate relationships between the codes, identifiers, and units of analysis. Analysis was structured around the primary benefit of the case-study approach, “doing justice to each individual case (Patton, 2002, p. 449).” This resulted in a five-step, bottom-up approach that was adjusted after step two based on the patterns emerging from the data. First, data among individual groups of employers and employees within each company were analyzed to get a sense of what employees had been exposed to and how familiar with the practices they were. Second, data from employers and employees were analyzed to understand the employer and employee perspectives and trends by company.

At this point I had originally planned to evaluate congruence between employers and employees in each company and then convert the company-specific information to a case record for comparison. In reviewing the data though, it appeared that employees perspectives and sense making was driven more by their affiliation as an employee and less by company-specific approaches. I then reviewed employers and employees responses for five major codes to evaluate patterns and make an analytical decision on how to group and proceed with the analysis. In doing so, I realized two things. First, employee data appeared more consistent across employees than by company. Next, in looking at the gap within an organization and then comparing the practices across companies, I realized that a critical mass of occurrences could occur in a single company or across companies. By looking at company comparisons, some of these similarities might be excluded; but, looking at employer/employee patterns first would present the opportunity to identify gap drivers which could be applied to the individual companies at a later stage. In other words, based on the available data, my original goal of generalization was served better by adjusting the analytic approach and analyzing employer and employee data first, followed by application of the results to individual organization afterwards. I decided to adjust the approach to an employer/employee based analysis.

The change in approach led to four subsequent analyses: 1) a complete review of all data for employers, 2) a complete review of all data for employees, 3) an analysis comparing the results from the employer-employee data to identify similarities and differences between them, and 4) sub-analyses of the findings from the employer-employee results. From these I developed individual company cases to determine

relevance and variation at the company specific level in line with the cross-case comparison approach. This allowed me to identify generalizability of specific gaps (Patton, 2001) and led to insights for the conceptual framework.

Findings were developed based on their substantive significance. The level of significance was evaluated based on 1) strength of evidence in support of the finding, 2) the extent to which the findings increased the understanding of espoused-experienced employer brand gap, 3) the extent to which the findings were consistent (confirming or new) with the literature and the rest of the data, and 4) the extent to which the findings were useful for the specific purposes of understanding employer brand congruence, employer brand's relationship with culture, or employer brand management (Patton, 2001).

Data Validity and Limitations

Although many steps were taken to mitigate limitations of and threats to data validity in the research design and analytical approach, several remained. These limitations included company and employee selection, the number of cases used, potential exclusion of meaningful data, threat to brand reputation, and personal bias of the researcher.

The main criterion for company selection, commitment to employer brand, was based on personal knowledge and contacts. A larger number of companies were invited, but 50% did not respond within the study timeframe. Effectively, this response pattern made positive response the second main criteria by default.

At the individual level, employee participants were drawn from a limited subset and in some cases from employee forums or groups that were responsible for

representing and communicating their colleagues' views. While these individuals shared information based on their personal and representative experiences, the nature of their role as a forum representative and involvement in managerial-style processes may have made them more aware of information, natural tensions, or company challenges than the typical employee. Both roles could have predisposed the responses positively.

Next, due to the volume of data collected and self-identification with organizational brand, individual responses may not be exhaustive. Although more than 2,400 pages of interview data, 20 company documents, and 1,000 Google alerts were gathered, not all data could be used in the study. Many tangents were explored and the analysis adjusted to incorporate relevant data with respect to the evolving themes. Despite these efforts, the study was designed to identify a set of employer brand factors relevant to establishing congruence between employee and employer brand practices and the role of culture in this process. The mere size of the data set suggests that the resulting findings may not be exhaustive. To confirm inclusion of the most relevant elements, I consulted my dissertation chair, some of my initial company contacts, and an uninvolved researcher to review my analysis and verify the findings.

Additionally, given the subject of this study and its relation to brand and reputation, both employers and employees may have been concerned with presenting a positive view of their organization as noted in the self-identity literature. Potential for this bias was noted several times during the interviews. In discussing their organization, both employers and employees expressed positive characterizations of their employer when discussing shortcomings. This positive view may have reflected their overall opinion; however, through additional probing questions, discrepancies and differences in views

were surfaced. Furthermore, on asking for a rating of congruence, few scores of greater than 80% were given.

The final area of potential data limitation stemmed from my potential bias as the instrument of the qualitative study. My own background in marketing, business management, employer brand development, learning, and as an employee may have affected how I viewed and interpreted the data in the study. Corrective measures were taken in the design to minimize threats to the data validity despite these potential limitations.

Chapter 4

ESPOUSED EMPLOYER BRAND

Chapter 3 described the methods used in this study, the subjects' characteristics, and data limitations. Chapter 4 presents research findings from the five companies for the first component of employer brand gap, the espoused employer brand. This chapter focuses on employer perspectives, beginning with a description of the nuts and bolts of the espoused employer brand, followed by the reasons why the companies invested in the practice and the factors describing how they articulated and supported it. It then describes how the companies used employer brand to try to shape employees' expectations and experience through touch points, "any internal tool, process, environmental feature or policy that touches a candidate/employee/alumni (Rosethorn, 2008)." The chapter concludes with a discussion of practices the companies used to manage the employer brand and ensure its application.

Articulating and Supporting the Espoused Employer Brand

Knowledge of the employer's purpose and methods is critical to forming the baseline of the employer brand gap. Consequently, it is important to understand how employers described the intended employment experience and the practices they used to promote the employer brand to their employees.

Demonstrated commitment to employer brand was a subject selection criterion for participating in the study, and each of the five companies studied had formally bolstered their employer brand practices within the last 10 years. The data suggested that the organizations exhibited characteristics associated with the first three strategic brand management stages (Keller, 2008, p. 35): 1) *establish positioning and values* (DIY); 2)

implementing brand marketing campaigns (Drinks Inc., Media Co., Compu Int'l.); and 3) *measuring and interpreting performance* (Media Co., New Air). None of the subjects' employer brand practices qualified for stage four, *increase and sustain brand equity*, as they had not established measures or processes for tracking it. The variation in companies' development proved useful for the purposes of this study because it allowed for examination of a range of characteristics associated with the employer brand gap at different stages of development.

The reasons for the companies' decision to enhance their employer brand varied, but all the organizations were motivated by their employer brand's strategic purpose. Ranging from provocative leadership to building the right employee experience to supporting a refreshed business strategy, the five subjects consistently mentioned the use of employer brand practices in aligning their organizations' people and business strategies to improve performance. In line with the resource-based view (Barney, 1991), all five companies referenced a direct connection between people and profits as an underlying purpose of investing. As explained by a Media Co. employer, "fundamentally we kind of think if we can be clear with employees about what to expect and what that looks like, then that should help in the service of our customers (Participant #09, Employer)."

Articulating the Espoused Employer Brand

The five organizations used a range of terms to describe the set of practices scholars refer to as employer brand. The variety of terms used reflected the range identified in both academic and practitioner circles (Schulte, 2010). Table 5 summarizes key employer brand characteristics identified in the study.

Table 5
Summary of Key Espoused Employer Brand Characteristics

	Compu Int'l.	DIY	Drinks Inc.	Media Co.	New Air
Stage of development	Implementing Campaigns	Establishing positioning and values	Implementing Campaigns	Implementing Campaigns; Measuring Performance	Measuring Performance
Terms Used	Employee Value Proposition	Great Place to Work	THE Best Place to Work	Employee Experience	Employment Experience

In the two organizations linking employer brand practices to *Best/Great Place to Work* (Drinks Inc., DIY), interviewees referred to Best/Great Place to Work almost exclusively and easily discussed the concept. Despite the use of a popular label employers saw the two terms as the same, as indicated by this DIY employer’s comment, “Internally, it’s a Great Place to Work. So, we don’t call it an employer brand...but, it’s not too far away from the language I use when I’m thinking in my role rather than thinking in the business (Participant #04, Employer).”

The three organizations without a declared name designated the term most likely to make sense to employees, but different interviewees referred to employer brand using terms reflecting their functional orientation. As explained by a Media Co. employer, “terminology around this gets used very kind of indiscriminately to mean different things by different people (Participant #11, Employer).” For example, the marketing team in Media Co. referred to the internal brand rather than employer brand based on a *tone of voice* communications campaign. Another Media Co. employer described it as an *employee value proposition* and *employee experience*, but noted the internal preference

for the latter. “Employee experience...tends to land more readily with people because we talk about the customer experience (Participant #01, Employer).”

Concern for the variety in terminology is not academic. Without agreement and consistency, operationalizing the practice is more difficult, especially when the concept draws from so many functional areas. Terminology communicates meaning and signals the range of processes to be included in the employer brand scope. A consistent label can only improve this messaging, and therefore, the brand’s impact.

The Message. All five employers described their brand in terms of their organization’s values and driving behaviors (Schein, 1985) to create the right conditions for employees to flourish. Four of the five organizations explicitly defined their employer brand as their organization’s values. New Air added their “principles of leadership” to further define acceptable behaviors expected to reflect and demonstrate the values. Tag lines were used to encapsulate the message and link into the organization’s brand architecture. Table 6 summarizes the tag lines and value propositions for each of the five companies.

Table 6
Internal Positioning and Messaging

Compu Int'l.	DIY	Drinks Inc.	Media Co.	New Air
<p><i>Helping People Thrive</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employer Brand is the four opportunities: to add value; operate in a diverse culture where rewards are linked to results; to develop and grow, personally and professionally; to contribute to a better environment and world • Core values and what we look for in candidates 	<p><i>A Great Place to Work</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employer Brand is the values: successful, valued, proud, trusted 	<p><i>The BEST Place to Work</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom to succeed, be the best, proud of what we do, • Passionate about consumers 1998 • Value each other 	<p><i>The Difference is You</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employer Brand is the values: Trustworthy, Helpful, Inspiring, Straightforward, Heart • Customer and employee values and experience closely tied together 	<p><i>Bringing Humanity Back to Air Travel</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employer Brand described as the values and leadership principles • Safety, caring, integrity, fun, passion

When originally asked about the employer brand, employers discussed the organization's values. Employers did not initially discuss the more traditional employer brand features such as the functional, economic, or psychological benefits associated with the commonly accepted definition of employee value proposition (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). This response from a New Air employer was typical of the values-based definition described by employers.

We have an orientation and we do tell [employees] to hold your leaders accountable for the values and the principles of leadership. Okay? And that's said on day one. And those two areas, the values and the principles of leadership, are really kind of our, I think, employee promise. (Participant #41, Employer)

While some employers added more traditional employment terms when prompted, for the most part employers presumed these details had been handled by other people (recruiters, HR, hiring managers) or were already understood by the candidate or employee themselves. A Compu Int'l. employer explained:

We do talk about [benefits]... it depends a lot on the candidate, at what point you get into discussion around that. Some candidates want to understand that straight away; other candidates are not particularly interested in that because they know they're going to get, you know, a standard kind of package of pay and benefits that would be reflective of a multinational company kind of thing. (Participant #54, Employer)

The flexibility described was considerate of the employee's style, but this approach left significant room for misinterpretation. If most of the basic elements of the employee value proposition are only tangentially related to how employers define the employer brand, there is a significant opportunity for deviation from the espoused proposition and

potential misunderstanding in the employment relationship. One employer mentioned his skepticism over the values-only approach.

There's what the organization says it prizes and believes in. Those are the espoused values. In fact, they are the company's values: our brand values which are trustworthy, helpful, inspiring, straightforward and heart. Those are the things we say are important, but actually and in many ways those are the things we measure ourselves against, so those are our espoused values, but they're not the lived values, all the time. (Participant #11, Employer)

The values-based approach was not without challenges, as evidenced by experiments recently introduced in three of the participating organizations. Media Co. had added “well-being” features (physical, psychological, and emotional health) to its employer brand. Drinks Inc. had recently designed a multi-strand approach to address the complexities of the features and benefits associated with the employment promise.

What we call now our ‘Best Place to Be’ journey, which is a multi-strand approach to our employer brand, and I suppose, our engagement strategy. And it looks like everything from how you work in the business, who you connect with, how we celebrate, how we develop our people, how we reward our people. (Participant #14, Employer)

New Air realized that while the values did not vary, “depending on which work group you're dealing with or what specific position you're working with the employee’s needs could change (Participant #53, Employer).”

All organizations were quick to confirm that regardless of where they stood in the employer brand development process, their values had to be achievable (Moroko & Uncles, 2008). A New Air employer expressed the collective sentiment, “I do not think we should say something that we can't deliver on (Participant #41, Employer).”

Now that we have a better understanding of how the companies articulate the espoused brand, we can explore how they support it. The next section examines company practices, and is followed by a deeper look at how employers used the espoused brand to influence employees.

Supporting the Espoused Employer Brand

The companies studied used a range of practices to support their employer brand. Table 7 summarizes practices used. Although different areas were emphasized, the companies were fairly uniform in the functions involved and the level of delivery. Responsibility for employer brand varied, reflecting the culture of the organization.

Table 7
Summary of Employer Brand Practices

	Compu Int'l.	DIY	Drinks Inc.	Media Co.	New Air
Ownership	Talent Acquisition (HR)	Employee Engagement (HR)	Communications - Corporate Relations	Brand/Marketing	People (HR)
Functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talent acquisition (HR) • Marketing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employee engagement (HR) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employee engagement (HR) • Communications & engagement (Corporate Relations) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employee engagement (HR) • Organizational design • Marketing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People (HR) • Organizational effectiveness • Analytics (HR) • Communications (internal / external)
Level of delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization • Individual 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization • Group • Individual 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization • Group • Individual 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization • Group • Individual 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization • Group • Individual

Ownership, functions, and level of delivery indicated underlying employer beliefs about the espoused employer brand and commitment to the employment relationship. These practices were implicitly, not explicitly, signaled to employees. They signaled how employers supported the espoused employer brand, and therefore, where the practices were designed to impact the employees' experience.

Ownership. The choice of function responsible for employer brand reflected different strategies for operationalizing it across the participating companies. HR leadership indicated a shift to the employment experience side of the framework. While Marketing/Communications ownership indicated a focus on communications, understanding and dialogue in the employment relationships.

Functional responsibility for employer brand was split across employers. Despite its origins in Marketing, HR took main responsibility for employer brand practices in three companies and played a significant role in the other two. DIY was an extreme example of this people/culture approach to developing employer brand exclusively through culture transformation. The other two organizations, Media Co. and Drinks Inc., were led by Marketing and Corporate Relations, respectively.

Functions. Across the five companies, functions involved in employer brand management included a mix of HR, Marketing and Communications in every organization, except DIY. Involvement of the groups responsible for people and related issues (Employee Engagement, HR, Organizational Effectiveness, Learning and Development) appeared in all five companies studied. HR involvement created a logical opportunity to integrate HR practices such as compensation, benefits, and performance reviews into employer brand management. On the other hand, involvement of Communications appeared to reflect the business challenges and importance of stakeholder communications.

Two of the five employers, DIY and New Air, represented extreme approaches. DIY had no Marketing involvement while New Air “dedicated 13 of the 15 Communications team members to employer brand (Participant #55, Employer).” The

other three organizations, Media Co., Compu Int'l., and Drinks Inc., involved a person tasked with responsibility for ensuring marketing consistency and support. Both Media Co. and Compu Int'l., further strengthened the link between functions by including Marketing and/or Communications staff in their HR teams. Regardless of the focus, managing people and communications played a key role in the employers espoused employer brand practices.

Of particular interest was the unexpected level of involvement of employee engagement in four of the five organizations studied. An intentional link between employee engagement and employer brand had not been identified in the literature. The level of responsibility of employee engagement foreshadowed the organizations' views of employer brand impact. We will come back to this link between employer brand gap and engagement later in this chapter, as well as in Chapters 6 and 7.

Level of Delivery. The espoused employer brand is a multi-level concept often defined in one way, but delivered in another. When defined at the organizational level, the espoused employer brand can become a unifying set of values to help overcome the differences across business unit structures or geographies. Applying employer brand so broadly, however, makes it challenging to ensure consistent delivery. This challenge invites comparison of satisfaction levels between employees and groups.

Business structure did not affect the level of articulation of the espoused employer brand differently for the most part. Four of the five companies had different business structures, but articulated their espoused brand exclusively from the organizational point of view. Media Co., the fifth but unique approach, also defined its employer brand at the corporate level, but allowed individual business lines to adjust and tailor the values as

they felt appropriate for their business line. As described by a Media Co. employer, “The values kind of work differently for each area of the business. Because we are such a large, kind of multifaceted [organization], we deal with lots of different market sectors (Participant #39, Employer).” Individual units were given freedom to embed the messages in a way that reflected their respective needs and characteristics. At one point, this practice resulted in nine definitions of a single value. Consequently, Media Co. since refined and streamlined its values definitions to address some of the challenges related to too much specificity.

Having focused on the ways in which organizations articulated and resourced employer brand, we can now examine how the organizations intended to influence employee expectations and experience.

Influencing Expectations and Experience

The espoused employer brand deliberately articulates what the intended employment experience should be, but this must be coupled with effective policies and practices to deliver on the promise. For employers, the approach and processes used shape both employee expectations and organizational culture. Communicating and then delivering on the expectations builds trust. Communication and trust are critical to building a relationship. Without both, employers are unlikely to find receptive partners and employees are unlikely to experience congruence between the espoused and experienced employer brand.

Managing expectations means managing all things which influence employee perspective (Keller, p 47). At Media Co. one employer construed that “paying more attention (Participant #09, Employer)” to the employee experience was critical “because

by the very nature of making it explicit, you then have something to live up to (Participant #09, Employer).”

Living up to the company’s espoused values proved a challenge. Not all employment experiences went well. Often the organization was not aware of the potential incompatibility of individual managerial decisions. An example from New Air on relocating personnel to another state proved to be very tricky. As the New Air employer put it, “Saying here's \$5,000 bucks, you're on your own. Come if you want.” was not consistent with New Air’s espoused employer brand. It's now been two years, and I think there's still major challenges around rebuilding that [relationship] (Participant #40, Employer).” It is not only these big, moments-of-truth, but also *small* experiences over time that collectively shape expectations; therefore, it is impossible to manage expectations and perceptions without managing the experience. Customer satisfaction literature acknowledges the impact of repeated events on perceptions (Coye, 2004). More frequent, more consistent and more meaningful experiences intensify the impact on employee’s expectations. Similarly, the longer an employee *collects* experiences, the more likely the impressions are to root.

The espoused brand was designed to influence the employee relationship and communicate the functional, economic, and psychological benefits of employment. Employers consolidated internally and externally available information to signal their company’s views of the intended employment experience. It also signaled acceptable behaviors and ultimately attempted to influence the work experience itself. These signals originated from specific sources, contained important content, and targeted specific

opportunities for interventions. Employers used tools to facilitate this process, gather feedback, and measure progress toward their objectives.

The process used to support the espoused employer brand was similar to typical communications programs with a link to HR functions. In their optimal state, signals were used to communicate intended associations, norms and information at various levels. Employers focused these signals on touch points across the employment experience to refresh the intended message and guide the behavior. Feedback loops and tools were used to keep the brand experience on track and highlight opportunities for improvement (Schulte, 2010).

Managing through Touch Points

On the whole, employers indicated an awareness of employer brand practices that covered all three stages of the employment lifecycle: candidate, employee, and alumni, but focused their approach on the first two (Rosethorn, 2008).

So yes, there is an employer branding thing where you can go: we set the expectation. It's in the way we advertise our jobs, it's in how we conduct people into the business, it's in how we treat them and their lived experience, you know, it's right the way through to kind of that journey. (Participant #11, Employer)

Touch points are the next level of granularity in the employment lifecycle. They are commonly occurring events or stages experienced by a critical number of employees as part of the employment experience. By design, they reduce a lot of the idiosyncratic occurrences to create consistency and cost effective, replicable processes and interventions.

Employers operationalized their employer brand approach through various touch points occurring at different points in the employment experience. Touch points

referenced by the employers included recruiting (marketing processes), candidate care, selection and assessment; induction and on-boarding, culture, leadership, training and development, talent management and career paths, recognition and rewards, internal communications, office space, and compensation and benefits from the employment stage; and exit process, redundancies and alumni networks in the alumni stage as event-focused or overarching themes. The touch points were viewed as both sequential and non-sequential opportunities. The approach taken ranged from sequential and event-focused (New Air), to non-sequential event-focused (Compu Int'l., Drinks Inc.) to non-sequential life cycle (Media Co.) to non-sequential themes (DIY).

A shift appeared to be taking place in the companies' approach to influencing employees at various touch points. Each organization realized limitations in its previous approach and had evolved its thinking and practices to address specific issues. As described by a Media Co. interviewee, "the way we used to think of it...was much more sequential, like a process, like a lifecycle. Clearly through that process, you have slightly different needs at different points (Participant #09, Employer)." Media Co. addressed this limitation and re-conceptualized its HR policies and processes to better align them with the employee lifecycle touch points. Media Co.'s new approach comprised six stages: *joining the team, getting the work done, getting the best out of people, recognizing and rewarding people, leading the team, and leaving the team*. Media Co. had also established an internal website to provide tools to support managers in growing into their new and important role.

DIY and Compu Int'l. had moved to a non-sequential approach. Although the number of stages differed, the overall approach was relatively consistent. DIY described

implementing a “six pillars” approach designed to support the employee throughout the employment experience. One DIY employer remarked

You do have to do those sorts of things because you want people to experience the brand from the minute they join. The whole time they're in the business at all different points till the time they leave. And even when they leave, you want them to be leaving with the brand advocacy. You want them to exit loving the business they worked in and loving their time at [DIY]. (Participant #04, Employer)

At the time of this study, Compu Int'l. reported having begun introduction of a similar approach comprised of four strategic priorities, integrated with the HR touch points.

Managing with Signals

The five employers signaled different levels and types of information to influence expectations and experiences. Specific tools or processes were chosen based on touch point, audience, objective, message formality, logistics, and cost. None of the subjects used the full range of available methods, but each used a variety of signals and tools to create their preferred message and mix. The chosen mix reflected the respective culture and incorporated both offline (such as emails, flyers, targeted newsletters, and campaign-specific pieces) and online (intranet sites, HR and engagement websites) officially produced marketing communications.

Words, pictures, logos, and colors were used by all the organizations to different degrees. Words were used most extensively as evidenced by values and tag lines for all the subjects. Tag lines were used as a short mnemonic device to create resonance and a common language. Logos and pictures were introduced in three organizations, Media Co., Drinks Inc., and DIY, to improve message awareness during day-to-day interactions. Images and designs enhanced layers of meaning and associations (Keller, 2008). DIY

proved most prolific in using imaging and messaging techniques. They used a logo, color scheme, and a performance review form designed to create visual recall and reinforce importance of the values. Impact of these symbols and devices will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Some of the most abundant tools identified were posters, values reference cards, and yellow cards which served as cultural artifacts. All organizations except Compu Int'l. demonstrated active use of visual cues. However, Compu Int'l. was not necessarily an outlier. Due to time limitations for completing the study, I was unable visit Compu Int'l. HQ as originally planned, and therefore, unable to confirm "arm's length use" as with the other four. Despite exclusion of Compu Int'l., confirmed use in four of the five indicated an overwhelming use of tools to constantly signal espoused employer brand messages.

The visual tools reminded employees constantly of the espoused brand message. The tools appeared at different touch points, creating awareness among employees at all levels and across the life-cycle stages. For example, senior leaders in DIY instituted a football *yellow card* with the values printed on it. The yellow card was used to signal a violation of an agreed leadership behavior during senior level meetings. Two employers pulled out these easy-to-reference yellow cards during the interviews to demonstrate how they reminded themselves of acceptable behaviors.

Employers described technology as a double-edged sword, having made it both easier and more difficult to manage the expectations and experience. All five organizations used websites, some more robustly than others. Four organizations mentioned blogging to increase openness and contact between executives and employees in day-to-day activities. Compu Int'l. took this one step further by segmenting blogs by

organizational sub-group. Compu Int'l. used tools such as *Chatter* (an online collaboration and corporate form of *Twitter*) and an online brainstorming software (for surfacing ideas, recommendations, and voting). One organization introduced video tutorials to help teach behaviors and provide support in line with the HR/touch point process.

