



# Talent attraction and retention through brand building: An exploration of practices in companies that are top South African brands



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## Dates:

Received: 13 July 2020

Accepted: 13 Oct. 2020

Published: 08 Dec. 2020

## How to cite this article:

Wolfswinkel, M.B., & Enslin, C. (2020). Talent attraction and retention through brand building: An exploration of practices in companies that are top South African brands. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management/SA Tydskrif vir Menslikehulpbronbestuur*, 18(0), a1443. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v18i0.1443>

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**Orientation:** Companies leverage employer, internal and corporate brand building practices as they compete to attract and retain the rare talent required for organisational success.

**Research purpose:** To explore, in the context of global leading practice, the talent attraction and retention practices pertaining to employer, internal and corporate brand building in companies that are top South African brands.

**Motivation for the study:** There is a shortage of South African studies providing relevant current insights into talent attraction and retention through brand building within the local context.

**Research approach/design and method:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with strategic-level leaders in human resources and brand and line management across five companies that are top South African brands. Thematic content analysis yielded six themes that provided insight into local leading practices in talent attraction and retention through brand building.

**Main findings:** Corporate brand building dominated talent attraction and retention, with talent lured by the commercial success of the brand and drawn to purpose-driven brands. Rigorous assessments confirmed whether talent met clearly articulated requirements and offered optimal brand fit. The employer and internal brands were currently under development, with learning and development as a central theme to both.

**Practical/managerial implications:** This research provided insights from strategic-level leaders across human resources and brand and line management, providing current and practically applicable insights for all cross-functional leaders involved in talent attraction and retention.

**Contribution/value-add:** South African companies and their leaders gained insight into leading practices in talent attraction and retention from an unprecedented sample of companies that are top South African brands.

**Keywords:** talent; talent attraction; talent retention; employer brand; internal brand; talent management; brand management; corporate brand; South Africa; qualitative research.

## Introduction

### The war for talent

The war for talent sees employers competing against each other to attract and retain talent (Chambers, Foulon, Handfield-Jones, Hankin, & Michaels, 1998), the term used to describe prospective and current employees that are top performers and show ample potential for further career development (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016). Talent is often defined in terms of the rare or critical skill sets they offer (Barriere, Owens, & Pobereskin, 2018) and their brand fit, evident in high levels of alignment between their personal purpose, vision, values and behaviour and that of the organisational brand (Eds. Cappelli & Keller, 2017; Keller & Meaney, 2017). Talent has a direct positive impact on organisational performance and success (Andrianova, Maor, & Schaninger, 2018; Keller & Meaney, 2017) and provides an enduring competitive advantage in a global marketplace where products and services are rapidly copied and even improved upon by competitors (Bafaro, Ellsworth, & Ghandi, 2017; Keller & Meaney, 2017).

Talent is valuable, but scarce: global surveys suggest all-time high talent shortages (Deloitte, 2019; Manpower Group, 2018), with more than half of the global companies reportedly unable to attract the talent they are looking for (Manpower Group, 2020) and less than 10% of companies

able to retain the services of top talent (Deloitte, 2019; Keller & Meaney, 2017). Talent attraction refers to the set of practices that employers use to appeal to prospective talent (Eds. Cappelli & Keller, 2017; Keller & Meaney, 2017; Mosley, 2016) and attract them to the employer (Bali & Dixit, 2016; Charan, Barton, & Carey, 2018), whilst talent retention practices aim to ensure that current talented employees continue to experience the value and benefits of employment (Eds. Cappelli & Keller, 2017; Charan et al., 2018) and are optimally engaged and their services retained (Barriere et al., 2018; Eds. Cappelli & Keller, 2017). In a high demand, low supply talent marketplace, the attraction and retention of talented employees is a critical business priority (Bersin, 2019; Keller & Meaney, 2017).

Two current trends exacerbate the war for talent. The future of work is likely to see exponential leaps in skilled workers amidst increasing disruptive technological advances that drive automation, remote work, connectivity, innovation and change (Deloitte, 2019; Parekh, 2020). The coronavirus pandemic's devastating economic impact has necessitated widespread retrenchments and job cuts. However, the pandemic has also intensified the global demand for talent, particularly talent that offers essential or medical skills, high levels of technological competence and the ability to contribute optimally across job roles and business functions (Bravery & Tomar, 2020; Fine et al., 2020).

With a raging war for talent that is likely to intensify, talent attraction and retention is front of mind for companies and their leaders (Deloitte, 2019; Keller & Meaney, 2017). Now, more than ever, companies need to utilise every possible talent attraction and retention tool at their disposal.

