



XXIX International Scientific Conference

Strategic Managementand Decision Support Systems
in Strategic Management**SM2024**

Subotica (Serbia), 17-18 May, 2024

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DOES EMPLOYER BRANDING MATTER IN HEALTHCARE ORGANIZATIONS? PERCEPTION OF HEALTHCARE WORKERS IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

Abstract: Attracting and retaining high-quality employees is the ultimate task of healthcare organizations in order to achieve their mission of providing quality healthcare services. Building a strong employer brand can not only reduce the turnover rate, but also make the healthcare organization a desirable place to work. Accordingly, the aim of the paper is to identify the perception of healthcare workers about the employer brand of healthcare organizations in the Republic of Serbia. The research results show a significant gap for the development of the employer brand in healthcare organizations.

Keywords: Employer brand, Healthcare organization, Healthcare professionals

INTRODUCTION

The healthcare system is becoming increasingly complex, and the success of a healthcare organization depends on the quality of services provided. Provisioning healthcare services becomes challenging due to a shortage of human resources, especially in terms of the number of nurses. The lack of qualified healthcare workers is the most significant challenge healthcare organizations are facing today. Despite population growth, there are not enough educated workers capable of responding adequately to the rapid increase in demand for healthcare services (Balakrishnan et al., 2022). To improve the quality of provided healthcare services, employer branding in healthcare has become an integral part of successful employment strategies for healthcare organizations. Today, employer branding is recognized as a key resource for attracting and retaining high-quality employees in an era where the battle for talent is ongoing (Elving, Westhoff, Meeusen & Schoonderbeek, 2013).

In the healthcare system, there is an increasing level of employee turnover, and the outflow of qualified healthcare workers is becoming more pronounced, which leads to serious operational problems. Consequently, healthcare organizations more frequently need to hire new personnel. Overcoming the problems arising from the constant shortage of healthcare workers, human resource management plays a significant business function. Through its activities, human resource management should attract, select, and subsequently retain qualified healthcare workers. Employer branding stands out as a key element for effective talent recruitment and retention, and turnover reduction, contributing to the improvement of the quality of patient care, and enhancing the overall reputation of healthcare organizations (Aeschbacher & Addor, 2021).

Based on the above, the research subject is the employer brand of healthcare organizations. The research objective is to examine the perception of employees about the importance of employer brand of healthcare organizations in the Republic of Serbia.

EMPLOYER BRAND IN HEALTHCARE INSTITUTIONS

Employer brand is considered the most valuable tool for attracting and retaining the best candidates, including those in the healthcare sector. Therefore, brand management is an essential activity in many organizations. According to the definition provided by Ambler and Barrow (1996), employer brand represents a set of functional, economic, and psychological benefits provided by employment, which are characteristic of the employing organization (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). This initial definition is still considered a general definition today (Kucherov & Zavyalova, 2012). Employer brand can also be defined as the organization's image as perceived by current employees and how potential employees see the organization they might work for (Tanwar & Prasad, 2016). There is a distinction between the concepts of brand and branding. Branding is the process of building a brand, while a brand represents a part of the process of developing its identity and characteristics. Employer branding is an organization's effort to promote, both internally and externally, a clear view of what makes the organization different and desirable as an employer (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Internal employer branding is focused on employees within the organization, aiming to ensure that employees feel satisfied and connected, contributing to greater loyalty and commitment to the job (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011). External employer branding is designed to attract candidates and represents the identity and job description, as well as the perspective the organization offers to employees (Nagpal & Nagpal, 2019) through advertising and marketing strategies. Information about healthcare organizations can be found on websites, social media, congresses, seminars, television, and radio advertisements, or through sponsorship cooperation (Wijaya, Mustika, Bulut & Bukhori, 2023).

Considering the expected increase in competition in healthcare soon, most healthcare organizations have begun to realize the importance of a good employer branding strategy to be competitive and attract the best candidates from the labor market. The goal of employer brand is to attract and retain the best possible human talent. Employer brand is a planned, long-term strategy that relates to managing the awareness and attitudes of current and future employees. An organization recognized for a successful employer brand has numerous advantages, including improving its reputation in society, enhancing cohesion among employees, and increasing the number of potential candidates, as the organization is positioned as a desirable place to work (Tanwar & Prasad, 2016).

