



EPISODE 7

How to Improve Employment Branding and Attract Star Performers

- Introduction:** Welcome to Strategic Insights, brought to you by PrideStaff. On each episode, we bring you interviews with leading management and employment experts from across the country. Your host for Strategic Insights is Brad Smith. And now, here's Brad.
- Brad Smith:** Hello, and thank you so much for joining us today on Strategic Insights. I'm your host, Brad Smith. I'm extremely excited to have Matt Ertle, owner and strategic partner of the Bend, Oregon office, join us today. Matt, thank you so much for taking the time.
- Matt Ertle:** Hi, Brad. Great to be here. Looking forward to this as well.
- Brad Smith:** Matt, today's episode is all about building a strong employment brand. Before we really jump in and get into the details, tell us a little bit more about that phrase, employment brand. What does that really mean to you?
- Matt Ertle:** For us and the companies that we work with, the employment brand is really the perception that the public has about a company and the market where it operates or is serving the community, or providing products and services to the customers that it's servicing. It's really, what is the perception about how employees feel about the company. What are they saying to their friends, their family members. And how that transfers to the experience that customers have, and stakeholders have interacting with the company and the brand.
- Brad Smith:** Obviously, your perception in the market is extremely important. We all want to be perceived in a positive light. But at the end of the day, how does that really impact hiring? Why is a strong employment brand so important to an end employer?
- Matt Ertle:** People and employees want to feel engaged. They want to feel appreciated. This has been proven to lead to higher productivity over time. And so for a company to maximize the use of its employees, for the employees to maximize the relationship it has with the company that they work for, having a high level of engagement is important. And the perception that employees have, the perception that the public has of that company, of that product or

service, of the people that work there all influences those factors into this topic.

Brad Smith: Yeah, for sure. We see that the companies that have a really strong employment brand in the local market, they're able to attract a higher level of talent. Aren't they?

Matt Ertle: Yeah, absolutely. Companies that are desirable places to work are sought after by individuals that are looking to work for them at all levels. And it makes it easier to acquire people that are the highest caliber and the most talented individuals.

Brad Smith: So now, we work in recruiting. We work in employment branding day in and day out. We often talk about the term or the acronym, EVP, which stands for Employee Value Proposition. As alluded to earlier, when you're selling a product or service, you really want to brand that in a positive light. You want to explain why it's so great to use that product or service. Now, when organizations are looking to recruit. We want to brand ourselves in the positive light too, because we want to clearly identify why it's so great to work at an organization. When you're working with your clients in the local market, do you feel like the majority of companies have really spent time coming up with a strong EVP, employee value proposition? Or do you feel it's maybe a little lacking?

Matt Ertle: In our market, it's mixed. This topic has started to accelerate in terms of adoption within the last five years. But our market is historically small business owners and the community, the business community here for 100 years revolved around the timber industry. Only in the last few decades, the last 20 years really, have we seen an evolution from a timber-based economy to an economy that's more diverse with technology firms, niche manufacturing, food products. We've got a lot of food products and beverages coming out of our market here. And historically the value proposition that the business community presented to the workforce was a paycheck. And it was a transactional value proposition.

Matt Ertle: And so business' recruiting strategy were revolving around the stability of employment, as well as the paycheck associated with that employment. Both of those two things are very important, but as the needs and the values of workforces evolve, the companies that have stood out, that are really doing a good job of attracting the best talent, and equally as important, if not more, retaining that talent, have started to focus their value proposition much more on a relationship basis and an emotional level that's different than the historic transaction paycheck level.

Brad Smith: It's interesting you brought up pay. When we think about hiring, oftentimes we're thinking, boy, we want to get better talent. Let's just pay more. Let's

recruit at a little higher level. But more goes into it, as you just mentioned. You obviously have to pay a fair pay rate. You're not going to get the talent without comparable pay rate. It doesn't always have to be the highest, but there's other factors that go into it. So beyond pay, when you're talking with employees, and you're recruiting all the time, when you're talking with employees, what are they actually looking for beyond pay in an employer?

