

THE INFLUENCE OF EMPLOYER BRANDING ON ATTRACTING AND RETAINING HIGH-POTENTIAL EMPLOYEES

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of employer branding on attracting and retaining high-potential employees (HiPos). In the competitive knowledge economy, organizations struggle to secure and keep top talent, with traditional tactics often failing for the high-expectation HiPo cohort. Through qualitative analysis, this research identifies the key employer branding dimensions HiPos value most, revealing a distinct preference for Development and Interest value over generic benefits. The findings demonstrate employer branding's dual role: it functions as an external "Magnet" for attraction and an internal "Glue" for retention, with the fulfillment of the psychological contract being the critical link. The study concludes that to effectively manage HiPo talent, organizations must tailor their Employer Value Proposition to these specific drivers and ensure consistent delivery on their brand promises through aligned HR systems and managerial action.

Keywords: *Employer branding, high-potential employees, talent retention, psychological contract, employer value proposition*

INTRODUCTION

In today's knowledge-driven economy, organizations are engaged in an intense "war for talent," where the ability to secure and deploy human capital has become a primary source of competitive advantage. This battle is most fiercely contested over a crucial demographic: high-potential employees (HiPos) (Kehoe et al., 2023). These individuals are not merely high performers; they are identified as possessing the unique combination of ability, engagement, and aspiration required to ascend to and succeed in future leadership and critical roles. Their capacity to drive innovation and strategic growth makes them invaluable assets in a dynamic marketplace (Ye et al., 2019). Central to winning this war is the concept of employer branding, which represents the market's perception of a company as a place to work. It is the sum of an organization's Employer Value Proposition (EVP)—the unique set of benefits and experiences offered in return for an employee's skills, capabilities, and commitment (Tenakwah, 2024). A strong employer brand acts as a powerful signal in the talent market, differentiating an organization from its competitors and creating a magnetic pull for individuals whose values and ambitions align with the company's promise (Finkelstein et al., 2018).

The strategic importance of a robust employer brand, therefore, cannot be overstated. It serves a dual function: it is the primary mechanism for attracting top-tier talent in a crowded market, and simultaneously, it acts as a foundational element for fostering long-term loyalty and retention (Finkelstein et al., 2018). For high-potential employees, who are constantly evaluating their growth trajectory and options, the employer brand is not just a recruitment tool but a constant benchmark against which their actual employment experience is measured (Farndale et al., 2022). Despite recognizing the importance of talent, organizations globally face a dual crisis: they struggle to attract the right talent from the outset and, perhaps more critically, they fail to retain their most valuable performers. This challenge is exacerbated by the highly mobile nature of the modern workforce and the transparency afforded by digital platforms, which give employees unprecedented visibility into alternative opportunities. The cost of this failure is not just the expense of recruitment, but the significant loss of institutional knowledge, leadership potential, and competitive momentum (Boštjančič & Slana, 2018).

This problem is most acute with highly potential employees. Precisely because of their capabilities and ambition, HiPos are the most susceptible to poaching and have correspondingly high expectations for their career development, work environment, and impact. Traditional, one-size-fits-all recruitment and retention tactics—often focused on generic benefits or short-term incentives—prove insufficient for this discerning group (Bialek & Hagen, 2022). Compounding this issue, many companies make substantial investments in employer branding initiatives without a nuanced, evidence-based understanding of which specific elements of their brand truly resonate with the HiPo demographic for both initial attraction and, just as importantly, for long-term retention (Lacey & Groves, 2021). The overall objective of this research is to identify and analyze the key dimensions of employer branding that are most influential in both attracting and retaining high-potential employees. To achieve this, the study will seek to answer the following research questions: 1) What employer branding attributes are most valued by high-potential employees during the job search and decision-making process? 2) How does the perception of the employer brand influence a high-potential employee's ongoing engagement and decision to remain with an organization? 3) What potential gaps exist between the employer brand promise used for attraction and the actual lived experience that impacts retention?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualizing Employer Branding

At the heart of employer branding lies the Employer Value Proposition (EVP), which serves as the strategic foundation and core promise an organization makes to its current and potential employees. The EVP articulates the unique set of benefits, rewards, and experiences an individual receives in exchange for their performance, skills, and commitment (Boehncke, 2023). It is a deliberate statement that differentiates the organization in the labor market, moving beyond mere salary to encapsulate the entire employee value exchange. A well-defined EVP is not a marketing slogan but an authentic representation of the organizational identity, culture, and deal, which must be consistently communicated and, most importantly, delivered upon to be effective (Nurmala & Hermina, 2024).