Contemporary definitions clearly emphasize the importance of activities focused on information about both material and non-material employer benefits, as well as the characteristics that set the organization apart as a competitor compared to others present in the market (Saraswathy & Balakrishnan, 2017). Literature has shown numerous benefits of a strong employer brand, including the ability to attract and retain high-quality employees (Piyachat Chanongkorn & Panisa, 2014), motivating employees to greater commitment and loyalty (Kucherov & Zavyalova, 2012), and increasing employee engagement and productivity (Bellou, Rigopoulou & Kehagias, 2015). However, research indicates that employer brand benefits associated with organizational attractiveness also include competitive compensation, social capital, and career development opportunities (Martin-Alcazar, Romero-Fernandez & Sanchez-Gardey, 2005).

To achieve the comprehensive goal of employer branding to become an attractive and competitive organization, a place where people want to work, human resource managers should take certain measures. Accordingly, developing a positive employer brand is an indicator of why a healthcare institution should be the best choice for job seekers. This includes various aspects such as the culture of the healthcare organization, communication style, performance and development, organizational reputation, and overall work environment. Today, there is increasing competition for healthcare workers with the opening of private sector healthcare institutions, so candidates often look beyond salaries and benefits. They strive for positions that align with their values and can provide an advanced career. For this reason, an effective employer branding strategy should provide comprehensive information about the organization's culture and employee benefits, including employee safety, competitive salaries, flexible work schedules to strike a balance between work and private life, professional development opportunities, and a positive work atmosphere.

For a healthcare organization to build a positive brand, it is necessary to motivate employees to achieve better work performance and fully dedicate themselves to their jobs. Organizations should provide more comprehensive benefits, showing concern for employees and their families. This builds trust between employees and the organization. Many organizations offer flexibility in terms of working hours and employee placement, aiming to increase employee motivation and strike a balance between work and private life (Sivertzen, Nilsen & Olafsen 2013; Kumari, Dutta & Bhagat, 2020). However, in healthcare organizations, providing employees with flexible working hours is not easy. Continuity in providing healthcare services requires teamwork, and to improve employee performance as a team, flexibility based on teamwork is necessary. Radical flexibility will encourage employee freedom by providing flexibility in various aspects of work, such as job sharing, teamwork methods, workplace, and working hours (Wijaya, Mustika, Bulut & Bukhori, 2023).

Based on the research objective, the following hypotheses have been defined:

H1: Demographic characteristics (gender and age) have a statistically significant influence on employees' perception of the employer brand in healthcare organizations.

H2: Life circumstances (community living and children) have a statistically significant influence on employees' perception of the employer brand in healthcare organizations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A cross-sectional study was conducted to examine the employer brand of healthcare organizations. The research population consisted of employees in healthcare organizations in the Republic of Serbia. The questionnaire designed for the research purposes was distributed to health centers and general hospitals after obtaining consent to conduct the study. A total of 150 questionnaires were distributed, of which two were not valid. The final sample consisted of 148 respondents. Participants expressed their opinions or the degree of agreement/disagreement on a five-point Likert scale, where a rating of one indicated complete disagreement, and a rating of five indicated complete agreement with the statement. The questionnaire comprised eight statements, which are following the preferred HR practice that supports the strengthening of the employer's brand (Villajos, Tordera, Peiró & Veldhoven). Statistical data analysis was performed using the IBM SPSS Statistics software, Version 21.

The research sample consisted of employees in healthcare organizations in the Republic of Serbia, specifically those working in the position of nurse-technicians. The total sample comprised 148 respondents, with the majority being female, constituting 88.5% of the sample. The largest number of employees in healthcare organizations belonged to the age group up to 40 years, making up 37.8% of respondents. Regarding educational levels, 79.1% of respondents had a medium level of education. In terms of work experience, respondents who had been in the healthcare organization for over 21 years dominated (48.6% of respondents). This suggests that individuals often perceive engagement in the public sector as a secure, permanent job, where they spend their entire working life. Of the total number of respondents, 95.9% were employed indefinitely, while 54.7% had no experience in managerial positions. Among employees in healthcare organizations, 87.8% of respondents lived in communities, and 43.9% had adult children.

RESEARCH RESULTS

To address the research objective, descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were initially conducted to examine the rankings of values concerning statements used in the research process. The degree of agreement among participants with these statements can help identify the significance of various workplace factors in healthcare organizations that influence employer brand.

