

# The role of employer branding on attracting, developing and retaining talent: the case of a leading Portuguese business group

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## Abstract

Employer branding has gained considerable attention from practitioners and academics on recent years. It is believed that corporate brand can only be fully implemented if it reaches all the stakeholders, not only consumers. Although there is substantial literature about how companies should build their brand as employers, little attention has been given to the concrete answers companies come up with when facing the challenge of building an employer brand. In this sense, this paper aims to reflect the role of Employer Branding to attract, develop and retain talent and aims to analyse the steps and answers that a leading Portuguese Business Group used to create their employer brand strategy. For reaching this goals, our reflection and analysis is essentially supported by the concepts of Internal Marketing, Corporate Branding, Employer Branding and Internal Branding. This research is a case study and has a qualitative and explorative nature, assuming particularly an action research methodology. The approach adopted was rigorous, following the stages of diagnosis (1st phase) and implementation (2nd phase) of an Employer Branding strategy in the Portuguese Business Group. As a result of this experience, the conclusions summarize a series of reflections necessary to implement an Employer Branding strategy in a real business scenario.

Keywords: Internal marketing, Corporate branding, Employer branding, Internal branding, Integrated marketing

## Resumo

*A estratégia de Employer Branding tem ganho crescente reconhecimento por parte das Empresas e do mundo académico nos últimos anos. Acredita-se que a marca corporativa só pode ser verdadeiramente implementada quando chega a todos os stakeholders e não só ao cliente final. Nesta perspectiva, a construção de uma marca empregadora forte tem em conta duas dimensões. Uma que reflete e atinge stakeholders externos, como as pessoas à procura de emprego, e outra que olhe para os stakeholders internos, nomeadamente os colaboradores. Marca e marketing interno desempenham um papel chave neste processo, pois explicam como é que as organizações podem construir as suas marcas de dentro para fora. Apesar de existir uma grande quantidade de literatura sobre a importância das empresas construírem a sua marca empregadora, pouca atenção tem sido dada às ações concretas que as organizações desenham ao enfrentar o desafio do desenvolvimento de uma marca empregadora. Baseado nos conceitos de marketing interno, marca corporativa, employer branding e marca interna (colaboradores, envolvimento e empowerment), o presente paper descreve a abordagem adotada por um grupo empresarial líder em Portugal, nomeadamente os passos desenvolvidos para a construção e sustentação de uma marca empregadora competitiva. A par disso, foi elaborada uma reflexão sobre a importância da estratégia da Employer Branding na atração, desenvolvimento retenção de talento. Criar, apresentar e comunicar uma proposta de valor baseada em benefícios funcionais, emocionais e simbólicos direcionada para os atuais e potenciais Colaboradores emerge como um fator chave na estratégia de negócio, em tempos de crise.*

Palavras-chave: Novas abordagens de marketing, Marketing interno, Branding, Employer branding, Employer branding

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays companies have to reduce costs with their human capital and, at the same time, they need to attract, develop and retain talent with new strategies that sustain a competitive advantage in the labour market. In fact, this need emerges as one of the vital concerns in the business scenario. In the literature, a solution shows up – Employer Branding (EB). Some authors even mention EB as a long-term solution strategy that personifies the best weapon in the company armoury (Kapoor, 2010; López et al., 2014). It is believed that corporate brand can only be fully implemented if it reaches all the stakeholders, not only consumers. Within this approach, building a strong employer brand should consider two main dimensions. One that reflects and reaches outer stakeholders, such as job seekers, and the other that looks to internal stakeholders, mainly employees. In this assumption, the alignment of external and internal brands, recognizing the differences in all stakeholders and acting accordingly, always enhancing the brand equity, proves to be a priority in the management of the hallmarks of the new century. This is due to a new era of marketing, which more than customer oriented is stakeholder oriented (Aydon Simmons, 2009; Luxton, Reid, & Mavondo, 2014).

In the literature, we found a wide variety of articles that reflect the importance of EB and its advantages. However, little attention has been given to the concrete answers companies come up with when facing the challenge of building an employer brand. This paper aims to reflect the role of EB to attract, develop and retain talent and aims to analyse the steps and answers that a leading Portuguese Business Group (PBG) used to create their employer brand strategy. In this context, we try to increase the knowledge about how companies make human resources become even closer to the marketing skills. Create, present and spread a captivating value proposition based on functional, emotional and symbolic benefits for current and potential employees emerges as a key factor in business' strategies (Aaker, 1991). Our reflection and analysis is essentially supported by the concepts of Internal Marketing, Corporate Branding, Internal Branding and Employer Branding. These concepts cannot be seen in a separated way. The EB concept has its origins in the branding and Corporate Branding. The main goal of these concepts is the same: attract and maintain their targeted public, with a real value proposition of the brand. The only difference is that EB focuses not on customers, but in current and potential talents, enhancing the idea that a brand starts from within. And when the focus goes only to the current employees of an organisation, the internal branding concept strikes on.

Taking this into account, we developed a research in a PBG to obtain relevant information of their past and recent activity in the human resources (HR) area, using a qualitative and exploratory methodology. The field work was oriented towards pragmatic and entrepreneurial issues, in order to discover the approach developed by this Portuguese company, namely the steps taken in building and sustaining a competitive employer brand. With this research we intend to find the answers to the following questions:

- Can EB contribute to the attraction, development and retention of human capital with talent?
- The Employee Value Proposition (EVP) includes functional, emotional and symbolic attributes. Can marketing and branding methodologies be applied to EB for attracting, developing and retaining People, enhancing the corporate brand?
- Is it possible to apply the EB concepts to the business reality?

We want to contribute with valuable clues, which help companies to create EVP. The academic results come from the deepening of the “Employer Branding” concept that began to be addressed in the literature only in the 90s, put it in practice and does the intersection of marketing and human resources.

## **2. Literature Review**

Corporate Branding, Employer Branding and Internal Branding are more and more important concepts in the daily management of organisations. That is because, in recent decades, the concept of "brand" has evolved exponentially. This is no longer just a concept applied to products and services; it is now extensive to non-profit organisations and even locations and people. From Branding to Employer Branding, the same tools should be used to optimise and make products, organisations and employer brand more attractive. Improving the experience of stakeholders and delivering value propositions based on functional, emotional and symbolic benefits are of paramount importance to boost the performance of all the intervenient parties in the day-to-day business.

Internal customers, such as consumers, seek a holistic relationship with rational and emotional benefits that support their choice. Simultaneously, it is considered that one can only deliver competitive value propositions to the market, if the company is able to manage its offer from the beginning of the process. That is to say, branding begins within the organisation and it reinforces the brand's value proposition in the external market. Transferring branding practices to EB requires integrating the concepts of Corporate and Internal Branding into the approach.

### **2.1. Internal Marketing**

The concept of Internal Marketing was introduced by Berry et al. (1976), and emerged from the need to provide domestic products (jobs) that meet the needs of a vital internal market (employees), and still achieve the goals of the organisation. The first studies on this subject were evidently focused on motivation and satisfaction of internal customers. Today, this is considered as a mechanism that ensures the development of sustainable competitive advantages by encouraging commitment, satisfaction and loyalty of employees (Farias, 2010; Vasconcelos, 2008; Robertson & Khatibi, 2013). Its growing significance is also explained by the context of external environment, since to improve the performance of employees, to attract and retain talent is now one of the vital concerns of organisations. Employees become the first and most important market, as they have a key role in the growth and sustainability of enterprises (Matanda & Ndubisi, 2013). According to Bansal et al. (2001) "the people who buy goods and services in the role of consumer, and the people who buy jobs in the role of employee, are the same people, and the exchange that takes place between employers and employees is no less real than the exchange that takes place between consumers and companies". Thus, Internal Marketing can be seen as a philosophy which aims at managing the human capital based on a marketing perspective. According to Joseph (1996: 55), it is the "application of marketing, human resource management, and allied theories, techniques and principles to motivate, mobilize, co-opt and manage employees at all levels of the organisation to continuously improve the way they serve external customers and each other". It then consists of a set of multifunctional systems and efforts that employ a marketing approach to educate and engage employees in a customer-centric perspective (Ahmed & Mohammed, 2003).

