

Case Study 4: How to be an attractive SME for future vocational trainees (Germany 2017)

Abstract

This case study deals with employer branding in a medium-sized enterprise in Saxony, Germany. The HR problem is to increase the attractiveness as an employer for future vocational trainees. The research problem is to find ways in which the case company can compete against other attractive employers and to identify potential problems that could prevent young people from applying to them.

The practical part of this case study focuses on applying theoretical HR knowledge to the case study company. A strategy and specific methods for emphasising and communicating to the target audience has been composed.

Introduction

The medium-sized company VegetableX is a highly developed enterprise in the agricultural sector in Saxony, with the latest technology used to provide an excellent service to their customers. However, they lack suitable ways to win employees, especially from Generation Y. The HR problem is to increase their attractiveness as an employer for future vocational trainees.

The Company

VegetableX is an agricultural company specialising in the production, distribution and refining of vegetables. It is headquartered in a village in Saxony. The company currently employs 249 people and, especially in the production plant, is equipped with highly developed technologies, in which they have invested over the last number of years. A challenge facing the company is the existence of many other companies in the region. These other companies present more attractive employment for young people, because of their size and the wage level they can offer, or simply because of a prestigious name in connection to a good employer brand.

Furthermore, the company needs to be aware of problems that could prevent young people from applying to them. For potential employees who do not have a driver's license or a car, this SME is not easy to access. Even though there is a lot of competition for VegetableX, especially in the energy sector, the company has its own particularities and advantages that they can use to further improve their employer brand and recruitment process.

The HRM Priorities of the Company

The company's structure is somewhat flat, their HR department consists of three people. There are lots of different HR processes in the company. Recruitment, contract negotiation, relocation, on-boarding and training, to mention just a few. There are quite a lot of processes that the HR management is responsible for and they also include some other smaller tasks besides those mentioned above.

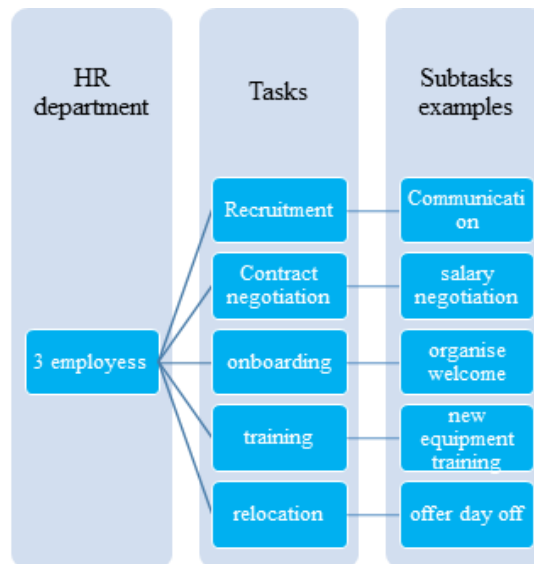


Figure 1: Organisational Structure HR department (Source: own elaboration)

The company views its employees as a valuable resource, which works as a competitive advantage. All the employees are treated as individuals and they are invested in, and this approach to HR management seems to be going well with the company. Looking at the current state of the company's presentation as an employer, it is very striking that VegetableX does not put emphasis on a strong and attractive employer brand.

The location of the SME is no big advantage when looking for young, skilled employees from schools in the region. For example, the main location is situated near a highway. For a young man or woman who has just left school and, most likely, does not have their own car, let alone a driver's license, it would be very difficult to reach the company without help e.g. from their parents. And as these young people are the ones the company is looking to attract, this is another huge obstacle in the process.

