

HOW TO TAKE CARE OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF RECRUITMENT PROCESSES IN THE ERA OF A PANDEMIC?

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Abstract: This article examines the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labor market, elucidating its transformative effects on the employer-employee dynamics. Through a comprehensive exploration of recruitment processes, employer branding, and the broader employer-employee relationship, the study addresses the challenges organizations encounter in maintaining their coveted status as an “employer of choice” during these unprecedented times. Using survey research and literature review methodologies, the investigation, centered on 36 HR representatives from medium and large companies in Poland, reveals the substantial influence of the pandemic on employer branding activities, mainly through a pronounced shift toward social media campaigns. The research also identifies heightened difficulties in maintaining the employer's image during the pandemic, significantly impacting direct communication with employees. Strategies adopted by companies, such as changes in benefits, support for remote work, and prioritizing employee well-being, are scrutinized. The article introduces the HCDS model – Honesty, Care, Development, and Stabilization – as a framework for managing employer-employee relationships during crises. In conclusion, the study underscores the centrality of employees in organizational success, advocating for a strategic alignment of compensation with employee expectations, integrating internal branding activities with external efforts.

Keywords: COVID-19, employer branding, EVP, human resources, labor market

JEL Classification: O15, J28, H12

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Introduction

In the complex landscape of organizational management, the pursuit of talent is a critical endeavor encapsulated in recruitment and selection processes.

This article delves into the intricate web of talent acquisition, exploring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on recruitment dynamics, employer branding, and the broader employer-employee relationship. Against the backdrop of unprecedented challenges brought about by the pandemic, organizations face the daunting task of maintaining their appeal as an “employer of choice”. Methods that worked before the pandemic, both during the recruitment process, employer branding, and building employer-employee relationships during the pandemic, had to be adapted to new conditions and opportunities. The ensuing sections dissect the recruitment process, explore the concept of employer branding, scrutinize the labor market in the context of the crisis, and elucidate the research methodology adopted for a comprehensive study of the subject.

Navigating the intricate terrain of recruitment in the pandemic era, this article aims to address pivotal questions: How has the pandemic reshaped talent acquisition? What strategies can organizations employ to retain employees and circumvent recruitment difficulties? How can robust employer-employee relationships be fostered in these challenging times? A meticulous research methodology has been employed to unravel these queries, blending survey research and literature review, culminating in a comprehensive analysis of the evolving dynamics in recruitment and selection.

Literature review

Recruitment and Selection

The term “recruiting” comes from Latin and means accepting or gaining members of an organization or company. The essence of recruitment is primarily activities undertaken on the labor market, which are focused on informing people willing to work about the company, its structure, and its working conditions (Szalkowski, 2000). The very essence of the recruitment process can be divided into two stages: the recruitment stage and the selection stage. Recruitment is the interest of potential candidates in an offer of a vacancy, which, in effect, is to persuade them to apply for employment. It has three main pillars – the informative, motivational, and pre-selection functions. Djabaty (2012) defined recruitment as attracting suitable candidates for the selection process. Selection quality depends on the recruitment process (Woźniak, 2013).

Selection is also known as personnel selection and takes place after successful recruitment. In the institutional context, personnel selection is defined as a set of actions taken to fill a position to guarantee the organization's continuity and efficiency (Marek, 2008). According to Pushpendra, Garima, and Monika (2017), selection is the process of choosing an acceptable applicant from among the pool of job applicants, where recruiters are looking for potential employees to apply for job postings. So, it occurs when the number of candidates for a specific job exceeds the number of vacan-

cies. Its tools may include interviews, references, biographical information, tests, competition, competence checks, and assessment centers. This makes it possible to determine whether the candidate adequately meets specific requirements. This activity makes it easier to achieve the goal of hiring the right candidate. The appropriate selection of employees means confronting two points of view – of employees and employers (Kozmiński & Piotrowski, 2007).

It is worth emphasizing that making the wrong decisions at the selection stage may, in consequence, have very adverse effects on the entire company. That is why the correct recruitment and selection procedure is so important. These two processes are closely related, forming the employer's actions to select the best candidate for a workplace in a company.

