

Journal of Volume 4 • Issue 7 • July/August 2009

# Corporate Recruiting Leadership

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# Building Your Employer Brand Virtual Community

*The economic downturn, advances in technology, and an explosion of online communities are changing the way companies build competitive advantage through human capital.*

**By Brett Minchington, MBA**

Today's workplace can best be described as in transition to a global knowledge economy, which requires that rules and practices that determined success in the industrial economy need rewriting in an interconnected, globalized economy where knowledge resources such as know-how and expertise are as critical as other economic resources.

In the employer branding industry (which consists of employers, employees, agencies, thought leaders, academics, students, and the media), the battles that matter aren't between products and services but between business models. Compounding this is the trend toward a virtual business model, which provides companies with the benefits of using best practices from all regions of the world while saving on consulting fees in the process. Knowledge, when locked into a community, systems, and processes, has higher inherent value than when it can "walk out of the door" in people's heads.

The virtual community model provides a sustainable proposition at a time when average employee tenure is decreasing and the concept of a "job for life" has disappeared.

Your employer brand is "the image of your organization as a 'great place to work' in the mind of current employees and key stakeholders in the external market (active and passive candidates, clients, customers and other key stakeholders)." The management of your employer brand is concerned with the attraction, engagement, and retention initiatives targeted at enhancing your employer brand. In today's knowledge-based economy these initiatives are increasingly being driven by knowledge technologies (such as knowledge engineering, knowledge manage-

ment, and social media) which provide companies with a 24/7/365 employer brand management service.

According to McKinsey & Co., nearly 85% of new jobs created between 1998 and 2006 involved complex "knowledge work" like problem-solving and concocting corporate strategy. The job of the future will have very little to do with processing words or numbers (the Internet can do that now). Business leaders will need to create highly flexible and skilled human resources to successfully compete in a

**I've seen companies spending hundreds of thousands of dollars in employer branding consulting fees when similar results could have been achieved from an employer brand virtual community.**

world now driven by speed, technology, and connectedness. The launch of Google Wave is set to change the way we use email to communicate (or even make the tool obsolete!) and Microsoft's new search engine called Bing promises to help people use the Web to accomplish more complicated decision-based tasks.

The U.S. Department of Labor spotlights network systems and data communications as well as computer-software engineering among the occupations projected to grow most explosively by 2016. Over the next seven years, the number of jobs in the information-technology sector is expected to swell 24%—a figure more than twice the overall job-growth rate.

In Seth Godin's view, work will mean managing a tribe, creating a movement, and operating in teams to change the world. Anything less is going to be outsourced to someone a lot cheaper and a lot less privileged than you or me.

The need to actually show up at an office that consists of an anonymous hallway and a farm of cubicles or closed doors is just going to fade away. It's too expensive, and it's too slow. In the virtual economy you can send a file (or project tasks) at the end of your day (when you're in a very dif-

ferent time zone) and have the information returned to your desktop when you wake up the following day. You may never actually meet the vendor in person, but you're both doing essential work.

This is why companies like Procter & Gamble use a network of 140,000 scientists called InnoCentive to help solve some of its most complex problems. It would be financially unviable for Procter and Gamble to employ this "crowd," so it uses the crowd's expertise to solve complex problems for commercial return.

### The Call for Innovation

The adoption of employer branding theory and practice by industries and organizations has accelerated over the past five years, driven by the talent shortage—and more recently, the economic downturn, where the latest research by Manpower shows companies are still finding it difficult to recruit talent even though unemployment is at a 25-year high.

The Employment Policy Foundation in the U.S. estimates that within the next decade there will be a 6-million-person gap between the number of college graduates

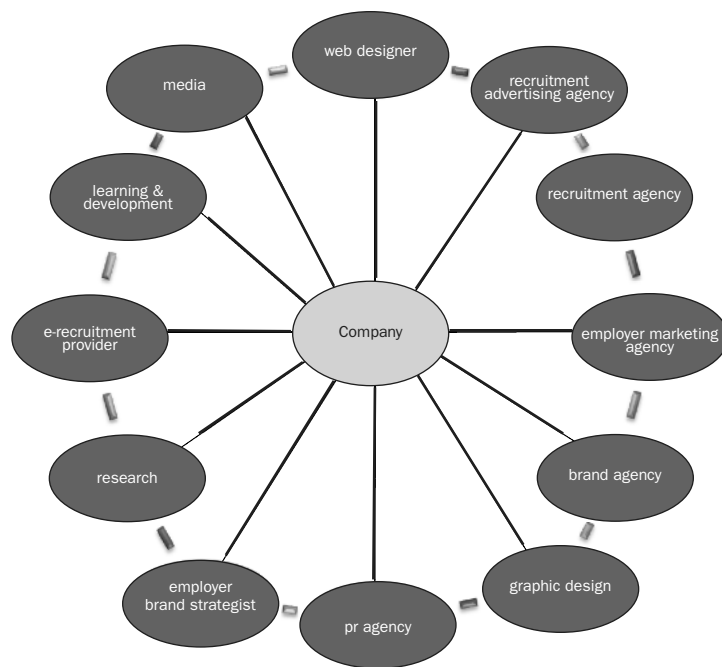
and the number of college-educated workers needed to cover job growth.

