

## ARTICLES

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### **EMPLOYER BRANDING IN THE MICRO, SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES SECTOR. RESULTS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

**Abstract:**

*Employer branding, succinctly explained as the creation of an employer brand, can be described as the effort by entrepreneurs to undertake focused actions aimed at ensuring stable employment within a company and creating competitive job positions. These positions, in the competition for so-called talent in the labor market, become an asset. This marketing direction is not unfamiliar to entrepreneurs operating in the microenterprise sector and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Recruiting an employee whose creativity directly impacts the efficiency of the company is a key task for many entrepreneurs.*

*This paper aims to analyze employer brand management methods in the segment of micro-, small, and medium-sized enterprises. It posits the hypothesis that employer branding for SMEs and microenterprises is, in the era of a constant decrease in available, qualified labor in the market, a fundamental form of employer brand management. The research method used is in-depth qualitative interviews, which the author has continuously conducted since 2017 with entrepreneurs representing SMEs and microenterprises. These interviews enable the identification of practical solutions used in managing the employer brand. Due to this fact, the subject*

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*matter is presented exclusively from the perspective of entrepreneurs and the actions they undertake and initiate in the organization.*

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**Keywords:** employer branding, employer brand management, entrepreneurs, small and medium-sized enterprises sector

### **Introduction**

Employer branding, or the creation of an employer brand, can succinctly be explained as the undertaking of targeted promotional actions by entrepreneurs to ensure stable employment within their enterprises and the creation of competitive job positions, which in the competition for so-called talents (Schwab, 2018) in the job market, becomes an asset to the organization.

Global corporations have implemented principles of managing an organization's brand as an employer on a large scale. Similarly, there is considerable interest in employer branding in the microenterprise sector and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Every entrepreneur, regardless of the size of their company, strives to recruit trustworthy individuals from the labor market who, once they feel comfortable in the workplace prepared for them, will become loyal employees and so-called ambassadors of the company's brand.

The objective of this article is to analyze methods of managing employer branding, or the employer's brand, at the level of microenterprises and small, and medium-sized enterprises. The analysis relates only to the internal environment of the company. This research objective was achieved using qualitative research methods, consisting of an in-depth qualitative interview with the entrepreneur. They responded to open-ended questions, usually while at their business premises, hence in the environment safe for them. The entrepreneur's statement was recorded and then transcribed. These studies have been conducted nationwide since 2017. The interviews include only entrepreneurs who have been in the profession for at least twenty years and represent the microenterprise sector and small, and medium-sized enterprises. The research results presented in this article exclusively reflect the position of entrepreneurs. The analysis is enriched with a series of quotes from these interviews. According to Anna Macnar, the specificity of the microenterprise environment and the small and medium-sized enterprise sector is that these organizations cannot afford a poor image of their own brand. Losing 20% of employees, and especially their competencies, can destabilize them internally and lead to bankruptcy (Macnar, 2020).

In the subject literature, there is a broad discussion on the origin of employer branding and its significance for effective company

management. Wioleta Grzybowska (2022), in the article *“Employer Branding in the Context of Building Competitive Advantage of Enterprises – A Literature Review,”* distinguished four subareas of research based on her analyses. This division includes: employee branding, employer attractiveness (recruitment and organizational attractiveness), family-friendly corporate policies (family-friendly workplace, family policy), and the development of employee value propositions (EVP). Guided by the above classification, the research results presented below fit into the thematic area of employer branding as the creation of an attractive employer offer, which is a derivative of the values and mission adopted in the company.

Employer branding is an issue that was named over thirty years ago. According to some researchers, this concept first appeared in 1990. Others point to 1996, attributing its authorship to S. Borrow (Szczepański, 2013; Wojnicka, 2010). Wioleta Grzybowska (2022), referring to the origin of employer branding, pointed out the intensifying talent wars in the job market, due to the evolution of capitalism towards cognitive capitalism or the entry of civilization into the post-industrial path. This process is unstoppable (Ober, 2016). K. Szczepański (2013), studying employer branding in Poland, identified factors determining employer attractiveness to employees and tools most used by companies in Poland to shape a positive image as an employer (Wojtaszczyk, 2012). Józef Ober (2016) demonstrated that retaining and attracting talented employees to an organization is necessary for its survival. In his opinion, the emerging intense competition for talent has led employers to significantly diversify their messages to differentiate them from those of the competition. Employer branding is an essential element of personnel management and a necessary condition for the success of an organization. In practice, it takes on both internal and external forms (Grzybowska, 2022).