Job proposals should attract, develop and motivate employees, meeting both their needs and the organisation's strategic goals (Sehgal & Malati, 2013). Some authors also highlight a strong link between the satisfaction of employees and a high-quality service. Employees who are more satisfied deliver a higher quality service, which in turn leads to more customer satisfaction and loyalty (Powers & Valentine 2008; Tortosa, Moliner, & Sanchez 2009; Salegna & Fazel 2011 in Dahl & Peltier, 2013).

### **2.2. Corporate Branding**

In order to attract, develop, motivate and retain high potential employees is necessary to recognise that we live in an era of branding and to understand which elements, implications and processes are intrinsic to this concept (Keller, 2003b).

In the last decades, branding as well as marketing are no longer just concepts applied to products of organisations; it includes now services, non-profit organisations and even locations and people (Roper & Parker, 2006; Booms & Bitner, 1981). The first question that arises then is the meaning intrinsic to the brand. According to Berthon et al. (2011) and Aaker (2011) the purpose of any brand

is to gain relevance through a strong positioning. "From the marking of cattle in ancient Egypt to modern-day behemoths such as Coke and McDonald's, brands delimit, differentiate, and denote" (Berthon, et al., 2011, p. 182). Discussing its evolution, it is clear that half a century ago the focus was only on the physical manifestations of the brand. A more subjective approach emerged later, viewing them as individual and holistic experiences (Keller, 2003; Schmitt, 1999; Roberts, 2005). More recently, brands are seen in an intersubjective and collective dimension, even being defined as socio-cultural phenomena (Berthon et al., 2011). And it was not just the concept that evolved, but also the brand management approach and processes transformed. First they were merely considered tools that could be used by marketers. Over time, it evolved from an operational perspective to a more strategic vision and brands developed from tools to a position where "brands becomes the company" (Berthon et al., 2011, p. 187). Thus, it is recognised that a brand is more than a simple logo or name; a brand is a definition (Bonevac & Jones, 2013). A brand is the sum of an idea, a sentence and a long list of attributes, values and principles, establishing itself as core information focused on a word or a symbol (Lendrevie & et al., 2015; Lancaster, 2007; Arenti, 2009). A brand is expression; it conveys imagination, personality and emotions. Brand is an inspiring idea that unites business, ideas and people (Roper & Parker, 2006; Goldfarb, Lu, & Moorthy, 2009).

What about Corporate Branding? According to Maon et al., (2013, p. 137) "Corporate Branding is a combination of elements (i.e., names, words, signs, symbols, and other elements) transmitted to multiple audiences, such as customers, employees, investors, the media and non-governmental organisations". This stems from a set of events such as organisational culture, communication, management methods, employees' behaviour and attitudes. Thus, Corporate Branding is constantly influenced by internal and external factors, resulting in a continuous need for management (Baxter, Kerr & Clarke, 2013). Its main goal is to communicate the principles and values of organisations in order to lure stakeholders and to build their sense of belonging (De Roeck et al., 2013).

Like any brand, Corporate Brand also abides by the core elements of the brand: identity, positioning and image (Lancaster, 2007; Aaker, 1991; Aaker, 2011; Kapferer, 2003; Melin, 2005, in Vaijyanthi et al., 2011). When we talk about identity we refer to answering the following questions: Who are we as an organisation? What do we do? How should we do it? Brown et al., (2006) also points out that the organisational identity is created, influenced and used by all the members of an organisation. When one thinks of building a corporate identity, it is necessary to focus on the purpose, direction and meaning that a brand is seeking to get from its audience. The brand creates a promise of value defined by functional/rational, emotional and symbolic benefits, resulting in a set that reflects the values and goals and preserves its unique identity (Neil & Strauss, 2008; Balmer, 2012; Aaker, 2010). Thus, building a corporate brand should be the result of strategic thinking, which is in the origin of the positioning. For Keller (2003a), a good positioning is the one that makes the organisation stand out in a market characterized by strong competition. In order to be distinctive, it is necessary to take into account the characteristics of the organisation, its "personality" and consequently its functional, emotional and symbolic benefits, i.e. a set of unique and enduring attributes that are relevant to its stakeholders and which would differentiate it from competitors (Kotler & Bes, 2004; Lopez, Tarodo & Lores, 2014). Completing this brand triangle, corporate image refers to how stakeholders perceive organisation. According to Urde (1994, p. 26) "the image of the brand-orientated company can be said to be a reflection of all the actions taken by the organisation".

Therefore, it should be noted that the positioning of a corporate brand should promise security to all stakeholders, but this is always manifested by what is delivered to the market (Balmer, 2012), thus establishing its reputation, because "organisational reputation should not conflict with the values, norms and beliefs that characterize how members experience organisational life (i.e., the organisational culture) to maintain the corporate brand integrity in the eyes of stakeholders" (De Roeck et al., 2013: 139).

For many authors the main goal in designing a branding strategy is gaining a long-term competitive advantage in the market (Todor, 2014). However, creating value should not only include a customer-oriented approach, but also an employee-oriented one, because companies do not compete just for customers (Tavassoli, Sorescu, & Chandy, 2014).

### 2.3. Employer Branding

Due to the need for organisations to compete for their current and potential employees, there is an inherent meaning in the development of an outstanding employer brand. EB is therefore a specific term created in the 90s by Ambler & Barrow (1996: 185), defined as "the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employee company," with the primary role of "providing a coherent framework for management to simplify and focus priorities, increase productivity and improve recruitment, retention and commitment."

More recently, Minchington and Thorne (2007, p. 15) pointed out that "every organisation has an employer brand. Whether you own it or not, your organisation is influencing its employer brand 24 x 7 x 365." This is because every individual creates different perceptions on various entities in his/her mind. Having a positive image in the minds of the organisation's target audience proves to be a critical success factor (Lemmik, Schuijf, & Streukens, 2003). To Aggerholm et al. (2011, p. 113), EB is based on a strategy covering more than potential and current employees, having the potential to create real value propositions to society in general: "employer branding is a strategic branding process which creates, negotiates and enacts sustainable relationships between an organisation and its potential and existing employees under the influence of the varying corporate contexts with the purpose of co-creating sustainable values for the individual, the organisation and society as a whole."

The concept can thus be divided into two distinct perspectives: the internal perspective (how organisations develop and retain talent) and the external perspective (how organisations attract and capture talent) (Ferreira, Ventura, & Oliveira, 2014). And it is through this evidence that, since its inception, EB has increasingly gained importance in the HR, mainly because of its potential to retain and attract high potential employees, which in turn leverages the capabilities and competitiveness of organisations (Ferreira et al., 2014). Several authors even refer to this phenomenon as being one of the few long-term solutions to the problem of "lack of talent", as well as a solution for the development of aligned, engaged and committed work teams (Lopez et al., 2014; Stariņeca & Voronchuk, 2014). Kapoor (2010) further presents EB within organisations, because while most employment strategies are short-term and designed reactively, an employment brand is a longer-term proactive solution created to offer stability for stockholders, developing an image of being a 'great place to work' in the minds of the targeted talent.