For the most part, a difference in use of technology appeared to correlate with size of the organization. Media Co. and Compu Int'l., two large and widely dispersed organizations, relied on technology the most. The main exception to this general rule was New Air. New Air incorporated technology and face-to-face interactions despite its smaller size. New Air introduced formal use of social media to increase real time communication and to reduce the distance between employees and sites, whereas face-to-face interactions were used to balance the potentially less personal nature of the frequent online interactions.

Formal and Informal Signals. Companies used a range of formal and informal signals to indicate endorsement, compliance, and responsibility for espoused brand. Formal communication of the brand tended to be hierarchical; line managers were often used as the official channels of information dissemination as well as the informal conduits. DIY used a mix of formal and informal signals to implement the employer brand to find the best way to provoke a reaction.

It was driven by the more formal structure. It took on a life of its own so it went all over the place. ...I had an organic 'let's just go with this and see what happens' approach. Let's see what happens and when we think we've got something that we wanted.
(Participant #04, Employer)

This DIY employer's approach had the added benefit of symbolically rejecting similar initiatives that had not worked in the past. In DIY's case, the employer brand rollout/cascade followed the organizational hierarchy. The board was engaged first to secure high level support, followed by meetings of functional departments and additional peer teams down the organization. An informal approach followed to leverage the viral word-of-mouth activity bubbling up. This combined approach used ordinary conversations to push employees to find their own answer rather than accepting the party line.

Feedback. All five employers used feedback to gauge the impact of their efforts to influence expectations and the experience, but specific practices varied across the five. The practices ranged from standard employee values and engagement surveys to enhanced surveys directed by employee-representative groups. One of the organizations relied on the more traditional process improvement approach: run the process, make a change, evaluate the impact of the change through feedback, capture and measure the results, make improvement to system, and repeat. It did, however, use robust customized qualitative survey technology to gather data quarterly and merge with employee engagement data to identify trends and inform current and future practices. The other four companies took more of a relationship-oriented approach and reported instituting employee representative groups or *forums* to engage as employees in roles such as employee needs champions and employee sounding boards. Compu Int'l. segmented its feedback forums by community and engaged them virtually using online polling software and discussion groups instead of face-to-face interactions. Two of the remaining three

organizations operated in industries typically supported by unions. One of these was formalizing the practice further by establishing principles for partial self-governance.

Measuring Employer Brand Effectiveness

Measurement of business processes was standard practice among all respondents and almost obsessive for two companies, yet none of the employers tracked employer brand effectiveness, employer brand gap, or the expected employee experience explicitly. They tracked employee engagement. All five believed, however, that employee engagement scores indicated roughly the effectiveness of the espoused employer brand. Although imperfect and unproven, respondents mentioned both employee engagement and values surveys as measures of their employer brand effectiveness. When asked about certainty of employer brand success a Compu Int'l. employer described the benefit of meeting the expectations and motivation leading to discretionary effort, otherwise known as the engagement (Macey, Schneider, Barbera, & Young, 2009).

Through addressing the issues that are cropping up through the survey processes or at these town hall meetings we bring every week together, and that they're seeing at these, we're taking them seriously, we're doing something about them that people, the psychological contract that people have with the organization will improve. And therefore, you know, your discretionary efforts will improve, people will be willing to, you know, they really feel that passion and pride that we have will translate into exceptional business results. (Participant #54, Employer)

Compu Int'l. used the surveys to identify areas of improvement. Compu Int'l. employers expected improvements to lead to increased engagement.

Conversely, employers described the *engagement opportunity* score, the difference between engagement scores and 100% engagement, as an indication of employer brand incongruence. Only one of the employers indicated tracking employer

brand effectiveness, but without success. This employer had experimented with employer brand messaging effectiveness. This was the closest approximation to employer brand gap measurement mentioned by any of the employers. In line with brand messaging principles, the organization tracked employee value proposition awareness among employees over time. As the company increased messaging, employees reported increased awareness. Separately, engagement scores were declining. The company decided to look at the data over the same period only to discover that as awareness increased, employees were growing less engaged. Once the company stopped tracking awareness, engagement scores began to turn around slightly. It was fair to conclude that by making the promise explicit, employer practices were subjected to more scrutiny.

Employers from all five companies mentioned, in agreement with the literature, that turnover and engagement figures directly reflected the quality of the line manager. Regardless of whether or not this was the cause, it was surely a point of pressure in the organizations as it affected the quality of many employees' experience. Line managers were the focus of many employer brand cascade processes. Repeatedly, respondents agreed with the sentiments a DIY employer expressed, "I consider [line manager performance] as a measurement of the quality of people management that happens in the business (Participant #04, Employer)."

Two organizations were experimenting with different marketing measures by taking customer satisfaction methods and turning them inside, onto the organization. New Air tracked net promoter score on the employee population as a potential measure of employer brand effectiveness and the employee experience. This use of a customer recommendation metric on internal customers was interesting in its assumption that

employees shared their work experiences in the same way customers share their service experiences with friends and family. New Air tracked this net promoter score for two years and recently began analyzing these scores in relation to employee engagement. Similarly, Compu Int'l. reported pending use of the same metric to understand its employees' level of passion for their work experience and their desire to share it with others.

The Shifting Sands of the Employment Relationship

Employers put effort into establishing consistent expectations and experiences throughout the employment lifecycle to reinforce the relationship between employer and employee. In doing so, they appeared to be changing the paradigm that drove it too. Employers explained their desire to move away from the parental styles of employment relationships of the past. The relationship paradigm drove several of the assumptions for employers and employees.

Each of the five organizations expected a relationship with their employees based on shared responsibility. For at least three companies, this shared responsibility represented a change in the fundamental working relationships. All five discussed the desire to move to a more balanced, joint-owned model. Most of the companies studied discussed moving to a more "balanced" relationship, favoring the concept of reciprocity, as evidenced by this Media Co. employer.

So we do want people to realize that they need to continue as a personal and organizational responsibility. It's almost like a commitment for commitment or an employee deal... You should be expected to be helped and get materials and training and everything you need to make your performance better. But equally, there's a responsibility on the employee. It's not an entitlement, it's a responsibility they've got that both-- you know, there'll be

reciprocation of effort versus support and help. (Participant #36, Employer)

This joint responsibility offered a foundation for mutual benefit. With both sides working toward the same goal, they had a reason to continue doing more together than they could have done on their own.

The recent addition of well-being also presented an interesting question in the relationship definition. On one hand, acknowledgement of the increasingly pressured demands of work and life was a progressive move that offered benefits to employees as well as employers. Employee health has and continues to affect employee energy in and out of work. By improving well-being, Media Co. believed it could increase the capacity of employees to enjoy life and their career to the fullest.

It will be getting the context right because what we're trying to do is move people away from the parent/child relationship which is the traditional model in this country and certainly in this company. So what we do in terms of health and wellbeing is much more about helping you to help yourself rather than doing it for you.
(Participant #37, Employer)

As mentioned by the Media Co. employer, context was critical. Employers had to find a way to balance concern for the organizational impact on the individual with increasing costs of stressed employees and a desire to encourage employees to change their personal behaviors. Doing this while redefining the employment relationship paradigm required persistent subtlety, thoughtful messaging, and constant communication. The promise of mutual benefit was not disingenuous. A DIY employer summed up individual ownership as an approach to giving one's best to the job.

If I don't enjoy my job, I'm not going to complain about it. I'm not going to sit quietly and become gradually unhappy or see bad service or see bad decisions made, but I am actually going to front

up and say that isn't ok with me and this is what you could do to get more out of me because that thing you just did, didn't get the best out of me at all. I'm not at my best because you're doing that thing. If you just did this, that actually that would be wonderful because I'd be really engaged and you'd be getting loads from me. (Participant #04, Employer)

Ownership of part of the process at DIY involved raising one's hand to identify areas not working well, to become part of the solution. DIY viewed conversations as critical in building the relationship required to support the new, shared responsibility for creating great working environments.

Language is a critical component in both expectations and experience management. Words are part of how we communicate and explicitly set expectations. Language also becomes the means of interacting and can affect the tone of the interactions. To create the right conditions, one must have real, two-way communication -- critical listening, understanding and a shared language.

Language was a focus of the espoused employer brand for some, but not all of the organizations studied it. DIY and Media Co. believed that great conversations were a key success factor of relationships. DIY focused on language and conversations to create the right working environment.

Organic, in the business, in the language, people own it, they know why it's important, they drive it through on a very local relationship level. It's kind of intuitive, it's judgment, it's kind of trust based. It's all about good conversations. (Participant #04, Employer)

As evidenced here, the objective was getting people to talk and understand each other.

Good conversations required understanding and dialogue. Media Co. also believed language to be important. To Media Co. it was so central to relationships that they

decided to include employee language in a customer language project to improve the way employees speak to each other, reinforce the values, and signal their support for the espoused employer brand.

Started by the brand team around trying to change the tone of voice that we use internally as a way [to] help strengthening the things that are important to us. Making things more straightforward, making them more helpful, making them more honest in the sense of trustworthy. It's kind of a way of us trying to live the brand. It's much more conversational; it's much more personable...It is actually for external as well as internal use in the sense of trying to create our [Media Co.] personality and our [Media Co.] brand (Participant #09, Employer).

Media Co. hoped this common language had more meaning for employees at all levels. They believed that moving away from business speak would humanize the work experience as well as impact the customer relationship.

Employers' desire to influence employees' views and feelings about their employment relationship creates expectations. Attempts to shape employee expectations and experiences lay the foundation of the employer brand. Inevitably, by stating the employer point of view explicitly, employers also form the foundation for a gap. By espousing what the employment experience should be like, the espoused employer brand becomes the normative instrument to which employees compare their impressions and experiences. It is from this baseline that the employee has selected the employer and will evaluate the congruence between what they believe was espoused and what they experience. If expectations go unchecked or unfulfilled, employees may become demotivated. The increased focus on employer brand makes it increasingly important to get this practice right. The following chapter describes the second part of the equation, the

employee experience to help us identify areas of congruence with the employer's espoused employer brand.

Chapter 5

EXPERIENCED EMPLOYER BRAND

Chapter 4 presented five employers' espoused employer brand practices. It explored how employers defined, articulated and supported the employer brand, how they used the espoused employer brand to influence employee expectations and the organizational culture, and how they managed the espoused employer brand on an on-going basis to ensure the experience matched the promise. Developing an understanding of the espoused employer brand was the first step in understanding the employer brand gap. This chapter describes the second step, the employer brand as interpreted and experienced by the employees. Employees are beneficiaries of and participants in the employment relationship; but, the relationship strength depends on level of congruence between what employees believed they were told they would experience and what they actually did. Before we can explore the congruence, or gap, we need a better understanding of the employee perspective. This chapter explores the employee reality by looking at employees' definition and conceptualization of the employment experience, how employees interpret the espoused employer brand, their working experience reality, and how they reconcile the expectations with the reality.

Without exception, employees from each organization referred to the first two stages of the employment lifecycle, candidacy and employment, as instrumental in their conceptualization of the work experience with their current employer. Only five references to the third stage, alumni, in the form of influential employee relationships were made tangentially; however, most interviewees expected they would move to another employer at a later time. Awareness of their future career step caused them to

keep their personal and their employer's market value in mind. Employees mentioned staying in touch with previous colleagues from other work experiences (DIY) or those who were alumni of special management training programs (Media Co.). In other words, alumni status was only mentioned infrequently and was not a significant consideration for employees. Relative absence of the third lifecycle stage was reflective of the work on alumni in the employer brand literature. For these reasons, employee conversations focused on the first two lifecycle stages.

Employees assimilated signals and information from a variety of sources. Some of these they brought with them from other experiences, some they obtained specifically because of their working relationship with the organization. The signals and information shaped their expectations and perceptions of their experience.

Employees came to their employer through various channels, but each had some level of knowledge of the organization and its reputation, had a personal background that informed his or her views, and had other information from various channels or people. Employees used this information to construct beliefs of how an employment experience with the organization would work. The employers had control over some of the information sources, but not all. Whether accurate or not, these employee interpretations of the espoused brand combined with the individual employee's other beliefs generated expectations of the values, the opportunities, the benefits, the overall working environment, and the working relationship. The expectations became an internal benchmark for employees to make sense of their work experience.

As employees began working and experienced various business processes, such as orientation and training, they continued to develop their expectations. In other words,

they began to experience the culture and perform the work. In this way employees experienced a personal reality of the working experience and relationship. They encountered the work reality at various touch points and other important events at various points in time. Some of these experiences were processes sanctioned for specific purposes by their employers; some were idiosyncratic and resulted from changes in the employee's personal situation.

The employee sense making process was similar to those involved in the role of expectations in customer service experiences (Coye, 2004). Similar to customers interacting with brands, employees found that the frequency of their experience, the frequency of their evaluation, and the amount of information they processed played a role in their experience of *satisfaction* and *delight* (Rust et al., 1996). We will now take a deeper look into how employees used their sense making process to assess their expected versus actual work experience.

For ease of discussion throughout the following sections, I have broken out influential elements into two groups, one that influenced expectations, and another that influenced the work experience. For example, *Signals from Leaders* was placed in the expectations section because of the inspirational messages leaders communicate. Leaders also made compensation decisions and create policies that have a direct effect on the employment experience. Thus, these elements are by no means mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they sit on a continuum and generally contribute to both. To ensure focus on the most important elements, I have placed them with the area which they most favor and affect.

What Shapes Employee Expectations?

On the whole, employees developed expectations of their work experience from a range of signals from different sources such as company reputation, consumer experiences, recruiting agencies, personal references, and news. Some of these sources were controlled by the employer; several were not. The types of signals that influenced employee expectations included experiences, information, and inferences (Coye, 2004). Signal type affected the perceived level of authority and played a significant role in the level of impact the signal had on the employee's expectation. Signals included corporate reputation, personal background, formal employer brand activities, and other internal leader behaviors. The following sections describe how each of these signals shaped employee work experience expectations for employees in this study.

Reputation's Halo Effect

Company reputation, an information signal, played a significant role in the formation of employees' expectations. Reputation implicitly created a halo effect around the quality of the colleagues, types of career opportunities, and professional practices to be encountered in the organization. Employees viewed the quality promise as tangible benefits of the work experience, thereby adjusting their expectations to match these expectations. Explicit descriptions of the expectations also made them more tangible.

Great Colleagues. As explained by self-identity theory, company reputation was a personal attraction for employees in the study. "Yeah, I just think it's the whole reputation around it. I work for a big company which, kind of, by default, implies that I'm successful (Participant #38, Employee)." The personal success this employee felt was shared by employees from each of the five organizations. "It also gives me some pride, I

must admit in thinking that, well, you're working for the world's leading company (Participant #10, Employee)," a Drinks Inc. employee agreed. Interestingly, for some employees the reputation even implied importance at times of negative press. A Media Co. employee took pride in Media Co.'s visibility, "People talk about [Media Co.] all of the time. We're always in the news whether it's good, bad, or indifferent; but we're always there. I think it's that association that makes me proud (Participant #38, Employee)." Identification with the brand prestige also extended to product brands as described by a Drinks Inc. employee.

I already knew the brands, as much as I think I needed to know them at that point, which was what they stand for, who drinks them, et cetera. And then when I think in my assumptions of what it must be like, and these people behind there were just confirmed. (Participant #12, Employee)

As alluded to by this employee, prestigious brands, product or company, must be full of successful employees, suggesting existence of the halo effect. Another Drinks Inc. employee was more explicit in making this connection. In this example the employee described the logical connection between the company's reputation and what the employee believed the reputation signaled about his colleagues and the culture.

Because the process was so tough, I think in my head I had a picture of a company where everyone in there was amazing... everyone is kind of switched on, they're know what they're doing. There's no one here who shouldn't be here. (Participant #05, Employee)

For many employees, the combination of great people and great brand(s) reputation signaled a great organization. Great organizations, like those in the study, were also presumed by employees to have a disproportionate share of opportunities designed to hold onto such extraordinary talent.

Plentiful Opportunities. The expectation for great opportunities as part of the work experience was the most common expectation and was mentioned by more than half of the employees. Employees believed such prestigious brands would offer promotions and choices across functions and geographies.

I believed it would be I think the biggest thing is the opportunities. The opportunities for growth, the high-performance you can do whatever you want to do, promotion you know you can stretch ahead, you can really succeed. (Participant #07, Employee)

The opportunity for professional growth anticipated by the Drinks Inc. employee was typically accompanied by an assumption of constant organizational growth. In other words, employees believed company success would create ever expanding opportunities for its employees. The basis of this assumption was summed up by this Compu Int'l. employee, "the growth prospects were very compelling (Participant #63, Employee)." A Drinks Inc. employee even translated specific business activities into a source of motivation.

So it kinda like keeps me still excited about working for this company because it's big and ugly enough to be able to spend that sort of cash to go and buy something else. (Participant #02, Employee)

In this case, growth was expressed in terms of revenues, size, operating footprint, and M&A activity. Overwhelmingly, employees believed business growth provided a personal benefit to them, individual professional growth opportunities.

In addition to opportunities for personal success and professional growth, employees translated business growth into opportunities for choice and flexibility too.

Having some choice and flexibility is really important. So one of the reasons why I at least wanted to start my career in a big

company ... [is it implies] sort of more opportunity that there is to do something. (Participant #16, Employee)

For this Media Co. employee, size was another characteristic which ensured choice and flexibility. A Drink's Inc. employee got even more specific with the types of choice and flexibility one could expect.

A big thing around with big companies is that there's also a lot of opportunity. ...but what I was looking for, and in my method, was that I wanted to work at a company where I could work across different functions and in different countries. (Participant #12, Employee)

In this case, choice and flexibility implied functional and geographic opportunities. For these employees, seeking out large, prestigious brands was not only a personal statement, but a career strategy.

The career strategy implied additional expectations around timeframes. A DIY employee explicitly stated he expected this to translate into new opportunities within a couple of years. "I joined the business for the view to sort of probably in the next couple of years progressing into a bigger role within the organization (Participant #29, Employee)." A bit more flexible, but still as focused, this Compu Int'l. employee expected the opportunities to be driven by the company and the industry.

This was an environment where you were promoted very quickly if you were a hard worker, having intellectual horse power that was required, you worked well with others. So you move very, very quickly through the corporation if you're able to embody those characteristics. (Participant #63, Employee)

As evidenced by employee comments, implications of the strong reputations meant specific returns to employees. The returns were appropriation of the company/product prestige for one's self-identity, numerous opportunities in different

functions, business lines, products, geographies, and the general promise of a career accelerator.

Operations Quality Indicator. Reputation also signaled quality. Although not there was no explanation of causal effect, the halo effect of commercial brand reputation also created beliefs of high-quality business processes and practices inside the respective organizations. For individuals transitioning into the industry for the first time, the brand and reputation were appropriated to fill a cognitive gap as described by this employee.

Because [Drinks Inc.] is a world class marketing company. You know, if you look into [Brand S] advertising ad, a TV ad, you're going to be, "Wow, this company must be the most incredible company." And in the mind of a [person from a professional services industry] would be super organized and everything, a lot of processes and policies in place. (Participant #30, Employee)

Interestingly, this employee's legal training led them to use a personal reference point, the importance of structure and professionalism, to translate the brand into a description of the future working experience and cultural reality.

Unfortunately, the assumption was not as correct as the employee had imagined and the misunderstanding meant unanticipated increased work load in the person's new role. This type of error was a relatively common one. Even employees with business background or business school education made the same mistake.

The way you know those brands is through advertising. And then, the assumption was completely made to think, well, to have a company that can produce this and understand their business and how campaigns come around, because I had done the business degree whereas work experience, you just knew that [business processes] would be [thumbs up]– well, I certainly made the assumption that that's how it would be. (Participant #08, Employee)

Admittedly, the employee had “assumed” the strong product reputation and flash advertising as a sign of great operational processes. While the brands were great, the processes and operating professionalism were not as clean as the employee had expected.

The tendency to assume applied to security and stability as well.

The size and expanse of the organization also communicated security, stability and even organization to others.

Without knowing the specifics, I knew that, generally, a big multinational corporation would be more established, more secure and better organized, more job security and stability than, say, a smaller company. But they're assumptions I made. (Participant #16, Employee)

Given the multitude of examples, reputation clearly influenced employees’ expectations of the work experience in several ways (Cable & Turban, 2001). These ranged from prestige for oneself to career acceleration to the day-to-day processes one experienced on the job. The halo effect was quite strong.

Of particular note, though, was the halo effect’s reach into the employer expectations. The lack of distinction between reputation as an organization or product from that of employer was surprising. It cannot be assumed that employees did not see a distinction or presumed they were discussing reputation as an employer; however, not one of the 47 interviews asked about or made a distinction between the business and the employer reputation. All employees conflated the expectations of the organizations’ reputation with being a good employer. Performance, size and growth drove many of these expectations; however, the role as a career accelerator was probably the most profound and unique to each of the brands.

The Powerful Frame of Experience

Personal background and experience, another aspect beyond the employer's control, also affected employee expectations of the work experience. These experiences provided idiosyncratic *frames-of-reference* for employees' to make sense of their work experiences. These frames-of-reference played two roles, an initial mental map and an emotional benchmark. According to the data, employees developed their views of working relationship norms based on these past experiences. Personal experiences affected fundamental values and assumptions that drove these relationships, motivations, and ways in which employees expected to encounter the work. By creating a reference point, the personal experiences established employees' sense of the probable as well as the possible.

Illustrated by comments in interviews from three different companies, employees unknowingly took these frames-of-reference as the basis of expectations of their current employment relationship. The first example demonstrated how the employee's personal background set the initial reference point and how the subsequent work experience changed the employee's fundamental beliefs.

My thinking is conditioned by family background...I went from being a weekly paid manual laborer with a view that your boss is to screw you and then get as much out of you as possible for as little return that he could possibly give you, to an understanding that the best companies attract the best talent and will get the balance between commercial requirements and personal advancement correct...working for a major company has changed my mindset entirely over the years. (Participant #10, Employee)

The profound impact the work experience had on this employee altered basic assumptions driving the individual's view of the employment relationship. Meanwhile, an

employee from New Air stated the value of a broader set of references due to the person's breadth of job experiences, "Like I said, non-union places, union places, management, labor. So I have a pretty wide background to draw from where other people may not (Participant #51, Employee)." For this employee, their range of experiences provided multiple frames-of-reference through which to envision and assess the work experience. These were especially important to injecting a range of potential ways of working in the troubled airline industry. In this way, the different frames became a source of hope and the possible.

By contrast, an employee from Compu Int'l. articulated the power of the first work experience and its ability to become the measuring stick for other experiences.

Now, what was very special at [previous company] was that, first of all, it was my very first experience, real experience. So it was like a blank page. I mean, I had no particular expectations. I was just following the flow in one way. And that is obviously an incredible experience that takes your expectations, and here the bar, it was really high. [Laughter] So probably I'm a very demanding person towards the organization I'm working for. (Participant #58, Employee)

The employee's first and formative experience was so positive that it became the person's employment expectations frame-of-reference. Additionally, the employee was not distracted by a competing framework. This example was particularly important because it demonstrated the power of past/early experiences. As the employee noted, this first experience raised subsequent expectations because of the quality of the experience and awareness of what was possible. The above examples demonstrated the impact employees believed past experiences had on current their employment expectations.

In other cases, employee expectations were affected by the lack of work experience. Employees who had no prior work experience sought out a point-of-reference. A Media Co. employee indicated “You don’t really know what’s going on, because you’ve got nothing to really compare it to (Participant #16, Employee).” A supervisor from New Air commented on the knowledge gap for those without work experience. “Now a lot of our new hires are younger. So I don’t think they know what to expect out of a full-time job (Participant #43, Employee).” The lack of comparison meant the individual searched for other ways of learning and integrating their own point-of-reference for employment norms. This was not only an important opportunity for line managers, but also for employers. No matter the background, employees sought out personal experiences for setting the context of and understanding what they should expect and had experienced.

Past experiences also affected employee’s expectations of basic employment benefits. Sometimes these expectations created positive benchmarks and motivators as explained by a Drinks Inc. employee, “As long as [the package] was better than what I was getting from [previous employer] and there was longevity there, [these two thing were] the deciding factor (Participant #10, Employee).” However, past experiences also caused misunderstandings for this DIY employee. Previous compensation experiences caused an employee to assume similar practices existed at the new employer.