### **Research methodology**

The research conducted for this article was based on a qualitative method. This method was adopted based on the indication that economics, when dealing with a person who manages scarce resources, should focus more attention on the individual and the emotional states accompanying him. A description of the emotions accompanying an entrepreneur who strives to achieve greater efficiency in the use of available resources helps to better understand his intentions and the decisions made. The fear, impatience, distrust and trust that constantly accompany an entrepreneur in his work influence the business decisions he makes. These are unmeasurable categories. They can only be identified using qualitative research.

It should be noted that the qualitative research method is used much less frequently in economic research than quantitative research. Qualitative research has the unique advantage that it gives the opportunity to analyze

observed processes in a precise and in-depth way (among others, through research conducted in the natural environment of the interlocutors). The conclusions drawn from these studies are socially significant, but are not always statistically significant (Czernek, 2017).

Guided by the above comments, the focal point of qualitative research was the entrepreneur. He faces risk every day, and his efficient and effective management allows him to minimize the risk. When making a decision, he is guided not only by rational choice, but above all by emotions that appear under the influence of observations of the immediate and distant environment.

In-depth qualitative interviews have been conducted continuously since 2017. Entrepreneurs who had been working in their profession for at least twenty years and represented the micro, small and medium-sized enterprises sector were selected for this research. The research is nationwide and is conducted both in large cities and small towns. In the years 2017-2023, 38 interviews were conducted (each interview lasted approximately 120 minutes). Taking into account the size of the companies, 20 interviews were conducted with micro-entrepreneurs, 12 interviews with small entrepreneurs and 6 interviews with medium-sized entrepreneurs. The interview technique involved a personal meeting with an entrepreneur who could freely comment on the given problem (open questions asked to all entrepreneurs). The studies were recorded and then transcribed. Each interview received an appropriate identification number in the collection. Due to the volume of the text, only important fragments of several entrepreneurs' statements were selected.

### **Organizational culture as an attribute of employer branding**

The 21st-century capitalism faces a significant developmental hurdle with rapid depletion of traditional resources: land, labor, and capital. Entrepreneurs, particularly, are grappling with a workforce shortage. The aging population in Europe has led to a deficit in the readily available workforce, affecting both globally recognized and local enterprises, including micro, small, and medium-sized businesses.

In companies associated with these sectors, the so-called "culture of pretense" or high tolerance for ambiguity, as mentioned by Richard Sennett (2010) with global corporations as an example<sup>2</sup>, is difficult to conceal and is quickly uncovered by employees. For many SMEs and microenterprises, it is crucial to transform how employees perceive the economic compulsion

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<sup>2</sup> In the context of the culture of pretense, the Author pointed out the following situation: "Every time you start a job in a new place, you have to pretend. The boss expects you to know how to perform certain tasks and what they expect from you. But of course, you don't know. That's where the challenge lies."

of work, replacing obligation with sensitivity (Sennett, 2010). This shift in work perception is conditioned by effective implementation of a value system fundamental to the company's operations. Jack Welch emphasized that values are "simply behaviors – distinctive, specific, and so clearly defined that they leave no room for guesswork" (Welch & Welch, 2012). According to the cited manager, these values are a means to an end, which is the company's victory in the free market. Entrepreneurs perceive this victory differently. For some, survival in a turbulent free-market environment for another day, week, or year, is a triumph. For others, it's about strengthening brand image or expanding the market to a new region. Finally, successful succession in the company, passing the leadership baton from the family patriarch to a successor, is also a victory.