The SME is highly focused and also dependent on the region they are located in, which is not necessarily a disadvantage; it could help to improve the employees' identification with the company, which might lead to more motivated employees working for the organisation. However, the sources of young people who might be eligible to become part of the company, are strictly limited. When looking at the company's recruitment process and strategy, it is clear that certain channels and recruiting tools are neglected. A company's online presence is paramount, especially when trying to attract young candidates. Their Facebook page was primarily used to share vegetable recipes. Being active on Facebook is a good thing and the recipes reflect the industry in which they operate, but this might give the impression of a food blog rather than a company site.

However, during the last few months, some changes have already been made. They started to share some things concerning the organisation, in particular about the construction of a new warehouse, as well as some job advertisements. Although the corporate website is professionally designed and clearly arranged, some important information, which potential candidates would wish to find on the website area respecting career opportunities, is still missing, such as the company's organisational culture and the management body, as well as precise information on job profiles. Furthermore, recruitment networks, such as LinkedIn or

only a tool for short term results in the recruitment of new employees, but also very important when trying to keep your current employees.

The next issue is the company's locations or, to be precise, the company's reachability for young prospective employees. When these young people leave school, they are at most 16 to 19 years old, so for most of them it is very difficult to reach the company's subsidiaries, which are not located in big cities, where it is possible to reach every place within minutes by public transport. They are located near the highway between some smaller cities. A solution to this problem might be to help young people financially with their driver's licenses, creating at the same time the first sort of relationship between the new employee and the employer. Another possible solution could be carpooling, where current employees could be put in touch with the new ones in order to be able to come to work together. This would be of course another kind of financial help, but also it could be very important for the new employees to get to know their colleagues, so they can be more confident and have their first contact person, when having troubles during their first days. For the experienced employees, this also can be an opportunity to boost their motivation through the increased responsibility for the newcomers.

The important thing when offering all this is, of course, to communicate it. It is essential to communicate the aforementioned offers to the target group. Thus, it is not enough to have the carpooling prepared and have enough financial resources to subsidise driver's licenses for young people who might come to the company. The first step is, of course, to first of all motivate the young people to apply for an apprenticeship etc. so they can benefit from your offer. For that matter, the development of an extra section on your career website could be considered, where you list and give detailed information about everything you are offering to these young people. In this case, the advantage is not only to have all these attractive offers, but it is also important and favourable to be transparent and provide detailed information. This significantly improves the company's image to prospective employees.

As VegetableX's priority is to attract more young people in general, it might be useful to look around a little bit more and take a look at bordering countries. Widening your horizons, when looking for new employees, can result in a growth of your candidate pool, since you might be able to attract young people from other countries who are looking for a job in a foreign country. The hiring of foreign employees is not only a solution to cover the company's needs for young people, but also a huge opportunity to improve the company's employer brand even more.

The next issue is the company's online presence, which is definitely something VegetableX should work on, especially since they are looking to hire young people. The already mentioned changes on their Facebook page (posting more content concerning the company, as well as posting current vacancies), are of course a first step in the right direction, but the number of shared recipes is still quite overwhelming and the content concerning the company gets lost in between. Therefore, the posted vacancies, could be pinned at the top of the site or re-shared from time to time to keep them visible. Additionally, those job advertisements, even when they are just for summer jobs for students, should be proofread, so that little mistakes like missing words do not occur. Another way to use social media as a recruiting tool would be to consider the placement of targeted ads. As already explained, Facebook has its ways to

precisely direct adverts at users fitting a chosen profile, who in this case, could be local school leavers or people living in the region who are looking for a job.

As already mentioned in our findings, the corporate website could also be improved. Since it is usually the first place people turn to when considering applying for a job at a certain company, it is of paramount importance that the area concerning career opportunities contains enough information. Therefore, the SME should consider presenting their management body, which could be done by giving short characteristics or CVs alongside photographs. Providing some quotations from current employees, saying why they like working there and what makes this employer special, could be one way to describe the organisational culture more extensively and could also have a positive effect on the potential applicant's decision, by showing that he/she would have personable colleagues. However, those statements should be picked carefully, because they could easily seem staged or scripted. Moreover, the vacancies, which are already posted on the homepage, should again be accessible in the area concerning career opportunities. Another change that should be considered is the picture that is the first thing a person sees when entering this area, which currently shows a machine that is part of the production process, which might not be the best choice to introduce VegetableX as an employer.

