

# The Concept of HR Image

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Human Resource Management is one of the major organizational functions that contribute to organizational effectiveness by adding value to its key factor, people. According to a number of academics, HRM creates added value for the company through its role as a strategic partner (Boxall and Purcell, 2003; Mayrhofer et al, 2000; Ulrich, 1997; Allen and Wright, 2006) or its involvement in the “decision-making” process (Brewster et al, 2000; Buyens and DeVos, 2001). Buyens and DeVos (2001) support that HR can deliver value for the organization not only in its role as a strategic partner but in other domains as well.

A number of studies have examined the perceptions of different stakeholders - namely employees, line managers, top managers and HR managers, about the effectiveness of the HR function (Buyens and DeVos, 2001; Gibb, 2001; Watson et al, 2007; Wright et al, 2001). Wright et al (2001) mention that even though line managers believe that a number of HR practices are critical to firm’s success, they do not value high HR’s overall effectiveness. Indeed, the “HR brand” is in trouble. It is impacted by lack of effectiveness in delivering HR services, lack of contribution to business results, confusion regarding the role and the involvement of line managers in HR activities and inconsistent HR practices portfolio (Watson et al, 2007; Wright et al, 2001). All these create ambivalence toward the HR brand. Executives, line managers and employees, all have different views, opinions and images of HR through which consciously or unconsciously have formed expectations and attitudes toward or against the HR managers. It is fundamental for the HRM function to convince employers, employees and line managers that HR practices and activities are important to achieve common and shared goals.

Images are important intangible assets and HR needs to understand them to manage them effectively, by strengthening, reinforcing or altering them through specific actions and relationships. Thus, HR executives are being compelled to think in terms of their department’s image and reputation and how to manage them. The image that line managers have of HR will influence their willingness to either provide or withhold support (Gray and Balmer, 1998).

The aim of this paper is to introduce the concept of HR image. In order to do this, we present a theoretical framework with five dimensions for addressing this issue.

## **The Concept of Brand Image**

In the literature the concept of image has been examined by strategy, marketing, and corporate communication researchers who analyze image from an external-based perspective (van Riel and Balmer, 1997). Hatch and Schultz (2000) support that the common-sense view of image is that image is externally defined through the perceptions of different external stakeholders of the organization. Dowling (1986, p. 110) described image as: “the set of meanings by which an object is known and through which people describe, remember and

relate to it. That is, the net result of the interaction of a person's beliefs, ideas, feelings, and impressions about an object". Van Riel (1995) has described corporate image as the picture people have of a company. Thus, there are three key points in the adopted definition of image: external orientation, perceptions of others and multiplicity of audiences (Hatch and Schultz, 2000).

Borrowing the definitions from the marketing and communication disciplines, we will explore the concept of HR brand image. A marketing-oriented philosophy can help HR people understand what line managers expect of them and monitor HR actions to design and implement HR practices effectively by involving line managers in the process. External images of the HR department formed by stakeholders have little in common with the images projected by and held within the department (Wright et al, 2001). A strong HR brand image in the eyes of line managers will influence their willingness to provide or withhold support in the design and implementation of HR practices.

The HR image will depend on a number of factors, such as: 1) the HR practices it provides, 2) the actions it takes, and 3) the manner with which it communicates to stakeholders. We can define HR image as the picture "external" audiences, such as line managers, have of HR. Images can be based on interactions with the HR department, past reputation still sticking to the department (Hatch and Schultz, 2003), lack of understanding of the contribution of HR activities to the firm's success, as well as line managers' lack of ownership over HR services (Wright et al, 2001). According to Dowling's definition (1986) HR image is the net result of the interaction of line managers' beliefs, ideas, feelings, and impressions about HR. In other words, HR image is "owned" by people without any conscious effort going on by the HR department.