Most critically, business leaders must work in ever closer partnership with specialists in the virtual economy to successfully compete against countries such as China, India, and Russia, which are fast climbing up the value chain and becoming niche competitors in knowledge-based services. I have witnessed, on a number of occasions, companies spending literally hundreds of thousands of dollars in employer branding consulting fees when similar results could have been achieved from the expertise of an employer brand virtual community. This is the reason why so many traditional brick-and-mortar advertising and recruitment agencies have either gone to the wall in the past year or have had earnings and profit significantly impacted by the economic downturn.

Think about the cost structure. With a virtual community, the overhead includes Internet broadband, ISP hosting fees, phone connection (if not 100% wireless), mobile phone, stationery, stamps, and e-marketing—a combined total of around \$400 per month. (And even that is being conservative, as e-marketing, stationery, and stamps can be scaled back!)

Forget running up international phone bills of thousands of dollars on voice calls with vendors when VOIP tools such as Skype and Google Talk are free! In the near future, brick-and-mortar agencies are unlikely to exist in their current form, and companies will welcome the ability to achieve a better outcome for their employer brand project by the ability to tap into global best practice real time, through the virtual community. The new business model may involve agencies who once thought of themselves as competitors, working in collaboration with the virtual community on projects on a case-by-case basis.

I recently worked on a global employer branding project and conducted virtual focus groups where employees dialed in from different regions, wrote up the results, and sent them off to the lead partner in the U.S., who delivered the results as part of a client presentation the following morning while I was asleep here in Australia. Upon waking



Minchington, 2009

Figure 1

### CHOOSING YOUR EMPLOYER BRAND COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Questions for consideration:

1. What is the level of synergy between your virtual community partners—do they attempt to offer a generalized service or are they specialists in a particular field?
2. Have the partners previously worked together on employer branding projects?
3. Do your partners deliver what they promise?
4. What is your partner's experience in delivering employer branding projects?
5. Who are their key members of the team? Who will be working on your employer brand project? Will they appoint partners with less capability in this area after they have won the project?
6. Which partner will lead the project?
7. How do they share and contribute to best practice in employer branding?
8. Where do they source their inspiration or direction from?
9. How do they track trends and keep up to date with the latest thinking and research in employer branding?
10. How much added value are they willing to provide in account management, i.e., do they charge for all the time they spend with you (e.g., meetings)?

I was pleased to hear the presentation went well.

A U.S. study found the number one reason professionals want to participate in virtual teams more frequently is simple: increased productivity (cited by 32% of respondents). As the size of the virtual workforce in America today is growing, so is the likely impact on productivity and profitability for organizations. More than 90 percent of those surveyed agree (35%) or strongly agree (56%) that virtual meetings save time and money.

#### Your Employer Brand Community

The implications of increased outsourcing and offshoring mean companies that can effectively manage virtual community partners will be best positioned to build competitive advantage through acquisition and deployment of its human capital.

The Employer Brand Community Model (see Figure 1) will help companies manage the complexities and competing priorities of virtual community partners responsible for working on a company's employer brand. The model identifies the main "channel partners" impacting the employer brand, which companies should recruit into their employer brand virtual community irrespective of where they are geographically located. The Web now allows companies to access global best practice by tapping into pockets of thought leadership and creative excellence throughout the world for a fraction of the costs of contracting one agency to deliver the full suite of employer brand solutions out of the same office or region.

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### STEPS TO BUILDING YOUR EMPLOYER BRAND COMMUNITY

#### 1. A clear vision and values for your community

Establishing a common set of values for how the community is to communicate and share best practices should be established. Progressive companies use blogs, wikis, Tweets, Yammer, Second Life, LinkedIn, and Facebook all through the development of technology.

No matter what mix of communications technologies are used, the virtual community partners should be encouraged to use voice contact in the absence of face-face meetings to support the communications conducted online us-

ing email, IM, or social networks. Even in Second Life (a free 3-D virtual world where users can socialize, trade, and connect), residents are still able to use voice to speak with residents from inside or outside the virtual world of Second Life (or the first life we are currently living!).

## **2. Assess your current capabilities to develop and manage your employer brand community**

The economics in the virtual community are not of scarcity, but rather of abundance. Unlike most resources that are depleted when used, information and knowledge can be shared, and actually grow through interaction and application by members of the community. The growth we're seeing in virtual work is enabled by digital technology—e-mail, Web conferencing, high-speed Internet connections, and the growth in the use of virtual communities will only increase as Internet penetration increases and access to high-speed Internet connection. You need to consider whether your virtual community is managed in-house or whether you engage a strategist from the community to guide and advise you through the roadmap.