The first two, three months were really difficult because I was working Sundays and I assumed that like at [previous employer], Sunday was double pay and it’s not in [DIY]. I hadn’t asked that question in interview. So the first two months, it was like, right, I took a step back in pay... I’m doing more hours than I did before and getting paid less money. So I was wondering if I’ve made the right decision at that point. (Participant #23, Employee)

In this case, neither the employee nor the employer sought to clarify the implicit assumptions leading to a serious misunderstanding that almost caused the employee to leave. The previous experience created such a strong point of reference that there was no question about terms and conditions. If this occurred with elements as important as pay, it was likely to have occurred with other practices too.

One of the most surprising observations resulted from the intensity and potential profundity these experiences had on some of the employees. One employee spent roughly 40% of the interview time discussing a single past employment experience. The meaningful management development program had created a powerful sense of emotional connection through its over-delivery and delight to the employee. As such, the employee kept returning back to the previous employer description, “Because if you're asking me for foundation of my approach in terms of employee expectations, this is definitely the cornerstone (Participant #58, Employee).” This example confirmed the potential emotional intensity that was possible because it had expanded the employee’s view of the possible.

The range of the various employment experiences revealed the significance of their impact on the employee expectation formation process; however, it also demonstrated the idiosyncratic nature of employee expectations. Whether teaching basic professional behavior, misinformation, or raising the bar on definition of “good” practices, employees from all five organizations illustrated that their past work experiences affected expectations of their current employers in significant ways.

Formal Communications

Formal communications ranged from the espoused brand itself to meaningful signals that employees incorporated into their expectations. These communications were important in that they were considered official endorsement given by the organization. Consequently, these signals also were held to higher scrutiny and accountability than informal or external signals.

Employees interpreted formal signals as the organization's endorsement of the information. Employees also took them as an indication of the standards to which they could interpret organizational intent and hold the organization accountable. As one New Air pilot said, "I think [communication] is centering. I think it's very helpful—our workforce craves information. There is an insatiable appetite for the business of the business (Participant #50, Employee)."

Employer communications. Employees drew their information from a range of formal communications. Formal communications referenced included the formal name (Great Place to Work), symbols, organizational values, annual reports, employee committees, newsletters, special work groups, special presentations, CEO/leadership visits, surveys, and inter / intranets.

In New Air's case the deliberate avoidance of formal communication was unique and noteworthy. In an industry riddled with regulations, New Air made a deliberate choice to "do away with" many of the typical official manuals. Employees used this as a license to explore opportunities to do what makes sense, not what was prescribed.

I've heard people say, "Find a way to say yes." You don't see any manuals here at all. Other than the regulatory pieces, we have very few rules and regulations here at [New Air]. We are not a clipboard

company. And that's because we want people to find a way to get to yes.

And so if you are a gate agent and you are confronted with a situation that there isn't a guideline on, we sort of empower people to make decisions to whatever it takes for you to delight and wow the customers, and each other. (Participant #50, Employee)

Employees drew different information from different communications. Despite the range of communications practices, the most prolific and uniformly considered input was organizational values. Employees used values as a normative guideline to develop expectations of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. Nineteen out of 47 employees discussed values as a point of reference to their employment experience, making them relatively important to employees' work experience. In fact the majority of employees described their employer's espoused employer brand (employment promise) in terms of the values. Two employees from different organizations viewed values as a company endorsed guideline for daily work life. A Compu Int'l. employee referenced values role in affirming a shared understanding of underlying organizational beliefs.

There is a list of values and there's a list of principles and there's a list of tenets that are a part of the organizational structure, sort of how people live and work every day, validation of a belief in a value structure. (Participant #61, Employee)

In addition to clarification of the shared beliefs, a Media Co. employee also viewed the values as a way to reduce the complexities of work life to their essence.

Our brand values have remained the same since 2003, which are trustworthy, helpful, inspiring, straightforward and heart. ... You simply communicate with anyone around the world at any time, but also about the way we behave. If you're in a very complicated meeting, if someone actually goes hang on a minute, I'm trying to do this, being absolutely clear, being really *straightforward*, that can actually be quite inspiring. (Participant #39, Employee)

For this employee, the simplification and shared meaning was inspiring, an act of leadership.

Values were also used to define the unacceptable. Employees described how important values were in their decision to join and stay with an organization.

I would never have joined [previous employer] if they had been open about the culture and the way it actually did operate. I would never have joined [previous employer] because I was not prepared to compromise my own beliefs and values. (Participant #29, Employee)

Of particular note was this DIY employee's belief that the organization was responsible for having misrepresented the values. Whether accurate or perceived, the employee also viewed the shortcoming and perceived deceit as grounds for departure. Employees took value statements seriously and incorporated them into their beliefs of what the organization promised.

A Range of Effective Tools. Employees incorporated various tools to interpret authority and employer brand related messages. Employee comments confirmed employee internalization of several employer internal communication efforts (posters, logo, badges), training programs, and performance management values messages over time. Exposure to these stimuli shaped individuals expectations of themselves and others.

Irrespective of my position in the business, [the Great Place to Work chart] makes me realize I have a responsibility to set an example to others around me, both above and below me. Again, I don't see this as a— although some would see it as a leadership role, I see it as much of an example for me to set, to people, to my boss and people above me, let alone below me. (Participant #21, Employee)

This DIY employee viewed the logo as a memory device to keep the 360 degree behavioral expectations top of mind. A Compu Int'l. employee mentioned the use of branded badges to support cultural change and embed a new, front-line management expectations framework.

[The] front-line management team that is focused on what we call FCCI, which is feedback, coaching, career development and integrity. In fact, I'm looking at it right now here on my badge. We all have badge tags with that. We've really tried to make a cultural shift with that primary research on people don't leave companies, they leave managers. (Participant #63, Employee)

Although the value of tool usage is sometimes controversial, all examples mentioned by employees were viewed in a positive light. The tools provided reminders and signals of official focus and commitment to working together toward a desired outcome. The ease with which each person accessed the tools also seemed to confirm cultural conformity and shared purpose. The simplicity, flexibility and relevance of the values-based message spoke to employees equally across all five organizations indicating their universality as a formal communication.

Great Place to Work as a formal title and logo proved to be a double-edged sword. Employees in both organizations using it (DIY, Drinks Inc.) appeared more fluent in their discussions of employment experience expectations; however, in Drinks Inc. the formalization of the practice reinforced a discussion over employer benchmarks "I think certainly since this all best place to be work really kicked off in the scale of it is at now. And you're put in that league table of who else is up there (Participant #08, Employee)." As the Drinks Inc. employee indicated, employees extended benchmarks used for Great Place to Work to other internal discussions; conversely, employees were also skeptical

over selective use of benchmarks to support discrete management decisions. This example demonstrated the real implications of some tools on employee expectations.

Employees valued various types of tools, but demanded they be of a quality consistent with their organizations' values and outcome oriented. Various employees spoke about the range of tools available for messages from organization's websites, newsletters, emails and operational processes, websites, surveys and other formal communications to build their views of what the work experience should involve. Employee surveys were described as a useful tool for gauging progress and helped employees validate the level of importance of employer brand efforts and initiatives. Whether this was related to measurement for individual accountability or general progress, the ability to survey, measure and track generated an expectation of longevity and seriousness of the practice being measured. Finally, two-directional discussion channels influenced employee desire for results. Employees in Compu Int'l., DIY, Drinks Inc., and New Air participated in and expected employee committees to affect the employment relationship between management and non-management and to help get things done.

Signals from Leaders

The distinction employees made between leaders and managers was one of expectations and experience. Employees looked to leaders for signals of the future business, prioritization and culture. In other words, leaders were the normative role model of *what should be*. Managers on the other hand were those who worked on the day-to-day in the evaluative roles, thereby playing a stronger role in the employment

experience. For this reason, I will discuss leadership signals here and save discussion for managers in the employer brand influence on the experience.

Leaders in all five companies used personal presence at times to signal the importance of a communication or person. In a poignant, but more traditional example, a change in leadership style helped create new frameworks for DIY employees to manage their business. Previously employees had focused on compliance, “Everybody feared [former leader], everybody feared [him]. A visit from [him] could make or break your career (Participant #23, Employee).” With the new leader, employees believed he changed their business, when in reality he helped them change their frame of reference to be able to run their business themselves.

“Well, what are you doing to drive your sales?”, and I went, “Well, we’re doing and it was all task and process”, and he went, “Right. Is that going to make a difference to your customers?”, and I went, “Well not really”, and he went, “Well, then.” And I thought “Then I was not driving me sales!” It was like somebody turned a light bulb on in your head. (Participant #23, Employee)

The difference in two leaders’ approach was transformational for the DIY employee. The new leader empowered employees by demonstrating a different management model and approach to working relationships. In Drinks Inc. where the leadership was actively trying to change the culture, employees looked to the nationality of the leaders to help anticipate and adjust to the new leadership approach.

[A lot of our leaders] and major program directors are from [another western country]. So you kind of like sense that the culture is changing and has changed somewhat because of the transfer of people from a different country to work here in the UK. And, I think that's helped, that is really shaped differently that the culture and thinking a bit. I mean if I hear what people sort of like say around the coffee machine you know they say wow, it is a lot a

much more brutal company, in terms of merits and style.
(Participant #02, Employee)

Leadership behaviors made a significant difference to employees. This impacted employees' sense of value and views of the employment relationship. Based on New Air's signature orientation process, employees developed a different impression of the employment relationship.

It made you feel special the way—I mean they put out this huge spread of food and cakes and, you know, every single upper—at that point, you know, we didn't have a many upper people as we have now. But you had—CEO and founder came and spoke to you. The vice president came and spoke to you. All these people came and spoke to you. [Chief Learning Officer] at the time came and spoke to you. Head of Inflight came and spoke to you. So many people in upper management. (Participant #43, Employee)

Individuals felt valued as a result of this approach. The reframed view of the employment relationship expectations helped employees believe that New Air could be different through very visible and frequent leadership actions. Employees at Media Co. described how a similar practice affected their day-to-day experience. The resulting value consistency convinced this Media Co. employee that the values were something that could be experienced everywhere.

That was reflected very much when the senior managers would come down to their site. They were all kind of reflecting exactly the same values. I think I was very lucky where I was to join it, they certainly the ones who influenced me and my decision to want to stay. (Participant #19, Employee)

In a completely different approach, employees described the impact of their leader's actions on their personal beliefs. According to a DIY employee, the Managing Director demonstrated compassion and fairness through his approach to a team charity

challenge. The Managing Director had a personal goal to continue special trips as a fund raising venture for a charity; however, he did not feel the experience should be only open to those who could afford it. He convinced the board of the value of the trip and requested financial support for employees to participate using a means-based scale (by level) to preserve the funds raised for the charitable purpose. The board signed and the organization picked up the bill for most of the trip. The experience changed the world view for several employees on the trip, teaching them leadership and team skills invisible in most work places. The experience profoundly shifted the employees' beliefs.

Leaders created significant expectations during good times, but according to one employee leader, actions during the difficult times and even mistakes made the strongest impressions on employee expectations. In bringing humanity back to air travel, New Air leadership clearly communicated its humanness by admitting to mistakes made, identifying what needed to be done and correcting them. According to a New Air employee the honesty exhibited by leaders gave employees confidence to create a different kind of working culture.

We have a pretty good track record of mea culpa when it doesn't work out. I've seen the [CEO] make public apologies and say, "You know what? Somebody pushed back. We got called out on it. And, you know what? You're right. We did not meet our own expectations in this area. But here is what we are going to do to fix it. (Participant #50, Employee)

These kinds of actions changed employees' views of a continued values fit. For some employees, the leaders were such a compass for the organization that their behavior was critical. "A deal breaker for me would be if the leadership behaved in a way that

didn't live up to the values (Participant #29, Employee).” Employees expected leaders to demonstrate what others were being asked to achieve.

A Compu Int'l. employee described the impact of leadership behaviors on employees expectations as well.

People and leaders and brand and reputation, and the collection of that becomes the reality of the culture and what it is like to work here. That becomes the brand of what it is really like to work here. It is not necessarily what the people at the top would like it to be. It's what the people who are actually leading are doing, people actually running teams. Their personal brand kind of comes together to make what is a brand a reality. (Participant #56, Employee)

Extension of leader behaviors helped employees determine what the working norms should be. Looking to others' behaviors became a way that employees evaluated what was and was not endorsed by the organization.

Observation of Colleagues

Many of the signals discussed so far have been direct communications that create expectations. Often the way colleagues treated other employees created more subtle and believable expectations. As was the case with this Media Co. employee, an interaction between a graduate and senior manager reinforced beliefs of respect for individuals.

The relationship even if you saw it for a few minutes, between the person who was a graduate and the senior manager was really just natural and seemed to be like they just worked well together. It was like there was no real level difference, which is really positive to see. (Participant #16, Employee)

This same type of behavior created expectations of the way groups were expected to interact in New Air. Having watched and learned from how New Air respected its customers, founders of New Air decided this was also the type of respect employees

deserved. New Air employees developed an expectation for this kind of relationship and interaction with each other.

It also applies to how we treat each other. So to answer your question about the employee piece, it is one of the great things—it is one of the reasons I really like working here. It's how we treat each other. Our value system, I think it works great with the customers. It's part of our business model. But what I like about it is that's how we treat each other, too. That safety, caring, integrity, fun, passion, that is what it is like to work here at [New Air].
(Participant #50, Employee)

According to this employee, respect for the individuals was much stronger at New Air than in other organizations the person had experienced. Respect was contagious. The effect was shared by all watching, even those uninvolved. Another organization created positive beliefs based on support given to colleagues to pursue their life goals.

They genuinely care for you as a person. And I would have the confidence, if I went to my boss tomorrow and said I had this dream last night and I've decided to become a clown at a circus, and I want to work there on the circus for two days a week, I would genuinely believe they'd try and work it out for you. Because I've seen it. I've seen people who have had kids and wanted to lose a day a week or go part-time. My friend started graduate schemes three years, and got through the three years; he's now doing a degree in nutrition and has a day off. And not only that, they completely restructured her graduate scheme and the role that she did, and she [found] an interesting corporate responsibility.
(Participant #05, Employee)

Likewise, if you've got an interest in something, they'll— say, within the company. So for example, I'm interested in managing people and doing a sales manager role. Now, senior managers give up their time to sit down with you for half-hour and talk through it, and give you a career development plan. I've not seen anything yet where someone's asked for too much. (Participant #12, Employee)

The power of having observed a colleague's experience was dramatic. The multiple examples and transfer of belief from organization, to line manager, to colleague, to self

and back to organization was particularly important. Clearly all roles needed to align, but when aligned, the power of the belief generated powerful expectations.

Collegial observation also influenced individual views of fairness. Employee watched, evaluated, and compared experiences among colleagues. This process implied a constant assessment of the norm as well as comparison of norm to individual cases to determine fairness in the workplace. Evidence of this issue played out in discussions over performance- versus effort-based compensation and work style reward links. How organizations addressed this practice affected employee trust, belief, and views of the espoused employer brand.

Other Factors that Shaped Expectations

Specific business processes, constant re-evaluation, and frequency of encounter shaped employee expectations. Business processes shaped employee expectations in two ways, the purpose of the business process, and the process orientation. Companies that were deeply committed to the recruiting selection processes intended to create expectations that the individuals had passed through an arduous selection process, but that the employees were special having made it through. Selection processes in Compu Int'l. and New Air created a sense of competition for positions. The openness made recruits feel privileged when accepted, but disappointed when business needs and therefore opportunities changed. For example, employees in Compu Int'l. and Media Co. made position-specific decisions. These employees developed very strong and specific expectations around the job, as well as specific features and benefits associated with the job.

Companies that had strong commitment to employee orientation/induction tried to develop expectations of what the person needed to be successful in his/her job, the team, and the organization. Orientation was particularly important to many employees and even developed into a signature process (Gratton & Erickson, 2000). It created significant expectations by starting out the individuals experiences on such a high. As explained by two New Air employees, “it kind of put the whole picture together for me, because I really didn't know what I was getting into (Participant #49, Employee).”

Orientation is great because they give you the awareness of what the company is about. They make you feel comfortable. It's not all about just stowing bags, all about traveling, meeting and greeting, socializing, being professional. (Participant #48, Employee)

By explaining what was expected and what the company was about, New Air was able to align these two employees and their expectations of New Air, each other and their role in the overall picture, despite having had different backgrounds. In some ways, employees experienced the orientation as a process of unlearning in order to relearn another frame of reference. Employees used New Air terminology to signal their new status and experienced concentrated socialization practices to scaffold this stage in their transformation. New Air employees were the only employees in the study to describe such a profound orientation experience.

Mandatory group-orientation programs were not mentioned by employees of other organizations. The closest comparator and other extraordinary approach that influenced employee expectations was at DIY. They required offline induction periods anywhere from a couple of days to six months. This allowed employees to focus on getting acclimated, observing, questioning, and understanding before getting too deep

into daily responsibilities. However, not all five organizations required a formal orientation or had an orientation program. Others had mandatory or individual training of varying lengths.

Of particular note was the infrequent mention of social networking sources used for making sense of the employee experience. Although technology was mentioned and specifically queried in several interviews, a couple of employees from Compu Int'l., New Air and DIY mentioned use of social networking sites and practices such as, You Tube, Glass Door, and blogging. This limitation appeared to differ from personal use but was not explored in detail. The information and perceived value of social networking had much less application for employees than it did for recruits. Recruits seemed to use outside internet information and sites to overcome asymmetrical info, but employees used experienced and other colleagues for the majority of their info.

Life situations created another catalyst to shape employee expectations through the re-evaluation of the organizational commitment. Due to the constantly changing nature of expectations and life situations, employees described re-evaluating their desire to stay with the organization as something which occurred periodically. The period, however, ranged from “daily probably (Participant #19, Employee)”, to what another employee described as infrequent and based on life situations.

Tends to be when someone goes through a particular, you know, whether it's taking holidays, whether it's talking about childcare, talking about some of the rewards, benefits, salaries. That sort of stuff. It's sort of infrequent, but just whenever it comes up.
(Participant #08, Employee)

The magnitude and difference in the drivers was notable because in either case this process would have updated the psychological contract if not entirely at least to some of

the individual terms. Without reassurance of the message priority or consistency, influence would have been less likely. To employees, the frequency of seeing the prioritization reestablished counteracts the effects of change (uncertainty), knowledge decay rate, continual influx of newcomers, and re-established expectations levels.

I think [what it is] tells you how it should be and what the purist solution looks like. But it gives you somewhere to aim to. The bit for me it does give is what other levers to pull within the team to work on. Do I think we ever get there? Then no, because your expectations change. (Participant #11, Employer)

I had a team day on Thursday around Great Place to Work and when we sat down in July, we had our first team day and everyone says, "Oh, it's brilliant. It's fantastic. We've made some real step changes. And we've come a long way." Looking back on that, six months ago, from February to that July date, everyone's saying-- or actually we said it was brilliant, but it wasn't. That was a first step. (Participant #25, Employee)

Lastly, employees mentioned the importance of consistent messaging over time in relation to both formal communications and signals from leaders. This third area regarding the frequency of encounter and comparison required constant messaging to reconfirm the congruence as well as the organizations' priority.

Employees viewed message presence and signal frequency as indicators of organizational prioritization. Without repetition employees questioned the message's continued priority.

In the last 4-5 years it's kind of like faded into the background quite a lot. Unconsciously, I don't think about it anymore, but in this, you know, when people ask me the question I do think to myself well, why has the company actually done that? (Participant #02, Employee)

This interpretation made sense when considering the perceived amount of change mentioned by employees and reference to number of signals, noise and change in priorities and leadership.

Whether it was reputation, personal experiences, signals from leaders, collegial respect, touch point or frequency of encounter, employees not only interpreted, but reinterpreted their expectation of the employer brand. The relative power of these signals varied. Strength of signal influence varied by type of interaction, direct observation, information or inferential interpretation (Coye, 2004). Experience was significantly involved in defining employees' interpretation of the past, estimation of the future, and understanding of current reality. I will therefore turn to the second important component of employee sense making, the experience itself.

What Shapes the Employment Experience?

On the whole, the work experience was largely formed by the day-to-day interactions and intersections the employee had with the organization's culture. Borrowing a term from consumer marketing, these proof points, were cultural artifacts that demonstrated congruence. Many of these proof points happened through various business experiences and specific touch points that affected the type of experience and focus. Sometimes extraordinary events, *critical incidents*, occurred that shined a spotlight on certain experiences more than others. These could be either work related or personal. While employees *encountered* the experience individually, they also affected and co-created the experience with a group of colleagues. These groups were formed by project, function, geography, or business line. Line managers and colleagues were those involved in the day-to-day activities. With the help of some additional structural elements, this

collection of subjects both described and limited the boundaries of our discussion on factors employees mentioned when describing their employment experience. The following sections describe how each of these components shaped employees' perceptions of the work experience.

The Importance of Everyday Interactions

Our discussion of the employment experience begins with the day-to-day interactions, the most frequently occurring and clearest definition of what it was like for an employee to work in a place. Employees described their experiences in familiar and new ways. While employees did not use the terms *life cycle stage* or *touch point* for the most part, their comments reflected commonly reflected stages of the life cycle as well as discrete *touch point* experiences. Employee descriptions indicated that these are some of the places they experienced the employer brand. Across the interview sample, employees referred to all of the 12 touch points in stages one and two of Rosethorn's (2008) framework, though not all touch points were mentioned by employees for each employer. In other words, all touch points were potentially relevant to employees' employer brand experience, but individual touch point relevance varied by company. The reason for the company idiosyncratic relevance was unknown, but notable.

To appreciate the enormity of the scope of the experience and its potential effect on employees, this comment from a DIY employee helped shed some light.

The day-to-day operation is very much around culture for a Great Place to Work...So Great Place to Work, for me isn't about a Great Place To Work is one big catch phrase, one big idea, if you like. It's about a thousand different things that might be completely different in some stores....so it's kind of comes into everyone's making it a Great Place To Work right down from every colleague washing up after themselves in the canteen to offering support to

colleagues when they have personal problems. (Participant #35, Employee)

As explained by this employee, variance by unit was acceptable because consistency in the outcome, a Great Place to Work, was the objective. As the experience and needs varied by individual, groups of individuals may also have different needs. For this employee, meeting the local needs was most important.

Also noteworthy were the everyday experiences or discussions of impact outside of commonly accepted boundaries of touch points. These additional references extended the scope of the employee experience beyond typical employer definition. Additional areas included challenges to scope boundaries between everyday/critical incidents, personal/professional, good/difficult times, strategic clarity/confusion. This blurring of the line between personal and professional surfaces repeatedly emerged in employee discussions on working relationships. The Media Co. employee's view below of the reciprocity, the personal investment, and the crossing of previously experienced boundaries reflected an undercurrent expressed by many employees from the five organizations.

I think it's a relationship, really, sort of a two-way relationship. There's me giving things, me giving my time, my resources, my ass to the company. And what I receive back, the two-way interaction comes in various forms-- you know, my salary, my pay and how my assignment manager treats me, how the [others] treat me.
(Participant #34, Employee)

The word "ass" denoted the emotional nature of the investment the employee had made and illustrated how employees believed they had personally made-up for many of the recent corporate hardships. The professional-personal boundary had already been

crossed. Employees believed that organizations were incorporating their right to personal space into everyday life.

One of the things you hear is people are over-stretched. Because we've lost quite a few people, a large number of people. The volume of work has not gone down. We are trying to push our business even higher. So how do you reconcile this reduced head count and this increase in productivity that you expect? So tell people the truth. Why you're doing this. Don't push it down and then in the background, build up this work. (Participant #02, Employee)

Asking for more than was reasonable to request had now worked its way into the acceptable norms. Employees did not necessarily reject this premise, but based on reciprocity, both parties needed to be able to call and rely on support beyond the boundaries.

Employees described the importance of the challenges in *everyday work* due to the frequency of mishaps that impact one's ability to do a good job and take pride in the work. They needed to be able to trust the employer and trust their tools.

[Not having working tools] can affect delivery. We saw a lot of system outages where their systems go down. We've got a problem with one of our systems this morning which has prevented us logging in. Or they go very slow. So it will prevent from delivering what we need to deliver on that day. (Participant #34, Employee)

As expressed by this Media Co. employee, job support related problems were the company's domain. Obviously support outages affected performance across the board, but they also affected identity, loss of face, for those on the front line. No one liked to be ineffective.

