

How to Build a *Human-Centered* Employer Brand.



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Introduction.

An employer brand is not just a company's employee value proposition (EVP) or its logo. Employer brands are the sum of every interaction a company has with candidates, employees and — increasingly — the public.

While messaging is a key part of a brand, it should be thought of as a lived experience. It's the extent to which a company brings its values into the world. It's the culture you promise — and then create — for your people. And it's actually more organic than some realize. According to author Seth Godin, "A brand is the set of expectations, memories, stories and relationships that, taken together, account for a consumer's decision to choose one product or service over another."

Your employer brand is why a candidate chooses you as an employer and why your employees continue to work for you. Given its importance, a company's employer brand should never be turned off. Consistent nurturing is key to keeping your story top of mind with candidates and employees alike. While it might be tempting to not invest in your employer brand, especially in times of uncertainty, it will be costly.

Whether we're in a bull or a bear market, companies will always need talent with technical skills and competition for those professionals will always be steep. You need to put your brand in front of talent if you want to earn their trust and attention. That's why a company's employer brand is more important than ever. More leaders and companies are beginning to see that an employer brand is not a "nice to have," it's a "must-have."

The brands that consistently tell their story, will emerge as winners in the competition for talent.

This guide will help you understand how to build a human-centered brand that will connect with what candidates and employees expect of employers today.

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SECTION 1

Why You Need a Human-Centered Brand.

This section shares four reasons why a human-centered approach to employer branding is key to truly connecting with candidates and employees-alike.

SECTION 1

There's been a lot of hand-wringing about trends like "quiet quitting," "slow work" and, of course, "The Great Resignation." The so-called "anti-work movement" — an active Reddit thread — has people in a panic about the possibility that we'll see the radical end of work as we know it.

But workers' new expectations are NOT, in fact, radical. They're human. People want to perform their duties with the appreciation that they work to live, not live to work, and there's nothing wrong with that perspective. Nor does it mean that employees won't choose to show up and be as productive as they can be when presented with the right environment.

Because of this, we know that human-centered employers are the only employers that will emerge from this era of uncertainty on top. And it's likely only human-centered brands will attract the technical talent they need to innovate when the competition is tight.

Don't believe us? Here's why you need to build a human-centered employer brand.

SECTION 1

#1 A Complicated Economic Environment.

Headlines in late 2022 are bleak. “Jobless claims jump to a five-week high of 219,000. Sign of rising U.S. layoffs?” and the like are what we’re constantly seeing. And the future is still quite uncertain.

We’re seeing conflicting and confusing headlines, like those about a “jobful” turndown. Is the tech bubble bursting? Certainly, it’s not sunny days for the FAANG companies. Is a recession imminent? It depends on who you talk to.

If we are in a recession, it’s a peculiar one, as the Wall Street Journal points out. Economic output is down, but the job market is strong, which is very unlike previous recessions. The journal refers to the first half of 2022 as a “jobful” downturn: output fell, and companies kept hiring.

In a landscape like this, as previously mentioned, the natural instinct for many companies is to pull back on telling their employer brand stories, which is a mistake. Whether we’re in a bull or a bear market, companies will always need talent with technical skills. And we do know this: When we’re talking about hiring tech professionals in particular — people with digital skills to innovate for the future — competition will always be steep, and the candidates will always have leverage.

SECTION 1



#2 Purpose Takes Precedent.

Purpose is now more important to workers than it was before the pandemic. Two-thirds of U.S. workers say Covid has caused them to reflect on their life's purpose. Seventy percent say they derive their sense of purpose from work, and 89% say they are seeking more purpose from work.

Brands are often thought of as a way to showcase what a company does but given this need for purpose, employers must rethink this to truly connect with professionals.

SECTION 1

#3 Quality of Life Improvements.

The rise of the ZoomTown is as tied to the quality of life as any other new “burnout benefit.” And it’s reshaping the landscape of America.

As far as defining ZoomTowns, a ZoomTown might be a smaller, quiet community close to nature. Now that employees can choose, people are opting for quieter lives than they’d experience in big tech hubs like NYC and San Francisco. In other cases, ZoomTowns are being created deliberately. Local governments are offering digital nomads grants to build up their economies. In turn, they commit to living there for a few years.

But people aren’t necessarily going off the grid — they’re moving to smaller towns adjacent to bigger cities. A good example is the town of Cary. It’s just outside Raleigh, NC. Big companies like Apple, Cisco and IBM have offices in Raleigh, so Cary reaps the economic benefits of being near a business center. The reverse is also true: People who move to Cary get the benefit of a quieter life, but they’re still within driving distance of where the action is.

