

Employer of Choice:

Holistic Conceptual Model of Employer Brand Creation

1.0 Introduction

The employment world has transitioned from the industrial era to the knowledge era and the supply and demand curve for talent increasingly favours the employee (Barrow, 2007). It is often said that a company is only as good as its people and that talented employees are the driving force behind every successful company (Sutherland et al., 2002). Microsoft has adopted the slogan “our people are our greatest asset”, which sends a powerful message to potential customers about its intellectual capital, thereby putting the company’s “greatest asset” firmly in the shop window (Crowe, 1998). Furthermore, as organisations have become leaner and flatter, a shortage of highly talented and skilled labour makes finding and retaining talented employees a major priority (Flegley, 2006). Organisations are now competing in the “knowledge” economy, and are facing great competition in chasing the same skill set (Srivastava and Bhatnagar, 2008). Many companies now lose so many talented people that their ability to compete with their rivals is severely damaged forcing them to reduce their growth projections (Blonchek, 2000). These companies then attribute their high labour turnover rates to their competition luring employees away with ever increasing salaries. However, employee loyalty, like customer loyalty, is not solely built on salary and other monetary incentives. To attract and retain people, companies should position themselves as remarkable and unique places to work (Blonchek, 1998).

In light of this companies are increasingly viewing their human resources as strategic assets which can play a decisive role in enabling them to achieve sustainable competitive advantage (Analoui, 2007: 67). Consequently, a more strategic approach to the management of these resources is now being adopted. One anticipated outcome of this strategic approach to human resource management is to gain the commitment and loyalty of existing staff and to attract the best quality recruits in the marketplace. In recent years Human Resource specialists have developed the concept of employer branding as a human resource management tool for achieving these twin objectives.

Despite the growing interest in the concept of employer branding relatively little research has been carried out either on its implementation or on how effective it is in achieving its objectives (Foster et al., 2010; Martin et al., 2009; Tüzüner and Yüksel, 2009; Moroko and Uncles, 2008; Lievens et al., 2007; Kimpakorn and Dimmitt, 2007; Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). What publications there are on the subject can be classified into two types: those that present theoretical and unapplied models of the process of employer branding and those that provide empirical evidence of a specific stakeholder group’s impressions of aspects of a firm as an employer brand. The three key stakeholder groups that determine if a firm is an employer brand are its management, its employees and its potential employees. Table 1.1 summarises the different perspectives of the literature on the topic to date.

Table 1.1 Critical Employer Branding Empirical Studies

Perspective	Empirical Studies
Management	Martin and Beaumont (2003); Kimpakorn and Dimmitt (2007); Moroko and Uncles (2008); Davies (2008).
Incumbent Employees (Internal employer brand Image)	Kimpakorn and Dimmitt (2007).
Potential Employees (External employer brand Image)	Sutherland, Torricelli and Karg, (2002); Berthon, Ewing, Lian Hah (2005); Knox and Freeman (2006); Lievens, Van Hoyer and Anseel (2007); Burmann, Schaefer and Maloney (2008); Tüzüner and Yüksel (2009).

Source: Developed by the Author

The publications presenting theoretical models typically adopt a managerial stance and are prescriptive in nature advocating a “one best way” for managing the employer branding process whereas the empirical studies usually examine the views of either a firm’s potential employees, or occasionally, its incumbent employees of its employer brand. There are a very few studies, apart from that of Kimpakorn and Dimmitt (2007) that have addressed the issue from more than one stakeholder groups’ perspective.

In light of the present fragmentary approach to research, the mix of publications on the topic of employer branding and the limitations of many of the definitions of what an employer brand actually is, it is difficult to gain a clear coherent view of the actual process whereby firms become employer brands. This paper then seeks to investigate and define the concept of employer branding, explore the importance of classifying a firm’s *unique employment value proposition (UEVP)* and finally, to develop a holistic conceptual model identifying the three key stakeholders involved in the creation of a firm’s employer brand.

