How to Win the War for Talent in the IT-city of Groningen

Antonia Hein

Groningen as the Dutch Silicon Valley? Too good to be true? Of all jobs in the city, about seven and a half percent are in the IT sector. According to het Financieel Dagblad, IT giants as IBM and Google, but also smaller IT companies and start-ups attract recent graduates, which works wonderfully well in Groningen. However, although attracting the IT talent has some ins and outs to consider, from a recent post by IT-stad Groningen, it appears that many of the IT companies and players in this vibrant industry have faced the challenges of retaining the IT talent they got in as well as increasing the portion of women in IT. In order to do something about it, IT companies in Groningen need to brand themselves— not just for customers, but for retaining the best possible candidates. The solution? Employer branding!

The art of employer branding

In order to become an employer of choice, organizations have to not only stand out from the crowd during the recruitment process but work on developing loyalty in their relationship with employees. In other words, retaining the ideal employees is about the art of connecting and cultivating relationships. So, what is the secret ingredient needed to engage in successful employee relationships?

Employer Branding focuses on the process of promoting an organization, as the *employer of choice* to a desired target group, which a company wants to attract and retain. Although classic branding principles promote a clear and unique image of what makes a company different and desirable as an employer (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004), more important is relationship management after recruitment. This shift from the roots of marketing principles (Cable and Turban, 2001) to communication competencies has been accelerated by the need for authentic communication both externally and internally. What does a company need to retain talent and build a strong brand for employees?

They do need to change the way of recruiting new employees. A study of on- and offline vacancies revealed very traditional, non-attractive approaches in current recruitment practices. In that, no word was spent on the corporate identity of the organization and nothing was mentioned about the great people already working in that organization. The analysis revealed old-fashioned, non-attractive phrases like the need for "hands-on mentality", whatever that may be, "excellent communication skills" and "the maximum salary". The experiment with a branded vacancy compared with a traditional vacancy showed already significant results. But how can IT-companies in the North apply these insights and find and attract the talents needed?
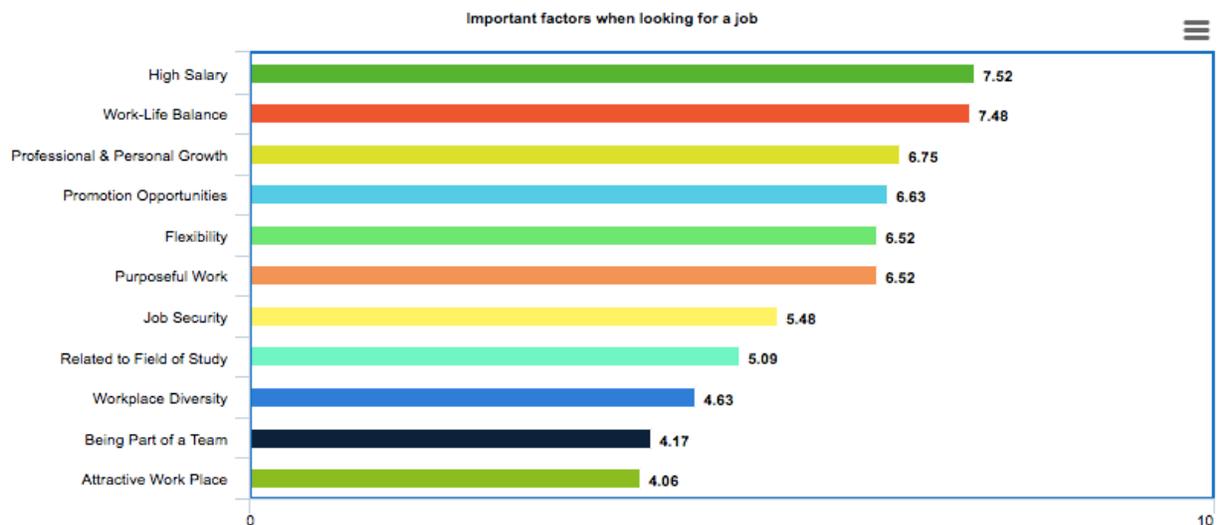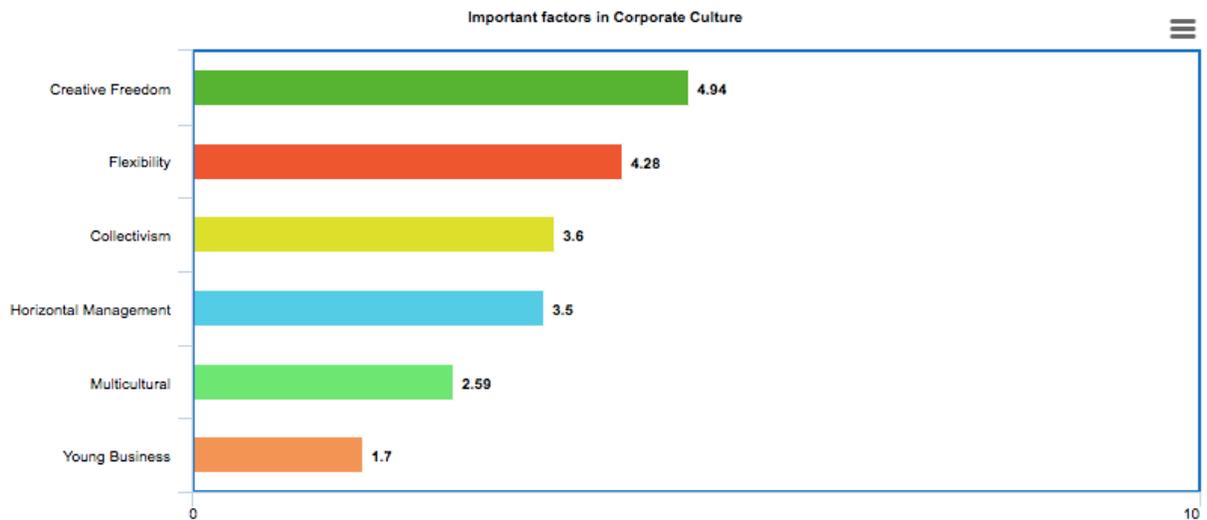
Authentic communication