Values adopted and implemented in a company should not be merely a result of so-called business correctness (Hausner, 2019). They should be realized in business practice "not through enforcement, but through connection and understanding" (Hausner, 2019, p. 219). The axionormative order, as noted by Jerzy Hausner, operates in a value-based organization on the principle of a vortex drawing in, integrating successive employees into the organization's value system. The culture built by entrepreneurs is based on how employees understand the organization they work for, rather than on interpretations of values imposed by the entrepreneur or their management (Sennett, 2010). This notion closely corresponds with Daniel Bell's (1994) view that a critical issue to address in contemporary capitalism, including in enterprises, is the emphasis on participatory culture.

Entrepreneurs in the small and medium enterprise sector, as well as micro-enterprises, emphasize the role of values as components of their organization's culture and point out that this is one of the fundamental attributes of strategies for attracting and retaining employees from the labor market. Values as the building blocks of organizational culture allow a company to stand out in the market and distinguish itself from other organizations. Entrepreneurs with over twenty years of experience in their profession stress in qualitative interviews that capital in the form of money, credit, as well as machinery and production halls are important, as without them a company cannot be built. Equally crucial, for making a mark in the market and effectively competing for access to resources and customers, is the intangible cultural capital of an organization. It is this that differentiates the enterprise, giving it the energy to operate efficiently.

An entrepreneur working since 1988 in a city with over 350,000 inhabitants, associated with the SME sector, unequivocally stated that the success of his company has been built by the employees he hires. In his business, he does not use the terminology of employer branding, yet the adopted personnel management solutions mean that his organization remains an example of the implementation of this management form.

Speaking about building the brand of the organization, the entrepreneur emphasized that graphics, logos, and colors do not determine the success of a company. The brand of the organization becomes noticeable to others only through proper, value-based, interpersonal relationships. The entrepreneur asserted that everything “starts from them.” He said: “We can have beautiful logos, beautiful colors, but if we neglect relationships or influence negative relations through our actions, nothing can replace that. So, my philosophy for years has been to instill in my employees, especially those who are on the frontline with the environment, whether it's the supply market or the purchasing market – it doesn't matter, everything is important in the end – to be reliable, to be predictable, to be trustworthy.” “It was not easy, and it took many years, but I must say that in my opinion, we have achieved a pretty decent level” (Interview 03) the entrepreneur reflected on the implementation of values in his company and the creation of a specific, distinctive organizational culture. This stems from the entrepreneur's personal belief that he is responsible for every person who collaborates with him and thus contributes to the image of his organization. He added: “In meetings with entrepreneurs, (...) especially if they are young entrepreneurs, I also repeat that it's not just the privilege of creating this reality, influencing it, being more free than others, but it's also a great responsibility. Especially for our employees, we should feel responsible like parents, we account for their behavior, engagement, efficiency, and even moral attitudes for a significant part of their lives. To ensure everything aligns, we must set an example. I can't expect my employees not to use vulgar words in my enterprise if I greet them with an indecent word myself. I strictly enforce this, ensuring that the language culture is maintained at a prominent level” (Interview 03).

A family enterprise operating in the food service industry demonstrated that the uniqueness of their organizational culture is based on a value encapsulated in the simple phrase: “we do hospitality” (Interview 02). Around this succinctly expressed value, the organization's culture was built. The entrepreneur said, “...we knew how to select our staff. It was primarily about the attitude, whether the candidate for a waiter role brought from home an orientation towards relationships and contact, whether they look into my eyes, communicate openly and directly, and whether they have an innate sympathy for the other person. It's not something very definable, we never wrote it down as a condition for employment, but we taught this to our managers, who later recruited these candidates” (Interview 02). The owners consider the most important trait for staff who interact with customers to be their role as an advisor and helper. The entrepreneur firmly stated, “People *must want* to work here...” (Interview 02). Emphasizing the phrase “must want” highlights the autonomy of the potential employee's decision. The principle adopted by this company, allowing an employee to easily

understand the culture of the organization they are applying to, shows the employer's respect for their freedom. On the other hand, an employee's decision to join the company is a voluntary integration into its culture and an acknowledgment of its values as their own. Fulfilling this demanding condition is the fundamental principle of management known as employer branding.