Table 1: Employer Brand in Healthcare Institutions: Rank of Values

Statements	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Salaries in this healthcare organization are above average.	148	1,83	,979
The healthcare institution guarantees job security to everyone.	148	2,76	1,141
The employment contract I have provides job security.	148	2,80	1,176
Job stability in this healthcare organization is above the usual level.	148	2,66	1,141
I have the option to work part-time if needed.	148	2,26	1,241
The healthcare organization provides all legally mandated options in case of layoffs.	148	2,34	1,193
This healthcare institution is of utmost importance to me.	148	3,05	1,208
I am delighted to work for this organization.	148	3,18	1,276
Valid N (listwise)	148		

Source: Authors

Descriptive statistical analysis showed low mean values, indicating that employees in healthcare organizations in Serbia do not perceive their organization as having a well-established positive employer brand. The statement with the highest mean value, reflecting the highest agreement among respondents, is "I enjoy working for this organization" (Mean=3.18). This indicates the satisfaction of healthcare workers in Serbia, as satisfied employees are likely to have a positive perception of their organization, contributing to a positive employer brand. The statement with the lowest agreement is "Salaries in this healthcare organization are above average" (Mean=1.83), suggesting that salaries in healthcare organizations in Serbia are not competitive.

To gain further insight into the characteristics of employer brand in healthcare organizations, a comparison of attitudes between women and men was conducted. The Mann-Whitney test was applied as a relevant non-parametric technique. The results show a statistically significant difference between genders regarding the perception of job security, legal options in case of layoffs, and the significance of the healthcare organization to employees. Strategies for work-life balance have become essential for enhancing employer brand, particularly in healthcare, where effective teamwork is crucial.

Table 2: Differences in Employee Attitudes toward Employer Branding Based on Gender

Statements	Gender	N	Mean Rank	Mann-Whitney test
Salaries in this healthcare organization are above average.	Famale	131	73,51	Z = -0,843 p=0,399
	Male	17	82,15	
	Total	148		
The healthcare institution guarantees job security to everyone.	Famale	131	77,37	Z = -2,343 p=0,019**
	Male	17	52,38	
	Total	148		
The employment contract I have provides job security.	Famale	131	77,84	Z= -2,717 p= 0,007***
	Male	17	48,79	
	Total	148		
Job stability in this healthcare organization is above the usual level.	Famale	131	75,62	Z = -0,928 p= 0,354
	Male	17	65,85	
	Total	148		
I have the option to work part-time if needed.	Famale	131	76,11	Z = -1,325 p= 0,185
	Male	17	62,12	
	Total	148		
The healthcare organization provides all legally mandated options in case of layoffs.	Famale	131	77,58	Z = -2,515 p=0,012**
	Male	17	50,79	
	Total	148		
This healthcare institution is of utmost importance to me.	Famale	131	77,19	Z=-2,179 p= 0,029**
	Male	17	53,76	
	Total	148		
I am delighted to work for this organization.	Famale	131	76,82	Z = -1,878 p= 0,060*
	Male	17	56,62	
	Total	148		

Notes: p<0,01***; p<0,05**; p<0,1*

Source: Authors

The results of non-parametric test related to employer brand statements show a statistically significant difference in the perception of job stability, the opportunity for part-time work, and legal options in case of layoffs based on the living arrangements of respondents.

Table 3: Differences in Employee Attitudes toward Employer Branding Based on Life Circumstances

Statements	Life circumstances	N	Mean Rank	Mann-Whitney test
Salaries in this healthcare organization are above average.	They live alone	18	76,39	Z= -0,215 p= 0,830
	They live in a community	130	74,24	
	Total	148		
The healthcare institution guarantees job security to everyone.	They live alone	18	62,11	Z= -1,355 p=0,175
	They live in a community	130	76,22	
	Total	148		
The employment contract I have provides job security.	They live alone	18	63,08	Z= -1,246 p= 0,213
	They live in a community	130	76,08	
	Total	148		
Job stability in this healthcare organization is above the usual level.	They live alone	18	55,31	Z= -2,127 p= 0,033**
	They live in a community	130	77,16	
	Total	148		
I have the option to work part-time if needed.	They live alone	18	54,17	Z= -2,248 p= 0,025**
	They live in a community	130	77,32	
	Total	148		
The healthcare organization provides all legally mandated options in case of layoffs.	They live alone	18	56,81	Z= -1,939 p= 0,053*
	They live in a community	130	76,95	
	Total	148		
This healthcare institution is of utmost importance to me.	They live alone	18	62,03	Z= -1,354 p= 0,176
	They live in a community	130	76,23	
	Total	148		

I am delighted to work for this organization.	They live alone	18	61,83	Z= -1,374 p= 0,170
	They live in a community	130	76,25	
	Total	148		

Notes: p<0,01***; p<0,05**; p<0,1*

Source: Authors

Further research applied the Kruskal-Wallis's analysis as a relevant non-parametric technique. Three categories of sub-samples were extracted, relating to respondents without children and those with children, depending on their age. The results show a statistically significant difference in statements such as "The healthcare institution guarantees job security to everyone" and "This healthcare institution means a lot to me."