1.1 Defining an Employer Brand

Employer branding as a concept was first mooted in the U.S, around the beginning of the 21st century (The Conference Board, 2001). The term implies the differentiation of a firm as an employer from its competitors and highlights the perceived unique aspects of the firm’s employment offerings (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). Ruch (2002: 3) states that an “employer brand is a company’s image as seen through the eyes of its associates and potential hires”, which ultimately links to “the employment experience” of “what it is like to work at a company”. Therefore, the process of employer branding is aimed at helping managers make their companies attractive to both current and prospective employees (Woods, 2001).

The employer branding concept was first introduced to UK by Ambler and Barrow (1996) who stated that it “is about applying to the employment experience the same care and coherence used by good marketing and sales people in the management of valued customers. It is not exclusively concerned with recruitment, but is a strategy for managing all aspects of the employee relationship”. Crowe (1998: 19) claims that employer branding “is the process of creating an identity and managing the image of a company in its role as an employer. It has to take into account and manage the values, systems, politics and behaviours the company uses in pursuit of its corporate objectives through its people”.

Research conducted by Jenner and Taylor (2008: 1) on behalf of the CIPD, identifies four main reasons why employer branding has emerged as an influential approach to SHRM in the USA and the UK:

1. Brand power is now a central concept in organisational and social life;
2. HRM is searching for credibility and strategic influence within businesses;
3. The need for employee engagement – including attempts to recruit and retain a committed workforce;
4. The prevailing labour market conditions – in the current economic climate firms seek to motivate and engage existing employees and need to tempt potential employees for key positions away from roles they perceive as ‘safe’ in their current organisations.

In the Chartered Institute Personnel and Development (CIPD) Resourcing and Talent Planning Survey (2011), around 68 percent of employers reported they were experiencing recruitment difficulties and as a result they were developing a range of innovative strategies to address these, including employer branding. In fact, 71 percent of the surveyed organisations claimed they were using the employer brand as a recruitment tool (CIPD, 2009). Furthermore, due to the change in labour market conditions with the economic downturn and rising unemployment, current reports from CIPD (2012) suggest that employer branding continues to be a relevant concept as many organisations seek to motivate and engage existing employees.

The strength of the employer branding concept is that it aims to deal with the complex task of harmonising internal belief with the external brand message (Martin et al., 2005). This refers to the internal beliefs of existing employees and the external messages communicated by management and others to potential employees. Building an employer brand is not only concerned with creating an engaged and committed workforce but also with communicating the benefits of employment in the firm to future employees in a manner that is meaningful to them (Kimpakorn and Dimmitt, 2007: 50).

An effective external employer brand image results in “employer attractiveness” which has been defined as “the envisioned benefits that a potential employee sees in working for a specific organisation” (Berthon et al., 2005: 156) which is an antecedent of employer brand equity (Minchington, 2006: 96)

Thus, more and more companies are becoming interested in the concept of employer branding. Its aim is twofold; to attract the most promising new recruits and to ensure that existing employees understand the company's goals and believe in the company's commitment to them (Buss, 2002). The ultimate aim of employer branding is to have a group of employees who exemplify and embody the corporate promise to the ultimate consumer. Just as sales strategies have evolved towards a greater emphasis on customer retention, and purchaser relationships have become more like partnerships, so another major business activity, employment, is moving towards a more equitable footing and hence, employer branding is believed to give companies an HRM tool for recruiting and retaining talent within the organisation (Williams, 2000).

Additionally, Minchington (2006: 70-71) presents a business case for developing an employer brand by offering a range of expected and actual benefits for the organisation. Table 1.2 illustrates the proposed benefits of developing an employer brand to a firm.

Table 1.2 Proposed Benefits of Developing an Employer Brand

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased productivity and profitability • Positive financial results • Increase employee retention • Higher level of employer attractiveness • Increased level of staff engagement and commitment • Improved employee relations • Shorter recruitment time • Lower recruitment costs • Improved staff morale • Minimised loss of talented employees • Employees recommending organisations as a 'preferred place to work' • Employees committed to organisational goals • Maintenance of core competencies • Ensured long-term competitiveness.

Source: Minchington, B (2006, 2013), *Your Employer Brand*, CLA: Collective Learning Australia, pp: 71.