The recruitment process often looks similar, depending on the company's needs and internal arrangements. Mainly, this process can be characterized by the following steps:

Table 1. Characteristics of the stages of the recruitment process

Recruitment	Step 1.	Recruitment needs analysis	Headcount verification, specifying the candidate's profile, budgeting, market verification
	Step 2.	Creation of a recruitment strategy	Creating a strategy that includes internal/external recruitment, selection of the person responsible for recruitment, strategy, and sources of candidate acquisition based on a specific budget
	Step 3.	Attracting Candidates	Active and passive forms of recruitment – announcing a new job offer on portals, social media, traditional media, verification, and searching for candidates on contact networks (LinkedIn, social media)
Selection	Step 4.	Screening candidates	Verification of candidates' application documents in terms of recruitment needs, remote/phone screening interview
	Step 5.	Interviewing	Job interview with HR managers – maximizing online interviews
	Step 6.	Employment decision	Selection of the candidate who best meets the criteria
	Step 7.	Onboarding – Introduction & Training	The process of introducing a new employee to the company

Source: Own study based on research

The recruitment process is divided mainly into internal and external activities. The internal activities are those conducted among current company employees; the exterior ones are to encourage people from the outside to apply for a given position. Recruitment departments created in company functions related to recruitment or HR, outsourcing companies designated for recruitment activities, or external job agencies can be responsible for recruitment. In the case of a small company, the search for employees may be limited to a given city or voivodeship, while in the case of a large enterprise, it is necessary to search even for the entire country. The attractiveness of

a given advertisement is influenced primarily by promotion and advertising (Suchar, 2018). Dessler (2014) emphasized that to perform effective recruitment employers require a proper brand to differentiate themselves from other competitors and to gain competitive advantages in the labor market. This is where Employer Branding comes to the rescue.

Employer Branding

Employer branding was defined in 1996. Barrow and Ambler (1996), in the article “The Employer Brand”, explained the concept of employer branding as “a package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by the employer and identified with the employer business”. Employer branding has been dynamically developing as a field of multidisciplinary studies over the last twenty-five years. Academic scholars have recognized employer branding as a critical resource for attracting high-quality employees in the war for talent (Elving et al., 2013). Among employer branding, we can distinguish two types: external, i.e., all activities that will help us build the name of “employer of choice” and thus gain the necessary, valuable employees faster and cheaper, as well as internal: aimed at current employees, whose goal is to grow their satisfaction and retention in the company. Martin (2008) describes a slightly different approach to building an employer brand. He bases his observations on organizational and corporate identity. According to him, it is essential to emphasize the image of an employer that provides good working conditions. The basis of employer branding is the package of benefits provided by the employer. As a process, employer branding covers three core aspects: the development of an employer value proposition (what the organization offers to its employees), external marketing of the employer brand (recruitment task), and internal marketing (developing the highly committed employees to retain them) (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). If a company cannot attract the talent needed to achieve its strategic goals, it is not creating a good employer brand. Finding the right employee to meet lasting needs has now become an issue worthy of the attention of the board and management staff – and all this is encapsulated in the concept of employer branding (Altkorn, 2004).

The labor market in the crisis

In 2020, the recruitment market faced a serious problem: the COVID-19 epidemic. High social and economic uncertainty also affected recruitment, which fell dramatically. At the end of the first and second quarters of 2020, there was a global freeze on the labor market. Considering the data from the Element ATS Recruitment report prepared for Grant Thornton, compared to April 2019 and April 2020, the number of advertisements published on recruitment portals decreased in Poland by 49.48% and compared May 2019 to May 2020 – by 58.38%. As a recruiter working for one of the large corporations, the author personally experienced this decline. Due to the dynamic and constantly changing situation, which globally shook the economy, many companies faced the consequences of economic stagnation, which meant that we, as a recruiting team, had to suspend our activities. Hopefully, the uncertainty accompanying every action taken then, both the one felt among the candidates and

our team, will never return. Returning to the Grand Thornton research, which measured the number of new offers published on Poland's 50 largest recruitment portals. Below is a graph of job offers compared to April and May 2019 and a graph of job offers in 2019 compared to 2020. This indicates how much the pandemic has affected the labor market and the number of published advertisements compared to the previous year.