Table 4: Differences in Employee Attitudes toward Employer Branding Based on Life Circumstances (Children)

Statements	Children	N	Mean Rank	Kruskal Wallis test
Salaries in this healthcare organization are above average.	I do not have children	21	72,93	X ² =5,589 df=2 p=0,061*
	I have children of school age	62	66,25	
	I have grown children	65	82,88	
	Total	148		
The healthcare institution guarantees job security to everyone.	I do not have children	21	67,12	X ² =9,573 df=2 p=0,008***
	I have children of school age	62	64,57	
	I have grown children	65	86,35	
	Total	148		
The employment contract I have provides job security.	I do not have children	21	69,69	X ² =4,029 df=2 p=0,133
	I have children of school age	62	68,05	
	I have grown children	65	82,21	
	Total	148		
Job stability in this healthcare organization is above the usual level.	I do not have children	21	62,69	X ² =2,131 df=2 p=0,345
	I have children of school age	62	75,36	
	I have grown children	65	77,49	
	Total	148		
I have the option to work part-time if needed.	I do not have children	21	65,07	X ² =1,948 df=2 p=0,378
	I have children of school age	62	73,06	
	I have grown children	65	78,92	
	Total	148		
The healthcare organization provides all legally mandated options in case of layoffs.	I do not have children	21	75,00	X ² =0,009 df=2 p=0,995
	I have children of school age	62	74,14	
	I have grown children	65	74,68	
	Total	148		
This healthcare institution is of utmost importance to me.	I do not have children	21	71,00	X ² =9,496 df=2 p=0,009***
	I have children of school age	62	63,51	
	I have grown children	65	86,12	
	Total	148		
I am delighted to work for this organization.	I do not have children	21	71,83	X ² =2,358 df=2 p=0,308
	I have children of school age	62	69,24	
	I have grown children	65	80,38	
	Total	148		

Notes: p<0,01***; p<0,05**; p<0,1*

Source: Authors

To investigate employee attitudes toward employer brand based on age, the Kruskal-Wallis's analysis was also applied. A statistically significant difference was found in statements related to above-average salaries, job security guarantees, and the significance of the organization to employees.

Table 5: Differences in Employee Attitudes toward Employer Branding Based on Age

Statements	Age	N	Mean Rank	Kruskal Wallis test
Salaries in this healthcare organization are above average.	less than 40 years	56	65,41	$\chi^2 = 7,337$ df=2 $p=0,026^{**}$
	from 41 to 50 years	47	73,46	
	more than 51 years	45	86,90	
	Total	148		
The healthcare institution guarantees job security to everyone.	less than 40 years	56	58,57	$\chi^2 = 13,368$ df=2 $p=0,001^{***}$
	from 41 to 50 years	47	83,66	
	more than 51 years	45	84,76	
	Total	148		
The employment contract I have provides job security.	less than 40 years	56	64,86	$\chi^2 = 5,387$ df=2 $p=0,068^*$
	from 41 to 50 years	47	77,33	
	more than 51 years	45	83,54	
	Total	148		
Job stability in this healthcare organization is above the usual level.	less than 40 years	56	68,58	$\chi^2 = 2,326$ df=2 $p=0,313$
	from 41 to 50 years	47	80,85	
	more than 51 years	45	75,23	
	Total	148		
I have the option to work part-time if needed.	less than 40 years	56	66,66	$\chi^2 = 3,708$ df=2 $p=0,157$
	from 41 to 50 years	47	76,61	
	more than 51 years	45	82,06	
	Total	148		
The healthcare organization provides all legally mandated options in case of layoffs.	less than 40 years	56	70,44	$\chi^2 = 0,881$ df=2 $p=0,664$
	from 41 to 50 years	47	77,40	
	more than 51 years	45	76,52	
	Total	148		
This healthcare institution is of utmost importance to me.	less than 40 years	56	64,36	$\chi^2 = 7,040$ df=2 $p=0,030^{**}$
	from 41 to 50 years	47	75,11	
	more than 51 years	45	86,49	
	Total	148		
I am delighted to work for this organization.	less than 40 years	56	69,70	$\chi^2 = 1,936$ df=2 $p=0,380$
	from 41 to 50 years	47	73,76	
	more than 51 years	45	81,26	
	Total	148		