Data from the interviews confirmed that major tenets of brand confidence, quality, and consistency applied to employer brand experiences as well. Employees

desired evidence of consistent experiences during different circumstances, across different groups of people, and over time. Consistency was described as those types of experiences in which the outcome could be anticipated based on previous outcomes. This applied to experiences through processes, over different time periods, and across different groups. The certainty removed cognitive dissonance and doubt while simultaneously increasing reliability which generated trust. As expressed by a Media Co. employee, “I think it is about trust and I think it is about consistency (Participant #38, Employee).” Consistency was raised by 15 out of 47 employees as important to making sense of the work experience, and therefore based on the analysis, considered a uniformly desired trait.

Critical Incidents

Although the 12 touch points covered the main points of interaction between employees and the experience, touch points were not the only employer brand experiences of importance reported by employees. Employees described three additional opportunities, moments-of-truth, where the employee expected to see, feel, and experience the employment promise (Keller, 2008). These three types of encounters resulted from explicit and implicit principles described by employees; they were critical incidents. The three critical incidents were *company incidents* (where business experiences crises), *life incidents* (where personal life comes off the rails), and *special incidents* such as *celebrating success*. These critical incidents were unexpected, high-intensity moments where the employee was keenly aware of and watching the employer’s response, hoping to experience the employer’s promise whenever and however they

happened. Because of this expectation, it also became a moment for disconfirmation (Coye, 2004).

Employees corroborated these additional critical incidents through stories of experiences that touched them profoundly, in some cases even more than the traditional touch point experiences. It is interesting to note that two out of three of these resulted from need for help in dealing with specific problems; the other one, for celebrating success. The critical incidents ranged in scope from organizational to individual, professional to personal.

Critical incidents were experiences that were unpredictable and disproportionately influential and either reinforced or broke the brand promise when employees interacted with the organization under these special circumstances. The data showed that employee examples of critical incidents exhibited some consistency and some idiosyncrasies. Idiosyncratic moments varied by person and over time.

Company Incidents. Employees reported the importance of the tough times an organization experiences. Strategic mishaps or tough industry dynamics require extraordinary support from leadership.

I saw [company] go through a lot of different phases that were a reflection of our senior leadership. ...but, when we started to hit our rough patch, [company] was always kind of focused on a big three initiative and usually had a rallying cry or two. But it was when we went through a period where there were no key initiatives and there was no clear rallying cry and our stock price keeps plummeting and the company was clearly losing value, then we really didn't know where we were going. Those were the darkest days. (Participant #59, Employee)

Whether strategic adjustment as described by this Compu Int'l. employee, cuts due to downsizing, or the result of a catastrophic weather event, employees looked to moments like these for evidence of the employer brand.

Personal Incidents. On the other hand, critical incidents also provided opportunities to win over the hearts of the employees, to delight, as evidenced by this employee's story.

Last year my son was critically ill. He was in a hospital for [2 weeks] and it was a dreadful time and I rang and said, can I put two weeks holiday in because I need to be... and my boss said, he just went mad, he went "absolutely not! Absolutely not! You're not using your holidays. Your son is ill. You stay off as long as you need to be off and we will pay you." And I had a call every three days from the divisional director to say "how's he doing?" I had two calls from the MD to say, "How's your son doing?" "I've heard your son's not very well." I had email after email when I got back saying "How's [your son] and are you all right? And if there anything we can do to support you, We will." (Participant #23, Employee)

By the nature of being outside this Drinks Inc. employee's expectation of the company's responsibility, the experience had the effect of feeling bigger and more generous in addition to being evidence of great management. In addition to being supported through the tough times, another Drinks Inc. employee described the effects of not supporting someone effectively through the good times too.

A number of bad managers have ruined people. So people have left, really, really good, very talented very excellent people purely through lack of proper management training. If they promote someone to [management level], they should damn well make sure that they get management training. See it's the first thing they do when they get promoted, and they don't. (Participant #07, Employee)

Sadly, it appears from this employee's description that the situation affected several people. It affected those who worked with the person as well as the reputation, and probably future, of the person who was promoted for having been successful. The employee believed that the company should not have left the unprepared manager to fend for oneself.

Celebrating success. Finally, continuous improvement and increased pressures made it difficult for employees to remember to take time to celebrate successes. By contrast, celebrating success had a significant impact on employees' sense of making a difference and being appreciated. For example, a Drinks Inc. employee remembered fondly the time she won an award and her boss personally called her from abroad to tell her.

All of a sudden one day my boss called me from [another country] and said, "You know that you're going to win a prize?" I said, "No, I don't know." I didn't even know they had this prize. And he said, "Yes. Like the [regional director] thinks you're doing the greatest job. And he talked with the [regional] president; he thinks you're doing a great job." So, this for me was the point that I said, "Wow, I really like this, you know?" I'm here doing my job, I'm engaging with other people, but they're seeing me with a different level.
(Participant #30, Employee)

It made a significant difference to the employee too. The employee found the source of energy for the organization and her career path.

These critical incidents were experiences that reinforced or broke the brand promise when employees encountered them and interacted with the organization in these ways. Responsibility for such idiosyncratic and sometimes small moments may have been daunting to some employers, but the impact was great and was slow to dissipate.

Employees demonstrated awareness of the organizational scale and economic issues. The problem was that the moments that qualified varied by person and over time.

Patterns Build Certainty

As described in the previous expectations section, consistency mattered to employees. Not surprisingly, the need for consistency also applied to experience. In the case of proof points, employees needed consistency across processes, groups, and individuals. There was not an indication that continual consistency was needed across all events that happened to a discrete employee. Individually, employees knew they would not get everything their own way at all times, but consistency across groups over time built trust and communicated fairness. This resembled the role observation played in framing expectations. On several occasions employees alluded to or mentioned the importance of constant messaging. Similar to consistency, employees looked to the presence and frequency of messages as an indication of prioritization. Without repetition employees mentioned doubt about the continued focus and importance.

The Line Manager as a Carrier of Culture

While the behavior of company leaders influenced employee expectations, line managers were more likely to affect the day-to-day experiences of the employees. Employees in all five companies repeatedly mentioned the impact of line managers on the day-to-day experiences. As described by Media Co. and Compu Int'l. employees, the line manager controlled the majority of the small events such as work assignment, work environment, observations of efforts, judgements the use of your time and quality of work, etc. that made up a person's work experience.

Bottom line is, when you speak to people, they know the one person that has the most influence over whether or not you're happy or not happy in your daily job is your manager. It's your line manager. This is the person you have your relationship with. (Participant #38, Employee)

Many of the things about, that we say, what kind of a place it is going to be, we want it to be, are 80, 90% dependent on the person that you work for. (Participant #56, Employee)

Although the line manager did not control many of the processes or policies, employees believed that the line manager was responsible for process and policy effect on the employee's work experience. In fact the line manager was the one noted as the channel of choice for cascading many of the organizational policies and messages.

Unfortunately, this made the employee experience dependent on the quality of the line-manager. As seen with a Drinks Inc. employee, dependence on the line-manager had the power to cause significant gaps in the experience.

My specific line manager was particularly bad, I have to say. But again, [change] did seem to be a little bit of the ethos as well, by that time. The department had restructured, the person who was head of [group] when I joined was no longer the head of [group]. (Participant #07, Employee)

The employee had earlier credited the previous manager relationship with not following through on the organization's career path promise for reasons of extended absence.

Whether or not the situation occurred the way the employee remembered, the dynamic destroyed an engaged person's belief in the organization's values, and the negative organizational sediment still resides. By luck of assignment, the way many manager relationships were established, the employee encountered a very different experience. In effect the line manager had become the embodiment, and therefore, channel of the employer brand. To this employee, though, it was magical when it clicked.

For this particular project I had the most amazing manager. She is just unbelievable. She was new to [Drink Inc.] at the beginning of the project, and she was just amazing. She has kind of turned my head around a lot in terms of, take the organization for what it is, but get out of it what you can. I think she is probably the reason I am still here, even though I am not working for her anymore. (Participant #07, Employee)

Based on the Drinks Inc. employee experience, managers who helped get the day-to-day work done and created positive team oriented efforts that signalled equality and support were invaluable. A DIY employee described meeting a supervisor for the first time when checking out from the till in the store. “I thought it was great at that time. I thought at least he’s helping out, he’s not letting his people struggle and that was quite comforting for me at that time (Participant #23, Employee).” Employees viewed signals sent by the line manager as signals that reflected what type of behavior is expected, encouraged and rewarded.

For reasons of responsibility, motivation and frequency of interaction, the line manager makes up a significant portion of the employee’s work experience and personal access to opportunities and information. Because of this, the difference in the quality of the experience was viewed as more affected by the line manager. The line manager was also responsible in employee minds for several of the group achievements that created team bonds and feelings of accomplishment.

I should also say that I got to work for some great leaders. But it wasn't the senior vice presidents or the executive leadership team or ELT that kept me, it was more my colleagues, my direct bosses. Even when we were going through really hard times, there was-- -- even though we had lost our way, our people were so very dynamic and vibrant and really intelligent. And that's what kept me here. It felt like family. (Participant #59, Employee)

In the Compu Int'l. employee's view, the boss to a certain degree became the carrier of culture for the employee.

The family sentiment carried over into many line manager relationships that paid attention to critical incidents. As evidenced in this employees' personal story, it was the managers' attention to the human side that helped him empathize and leverage two proof points over time.

[After the situation in the store that provoked the desire to leave] [the manager] had the foresight to do two things. One, he came in and sat me down and said, "I'm really disappointed you're leaving because I got you marked as one for the future, and I think with the right development you could be a real key player in our business. He said, "So I want you to really consider what you want to do. Do you want to go and sit behind the screen in a bank and feel safe and secure or do you want to soar and fly." And I said, "Well, I don't know if I'm capable." "I'm telling you, you're capable."
(Participant #23, Employee)

The way this manager handled the situation that had been mishandled previously changed a negative experience to a positive one. This example was of particular importance because of the threat of safety to the employee. The approach had to overcome the logic and the emotion of the experience. At a different point in time, the employee incurred another personal setback only to again find an empathetic ear and a supportive colleague.

I remember ringing my regional controller at that time and saying, "[boss], I need a few days off." And he said, "What's the matter?" Because I've never rung him said, I need a few days off. I said, "Well, my marriage is over. It's my decision. It's the right thing to do, but my son was away with my parents at that time and, I just need a couple of days when [my son] comes back to sit him down and explain it to him. I don't want to do that and then leave him and go to work." So he said, "Look, take two weeks." And I said, "I don't need two weeks". I just need a couple of days...and he went, "Let me just stop you there, if you don't take care of yourself you'll be out far more than that. And if you need two weeks, I will pay you, and you stay home for two weeks and get it all sorted. I'd

rather you do that and come back firing on all cylinders then just have a few days off and come back distracted... I said, "Thank you very much but, two days will be fine." I always appreciated the fact that [he], straight off, unprompted, said, "I want you to take two weeks off and by the way, I'll pay you." (Participant #23, Employee)

And in fact, when annual evaluation period rolled around the same manager was again playing an empathetic role.

I had my review in December and he sat me down and said, you're the lowest paid [position] in the [region] division and I'm going to do something about that. and I think he did that because he knew that I was going to be raising my kids on my own and he never asked me if my financial situation was stable or not but I think he considered that, once [he] knew [what] were my circumstances. And I never had to ask. He sat me down and told me and gave me a pay rise. (Participant #23, Employee)

Across these situations, the employee not only felt valued, but was able to let go of reasons for worry. The employee actually took off less time than the boss had suggested as well. The most important piece, however, is the pattern the employee saw emerging. Being the repeat beneficiary of the values in action created a strong bond between the employee the line manager, the employee and the business, and the employee and the culture. Although a range of signals and communications pieces are useful, the boss' demonstrated values communicated more than any poster could have.

Creating the Right Conditions through Infrastructure

Across all five companies the desire for progress was the single most important concern for employees and their employment experience. They described it in terms of opportunities, career progression, continuous development, and achievement. Employees discussed these as the reasons they were willing to commit or tolerate more than they wanted to, and what they expected in return for their lower-than-desired pay check.

Opportunities were raised explicitly as important to the work experience by 27 of 47 employees. Career progression and constant development both were raised by 19 of 47 employees. While the relative importance of career advancement appeared to vary somewhat by company, the sense of constant achievement and moving forward was significant for employees across all five.

One of the reasons employees joined a large company with a strong reputation was to have access to these kinds of opportunities. Employees associated growth with opportunities and being part of something bigger than they could have been on their own. Interest in the opportunities depended on who had success accessing them and those who had not. All the organisations mentioned the importance of “who you knew” in accessing the opportunities.

You can change the world if you want to. There are plenty of opportunities here to do that. And when you are working for the right leader you will get on the right team. You can really make things happen. (Participant #56, Employee)

Only employees who were successful in accessing opportunities made the connection between one’s network, relationships and line manager as a gateway to the opportunities. Various employees felt opportunities in their organization happened or did not happen for specific reasons; however, they universally agreed that the access to opportunities and the possibility to develop and grow was critical in shaping their work experience. This also included the opportunity to make a difference, to be part of something bigger than the employee could have been individually.

Not surprisingly, employees frequently defined opportunities as moving up. But some individuals also discussed it as moving sideways, as long as it was moving and

learning. In cases where it was a sideways move, understanding the career path or the end goal was important so they felt directed. Employees also believed progression was something relative. In addition to their own progress relative to their expectations, they also compared their progress to other colleagues and friends or contacts outside the organization.

I mean, you know if you're good or not just basically from-- if the market wants you. Like for example, if I meet someone from a law firm and they offer me a job, they wouldn't be offering me a job if they don't think I'm great. They wouldn't be wasting their time offering me jobs. I was offered three jobs since I came to London, for example. (Participant #30, Employee)

The benchmarking to other professionals in the industry was a way to interpret one's relative accomplishment as well as check the employer's data integrity at the same time.

On the other hand, several employees had some type of professional clock they compared their progress to. The comparisons were made over time as well.

There's a benchmark. You think, if I'd stayed in practice I'd be a level 3, level 2 by now. Why the hell did I do this? I think if I had stayed in practice, I think I'd probably be earning more actually. (Participant #07, Employee)

It was interesting to note that although money was mentioned, in the interview the employee went on to describe the irrelevance of the money. It appeared that the comparison was as much about feeling valued as it could have been about the actual pay rate.

Whether looking at opportunities, career progression or continuous development, employees were mainly willing to trade off several things including salary in return for progressive opportunities. As one employee described it, he saw the trade-off as "worth

it” as long as he was making himself more “sellable.” A Compu Int’l. employee alluded to the compelling nature of the growth prospects that attracted him.

Yeah, it’s been, as I said earlier, just a terrific ride. I mean, I really view it as three phases. The first phase was obviously a startup type of company. Second phase was hyper growth where we experienced some of the usual challenges that companies face during hyper growth. ...and then the third phase has really been around reinvention, redefining who we are. ... So it’s been just obviously a terrific experience. Otherwise, I would have left.
(Participant #63, Employee)

Regardless of the company, all employees shared a desire to continually progress. They made deliberate choices to work for employers whose size and reputation enabled the types of opportunities they wanted access to. In many ways, opportunities and progress was about increasing one’s market value. Benchmarking helped employees make sense of their own progress and market value, but it raised several questions, not the least of which was compensation.

Compensation. Like opportunities, compensation helped people establish their market value. Benchmarking and a desire for progress kept employees hungry to know where they fell in the compensation landscape. Fairness, transparency, and feeling valued were critical to feeling good about their compensation. When these were in place, employees claimed to feel less distracted and compelled to find an explanation for the cognitive dissonance.

First, the issue of fairness consumed a lot of employee energy. Employee tales of good returns go to those who leave, line manager negotiations, and restructure inequities made employees question the fairness of the overall approach. Several employees believed that loyalty does not pay as expressed by a Compu Int’l. employee.

It's probably a bigger—it is a bigger issue when moving companies. It is not really an issue moving within the company at all. It doesn't change unless it is a new grade level. (Participant #59, Employee)

This person's belief was shared by many employees and caused them to keep an eye open for what was available and happening outside the organization. Benchmarking against previous job and competitors was a very important part of employees' salary sense making. Equally, benchmarking inside the organization generated stories of well respected line managers negotiating better pay rises for their direct reports. Both were designed to increase the probability of fairness in the employee's mind.

These views were not without good reason. An employee reported having been caught in a loop hole due to corporate reorganizations. The employee was trapped in a job class because of legacy issues which resulted in a significantly lower pay for the same job and performance feedback as the employee's colleagues.

It's the unfairness of it. We're not all being treated equally. I do the same job as for the managers in this office do, and I'm treated differently to and I'm not treated equally within the pay scale because of the job family that I'm in. (Participant Anonymous, Employee)

The issue had been acknowledged, but no acceptable solution provided for a couple of years. In cases like these, employees did not expect perfection, they understood mistakes happen, but the service recovery was the litmus test. When problems were allowed to fester, employees experienced resentment and mistrust from the service recovery failure. A different employee questioned the fairness of a bonus scheme due to constant award calculations and timeline changes.

You get a story that says, if you work hard and help us succeed, you can share in our success. But then we're absolutely hopeless in

dishing out sharing that success. (Participant Anonymous, Employee)

Employees focused on the repetitive nature of such issues. When problems were not addressed or continued to happen, employees filled in the information gap with their own stories to explain how such simple but important things could have gone so wrong. In most cases, these stories are not generous or becoming to the employer. A significant part of the fairness question was fuelled by a second issue, a perceived lack of transparency. Drinks Inc. employees had determined that the company's strategic market position extended to the employee salary positioning.

We want to be what we call top-three CPG. Yet, no one believes—well, we all know we're not paid like a top-three CPG, because we're told we got the median. But the difficult years, I think that people get called by head hunters all the time. And the wages always tend to be there. There doesn't seem to be anybody who's

less than us. There seems to be people who are on the par with us in terms of pay. So we're saying we're at the median of all these companies, which we never would benchmark against. (Participant #12, Employee)

The irony was that the company benchmarking had created an expectation for this and other Drinks Inc. employees that did not match the information the employees had acquired through their own benchmarking. Unfortunately, the the lack of transparency had become the story, and the numbers had become somewhat insignificant. As explained by this Drinks Inc. employee, “It's not so much the fact that that's what people believe. It's the fact there's no communication to prove any of it (Participant #12, Employee).” Regardless of the reasons, the way that the situation was handled consumed a significant amount of company and employee energy. The company had not shared its data; employees assumed this indicated there was something to hide.

At the end of the day, employees really seemed to want the third driver, to be valued. Employees had other motivations and their motivations changed with changes in the employee's life as described by a DIY employee.

For me joining the right business at the appropriate level and developing my career to sort of get the remuneration that I think I probably would like to sort of be earning. That's far more important for me. Now, I'm probably in a financial situation where I don't need to. (Participant #29, Employee)

This employee wrapped all the pieces together demonstrating how he felt these elements fit together. Unfortunately, this view was not only person specific, but stage of life specific. For reasons of need for fairness, transparency and feeling valued, the compensation structure caused the greatest concern from all organizations as evidenced by the sentiments of this Media Co. employee.

I am quite happy working for [Media Co], but I think they do some things wrong. I think that the pay structure is not as it should be. If I could change anything, it would be that. (Participant #34, Employee)

For others, it was not the compensation, but the working environment that caused distractions and feelings of espoused-experienced gaps.

Work environment. In general, employees mentioned specific aspects of the working environment that mattered to them most. These ranged from general social behavior to safety to aesthetics of the place. In general, these were important because they made the employees feel valued.

Work was a social experience for the employees. Therefore, many had working styles where they preferred working with others. The employee preferred the company of others; proximity to colleagues mattered. However, notably, the employee's preference

also varied. On the other hand, the following example indicated how the internal space motivated and affected other employees.

Physical location, the environment of the office hasn't been good.
... the office, the environment that you work in has an impact on
your day to day moods, level of motivation and level of output.
(Participant #25, Employee)

Even though they were not the most important factors in the individual's definition of the employment experience, this example demonstrated additional needs or preferences that employees considered in addition to values (Herzberg, 1987).

Many employees mentioned the effect of a pleasant atmosphere, "a better place to be, [Drinks Inc.] is great in terms of environment, in terms of people being nice, in terms of leisure, flexible working (Participant #30, Employee)", good health and safety (Participant #34, Employee), and "friendliness, kindness. Everyone's there willing to help you. [Its] just a nice environment (Participant #46, Employee)."

Employee responses showed working environment factors to be forgivable for a period of time if employers were responsive, otherwise, the factors became demotivating, contentious and affected engagement levels. For employees, issues such as parking became serious.

As you mentioned, you got potentially 500 cars, 600 cars, and the building wasn't really built for that. And they responded. I saw tarmacs, new car park, with all systems. And it wasn't always done perfectly and quickly enough, but overall people could see they responded and tried to do things. (Participant #12, Employee)

Yeah. [It matters.] Am I hacked off at the fact that people that haven't a parking space? Then, yeah...and that cost, 100 pound a year or 200 pound a year, [DIY] should pay that. (Participant #25, Employee)

The difference approach was interesting to note and generated opposite reactions. The first, the Drinks Inc. employee, appreciated the response and spoke of the visible efforts that proved leadership understood the importance to employees and was taking action. Instead of dealing with the issue and moving on, the lack of action and response caused the DIY employee, the second, to resent and get stuck on the issue. Again, how management handled it made the difference.

Neglect and ragged quality of the working environment described in the following two quotes made these two DIY employees feel undervalued.

Physical location, the environment of the office hasn't been good. And my view, personal view, is the sooner we move the better. The office, the environment that you work in has an impact on your day to day moods, level of motivation and level of output. (Participant #25, Employee)

I don't think the environment we work in really fits we truly care about the brand that we are and the image...I just think it's slightly incongruous that how [our facilities] look and feel and us saying this is a great place to work. That seems a stretch too far. (Participant #21, Employee)

Facilities mattered because a pleasant and functioning environment reinforced the identity and employee moods. According to an employee, "well, they matter to the people (Participant #25, Employee)."

Beyond facilities, work environment included the way people interacted with each other, how the work space was used, and even the dress. Personal time and space factors into this as well. . "Right, you don't have to read anything on your lunch break. Every morning and every afternoon we'll do a team five." A team five was a daily mini meeting to remove the need for posting information to be consumed on personal breaks. In some cases, the dress was also mentioned.

“Special” bucket I’m thinking the uniforms, because then you don’t have to spend money. You don’t have to get up every morning trying to find something to wear. And at least everybody is uniformed. It creates an environment where everybody just looks so good together. At least you know people are appropriately dressed because they wear uniforms. (Participant #46, Employee)

The general aesthetics of the working environment made a difference to employees. Whether it was the social interactions, the physical appearance of the facilities or the individuals inside them, social identity theory also guided the importance of the working environment. An extension of the employee, the working environment affected how the employee felt about themselves as well as how they interpreted other’s behaviors around them.

Feedback

Employees described several types of feedback as important to their experience. Employees tied feedback to employee activities such as performance, personal development guidance, and monetary rewards. Clarity mattered in many of the cases, especially performance feedback.

It's like you were never quite doing a good enough job, because it was never very clear on what your priorities were to deliver. I think you accept the fact that everything will change and the targets will change, but it was just I think probably a lack of direction and a lack of clear communication, really. (Participant #19, Employee)

Clarity and consistency meant that employees could gauge their performance better. This had an impact on development needs. Development feedback was provided through various formal channels. Employees accessed and relied on online sites and tools. For example, employees in Compu Int’l. used *TalentDirect*, an online job database

and individual development profiles to communicate job opportunities and support their individually tailored plans. They contributed to their plans as well.

Employees expected this to converge in a monetary way according to employee expectations. Many employees felt that hard work would lead to monetary reward.

However, this was not everyone's experience.

I think if you ask most people in the company, I think they will tell you that hard work, at the moment, at the moment is not necessarily the measure for which you might get rewarded, in terms of your bonus at the end of the day. (Participant #02, Employee)

Employees mentioned smaller rewards that seemed to capture the heart of what employees were really looking for, recognition. When provided, recognition had a positive effect on those who received it. The frequency of these, however, was much more common than the standard pay versions and really got people in the habit of noticing each other's actions and thoughtfulness.