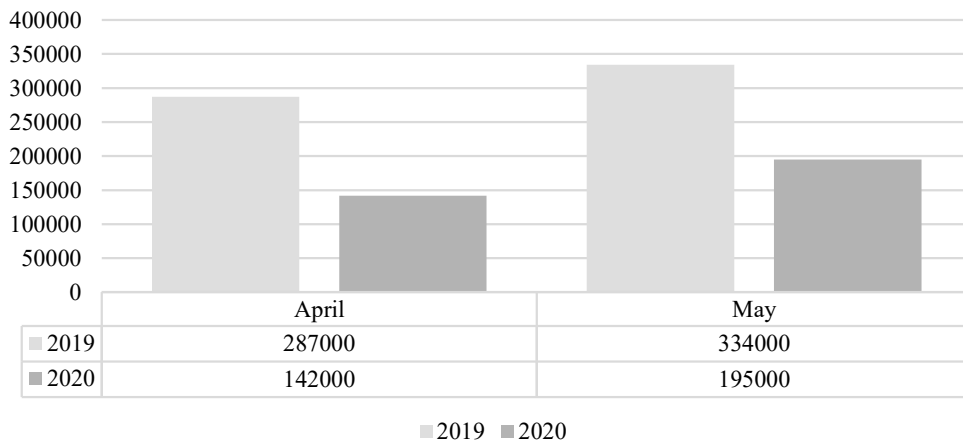


Figure 1. Number of new job offers published on recruitment portals in April and May 2019 and 2020

Source: Element ATS Recruitment report prepared for Grant Thornton (Element, 2021)

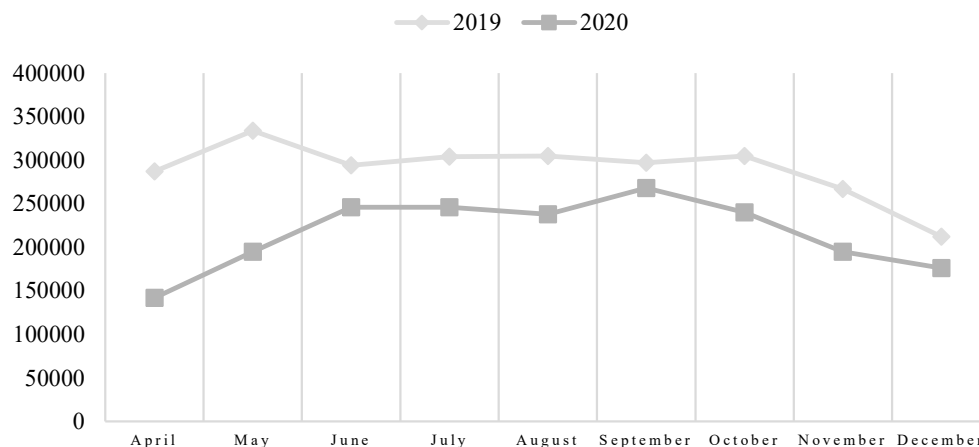


Figure 2. Number of new job offers published on recruitment portals in 2019 and 2020

Source: Element ATS Recruitment report prepared for Grant Thornton (Element, 2021)

It should be noted that the changes caused by the pandemic affected the least highly qualified specialists, especially those in the area of the so-called best-cost country.

As Tusl et al. (2021) noted in their research, the main effects of the pandemic on enterprises were:

- reduction of employment;
- no renewal of many temporary contracts;
- reduction of working time;
- reduction of benefits;
- unrest among employees due to the precarious employment situation;
- searching for employment in stable companies.

Looking at the same from the employee's perspective, we can mention:

- fear of changing jobs;
- uncertainty of working conditions in the face of job cuts;
- lack of motivation due to salary reduction.

Research methodology

Various research methods have been selected for the paper, such as survey research and literature review. A literature study makes it possible to understand the issue's essence under consideration.

During the creation of the paper, the following stages were focused on:

- formulation of the research aims,
- defining the questions to be answered by the literature,
- collecting data,
- data evaluation,
- data analysis and interpretation,
- data presentation.

The research questions were defined as follows:

- How has the pandemic affected talent acquisition?
- How can you avoid losing an employee and not face recruitment difficulties?
- Which activities can help the company build an employer-employee relationship?

This article aims to investigate the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labor market and employer-employee dynamics, explicitly focusing on recruitment processes, employer branding, and the broader relationship between employers and employees. I want to address organizations' challenges in maintaining their "employer of choice" status during the pandemic. To obtain the data necessary to verify the impact of the pandemic on the activities within the company, it was decided to conduct a questionnaire.