Notes: $p < 0,01^{***}$; $p < 0,05^{**}$; $p < 0,1^*$

Source: Authors

DISCUSSION

Based on the results, the preliminary conclusion is that employees in healthcare organizations in Serbia do not perceive a well-developed positive employer brand. Detailed analysis of each statement is necessary. In the study, two hypotheses were formulated. The first hypothesis was set to determine whether demographic characteristics (gender and age) have a statistically significant influence on employees' perceptions of the employer brand of healthcare organizations in the Republic of Serbia. Based on the obtained results, hypothesis H1 is partially confirmed. A statistically significant difference exists among genders regarding employees' perception that the healthcare organization and the employment contract guarantee security, that the organization provides the opportunity for shortened working hours, offers all legally prescribed options in case of dismissal, and that the healthcare organization means a lot to them. When considering the results based on age, it is concluded that employees older than 50 see healthcare institutions in the public sector in Serbia as a secure place to work, consider their salaries to be above average, and believe that the healthcare organization guarantees job security. Research conducted by Aeschbacher & Addor (2021) shows that there is an increasing likelihood that healthcare workers at the beginning of their careers will leave public sector healthcare organizations due to a lack of advancement opportunities, dissatisfaction with salaries, and/or due to too many tasks that are not part of the job description.

The second hypothesis was defined to determine whether life circumstances (living in a community and having children) have a statistically significant impact on employees' perceptions of the employer brand of healthcare organizations in the Republic of Serbia. The results of the conducted statistical analysis show that hypothesis H2 is partially confirmed. Healthcare workers who live in communities and have children see healthcare institutions in the

public sector in Serbia as a secure place to work, with above-average salaries, and the institution means a lot to them. Building a positive employer brand is a powerful tool for attracting and retaining top talents. Creating a positive work environment that contributes to employer branding can build unity among employees, leading to improved teamwork and collaboration and retaining talents in the organization.

In the public healthcare sector, financial rewards are the same, and employees believe that salaries are not above average. To differentiate one healthcare organization from another and be an attractive workplace, organizations need to provide career development opportunities, employee prestige, benefits, and focus on developing organizational culture through employer branding. Kucherov and colleagues (2022) found that the development of a strong employer brand influences improvements in hiring outcomes, attracts top talents, reduces turnover rates, and leads to higher job satisfaction and loyalty among employees. They also argue that every organization should work on strengthening the employer brand of healthcare organizations because, in addition to making the organization an attractive place for talent, it also contributes to building the corporate brand.

Due to the scientific research gap and the limited number of scientific papers in domestic academic conditions dealing with employer branding in healthcare organizations, this research has practical implications:

- An established employer brand contributes to employees perceiving the organization as providing security and being a desirable place to work.
- The way human resources management activities are conducted affects the development of a positive employer brand and the formation of an image of the healthcare organization among employees and potential employees. Therefore, it is extremely important to develop a positive, unique, and recognizable employer brand in healthcare organizations.

In addition to its contributions, the conducted research also has certain limitations, necessitating guidelines for future research. In fact, the study included a relatively small number of respondents who are employed in secondary-level healthcare organizations in Central Serbia. Therefore, future research should expand by increasing the number of respondents and include other types of healthcare institutions, such as primary health care centers, hospitals, and university clinical centers, thereby creating space for comparing the attitudes of employees in these institutions.

CONCLUSION

For healthcare organizations to provide adequate healthcare services, they need to attract and retain highly qualified workers. Managers define various approaches to motivate employees to provide quality healthcare services. Employees who are more satisfied and perceive job security have a greater potential to stay in the organization and are motivated for better performance. This can lead to increased dedication and loyalty of healthcare workers, contributing to higher satisfaction among patients. Based on the research, it is essential for HR managers in healthcare organizations in Serbia to focus their activities on strengthening employer branding. Results indicate that older employees, living in communities and having children, perceive healthcare organizations as a secure place to work. HR managers should build an innovative-oriented organizational culture, improve communication, and team management to attract younger populations and retain quality employees.

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