## **3. Optimize the power, reach, and impact of social media**

After the Web was invented by English scientist Tim Berners-Lee in 1989, the way things get done at work started changing. During the 1990s, it was estimated that the Internet grew by 100% per year, with a brief period of explosive growth in 1996 and 1997. This growth is often attributed to the lack of central administration, which allows organic growth of the network, as well as the non-proprietary open nature of the Internet protocols, which encourages vendor interoperability and prevents any one company from exerting too much control over the network.

Ten years ago, Facebook didn't exist. Ten years before that, we didn't have the Web. So who knows what jobs will be born a decade from now? Though unemployment is at a 25-year high, the economy will return to growth one again and the demand for workers will eventually return. But it won't look the same. No one is going to pay you just to show up. We will see a more flexible, more freelance, more collaborative, and far less secure work world. Developments such as the Internet bring the "virtual model" ever nearer.

Transparency, openness, and authenticity are the new rules of business where the community drives product and service innovation and where what is being said about you on media platforms such as Twitter, LinkedIn, or Glassdoor is mission-critical. The damage to a company's reputation is a hard lesson being learned by those who fail to react and respond to what's being said in virtual communities. Media has become highly fragmented and new platforms are being created at rapid speed. We recently launched Employer Branding Online ([www.employerbrandingonline.com](http://www.employerbrandingonline.com)) to provide an online platform where employer brand advocates or those wanting to learn more about the topic could visit one community to contribute, network, share, and learn from best practice. I see this as a progressive step toward establishing employer branding virtual communities to help companies manage their employer brands.

Global companies like Hewitt, IBM, and Intel have integrated social media platforms into their corporate sites to consolidate and provide visitors to their site a much richer online experience. The proliferation of media is creating significant challenges for companies as they try and catch up. The explosion of Twitter in the past year has added to increasing "noise," and without a strategy to monitor, measure, react, and adapt, companies will increasingly lose control of how they communicate to the market.

## **4. Train leaders how to motivate and reward people from different cultures to yours.**

A virtual community leverages the diversity of all team members. I don't just mean a demographic mix by gender, age, and race, although that helps. Teams benefit from the contributions from people of different temperaments, from different geographic areas (think of a software development that achieves 24-hour productivity by passing off code around the world), and from people with different professional skills and experience. Pockets of knowledge excellence are being tapped in emerging economies such as China and India to collaborate with thought leaders in the U.S., UK, and Australia/New Zealand to enable projects to be delivered 24/7 at a sustainable intensity as there are always people wanting to join the community.

**The damage to a company's reputation is a hard lesson being learned by those who fail to react and respond to what's being said in virtual communities.**

Communication is increasingly being seen as fundamental to knowledge flows. Social structures, cultural context, and other factors influencing social relations are therefore of fundamental importance to knowledge economies.

### 5. Management should demonstrate an ongoing commitment to virtual work

It's not enough for managers to merely allow team members to build an employer branding virtual community. They should support it both philosophically and financially, and ideally even participate in the community themselves. Managers who try to make virtual work look as much as possible like office work—establishing standard hours, expecting employees to make do with the bare minimum of tools for virtual collaboration, and treating remote team members as second-class citizens—won't get long-term productivity from their community partners.

Team members must get to know each other on a human level, not just as working robots. One thing you miss with a virtual team is getting to know about each other's lives. VOIP calls offer a good opportunity to learn a bit more about each other's personal lives. A group chat room can provide a virtual water cooler for teammates to swap stories about what they did during their vacation or over the weekend. Quick instant messaging lets you learn little bits about another person's life

and know them more as a whole person.

### 6. Contribute to a better society

There have been many debates about the impact of global warming, and it appears the consensus is that we must take some action (though what and how much is still being debated) to ensure our consumption of the planet's resources doesn't continue at a rate that threatens the actual existence of life on the planet as we know it today.

A staff blogger at Cisco said, "We are all responsible for this planet, and we need to consider this when making event choices. This does not mean all physical events should be scrapped, but when planning an event one should look at

whether a virtual extension or virtual-only option makes sense or is viable, as there are many ways these approaches can help green the globe. For example, reduced or no hotel stay needed for virtual event extensions or virtual-only events which means less water down the pipe ... or reducing the carbon impression associated with shipping booth materials and staffers around the globe, just to name a couple."

This same foresight can be applied to a virtual community, which contributes to reducing carbon emissions, as activities such as plane, car, and bus travel are reduced when the main vehicle of travel in the community is a chair, laptop, and Internet connection.

**It's not enough for managers to merely allow team members to build an employer branding virtual community.**



*Brett Minchington's expertise in employer branding led him to author "Your Employer Brand attract-engage-retain" in 2006, which has since been sold in over 42 countries. He has delivered employer branding keynote addresses, executive briefings, and masterclass events, has chaired summits in 28 cities in 18 countries, and has been published in HR, marketing, and management magazines globally.*

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