Additionally, Miles and Mangold (2004: 81) suggest that several favourable consequences are likely to accrue to organisations which participate in employer branding. These organisations are likely to benefit from higher levels of employee satisfaction and performance, service quality and customer retention as well as reduced employee turnover (Rousseau, 1995). Furthermore, Miles and Mangold (2004: 81) state that employees are more likely to engage in favourable word-of-mouth communication when they feel their psychological contract has been fulfilled, thus sending positive messages to other incumbent and prospective employees as well as to the firm's current and future customers.

For recruitment purposes, Price (2007: 333) claims that the aim of employer branding is to create a positive relationship between candidates and the organisation, by implementing simple but effective procedures that consistently project the company's values and portray strong, affirmative views of the organisation. These can even impact on unsuccessful candidates.

During recruitment, organisations aim to attract potential employees by publicising statements and announcements about employment within their business, career progression, training, and benefits/opportunities. These messages hopefully, project the *unique employment value proposition* (UEVP) that the organisation's management wants to convey externally. These messages may be interpreted by potential employees as employment promises (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). Recruitment messages, as stated by Rousseau (2001: 512), are the "subjective beliefs regarding an exchange agreement between an individual and the employing firm and its agent", while an employment promise is defined as the actual employment offer (over a broad range of components) and the organisations' ability to deliver on its promises (Corporate Leadership Council, 1999; Ruch, 2002: 5). Demonstrating the importance of the employer brand is not just about projecting the brand to current and potential employees; it must also encapsulate the nature of the job itself. Barrow (2007: 1) argues that "real employer brand management is all about working with other functions, persuading skilled and powerful people to do things differently in order to make the necessary changes to the working experience needed to achieve the organisation's objectives".

In 2005, a survey of 1,889 Personnel Today readers with responsibility for recruitment revealed that 95 percent of respondents believe employer branding is "important", with 80 percent saying that it will become even more so, and yet only 25 percent of those surveyed have responsibility for it (Willock, 2005). One respondent quoted, "there is so much competition for good candidates, and those (firms) with a good employer brand will be able to pick and choose from the best candidates". Collins and Stevens (2002) underline this point in their study, commenting that certain kinds of recruitment practices can be used to communicate employer brands better than others. The authors concluded that potential employees were influenced both by their impression of the company and the attributes of the actual job. In particular the values of an organisation can impact on its attractiveness to an applicant.

Slaughter et al., (2004) suggest that the brand personality of an employer brand attracts applicants with similar personality traits. Collins and Han (2004) argue that early recruitment and advertising have beneficial effects on increasing the quantity and quality of applicants. Again, research undertaken by Gotsi and Wilson (2001) found that PR consultants considered it essential to have this alignment between employee behaviour and the values of the organisation's brand. The consultants highlighted the need to ensure that there was no gap between what an organisation was saying to the outside world and what people believed inside that business. From this perspective, Gotsi and Wilson (2001) concluded that organisations must: (a) encourage employees to 'buy-in' to the business vision and values; and (b) ensure that everyone within the organisation clearly understands the purpose of the common set of values.

Overall then employer branding is concerned with creating and maintaining an identity for the business as an employer that both potential and actual employees can relate to (Byrne and Neuman, 1992). The better the match between the values of the firm and the values of the individual, the more likely the individual will be attracted and remain committed to the organisation (Schneider, 1987; Cable and Judge, 1996; Judge and Cable, 1997).

1.3 The Unique Employer Value Proposition

Employer branding has two key objectives. The first is to convey to promising, potential employees the impression that the firm concerned is an attractive place to work. The second objective is to convey to existing employees that their present experience at work is so satisfying they do not want to change employer (Mosley, 2007). The firm's strategies, policies and practices should be tailored to achieve these two objectives. Furthermore, these strategies, policies, and practices should highlight "the distinctiveness of the brand" (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004: 503). However, they should also "be a true representation of what the firm offers to its employees" (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004: 502).