Matt Ertle: The experience from start to finish is turning out to be one of the number one determining factors and criteria that we're seeing that influences, first, whether or not a candidate is going to move forward with job offer, if one is made. And second, if that employee is going to stay with the company beyond the initial introductory period. That introductory period could be a couple of months, could be all the way up to a year. But from the very first moment that a candidate applies to a company, or in our business where we reach out to a prospect that might be passively interested in something else, how that experience goes from start to finish is a big influencer, a big determining factor into whether or not the individual's going to join the company and whether the individual is going to stay with the company.

Matt Ertle: Competitive pay is an expectation at this stage. If there's not competitive pay, then we're missing one of the fundamental requirements that the workforce has, competitive pay. Then we move into other basic criteria. Paid time off is another one that we continue to see as an expectation of the workforces. What is the paid time off, from the company holiday policy, to what it looks like in year one and beyond that. Access to health insurance is also an area that we see as one of the go/no-go criteria. The majority of the workforce at this stage is looking for some type of employer sponsored health insurance program. Not everybody, but the majority of the workforce is.

Matt Ertle: We've got some of the basic criteria. Those expectations have to be met. They have to be met early on in order to even have a chance at developing a relationship with the workforce. And then we can transcend into what are the values that an organization has? What are the values that an individual has? That's really going to play a bigger part into the ultimate retention and development of the employee. And as mentioned earlier, leveraging the resources on both sides.

Brad Smith: That's really interesting. And one thing that you said that really stuck out to me is you need all of these things to not just attract the right people, but retain the right people. Your employment brand really isn't just about getting people in the door. It's about making sure that you retain them and they're productive as well. All of those things that Matt just mentioned go into that. Now, Matt, one thing that I've noticed across the country and what I've heard across the country is that millennials and the younger generation really are looking for organizations who have mission and values that they can really

align with. Are you seeing the same thing in your market? And really how important are a company's mission and values?

Matt Ertle:

Absolutely, we're seeing it in our market. We're seeing this not just with the millennial workforce, but as their values are now being adopted by some of their predecessors in the workforce as well. As the gen X generation is sunsetting into the latter third of their working career right now, we're also seeing all stages of the workforce prioritize values and mission of an organization on par, if not more, in some cases with compensation, benefits and some of the perks. The mission and the values of an organization can evolve over time. Although, the majority of organizations have adopted some baseline foundations where they don't evolve over the time. For the workforce, we see it evolving more over time with them than we do the evolution of values with companies. As an example, a workforce with somebody who's just entering the job market, they might value experience over compensation.

Matt Ertle:

So get a foot in the door with a company that's going to help build out a resume, provide a professional reference, might be more valuable than compensation. That doesn't mean that compensation won't be competitive as a requirement. It just means they might value it more. And as we progress in our working careers, the values that we have evolve over time. And so what we're seeing is individuals, as they're migrating and evolving in their career, they might be looking for something in a company that they don't currently have, even if they currently have great pay, great benefits. But there might be value misalignment because of something that's happened to them personally. And so they're looking to do something different. Values play an absolute critical role. The timing of when it becomes important, I think is the variable with the workforce.

Brad Smith:

We've talked a lot about how important a strong employee value proposition is, how important mission and values are and how that plays into your overall position in the local market. Now, doing all of those things effectively are going to allow you to recruit a higher caliber talent, retain people, your workforce is going to be more productive. Now, on the flip side of that, there are organizations that aren't doing a great job here. What are some of the telltale signs of an organization that maybe has an employment branding problem or issue?

Matt Ertle:

Some of the things we've seen in our market is larger employers that have a likely higher turnover rate, just because they've got a much bigger workforce. Might have a hiring practice where it's conduct a phone interview, make a job offer, and then have the employees show up the following day or whenever the targeted start date is. What we've seen is a higher turnover in that engagement process. As opposed to another business in the same industry, similar size company. About a year ago, they adopted a different interviewing

and hiring process. Where the process starts with either a phone interview or an in-person interview, but it's typically 20-30 minutes of just general conversation getting to know one another.