The website also contains an extra area whose title can be translated to "training" or "apprenticeship", where professions in which the company offers training positions are listed. Even though it seems as if the individual professions can be clicked on in order to get additional information on them, this is unfortunately not the case. The company is desperately looking for apprentices, but does not provide sufficient information for them on their website. When looking to attract prospective apprentices, a description of the job profiles as well as information on benefits is necessary, especially having large enterprises as competitors.

Additionally, recruitment networks, such as LinkedIn or Xing, should be considered as a recruiting tool, since the company is also looking for specialised staff. Therefore, it is advisable to study guidebooks on how to make the most of recruitment networks, or to seek the help of an external consultant, because there are many things that should be kept in mind when approaching candidates on such platforms.

In connection with the proposal of subsidising a driver's licence for apprentices, and therefore having a solution to the 'accessibility problem', VegetableX could widen their public presence at job or training fairs, as this is one important way to approach potential apprentices. There, students should be provided with information concerning the company, the professions in which training is available and the benefits, so that they are attracted to the company as a prospective employer. Brochures regarding apprenticeships at the company and little giveaways should be brought, so that students can take something away with them, which increases the probability that the company is going to be remembered.

Another way to reach prospective apprentices is by improving and widening the range of their collaborations with educational establishments. Again, the aim here is to get the students to view VegetableX as a potential future employer, which is crucial, because most young people do not even know that the company exists, much less think about applying there some day. So, the company should approach schools directly and ask for the opportunity to give a presentation for the students, on, for instance, a career day or simply ask permission to place

posters advertising it as a company that is offering vocational training positions. In addition, the company could ask the schools to communicate to their students that the company also offers positions for placements, which German students have to complete at least two times during their education. Through a placement, students could get to know the company and how they operate, which, combined with a welcoming atmosphere, could result in the student wanting to work there in the future. Another way to give students an impression of the company could be to participate in the “girls-” or “boys-day”, which is a concept where students are provided with an insight into jobs, which are traditionally being performed by the opposite sex in order to battle gender stereotypes.

Practical Toolkit

In order to develop a strategy and specific methods for emphasising and communicating to the target audience Generation Y, SMEs should keep different aspect in mind. Figure 3 can provide some interesting ideas.



Figure 3: Attracting Generation Y to SMEs (source: own elaboration)

First of all, the social aspect of the employment is very important to Generation Y employees, which can be an advantage for SMEs. Often, the good working conditions (e.g. flexible work time, parental leave and the frequent communication with the employees) expected by Generation Y are fulfilled in SMEs, however they have to be communicated. The advantages the company can offer have to be made visible on the corporate website or on other channels like the company’s social media profiles. The SME’s reachability for the young prospective employees could also be problematic. A solution to this problem might be to help young people financially with their driver’s licenses or to offer carpooling.

Overall, it is essential to be transparent and provide detailed information on the SME. On social media, e.g. the Facebook page posting more content concerning the company, as well as posting current vacancies and buying targeted ads can be a clever move for SMEs. The SME

should also consider presenting their management body on their website to make the company more accessible to Generation Y (e.g. short characteristics or CVs alongside photographs, and some quotations from current employees).

Another important step for SMEs is widening the range of their collaborations with educational establishments. At universities the SME could give a presentation for the students on career days or place advertising posters. Regarding schools, the SME could offer positions for placements or participate in “girls-” or “boys-days”.

Research Methodology

The methodology was based on interviewing the company’s Head of HRM. The methods are interview-based and consist of qualitative and quantitative research methods. The interviews were carried out by using a questionnaire. In addition, accessible corporate documents and online information were analysed.

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