Another of the great advantages mentioned in the literature for this strategy is the fact that it is able to shape the behaviour of employees so that they disseminate and promote the image of products and services of the organisation, through their behaviour and daily work. EB is thus seen as an enhancer for the creation of a great alignment between the employee and the organisation, which enables the development of a strong psychological and emotional connection between both parties (Vaijayanthi et al., 2011). Thus, EB enables the development of skills necessary for employees to become true ambassadors of the organisations.

However, for organisations to take advantage of these benefits, they need well-designed, developed EB programs that reflect the needs and desires of employees. "If an organisation wants its employees to live up to the company brand promise, it clearly needs to understand what drives their sense of engagement or commitment" (Kapoor, 2010, p. 51). EB is a mix of subjects and concepts (corporate culture, marketing, public relations, psychological contract, recruitment, ...). In the literature, there are several approaches that divide EB strategy in stages, components, elements, dimensions and subjects that help you understand what must be done to implement EB activities in the daily life of organisations (Stariņeca & Voronchuk, 2014). In terms of steps, it is suggested to start by defining the EVP, then paying attention to the internal and external focus (Lievens, 2007).

Regarding the components, one can note the following: organisational culture and environment, employee experience (tangible benefits such as salary, as well as intangible ones such as appreciation and opportunities for career advancement), integrity and reputation of the organisation, internal communication, performance assessment systems, social responsibility, external marketing, organisational performance, leadership, safety, organisational stability, among many others (Jain & Pal, 2012; Pahor & Franca, 2012;

Dahl & Peltier, 2013). Bondarouk, Ruël and Weekhout (2012) further suggest that EB consists of five key dimensions: people and culture (profile, goals and working conditions of employees), organisational features (what the organisation is and what it offers to the market: vision, mission, values), employer reputation (achievements, social activities, social responsibility), characteristics of job offers (opportunities, key roles, welcome and integration program) and remuneration and development (performance assessment, wages and benefits, career plans). The EB management process also includes creating tools and methodologies that enable measuring, assessing and working on activities, from an internal and external perspective, advocates Voronchuk and Stariņeca (2014, p. 6) and highlight: "If EB activities are new for the organisation, employees, i.e., managers, need to be educated on this topic to provide better/qualitative implementations.". In this sense, EB can be seen as a holistic process, and with an attractive job offer at its centre, i.e. the Employee Value Proposition (EVP) (Benz, 2014). EVP captures the essence of what the organisation wants to be in the minds of potential and current employees. This can be seen as a synthesis of unique attributes and benefits that will lead individuals to want to be part of the daily life of an organisation. It is an expression that must create and foster "a strong people brand" (Vaijayanthi et al., 2011). Thus, the concept of EB raises awareness in organisations about the importance of optimising their employer brand, from the hiring of young talent until their retirement (Kapoor, 2010).

#### **2.4 Internal Branding**

When the focus of EB is aimed at internal stakeholders, it is important to consider the concept of Internal Branding that according to Asha & Jyothi (2013, p. 37) "is the strategic process of creating brand ambassadors within the organisation who represent their organisation as the best place to work in the external marketplace.". In a market characterised by fierce competition, organisations need to be identified as outstanding employers through a number of internal branding initiatives (LePla, 2013). These events should enhance the human side of the brand, and do so in an authentic, true and not superficial manner (Asha & Jyothi, 2013).

And when thinking about the implementation of this concept, one must also know its key points: wages and benefits, participation in organisational decision making (employee empowerment), quality of working life, organisational socialisation, multidimensional communication, employee satisfaction, and training and talent development activities, among others. Working on and developing these key factors enhance the commitment of employees to the organisational brand, their sense of belonging and the alignment between employees and organisational values (Asha & Jyothi, 2013). This challenge requires planning (definition of timings, goals, audiences, budget), researching (internal market research and cultural fit analysis), integrating (aligning internal and external messages, as well as business goals with brand values, defining the visual message and communication tone), facilitating (decide on degree of staff empowerment, obtain and sustain staff involvement), implementing (using the various existing communication channels to communicate at all hierarchical levels), compensating (functionally and emotionally), quantifying (employee engagement with the brand), reacting (providing regular feedback) and changing (continuously improving) (Mahnert & Torres, 2007: 58). All this while bearing in mind that communicating an internal brand, consistently using the same voice, aesthetics, tone and meaning for the employer-employee relationship, is one of the most powerful weapons in the HR area (Sartain, 2005). Sartain (2005) also provides advice on the development of this brand. She first points out that, in order to create successful internal marketing, one should communicate with whole organisation, in a perspective of integrated brand communication. The process should start with the definition of the brand promise and the possibility of using marketing ideas and techniques to find out "how employees currently perceive the company, what they want, and how you can help them experience the company in a more positive way" (Sartain, 2005, p. 92). Subsequently, she states that the involvement of employees, authenticity, focus on each touchpoint, the use of metrics for impact assessment and a constant enhancement of the brand are essential conditions for its success (Sartain, 2005). The ultimate goal of Internal Branding is based on the assumption that the competitive advantage of the organisation should not be based solely on its operational policies and practices, but be created by People (Mahnert & Torres, 2007).

## 2.5. Integrated Marketing

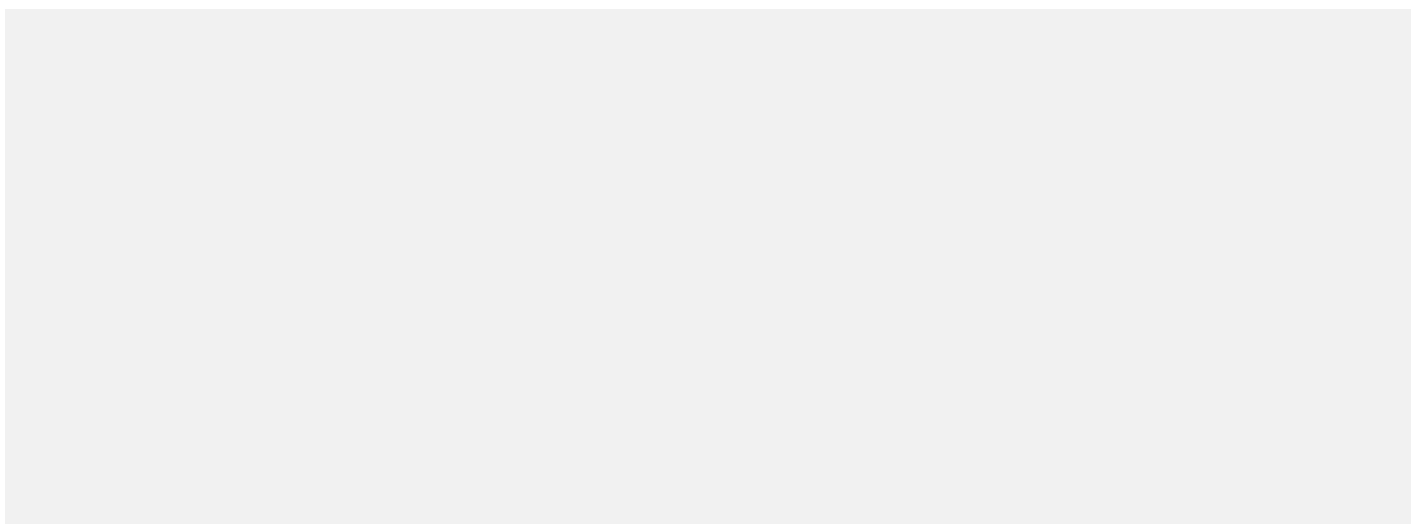
Internal Marketing, Corporate Branding, Internal Branding and Employer Branding are marketing concepts that cannot and should not be considered separately (Foster et al., 2010). "The interrelation and mutual dependence of external (customer) and internal (employee) brand experiences means they cannot be viewed as separate entities, but instead should be managed holistically" (Aydon Simmons, 2009, p. 685). A holistic and integrated brand management aims to create a "lovemark," i.e. a brand that creates a high-value emotional connection to its audiences, becoming close, trustworthy and transparent and being committed to the well-being of all its stakeholders (Roberts, 2005).