Again, companies must meet employees where they are at — literally. We aren’t going back to “the way things have always been.” Workers are finding the best lives for themselves. That might mean moving away from the big city. And that movement is really changing the landscape of America in many ways.

SECTION 1

#4 Tech Talent Competition Is Always Steep.

We're in the midst of an extreme tech skills shortage. IT leaders know it: 76 percent report tech skills gaps in high numbers. This will be a defining challenge for organizations for decades.

At the same time, leaders are breaking records in digital investments this year. In 2022, their investments grew 65 percent. And 72 percent of execs say they need to invest in digital transformation through 2024 to stay competitive.

There's tremendous opportunity for companies to innovate right now. There is, however, one caveat. They can leverage those opportunities emerging if — and this is a very big if — they have access to the right talent.

And that talent has spent years reassessing what they expect from employers.

Today, there's only one way to attract talent — you need to innovate: Show them you're meeting those new expectations through your brand. We all talk about the “Great Resignation.” But we need to talk more about the “Great Expectations” that continue to drive people to leave.

SECTION 1

For decades, those of us in the people space have spoken in terms of who's in the driver's seat. We speak in terms of who has leverage — the candidates or the employers. But this is a new world. We are, in fact, still in a tug of war. But people are not just thinking about the benefits they want or how much they want to be paid. They're thinking about the life they want. They're willing to live with less. Many are carving out new ways of earning a living.

So, in this tug of war, it's not about who has leverage. More and more, talent is willing to let go of the rope altogether. If they know employers are unwilling to treat them like whole humans, they'll let the rope slide right out of their capable hands. They'll walk away from the quote-unquote "war." And when this happens, employers could find themselves falling back into the mud.



SECTION 2

Elements of a Human-Centered Brand.

To address these changing expectations, the answer is to put people at the center of your employer brand. In other words, to build a human-centered brand. It's what the professionals you need are asking for. Keep reading to learn about the key factors that make a human-centered brand so you can create your own.

SECTION 2

#1 Vision.

This is the heart of every human-centered brand. It's the core from which all other elements should extend.

For years, leaders have been saying: “We need to do a better job of connecting people’s work to our larger vision.” After a collective human trauma that now runs deeper than it ever has, we must tell stories that connect. In the past, people may have wanted to know: “Okay, how do my daily tasks tie into a larger vision?” But now, they’re thinking about every aspect of life, and that’s especially true among younger workers, who are saying: “Okay, work can give me a sense of purpose or deplete it — and my life is worth meaning.”

That’s why having a vision is more important than ever. If you are not pulling in people with a strong vision, you will fail to bring them in at all.

#2 Trust.

Leaders trust employees, and the reverse needs to be true. Communicate transparently and live the values you espouse.

If you want to reach your company vision, you first need to earn not only the trust of your employees and candidates, but also the public. The world is watching. We live in a cynical world. Moreover, people have good reason to mistrust corporate intent. People want to know: Are you claiming to be something you’re not? Can I trust you’ll do what you say?

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In a hybrid world, it couldn't be clearer: Employees and leaders need to trust each other. The most progressive hybrid companies give people the freedom to choose what will be best for them and the company. As leaders in a hybrid world, we'll need to learn to trust people even if we can't see them sitting at their desks in the office. At Airbnb, CEO Brian Chesky created a plan that allows employees to work with their managers to find the win-win: What's best for the employee and the company. As he says: "It's simple. I trust you." It's been hailed as one of the most effective return-to-work plans ever, and it's largely because of the trust Chesky has expressed.

Legislation around pay transparency is now being enacted across several states. But the law is almost secondary. This has much more to do with earning the trust of your candidates and employees. Members of Gen Y and Z have normalized sharing their salaries on social media. Consumers are watching too.

Edelman has called trust the new brand equity and notes that brands with high levels of trust are much more likely to be purchased, seven times more likely in fact.

Transparency, consistency and equitability make a brand trustworthy. Additionally, protecting workers' rights and paying a living wage are two key areas that make a brand more trusting.

In a world where employees have reason to be cynical, trust is difficult to come by. Companies need to be accountable and transparent about essentially everything.

And this is true of where people want to work, too. And yet, companies are using technology to monitor employees. Experts have called this the largest exertion of employer control in generations.

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Dubbed ‘bossware’, a host of computer programs can log keystrokes, take screenshots, and activate employees’ webcams while working from home. Often, these technologies run undetected. Biometric tracking is already used for workers “clocking in” through fingerprint scanning — but it’s also a part of tracking and monitoring workers’ attention and emotional affect.

But we know it doesn’t work. The HBR found that monitored employees were, in fact, MORE likely to take unapproved breaks, damage property, steal and purposefully work at a slow pace.