If you did something great, you get a letter. They have little perks. Little New Air key chains, pens, stuff that just kind of makes you like, oh, thanks. ...It's the thought and the recognition that really counts. (Participant #49, Employee)

Similar to critical incidents, the fact that someone gave some type of positive reinforcement indicated to employees that the person had noticed the effort contributed. Employees' desire to make a difference was as easy to please as noticing the effort they had made.

Peer/Colleague Interactions

Employees indicated they got a lot of satisfaction from the social dimensions of their jobs. This benefitted them individually and also in terms of doing their jobs. They saw the relationships with colleagues as key channels to helping them get work done and to have access to information and opportunities.

So it's kind of like the first thing I would ask folks that I've not seen for a while and you know they're part of the business just to find out what's going on. Well, scandals, the reorgs, you know acquisitions that we may be making, you know, you try and tie up what you hear all day in public and on the blocks about what we are doing. (Participant #02, Employee)

The Drinks Inc. employee felt that by keeping the network alive, employees could preserve relationships. Information gained from the relationships helped accomplish work, build camaraderie, and increase job satisfaction. Relationships were critical to performance and accessing opportunities. From the discussion we had, time on the road was also quite important to this employee's ability to keep this virtual circle going.

Travelling and networked relationships demonstrated examples of covering people in the network, crossing over into other verticals, linking up with views and knowledge outside the office and crossing the personal / professional border. By having a meal with people one Drinks Inc. employee felt that they gathered different information by spending different types of time with people. "You go out for a meal with them; you get to hear a little bit more about the sort of things that you don't hear sitting here in London (Participant #02, Employee)."

Employees saw work as a social experience. For several employees, the more social approach was a preferred work style. It drove engagement and motivated them. As

mentioned by this employee, the unplanned casual conversations were in some cases more valuable than hours working alone.

That feedback came back from quite a few people when we talked about it, was that even just a coffee bar chats can actually add more value than a whole day sitting at a desk working in one conversation from either a personal or job perspective can make a world of difference. (Participant #08, Employee)

The informal networking energized some of the employees. With so much time spent in the office, the social element had become part of the environment for this Drinks Inc. employee.

I think they have recognized that [social interaction brings] wider benefits. So it's not necessarily just, you know, the salary, the package piece...I see a lot of people at [the office] very happy with the social aspect of their job down there. The fact that there are means of finishing work and relaxing with colleagues and that kind of thing. (Participant #12, Employee)

The social aspects also bled over to the shared goals that employees experienced with some of the shared projects. Different working interactions tapped into different employee feelings and emotions.

The element of pride that you get really around the kind of everybody working together for the same goal, and everybody really being very customer-focused, and everyone knowing that there's a really clear output to what we do. That's the bit that I love. (Participant #19, Employee)

The social dynamic created a sense of belonging. Many employees mentioned the sense of belonging as part of how they explained what made their work experience more uplifting.

When you see that much talent around you, it really uplifts you. It certainly does me anyway, it drives me forward. Because you are continually learning in what you're doing. (Participant #43, Employee)

Finally, employees extended their sense of belonging out into the community. Their desire to be connected with the greater good provided meaning beyond the job as well as channels to contribute back to their community.

We have leukemia and lymphoma research is our corporate charity and we've been with them four years now and we do store fund-raising, we set a target, the store sets their own target every year and then works tirelessly to blast it and we've raised £1.6 million in four years for leukemia and lymphoma research as a business. (Participant #23, Employee)

There's just always something going on. We have the concerts in our terminal at [airport]. They have concerts there. That's a pretty new thing. That started, I believe, in the fall. Every month or so, they have a concert there. We had [performer]. I think we had [another performer]. A bunch of different things. (Participant #46, Employee)

The combined effect of the networking, social interaction, inspiration, belonging, and giving back was best represented by a New Air employee, "I feel like [New Air] is like a lifestyle (Participant #46, Employee)". Employees had moved beyond the strictly functional aspect of the job. Social interaction was a way of working and a reason for working in specific places.

Conclusion

This chapter examined how employees conceptualized their work experience, focusing in their expectations and perceived experiences. External factors such as organizational reputation, personal background, leadership signals, and other professional organization influenced the development of employee expectations. On the other hand, internal factors such as business practices, touch points, critical incidents, line managers, collegial interactions, feedback, compensation and benefits, environment, and social

interactions, shaped the way employees experienced the working culture daily. Employees used expectations as a framework for understanding how these were supposed to fit together to allow each of them to participate in the interactions. But, these experiences did not always match the expectations. In these cases, employees had to find a way to reconcile the differences. Based on the espoused employer brand, this is now where we turn our attention, to employer brand gap.

Chapter 6

EMPLOYER BRAND GAP

Chapter 4 described how employers influenced employees' expectations and experiences through the espoused employer brand. Chapter 5 discussed how employees experienced the employer brand. Continuing to draw from customer satisfaction literature, this chapter overlays findings from Chapter 4 with Chapter 5 to determine congruence between the espoused and experienced employer brand and provide insights into the characteristics of the gap between them. To do so, this chapter begins with a description of the manner in which the employer brand gap manifests, followed by identification of gap characteristics, and closes with a discussion of the domains in which the gap is rooted.

How the Employer Brand Gap Manifests

At the most fundamental level, employer brand was not only the employer brand espoused by the organization, but rather the one espoused by an organization as reconciled with the employment experience expected and encountered by individuals. Employees described their overall satisfaction level of their employment experience by describing the overall congruence between the espoused and the experienced, but noted specific differences between what they expected and experienced.

Employee expectations were influenced by their past experiences, outside information, the hiring process, and their previous work experience. These factors influenced their perceptions of the espoused and the actual employment experience, making employee internalization an important part of explaining the employer brand gap. These differences, actual or perceived, were expressed in terms of expectations, the belief

in the probability of a certain outcome. Espoused-experienced congruence was discussed as a single gap, summed up as an overall balance of the level of satisfaction of the experience; but, individual expectations carried their own value and level of congruence.

Employers and employees described the espoused-experienced incongruences using one of three values, *met expectations*, *did not meet expectations*, or *exceeded expectations*. It was natural to assume that gaps were undesirable and needed to be reduced; however, in describing areas of importance employees described both negative (did not meet expectations) and positive gaps (exceeded expectations). In other words, to employees, not all gaps were bad.

Two aspects of the gap are important, involvement of expectations, and expression of satisfaction level. Both the act of comparing (expectations and experience) and the value (level of satisfaction) reflect customer satisfaction literature where satisfaction and overall quality of experience are seen as a comparison between customer expectations and perceptions of actual service received (Coye, 2004). The similarities between customer and employee sense making of experiences are noteworthy and represent an addition to the employer brand discussion.

Based on the findings in this study I have developed a new, multi-dimensional conceptual framework (Figure 2) that illustrates the relationships between components of the espoused and experienced employer brand and the formation of the gap.

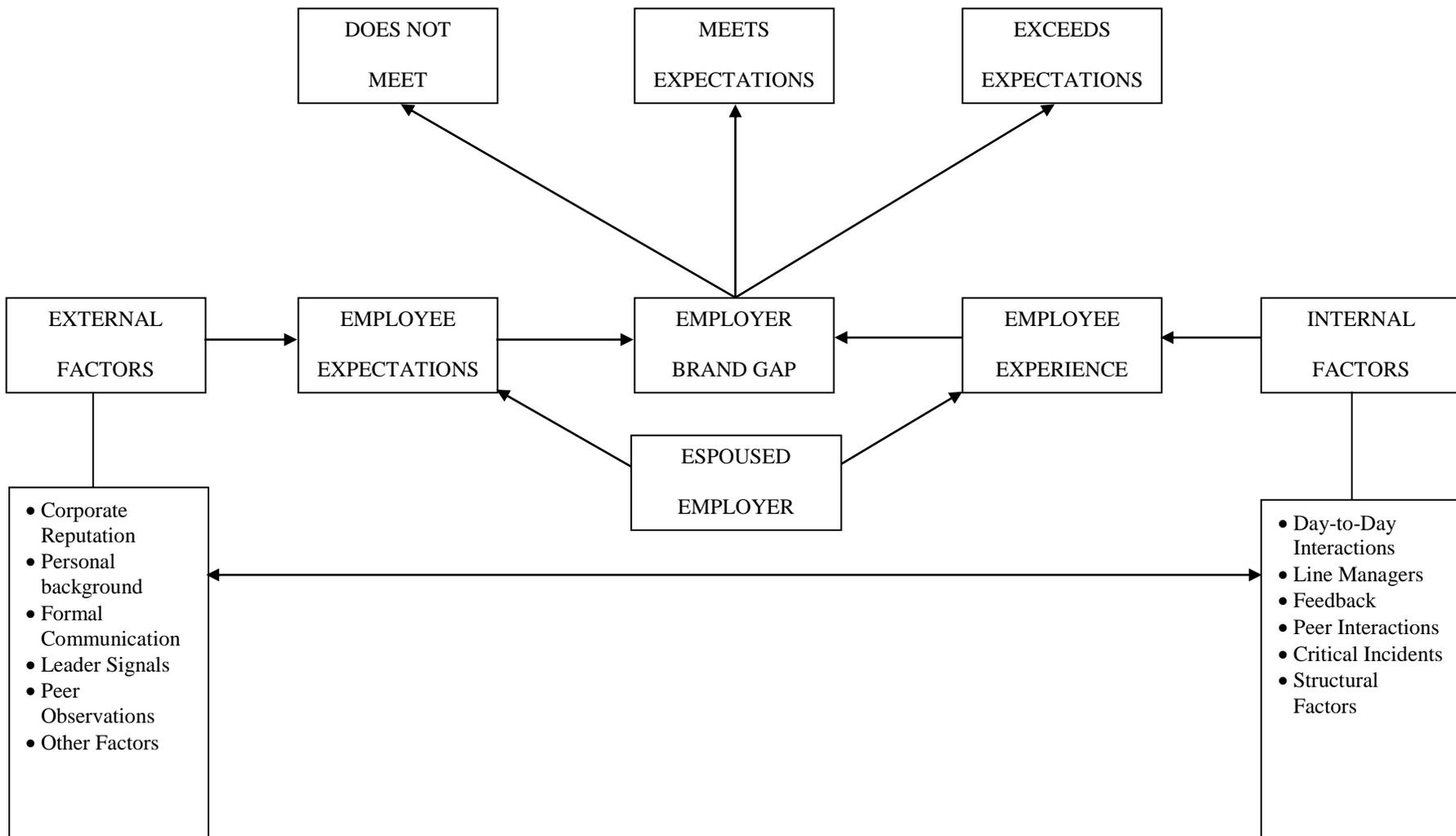


Figure 2: Revised Employer Brand Gap Conceptual Framework as Experienced by the Employee

By looking at the employer brand gap as a multi-dimensional construct involving employee interpretation of internal and external factors, I was able to better understand how employees encountered differences between what the organization *said* and *did* as well as the potential impact of these differences on the employer brand gap. This finer understanding of the gap's characteristics and domains offered three key benefits. First, it established a foundation for developing an espoused-experienced gap measurement tool in the future. Next, it offered a way to explore the underlying drivers for improving the gap. Finally, it helped differentiate the relative impact of each in support of more effective prioritization of management efforts and resource allocation. The following sections will continue this discussion of the characteristics and domains of the employer brand gap and their managerial relevance. I'll begin with the characteristics.

Understanding the Characteristics of Employer Brand Gap

As described in Chapter 5, employees described differences as a measure of satisfaction. The descriptions of the satisfaction, however, offered a richer understanding of the type of differences the employee was describing. I observed four characteristics in these descriptions: direction, degree, distribution, and dependability. The first, directional incongruence, or relative value, indicated the under (negative) or over (positive) delivery against expectation. Second, degree incongruence represented the relative importance or weighting and magnitude of the particular difference between the espoused and experienced employer brand domain to the person. Third, distribution incongruence connoted the variability in views across different groups or pockets in the organization. Fourth, dependability incongruence, represented the level of consistency of the congruence over time.

Direction of Incongruence. The direction of the incongruence indicated the need for management attention or not. As illustrated in Figure 2, employers and employees described three states when comparing the espoused and experienced employer brand: *met expectations*, *did not meet expectations* and *exceeded expectations*. Similar to Rust et al.'s (1996) description of customer satisfaction measurement, employers and employees described expectation deviations in terms of satisfaction mainly referred to *met* and *did not meet* expectations. Yet, positive emotional responses were identified with expectation deviations with a corresponding value of *exceeds expectations* as previously found with customers (Rust et al., 1996; Keller, 2008). It is, however, noteworthy that there were significantly fewer references to *exceeded expectations*.

As described earlier, when asked did their *overall* experience meet their *overall* expectations, most interviewees reported that their employment experience was fairly congruent with their espoused or their expectation of the espoused employment experience. However, as supported by the way employees make sense of their experience and the employer brand gap framework in Figure 2, a net positive opinion could mask individual incongruences and reduce the emotional connection to the employer (Scarpello & Campbell, 1983).

To establish a sense of the satisfaction level and direction of the gaps mentioned by interviewees, responses were grouped by their responses. All 16 employers reported did not meet expectations. The 37 employee responses were distributed across the three groups, registering 24 as did not meet expectations, nine as met expectations, and four as exceeded expectations. Table 8 shows the satisfaction level and direction of specific gaps

mentioned by interviewees. It is important to note that results in Table 8 may have been affected by the following *meets expectations* biases.

Slight *meets expectations* biases were expected due to the company sampling criteria, employee identity issues, and employee access to information. Companies were selected because of their continued interest in developing a strong employer brand and naturally, one would expect this would produce a more positive result on average. In addition, it was also apparent in speaking with employees that they had a desire to portray their employer in a positive light. I countered this bias with a reminder of the anonymity of the interview as well as assurance that the study was focused on understanding *how* employees think about the company promise and their experience, not to evaluate the quality of the company as an employer. A third bias toward *meets expectations* may have resulted from employee roles and access to information. Two of the companies using employee forums included forum members in their sample. As members of employee representative groups, some interviewees had access to more colleagues' views and had been involved in company decision making exercises. Finally, the study's purpose, to confirm existence and understand the nature of the gap, would have naturally suggested interviewees look for gaps. These four potential biases may have encouraged a search for disconfirming evidence. Notwithstanding these biases, the data presents an interesting picture of the employer brand gap and opportunities for improvement.

Table 8

Satisfaction Level by Mention from General Gap Quotes from Employers and Employees

	Compu Int'l.		DIY		Drinks Inc.		Media Co.		New Air		Total
	Employer	Employee	Employer	Employee	Employer	Employee	Employer	Employee	Employer	Employee	
Unmet	2	3	2	6	6	5	2	4	3	4	37
Meets	0	0	2	2	0	1	0	1	0	3	9
Exceeds	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	1	4
Total	2	3	4	8	6	8	2	6	3	8	50

The number of unmet expectations responses shown in Table 8 indicated that employers and employees uniformly agreed an espoused-experienced gap existed. Of the 64 employer and employee interviews, 53 cases expressed the existence of an espoused-experienced gap. All employers and most employees mentioned a gap explicitly with 74% of the respondents indicating a negative gap direction.

Employees and employers seemed attuned to the concept of did not meet expectations as evidenced by the New Air employer's description of the possibility of 100% employer brand congruence, "We're up there as a really good one. But, there's always room for improvement (Participant #49, Employer)." The employer's view of improvement underscores the constant corporate search for imperfections stemming from a continuous improvement culture rooted in many organizations.

Relative importance varied by individual, based on their personal expectations and motivations. Factors which influenced employee expectations were relatively consistent across the five companies, but the actual expectations varied by the individual, making each employee's expectations part shared and part idiosyncratic. Employees also reported that their expectations changed over time, based on influences from external sources such as family, personal expectations, or market opportunities.

Degree of Incongruence. Degree incongruence was the second dimension of the employer brand gap observed. Degree incongruence referred to the intensity of the specific gaps and represented the relative importance of this particular difference to the individual employee. Degree was important in prioritizing actions or attention to the gap.

Two types of degree incongruence were identified, magnitude and intensity. Magnitude was apparent in the discussion of the employment relationship paradigm in use in Drinks Inc. The difference between the employment paradigms used by employers and employees in Drinks Inc. exhibited a greater incongruence between employer and employee than did the different family references mentioned by the various employees. Thus, magnitude illustrated how far apart the two views were.

Intensity, the second type of degree incongruence, indicated the level of importance a single domain could hold for an individual. Intensity examples were found in references to extreme degrees of unmet expectations and exceeded expectations. On the negative side, employees expressed intensity of feelings associated with the negative gap as extreme disappointment or violations of specific principles. In fact, some factors were so important to some individuals that if violated, individuals suggested they would leave the organization. Employees referred to these as *deal breakers*. On the positive side, individual aspects that exceeded expectations created positive affect. Aspects that registered surprise or were unexpected were a delight. Responses to the question of surprise manifested in different body language, change in verbal language, and expressions of joy. References indicated that these moments created an emotional affection toward the employer. Employees who expressed these feelings used “love” language to describe the respective leaders, mentors, jobs, and organizations.

Distribution of Incongruence. Finally, the most prolific of gaps acknowledged by employers was the variance across employee populations. Three employers from two different organizations shared this New Air employer’s view that gaps existed by sub-

group membership and business unit. “There's a very big disconnect between what we project and say [and] in what people, some people experience. Not everyone. So it depends on the pocket. It's not consistent though (Participant #41, Employer).” One of the most interesting gaps was associated with different “pockets” or sub-groups in the organization. In New Air, employers described different pockets based on different functions (pilots, flight attendants, ground crew, maintenance, customer service, ticketing agents etc.), tenure (due to industry tenure norms and time inside organizational culture), proximity to the customer, line manager, or airport site.

Across the five organizations, employers most commonly mentioned departmental functions or business unit as groups most likely to experience variation in the employer experience. Employers developed their views based on evidence of the gaps by sub-group from employee survey and values survey data, “We use an employee survey and you see it in that (Participant #36, Employer).” Media Co. viewed union activity as a “barometer of the state of employee relations (Participant #36, Employer).” and a lagging indicator of employer brand gap. DIY was more speculative, but saw the variability by business unit, “I'm not sure right now, that you could come into any shop and meet the right person or meet the person that's engaged (Participant #04, Employer).” Of note however was the reference to the individual in the business unit. DIY was very granular in its definition of distribution success, consistent experience across each employee and customer experience.

Employees agreed that the employment experiences varied by one's membership in different functional groups. An employee explained the variety of different experiences by sub-groups observed in Drinks Inc.

Employees have a very different experience, we believe, as a forum if they work in sales verses marketing, if they work in logistics verses HR, if they work in a big team or small team, if they've got a very proactive career, you know, the kind of coaching, mentoring type line manager than someone who's less, you know, concerned about driving their people and more about delivering, you know, the day to day numbers.... We believe there are big inconsistencies. I've seen it myself through, you know, working across different functions, working with different line managers. (Participant #05, Employee)

This Drinks Inc. employee reported gaps by functional group, team size, and line manager. Most employers had attributed group variance to poor line management; however, as alluded to in this example, variance between groups also resulted from preferential treatment for different functions. Across the five organizations reviewed, distinctions were made between various functional departments, front office/back office, revenue/non-revenue, and group/central functions. For example, two individuals from the same organization, but from back office functions mentioned frustration over different standards for preferential groups. Examples given were explained by the privileged and lesser status often granted to customer facing and non-customer facing functions respectively. This was not a surprising interpretation based on strategic management practices. Preferential treatment was sometimes sanctioned by the business and used strategically to bias the business in strategic ways during specific stages of development (Schein, 1985). In either case, out of ignorance or intent, a gap for at least one group existed.

Dependability of Incongruence. Finally, the concept of consistency appeared throughout the data. Reducing uncertainty meant increasing reliability of the anticipated outcome. The data indicated that increased reliability had a positive effect on engagement. Employees mentioned on several occasions, that consistency over time was important to them and their view of the saying-doing gap.

The four dimensions were characterizations of the nature of the espoused-experienced gap. While establishing values for these dimensions was not part of this study design, understanding the characteristics of the data was. The dimensions were generated by the patterns of descriptions employees used to explain their views and they try to capture the essence of the internal evaluative process by which employees make specific judgements. On their own, they just indicate how employees think about differences, but applied to the four domains identified in the study they help describe the contours of the employer brand gap.

The Four Employer Brand Gap Domains

Mention of the individual factors and their varying direction, degree, and distribution, suggested the need for multiple domains underpinned the espoused-experienced gap. It is important to explore the domains in order to operationalize the multi-dimensional construct. Once we understand the domains, we can provide insights into ways employers may improve delivery of the employment promise and discover opportunities for developing a stronger emotional connection between employers and employees.

While employers and employees tended to refer explicitly to the espoused-experienced difference as a single gap, the data suggested that the gap results from more than one domain. Moreover the data indicated that not every domain was equally important to each employee. The data were not conclusive, but the satisfaction levels ranging from deal breakers to did not meet expectations to met expectations to delighters suggested that some differences did not matter, some were acceptable, some could be forgiven and tolerated for a period of time, some were important, and some were so important they could trump all the other. It was, therefore, important to examine each domain because some may be more salient than others. This section examines the four most important domains of the employer brand gap: employment relationship, influence of values, delivery and infrastructure, and opportunities.

Employment Relationship

Both employers and employees hold a set of beliefs about the obligations of an employment relationship between employee and employer (Morrison & Robinson. 1997). A difference in beliefs could cause differences in assumptions of how this relationship is supposed to work. These assumptions became the drivers of expectations, and thus the basis for expectations. In terms of employer brand, a difference in assumptions could become the driver of incongruence. For this reason, the employment relationship was so fundamental to employer brand gap and is the first domain discussed.

The employment relationship domain referred to the reciprocal obligations between the employee and the employer resulting from a commitment to work together. The paradigm provided as a point of reference and established related assumptions about

obligations expected by and of each party. The employment relationship did not have to be the same for all employers and employees, but reasonably strong alignment of expectations between the two groups would have reduced employer brand gaps.

Data from the study indicated a fundamental difference in employer-employee paradigms, shifting the points of reference. Challenges occurred when employer and employee differences were observed in the employment relationship paradigms used. These challenges tended to appear when the type of paradigm in use was not expressed explicitly or when significant competitive changes took place. For example, at the time of this study, Media Co. and New Air were experiencing changes in their paradigm due to industry and business stage pressures, all five businesses were also trying to adapt to economic or competitive pressures stemming from the economic downturn. On the other hand employee expectations continued to evolve including due to changing generational employee base mix.

The current paradigms in use varied across both employers and employees. Employers varied slightly less but ranged from “parent/child” to “grown-up”. Employees, on the other hand, demonstrated a broader range including “employer,” “friend,” “family,” and “marriage.” A Drinks Inc. employer indicated it was important to build trust and understanding between “grown-ups”.

I think what we need to be clear about is why we treat employees like grown-ups. We need to make sure we do that, which again might sound really obvious, but I think sometimes in organizations it's built up to be a parent/child relationship...we need to be really clear with employees about the commercial drivers of the business. (Participant #12, Employer)

The employer believed that by educating all employees, individuals would have been better able to grasp some of the difficult choices the employer had to make. It was evident however that compatibility had not been achieved yet based on an employee's description of Drinks Inc.'s actions as those of a friend.

I think it almost feels like, you know, kind of [Drinks Inc.] wants to be your friend to a degree rather than just your employer and really kind of work to understand you, understand what motivates you, you know, work with you on challenges you have, work to make your working experience better and improved. (Participant #05, Employee)

Both the employer and the employee had reasonable points of view, but the “grown-up” and “friend” labels carried specific meanings which appeared inconsistent with each other. The most telling sign of this potential incongruence was the dehumanization of the organization by the employer and the anthropomorphism of the organization by the employee. By referencing the need for educating employees on the *commercial drivers* of the business, the employer signalled the organization's hierarchy of considerations in decision making and obligation to the business performance over the individual. According to the employee, the “friend” relationship carried expectations of understanding, taking an interest in the employee as a person, the employee's motivations, and helping improve the individual's capabilities. An exact match in paradigms was less important than ensuring the two paradigms were complimentary; however, even complimentary paradigms proved difficult to establish.