Next season's success will therefore depend on the ability of organisations to extend their traditional marketing mix in order to include corporate reputation and to align external and internal brands in an integrated marketing strategy, which recognises the differences in all stakeholders and acts accordingly, always leveraging brand equity (Aydon Simmons, 2009; Luxton, Reid & Mavondo, 2014). In this sense, the alignment of external and internal perspectives proves to be a priority in the management of milestones in the new century. This is due to a new era of marketing, which is more stakeholder-oriented rather than customer-oriented and which realises that the relationships created between the organisation and its customers, shareholders, suppliers, communities and employees are the ones that create the true value proposition of the company (Paul, 2014; Aydon Simmons, 2009).

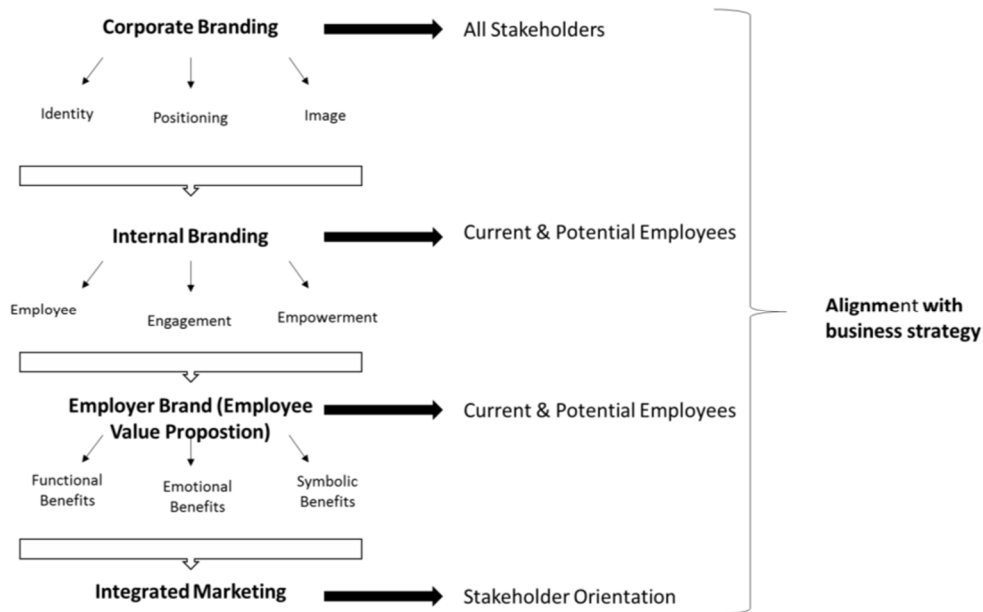
This stakeholder orientation is also based on the marketing of experiences, emotions and spirit. Experience Marketing (Schmitt, 1999) considers interactions of stakeholders with brand touchpoints important, giving them a meaning. These interactions are not just perceived rationally, but also emotionally, and influenced by feelings, values, emotions, thoughts and actions, providing memorable experiences to the community, due to the power to stimulate mind and body intensely (Schmitt, 1999; Schmitt, 2003; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). We speak of an era driven by emotions and essentially by values, so the propositions must approach the functional, emotional and spiritual side and be designed in mutual collaboration. The storytelling and use of metaphors that establish a connection with the human body, heart and spirit proves to be a component to be used with all stakeholders in a more complete and integrated perspective. We are referring to value marketing with consumers, value marketing with channel partners, value marketing with employees (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Iwan, 2010).

## 3. Theoretical Framework Model

Figure 1 is a simplified version of the theoretical framework model that connects the various concepts under discussion. One can point out that they must be managed in a fully integrated way, allowing the development of a corporate brand that meets the expectations of all stakeholders, and mainly the employees and their roles.



**Figure 1 - Theoretical framework model – the connection between corporate branding, employer branding and internal branding**



Following the above, it is considered to be of the utmost importance to understand the extent to which the methodologies of corporate branding applied to EB enhance the attraction and retention of talent, by offering a relevant value proposition, which engages and empowers employees.

According to the literature review, any EB strategy should be based on the management and development of the employee value proposition, pointing out the marketing skills to HR. Under this assumption, the present study is based on a general proposition, subdivided into two specific propositions:

1. The principles of EB, Internal Branding and Corporate Branding can be applied to a real business strategy as long as it develops an integrated solution for HR management.
  - a. The application of branding skills on HR management helps to attract, develop and retain talented human capital for organisations, thus enhancing the value of the corporate brand.
  - b. The methodologies of EB emphasise the functional, emotional and symbolic attributes of the employer brand, based on the stakeholder orientation.

#### 4. Methodology

This research is a case study and has a qualitative and exploratory nature. According to Yin (1994), an exploratory methodology aims at understanding and deepening the topics on which one has not yet produced great knowledge, nor developed concepts and understanding of the reasons and motivations for the attitudes and behaviours of individuals or organisations. In detail, this research is a case of action-research, since it implied the direct contact of researchers with the situation studied (Guba, 1990; Ceballos, 1998). We tried to analyse and understand the phenomena taking into consideration the participants' perspective concerning the situation under study. On the other hand, the approach adopted was rigorous, following the stages of diagnosis (1<sup>st</sup> phase) and implementation (2<sup>nd</sup> phase) of an EB strategy in a PBG. The narrative reported in this paper is the result of 15 months of action-research, including the intervention of a multidisciplinary work team, which involved an external consultant specialised in the organisational development and HR.

We have collected the most relevant information about the past and the recent activity of this company on the “people” management and development. To this end, besides considering the secondary sources of the organisation, we have collected the opinion of a

sample from the internal team, in order to consolidate the vision of the result of the information gathered. We have also tried to understand which steps this company took in the creation and management of an EB solution, also including the principles of Internal Branding and Corporate Branding. For the evidence collection, we have used the following research tools: in-depth interview, focus group and data analysis strategy. With regard to data analysis strategy, we gathered policies, organisation, processes and management practices of RH in the targeted companies of this PBG. We conducted 29 individual interviews with employees from different functional levels. These focused on the main macro processes of the HR department, as well as organisational aspects of people management structure. Finally, we conducted two focus groups (in a total of 30 employees with executive, tactical and operational functions), where we were able to collect the views and feelings on the areas studied. Thus, in order to capitalise resources and maximise results, the diagnosis provided for an intervention that included relevant information on the recent activity of the PBG in the HR and the collection of opinion on a sample from the internal team, which aimed at consolidating the results in a global view, supported by a qualitative methodology. A benchmarking was also conducted in order to learn good practices in “people” management. Resulting from the diagnostic phase, guidelines for the PBG were proposed taking into account the gaps that were identified; in order to position the HR Management at a strategic level of the business and in the direct dependence of the Top Management.

Summarizing, as a starting point for this analysis, we tried to identify and systematize the existing procedures and perceptions about the organisation activities and the integrated HR management, in relation to the various processes connected. The analysis we carried out is based on three dimensions: Employees, Empowerment and Engagement. Based on this collection, we were able to redirect the evolution of the PBG towards creating and sustaining an EB strategy.