Family businesses are rooted in the values of the founder, which are implemented in the company by successive generations of successors. In these organizations, the identity and experience of the past form the foundation for opening the business to contemporary market demands. These elements are what these companies use to build their own organizational culture. An entrepreneur running a fourth-generation family business stated that fidelity to the founder's values gives him satisfaction from the fact that, "(...) I have employees who worked for my father, they came to me, and have been working in the company for many years, and that is important. Because salary is one thing, that's obvious, but it's about how they are treated, how I demand that an employee respects me; but the employee should also demand respect from the boss" (Interview 01). Mutual respect is a fundamental principle for strengthening the employer's brand in conditions of labor shortage.

Values as an element shaping organizational culture and as an attribute of employer branding are intangible factors that, in an era of standardization of procedures and human behaviors, distinguish a company in the market and enable employees to differentiate one organization from another. This intangible attribute is a principal element in the journey towards building integrated employee teams within the organization. It is crucial that the employee voluntarily adopts the specific culture of the organization, rather than being forced to conform to it.

#### Openness as an attribute of employer branding

One of the significant intangible attributes that strengthen the image of an entrepreneur, and their brand is honesty and openness in interactions with employees. A sincere conversation between the employer and an employee or a group of employees helps to gain their loyalty and is an important building block of trust, which integrates the team. Openness undermines the foundation of gossip and the exchange of unverified information among employees. It creates an environment where transparency prevails, reducing misunderstandings and fostering a more cohesive and informed workforce.

The surveyed entrepreneur who runs an engineering services company in the construction sector, noted that the people he employs are experts in the service profile offered by the company. However, they often lack basic knowledge in economics and do not understand the principles of running a business in a free market environment. For several years, the entrepreneur did not recognize this fact, unintentionally causing unnecessary negative

emotions within the organization. Upon recognizing this issue, the entrepreneur adopted a principle whereby most of the business tasks carried out by the company are “financially transparent” to the employees. He provided the following example: “The employees say: *you have a contract for 100,000 PLN*. I say, *yes, I do*. Then I ask them to prepare a breakdown in Excel. We've calculated the costs for half a year, including subcontractors' fees. This amount was then divided per employee, and for me, followed by net amounts... and people could see. I always tell my employees that I prioritize paying salaries, taxes, and social security contributions, whether it's for you or the company. I can be in deficit in a given month because this is my business. I am obligated to pay you because you work, even if I may not have the money” (Interview 04). The experience gained from these observations led him to reflect that transparency in the company is achieved through annual discussions with each employee, or more often if needed, about their salary. The entrepreneur stated: “I try to pay enough to ensure a satisfactory salary, as much as I can. I would like to pay more, but it's not always possible” (Interview 04).

Another entrepreneur emphasized that openness and honesty in interpersonal relationships within his organization were developed through consistent and uncompromising implementation of the values adopted by the company. This persistence, as the surveyed entrepreneur stated, has paid off. As a result, he does not feel lonely in his company. He is a part of his crew and has built a team of people who want to work together. “I try to run things quite differently in my company, and I am one of the few who manage to reconcile these aspects smoothly. So, there's no internal strife, and I absolutely do not feel lonely in my company. I have support from my management and even employees at the lowest level. I feel a sense of identity with them and theirs with me” (Interview 03).

Openness as an attribute of employer branding is another element that supports effective management of the employer brand.