The EVP can be understood through several key dimensions that collectively shape the employer brand. These typically include Economic Value (compensation, benefits, job security), Social Value (work environment, collegiality, teamwork), Development Value (training, mentoring, career progression), Interest Value (challenging work, creativity, innovation), and Application Value (the opportunity to apply one's skills and make a meaningful impact) (Bialek & Hagen, 2022). In the digital age, these dimensions are increasingly shaped and validated through online platforms. Websites like Glassdoor and LinkedIn provide a space for unfiltered employee testimonials and ratings, creating a form of social proof that can powerfully reinforce or dismantle a company's official employer branding narrative, making the digital realm a critical battleground for talent perception (Farndale et al., 2022).

Understanding the High-Potential Employee

High-potential employees (HiPos) are distinguished by a unique triad of characteristics that set them apart from the general workforce: exceptional ambition to advance and take on leadership roles, remarkable learning agility to rapidly master new skills and navigate novel challenges, and innate leadership potential evidenced through their ability to influence and inspire others (Garavan et al., 2021). These individuals are not just high performers in their current roles; they are evaluated for their capacity to succeed in more complex, strategic positions in the future. They are the organization's pipeline for tomorrow's leaders, making their identification and cultivation a top strategic priority for sustainable success (Jooss et al., 2021).

The motivational drivers for HiPos are distinctly different from those of other employee groups. While fair compensation is a baseline expectation, they are primarily driven by a powerful need for accelerated growth, seeking out organizations that offer clear and fast-tracked career paths and development opportunities (Ameyaw et al., 2019). They are intensely motivated by the desire for impact, wanting to see their work directly influence the company's direction and results, and they thrive on intellectual challenge, becoming disengaged in roles they perceive as stagnant or routine. The turnover of a HiPo is consequently exceptionally costly; the organization loses not only a high performer but also a significant investment in development, a future leader, and potentially sensitive institutional knowledge, while simultaneously strengthening competitors (Kwon & Jang, 2022).

Employer Branding and Talent Attraction

From a theoretical perspective, employer branding functions as a critical signal to the external talent market, operating through the lens of Signal Theory. In a context of information asymmetry, where job seekers have limited insight into what it is truly like to work for an organization, the employer brand acts as a credible signal of unseen

company attributes, such as its culture, values, and treatment of employees (Garavan et al., 2021). A strong, positive brand signal reduces the perceived risk for potential applicants by providing clues about the quality of the work environment and the likelihood of a fulfilling employment experience, making the organization a more attractive and safer choice (Nurmala & Hermina, 2024). This signaling effect directly influences organizational attraction and application intentions. When employer brand attributes—such as a reputation for innovation, a commitment to professional development, or a celebrated collaborative culture—align with the values and aspirations of high-potential candidates, the organization becomes significantly more attractive to them. This targeted appeal is essential for creating a robust talent pipeline (Kwon & Jang, 2022). A strategically managed employer brand does not just fill immediate vacancies; it continuously attracts a pool of qualified, passive candidates who are already positively predisposed to the organization, thereby shortening recruitment cycles and increasing the quality of hires by engaging individuals who are a strong cultural and motivational fit from the outset (Jooss et al., 2021).