The sample selection process involved a systematic approach to ensure a representative and meaningful representation of medium-sized and large companies with foreign capital operating in the Polish market in 2021. The initial pool consisted of 4,617 companies, comprising 2,993 medium-sized and 1,624 large enterprises, as the GUS (Central Statistical Office in Poland) reported in 2022.

A targeted recruitment strategy was implemented through a business networking portal to gather respondents, focusing on maintaining proportional representation based on the number of medium and large companies in the market. The selection

process considered the significance of aligning the respondents with positions related to Human Resources Management within their respective companies.

In order to achieve a balanced and reflective sample, the number of participants from the HR departments of medium-sized and large enterprises was determined in proportion to the overall market composition. Specifically, 30 representatives from medium-sized companies and 16 representatives from large companies were invited to participate. This selection accounted for 10% of large and medium-sized companies with foreign capital in the Polish market in 2021.

Ultimately, 36 respondents, comprising 14 representatives from large companies and 22 representatives from medium-sized companies, accepted the invitation to participate in the study. The high participation rate ensured a robust dataset for analysis. Regarding the percentage distribution, 39% of the respondents represented large companies, while 61% represented medium-sized companies. This approach aimed to capture a nuanced understanding of the experiences and perspectives of HR professionals in both medium-sized and large enterprises affected by the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Among them, 25% were people who held HR leadership positions. 75% of people declared that they work in non-managerial positions.

Research results

The pandemic has undoubtedly left a significant mark on the labor market and the change in the employer-employee relationship. To obtain the data necessary to verify the impact of the pandemic on the activities within the company, it was decided to survey with a questionnaire. The study involved 36 HR representatives from companies of various sizes, occupying different positions, including those of leadership. The respondents answered to the statement, “Among the image-building activities carried out by various online companies, those carried out via social media stand out the most”, using the Likert scale. As can be seen in the pie chart, in the respondents’ opinion, the most effective tool for building an employer brand is social media (77.77%).

Among the image-building activities carried out by various online companies, those carried out via social media stand out the most

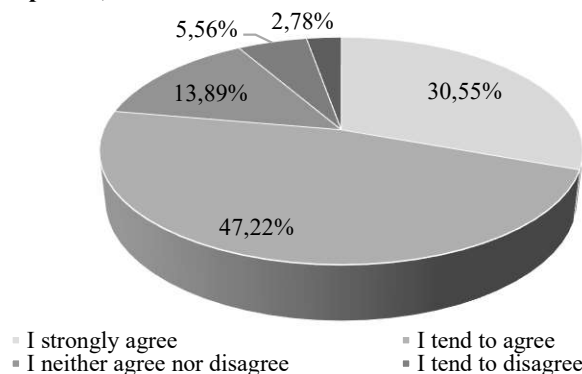


Figure 3. The popularity of the employer branding campaign activity on social media

Source: Own research

To the statement, “In times of a pandemic, it is more difficult to care for the image of an employer than in the past”, the respondents also responded using the Likert scale. The results show that, in their opinion, it is true. 64% of the respondents seem to struggle more with caring for the employer’s image than before the COVID-19 pandemic.

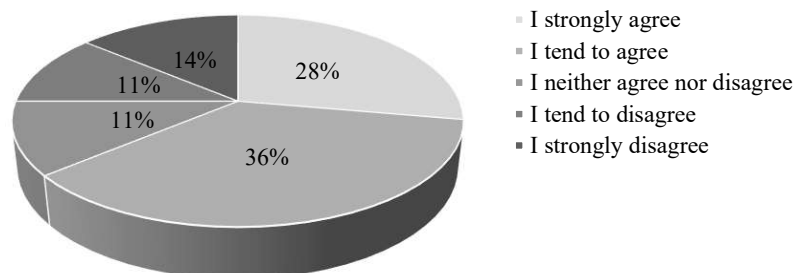


Figure 4. Difficulties in caring for the image of the employer during a pandemic

Source: Own research

It also affects direct communication with the employee. Therefore, recruiting exceptionally qualified specialists in times of a pandemic can be considered a kind of challenge.

According to the data analysis, most respondents, as an Employer Branding activity, use business campaigns on social media (75%), participate in job fairs (61.1%), and use the “Career” tab on the company's website (55.6%). The following categories were: Advertising the company as an employer in traditional media (50%), conducting an employer branding media campaign (47.2%), activity among industry groups on social media (47.2%), and ambassador programs at universities (38.9%), workshops conducted by employees (30.6%). 13.9% indicated that their company does not conduct any EB activities.