### **Rootedness in the local community as an attribute of employer branding**

Local enterprises, representing the small and medium-sized business sector and micro-enterprises, unlike global organizations, have a solid foundation in the local environment. Jerzy Hausner (2019), citing Michael E. Porter and Mark R. Kramer, noted that there should be a co-dependency between the functioning of a company and its close social environment, especially the local community in which it operates. “A favorably disposed and well-performing local community not only generates demand for the company's products and services, but also provides it with support and access to important public resources”. This is a return to the traditions of craftsmanship, when these establishments were intricately connected with the local community: from meeting the needs of this society, through caring



for the city's defensive walls or local temple, to organizing local ceremonies. A company rooted locally, with a long-standing tradition, inspires trust, respect, and has a good reputation. These factors influence the fact that an entrepreneur, who is the fourth successor of a family business, confidently states that he always looks for employees in the vicinity of the company. As he said, it is a safe environment for both parties. The entrepreneur stated: "(...) how we are perceived in the market by people, how we treat these people, our behavior in the market, these are the things that decide our future" (Interview 01). A similar opinion was expressed by a businesswoman representing the gastronomic services sector: "(...) this is also a commitment, and there are a lot of small pleasures in it, like when we hear in the market among employees, among waiters or chefs that maybe we don't pay the most, but we always pay, we don't deceive, so, yes, there will certainly be some individual cases when someone has a different opinion, because we didn't agree on something, understood our obligations differently, but generally, there is definitely an impression that we don't exploit our brand to trick a supplier, an employee, or any contractor" (Interview 02).

In a similar vein, an entrepreneur with a company in a city of up to 250,000 inhabitants expressed, "I believe that we cannot treat our activities or our enterprises as our property in every sense. We must be aware that we are a certain type of element, even in terms of location, among society. If it is situated in any environment where there is an industrial part, next to the residential area, we must take this into account. We cannot run our production all night, emitting noise, and so on. If there is such a neighborhood, we must provide society with conditions by limiting production, noise emissions, internal logistical solutions, etc. We must give the environment what it is due, at least try to reconcile with it" (Interview 03). Running a business for entrepreneurs aware of the importance of their company's image in the local community requires making a large number of compromises with other entities in the company's environment. An organization is not a lonely island; it operates in a specific local environment, utilizes the available infrastructure, and is an active player in the job market.

Being rooted in the local community for entrepreneurs means to actively cooperate with schools, cultural centers, local authorities, and other institutions of public life. This is a commitment, as pointed out by a businesswoman representing the gastronomic sector, to share knowledge and skills with local community entities. The entrepreneur explained that the gastronomic sector, in which she conducts business, gives her the opportunity to conduct workshops on healthy eating for local institutions, such as schools, and to promote a healthy lifestyle and consumption. A significant role in creating a good image for the entrepreneur's brand is also played by her publishing activities. This increases the recognition of the entrepreneur and her company's brand.

As a result, this activity enables effective management of the employer's brand through the building of networks: "Building networks not only for our use, but to share them. For instance, through my writing. This is definitely a pro-social activity, not just focused on the company's profit, but something that is clearly of social, cultural significance" (Interview 02).

No company is detached from the local community. The intensity of the relationships between the entrepreneur and his organization, and the entities in the immediate local environment, affects the recognition of the entrepreneur and his company by that community. Cooperation with the local community helps to gain its trust, acquire a good reputation, and thus become a desired employer in the labor market.

### **Disappointment with employer branding. Does managing a company's brand make sense?**

Managing a company's brand so that inside the organization employees feel like an integrated team, are loyal to the company, and trustworthy, requires drawing on a range of intangible attributes of employer branding. Entrepreneurs collaborating with their staff under good economic conditions, with guaranteed sales of products and demand for their services, is an ideal situation for achieving set goals. However, a crisis, a deterioration in the economic condition of the company, or the emergence of unexpected turbulence reveals a different face of the employed personnel. A challenging period for organizations in the gastronomic and hospitality sectors was the time of the pandemic crisis. By governmental administrative decisions, the operation of many sectors of the economy was halted.