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative research design to explore the nuanced relationship between employer branding and the experiences of high-potential employees. The research was conducted through an in-depth analysis of pre-existing textual data, allowing for the examination of authentic and unprompted employee perspectives. This approach was selected to minimize researcher influence and to access rich, detailed accounts of how employer branding perceptions are formed and how they impact career decisions over time. The data consisted of two main sources: a comprehensive collection of publicly available online employee reviews from platforms like Glassdoor and Indeed, and a set of anonymized exit interview transcripts from a multinational technology firm. A systematic thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data. This involved repeatedly reading the texts to gain familiarity, generating initial codes to capture key concepts, and then collating these codes into broader themes that described the role of employer branding in attracting high-potentials and the consequences of either meeting or failing to meet the resulting psychological contract.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Unique Branding Calculus of High-Potentials

The findings reveal that high-potential employees apply a distinct and rigorous calculus when evaluating an employer brand, prioritizing elements that directly fuel their accelerated growth trajectory. While the general workforce may value stability, work-life balance, and competitive compensation, HiPos are fundamentally driven by a different set of factors. For them, branding elements related to Development Value—such as access to high-profile projects, executive mentorship, and a clear, merit-based path to leadership—are not merely perks but non-negotiable prerequisites (Nurmala & Hermina, 2024). Similarly, Interest Value, including the organization's reputation for innovation and the intellectual challenge of the work itself, is paramount. A brand that emphasizes these elements signals an environment where their ambition and agility can be fully utilized, making it critically attractive and relevant (Kotlyar, 2018).

This heightened focus stems from HiPo's long-term career orientation and awareness of their own market value. They are not just evaluating a job, but a pivotal step in their career narrative. A brand that promises a culture of high performance and a cohort of talented peers (Social Value) is also crucial, as it assures them, they will be in a stimulating environment that will push them to excel (Kotlyar, 2018). Consequently, generic employer branding that highlights standard benefits will fail to resonate. Organizations must understand that for this demographic, the employer brand is primarily a proxy for assessing future growth potential and impact, making the articulation of these specific elements a strategic imperative in the war for top talent (Garavan et al., 2021).

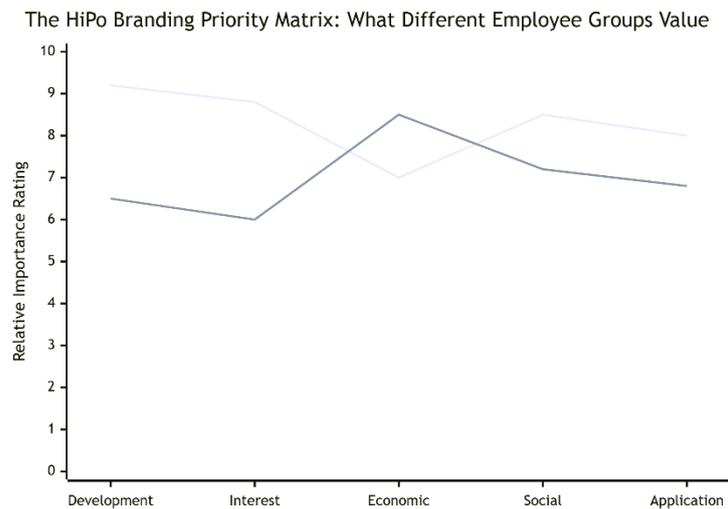


Figure 1. The Impact of Brand Promise Fulfillment on HiPo Retention

Figure 1 effectively visualizes the distinct "branding calculus" employed by high-potential employees, revealing a fundamental misalignment between what HiPos value most and what traditional employer branding often emphasizes. The chart clearly demonstrates that HiPos prioritize Development and Interest value—such as growth opportunities and challenging work—far more than the general workforce, which places a higher relative value on Economic stability. This divergence underscores why generic, one-size-fits-all employer branding strategies frequently fail to attract or retain top talent. For organizations seeking to win the war for HiPos, this data provides a compelling mandate to radically redesign their Employer Value Proposition, shifting focus from standard benefits to crafting a compelling narrative around accelerated growth, impact, and intellectual challenge.