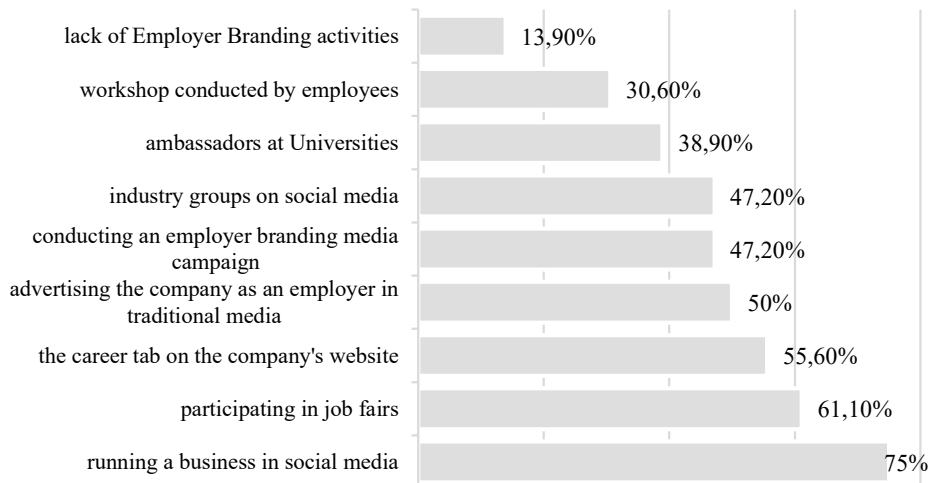


Figure 5. Employer Branding activities used in the respondents’ company

Source: Own research

Was the number of benefits limited during the pandemic?

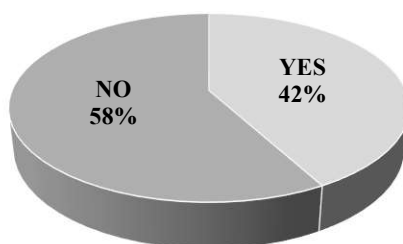


Figure 6. The impact of the pandemic on the number of benefits in the respondents' companies

Source: Own research

When asked about the opportunities offered by the company during the pandemic, addressed to current employees, the respondents unanimously emphasized the critical role of supporting physical and mental health. 67% of the employers surveyed did not conduct internal recruitment or role rotation in the first year of the pandemic. However, to the same extent, they allowed their employees to participate in additional training and access to platforms that enabled them to improve their professional qualifications. This is a lost opportunity for internal talent development in times of pandemic. Remote work also played an important role, as 83% of employers enabled it for their employees.

Did your company provide your employees with the following:

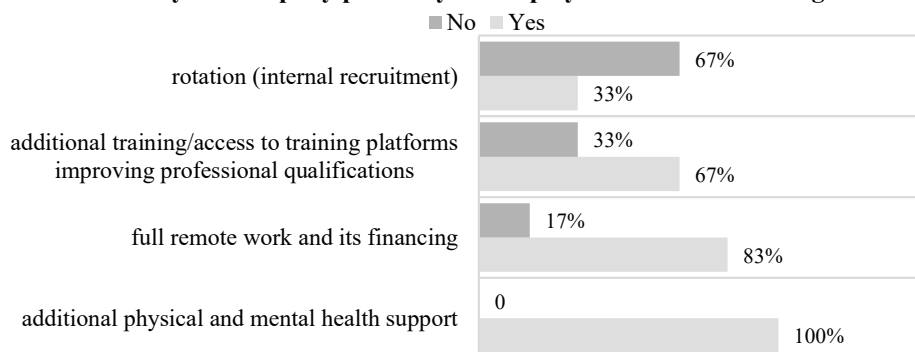


Figure 7. Opportunities offered by the company during the Pandemic

Source: Own research

Employees also sent requests and questions to the HR department during the pandemic. When asked about employee requests during the pandemic, it appeared that 78% of employees asked about the possibility of changing their position, 86% asked about additional training/professional development, 97% wanted to work remotely, and 100% of employees requested support in the field of physical and mental health.