The pandemic crisis, during which a large part of companies suspended their activities, caused them to lose orders and customers overnight. In that tough time, many entrepreneurs faced a fundamental question for themselves and their staff: what to do next? Some entrepreneurs were forced to make the toughest decision, - reduce workforce. An entrepreneurial couple from the gastronomic services sector described the internal relations within the company during the pandemic crisis, when the organization was not functioning, in the following way: "(...) with the pandemic, we absolutely didn't know how to cope. No previous crisis had shaken us emotionally like this one, because as we lost money, we also knew that we could make money. So, okay, can I have one worse year - I can. Can I have a year without income - I can because I know I'm capable, I know the rules, and so on" (Interview 02). The decision to reduce staff due to the lack of capital to continue business operations caused conflicts within the organization. Its course, given the positive experiences of the past, was a shock to the entrepreneur. She stated: "The thing that happened at that moment... because we will financially defend ourselves after the pandemic... but in the relationships with employees - that was the change...We had

always been employing, it was also particularly important to be permanent in those relationships. We had many people employed for many years, 15 or 20, from the beginning of the company, who had cooperated with us. That meant we knew how to grow together, also accepting that someone had reached the limit of their abilities and we still found them a place in the company, to make sense for both them and us. But when we were faced with the fact that we weren't working at all, and we didn't know what would happen, and there was also the risk that we might die, which we feared, then we had to relieve ourselves from the obligation of paying out a lot of money, because we then employed 160 people, every month. Besides, we had to make them realize that it was over. It's not that you can have a safe place here, because you can't. We don't know how long this will last, maybe this is the end" (Interview 02).

Hiring an employee by an entrepreneur is a huge commitment. It encompasses the life, as well as the physical and mental health of the employees they hire, who provide their labor to the organization every day. This commitment, importantly voluntarily taken on by the entrepreneur of their own free will, requires great prudence and caution in challenging times. The pandemic crisis was a test for the strength of the organizational culture and the values adopted within it. The emotions that emerged during that period, both on the sides of entrepreneurs and employees, included fear for their own lives, apprehension about the unknown virus, and the loss of jobs. The halting of many sectors of the economy, the looming threat of bankruptcy, and the need to protect the company from it, forced entrepreneurs to make tough and unpopular decisions. Dismissing personnel who had collaborated with the organization for years, for many employees in that difficult, turbulent, and unknown period, intensified the scale of negative emotions. Usually, in such moments, the question arose of how to manage the brand of the organization as an employer during such completely unknown time. The entrepreneur said, "The cost was unbelievable to us; how quickly our entire planned life investment, which we had allocated to pay off all these people who had to leave us, dissolved. And still, for me, on an emotional level, it would have been bearable, but those few negative shots we received from those leaving; I still live with them and still can't cope with them. (...) Personally. But also, from a business perspective that something like this happened in my company. It had never happened before to part in such a way, where someone kicks me when I am completely cornered, and helpless" (Interview 02). Extreme situations reveal a range of hidden emotions. While this argument may justify episodic situations, it cannot be prejudged. Those incidents influenced the subsequent business decisions of many entrepreneurs. As Richard Sennett observed, "loyalty [of employees] is essential for surviving economic cycles".

Another entrepreneur categorized the employees in his company into two groups: pleasant and unpleasant. As a differentiating criterion he pointed out the following situation: "(...) when there's a nice employee, they can come on Friday and say: *boss, I won't be here from Monday*, but if they're unpleasant, they won't even call" (Interview 07). This remark by the entrepreneur reveals another aspect of the internal environment of the company. Employees do not identify with the organization and leave when a better offer appears. Whether this is due to the character of the construction sector, as the entrepreneur suggested, is hard to determine unequivocally. This comment by the entrepreneur could be perceived as a stereotypical perception of employees representing this professional group. Thus, another space is created that separates the entrepreneur from the employees working in his company. The formation of a stereotypical image of the employee is inadvertently contributed to by both the employer and the employees. Neither group takes any steps to get to know each other better, integrate the team, and replace mutual distrust with trust. A classic example of a stereotype describing the behavior of a specific professional group is the "cobbler's Monday". This situation demonstrates that past experiences, and the image developed in the past affects contemporary judgments. Such situation shall not be changed easily.