In order to achieve this, the literature argues a firm's management needs to create a *unique employment value proposition* (UEVP) (Knox et al., 2000). This is sometimes simply referred to as the "value proposition" (Martin, 2008) or the "employer"/"employee value proposition" (Barrow and Mosley, 2005). A firm's U EVP is perceived to be important for acquiring and retaining talent. Mosley (2007: 131) states that the U EVP should clarify to prospective and existing employees what they, as employees can expect from the organisation. It should create a compelling profile, (Housley, 2007), image or proposition and communicate it to actual and potential employees, convincing them of the firm's worth. ERC (2008) suggests that the U EVP should convey the value or benefit that employees, both actual and potential, can obtain through employment in a firm. That is, it should communicate, as far as possible, the value of an organisation's employment experience. According to Lopus and Murray (2001) an effective U EVP should offer to employees performance management based on the principle of merit; potential for growth in professional competence; potential for job advancement with the associated rewards; and a management that acts with integrity and concern. Implementing and communicating an effective U EVP should result in a highly committed and involved workforce.

Minchington, (2006: 142) believes that a U EVP should create a set of associations and offerings that characterise a particular firm and differentiates it from its competitors. The U EVP should provide a true reflection of what it is like to work in the firm (Eisenberg et al., 2001). In other words, it should identify what the organisation stands for, what it can offer to its employees and what it requires of them as an employer. It should reinforce and promote an organisation's strengths as an employer and the corresponding value of

employment in the organisation. This can be in the form of compensation, benefits, training and development or other defining attributes that provide a valuable employment experience aligned with target-applicant preferences. Ultimately, if the managers of an organisation communicate and implement its UEVP successfully, it should, firstly, convey and offer everything employees expect of the company, and, secondly, appeal to the types of potential employees that the organisation would desire to employ (Housley, 2007). Basically, the UEVP should make clear to existing and potential employees “what’s in it for them” or what extrinsic and intrinsic benefits they should gain in exchange for their labour, both now and in the future (Dell and Hickey, 2002: 24). In developing such a UEVP, Hughes and Rog, (2008: 753) assert employers should be particularly mindful of the key factors associated with employee recruitment and retention.

If the UEVP is effective it will facilitate the creation of a strong employer brand which will make the company an employer of choice (Leary-Joyce, 2004). Sullivan (1998: 1) defines an employer of choice as “a company that because of its status and reputation is always the first choice of world class candidates”. An employer of choice attracts top talent as a result of its reputation and employer brand message, both of which are tailored to appeal to the target audience (Sutherland et al., 2002). Consultants Ahlrichs (2000) and Ashby and Pell (2001) claimed that to become an employer of choice firms should adopt a deliberate business strategy. Often employers in both the US and UK benchmark themselves against other organisations ranked in the “Best Place to Work” published by *Fortune* magazine in the US, and *The Sunday Times* in the UK.

To be effective an organisation’s UEVP should be designed to both attract new staff into the firm and to offer existing staff a good working experience. Thus, it should focus on the areas that are valued by employees in their work. A variety of writers have identified a number of strategic and operational characteristics of a firm that potential and actual employees may feel affect its attractiveness as an employer (Hermann and Gioia, 2000; Johnson, 2000; Simons, 2000; Knox and Freeman, 2006, Mosley, 2007; Srivastava and Bhatnagar, 2008; Agrawal and Swaroop, 2009). Among the most frequently cited characteristics are a compelling organisational vision and values, enlightened people oriented leadership and management, effective corporate communication, effective selection and recruitment, effective career training and development opportunities, meaningful work, and appropriate pay and compensation. Many of these characteristics also feature in the increasingly popular concept in human resource management of total rewards for employees.

Ruch (2002: 3) asserts that a UEVP should include tangible elements such as salary and benefits and intangible ones such as company values. Research conducted by Lievens, Van Hoye and Anseel (2007) concluded that the UEVP should be more related to pride and respect than to material (instrumental) benefits, such as advancement, pay, travel and job security. Other writers (Ambler and Barrow, 1996; PA Consulting, 2002; Minchington, 2007) have suggested a range of corporate strategic issues and HR policies and practices that they feel should be central to a firm’s UEVP. There is, however, no

general agreement about these elements. Some writers would also include, for example corporate social responsibility and organisational culture.