If the success of the relationship is based on reciprocity, it is important to establish an appropriate balance between the employer and employee relationship, assumptions, and expectations. Otherwise, as suggested in this example, behaviors

associated with the grown-up model may lead an employee operating from a friend or family model to feel as if he/she overinvested in the relationship and was betrayed by the unjust pressures of economic realities.

The potential for concern worsened by comparing other Drinks Inc. employee references. A second Drinks Inc. employee viewed the employment relationship as more of a transactional one, designed to serve the employer.

When you work in a major corporation I think one of the things I have learned is you cannot be if you want to force things your way, there's only one way. That's the front door because that's what they're going to do to you. (Participant #02, Employee)

This employee perceived no real room for dialogue or mutual interest while yet a third employee referred to the employment paradigm by “getting married to the company.”

The diversity of responses posed here was quite remarkable. Within the same organization there were at least four different views of the appropriate frame of reference for the employment relationship. It was no surprise that such varied perspectives resulted in a range of expectations. Drinks Inc. was not alone. Other employers faced similar difficulties.

Language may have seemed trivial, but it served as a sign post for the meaning the person was trying to convey. These meanings were indicators of the assumptions driving the employee’s behaviors, but also signalling the employee’s expectations of others’ behaviors. For this reason DIY and New Air focused on communication to ensure consistency in meaning and understanding of the employment relationship. The DIY employer focused on the employee ownership and actively described the type of relationship paradigm it believed would create the conditions for a Great Place to Work.

The ownership bit then is people own how they feel...It's the relationship you have with your person. If you're the managing director, it's the relationship you have with the ops director, but if you're the store manager, it's the relationship you have with a forklift. It's every single level that line manager/colleague relationship is all about the trust and the openness. (Participant #04, Employer)

While more explicit, this description clarified the acceptable meaning and behaviors behind the employee relationship and described the basis for the corporate culture that in doing so. DIY was the only one of the five organizations that reported developing this level of description as a part of its espoused employer brand.

Recognizing the importance of communication, New Air focused on the dialogue and information shared between both parties in the employment relationship. A New Air employer described how the relationship and dialogue relied on availability and accessibility to each other.

That is part of the brand. Do you know what I mean? We're here. Talk to us. Let's talk about how we build this together. Let's talk about how we create something different. Let's talk about how we keep it different. Let's talk about how we get you engaged in doing this. Rather than here's the handbook, it is very much, much, much more relationship orientated. (Participant #52, Employer)

New Air built the employment relationship into the core of its culture; however, the most important part is that it implied specific assumptions about expectations of motivations and behaviors. Implementing this intimate, more reciprocal relationship style did not come without difficulties. Employers mentioned the difficulties of applying these models throughout the world.

Introducing these models globally added a layer of complexity given the dynamic nature of these relationships and the varying economic conditions found in different

countries. Unfortunately, the relationships, norms, and expectations do not stop evolving if they were not addressed. Omitting them simply increased the likelihood of misunderstanding and disappointment, in other words of a gap.

In general, employers and employees expected the same thing: something in exchange for what they invested in each other. “At the end of the day, the quid pro quo for the employees is that they get a great career out of it, they're well rewarded for their efforts, and they enjoy very much working for this business (Participant #13, Employer).” As evidenced by the examples presented, the employment relationship was fundamental in understanding the assumptions driving employer and employee beliefs. Although each organization and employee operated from an implicit employment paradigm, only one organization articulated explicitly the type of employment relationship paradigm it desired and the related requirements and behaviors from employees. This explicitly approach gave DIY an anchor to continue to build consistency and understanding around the assumptions that drove relationships and expectations between the employee and employer as well as between employees. Communication, dialogue, and information were used to tease out and work through differences between paradigms. Global issues only increased the probability of increased distribution incongruence. Without making the implicit explicit, it would be difficult to address the direction, degree, and distribution of the employment relationship domain.

The Influence of Values

The second important employer brand gap domain was the *influence of values*. By this I mean how did employers and employees use values, and how important were

values to establishing congruence between the espoused and experienced employer brand? According to employer and employee interview data, the employer brand gap resulted from negative incongruence in two key areas, differences in uses of values and differences in range of inputs used to make sense of the employment experience. Both of these challenges made values a necessary, but insufficient condition for employee sense making.

Recent trends in employer brand practices led employers and employees to slightly different conclusions about whether values were sufficient for guiding the espoused employment experience. As mentioned earlier in this paper, employers reported various attempts of also using principles and some behavior guidelines to describe and influence employee experiences and expectations, but four of five *employers* relied heavily on values to describe the employment promise. In some cases, previous attempts had not worked.

This was not an easy problem to solve. Media Co.'s use of values definitions illustrated the challenge faced by employers. Previously, Media Co. had experimented with ways of being more "straight forward." Committed to the customer and the employee, Media Co. tried to clarify what was meant by one of the organization's values, *straightforward*. In an effort to distinguish between customer/employee applications, Media Co. created two definitions, one external and one internal which complicated matters as this employer commented, "We ended up with at least six or seven explanations of what the word straightforward meant. Which you can argue is anything but straightforward (Participant #39, Employer)." Its efforts to be more explicit only

made the values more confusing for employees to operationalize. Media Co. has since returned to a more consolidated version of values.

New Air. took the previous Media Co. approach, but used its leadership principles as their definition. Various employers and employees reported this helping define acceptable behavior. A few people also mentioned the principles' support in recognizing someone living the values. The subtext in the comment was that without them, the behaviour may have gone unnoticed or varied too widely to match some individuals' perceptions.

While employees demonstrated appreciation and belief in values, they used other elements to evaluate and make sense of their experiences. Some representative examples from Chapter 5 were employment benefits, working environment and compensation. Like customers (Oliver, 1980) employees also used day-to-day interactions and events as disconfirming evidence of espoused-experienced employer brand congruence. This created a significant difference between the employer's and employee's view of sufficient level of inputs and information required for alignment of stakeholder behaviors with the values.

The different use of values also played out in the commitment level experienced by employers and employees. As presented earlier in this paper, values statements triggered emotional reactions and tapped employee identities. As evidenced by Drinks Inc.'s distancing from an anthropomorphic employer model, the employer did not associate values with a personal commitment, yet, employees did.

Many employees interviewed were involved in front-line sales or customer service, charged with delivering on the organizations' promises and handling unmet customer expectations. In these cases, the corporate-personal identity link used to build the espoused employer brand also created a source of tension for employees. In some cases, difficulties delivering on values during extraordinary weather events exposed individuals personally in unexpected ways as this New Air employee dealing with weather-driven delays came face to face with.

I can tell the customer, 'Your flight is cancelled and this is what is going to happen.' Not, 'Your flight is cancelled but I don't know anything. You know, give me 5 minutes or 10 minutes to try to call someone and see what's going on, what we are going to try to do.' It just looks like unprofessional if a customer is like, "Okay. So what's going on? What's going to happen?" They are in your face. They want to know. (Participant #45, Employee)

Reflective of self-identify theory, tapping into employees personal values and hiring for person-organization values fit inevitably links employees personally to delivering these values to the customer. This New Air employee described the stress experienced by not being able to serve the customer in a manner congruent with the values. While emotional connections were intended benefits of employer brand, gaps at the values level could also raise unintended consequences.

It was interesting to note that most of the data that qualified in the values domain touched on an emotional and/or psychological gaps created for the individuals. These reactions were reminders that in creating associations through the espoused employer brand, employers were also stirring emotions associated by the espoused employer brand. In working with values it was important to recognize the need to define the appropriate

level of responsibility for ensuring the employees' well-being when serving on behalf of the organization and ensuring congruence with the employment relationship.

The second gap this domain appeared in employers' overdependence on values to define the employment experience. The clear focus created a slight false security as relying on values alone as most employers did omitted some basic elements of employees' work experience. A DIY employer acknowledged the risk of varying levels of quality in the employee value proposition associated with focusing primarily on values to guide behaviors.

What we do really well is the make you feel loved, make you feel welcome, but we don't do any of the basics. What happens is people forgive us. They join and they say well, it was what you said it was like from a culture perspective. You've got the rubbish stuff wrong...I felt really welcomed; people were lovely. I was really supported. No matter what job you're in you get that feedback. But, you know, my card didn't show up for three months and I wasn't paid on time.
(Participant #04, Employer)

Without the right balance of values and the additional elements, a high variability in quality of experienced employer brand was likely to occur. The DIY employer quoted above highlighted that frustrations and disappointments often go unreported or unnoticed because "we've sold the culture," but the lack of action was not an indication of continued engagement at previous levels. As discussed earlier, these unmet expectations caused cognitive dissonance that distracts and frustrates while the employee searches for ways to make sense of the situation. If repeated over time, the additive properties of satisfaction could have eroded belief and trust in the boss, the leadership or the organization. Values were a necessary part of the experienced employer brand and

provided the storyline for how artifacts of the various work experience were supposed to fit together; but, employees needed the artifacts to match the values consistently.

Clearly, values were important to the employer brand, but the difference in uses of values and sole reliance left a gap between what employees needed to make sense of the work experience and ensure espoused-experienced congruence. Without further clarification or broader reference points, employees' experiences varied unnecessarily and in some cases created significant personal exposure.

Delivery and Infrastructure

The next employer brand gap domain is *Delivery and Infrastructure*. Maybe the most visible of the four domains because the elements that comprise it were employees' moments-of-truth for espoused-experienced gaps. For purposes of this study, Delivery and Infrastructure referred to any internal tool, process, environmental feature or policy that affects an employee's productivity. Differences between employer and employee approaches to this employer brand domain occurred in three ways, individual touch point processes, the scope of responsibility, and frequency of encounter. Incongruences in these areas proved to be the litmus test for employers' ability to convert words into action and in the right way in the right place at the right time.

Individual Touch Point Processes. Use of touch point processes was the first significant incongruence in the Delivery and Infrastructure domain. Incongruences occurred in three ways, focus on relatively few touch points, variation in touch point experience, and difficulty transitioning the experience and expectations between touch

points. Unfortunately, these incongruences were also used by employees as disconfirming evidence of living the values.

Despite awareness of the range of individual touch points, as mentioned in Chapter 4, an analysis of touch point practices mentioned by employers highlighted the first challenge with touch points, a concentration of activity or focus on relatively few of the 12 key people processes or touch points (Rosethorn, 2009) at hand. Employers used touch points to address two of the three different stages of the employment experience, but in several cases were not confident in the congruence of the espoused-experienced experience. Three of the organizations, New Air, Drinks Inc., and DIY, that used this approach appeared to reflect Erikson and Gratton's (1997) signature processes approach. Unfortunately, focus on a few touch points did not ensure espoused-experienced congruence in the areas of focus and may have had the unintended consequence of neglecting the importance and impact of other touch point processes. For example, New Air focused on the orientation as well as the culture & leadership processes. However, talent management & career path processes were non-existent. On-boarding was a common area of interest and challenge.

The second challenge with touch points, variance in touch point experience, was observed in two examples, on-boarding and compensation. On-boarding was the first opportunity an employer had to deliver on the promise, making it particularly important. All organizations experienced espoused-experienced variance in individual processes. For example, Compu Int'l. worried about the likelihood of negative incongruence associated with the initial stage of joining the company.

One thing that really keeps me awake is that, you know, creating all of this messaging externally about kind of our future state and our vision of what life will be like if you come to work at [Compu Int'l.] And making sure that from the moment you decide to join our team, that when you come through the on-boarding process, that that experience matches up. (Participant #64, Employer)

Compu Int'l.'s focus on the on-boarding process reflected the company's recent commitment to aligning people and business strategies. By selecting the initial step in the employment process, Compu Int'l. hoped to influence employee interpretations of the espoused employer brand and shape employee expectations. Focus on on-boarding offered Compu Int'l. an impactful place to start reducing the espoused-experienced gap.

In a second example highlighted the potential impact of the incongruence. Media Co.'s employer recognized the touch point's undesired incongruence by highlighting its impact on the employment relationship, undesired fragility.

I think most people would say the first six months is like roller coaster where you think I've definitely made a bad decision and then it goes to oh, well you know, this is a really good project; I'm really enjoying this. (Participant #09, Employer)

The relationship was exposed for an extended period of time and based on the employer's comments, appeared to have happened to several people. While the bumpy start related to specific moments or touch points, first day to socialization, it apparently depended on the change in roles, work assignments, thus highlighting the importance of the work assignment. Each of these affected the relative incongruence between the espoused and experienced employer brand and had significant impact on the employee experience.

Unfortunately, employees used specific processes as disconfirmation of organizational values. This made each touch point important in delivering on the

espoused experience. As mentioned in Chapter 5, the bonus structure example and perceived promise of sharing in the profits in exchange for hard work caused cognitive and emotional dissonance in some of the organizations. Issues around reward systems, 2 of the 12 touch points (recognition & rewards; compensation & benefits) were expected. Compensation issues were one of the most common complaints heard by employees and were often written off by managers because people often believe they are never paid enough. However, the complaint from this case was different. It centered on the difference between the values promise and the employee's experience with the touch point and system designed to execute it. The example demonstrated the incongruence over the more controllable portion of the rewards systems and processes. This was a clear example of employees' frequent concern over the *how* instead of *what*, an issue that surfaced several times with employees.

Variation also happened across touch points. If organizations got a touch point "right", it was difficult to ensure and build on that success. This conflicted with employee expectations of consistency of delivery across the employment experience. DIY had experienced incongruences across touch points. In efforts to embed some of the values-driven softer cultural experiences, DIY had made significant improvements, but had not yet been able to align some of the basic experiences and artifacts to reflect the values. According to DIY's employer, these types of issues typically did not show up in turnover numbers. "They don't reject us if the culture is as we said it was (Participant #04, Employer)." Ironically, the goodwill and forgiveness may have been more corrosive than helpful. Basic employment responsibilities such as contract, salary payment, parking, etc.

were recognized as basic employment needs by employees in the study. If the employer did not meet the needs, employees would have likely been irritated or annoyed and depending on past experiences, been affected by the disconfirming evidence.

Finally, all of the companies experienced problems with touch point transitioning. Transitioning from the hiring process to the on-boarding process was particularly exposed. For example, Media Co. and Compu Int'l. offered special management training programs and recruited for specific positions and roles. Although attracted by other influencing factors discussed in Chapter 5, employees believed they accepted a specific job. For a few, this approach conflicted with fulfilment of their understanding of the original promise. Whether the result of dropped communications, work force planning hiccups, or a change in market conditions, expectations had a slow decay rate and were carried over from one touch point to another.

This was not a simple issue, but another example illustrates how results from the touch points can appear incongruous from the employees' perspective. Employers and employees had different views of the level and definition of commitment. In employees' minds, they were joining an organization, but had made a choice based on a specific role. The job was to define a starting point in their career, to signal which career trajectory they wanted. On the other hand, employers operated from a combined values-based, supply and demand paradigm. If a values fit had been established, but business needs had changed, employers offered the employee a different role. By not rescinding the offer of employment, employers believed they had demonstrated the commitment that had been established between the company and the individual. Some employees viewed this

commitment differently. In fact, when these changes happened, a Media Co. employee reported that many of the affected individuals left and went to work for a different organization. A Compu Int'l. employee described a similar experience.

When I came on board, I think nothing was available at that time for the job that I was expecting to do...business needs change every day, so one job can be available today and then next week probably that team doesn't exist anymore...I think that that was the main problem, right, not 100% alignment. (Participant #57, Employee)

Although still with the company, the employee referenced the problem this created and that it lasted for a couple of years.

Clearly employer focus on touch points as the main channel for espoused-experienced congruence proved challenging and had room for significant improvement. Both employers and employees recognized challenges ensuring congruence due to problems with perceptions of neglect due to concentration on signature processes, incongruence in specific touch points, and transitioning information between touch points. These challenges gained even more credence because of employees' tendency to use touch point experiences as disconfirmation of values. It was difficult to believe that these types of touch point incongruences would not have affected the employee's cognitive or emotional connection to the organization. Unfortunately, data indicated that employees expected espoused-experienced consistency across an even larger scope.

Scope of Responsibility. Employers and employees had different views of the scope of responsibility for the employment experience. Employees viewed all experiences as proof points of espoused-experienced congruence; however, they varied in their tolerance or importance across different proof points. The areas employees

considered significantly different from employers were largely defined by perceived level of control, comparison with external experiences, and ability to get the job done. For these reasons, the breadth of the range of proof points (touch points, day-to-day, critical incidents), tools, and working environment were all important in establishing espoused-experience congruence.

The range of experiences was the first important difference in scope. As mentioned in Chapter 4, each of the five companies in this study described their employer brand approach as ensuring delivery of the employment experience through employee touch points. Collectively, employers reported use of 10 out of 12 candidate and employee related processes. Awareness of all 12 touch points (Rosethorn, 2009) confirmed the likelihood of expected employer brand encounter. Yet each company only reported established processes to support four of the eight employment stage touch point processes. On the other hand, as seen in Chapter 5, employees expected to encounter the espoused employer brand across a broader range of interactions than employers described was in their remit. These encounters became proof points of congruence for employees. Employees described significant elements in each of the 12 touch points as well as tools, day-to-day experiences, and critical incidents (corporate, personal, special). Although critical incidents were the data points most likely to become delighters, if done poorly, they also had the potential to become extreme disappointments. Employees expected message, behaviour, and artifact congruence across the range of these proof points. Clearly, a difference in the range of responsibility existed.

Employer choice of areas of focus processes was interesting as well. Some organizations did not use the processes or practices that demonstrated the strongest ability to create shared values and culture. Tools were used sparsely in employer descriptions of espoused employer brand scope and the equivalent of employee proof points. These differences in employer-employee expected espoused employer brand encounter made the scope of responsibility the next important aspect of Delivery and Infrastructure congruence.

It was not surprising then, that employees described negative incongruences among various espoused employer brand encounters. Employees felt that unstable systems or tools were unacceptable and caused employees to question validity of values claims. Some Media Co. employees found it difficult to live the brand because of systems instability.

The biggest issue that we have is around the systems. The systems can be a little bit unstable at times. And for the large company that they are delivering the volume of product that they're delivering, I do think that the systems should be more stable. (Participant #34, Employee)

To this employee, the difficulty performing the job and the brand reputation for quality conflicted with the state of the systems. This made the state of the systems unacceptable. A hint was made to the trade-off of quality for growth signalled by introduction of the systems before they were ready. On a less crucial topic, ongoing information needs, this Drinks Inc. employee also raised a question regarding internal information systems and tool user friendliness.

The Intranet isn't...very well set up. They have a [company] news site, but that's not kept up to date very often. So I think they should put all these things on, with all the historical ones, so you can go, and

you can regularly check what's happening. (Participant #07, Employee)

For this employee, tools were a source of information, but also part of the experience and effort to make it easier to do the job. These two examples represent extremes of the systems/tool scope expectation. While both may not be possible, identifying where on the spectrum of delivery employer and employee expect to be is important.

The second area of scope difference, comparison to external perceptions, reflected the constant employee benchmarking and reconciliation with current and past experiences. Although it may have seemed demanding, employees not only defined the experience in terms of internal standards, but they also brought their knowledge of the possible into work. This meant that they expected their work tools to reflect their job demands and work practices as well as some of their consumer experiences.

Along these lines, employers and employees demonstrated different sensitivities to the third factor, the working environment, in their view of espoused-experienced scope congruence as mentioned in Chapter 5. The employer-employee environment gap was a long standing issue, but it was not equally shared across all five organizations. Media Co. and DIY employees spoke out most strongly in the number of cases that mentioned the gap between the values and the quality of the working environment. The degree of the gap was most significant between head office and field sites. Differences existing between head and field offices were not novel, but created cognitive dissonance related to the values stated by the respective organizations.

Employees included environment in the scope of the employer brand. Employers were more instrumental in their approach toward working environment issues. Whether

was a concern with parking spaces, changes in working location to save money, tolerance for a broken water tap in the men's bathroom, employers and employees viewed and interpreted these signals differently. For employers, they were another task on the list, but for employees the issues ranged from disappointments to enablers.

On the positive side, the data and conceptual framework indicated that misaligned support processes mattered because they might contain the seeds of opportunities to improve emotional affect and espoused-experienced congruence. A DIY employee explained the gap between pride, a *Great Place to Work* and a poorly maintained working environment (office space).

If you go off-sales to a store and go to a canteen, it will be ugly...you'll have off-sales areas that are dishevelled, are serving the worst possible coffee out of a machine, with really bad facilities, a knackered microwave or a kettle that– stuff that really doesn't work...It says to me, the irony of it, is we're a DIY retailer working construction and we have part of a group that's part of building materials and we don't work in the best environment. It could probably do with a lick of paint and knocking down and rebuilding. All the stuff that we sell and we say do, we live it and breathe it in our environment? (Participant #25, Employee)

Many times people have written off and joked about the 'cobbler's kids with holes in their shoes' syndrome as it appeared in this employee's example. The importance of the environment's affect was two-fold, it was demotivating and even moreso when issues were ignore, and as a proof point, it raised a question about the authenticity of the employment promise. While such challenges of authenticity may not have caused an immediately public reaction or employee departure, the doubts might have damaged the employees' trust, pride or belief in the organization.

In the past many of these environmental factors were described by Herzberg's hygiene-motivator framework (1987) as potential for dissatisfaction. Data from this study indicated that continued neglect of these areas had the potential to erode trust and belief in the authenticity of the organization's espoused values and employer brand. Employers established many of these operational aspects; therefore, in the minds of employees, employers had control over the outcomes. Consequently, negative incongruences in this domain generated "why" questions, indicating employees viewed managerial inaction as a cause of cognitive dissonance.

Frequency of Encounter. Many of the incongruences in Delivery and Infrastructure stemmed from differences in regularity of espoused employer brand encounters. As illustrated in Chapter 4, Employers focused on planned interventions, while Chapter 5 described the ubiquitous nature of employee expectations and reliance of proof points.

Employers focus on the touch points to coordinate and standardize processes demonstrated an awareness of the power of coordinated and repeated activities. Inevitably though, these led to planned processes with business oriented, period-driven (monthly, quarterly, semi-annually, annually) milestones. Employees expected to encounter the espoused employer brand when they encountered any experience, not just those identified or driven by the calendar. In many ways, the employee expectation reflected the role culture played in delivering the espoused employer brand. Similarly, for employees, the experience happened everywhere at any time. Changes in the nature of work made the employees' expectations prolific and even more idiosyncratic.

Three of the organizations understood this change and had adjusted their espoused employer brand approach to address the *anywhere, anytime* Delivery and Infrastructure employee expectation. DIY, Media Co., and Compu Int'l. explained their move away from a sequential delivery model toward a more *anywhere, anytime* delivery model. A DIY employer described a move to a six pillars approach to better reflect the reality of the employment experience and enable the espoused employer brand to be omnipresent.

It isn't about one of these; it's the impact of all of them together. Because Great Place To Work really lives. If you meet it there and you meet it there and you meet it there and you meet it there, you're meeting it all the time. It's where you work, it's who you are, it's coming at you in all-different directions. If you meet it here, but that it doesn't exist anywhere else, then you join and it's not what they said it was. (Participant #04, Employer)

DIY included *Attract & Select, Integrate, Drive Performance, Develop, Listen & Communicate, Reward & Recognize* as enabling pillars and saw the pillar as ubiquitous. Similarly, Media Co.'s employer described their evolution as a means of aligning their employer brand practices with a more lifecycle approach.

When people join the team, getting the work done, getting the best out of people, recognizing and rewarding people, when people lead/leave the team, we've kind of aligned all of our HR policies and processes to that very simple employee lifecycle. (Participant #01, Employer)

Media Co. used the employee lifecycle to incorporate some of the previously missed encounters around the everyday life and to move away from a career-progress-based model. Although both DIY and Media Co.'s new approaches included career transition points, the models focused less on the business calendar and more on employee activities that reinforce corporate culture and day-to-day encounters. Both companies defined similar activities as important, but the ways in which they addressed them reflected their

respective corporate culture. Effectiveness of DIY and Media Co.'s practices or related challenges was not discussed because the practices had not been in use long enough to determine their success.

In many of the Delivery and Infrastructure experiences, intentions were good, but the execution was unsatisfactory. Differences in employee views of touch points, scope of control, and frequency of delivery provided explained the incongruence many employers and employees described in general. With so many moving parts, the lack of congruence was not surprising and presented tangible opportunities for improvement.