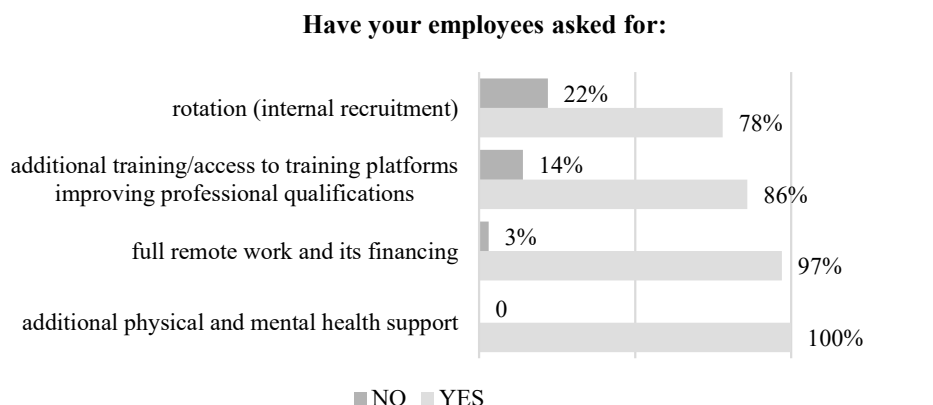


Figure 8. Employee requests during the pandemic

Source: Own research

The pandemic uncertainty has made it more difficult to actively encourage and win over a candidate, unlike in the past years. Many are afraid that the situation will come full circle and, as fresh people in the company, they may be dismissed in the first place in the event of further stagnation. The global situation and the fear of a pandemic are not conducive to changing jobs, which will always be associated with change. How then to ensure the effectiveness of recruitment processes?

Considering the above, when recalculating costs, it is often forgotten that recruiting and training employees may be disproportionately higher than the apparent savings resulting from, e.g., cutting allowances that motivate an employee to work.

Currently, internal employer branding differs from the one we knew before the pandemic. In the past, the emphasis was placed on typical activities within the company, mainly relatively standard and already known (benefits, activities such as “fruit Thursdays” and “pizza days”). As Employer Branding is still important and the value of employees is the most important, we are going through a difficult time.

I called it a time of novelty because it requires introducing a new quality of activities for the employee, which is a response to his unknown expectations. As the report shows, new opportunities began to open up after the first wave of the epidemic, associated with the fear of losing a job and the desire to keep it at all costs. It is related, among other things, to remote work, which was once a benefit; today, for many, it is everyday life. The new time also requires exceptional support from the employee in a remote work situation that is often new to them – verification of how the employee copes with the unique situation, providing mental help and care, and appreciating the employee's special commitment. Implementing regular remote group meetings is another activity that maintains the relationship. Like the famous football club slogan, “You will never walk alone”. You are not alone, even when working from home. For example, we celebrated employees’ birthdays inside or outside the company. Now, we can do it online and surprise the employee with a small gift, e.g., a package of fresh fruit delivered straight to the house or a voucher to any partner in the company. Even a symbolic amount spent on such a gift can help achieve the desired effect –

showing the employee that he is essential; he is still a group member. The appropriate motivation of employees is critical, that is, the selection of benefits to the needs and conditions of the employee. In the past, the benefits package containing a sports card and tourist discounts was “on top” today, it is impossible to use due to the freezing of this economic sector. Therefore, it is worth giving the employee a choice – what is most important to them and how they want to use the gift they receive from the company. During the coronavirus epidemic, we must not overlook online activities, such as increasing tailored training programs based on employees’ needs, skills, and requirements. It would be best to show how employees could improve their qualifications during a pandemic and give them time to discover their talents. The new capabilities of the employee also mean a profit for the company, for example, in the event of internal recruitment or the need to transfer an employee to another position.

How can we ensure the effectiveness of recruitment processes during the pandemic? First of all, rely on employer branding processes. In the case of external recruitment, it is worth investing in well-thought-out social media campaigns based on concern for employees’ physical and mental health (and future employees), remote work, training offered by the company, and professional development. It is also worth looking at the talents that already work in the company. With the effectiveness of internal recruitment processes, internal employer branding, and care for internal candidates – employees in mind, I created the HCDS recommendation model:

HONESTY – in a crisis, openness in communication is essential. Without it, employees will not find themselves in a challenging, unusual situation or an unexpected change. It is, therefore, necessary to skillfully manage change and communication, correctly constructing information to avoid causing a sense of fear;

CARE – the pandemic is a difficult time for all of us. Let us take care to ensure the safety of employees. If possible, let us switch to remote work. If not, let us provide the highest security measures. Let us talk to employees and verify their emotions and needs. Let us consider what activity we can support him with;

DEVELOPMENT – Even during a pandemic, a small quantity of normality is needed. Let us allow employees to spread their wings and discover new talents. It is worth presenting them with an offer of online courses that they can do even during working hours;

STABILIZATION – it is not worth cutting the budget without in-depth analysis. It should be remembered that the costs of recruiting and onboarding a new employee are not small. It is not worth losing an experienced employee for relatively small savings, e.g., on benefits or bonuses, which are an incentive to work effectively.

