

Brand Your Organization as a Development Culture

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An established brand built around continuous learning can be a marketplace differentiator for potential recruits.



An individual or organizational brand isn't necessarily about an internally derived definition as much as it is about how customers define it. Those customers can be internal — employees — and external. In many cases, a brand is not the message a marketer intends to send a customer but what the customer perceives. No matter how great the advertising, in the end the customer will make the final decision.

The same principles apply whenever organizations aim to attract talent. Once talent is attracted to a brand, organizations must find ways to retain brand loyalty and relevancy. Organizations call this being an employer of choice, and many invest time and resources applying for industry awards that will formally grant them that title.

What Does a Brand Say?

Brand is the image that comes to mind when potential recruits and employees think about a company. It answers questions such as, does the company stand for growth and development? Does it offer opportunities for all employees? Does it provide a great working environment? Does it offer top-notch benefits? Is it an innovator in its field?

A company's brand is essentially the face it presents to the world and to its employees. If a company is known for having a development culture, it will offer employees continuous opportunities for learning and growth. While almost every company promotes this as true, few find that their employee survey scores agree. The key to success is not only to create an image, but to ensure that a learning and development culture actually exists within the organization.

Deploying a development-centric brand is not easy, however. It takes time, effort and requires consistency. Employees today are more like customers

— they know they have options. Therefore, it's up to the organization to convince them — with consistent messages from recruitment through all the stages of the employee life cycle until the end of their tenure with a firm — that development is serious business.

To test the efficacy of an employee brand, ask, "Why would someone work here?" Employees are an organization's best messenger. They are brand ambassadors, and branding begins at home. If employees believe in an organization's values and mission, they will spread the word — and if they don't, they will spread that word, too.

To ensure employees are spreading the right messages, leaders should develop a compelling employee value proposition (EVP). A development EVP is a statement that clearly lays out how the organization views learning. The learning value proposition should be a common thread in all of the organization's programs, systems, communications, marketing and processes. It should serve as a litmus test when business decisions are being made and be a guiding principle when defining the organization's future direction.

Development-centric EVPs can take any number of shapes and tones. Consider these printed messages from a variety of organizations:

Own your career: Career development is a personal journey that starts with your enthusiasm and desire to learn about the possibilities. No one knows your career goals and aspirations — or how best to meet them — better than you. Only you can own your career, and it's up to you to take an active role

ON THE WEB

Booz & Co.'s Jon R. Katzenbach said companies can boost learning through culture by focusing on behaviors that change how people react to learning opportunities. Hear more at CLOmedia.com/materials/view/238.

in your development. So when you're ready, take the first step. Talk to your leader about where you want to go, and how you need to grow.

Unleash your potential: We believe you have many special talents to share. Growing a career with us means you'll have the opportunities you need to realize your potential and meet your goals, whatever they may be. Whether you're a sales associate, a supervisor or a manager, we'll help you unleash your potential, so you can help others unleash theirs.

We're partners in your success: We believe career development is a partnership between you, your leader and your organization. As your partners in the process, we're committed to helping you grow your career by giving you the tools, resources and support you need to realize your potential and meet your goals, whatever they may be. Your responsibility is to take the necessary steps to move forward by learning about the world of possibilities around you.

Our future depends on you: Today we're at a crossroads. The world of business is changing dramatically. Our ability to respond to new challenges depends on how well we develop the core of our business. With this in mind, we are committed to a culture of development. We're working harder than ever to improve the way we grow careers.

How to Build a Development Brand

Branding should start by expressing an organization's commitment and purpose. Building a development brand is inextricably linked to the business, so the entire company needs to be on board with the message. It demands involvement from three critical stakeholder groups: senior leaders, managers at every level and, finally, employees.

The organization needs to consider development as part of its business strategy and provide the necessary resources and structures to support it. Educational opportunities, internal mobility systems and on-the-job learning are just a few of these systems.

The organization also must determine what talent it will need for the future and how it will develop it. What are the important core competencies and who are the individuals who best fit those competency models? Further, an organization needs to communicate these future needs to managers and employees, so that managers can determine the skills needed to support the company's future and encour-

age employees to take the initiative to help develop these skills.

Managers are also messengers of the organization's brand. They are the face of the organization to their employees. They either enhance the brand or diminish it. Further, managers need development, too. They need to be exposed to the necessary coaching and learning that will enable them to provide support to their employees, and encourage and guide their critical skill and competency development. Managers are on the front line with employees. It's not enough to have commitment from the C-suite. All leaders must embrace a firm's development brand.

How Employees Develop Their Brands

Ultimately, while the organization and managers provide opportunities for the development brand experience, it is up to the employee to exhibit the initiative to seek out a development opportunity and to put forth the effort to make it work.

In the late 1990s, Tom Peters wrote a cover story in *Fast Company*, "The Brand Called You," which encouraged individuals to see themselves as brands. Employees must create a consistent message and realize they are the best ones to effectively and constantly promote their brand.

Careers are a continual reinvention of one's individual brand. And leaders can help employees utilize targeted development options to position themselves as the right person for a new job, a key project or other advancement opportunity.

Employees must determine what makes their brand unique. Do they want to be seen as flexible, agile, enthusiastic, creative and detail-oriented? What makes them the compelling choice for the opportunity? Is it their ambition? Their knowledge or skill? Encourage employees to think about their skills, interests and values, and have them define why their brand makes them best fit for a job or a new opportunity.

Personal branding requires that individuals be relentless about marketing their value-add to the organization and to others. Tools such as LinkedIn and other social media can help individuals advertise achievements to showcase their brand. The brand employees create online is just as important as the one they create at work.

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An employee's professional network — boss, colleagues, clients and direct reports — is the most important brand marketing vehicle he or she has. If people have no idea how they are perceived, they need to create a brand audit by talking to their network and finding out.

An employee brand that is valuable in one organization may not be in another, however. To build a personal brand, employees must seek out opportunities within their career to not only develop skills but strategic alliances with people in their areas of interest, both in and outside of their current organization. Organizations with a development mindset are not afraid when employees build a network outside their walls.

Tracking Brand Strength

According to *The Big Book of Marketing* by Anthony G. Bennett, it's natural to want to understand how much a brand is worth. Organizations cultivating a development brand are no different. If development is a business imperative, there must be a way to measure it. Organizations can use a variety of measures to gauge their leaders' and employees' development temperament, such as:

- **Turnover and exit interviews:** What are employees saying in exit interviews about why they are leaving? How many of their reasons for departure are related to development? Are their reasons in direct contradiction to the EVP?
- **Regrettable loss:** Is an organization losing employees it has invested in developing? What does the exit interview reveal?
- **Employee engagement/culture surveys:** How do employees evaluate their organization, leader and themselves on questions aligned with development?
- **Internal versus external fill rate:** Is the organization able to fill open positions with internal candidates or does it have to look outside for the necessary talent?
- **Voice of the customer:** What do external customers say about their interactions with employees? How do their experiences align with what employees are saying on engagement surveys?

If the measures reveal gaps, action must be taken swiftly to realign with the organization's EVP and get the development brand back on track. When organizations commit to creating a development culture, it can't be assumed that an EVP alone will create change. It will take the sustained commitment of the organization, its managers and its employees to embed the mindset and realize the EVP. [CLO](#)

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