Matt Ertle: And then it turns into a followup scheduled meeting where there's more representatives from the supervisory team or the management team conducting a larger group meeting with the specific intention of providing the candidate, the job seeker in this case, the ability to have access to more decision makers, to more of the management team. To see who's running the different departments of the organization. And then as that conversation tracks, it leads into a tour of the facility or a tour of the organization, so that the job seeker can see, okay, here's the real scope of the opportunity at hand. It's not simply one person, one conversation. It's multiple managers, multiple departments, multiple opportunities that somebody can really make a career with.

Matt Ertle: What we've seen with that approach, it takes longer to do the interview process. It takes longer to do the onboarding process. It takes longer to do the embedding process. But what it results in is a much higher retention rate and a much lower turnover rate. For us, in our business at PrideStaff, we've automated a lot of those processes with new technologies. In the last year we've developed a PrideStaff Connect technology that allows us to quickly connect with people as they're going through the application process with them.

Matt Ertle: It provides a real-time opportunity to interact with the job seeker and the applicant, get some basic information, provide them with some basic information as well, to get a mutual go/no-go decision. And then move into followup meetings, followup interviews, followup onboardings. All of it is automated in workflows that we've developed that are proprietary to us. Once we place an individual with our clients, then we move into a quality assurance program, touching base with them. Again, at very specific intervals and touch points to ensure that they're enjoying what they're doing, to ensure that they're meeting the supervisors on the team and to ensure that they're progressing in the direction that they want to be progressing career-wise.

Brad Smith: I absolutely love that process and that technology. I think it's one of the biggest differentiators that PrideStaff offers is that you help close that feedback loop. For small and medium-sized businesses, often they're missing that feedback. For large organizations, it can fly under the radar until it creates a huge problem. And you identified some of those earlier. High turnover can be a productivity killer. You're losing knowledge, you're not being able to get product or service out the door. It can be a business killer. Low morale can be extremely costly. All of those things and being able to close that feedback loop helps organizations identify issues before they even become issues. I absolutely love that you're incorporating that into

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technology, and you're making it simple and easy for organizations of all sizes to capture that intel.

Matt Ertle: Yeah. We semi jokingly say that we're a technology firm that happens to be in the staffing industry. Our technology deployment schedule has been very aggressive over the past few years, and I think it's accelerating over the next few years to come.

Brad Smith: This is kind of a nice segue into our next topic here. Your employment brand does again, doesn't stop at hiring somebody. It continues for the entire life cycle of that person with your organization. One challenge we've seen recently with younger people who are extremely motivated, is that they want to advance quickly. When you think about someone that's new to the job, and maybe frustrated that they're not advancing fast enough, or just don't see that opportunity or light at the end of the tunnel. What can a hiring manager, or department manager, or an organization do to help appease those people, make them happy and get them to that next level of their career?

Matt Ertle: I think a couple of things. To summarize, one is out of the gate, is establish expectations. What are the expectations in a task list that outlines what somebody is getting paid for? And so this can be somewhat informal and doing it verbally. It can be something that's formalized and put into a matrix. A lot of the major technology companies, Google, Apple, have adopted skills matrix where they're going through and they're defining specifically what somebody needs to be doing in their actual role. And then they're measuring somebody's ability to do that. That's then predetermined as to where somebody is going in their career advancement opportunities.

Matt Ertle: Companies in manufacturing sector have done this for the last 100 years. It's not just Googles and Apples. It's companies that have skills matrix in manufacturing. For us in our professional office setting that we have as a staffing and recruiting firm, we establish the expectations in this matrix by having a checklist of being able to do things as basic in the office as changing printer paper, changing printer toner, greeting people that walk in the door, greeting people that walk in the door that don't know where they are.

Matt Ertle: There's some real basic things that are expectations of the workforce in any environment that they're working at. They're different in manufacturing. They're different in the office. Number one is, out of the gate established expectations for what somebody is being hired for in their current role and providing the opportunity for those duties to be measured, demonstrated in competency. And then that opens up the door for, okay, what's next? Are those competencies, I think very proficient in 90 days, 180 days, whatever the timeframe is. At some point in time, any workforce is going to expect to move on and add responsibilities and compensations. Number one, establish expectations and have a way to measure it.