For the purposes of this paper the following corporate issues and HR strategies, policies and practices have been considered. Corporate issues include the organisation's vision and values, its predominant leadership and management style, and its communication systems. The HR issues concerned include recruitment practices, opportunities for career development, pay and compensation practices, the firm's attitude towards employee work-life balance and employees' working environment. If a firm's approach to addressing these issues contributes to the creation of a loyal, engaged and committed workforce, on the one hand and attracts the best available talent to the firm, on the other hand, then management will have created the basis of an effective UEVP.

Table 1.2 illustrates the elements that theorists suggest should be part of a firm's UEVP.

Table 1.2 Employer Brand: Elements that can contribute to a firm's Unique Employment Value Proposition

<p><u>CORPORATE ISSUES</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Corporate vision and core values• Leadership and management style• Corporate communication systems <p><u>HRM ISSUES</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recruitment practices• Pay and compensation practices• Career development opportunities and management• Approach to work-life balance• Management concern about the working environment
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Source: Adapted from Ambler and Barrow, 1996; PA Consulting, 2002; Minchington, 2007, 2013).

To create an effective employer brand companies are expected to articulate a UEVP which suggests that the total work experience at their organisation is superior to that at other companies. An effective UEVP is considered to provide business advantage by, firstly, enabling an organisation to attract employees with the skills and knowledge that it needs to achieve competitive advantage, and secondly, enabling it to retain and motivate a highly skilled workforce. To be effective a company must ensure that it fulfils the implicit promises made within its UEVP. An effective UEVP should therefore exhibit the following features:

1. Its vision and values should be meaningful to actual and potential employees and be communicated in a clear and concise manner so that, on the one hand,

employees know and understand what it is trying to achieve and the values affecting its operations. These provide the foundation on which the psychological contract made between the employee and the employer is based (Miles and Mangold, 2005: 538). The organisation's vision and values should also be attractive to the most suitable potential employees in the labour market. Furthermore, for an organisation to be an employer brand it must ensure that its practices and policies are perceived by both actual and potential employees to be totally consistent with its vision and values.

2. Its leadership should aspire to be transformational and its management should be participative in order to gain the long term commitment of existing employees and to build a reputation as an employer of choice for potential employees.
3. Its communication channels should be both externally and internally focused and should enable communication to flow in all directions, ensuring that potential employees are knowledgeable about the activities of the organisation and believe it to be a "good place to work" and enabling actual employees to participate in discussion and decision making where appropriate. Communication should be well designed, thoughtful and clearly presented. Informal communication between those at different levels in the hierarchy should be encouraged as it enables managers to offer individualised attention to employees. This can be highly motivating and result in employees feeling respected and valued.
4. Its recruitment practices should strive to create a positive recruitment experience for its applicants. They should also strengthen its reputation as an employer of choice and increase its potential to become a corporate and employer brand resulting in the recruitment of staff who will be engaged and motivated, while retaining a regular source of referrals.
5. Its pay and compensation practices for potential and existing employees should be perceived as being both attractive and fair for all employees and should be aligned with the non-financial aspects of its total rewards system.
6. The career development opportunities it provides for employees should be fairly implemented and should encourage employees to develop their skills in order to progress throughout the organisation. They should also benefit the organisation by ensuring that it is continuously equipped with people with the skills to enable it to function effectively.
7. It should implement practices and policies which are consistent with ensuring that staff can have a balanced lifestyle.
8. Its working environment should be healthy, safe, comfortable, supportive and empowering, as well as offering employees opportunities for social interaction and affiliation.

1.4 Holistic Employer Brand Creation Model

In order to develop, implement and communicate the strategies, policies and practices of a firm's UEVP, its management must have a clear understanding of the impression that it wants actual and potential employees to gain of the experience of working in the firm. Borrowing from both branding and corporate identity literature these managerial perceptions of the impression they want to make are referred to in this paper as the employer brand identity (Kaperferer, 1997; Harris and de Chernatony, 2001; de Chernatony, 1999; Balmer, 2009; Balmer and Gray, 2003).