## **5. Analysis and Discussion of Results**

The data analysis section is composed by three major areas: diagnostic + benchmarking + implementation. It is organized in this way, because follows the exactly steps taken by this PBG. In the first phase – diagnostic – we start with the main conclusions of the data analysis strategy. Following we present the most important facts removed from the interviews and focus group. Finally, we developed a general conclusion of this first phase, using some direct speech that reinforce the shortcomings found and what must be done, in order to this company start an EB strategy. In benchmarking we summarize some results of the research that we made in the market, characterizing what the biggest groups in Portugal are doing in the area of HR management. Finally, in the section dedicated to the implementation of an EB strategy on this PBG, we describe the various steps taken by this company, namely:

- Goals setting;
- Definition of the strategy and its mission;
- Alignment with the business strategy;
- Key vectors definition;
- Customer identification;
- Realignment of “people” structure.

### **5.1. Diagnostic: 1<sup>st</sup> Phase**

Given the amount of information collected as well as the limited space, the main relevant messages for the case study were systematised in the following tables. The table 1 is dedicated to the main founds of data analysis strategy, that reveal a focus of the PBG in payroll, but a lack in people development and corporate communication as well as an inconsistent strategy aligned with the business goals and values. The messages in the following tables, namely in interviews and focus group were transmitted by the majority of the participants. Only the ideas advocated by several speakers were selected.

**Table 1 - Summary of the Document Analysis Results**

<b>Data Analysis Strategy – Helpdesk</b>
The payroll component presents a high level of organisation and rigour of the processes, being an essential basis for a Group of this size and dynamics.
The effort dedicated to improve information systems as a support among partners in the people management function, namely among managers and employees individually, but focused on the administrative side.
With regard to the development of areas such as Management by Objectives, Performance Assessment and Career Development, most companies analysed show incipient or non-existent practices. Consequently employees are unmotivated and reflect this feeling in the customer care.
The collected documentation does not reveal the existence of a HR central service dedicated to processes of retention and development of people, able to bring advantages to all: people, leadership and business.
The people management function in the Group occupies an operational position without the strategic component that this function should play in modern organisations, intrinsically associated with the activities of attraction, retention and development of people: recruitment and selection, welcome and integration, training and development, career development, management by objectives and communication.
The companies of this PBG lack of structured processes for the development of people, namely, recruitment and selection, salaries and benefits, training and development, career development, management by objectives and communication.
The HR function does not know Group's strategy and there is no integrated strategy in the organisation and people management. Even the core activities of people development such as recruitment and selection and welcome and integration do not have an alignment with Group, in terms of policy and procedures.
The activities of internal marketing, social responsibility and corporate branding are not developed in the HR structure; they are rather dispersed by the various business areas and are not supported in a corporate internal communication strategy.
The Group's Values aren't communicated in the majority of the information collected.

Table 2 is dedicated to the main findings of the interviews, that reflect a need to work on the corporate culture, values and communication, aligned with "people" development strategy.

**Table 2 - Summary of Results of Individual Interviews**

<b>Semi-structured interviews</b>
Areas with more positive assessment: Training and Learning, Welcome and Integration and Recruitment and Selection.
Areas with negative assessment: Performance Assessment and Career Development.
Respondents recognise that HR are inextricably linked with bureaucratic practices instead of human capital development.
There is a widespread opinion that HR do not serve the company, the business, the employees and that this is due to the weak link between intermediate management and people management.
The implementation of a performance assessment process has already failed twice in this PBG by lack of consistency and persistence in it, as well as due to non-involvement of Top Management.
Internal communication is not working well.
The group culture is vanishing. The Group's founding values are disappearing and the corporate culture is vanishing with the acquisition of new companies. The founder of the Group had a strong concern with both employees and external customers.
The HR practices differ from company to company.
There is a general lack of knowledge from the plant management on the strategic guidelines of the organisation.

Table 3 summarizes the results of the two focus groups, that showed to the company that its employees want a more innovative HR management, that deliver emotional, symbolic and functional benefits, like performance assessment and career development, but without forgetting de communication and leadership.

**Table 3 - Summary of Results of Focus Group**

<b>Focus Group</b>
There is a common opinion that the values of the Group have been losing impact.
The "strength" was the most active value.
There is a shared concern over the loss of "relationship", a word that is in the Values, Mission and Vision Statements of the Group.
It is considered that the expansion and diversification of the Group have decreased the family feeling "Be PBG"
The participants points out the lack of knowledge about his/her development in the company and what is expected of each employee.
The people management function and structure was classified as poor in relation to the current needs of employees, teams and business strategy, as there is only one focus in the administrative area.
There is a positive highlight attributed to the loyalty of employees.
The most negative highlight was given to career development and functioning of HR (no integrated policy of management of people).
In the future, participants in the focus group would like to see the PBG with a modern and innovative human resource management, particularly in the areas of welcoming and integration, performance assessment and internal marketing.
There is a general lack of knowledge from the plant management on the strategic guidelines of the organisation.

Taking into account the information presents in the tables 1, 2, 3 we summarize now some general conclusions of this diagnostic phase. The diagnostic activity revealed the absence of a People Corporate Management policy and strategic guidelines for HR management. Also at the operational level was found that there is no action plan for the issues and processes related to the topic.

In recent years, the PBG has undergone major changes in terms of dimension, ownership and management of companies, even the very concept and strategy of business. Therefore, HR activities need to adapt itself to respond to new challenges, particularly the restoration of corporate culture. "This is a critical area for an organisation that is on the global market". In this sense, together with the payroll area, it is crucial to invest in people development of and to strengthen corporate branding, as a mean to attract and retain employees. This is the main conclusion drawn from interviews, focus groups and document analysis. Even in traditional activities related to HR (recruitment and selection, welcoming and integration), the collected testimonies showed the urge for an intervention and integration into a global strategy.

"There is no information about the performance assessment. It is frozen, suspended ... "; "Some managers must know how to delegate." "Internal communication is not working well." These are testimonies in direct speech that reveal the need to improve the **empowerment** in the leading PBG.

Indeed, and according to information gathered, it is compulsory to align the organisation's interests with the needs of employees: "Teams aren't motivated". To take advantage of people's potential is necessary to know them, be able to identify their values, attitudes, skills and expectations. Only then you can put the right people in the right place, resulting in higher team performance, in more positive business results and more motivated people that grow side by side with the organisation. Through the diagnostic, it was noticeable the urgent need to strengthen the bond of managers with their teams; to set targets and goals properly aligned with the company's strategy and the functions of each individual, each team and to implement a model of performance assessment and career management that contributes to the mobility of staff between the PBG's companies. "Information is not circulating." The excessively administrative management model of human resources caused its alienation from the area of development and, consequently, from the majority of managers and employees in general.

"We need to hold the internal customer"; "The Group Culture is vanishing"; "The lack of employee engagement is affecting the relationships with external customers" are phrases mentioned in the focus group and interviews that express the current necessity of **engagement**. From the tools applied, it was found that the level of loyalty of the employees towards the company has been degrading. This negative trend is not due to a single factor, but rather an accumulation of circumstances such as: perception of absence of communication and indication of lack of guidance and of recognition of individual performance. The inferior level of loyalty of employees is also a consequence of the absence of both a career plan and training. The poor coordination between career, training and assessment promotes the negative expectation of people as to its value within the Group. Nor is there alignment about the person's identification with the company – to know what the Group is - resulting in the continued loss of team spirit and sense of family "Be PBG".

Both in interviews and in focus groups, people proved more faithful to trademarks the corporate brand "Be PBG". It is therefore essential to work on this second, as this is the one that aggregates the Group's employees. The brand "Be PBG" is still a matter of confidence in solidity and business continuity, as several participants demonstrated. Nonetheless, the distance of managers and middle managers from people management processes and the dispersion of people management policies are emphasised and the HR direction shall have an intervention in this direction, against the statement: "There is no HR figure". We can establish that there is a reduced perception of HR policies and guiding principles. Many referred to these as "non-existent" and "purely administrative", which makes evident the desired focus on **employees**. A general understanding of the absence of people management practices increases the demotivation levels causing the loss of "talents".