## Brand and talent

A brand is identified and differentiated in the marketplace by a unique and compelling identity expressed and delivered internally and externally at all contact or touchpoints with stakeholder groups. The aim is to sustain positive, trustworthy and coherent experiences with the brand across multiple brand touchpoints (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2012; Balmer, 2017; Kapferer, 2012; Kotler & Armstrong, 2018; Li, Littleton, & Akhtar, 2017; Merrilees, 2017). The use of brand building practices to differentiate the employer and provide a competitive advantage in attracting and retaining talent has enjoyed widespread support in the literature for over two decades (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Chambers et al., 1998). To attract the right talent, companies should leverage a differentiated employer brand to convey the sum total of qualities the employer wishes to be known for (Mosley, 2016; Russell & Brannan, 2016) along with a unique value proposition and benefits (Eds. Cappelli & Keller, 2017; Mosley, 2016). Once employed, internal brand building practices such as internal brand communication should be used to engage talent and build an enduring employment relationship that retains their services (Erkmen, Hancer, & Leong, 2017; Kaplan, 2017; Russell & Brannan, 2016; Sharif & Islam, 2017).

There appears to be complexity at this intersection between talent and brand. The current literature suggests that employers are not using brand building practices to their full advantage to attract and retain talent (Banta & Watras, 2019; Eds. Cappelli & Keller, 2017; Theurer, Tumasjan, Welpe, & Lievens, 2018). However, the study of talent attraction and retention through brand building is frustrated by the disparity thereof in the literature (Behrends, Baur, & Zierke, 2020; Moroko & Uncles, 2016) as it spans theoretical domains ranging from human resource management to internal marketing and brand management (Eds. Cappelli & Keller, 2017; Theurer et al., 2018). This complexity and fragmentation seem to be reflected in organisations, where the functional business areas dealing with talent, brand and line management collaborate on matters pertaining to talent and brand, but there is a lack of clarity around the ownership of talent and talent-related management practices (Mölk & Auer, 2018; Theurer et al., 2018) as well as the creation and implementation of brand building practices related to talent attraction and retention (Allas, Chambers, & Welchman, 2019; Banta & Watras, 2019).

Gaining insights into talent attraction and retention through brand building would require an approach that incorporates multiple theoretical domains in the literature and spans a range of different functional areas within organisations. For companies that are struggling to use brand building practices optimally in fighting the war for talent, it would be valuable to gain insights into companies that are doing it right – and what can be learnt from them.

## Focus of this research study

This study explored leading practices in talent attraction and retention through brand building. In the literature review to follow, a synthesis of global literature pertaining to talent and brand building allows the articulation of global leading practices in this regard.

## South African context

Whilst global leading practices provide South African companies and their leaders with rich insights, South African literature outlines several unique socio-economic factors that are likely to impact talent attraction and retention through brand building locally. A talent paradox sees critical skills shortages in South Africa (Deloitte, 2019; Tshilongamulenzhe, 2017) amidst high levels of unemployment (Stats SA, 2019; Subban, 2016). South Africa's volatile economic climate has led to a lack of job security and financial stability, fuelling emigration of educated South Africans abroad in the so-called brain drain (Mlambo & Adetiba, 2019; Subban, 2016). Labour legislation promoting the advancement of previously disadvantaged groups and broad-based black empowerment introduces race or gender qualifiers to talent identification (Benjamin & Cooper, 2016). Leadership and organisational culture seem to be grappling to respond to the rapid diversification of the workplace brought about by the birth of political democracy (Mazibuko & Govender, 2017; Tladinyane, 2016).

It cannot be assumed that global or universal branding practices could be seamlessly applied into a local context with a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, the literature recommends that the context in which brand building is carried out must be explored and understood, and brand building practices should be adapted to meet the requirements and needs of the local talented customer (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2012; Vaiman, Sparrow, Schuler, & Collings, 2018). Brand and talent scholars urge further exploratory research into the South African landscape in order to tailor branding practices to the unique needs and context of local talent (Enslin & Klopper, 2011; Ferreira, 2016; Subban, 2016; Vaiman et al., 2018).

## Research purpose

In response to the call for insights into leading practices in talent attraction and retention through brand building with due consideration of the local context, the research purpose of this study was to explore, in the context of global leading practice, talent attraction and retention practices pertaining to employer and internal and corporate brand building in companies that are top South African brands.

This research purpose required a review of literature that would firstly enable a theoretical foundation of key constructs in talent and brand building and secondly allow for the formulation of global leading practice in talent attraction and retention through brand building.

## Literature review

### Theoretical framework

A literature review allowed key constructs pertaining to talent attraction and retention through brand building to be presented in a theoretical framework. These constructs and the relationship between them will be discussed in Figure 1, the theoretical framework that follows.