Matt Ertle: Number two, invest in the workforce. Invest in the employees. If anybody follows LinkedIn, I assume a lot of people listening to this do. There's of course the LinkedIn pop-up that comes up I think once a year. It says, "The CFO asks the CEO, what happens if we invest in developing our people and they leave us?" And the CEO responds, "What happens if we don't and they stay?" And so this is something that we're seeing more and more with the businesses that we work with, is companies that are formalizing professional development programs that are helping employees get from wherever they start with the company to wherever they want to go in their personal career. Those companies are having higher retention rates. They're seeing more productivity out of their employees. They're seeing more satisfaction overall, and it's turning into a better partnership. Establish expectations out of the gate, and then continue to invest in employees going on. And business owners need to have a firm hand. If it's not working, take action. Move on, start over.

Brad Smith: Great tips. Now, we always have to be flexible. And the workforce is constantly changing. Things are different. This past year, we ran into some challenges. As more organizations had to turn to remote work, companies struggled a little bit with maintaining morale, maintaining a strong culture, maintaining a solid employment brand. What tips can you share with our listeners today on how companies can handle employment branding if they stay remote?

Matt Ertle: I think on this topic, everybody at this stage is experiencing Zoom fatigue, for anybody that's been using Zoom or other video conferencing settings. And so this has been a challenge for a lot of companies that are historically brick and mortar companies, where they've got the workforce in the office to quickly pivot and transition to a remote workforce. Some companies were better positioned than others going into this and might have already solved some of these challenges that are arising. The big recurring theme that we're seeing for companies in our market that are doing this successfully are the companies that go back to the basics of maintaining the personal relationship between whoever the department supervisor is and the employees that are working for them, in having one-on-one discussions with them.

Matt Ertle: That can be over the phone. That can be over a Zoom meeting. But it's not a team Zoom meeting or a team conference meeting. And maintaining that personal relationship to ensure the employees know what the priorities are, know what the goals are, know how those daily activities are contributing to their personal goals, to their personal values, to the company values and to ensure that there's collaboration with whatever those daily activities are with the rest of the organization.

Matt Ertle: So it goes back to the basic of the personal relationships between the supervisors. And then how those are done is what is evolving. It used to be in person exclusively. Then it went to a hybrid. Then it went to exclusively virtual

or over the phone. And the future of it is going to continue to evolve as well with everything we know about and things that are in development.

Brad Smith: Matt, I want to thank you so much. There were some great key takeaways and several that I'm going to look to incorporate in our organization. You've clearly made the case for how important employment branding is. It can help you attract really high level talent. It can help you decrease turnover. It can help you improve morale. It's a driving force behind productivity. For those listening today, any closing words that will help them really create a stronger employment brand and achieve many of these things that we just talked about?

Matt Ertle: Yes. I think the three things that I would close with are get involved with the community where the business is operating. That might be a local community. If it's a business-to-business that exists, then it's the local community that that businesses is working with. But get involved. The second thing is stay involved. Once a business engages its community and wins that audience, then it becomes the business's responsibility to stay involved with that community. The third is to get recognized for it. If a business is doing great with the community that it serves, they get recognized for it. Ask for the online reviews, ask for letters of recommendations on LinkedIn, ask for some type of testimonial that can be used to tell a story, to go out and shape the brand of the organization and the perception that the public has of it.

Brad Smith: I love those tips. I want to commend you and PrideStaff in general for that third, getting recognized. You've done an amazing job of building a strong employment brand. And then following up. You consistently survey employees and your clients to make sure that they're happy and that's helped put PrideStaff at the top of all staffing agencies across the country in terms of client and talent satisfaction. And it speaks volumes to everything that you just shared today. So, great job.

Matt Ertle: Thanks, Brad. Good to catch up with you.

Brad Smith: Good to catch up with you as well. For all of those listening, we appreciate you listening to today's episode. We hope you found some great value. I know that I did. And I want to encourage you to visit pridestaff.com for some great follow-up resources, eBooks, white papers, and thought leadership. Thank you all again for listening.

Closing: Thank you for listening to Strategic Insights, brought to you by PrideStaff. Whether you're looking for high-level workforce consulting or staffing help to meet demands, PrideStaff is here to help.