The present remuneration framework, in addition to a reduced communication on this subject causes further dissatisfaction of people. People lack an individual development plan, associated with their career development. This is supported by the following quotations from the interviews: "Insufficient recognition and motivation"; "There is no return of communications." Likewise, a growing support of internal mobility situations is required, not forgetting the specialised technical support on expatriate

management. Employees assume they are an integral part of the business, however, the reduced guidance of what is expected of each and where they should head does not create collective ambition, damaging the growth of the Group.

## 5.2. Benchmarking

The Benchmarking exercise conducted was seen as a positive and proactive process. The collected contents have as sources of information web pages or other means of information considered public. For this activity some cases were selected based on the following criteria: company size; (re) organisation that has accompanied strategic changes and reference in HR management practices. We selected five large groups belonging to different sectors of activity: construction, retail, manufacturing, services.

**Table 4 - Summary of the Benchmarking Results**

<b>Benchmarking Results</b>
All cases show the existence of corporate statements, disseminated both internal and externally
The strategic plan of the company is disclosed internally.
All analysed cases present a centralised HR structure, positioned at the level of the Executive Director of the main holding. This practice places the HR function at a strategic and cross-level position of the organisation.
In recent years, large business groups have placed in its strategic plan actions aimed at repositioning the HR management to a more central level and with a more integrated management model.
The following priorities in terms of the managing of people management were defined:
- Main focus on people;
- Align the goals of each function in company with corporate goals;
- Risk and merit sharing - management by meritocracy;
- Promotion and mobility management and staff turnover.
Strengthening the basis, culture and corporate values is also a current priority for large organisations.

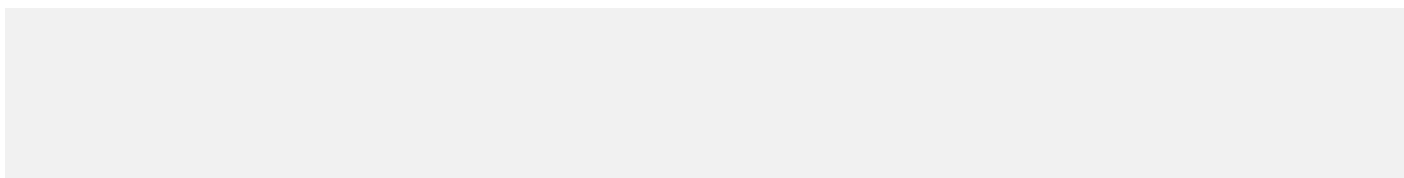
As it is clear, focus on the development of people and alignment of HR management with corporate strategy is one of the up-to-date practices of the largest Portuguese groups. It should be noted also the priority given by organisations to a management linking all stakeholders.

## 5.3. Implementation: 2<sup>nd</sup> Phase

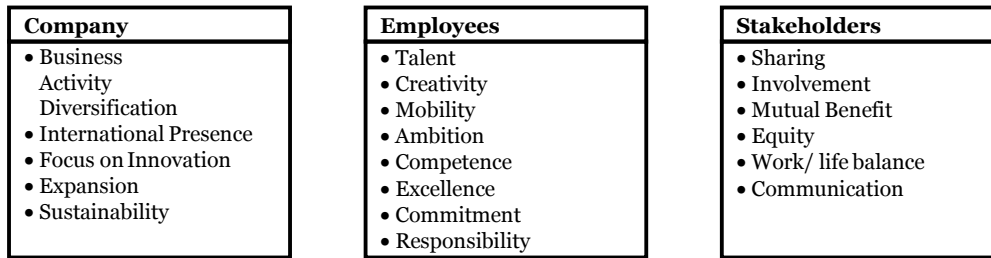
Taking the results from the diagnostic and benchmarking, we gathered information on the reaction of the PBG to the gaps that were found, thus moving towards a consolidated and competitive EB strategy in the global market. First, the goals were set according to the assessment made in the six target companies: 1) Aligning the Organisation with the Group's strategy; 2) Improving the performance of the organisational structure; 3) Communicating effectively; 4) Retaining and engaging employees.

The strategy and mission that the HR management board should follow were thought with these goals in mind. In this sense, it was decided that people corporate management should increasingly be an ally for the organisational strategy. No organisation achieves its goals without knowing the strategy and having employees committed to its execution. Thus, it was crucial to look for new ways of understanding the role of people in the company: new ways to carry out responsibilities, new ways to provide appropriate working conditions, new ways to develop skills and retain talent and new ways of engaging employees and still reconciling their professional and personal life. Innovating in people management is possible and necessary and it was the path chosen by this organization, when faced with the results from the field work performed during the 1<sup>st</sup> phase of this project.

Based on the organisation's guidelines, the key vectors considered for defining a people management strategy were: the company, employees and stakeholders (Figure 2).



**Figure 2 - Key Performance Vectors of Group's Practices**



Thus, the PBG's reaction was based on a commitment that should account for strategic options, but should also be invested with a fresh impetus to seek and retain talent, promote and encourage creativity and innovation and enable the mobility of people. It is also expected that each person takes on the responsibility and acknowledgement before the company's commitments. The company's interaction with society enables a greater sharing of values with people and institutions of the surrounding area, greater connexion with local communities, the demand for a fairer society and a better relationship between family life and working life.

In this context, it was also decided that people corporate management should be oriented towards the following customers: employees, team leaders, executive directors and society. Thus, the HR management board's mission must be related to these customers. Once the mission and strategy are set, the next step taken by this organisation was to (re)align its organisational structure in order to meet the planned goals. First, we studied the name of the new structure. If the PBG wanted the role to move away from the payroll component, evolve towards "People Corporate Management" and also embrace the corporate brand, the name had to take this into consideration. People, Brand and Communication Corporate Management was the expression that best reflected the culture and repositioning strategy of the PBG, through a name that contributes to a more transversal and integral role of modern HR management. After defining the name, it was decided that the new corporate management should develop procedures, methodologies and tools aimed at supporting employees individually, their leaders and each companies.

In terms of structure, taking the results of the diagnostic as well as the mission and goals set for this new management, it was agreed that the People, Brand and Communication Corporate Management should be structured according to the following areas: wages and benefits, training and development, careers and compensation, brand and communication.

In the four main areas we can find the activities that meet the different needs associated with the proposed development cycle for an employee of the PBG, from his/her identification until the termination of employment. This cycle establishes a people corporate management policy based on: employees, engagement and empowerment. Given the outputs of the diagnostic phase and the aforementioned, it has become clear that, in order to improve the performance, this organisation had to reorganise the structure responsible for People, Brand and Communication Corporate Management under six major areas, as stated in Figure 3.

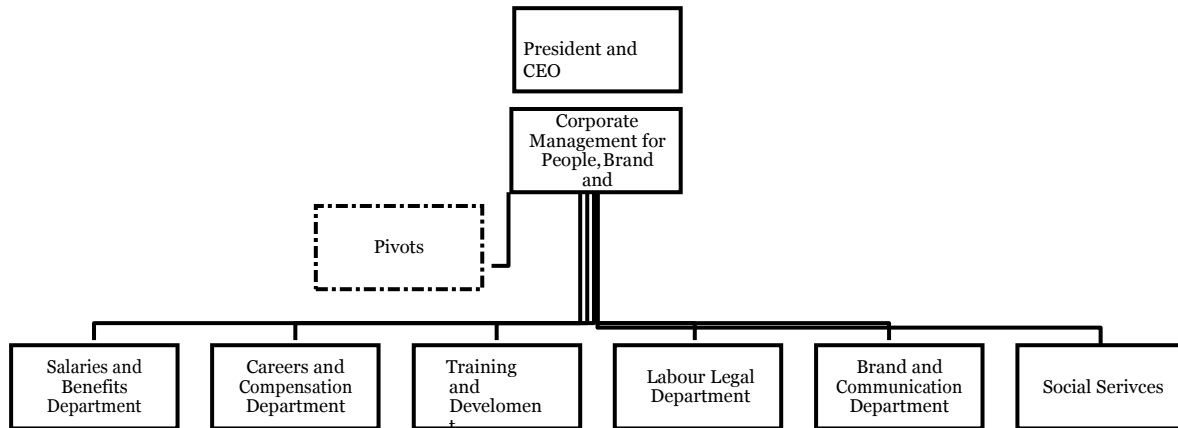
**Figure 3 – Main Intervention Areas of PBG People, Brand and Communication Corporate Management**



The macro processes were addressed according to an organisational design that fits each intervention area in six departments. This structure reports directly to PBG Top Management and there are HR partners known as "pivots" in the various companies of the

Group. Each department and service has employees with skills, knowledge and experience in specific areas. There are professionals from HR, legal, training, marketing, psychology and communication expertise.