### Talent attraction and retention through employer and internal brand building

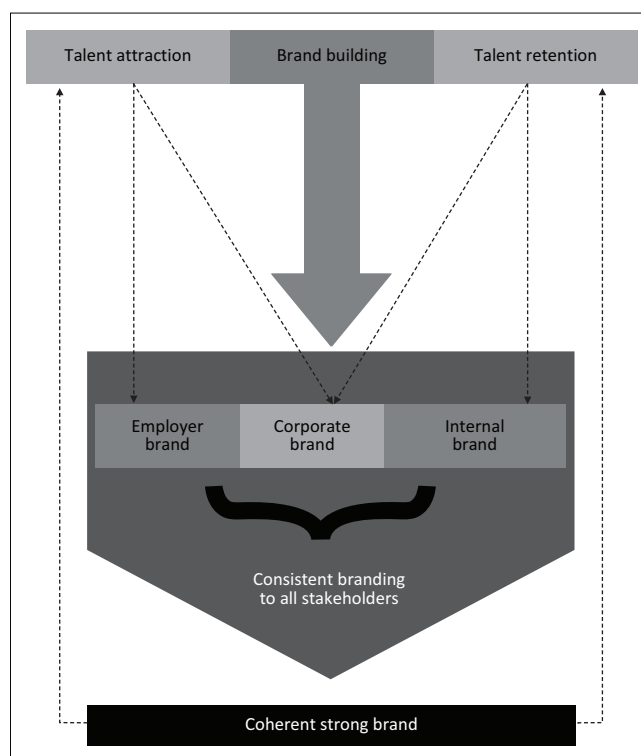
At the top of the theoretical framework, the defined constructs of talent attraction and talent retention in relation to brand building are revisited visually, showing brand building as central to the deployment of talent attraction and retention.

Similarly, the aforementioned relationship between talent attraction and the employer brand, as well as talent retention and the internal brand, is visually depicted with dotted, arrowed lines.

### Talent attraction and retention and the corporate brand

Figure 1 introduces the construct of the corporate brand and reveals a relationship between the corporate brand and both talent attraction and retention.

Corporate brands have a brand orientation that sees the company's brand speak on behalf of the company as a whole (Balmer, 2017; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2017). Corporate



**FIGURE 1:** Theoretical framework – Key constructs and relationships between them.

brands are built from the inside with the purpose, vision, mission and values providing strategic directions to all people who are living the brand outwards (Balmer, 2017; Merrilees, 2017). The stakeholder focus of corporate brands sees the identification of all possible internal and external brand stakeholders – those who come into contact with the brand, are influenced by the brand and help to build the brand (Balmer, 2017; Merrilees, 2017). Prospective and current talent is an important corporate brand stakeholder and as such, corporate brands hold relevance in both talent attraction and retention (Balmer, 2017; Kaplan, 2017; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2017).

### Consistent branding builds strong brands

Figure 1 features a bracket symbol that indicates alignment between the employer, internal and corporate brand. The alignment between these three brand building platforms holds particular relevance to talent, as employees experience the dynamic interplay of these three platforms throughout the employee life cycle (Balmer, 2017; Sharif & Islam, 2017). Talent attraction promises made by the employer brand must come to realisation in the internal branding efforts during the working experience (Andrianova et al., 2018; Erkmen et al., 2017). Talent needs to support the corporate brand and bring it to life as they engage with external stakeholders, a task much easily executed if there is alignment between the corporate brand and the internal brand work experience (Bafaro et al., 2017; Merrilees, 2017).

The consistent portrayal of the brand's purpose and values to different brand stakeholders as they engage with the brand through contact points, communication and experiences

across different brand building platforms will positively impact both talent attraction and retention and customer experience (Balmer, 2017; Li et al., 2017). Consistent branding requires cross-functional collaboration and the strategic alignment of leadership (Bafaro et al., 2017; Schaefer, 2016; Sharif & Islam, 2017). In particular, achieving consistency between the employer, internal and corporate brand requires a high measure of strategic alignment and collaboration between talent and brand leaders as they create and drive talent and brand building initiatives (Eds. Cappelli & Keller, 2017; Deloitte, 2019; Mosley, 2016). Top, strong brands have managed to align their employer, internal and corporate brands consistently, arguably because of strategic leadership alignment across talent, brand and line management. The selection of the research sample for this study was steered by the literature that holds that strong, top brands have managed to align their employer, internal and corporate brands consistently, arguably because of the strategic leadership alignment across talent, brand and line management and these brands would be able to provide valuable insights into brand building for talent attraction and retention (Foster, Punjaisri, & Cheng, 2010; Kaplan, 2017).