However, firms in which management has a positive employer brand identity are not automatically employer brands. This is because the firm's employer brand is also dependent on the actual employees' views of their working experiences in the firm as well as potential employees' perceptions of what it would be like to work in the firm. Following on from the branding and corporate branding literature the perceptions of existing employees in this context are referred to as internal employer brand image and those of potential employees are referred to as external employer brand image. Where employees have an overall favourable internal employer brand image the firm will typically have an engaged, committed and loyal workforce and where potential employees have a favourable external employer brand image the firm will typically attract high calibre recruits. Again, following on from the corporate branding literature (Ind, 1997; Dowling, 1986, 1993) in which it was noted that contradictory messages about a firm emanating from different sources, can damage its corporate image, it can be deduced that different messages about the employment experience offered by a firm can damage its employer brand. Thus, to be an employer brand not only must a firm's managers agree about the employer brand identity, so too must its actual and potential employees respectively agree about the internal and external employer brand images. Furthermore all the components of the potential employer brand need to be compatible and congruent with each other. Confusion and lack of clarity across and within any of the three components that make up an employer brand can impede a firm's chances of becoming an actual employer brand.

Unfortunately for many firms achieving consensus, congruence and compatibility within and across the three components that make up the employer brand is problematic because employer brand identities and images typically derive from different sources. For example the employer brand identity held by a firm's managers derives from their perception of the firm's implementation of the strategies, policies and practices that can contribute to its UEVP. In contrast to this, the internal employer brand image of existing employees is derived from their actual working experiences (Knox and Freeman, 2006; Ruch, 2002; Mosley, 2007). Finally, the external employer brand image held by potential employees is derived not only from the formal communications that they receive from the external employer brand marketing of the firm itself but, as is the case with corporate branding, also from informal sources (Dowling, 1986, 1993; Melewar and Jenkins, 2002). The different sources of internal and external employer brand images can be likened to the different sources of the pre-experiential and post-experiential brand associations identified by Boyle (2007) in the brand cocreation process. The three components of an

employer brand and their different derivations are shown in the diagram of the holistic model of the process of employer brand creation in Figure 1.1 below.

Freeman and Knox (2006) also identified the concept of “construed employer brand image”. This concept, derived from the work of Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail (1994) on corporate image refers to what organisational insiders believe outsiders think of the organisation. Thus construed employer brand image can be defined as organisational members’ perceptions of external stakeholders’ view the employment experience within the firm. Construed employer brand image is particularly significant for a firm’s management because it can influence its implementation of strategies, policies and practices that impact on employee commitment.

In light of the foregoing discussion it is clear that building an employer brand cannot be done alone by management by conveying a positive message, nor even implementing strategies, policies and practices that it believes will be attractive to actual and potential employees alike. It is also determined by existing employees’ perceptions of their employment experiences and by potential employees’ beliefs about what it would be like to work for the company. This may explain why so little research has been carried out focusing on all three key stakeholder groups involved in employer brand creation (Moroko and Uncles, 2008; Lievens et al., 2007; Kimpakorn and Dimmitt, 2007; Backhaus and Tickoo, 2004). It is also the reason why the author proposes to undertake primary research to determine if the multi-site hotel group based in Northern Ireland is an employer brand to consider the views of the three key stakeholder groups, namely its management, its existing employees and potential employees.

1.4 Rationale for Selecting the Case Study Firm for the Primary Research: Northern Ireland Multi-site Hotel Chain

There are two main reasons, one industry based and one company based why the case study firm is selected for carrying out the primary research. Firstly, it is well known that the hospitality industry, and particularly that in Northern Ireland, suffers from a range of employment problems including high labour turnover and poor labour retention rates. (Devine et al., 2007). In fact, the Northern Ireland Skills Monitoring Survey (2010) reported that across all industrial sectors, employee turnover was highest in the hotel and restaurant sector at 36 percent. Additionally, a recent CIPD (2012) Resourcing and Talent Planning Survey, reported that while all UK organisations are experiencing recruitment difficulties the highest labour turnover rate of 41 percent is in the hotel and catering industry. As a result, recruiting and retaining the best human capital is an urgent strategic human resource problem for this industry. Becoming an employer brand could alleviate this problem.