**Figure 4 - Organisational Design of People, Brand and Communication Corporate Management**



The next phase went through the structuring of the team as well as the definition of action plans for each of the intervention areas, always supported by measurable goals and based on the strategy focused on attracting, developing and retaining talent. Each of the infrastructure projects is supported by the corporate culture "Be PGB", reasserted during the organisation's strategy development process and integrated HR management. The corporate brand "Be PGB" becomes the common denominator of all the events and is expressed in the name of each project (Figure 5).

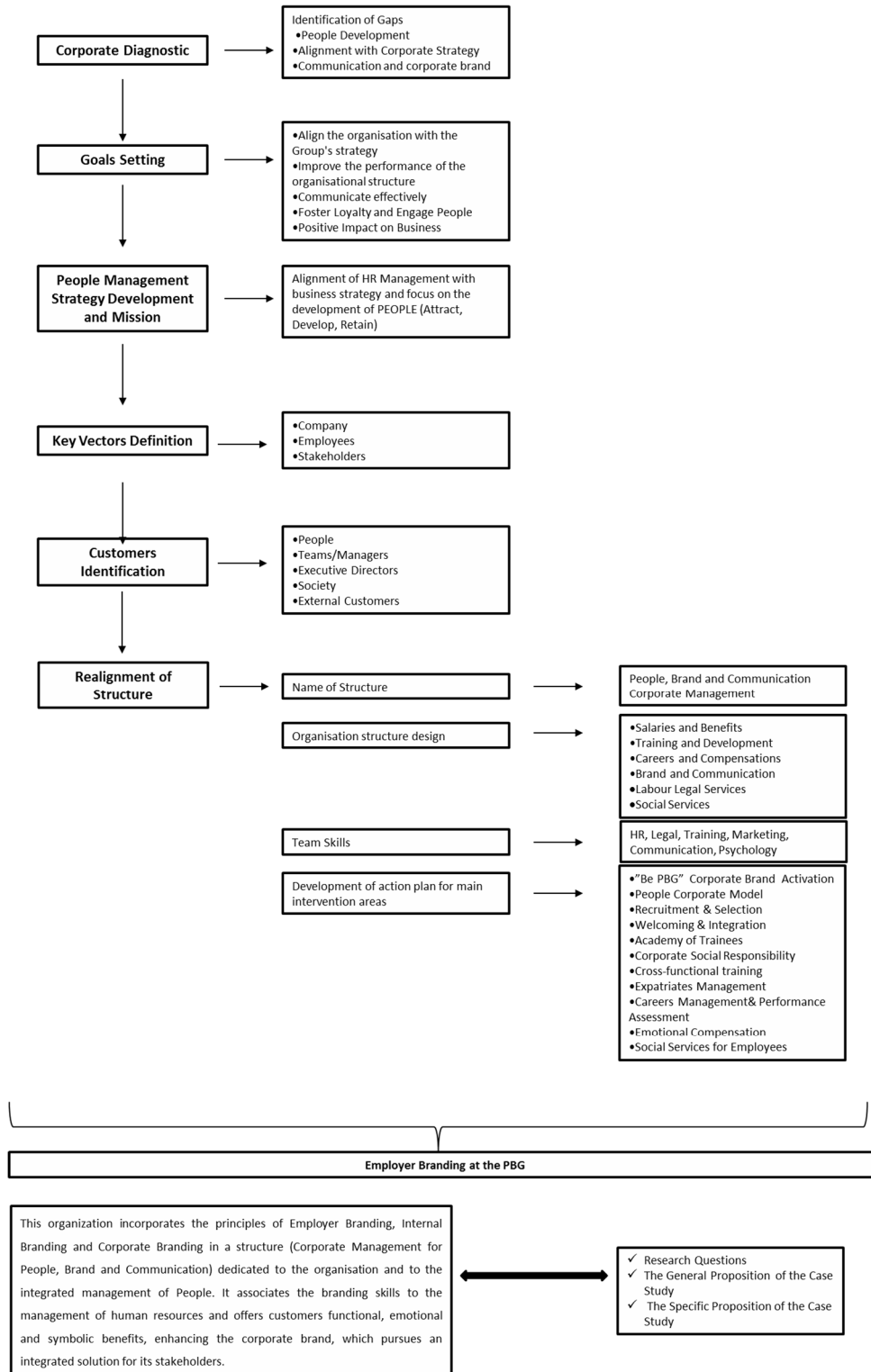
**Figure 5 - Action Plan of People, Brand and Communication Corporate Management**

Salaries and Benefits		
"Be PGB. I monitor" - Monthly report that sums up the main activities and respective pay roll indicators	"Be the PGB .I align" - Align Salary + Benefits, Functions and Job Categories	"Be PGB .I go" - Hiring, Staff Turnover at the Group and Terminations: standardize procedures and accelerate availability of information
Training and Development		
"Be PGB. I know!" - Cross-functional Training of employees in critical areas, such as "Be the Group", "Kaizen" and "Leadership"		"Be PGB. I grow" - The Group Sales School: adopt a Marketing attitude in business activity of the companies of the Group
Careers and Compensation		
"Be PGB. I do" - People Corporate Model: review and align functions, skills and career plan		"Be PGB. I select" - Recruitment and Selection Model: definition of procedures and tools
"Be PGB. I Integrate" - Integration Academy: management of various types of traineeships and the creation of educational institutions network	"Be PGB. I welcome you" - Welcoming Model and Integration (uniform procedure and create tools)	"Be PGB. I am in the World": definition of expatriate management strategy and development of tools
"Be PGB. I can" - Model of Performance Assessment/Management		"Be the PGB I challenge" - Career and Talent Management Model
Brand and Communication		
"Be PGB. We are!" - Brand Activation Plan (communication and training of Group's values)	"Be PGB. I communicate" - Corporate Communication tools (Diagnostic and plan to improve and develop the Group tools)	"Be PGB. I am responsible" - Corporate Social Responsibility Programme
"Be the PGB. I feel" - Be the Group Emotional Compensation (through the creation of BE Club)	"Be PGB. I listen!" - Organisational Climate Study	"Be PGB. I improve every day!" - From Kaizen to People and Brand Certification
Social Services		
"Be PGB. I take care" - Reorganisation of the occupational health service in order to meet the legal requirements /certification, gain efficiency and respond to projects of Corporate Social Responsibility		"Be PGB. I am": intervention programme in the spaces and premises of areas and conditions improvement
Labour Legal Services		
"Be PGB. I support" - development if a project in the labour legal area to support management.		

## Summary of the Strategy Development Process of EB

A scheme was designed as the corollary of the aforementioned phases (Figure 6), which provides an overview of the various steps taken by this organisation towards an EB strategy, culminating in the structuring of a management combining the payroll, people development and corporate communication.