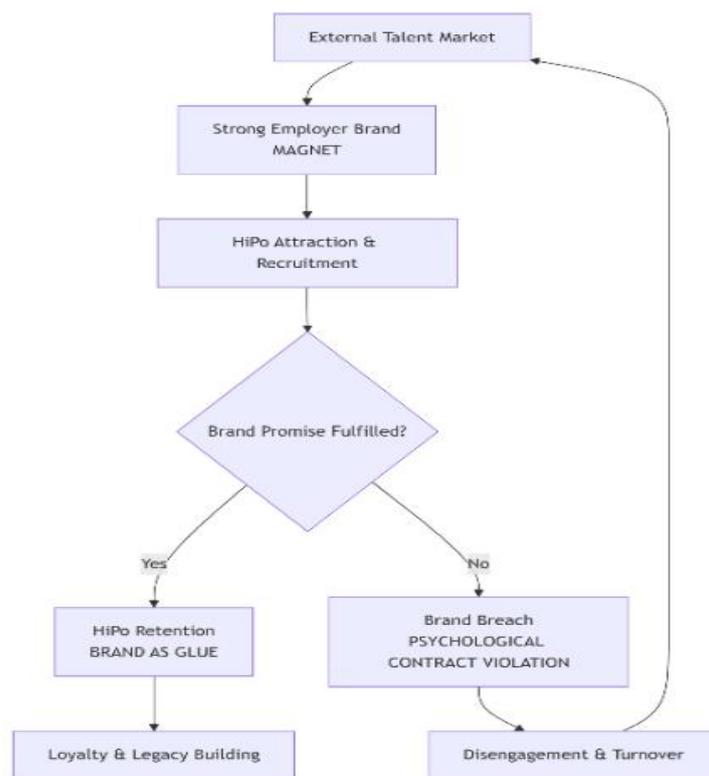


Figure 2. The Employer Brand Lifecycle: From Magnet to Glue

Figure 2 powerfully illustrates the dynamic lifecycle of employer branding, framing it not as a static message but as a continuous process that evolves from an external "magnet" to an internal "glue." The chart highlights the critical juncture post-hire where the organization must deliver on its branded promises, making the transition from attraction to retention contingent on fulfilling the psychological contract established during recruitment. This visual underscores that a "brand breach" is not a terminal event but a destructive feedback loop; the disillusionment of departing HiPos re-enters the talent market, actively undermining the initial magnetic pull and making future attractions more difficult and costly.

The Dual Role of Employer Branding: Magnet and Glue

The study underscores the dual functionality of a strong employer brand in the HiPo lifecycle, acting first as an external magnet for attraction and subsequently as an internal glue for retention. As a magnet, a well-crafted brand cuts through the noise of the talent market, efficiently attracting HiPos by pre-emptively signaling a culture aligned with their intrinsic motivations (Whysall et al., 2019). It serves as a powerful filtering mechanism, drawing in individuals who are predisposed to thrive in and contribute to a high-challenge, high-reward environment, thereby increasing the quality and fit of the talent pipeline from the very start (Nurmala & Hermina, 2024). Once the HiPo is onboard, the employer brand transitions into its role as internal glue. The promises that attracted them—rapid a meaningful impact, a culture of excellence—now form the basis of a psychological contract. When the organization consistently delivers on this branded promise, it validates the employee's decision to join and fosters a deep sense of loyalty and organizational commitment. The brand evolves from an external marketing tool into an internal reality that reinforces their identity as a valued, high-potential individual. This fulfillment transforms the initial attraction into a lasting bond, making them less susceptible to external poaching and solidifying their intention to stay and build their legacy within the organization (Bialek & Hagen, 2022).

Table 1. The Dual Role of Employer Branding: Magnet vs. Glue

Aspect	The MAGNET (Attraction)	The GLUE (Retention)
Primary Function	To attract high-potential employees (HiPos) from the external talent market.	To retain HiPos by ensuring they remain engaged and committed.
Core Mechanism	Acts as a signaling and filtering mechanism that pre-emptively communicates company culture and value.	Forms the basis of a psychological contract based on the promises made during attraction.
Key Action	Drawing in individuals predisposed to thrive in a high-challenge, high-reward environment.	Consistently delivering on the branded promises of advancement, impact, and excellence.
Outcome for HiPo	A decision to join the organization, based on aligned intrinsic motivations and perceived fit.	A validated decision to stay, fostering deep loyalty and reducing susceptibility to poaching.
Organizational Benefit	Increases the quality and fit of the talent pipeline from the very start.	Solidifies the HiPo's intention to stay and build their legacy within the company.
Nature of the Brand	An external marketing tool designed for communication and appeal.	An internal reality that reinforces the employee's identity as a valued individual.