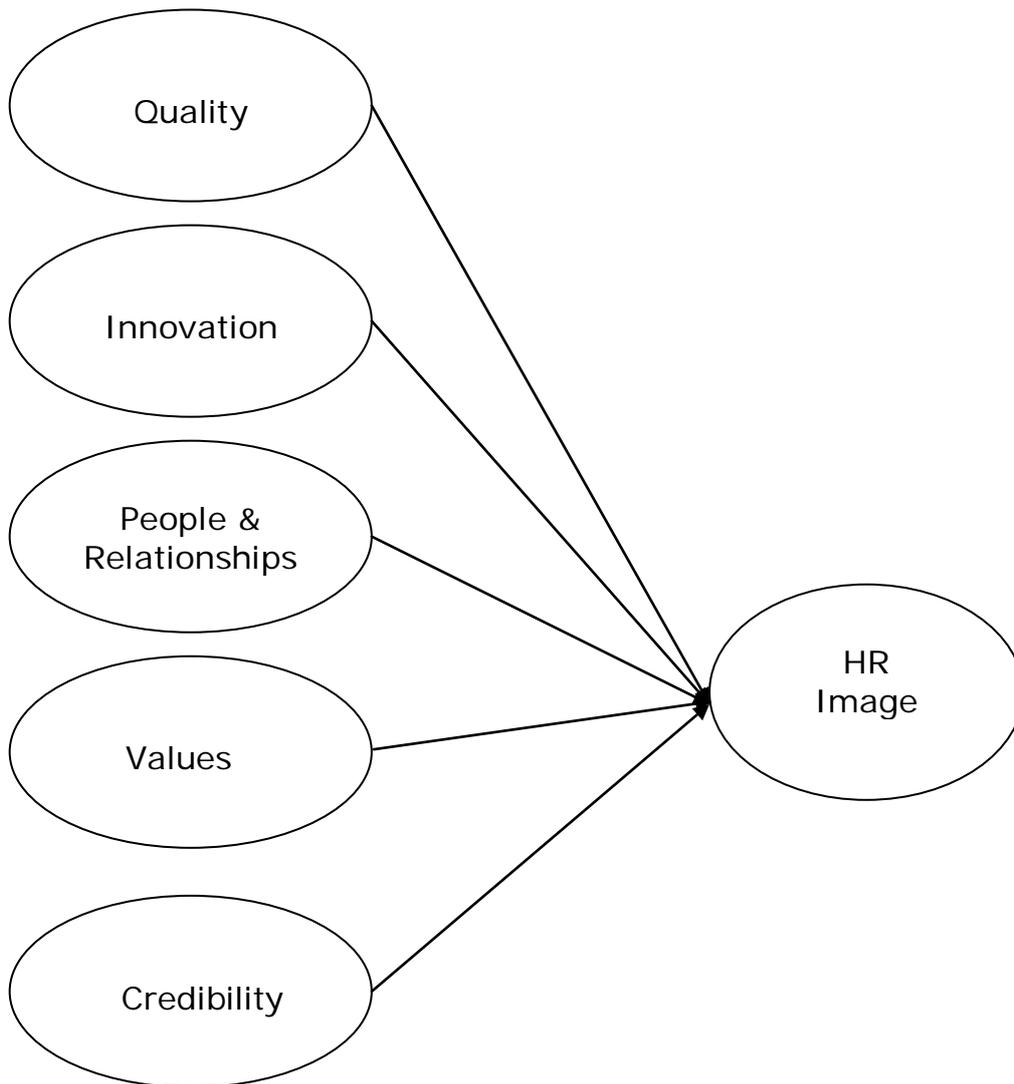
In our work HR image can be thought of as the associations in the line managers' memory to the HR department designing and providing its services as a whole (Keller, 2000).

HR brand equity occurs when relevant constituents such as executives, line managers, employees hold strong, favorable, and unique associations about the HR brand (Keller, 2000). Thus, in this paper, we take the approach of HR brand image.

The purpose of HR branding is twofold. First, to make the HR name known, distinct and credible in the minds of existent and potential "customers", such as employers, line managers, and employees, and second, to create and facilitate relationships with existing and potential customers (De Chernatony and McDonald, 1998).

An HR brand name may be more likely to evoke associations of common HR practices and their shared attributes or benefits; people and relationships; values; and, HR credibility (Keller, 2000). Thus, in this study, we propose that the concept of HR image can be described by these five dimensions, namely, Quality of HR practices, Innovation of HR practices, People and Relationships, Values and HR Credibility.

Figure I



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