According to the European Communication Monitor (2017), authenticity has become the new buzzword to establish employer attractiveness. What does this mean? Being in a relationship with your employees involves the context of the business of the day for your organization. Everything that the company says has to reflect its values and culture. It must now include not only the way the company is perceived, but also how it actually behaves – and continues to behave over the long-term internally (Page Society, 2017). That cannot be shaped by something ad hoc or short-term, such as a message or an image. Rendering authenticity therefore is a job in itself when being in a relationship, it involves taking care of constant realignment between strategy and employees' daily routines. Being what you say you are to others and walking that talk among your best ambassadors – your employees. This stance includes

handling internal processes and workflows with great transparency and being able to link to the values of employees.

How authentic organizations retain IT talent

To learn what values make an attractive brand for employees in the IT industry of the North of the Netherlands, a study was carried out by the lectorate of Communication, Behavior & the Sustainable Society (CBSS). The project was executed together with fourth-year International Communication students and focused on values among international IT employees working in Groningen. When ranking the most important values of corporate culture which matter to IT employees who have been hired in the recent 5 years of their career, they mention creative freedom, purposeful work, flexibility, work-life balance as well as personal development. Whereas attractive work place and job security do not matter to such a degree. A positive work environment and a good relationship with colleagues are valued highly. Job security, however, could be a nice plus but is certainly not a necessity.

Important factors in Corporate Culture

Factor	Value
Creative Freedom	4.94
Flexibility	4.28
Collectivism	3.6
Horizontal Management	3.5
Multicultural	2.59
Young Business	1.7

Important factors when looking for a job

Factor	Value
High Salary	7.52
Work-Life Balance	7.48
Professional & Personal Growth	6.75
Promotion Opportunities	6.63
Flexibility	6.52
Purposeful Work	6.52
Job Security	5.48
Related to Field of Study	5.09
Workplace Diversity	4.63
Being Part of a Team	4.17
Attractive Work Place	4.06

How Authentic employers retain Millennials

Authenticity as represented by the values that the organization provides to employees should be consistent with what the organization actually is. Most of the hires with a maximum of 5 year of experience at IT companies in the research are represented by Millennials, which is why the values they are searching for in an employer are skewed towards the Millennial values. Millennials are known to be proud of their individuality, their skills and their personal values. As a staff member at IT companies, individuality gets often buried by the need of a broad skill set and no direct communication with clients. Therefore, emphasizing the individual personality and actually being valued for who they are, and their specialties is a MUST in order to retain a Millennial as an employee. Collectivism as part of a team and relationships as well as flat hierarchy (Horizontal Management) come high on the agenda for Millennials. If you as an employer would like to keep your young IT employees, do make sure that you integrate your brand values into your organizational culture. Give Millennials responsibility, let them learn new things, be their mentor and not their boss. Easily said than done! But small steps matter. In what way do you make sure that your Millennial IT employees are involved in your organization? Additionally, make sure you use these in your campaigns to attract new talent. Take action, become a winner!