The importance of the opportunity around delight as related to the Delivery and Infrastructure domain was unexpected though. As described, not all gaps were bad. The critical incidents unrecognized by employers in general, but sometimes gracefully managed by line managers, were the source of emotional connection for employees. The Delivery and Infrastructure domain was the most riddled with incongruences, yet had some of the largest opportunities for upside, making it a domain worth prioritizing. A perceived gap existed in the scope of what employers and employees considered when determining the congruence of Delivery and Infrastructure domain elements. Employees defined the congruence by a larger set of encounters or proof points including touch points, critical incidents, and tools.

Opportunities

The fourth domain, opportunities, was the most mentioned and most important noted in the work experience. As indicated in Chapter 5, expectations in this area were also some of the most influenced by factors outside the employers' control. The

opportunities domain was fuelled by and included elements identified by employers and employees that supported, hindered, encouraged, or discouraged the concept of progress and development of the organization and individuals inside it. The notion of “being bigger than one’s self” reflected employees’ connection of self-identity to opportunities mentioned by several employees.

Employees and employers shared a mutual desire for progress and continuous improvement of human resources, the employees. In fact, both groups were somewhat opportunity obsessed. Most employers echoed this New Air employer’s sentiment, “There’s always room for improvement (Participant #40, Employer).” Twenty-seven out of 47 employee interviewees mentioned opportunities as an employer brand factor using the emic code set. Although opportunities were the most frequently mentioned employer brand factor for all five organizations, the number of cases that mentioned opportunities stood out in Media Co. and Compu Int’l. at 80% and 100% of employees interviewed, respectively.

Employees developed their beliefs about opportunity promises from explicit and implicit signals. Employers used cultural artifacts, such as storytelling and performance forms, to signal the opportunities available for individuals as a result of strong reputation and continued business growth. Drinks Inc. and DIY used *Great Place to Work* as a way of branding their employer brand efforts. Both companies also designed performance forms as a way to embed the concepts and values in performance conversations. To the Drinks Inc.’s employee, the company making the future aspirations box the largest one

on the form, and a blank slate signalled the importance of the individual and values to the employee.

After you fill in the [requisites] like your name and job title, it's there. It kind of defines the opportunities, what are your aspirations. And the best thing is there's no text there. There's no, like "within your job" or this. It's just a blank canvas...we're creative people. We're people with real lives who want to achieve things. (Participant #12, Employee)

This reinforcement of the values and the focus on opportunities, whatever the employee wanted them to be, was a strong and powerful message to the employee. The interpretation of the box size signalled much more than a space to complete. As the interview continued, the employee recounted the use of storytelling used by the employer to complete the meaning of the box.

I got told the example, when I began of someone said that they wanted– I forget what the business was, but they wanted a business, their own independent company when their kids had left university. And [Drinks Inc.] structured their entire career around them getting that person to that point... You can't say any more than that. (Participant #12, Employee)

Both parties understood the importance of the opportunities and the power of following through on them.

Reputation also played an important role in the implicit signals of opportunity for employees. Corporate and product reputation signalled growth and the type of opportunities to employees as well. Specifically in New Air's case, employers deliberately contrasted New Air with the industry norms to communicate the culture and create a perception of opportunities. New Air employers confirmed this expectation causal relationship in employee survey data, "We see in our data [that] people also come here for career opportunity (Participant #41, Employer);" but, this is where the challenge

started. With the focus on the size and growth for providing the opportunities, companies, like New Air were challenged to provide enough opportunities at the individual level.

That's a big area that we're struggling with, and that's actually one of the biggest areas of complaints of our [colleagues], is they get here, they thought there was a lot of career opportunity, but there's not [as much as they expected]. (Participant #41, Employer)

Employees at New Air confirmed the incongruence described by the New Air employer. Employees believed opportunities were not playing out as promised. Employee responses from the other organizations echoed this gap citing a reduced number of new opportunities resulting from decreased growth over their tenure. Employees also mentioned that the opportunities which did exist, often limited employee access.

Likely the result of the economic downturn, the number of growth related opportunities were fewer. In fact, corporate downsizing meant that longer tenured individuals were not moving on and the constant purging reduced the number of available positions as described by a Drinks Inc. employee.

The number of roles at the top are kind of ever decreasing. so you know, it's quite unusual now for people to get, you know, internally promoted in market to a level three, which when I joined seven years ago, was the aspiration for all of our marketing grads...and you do see frustration with people coming in. They're coming in at grad level. They're coming in at level six. They're doing their couple of rotations. They got to level five. They've been great brand managers. They got to level four; great sort of senior brand managers and then it's kind of, you know, where do I go from here? (Participant #05, Employee)

In addition to the decreased career track velocity, numerous restructures had removed middle level management. Another Drinks Inc. employee has seen this happen so many

times that the employee shied away from applying for a middle management position because of the perceived probability of being *downsized*.

At the moment now, I don't want to get promoted. People get promoted. The last line of our organization, they got sacked. When you get to level 3, it's like, oh you're expensive now. Let's get rid of you. (Participant #07, Employee)

Whether or not the employee's perception was correct, observation of what had happened to others changed this employee's level of engagement.

For those roles that still existed and employees who continued to pursue them, some employees mentioned limited access to many of these opportunities reflecting their view of an opportunity incongruence. Individuals from two organizations mentioned the use of online career and job site tools and supporting policies to ensure all jobs were posted and available to everyone; but, their actual experiences with application on these sites left them in disbelief as evidenced by this employees experience at Drinks Inc..

We have a career shop, online where you can see all the vacancies that's available around the world. All the different functions at all the different levels. And I've asked myself this question, because I've seen roles, new roles appear that has never appeared in the career shop and somebody's been appointed into it. (Participant #02, Employee)

Employees explained that access depended more on one's line manager than the tools promoted by the employer. Whether accurate or not, employees believed that respected line managers had access to better networks, better roles, better projects, and therefore, better opportunities for their people. "Any of the things about, that we say, what kind of a place it is going to be, we want it to be, are 80, 90 % dependent on the person that you work for (Participant #56, Employee)."

Although employers and employees appreciated the value of opportunities as well as the powerful attraction they provided, perceptions of fulfilment of the opportunities differed. Employers had a tendency to think of opportunities as a collective set, a group of success stories in which the company could feel proud. The employees, on the other hand, were very interested in the discrete opportunity for them. This basic difference in the definition of success and point of reference led employers and employees to very different conclusions regarding opportunities. This Drinks Inc. employee talks about how he translated the general opportunities into very specific ones that might be a fit for his interests.

You hear about us looking at [drink brand] and everything and anything and with these guys building up cash you gonna say well hey there is something in the air. ... I'm very keen to hear these things coming in because it gives us a huge opportunity to where we want to go. How does [Drinks Inc.], as a company, win more business, increase its market sharing in an ever tight competitive world? How do I do that? (Participant #02, Employee)

Of particular note was the employee's closing line. This demonstrated how the individual translated this down to a personal opportunity. Media Co. employees painted the same picture of the benefits of the reputation and perception of the recruiter's promises.

I think the biggest thing is the opportunities. The opportunities for growth, the high-performance you can do whatever you want to do, promotion you know you can stretch ahead, you can really succeed and drive and do whatever you want to do basically. (Participant #07, Employee)

Translation of the opportunities to the individual level indicated the employees' motivations and interpretations of the espoused employer brand. Now more than ever, employees were translating the explicit and implicit signals into "what was in it for me".

The story was not all doom and gloom. The power of opportunities had also been used as a tool to convert espoused-experienced gaps and unexpected situations into great opportunities as explained by this Drinks Inc. employee.

I came to realize everything was informal, and no processes, no files, everything was, in my view, really messy. But then I thought, again, this is an opportunity for me because if I do the right thing and I would learn from it and I can construct something, build something good for the company. That would be great for my personal experience and for the company, too. (Participant #30, Employee)

The employee went on to win an award for the quality and value of the work completed to turn this situation around. For a New Air employee, the promise of making a difference was enough for one person to move from the defence to the airline industry and seek out a way to make a mark on a new company in a troubled industry.

It is one of the things that I love about this company is, you can be and do whatever you want here. There are no limitations. It's one of the reasons why there are so many pilots in management here. (Participant #50, Employee)

Although this employee was able to see and take the opportunities, others needed a bit of help connecting the dots and gaining access. With help from mentors, coaches, or line managers, employees believed it was possible to identify and seize the opportunities in different situations.

The data indicated a negative incongruence between the way employers and employees approached, made sense of, and measured success. At the macro level employers pointed to many successes, systems and tools in place to facilitate the continuous development and tailor career paths; but, at the individual employee level, the opportunities did not materialize in the same manner as promised. In other words, the

same promise created consistent expectations, but the availability of these options actually varied by person for several reasons.

The opportunities gap also demonstrated a significant degree of incongruence due to its overwhelming importance to employees. A gap in this domain meant departure. In some domains employees appreciated and tolerated outcomes if they were managed and communicated well, but in the opportunities domain, intent and effort did not make up for unmet expectations as described by a Media Co. employee.

So I think it wasn't dishonesty. It wasn't like, Oh, you know, if they see talent there and if they want a reputable business, they perhaps might exaggerate or— not make fast promises, but imply sort of more opportunity than there is to do something. And then, I would say if it doesn't actually meet your expectations, then people just leave.
(Participant #16, Employee)

Despite a willingness to give the employer the benefit of the doubt, the employee was quite “matter of fact” about the likely outcome of an opportunities domain gap, departure. This approach was familiar to many of the interviewees as demonstrated by this DIY employee’s reason for leaving previous employment.

I didn't have a picture of this is what it really looks like. A lot of it was around what were the reasons I wanted to leave [previous company]. And by leaving [previous company], would it address my concerns or aspirations? So that was around location, a bit around career opportunities, and a bit about what's the team working environment. (Participant #25, Employee)

To complicate matters, in addition to seeking opportunities, employees also had beliefs about acceptable timeframes for opportunities to materialize as expressed by this DIY employee.

I joined the business for the view to sort of probably in the next couple of years progressing into a bigger role within the organization.

... 24 months, 36 months that's where I'd like to be. (Participant #29, Employee)

Employees had multiple reasons for their interest in opportunities and career progression. In addition to the link to compensation, sense of accomplishment, and making a difference, many times it was simply to keep one's intrigue and continued development.

They are willing to give you an immense amount of responsibility if you are willing to take it. And, you know, I've never been bored in the 10 years I've been here, to be honest. (Participant #60, Employee)

As evidenced by the Compu Int'l. employees' perspective, the focus on opportunities started from a shared belief and understanding of the importance and benefit to creating great opportunities for great people. Unfortunately, the data indicated that a significant espoused-experienced gap existed. The shared opportunity obsession suffered from perceptions of reduced opportunities, limited access, and differences in definitions of success. The data indicated this problem existed for all five organizations, but the three largest organisation, who were arguably in the most competitive industries, Compu Int'l., Media Co. and Drinks Inc., had more pronounced gaps.

Is Perfect Congruence Possible?

Theoretically, perfect congruence was improbable and undesirable. In order to achieve perfect congruence, all factors would be required to stay constant or move in perfect concert. The likelihood that multiple factors such as environmental, strategic, professional and personal employee would remain constant was extremely unlikely, therefore, the increasingly competitive reality of the businesses made 100% convergence at the same point in time virtually impossible. Moreover, the need to maintain

competitive advantage derived from the organization's success ensured the long-term viability of the firm. The benefits of this success were important to employees and employers as evidenced in many of the reasons given for initial and on-going attraction to the organization. These covered identity, opportunity, stability, and progress.

Employers and employees agreed. Both groups stated that they did not believe perfect congruence was possible. Despite the compulsion to improve as evidence by multiple occurrences of comments such as "there's always room for improvement", employers from the five companies agreed that getting closer to congruence was desirable and important. Even employers who described their respective employer brand as an accurate description of the current working experience did not believe that achieving 100% was feasible. Introduction of employer brand will accelerate this increase in congruence by explicitly defining the promise and demonstrating the organization's ability to deliver on the promise. An employer New Air agreed on the improbability of 100% congruence, but for different reasons.

I don't know if you can ever get it 100%. Take that question and say it's really engagement, how engaged are your [employees], I think if you look at engagement data, it tends to be hovering in like the 30-40% range for most companies. So, [being in the sixties]...we're up there as a really good one. But there's always room for improvement. The challenge is, can you ever get to 100% and maintain your cost and financial advantage. (Participant #40, Employer)

This employer viewed the challenge as one of trade-offs between employee engagement and cost constraints. This is an interesting insight because it implies that while congruence could be limited by its practicalities, it may also result from a difference

between how accountants and employers view the costs of achieving congruence, as expenses or investments.

Summary of Employer Brand Gap

This chapter compared espoused employer brand practices to employee conceptualization of the work experience to identify and understand the employer brand gap and how it manifests. Examples from this chapter supported the employee as customer metaphor, employer brand links to employee engagement, and development of a framework to understand the gap characteristics while providing insights to potential solutions for reducing the gaps. The framework presented concluded that gaps were described along four dimensions, direction, degree, distribution, and dependability, and occurred primarily in four domains, comprising the espoused-experienced employer brand gap. Customer satisfaction literature provided support for the notion of employee as customer metaphor and provided the theoretical and empirical background to interpret employee sense making data from this study. By using a customer satisfaction approach we were able to translate the met, unmet, exceeded, and delighted responses from employers and employees into two types of responses, satisfaction and delight. From the data collected and presented here, we can confirm that gaps do and will always exist, but they are important to understand and manage appropriately. Now that I have discussed employer brand gaps and relative congruence between the espoused and the experienced employer brand, I will turn my attention to the implications and suggestions for further research.

Chapter 7

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The objective of this dissertation was to empirically explain the espoused-experienced employer brand gap encountered in the employment phase of the employee lifecycle across five organizations. To accomplish this I compared employer brand practices and processes with the ways employees make sense of their work experience to characterize similarities and differences between the two approaches.

The literature review suggested previous studies oversimplified employer brand by focusing on the employer's perspective, overlooking the significance of the employee's experience for employer brand management. This oversight had two effects. It disregarded a basic tenant of strategic brand management, which is reducing espoused-experienced brand gaps, and it limited management's ability to take specific action on gaps observed. Employers stated knowledge of some of the gaps, but had focused on changing the practice rather than understanding the drivers behind the gaps, in other words, treating the symptom not the cause.

By taking this approach, empirically identified similarities between the employee and customer experience sense making processes leveraged customer satisfaction literature to develop a deeper understanding of the employer brand gap. Discussions with employers and employees also provided substantial evidence of their belief in links between employer brand gap and employee engagement.

Supported by the literature, the employer brand gap was best explained as a single gap, representing an amalgamation of four key domains identified from the data. These

domains represented relevant areas of common incongruence between the employee experience and organization's espoused experience. The incongruence occurred along four dimensions (direction, degree, distribution, dependability) which described each domain's contribution to the employer brand gap and provided direction for employer brand management action.

The study set out to answer four questions:

1. How do employees make sense of their work experience at their current employer?
2. How does the employee approach compare with the respective employer's employer brand practices used to shape the employee work experience?
3. Is there a gap between the employees' and their current employer's employer brand approach?
4. In what ways does the organizational culture shape the employee's experience and expectations?

The Nature of the Employer Brand Gap

Three features of the nature of the employer brand gap emerged from the data. First, the way employees make sense of the employer brand gave rise to the employer brand gap. Employees incorporated signals and information from the first two stages of the employment lifecycle to shape two key components of their work experience sense making process, expectations and experiences. Employee expectations were heavily influenced by factors external to the work experience at the current employer such as company reputation and past personal and work experiences. Internal factors such as signals from leaders and formal communications also played an important role. Current work experiences were influenced significantly by day-to-day experiences, critical

incidents, line manager interactions, peer interactions, and structural support. The employers used branding, communications, and operating processes to try to influence employee expectations and experiences.

Whether accurate or not, employee interpretations of the espoused brand combined with the individual employee's other beliefs generated expectations of the working relationship, the values, the overall working environment, the opportunities, and the personal benefits from these. Because of this, expectations became the initial and on-going benchmark for employees. Employees continued to experience the working reality as they encountered touch points and other critical incidents at various points in time. Thus work and life experiences provided disconfirming evidence employees used to compare and evaluate the experience against expectations.

This difference in the employee's conceptualization of employer brand was not only critical, but also added an important component in our understanding of employer brand and research. Omission of the employee perspective until now accounts for oversimplification of the concept and past oversight of the employer brand gap.

The second feature of the nature of the employee brand gap and its characteristics was the relative importance of past experiences and expectations in employee sense making and the similarity to customer satisfaction literature. Influence of experience and expectations largely uncontrolled by the employer explained the differences between the experience espoused by the employer and the expected and actual employee experience. Expectation deviations created cognitive dissonance or emotional reactions that needed to be explained. Depending on the relative level of satisfaction, gaps registered either a

positive or negative value. Positive values registered satisfaction or in extreme cases, delight; negative values represented dissatisfaction or in extreme cases, extreme disappointment or deal breakers. Extreme positive and negative values, respectively, were described as sources of emotional connection and trust, or grounds for departure.

The employee sense making process and characterization of the gap values were similar to what we know about the role of expectations in customer satisfaction experiences (Coye, 2004). Also like customers (Rust et al., 1996), the amount of information individuals processed while evaluating the encounters as well as the frequency of the experience and the evaluation played a role in employee experience of satisfaction and delight. The data in this study provided empirical evidence for extending the use of the employee as customer metaphor.

Finally, comparisons between the employer and employee approaches confirmed existence of the gap and explained the third feature of the nature of the gap identified in this study, the domain-dimension framework of the employer brand gap. Analysis of data identified four domains relevant to the generation of employer brand gaps. The four domains were employment relationship, values, delivery and infrastructure, and opportunities. In addition, four dimensions were identified that described the type of domain deviation. These were direction (positive, negative), degree (magnitude/importance of the gap), distribution (consistency of the gap across different groups or individuals), and dependability (consistency over time).

Throughout these findings, employers and employees provided cultural evidence used to explain the ways in which discussed, demonstrated, and made sense of the

espoused-experienced gap. The literature suggested that employer brand was the embodiment of the culture. As such, culture shaped the employee's experiences and expectations and was deeply embedded in the key influencers described by my revised conceptual framework. The internal signals from leaders and formal communications shaped expectations, while day-to-day experiences, critical incidents, line manager interactions, peer interactions, tools, structural factors, feedback, work processes, and policies influenced the experiences and became proof points of the employer brand congruence. In other words, culture became the frame through which the employee experienced much of the employer brand; thus, culture not only played a critical role in explaining the gap, but was a major instigator of the gap. In fact, culture was a major driver in the reason for studying the difference between what the organization *says* about employment experience and how it differs from what the organization *does*.

Implications of the Study

The study produced several implications for the practice. Relevant implications were identified in four areas, strategic implications of employer brand, employer brand management, tools for line managers, and next steps for learning and development leaders.

Strategic Implications of Employer Brand

Each of the organizations in this study mentioned strategic objectives as a reason for increased employer brand efforts. The promise of sustainable competitive advantage is a common promise attraction to employer brand. However, this study has shown that without close attention, organizations may experience some of the pitfalls of employer

brand such as escalating expectations or increased scrutiny of espoused-experienced employer brand congruence. If done well, though, employer brand gap offers a tool to improve organizational performance, develop strategic employer-employee relationships, and improve employee engagement.

Improving organizational performance. If performance and impact of average managers could be raised even 1%, it could reduce the employer brand gap and improve employee engagement significantly for the majority of an organization's employee population. Improving the Delivery and Infrastructure and Opportunities domains would impact operational performance for organization and individual employees.

Accomplishing this, however, would likely require significant investment in numerous layers of management for all performance cohorts. This approach runs contrary to popular talent management and learning and development practices of investing in high potential individuals.

Importance of employee knowledge. The question of employee research has been raised in the literature (Barrow & Moseley, 2005; Rosethorn, 2009), but evidence for it has been presented only theoretically. This study confirmed the importance of employee knowledge and perceptions as well as their dynamic and idiosyncratic nature. Without understanding the employee perspective, employers cannot predict the likely impact of work-experience-related changes on the employee population overall or to specific individuals. Without more rigorous data gathering, analysis, and tracking, organizations and managers are unlikely to improve the incongruence found across individual

employees or across functional, business line, or geographic pockets or sub-groups of employees.

Yet, without this finer data and more informed understanding, organizations are in direct conflict with the key message, “employees are our most important asset.” If understanding customer insights is critical to business performance, then developing similarly rigorous understanding of employers’ “most important asset” is business critical too.

Based on evidence from this study I would argue for the evaluation, design and introduction of an employee relationship management system to record, track, and analyze employer-employee expectations and experiences to enrich the employment relationship and improve delivery of the career development promises and investments made across the employment lifecycle. The system would require inputs from employers and employees alike, be able to capture espoused, factual, and subjective employee data. It would support a more coordinated and partnership-oriented approach to employee performance and career management.

Importance of expectations management. Without a better way of evaluating the discrete value of incremental additions to the employer brand, companies run the risk of ending up in a features spiral. Data from the study indicated that as employees experienced new features, they integrated these features into their expectations set. Extending the data and customer satisfaction literature, if employee expectations continue to rise they will be increasingly difficult for employers to meet and exceed. Continued introduction of new features and benefits without an understanding of their incremental

cost and value and assessing their fit with the employer brand, risks diluting limited financial and operational resources.

Employer Brand Management

Findings from this study indicated that although employers had made significant progress in their employer brand practices since its popularization in 1997, they had not developed sufficient employer brand management practices. Many of the gaps stemmed from areas under management control and related to traditional operating process challenges. The power of the employer brand lies in the organization's ability to make a promise and then deliver on it (Ready, Hill & Conger, 2008). Data showed that continual follow-through builds trust. Trust is a critical factor for employee engagement and the employment relationship; therefore, developing better methods for employer brand management is important to achieving employer brand benefits.

Assess areas for focus by conducting an employer brand gap audit. Employer brand gap is multifaceted and complex. Effectively targeting areas of priority and significant return will require investment in time and effort. Companies would benefit from collecting relevant data to better understand and make informed decisions on where to start. To do this, I propose conducting a survey reviewing the four gap domains identified in the study (employer relationship, values, delivery and infrastructure, and opportunities) and impressions of their performance on the four dimensions (direction, degree, distribution, dependability) relative to employee expectations. This information could be used to determine areas of greatest opportunity and importance for management attention. These data could then be analyzed to identify employer brand gap improvement

opportunities at the organization and group level, and employee relationship management at the individual level. Best practices would suggest that this survey should be conducted periodically to track results over time.

Managing the gap domains. The four domains identified in the study, employer relationship, values, delivery and infrastructure, and opportunities, present areas for focused improvement. Achieving congruence in these aspects of employer brand would also improve overall employer brand congruence.

- Employment Relationship – First step is clearly to agree on the appropriate metaphor for the employment relationship. Then employers should co-create meaning with employees to reduce the number of conflicting assumptions driving many of the misalignments discussed throughout the study.
- Values – Based on the employment relationship metaphor, the importance of values in the employer brand concept will be agreed. Employers must then make explicit the elements contributing to this shared meaning. From this, identify opportunities to draw links between other cultural artifacts meaningful to employees. Finally, confirm specific cultural elements that do not reflect the agreed meanings and adjust policies and processes as appropriate.
- Delivery and Infrastructure – Probably the most challenging domain, but the most pervasive in the data and representing the highest frequency of employee encounters. Employers should identify process and other improvement opportunities and coordinate handoffs between touch points to ensure a consistent tailored approach throughout the employment experience.

- Opportunities – This last domain was a frequent deal-breaker with employees. It is clear that effectively managing opportunities expectations is critical. Employers should identify ways to create a range of career options for continued development and advancement. Another tact that should be considered is to redefine the belief that ‘up’ is the only way to progress by creating lateral and multi-directional career paths and articulating the specific value and connections to employee development as a result of these opportunities.