It is worth remembering about fair pay and non-financial incentives. Despite the pandemic, it is worth appreciating the employee by showing that he and his work are valuable to the employer. Look at the benefits that we know from job advertisements. In the pandemic period, the trend has also changed. Now, the most significant emphasis is on training that can improve the qualifications of employees and help them maintain their positions or recruit for a higher position in internal recruitment. Medical care packages were also appreciated, facilitating quick contact with a doctor during a pandemic. The employees also enjoyed the opportunity to work from home with flexible working hours. Of course, we can also find a high salary among the

most desirable benefits. In turn, activities such as sports cards are no longer as attractive as before the pandemic. It is worth asking the employee what would be an added value for him and what he expects when implementing internal employer branding activities.

Conclusions

It should be remembered that employees are one of the company's flagships; if internal branding activities are successful, the employee-employer relationship will also be successful. Therefore, salary and non-wage benefits should match the expectations, suggestions, and employees' expectations. Employees are the best advisors and critics of activities – that is why it is worth encouraging all companies to build a positive and authentic image inside the company in parallel with external activities. Only tools that are well matched to the desired expectations will effectively support recruitment teams to reach the appropriate target group and contribute to the employment of the ideal candidate.

Suppose we are unsure about which activities are best for us, or employer branding has not yet convinced us. In that case, the author recommends cooperating with an experienced branding agency within one campaign and monitoring the activities it had an impact on. Activities may have a long-term effect and, apart from recruitment activities, will also support other activities within the company. In conclusion, the HCDS recommendation model is designed to be a comprehensive framework that integrates honesty, care, development, and stability into organizational practices. By aligning with these principles, organizations can navigate challenges, support their employees, and contribute to a resilient and thriving workplace culture, even in times of crisis.

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JAK ZADBAĆ O EFEKTYWNOŚĆ PROCESÓW REKRUTACYJNYCH W DOBIE PANDEMII?

Streszczenie: W artykule zbadano głęboki wpływ pandemii COVID-19 na rynek pracy, wyjaśniając jej transformacyjne oddziaływanie na dynamikę relacji pracodawca–pracownik. Poprzez wszechstronną analizę procesów rekrutacyjnych, budowania marki pracodawcy i szerszych relacji pracodawca–pracownik badanie uwzględnia wyzwania stojące przed organizacjami chcącymi utrzymać pożądaną status „pracodawcy z wyboru” w tych bezprecedensowo trudnych czasach. Wykorzystano metodologię badań kwestionariuszem ankiety oraz przegląd literatury. W badaniu ankietowym wzięło udział 36 przedstawicieli HR ze średnich i dużych firm działających w Polsce. Jego wyniki ujawniły istotny wpływ pandemii na działania związane z budowaniem marki pracodawcy, głównie poprzez wyraźne przejście w stronę kampanii w mediach społecznościowych. Badanie wskazuje także na zwiększone trudności w utrzymaniu wizerunku pracodawcy podczas pandemii, znacząco wpływające na bezpośrednią komunikację z pracownikami. Analizie poddawane są strategie przyjęte przez firmy, takie jak zmiany w świadczeniach, wsparcie pracy zdalnej czy stawianie na pierwszym miejscu dobrego samopoczucia pracowników. W artykule przedstawiono model HCDS (Honesty, Care, Development, Stabilization) – uczciwość, opieka, rozwój i stabilizacja – jako ramę zarządzania relacjami pracodawca–pracownik w czasie kryzysów. Podsumowując, badanie podkreśla centralną rolę pracowników w sukcesie organizacji, opowiadając się za strategicznym dostosowaniem wynagrodzeń do oczekiwań pracowników i integrowaniem działań związanych z budowaniem marki wewnętrznej z wysiłkami zewnętrznymi.

Słowa kluczowe: COVID-19, marka pracodawcy, EVP, zasoby ludzkie, rynek pracy

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