**Figure 6 - Employer Branding Strategy in the Leading PBG**



## 6. Conclusions

The results of this qualitative and exploratory case study reflect the steps that a company made to building and implement an EB strategy. For a company to be able to deliver functional, emotional and symbolic benefits to all stakeholders as an employer brand, it is clear that a merger is required between the traditional HR and an innovative vision of people development procedures, which should be based on marketing and communication skills. Only then a set of enduring and unique attributes that are relevant to stakeholders and that differentiate organisations from its competitors will be possible, and this goal is praised by many authors as key to the day-to-day business (Kotler & Bes 2004; Lopez, Tarodo, & Lores, 2014).

The diagnostic phase proves to be essential for any organisation wishing to walk in that direction. It is the only way to meet the needs and expectations of its internal customers and to add them to the organisational and business context, in a perspective of engaging all players in the organization`s daily routine. This is how this leading PBG noticed its shortcomings and realized that the way to the attraction, development and retention of talent went by the connection between the company, employees and stakeholders in an integrated marketing perspective. In doing so it accomplished what Kapoor (2005) and Sartain (2005) pointed out: it is necessary to apply marketing knowledge to understand what the employees think about the organisation, how they feel and what they want, and then the company should act accordingly, praising employee experience, empowerment and engagement.

The definition of goals and performance strategy is an essential phase and resulted in the second phase of implementation, which embodied in the definition of the structure that shall support People, Brand and Communication Corporate Management and intervention areas. This same structure is designed according to the philosophy of defined performance. A structure that combines the payroll, HR development and corporate communication was the solution found by this PBG.

Communication becomes an essential element in this strategy, as it conveys transparency, strengthens the engagement and allows the development of skills necessary for employees to grow into true organisation`s ambassadors (Vaijyanthi et al., 2011), thus making it necessary to further enhance its human and authentic side (Asha & Jyothi, 2013). It should be noted that the areas of intervention of the structure created by the Group, working in coordination, are the cradle of the solutions to different needs associated with the development cycle intended for employees, from their identification (potential employees) until their termination from the company, always presenting true value propositions consistent to the culture of the organisation and that come from the employer brand positioning. Such is the genesis of any EB strategy, as evidenced by Kapoor (2010), when he stated that organisations need to optimise their employer brand from the capture of young talent until their retirement.

In the PBG studied, this cycle demonstrates a people management policy based on: employees, engagement and empowerment. With this research, we can establish that, in practice, an EB strategy is actually a mix of subjects, concepts, approaches and skills, which requires solutions to all stakeholders, in a perspective of integrated marketing (Starineca & Voronchuk, 2014).

Reflecting on the propositions that guided this research and sought to meet the research questions initially defined, we found that the application of branding skills to human resource management contributes to attracting, developing and retaining human capital [expressed in the **specific proposition a**], which was corroborated by the PBG solution, by including the communication department and corporate brand management under HR management, and by managing their services as products, developing its own identity and always looking to meet the needs and expectations of its customers (employees, team leaders, executive directors and society).

On the **specific proposition b**), one can find a set of elements in the intervention areas selected by the PBG, as well as in its action plan, that show the existence of functional, emotional and symbolic attributes in its services and, therefore, in its EB strategy. At a functional level, for example, there are projects focused on the alignment of wages and monitoring of indicators. Moving to the emotional level, there is a focus on emotional benefits, social responsibility, welcoming and integration, among other benefits. At a

symbolic level, there is the corporate rebranding "Be PBG", reinforcing the Group's values internally and the premise that developing a brand should start from the inside out (Ferreira & Oliveira, 2014).

Finally, after answering of specific propositions comes the validation of the **general proposition** (the principles of Employer Branding, Integrated Marketing and Corporate Branding can be applied to a real company, as long as it develops an integrated solution for People Management), as it was found that the response given by the PBG is based on a solution that follows an EB strategy. The Group has created a structure and a team merging the traditional areas of human resources with new marketing approaches based on the stakeholder orientation, given that value propositions being created would have to cover not only current employees, but also potential ones, and the company and society at large. With the validation of the propositions, we consider that we also answer the questions formulated at the beginning of this research process.

In this sense, with this case study we can conclude that an EB strategy actually requires a marketing application, HR management and combined theories and techniques to attract, develop and retain talent (Joseph, 1996). This is the only way for the job offers to be attractive for employees, meeting their needs, while also meeting the strategic goals of the organisation (Sehgal & Malati, 2013). With the approach taken by this organisation and presented in this case study, it becomes clear that meeting the needs and expectations of employees is as important as (and sometimes even more than) the existing focus on delivering real value propositions to external customers. As Kotler (1994) showed, investing on the organisation's people is a means to leverage the service delivered to customers, leading to higher levels of satisfaction and loyalty. It is also the way to create a "strong people brand", a "lovemark" that creates an emotional, physical and spiritual connection with all stakeholders in an era driven by emotions and essentially by values (Kotler, Kartajaya & Iwan, 2010; Roberts, 1999).

As mentioned by Albert Einstein, it is in times of crisis that each of us excels. Creativity, innovation, continuous improvement, accountability, trust and commitment are needed to bloom new strategies that enhance the contribution of each of the organisations. These are the new HR strategy guiding the work of this PBG that allowed the creation of this integrated structure of the corporate brand with people management and that shall govern all the underlying intervention areas, bearing in mind that "a great place to work is one in which people are trusted, have pride in what they do and enjoy the people they work with" (Robert Levering, founder of Great Place to Work, 2015).

## **7. Theoretical and Practical Implications**

The phases of the implementation of an EB strategy on a real business described in this paper can really help managers to think about the steps necessary to obtain the benefits found in the literature. As a summary of all that been discussed through this paper, we select some important topics that we think that will have impact on business and academy, and vice versa:

- The diagnostic phase proves to be essential for any organisation wishing to walk towards an EB strategy (internal and external diagnosis).
- After the diagnosis, it is essential to develop a strategy based on integrated marketing concepts, which goal is to deliver value to all the stakeholders, respecting the corporate brand and enhancing the values of the organisation.
- This strategy should be aligned with the business strategy, having at its centre the sense of customer orientation (internal and external).
- Communication becomes an essential element of an EB strategy. As so, it is important to introduce marketing skills on human resource management.
- It is important that the Top Management and leadership are committed to the EB concepts and strategy, bringing marketing skills to people management.

- After the strategy, it is time to develop an amount of policies and processes that allow a people integrated management system that transforms employees in true ambassadors of the company.
- In the development of the processes and policies, it is important to attend on functional, emotional and symbolic benefits that can be delivered to all the stakeholders, because we are in an era driven by emotions and essentially by values.
- When the EB strategy reaches a mature state, it is time to measure its implication on customer orientation and satisfaction (internal and external).
- It is time to HR research and literature embody more marketing orientations, doing the connection between both knowledge areas.

## **8. Research Limitations and Future Research Recommendations**

Despite the potential contribution that this study may provide, from the point of view of checking the practical impact that an EB strategy has in organisations, the analysis of the results should be cautious, since this is a case study of exploratory and qualitative nature, namely an action-research that is focused on the example of a single business group. Thus, it is considered appropriate to extend the analysis to other existing practical examples in the market, in order to compare the responses given by organisations on their way to an EB strategy. It would also be relevant to carry out a qualitative study in the near future so as to validate these results.

Finally, these results should primarily be used by professionals and leaders to think on the practical implications of an EB strategy and to understand the path required to implement theoretical knowledge into the daily life of organisations. And for future academic research, we also think that it is relevant to measure the impact that the creation of this structure has on the satisfaction of the Group internal and external markets, using qualitative and quantitative methods.

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