Secondly, the company concerned, a large multi-site hotel chain, has a complex, differentiated organisational structure (Daft, 2010). It is divided vertically between management and operatives, horizontally between back-of-house and front-of-house and spatially between the different hotels which focus on different markets. This complexity provides a perfect backdrop for determining if the chain is an employer brand or not, and if it is, how precisely it has achieved this position. If not, the complexity of the organisation and its business environment are ideal for identifying a range of factors that may have impeded its progress to becoming an employer brand.

1.5 Proposed Primary Research Strategy

A qualitative case study research strategy will be adopted for this action research inquiry. Case study research has been used for many years across a variety of disciplines. Social scientists have made wide use of this method to investigate contemporary real-life situations and provide the basis for the application of ideas and extension of methods (Yin 1981; 1994). Valsiner (1986: 11) claims that “the study of individual cases has always been the major strategy in the advancement of human beings”. Indeed, Bromley (1986: ix) maintains that “the individual case study or situation analysis is the bed-rock of scientific investigation”.

The research aim will be to determine if a successful multi-site hotel chain based in Northern Ireland is an employer brand and if not, to identify if it is the result of particular aspects of its business environment. These include the nature of the industry sector, the nature of the company's workforce and its local managers and the function and location of the various hotels in the chain.

This aim is further broken down into three research objectives as follows:

- 1. To determine if the case study firm is an employer brand;**
- 2. To identify if the nature of the industry sector, the nature of the company's workforce and its local managers and the function and location of the various hotels in the chain impeded its progress to becoming an employer brand.**

In view of the aims and objectives of this research, a qualitative approach to the primary research will be employed. Both in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews are deemed to be appropriate research methods to apply. Twenty-six interviews will be held with the management and employees of the focal organisation and four focus group sessions will be conducted. The research focuses on a comparison of perceptions of the management and of incumbent and potential employees about the attractiveness of the hotel group as a great place to work.

1.6 Conclusion

Human resources are now accepted as a strategic asset of organisations. As the world of academia and business communities learn more of the dramatic impact that informed, well trained, and motivated employees can have on the successful development and implementation of strategic plans, there are increasing calls for HR to become more engaged in core business processes (Ulrich, 1998; Becker et al., 1997). So, as sweeping changes continue to reshape the workplace and as the future is unpredictable, it is hard to determine what it will bring (Aghazadeh, 2003). Consequently, the need for strategies to attract and retain the most effective employees has never been more pressing (Cairncross, 2000). Employer branding is a competitive strategy that firms can choose in an effort to secure and retain the most appropriate employees; those who will enable organisations to remain successful and secure ongoing profitability (Moroko and Uncles, 2008).

The concept of employer branding is founded on the recognition that human capital is a valuable internal resource that needs to be nurtured and developed (Martin et al., 2005). In acquiring and assimilating “the best” human capital, HRM can contribute to the long term success of an organisation (Martin et al., 2005; Moroko and Uncles, 2008; Srivastava and Bhatnagar, 2008).

The ultimate goal of being an employer brand is that an organisation can position itself as an employer of choice, which top talent aspires to work for because of its status and reputation (Sutherland et al., 2002) and is always the first choice of world class candidates.

Figure 1.1 A Holistic Model of the Process of Employer Brand Creation

THE THREE STRANDS OF THE EMPLOYER BRAND			
	EMPLOYER BRAND		
From the perspective of:	Company Management	Company Employees	Potential Employees
Referred to as:	Employer Brand Identity	Internal Employer Brand Image	External Employer Brand Image
Derived from:	Implementation and Communication of the strategies, policies and practices that could Contribute to the Company's UEVP	Work Experience	External Corporate Communication and Uncontrolled Messages from Elsewhere
Anticipated Results:	Effective Recruitment and Retention of Staff	Engaged, Committed and Loyal Workforce	Positive Pre-Experiential Employer Brand Associations

Source: Developed by Author

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