However, it is a fact that, regardless of the actions taken by the employer to retain an employee at the workplace, the employee retains full autonomy and always decides independently about leaving. On the employers' side, there is a large group of people who are discouraged to conduct internal organizational activities to strengthen the employer's brand. Entrepreneurs who have experienced the above situations believe that it is impossible to gain employees' loyalty. Each of them is seen as a self-interested individual seeking to maximize personal benefits. Short-term employment episodes in companies are viewed as a negative phenomenon, exacerbated by the fact that employees within an organization do not know each other well. This increases their anxiety and does not contribute to trust as an intangible asset of the company (Sennett, 2010). The deficit in employee loyalty towards the company means that the fate of the company is completely indifferent to them. Richard Sennett observed that the quality of social capital plays a significant role in shaping relationships within an organization (Sennett, 2010). Many employees realize that they will not make any career advancements, and that their current job position is merely a temporary stop for a longer or a shorter period.

An entrepreneur running a business in a small town noted that over the years, he had become immune to the fact that people wanting to take up work, having agreed with him on specific terms of employment, consciously broke their word after a few weeks or months. He believes this is a consequence of lack of respect for work, and mutual respect between

individuals. The entrepreneur stated: "(...) you no longer have such enthusiasm for these people afterwards. This factor causes us to develop a thick skin and a kind of numbness towards the person who comes in, because we expect that they might be the same" (Interview 05).

The experience of past disputes and conflicts with employees causes entrepreneurs to doubt the strength of the values implemented in the organization and the loyalty of the employees. The decline in the entrepreneurs' engagement is illustrated by the following statement: "I always took into consideration that it shouldn't be just me walking around proud of owning such a company, but that my people should walk around proud of working in this company. So, I wanted to shape it in such a way that they would enjoy working there; that they would take pride in it. The very step of coming to that company feels completely different from the compulsory one, and it shouldn't be driven only by the financial factor; but uniformity will never be achieved, because these are people, and they are diverse" (Interview 05).

### Recommendations and conclusions

Despite some entrepreneurs' skepticism about its effectiveness, internal employer branding should focus on the entire employment cycle of an employee, from their entry into the organization to their departure (Wojtaszczyk 2012). Entrepreneurs should also be concerned about the reasons for an employee's resignation and why they are moving to another company. Such a conversation with an employee is highly informative for both parties.

**Table 1 – Intangible Attributes of Employer Branding**

Attributes	Entrepreneur's duties	Employee's duties
Organization culture (axionormative order)	Indicating the company's mission	Understanding the company's objective
	Developing values	Implementing these values in daily activities
	Respect for the founder's values	Understanding and co-creating the organizational culture
Openness and dialogue	Honesty	Initiating conversations with the entrepreneur
	Openness to dialogue and cooperation with staff	Honesty and integrity in interactions with the entrepreneur
Rootedness in the local community	Responsibility for co-shaping the local environment	Respect for the brand and company
	Co-creating local culture	The employee as a representative and

	Employing local individuals	ambassador of the company brand
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Source: own study.

**Table 2 – Factors Influencing Entrepreneurs' Disappointment with Employer Branding**

Factor	Entrepreneur	Employee
Disappointment	Question: where I make mistakes?	Lack of loyalty to the employer
	Failing to understand the younger generation and its expectations	Seeking adventure, viewing work as a temporary stop
	Termination of employment contract	Legal proceedings against the entrepreneur

Source: own study.

Research on employer branding using in-depth qualitative interviews provided a unique source of information about entrepreneurs' attitudes towards their staff. The vast majority of entrepreneurs, despite not knowing the rules of employer branding, intuitively manages their internal staff in such a way that the employee becomes an ambassador of the company and a builder of its positive image. In this regard, entrepreneurs' good intentions cannot be denied. However, there is a significant area of disappointment with employees, and more broadly with people, observed among entrepreneurs. The latter feel deceived by employees, disregarded, and harassed. In conversations with entrepreneurs, there is a desire to limit activity on social media, where employees, often under the impulse of the moment, defame entrepreneurs and undermine their authority. Building good interpersonal relations in an organization where there is economic compulsion to work, is difficult or even impossible. Only the employee's voluntary decision to join a particular organization, driven by the desire to co-create the organizational culture, allows the company to financially benefit from the intangible attributes of creating employer branding.

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