The provided table as shown in table 1 effectively delineates the two core functions of a strategic employer brand by contrasting its role as an external "Magnet" for attracting high-potential talent with its function as an internal "Glue" for retention. It illustrates the critical evolution of the employer value proposition from a pre-hire signaling mechanism that filters for ideal candidates to a post-hire psychological contract that must be fulfilled to foster loyalty. By comparing key aspects like mechanism, action, and outcome for each role, the table underscores that a brand's initial promise creates a debt that must be paid through tangible delivery. This framework makes it clear that

successful talent management requires a seamless transition from making compelling promises to consistently enacting them, as failure to do so breaks the trust that binds high potentials to the organization.

Theoretical Implications: Extending Signaling and Contract Theory

This research provides a significant theoretical contribution by refining Signaling Theory within the specific context of high-potential talent. It demonstrates that for HiPos, employer branding signals are not interpreted monolithically but are weighted heavily towards specific dimensions related to growth and impact (Tenakwah, 2024). The study suggests that the specificity and credibility of signals related to development and challenge are more influential for this group than generic signals of a positive work environment. This advances our understanding of signaling from a general process of reducing information asymmetry to a more nuanced, segment-specific process where the content of the signal must match the unique motivational schema of the target audience (Soomro et al., 2025). Furthermore, the findings deepen the application of Psychological Contract theory. They highlight that for HiPos, the psychological contract is predominantly "relational" and heavily centered on the organization's commitment to their future development. A breach of this contract—where the reality of limited growth opportunities contradicts the branded promise of accelerated advancement—is particularly damaging (Herrera & De Las Heras-Rosas, 2021). The study posits that because HiPos' identity is often tied to their growth trajectory, such a breach is perceived not just as a broken promise but as a personal impediment, leading to a more intense and rapid negative reaction, including cynicism and turnover. This clarifies why retention of HiPos is so fragile and tightly linked to the consistent fulfillment of the employer brand (Braganza et al., 2021).

Practical Implications: A Blueprint for HR and Managers

For Human Resources, the practical implications are clear and actionable. The design of the Employer Value Proposition (EVP) must be deliberately tailored to target HiPo motivations, moving beyond a one-size-fits-all approach. This involves conducting internal research to identify what truly retains HiPos and crafting messaging that explicitly highlights accelerated career tracks, leadership exposure, and the capacity for tangible impact. More critically, HR must institutionalize mechanisms to ensure alignment between this external messaging and the internal reality. This requires robust talent management processes—such as structured mentorship programs, transparent succession planning, and challenging assignment rotations—that actively deliver on the brand's promise, thereby preventing the corrosive effect of a "brand breach." For line managers, this study elevates their role to that of the primary "brand ambassador." Senior leaders may set the vision, but it is the direct manager who delivers the employer brand promise daily. They are responsible for providing challenging work, offering constructive feedback, advocating for their HiPo team members' advancement, and creating a micro-climate of high performance and trust. Organizations must therefore invest in training managers to understand this critical responsibility and equip them with the skills to coach and develop high potentials effectively. The daily actions of the manager are the ultimate test of the employer brand's authenticity; if they fail to embody it, even the most sophisticated EVP will fail to retain top talent.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study establishes that a strategic employer brand is not a monolithic concept but a dynamic force with a dual function: it first acts as a "Magnet" to attract high-potential employees (HiPos) by signaling a culture of growth and challenge, and subsequently serves as "Glue" to retain them by fulfilling the psychological contract formed during recruitment. The findings reveal that HiPos apply a unique calculus, prioritizing Development and Interest value over the Economic stability often emphasized in generic employer branding. This underscores that a one-size-fits-all approach is ineffective; to win the war for top talent, the Employer Value Proposition must be meticulously tailored to the distinct motivations of this critical demographic. The theoretical and practical implications are profound. For scholars, this research refines Signaling Theory and Psychological Contract theory by applying them specifically to the HiPo context, highlighting the critical importance of signal specificity and contract fulfillment for retention. For practitioners, the mandate is clear: HR must design EVPs that explicitly target HiPo motivations and implement robust talent management systems to ensure alignment between brand promise and lived reality. Ultimately, an organization's ability to retain its most promising leaders hinges on this alignment, transforming the employer brand from a marketing tool into a foundational pillar of sustainable competitive advantage.

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