Employer brand gap reduction as a means of improving engagement. Throughout the study, employers offered examples of links between employer brand gap and engagement. In fact, New Air and Media Co. described employer brand gap as a cause of lower than hoped employee engagement scores. Employee descriptions of the gap’s affect on their engagement level confirmed the employer’s beliefs. These data suggested that by reducing the employer brand gap, employers could increase engagement. Similarly, all employers saw a connection between the employee engagement surveys and the employer brand gap. Using employee engagement scores to measure financial and operational impact of employer brand management should be explored. Given the number of tools and metrics, it would be advisable to bottom out any possibilities to use existing metrics and tools to bring these insights together rather than introduce new metrics unless necessary.

Tools for Line Management

Employers and employees described the role of the line manager as critical to the employee experience. For several of the organizations, the line manager was *the* carrier

of the culture and by extension of the employer brand. Many of the insights found in this study contain useful information to help line managers in developing individual members in their team. With better knowledge of what influences employee experiences and expectations, line managers should find it easier to communicate, develop, and coach their employees. This should help the line manager improve each employee experience over time or at least identify where the experience and the expectation are misaligned.

Managing Employee Careers as an Investment Portfolio. Based on the data collected from employers and employees, an investment portfolio seems the best description for understanding how employees value and make decisions to invest in their work experience. Like a portfolio investor, an employee has an outcome expectation, a risk profile, available resources and a willingness to invest. Extending the portfolio metaphor, the employer becomes the portfolio manager, presenting different opportunities and articulating the expected returns and risks of each opportunity.

This employee experience supports the risk-return framework. The employee's return is their experience coupled with the uncertainty that they are asked to absorb. This return is provided in exchange for invested time and energy. While the returns are not always financial, they must have value to the individual. Similar to investors, employee risk-return appetite changes over time and can shift back and forth depending on one's personal situation and other trade-offs.

By thinking of the employment relationship in this way, employers may be able to move the discussion out of the personified definition that seems to cloud most relationship metaphors documented in this study. Conceptualizing the employment

experience in this way may also be useful to understanding how to help minimize the employer brand gap for individual employees.

Next Steps for Learning and Development Leaders

Employer brand, as described in this study, is a complex, yet powerful concept. The inherent complexity suggests training for employers and employees to better understand the range of elements involved in employer brand would increase its impact. Both parties need to better understand how the relevant pieces interrelate and work, as well as their individual role in delivering a high quality experience in the context of the employer brand.

Focus on line manager training is of particular importance. Employers and employees alike described the line manager as the carrier of culture. This study further expanded this notion to describe the line manager role in managing the employer brand gap at the individual level. As evidenced by the data, Line Managers scaffold the employee sense making process and are both formal and informal conduits of the employer brand. Learning and Development leaders would find good investments in focusing on development of this critical group, their knowledge of the employee sense-making process as well as their role in the culture and reconciliation of the espoused-experienced employer brand.

Recommendations for Future Research

Comparing employee and employer perspectives produced rich and unanticipated findings. In fact, I thought the data from this study would support the view for a separate way to study employer brand as argued by others in the literature. However, by looking

across disciplines and for intersections in employer and employee perspectives, employee sense-making, and gap management, this study produced interesting support for leveraging the employee as customer metaphor from customer satisfaction literature and the importance of the multidimensional nature of employer brand which may accelerate our understanding of employer brand management. Application of existing knowledge to other, multidisciplinary challenges may also support a more practical use for research. Knowledge innovation in this way is particularly important for the line managers and employees who are often burdened with delivering the senior leaders' initiative du jour.

Refining the Employer Brand Management Framework

The domain-dimension framework presented in this study presents a solid foundation to designing a tool to measure and track the employer brand gap. Building on the concepts and necessary and sufficient components is essential to applying the research.

Discovering Additional Domains

While four important domains were identified in this study, future research needs to build on these data to uncover the complete range of critical employer brand domains. Several additional potential domains were identified, but ruled out due to sample size, time, and/or resource constraints. I can imagine that a more complete view of the employer brand gap could be confirmed by a more extensive study, leveraging enhanced methodologies and increased resources to analyse a more comprehensive set of domains.

Understanding the Relationship between Employer Brand Gap and Engagement

Several of the employer brand practitioners in this study explained how they believed employer brand gap explained a significant portion of the less than perfect engagement scores. While the study demonstrated that perfect congruence, and by extension perfect engagement, was not possible, significant improvement in engagement scores is a credible target for nearly all organizations. Discovering the portion of engagement scores influenced by employer brand, would be an invaluable contribution to the employer brand and engagement bodies of knowledge and best practices.

Extending the Employee as Customer Metaphor

In this study, I made the empirical connection between customer and employee sense-making of service experiences. This finding increases the possibility of application of a larger body of knowledge of customer satisfaction literature to employer brand. In order to do so, it is important to develop a better understanding of the nuances, similarities, and dissimilarities between employees and customers identified in Chapter 2, Limitations of Current Research, to determine the areas that do not translate.

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APPENDIX

1. Interview Consent Forms
2. Interview Protocols
3. Interview Participant List
4. Analysis Codes

Appendix I

University of Pennsylvania Informed Consent to Participate in a Study of Alignment of Employer Brand Practices

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Purpose and Description of the Study

The majority of employer brand (EB) research focuses on the recruiting phase of the employment lifecycle. Employer brand insights are also most often described only from the employer's point of view despite employees being the main focus of the practice. This research study plans to develop a better understanding of how employees view the employment experience, the extent to which employees approaches match employers' EB practices, and how organizational culture may be involved in this process.

This study compares employees and employer approaches across four organizations that are committed to employer brand to determine similarities/differences in these practices and the implications for employer brand management. By understanding how employees/employers view the employment experience and the ways each group constructs these views, we will be able to improve employment experiences, employee engagement, employer brand management and ultimately strategic execution.

Time requirements

Your participation in this study will require one 45 to 60 minute interview to be conducted either in person, by Skype, or by phone depending on the location and availability.

Confidentiality

All information collected in the study will be kept strictly confidential except as may be required by law. Individual comments will not be shared with other individuals in the organization. All information collected will be depersonalized, analyzed and summarized for the purposes of understanding patterns and themes across respondents, groups inside organizations and ultimately across the four organizations. All efforts will be made to de-identify any potentially identifying information. In the event of publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

Benefits and Risks

There are no significant personal risks for individuals participating in this research. Only two sources of potential discomfort exist, expression of contrarian views and inexperience with interviews. Some individuals may feel uncomfortable sharing information that may not be consistent with company views. However, extreme precautions have been taken to ensure no identifiable information is shared with others inside the organization you may hold positions of power over some of those interviewed. The only other source of discomfort may stem from employee's limited experience with interviews.

Alternatives to Participation

Your decision to participate/not participate is an entirely your own and will have no bearing on your role or experience in your company. While overall numbers of participants may be revealed no identifiable information regarding those who choose to participate and those who do not will be made available to your employer.

Voluntary Consent

Participation in this research study is entirely voluntary. If for any reason you feel uncomfortable and would prefer not to participate, you are free to stop the interview and exit this research study at any time. Should you have any questions about your participation in this research study or about your rights as a research subject at any time, please discuss them with the study investigator. You may also call the office of regulatory affairs at the University of Pennsylvania at +1 (215) 898-2614 to discuss your rights as research subject. Keeping in line with University of Pennsylvania office of regulatory affairs research requirements you will be asked to sign this form to indicate that you are aware of your rights as a research subject and that you have agreed to participate in the study.

I hereby give my consent to participate in this research study. I am aware of my rights as research subject.

Participant Name

Participant Signature

Date of Consent

Appendix 2

Employer Brand Congruence

Employer Interview Protocols

Objective	Employer	Employee
Confirm Demographics - Title, Role - Tenure in org - Tenure in current role - Group/function - Level - Geography	Would you mind confirming - How you fit into the organization (title, role) - How long you have worked at <company> - How long in current role - Which group/function - Your Level - Which locations you have worked in?	Could you please confirm... - How you fit into the organization (title, role) - How long you have worked at <company> - How long in current role - Which group/function - Which locations you have worked in
Rapport	I am trying to understand how <company> approaches employer branding. I'm more interested in how <company> thinks about it rather than the specific term used. Which term is most meaningful to you? How do you refer to it here?	I am trying to understand what it's like to work at <company> and what affects that experience for you as an employee

		How is EB referred to here?
<p>Original Expectations</p> <p><i>Probe for</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Original beliefs</i> • <i>Purpose</i> • <i>Why important</i> • <i>Context</i> • <i>Intentions</i> 	<p>Can you describe how EB/employee experience became important enough to focus on?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What was going on outside / inside the <company> then? - When was it introduced? - How long practiced? - How discussed employment experience? - How was it designed? 	<p>I'd like to take you back to when you first joined the company...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What attracted or inspired you to want to work for <company>? - What had you envisioned it would be like working here? - Can you remember some of the reasons you believed your experience would be like this - Who/Where/When?
<p>Ongoing experience</p> <p><i>Probe for</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Values</i> • <i>Systems, policies, processes</i> • <i>Planned/unplanned (advertising, recruiting, PR, job sites, job fairs, newsletters, presentations, etc.)</i> 	<p>How do you pass on this kind of information to employees? Let's suppose I am a new employee:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What messages do I get from <company> about what it means to work here? - How are the messages communicated? - By whom are the messages communicated? - What role do you see others play in employees' experience? <p>Can you describe how you manage consistency and alignment of EB to positively affect the employee</p>	<p>Now I'd like to talk about your experience over the time you have worked at <company>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Share with me the situations / stories that best demonstrate what it has been like to work here - What are the most important experiences? - How has the promise changed over time? - Why did this happen? - How was it changed? - What has helped you do your job to your satisfaction? - What has kept you from doing your job to your

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Official/unofficial</i> • <i>Cascade through org structure, one-way/two-way, practices (Education, annual reviews) or types (written, spoken, viral, published, etc.)</i> • <i>Issues, challenges</i> • <i>Performance</i> 	<p>experience?</p> <p>Significant changes in company strategy, acquisition of new companies, economic situation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How did these changes affect employee's experience? - How did employees learn about the changes? - What messages were conveyed? How were they conveyed? - How did this change measure up to employee expectations? - Were there any differences in expectations? How do you know? - How were the changes reflected / incorporated into EB? <p>Let's suppose I am no longer a new employee:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How do I fit into the EB process? <p>What is EB supposed to do for me once I have been in the organization for a while?</p>	<p>satisfaction?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How did it affect you (head, heart) - How did this make you feel? <p>Have you noticed differences between what the employment experience was promised to be like?</p> <p>Tell me about times when you have noticed differences between what people said it should be like and it is like.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What was the difference (what, positive/negative)? - How did you know? <p>How does this compare with your colleagues?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How do you know?
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<p>The promise</p> <p>Probe for</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What gets rewarded</i> • <i>By whom</i> • <i>How gets rewarded (incentives, reward programs, performance management process)</i> • <i>When</i> 		<p><Company> has an ideal / desired experience they promise and want to give employees, what is the work experience supposed to be here?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How did you learn about this? - What was your reaction?
<p>EB Process Support</p> <p>Probe for</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Values</i> • <i>Activities, process</i> • <i>Funds</i> • <i>Systems, policies, processes, measurement</i> • <i>Planned/unplanned (advertising, recruiting, PR, job sites, job fairs, newsletters, presentations, etc.)</i> 	<p>How do you support the EB?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How do you shape the employee experience? - Ensure reach, awareness, experience of your desired EB across employees? - Create engagement around EB? <p>How do you measure EB performance?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do you measure? - How do you measure? - What does success look like? 	<p>Now I'd like to talk about your experience over the time you have worked at <company>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Share with me the situations / stories that best demonstrate what it has been like to work here - What are the most important experiences? - How has the promise changed over time? - Why did this happen? - How was it changed? - What has helped you do your job to your satisfaction? - What has kept you from doing your job to your satisfaction?

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Official/unofficial</i> • <i>Cascade through org structure, one-way / two-way,</i> • <i>Practices (education, annual reviews) or types (written, spoken, viral, published, etc.)</i> • <i>Issues, challenges</i> • <i>Performance</i> 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How did it affect you (head, heart) - How did this make you feel? <p>Have you noticed differences between what the employment experience was promised to be like?</p> <p>Tell me about times when you have noticed differences between what people said it should be like and it is like.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What was the difference (what, positive/negative)? - How did you know? <p>How does this compare with your colleagues?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How do you know?
<p>Process – Incorporating change</p> <p><i>Probe for</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Moments-of-truth</i> • <i>Impressions created</i> • <i>Types of changes that mattered (strategic,</i> 		<p><Company> went through some major changes in the last few years. Can you tell me about the kind of impact this change had on your work experience?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Did the <company> changes affect you? - How did you / <company> incorporate these adjustments?

<p><i>leadership, business, product, layoffs, personal, company)</i></p>		<p>How frequently does this happen?</p> <p>What do you expect will happen the next time?</p> <p>- Why?</p> <p>What do you think the outcomes depend on?</p>
<p>Process –</p> <p>Interpretation</p> <p><i>Probe for</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What gets rewarded</i> • <i>By whom</i> • <i>How (incentives, reward programs, performance management process)</i> 	<p>How do you ensure that employees understand?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What the EB means - What is reasonable to expect? <p>How do you know</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How EB compares with employee expectations? - Employees understand what is required of them? - Employees exhibit EB behaviors? 	<p>Now let’s talk about some specific examples of what has made you feel</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Delighted about your experience - Disappointed in your experience - Confused about your experience - Concerned about your experience <p>What made you feel this way?</p>

<p><i>Process - Feedback Probe for</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>References of handling differences in expectations (compensation, speed, apology, irritation),</i> • <i>Communicating</i> • <i>Demonstration of fairness</i> • <i>Impact on employee sentiment</i> • <i>Process</i> • <i>Relationships to culture</i> • <i>Strategy</i> • <i>Experience</i> • <i>Functions</i> • <i>Leadership</i> • <i>Managerial behaviour</i> 	<p>Let's say that the employee experience didn't match the employee's expectations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How would you know? - How do you handle positive and negative differences between the experience and the expectations? - What do you do to deal with other factors that influence employee expectations? - How have you dealt with differences in the past (reduction in pay, layoffs, moves, reduced benefits, etc.) <p>Can you tell me about a situation in which something planned or unplanned which was different or in direct conflict with the promised expectations happened</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What did the organization do? - What happened after the event? <p>What about a positive difference?</p>	<p>When there is a difference between your experience and what was promised...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do you do? - What do others do? - How does the company handle it? - How do you think it should have been handled?
<p>Employment Experience, a shared one?</p>	<p>How do employees deal with their feelings about their employment experience?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How does information flow? - Do they share? 	<p>Now about your work experience at <company>. How would you describe what it has been like to work here?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What stories best illustrate your experience since you

<p><i>Probe for</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Definition of promise</i> • <i>Actual vs. idealized</i> • <i>Messages - rewards, policies, process, values</i> • <i>Frequency, channel, information flow, over time and across groups</i> • <i>Employee involvement</i> • <i>Feedback and understanding of expectations</i> • <i>Moments-of-truth impressions created, types of changes that mattered (strategic, leadership, business, product, layoffs, personal, company)</i> • <i>Experiences across groups, levels, locations</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If so, what do they share? - Who do they share it with? - What practices does <company> use to facilitate to develop EB and ensure consistency among the range of employees? 	<p>started working here?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Org, group, boss, Job Fit - Time – first 90 days, 2 yrs, 2-5 yrs, 5yrs - now <p>Events / situations that have made you proud to work here?</p> <p>Tell me about your colleagues' experiences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do you find that your colleagues have the same experiences? - How do you feel about the differences? - How do you know? (WOM, witness, photos, communications, co. myth, etc.) <p>How/when do you share (process, technology, encouraged by employer, manager)?</p>
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<p>Employer Brand Gap?</p>	<p>How much does your employees' experience match with the EB?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Why? - In what ways? - Probe for how they think about it (Meet/Not meet/exceeded) and the factors involved - What kind of impact do you think differences have on the employees' experience 	
<p>Employment Experience How should it work? <i>Probe for</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Type</i> • <i>Magnitude</i> • <i>Rewards, benefits</i> • <i>Motivators, deal breakers</i> • <i>Situations</i> • <i>Process, signals</i> • <i>Agents, receivers</i> • <i>Sharing of information</i> • <i>Interpretive process</i> • <i>Factors influencing perception</i> 	<p>What practices does <company> use to facilitate to develop EB and ensure consistency among the range of employees? (If haven't talked about aspirational EB)</p> <p>What do you think the ideal employment experience SHOULD incorporate to achieve alignment?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What would be required to make this happen? - Can you describe what you think feel is within and beyond your control to influence? - Are there parts of EB that you deliberately avoid? Why? - What do you find are the most effective ways EB influences employees - How have employees responded to EB efforts? - How do you think EB will affect employees' experience the long run? 	<p>Finally, what do you think an employment experience SHOULD incorporate?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is your ideal working experience in <company>? - What would be required to make that happen? <p>What are opportunities for improving the work experience?</p>

<p>Conclusion</p>	<p>Is there anything about the EB or employment experience that I haven't asked you but you feel is important to share?</p> <p>Any questions for me?</p> <p>Thank you very much!</p>	<p>Is there anything about the EB or employment experience that I haven't asked you but you feel is important to share?</p> <p>Do you have any questions for me?</p> <p>Thank you very much for your time</p>
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Appendix 3

Employer Brand Congruence De-identified Interviewee List

Employee (E) Employee (R)	Function	Gender	Tenure (years)	Interview Length	Why Excluded
R	HR	Female	>7 to 10	2:12	
E	Technology	Male	>10 to 15	2:05	
E				1:27	No Trans
R	HR	Female	>1 to 3	2:40	
E	Marketing	Male	>5 to 7	1:59	
E	Finance	Female	>3 to 5	1:19	
E	Finance	Female	>3 to 5	1:05	
E	Sales	Male	>5 to 7	1:28	
R	HR	Female	>3 to 5	1:48	
E	Sales	Male	>10 to 15	1:41	
R	Marketing	Male	>10 to 15	1:16	
E	Marketing	Male	>1 to 3	1:12	
R	Marketing	Female	>15 to 30	1:29	
R	HR	Female	N/A	1:38	
R				N/A	Cancelled
E	Graduate Program	Female	>1 to 3	0:37	
E	Unassigned	Male	N/A	0:59	
E	Unassigned	Male	>15 to 30	1:16	
E	Unassigned	Female	>10 to 15	0:26	
R	Unassigned	Male	>15 to 30	1:04	
R	Marketing	Male	>1 to 3	0:55	
E	Back Office	Female	>1 to 3	0:48	
E	Operations	Female	>15 to 30	1:44	
R	Marketing	Male	N/A	0:40	
E	Finance	Male	>7 to 10	0:51	
E	Sales	Female	>10 to 15	1:06	
E	Operations	Male	>1 to 3	1:32	
E	Back Office	Male	>3 to 5	0:52	
E	Finance	Male	0 to 1	1:03	
E	Legal	Female	>3 to 5	1:03	
E	Operations	Male	>15 to 30	0:53	
E	Operations	Male	>15 to 30	1:24	
E	Unassigned	Male	>15 to 30	1:22	
E	Customer Service	Female	N/A	1:02	
E	Operations	Male	>10 to 15	1:32	
R	HR	Male	>15 to 30	0:37	
R				0:47	No Audio
E	HR	Female	>15 to 30	1:15	
R		Male	N/A	1:12	
R	Marketing	Female	>5 to 7	0:54	
R	HR	Female	N/A	1:25	
E	Admin	Female	>7 to 10	0:44	
E	Customer Service	Male	>5 to 7	0:27	

Employee (E) Employee (R)	Function	Gender	Tenure (years)	Interview Length	Why Excluded
E	Customer Service	Female	>1 to 3	0:32	
E	Customer Service	Male	>3 to 5	0:31	
E	Customer Service	Female	>3 to 5	0:27	
E	Customer Service	Male	>1 to 3	0:34	
E	Operations	Male	>1 to 3	0:32	
R	Operations	Female	>5 to 7	0:36	
E	Customer Service	Male	>5 to 7	1:03	
E	Operations	Male	>7 to 10	1:17	
R	Operations	Female	>7 to 10	0:53	
R	Marketing	Female	0 to 1	0:54	
R	HR	Female	0 to 1	0:37	
E	HR	Male	>1 to 3	0:37	
E	Marketing	Female	>7 to 10	1:23	
E	Unassigned	Male	>1 to 3	0:58	
E	Unassigned	Female	>1 to 3	1:09	
E	Sales	Female	>10 to 15	0:49	
E	Operations	Female	>10 to 15	1:29	
E	Admin	Male	>1 to 3	0:42	
E	Unassigned	Female	>10 to 15	0:47	
E	Sales	Male	>15 to 30	0:48	
E	Admin	Female	>5 to 7	0:34	
E				2:30	No Trans

Appendix 4

Employer Brand Congruence Code Definitions

Codes	Definition
<i>accuracy</i>	descriptions of the closeness of the actual employment experience to the promised employment experience
<i>alignment / congruence</i>	references to the importance of consistency between the promised/actual experience, different groups/functions in the organization, organization/individual, strategy/reality, different EB messages
<i>attitudes</i>	reference to a readiness to act or react positively or negatively towards a certain idea, object, person, or situation
<i>authority</i>	reference to the organization's control over the message
<i>behaviors</i>	descriptions of actions or reactions of a person/group/company in response to the external or internal message/event/situation
<i>benefits</i>	references to something financial, psychological, or emotional that enhances the well-being of the employees
<i>consistency</i>	reference to the importance of repeating a particular task with minimal variation
<i>differentiation</i>	reference to the organization's uniqueness and/or the uniqueness' influence on employees feelings or interpretation of their work experience
<i>employer brand</i>	reference to the actual employer brand/employee value proposition message or components
<i>employer brand process</i>	reference to different components or stages of the communications or branding process
<i>emotional affect</i>	description of the emotional impact or feeling produced by an action, event, policy, person, signal, content, factor
<i>employment stage</i>	reference to any of the three phases of the employee lifecycle
<i>endorsement</i>	reference to the level of association with the information
<i>expectations pre-company</i>	references to what the work experience was understood to be or feel in the current organization
<i>expectations once joined</i>	references to what the work experience was understood to be or feel once employed by the current organization
<i>desires</i>	employee's references to idealized work experience or what an employer 'should' be like
<i>fairness/justice</i>	description of what is perceived as being equitable or commensurate with the perceived value/action
<i>feedback</i>	occurrence of information or action taken in response to or after reflecting on another action, interpretation or perception

Codes	Definition
<i>formality</i>	description of rigorous or ceremonious adherence to established norms
<i>generic company information</i>	a description of the organizational characteristics, background, or context that is not related to other codes
<i>importance</i>	reference to the relative significance of an action, event, policy, process, person, signal, content, factor
<i>knowing</i>	expression of how or when employees knew what it was like to work in their current employer
<i>language</i>	special words, phrases, proverb, saying, words of wisdom, terminology used to highlight important aspects of the employee experience
<i>level</i>	reference to impact or meaning in relation to level of authority
<i>making sense</i>	reference to coping or meaning derived from how some event, interaction, information or perception fits into personal or organizational schema
<i>motivation</i>	description of driving force behind an expectation (need, want, desire)
<i>needs</i>	description of basic elements that individuals believe they must have to survive or not
<i>norms</i>	reference to unofficial company rules
<i>policy</i>	reference to official company rules
<i>relationship/reciprocity</i>	mention or indication of interdependencies between two or more entities
<i>role</i>	a reference to the part of the process people play in their job
<i>satisfaction</i>	the resulting feeling of meeting one's expectations
<i>signal - content</i>	meaningful event, action, information or message that describes or demonstrates 'what it is like to work in the workplace'
<i>signal - media</i>	reference to any type of media used to communicate the message
<i>signal - medium</i>	reference to the marketing activity used to communicate the employer brand/employment experience
<i>signal - message</i>	description of the message or experience characteristic
<i>signal - source</i>	reference to the specific brand/owner of the content accessed
<i>TBC</i>	general information that appears to be significant to the study, but which the significance is unknown at present and is flagged for later review/sense making
<i>timing</i>	description of the timeliness of the occurrence/non-occurrence of something
<i>transcendence</i>	a mention of losing oneself to become part of the whole
<i>trust</i>	reference to events, actions or information that creates a sense of belief for the individual, group or organization
<i>validation</i>	reference to source consulted or obtained that confirms belief or trust
<i>values</i>	description of or reference to values
<i>wants</i>	description of basic elements that individuals believe they should or desire to have