However tempting it may be, monitoring employees won’t improve productivity.

People need to trust that the values you espouse on your website are the values you live and breathe. At one point, companies defined values as a set of expectations they had for employees. They were like a manual for how employees would be expected to behave. But that is not enough for people today. Today, people want to know how employers will behave. What can they expect employers to do in the way of their values and principles? Living and breathing your values is a requisite for recruitment and retention.

DEI is probably the most important example. But companies are getting poor marks. In our [2022 “State of DEI in Tech” report](#), we found that 58 percent of job seekers said DEI initiatives are very important to them, and 67 percent said they’re more inclined to stay if their employer improves on DEI. But 35 percent of companies are still in the beginning stages of building a DEI program. Employees aren’t pleased. Thirty percent said their companies either don’t have any DEI programs in place or are making a very poor effort.

Companies must listen to their employees and make good on the promises they’ve agreed to. Otherwise, trust will never be gained.

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#3 Safety.

Employees want to feel safe physically, psychologically and emotionally. They rely on your systems to help.

We don't talk about safety enough, but it's critical to a human-centered brand. According to Pew, only 36 percent of workers are very satisfied with the steps that their companies have taken to keep them safe from COVID.

We have to think of safety in varied dimensions. There's physical safety and there's emotional safety. With every shift in the world order, there will be an uptick of new or worsened mental health issues. Consider someone with social anxiety before the pandemic. We're returning to the office after three years of isolation. Those anxieties will be more pronounced.

So many leaders want their people to return to office. So, they focus on their hybrid plans. But there's an undercurrent we are missing entirely. When people say they value remote because of the flexibility it affords — or because they dislike the commute — no one bats an eye. But in a 2022 Buffer survey, 32 percent of people said they value remote work because they feel safer working from home.

The world has become a much scarier place for many people. Your employees need to know they can rely on you and your systems to keep them safe. Can they? If not, we cannot expect people to enthusiastically return to the office. And we can't call ourselves human-centered companies.

Consider Timothy Clark's definition of psychological safety: "It's a condition in which people feel they can learn, contribute and challenge the status quo without being embarrassed or punished."

SECTION 2



#4 Empowerment + Opportunity.

Employees want to thrive, grow professionally and experience equitable opportunities.

We need to expect and reward quality work and high performers. And we must understand that growth is no longer a linear path. People want to be respected as individuals whose goals are unique. We need to support people's ability to grow in ways that are meaningful to them. Over the past few years, everything you thought you knew about rewards — about empowering your people to learn and grow — has changed.

Instead of a one-size-fits-all approach, build processes that allow you to understand what each individual employee values. This will allow you to personalize how you empower and create opportunities that matter for each individual. It's a more human-centered approach that will truly resonate with this employee desire.

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#5 Care + Support.

Companies must support every dimension of employees' well-being.

Human-centered brands are redefining what it means to care for employees and give them support.

Since COVID, burnout has become its own epidemic. We've been hearing more and more about "quality of life" benefits. We call them the "burnout benefits." Offering recharge weeks, half-day Fridays, no-meeting Fridays and "quiet weeks," for example, and sabbaticals are also on the rise.

But too many companies take a band-aid approach to meeting this need. They roll out a meditation app, a yoga program, or an EAP — and call it a day. No one program ticks all the boxes to foster wellness, work-life balance and quality of life.

A [2022 McKinsey study](#) posits that a systematic approach is the only way out of this. How do you do that? Well, you survey employees often to see how they are feeling. You define measurable goals to fix what comes up. You have no tolerance for toxic behaviors. And you shift your leadership approach in specific ways.

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This pertains to all leaders within organizations. When we went to get our MBAs, we were taught not to get personal: “Okay, I’m not going to ask about my people’s kids or their health. Too personal!”

The stakes are too high right now not to get personal. We must pay attention and ask when employees are going through disruptions, whether emotional, familial or health. We need to find out what that person requires, given their circumstances, to be well. We need to normalize the conversation about mental health so people are unafraid to talk about it.

According to [McKinsey](#), after taking a systemic approach over a 2-year period, one large organization saw a 7 percent decrease in burnout compared to an 11 percent increase in the national average over the same time period.

Conclusion.

We live in complicated times, and even in the midst of the challenges we face, workers are clear about their needs and what they want. It's up to employers to meet those needs if they want to attract and retain tech talent in a steeply competitive market.

A human-centered brand focuses on meeting employees where they are. It involves creating a vision that's at the center to then allow trust, safety, empowerment & opportunity, and care & support — all of which are key factors of a human-centered brand — to take hold. As you continue to grow and evolve these factors, you'll be an organization where employees want to stay and candidates want to work.





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