### Coherent, strong brand

Figure 1 culminates in construct-labelled coherent, strong brands. Coherent brands are most simply described as brands that have achieved the pinnacle of brand strength, with brand stakeholders who perceive the brand to be trustworthy and coherent, thanks to consistent positive experiences with the brand across multiple brand touchpoints (Li et al., 2017; Merrilees, 2017). There is a mutually beneficial relationship between talent and coherent brands. Through consistent positive experiences with the brand, talent builds trust in the coherent brand, which attracts and retains the services of talented employees (Balmer, 2017; Russell & Brannan, 2016; Schaefer, 2016). In return, talent is key to living the brand in their daily work, consistently providing external stakeholders with positive experiences that build trust and strengthen brand coherence (Balmer, 2017; Charan et al., 2018; Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). To this end, Figure 1 shows the consistent alignment of brand building platforms as a precursor to brand coherence, which, in turn, is shown to have a direct positive relationship to talent attraction and retention.

## Global leading practices in talent attraction and retention through brand building

Whilst the theoretical framework provides the key constructs and the relationships between them, the application thereof in practice required further insight from the literature. The research purpose of this study was to explore local practices in talent attraction and retention through brand building in the context of global leading practice. To support the theoretical framework and provide context to this research study, a synthesis of literature yielded the nine global leading practices in talent attraction and retention

through employer, internal and corporate brand building, as presented in Table 1.

## Research questions

The literature review allowed the formulation of a theoretical framework and nine global leading practices in talent attraction and retention that would provide context to this research study. Primary research would have to provide insight into the practical perception of what literature held to be a strong relationship between the constructs in the theoretical framework. Primary research would also be required to shed light on the brand building practices used by companies that are top South African brands to attract and retain talent, as global leading practices simply provided context to the local study. The following two research questions were thus articulated to guide the research:

*Research question 1:* What is the perceived relationship between talent attraction and retention and a company's employer, internal and corporate brand?

*Research question 2:* In which ways are companies that are top South African brands attracting and retaining talent through employer, internal and corporate brand building?

## Research design

### Research approach

The best research approach to enable the research purpose and address the research questions would be an exploratory study conducted from the interpretive paradigm, allowing the discovery of illuminating insights that were not conclusive, but could shed light on this underexplored research area and open up opportunities for further empirical enquiry (Rahi, 2017). Qualitative research methods would ensure rich exploration and a deep understanding of the

**TABLE 1:** Global leading practices in talent attraction and retention through brand building.

Number	Global leading practice
1	Identify and profile the specific talent that is needed to enable organisational success (Barriere et al., 2018; Charan et al., 2018; Keller & Meaney, 2017; Russell & Brannan, 2016).
2	View prospective talented employees as a brand stakeholder that should be positively influenced at every brand contact point (Balmer, 2017; Keller & Meaney, 2017; Russell & Brannan, 2016).
3	Develop an employer brand with a distinctive, relevant and persuasive employee value proposition (Bali & Dixit, 2016; Sharif & Islam, 2017).
4	Implement strategically driven talent retention initiatives that incorporate aligned human resource management practices, leadership practices and internal brand communication (Erkmen et al., 2017; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016).
5	View internal talented employees as brand stakeholders that should be positively influenced at every brand contact point (Bafaro et al., 2017; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2017; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016).
6	Implement effective internal branding initiatives that reinforce the brand purpose and values and enhance the employee's engagement with the brand (Erkmen et al., 2017; Kaplan, 2017; Russell & Brannan, 2016; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016).
7	Consistently brand to stakeholders across employer brand, internal brand and corporate brand platforms (Balmer, 2017; Foster et al., 2010; Li et al., 2017; Merrilees, 2017).
8	Ensure that cross-functional leadership across human resource management, brand management and line management strategically aligns to drive talent and brand initiatives (Andrianova et al., 2018; Balmer, 2017; Charan et al., 2018).
9	Ensure that strategic leadership, from CEO level down, is committed to building brand coherence and strength through talent (Andrianova et al., 2018; Bafaro et al., 2017).

subjective reality of research participants, as they share their real-world experiences, personal opinions and views (Flick, 2018; Rahi, 2017).

### Research sampling

Purposive, non-probability sampling was used to identify a sample of companies that are top South African brands. The Sunday Times top brands survey 2017 presented 20 corporate brands that held the number one brand position per industry or brand category (Sunday Times, 2017). Of the 20 top brands, five were willing to participate in primary research, with the clear ethical commitment that they would remain anonymous and that all research data would remain confidential. These top South African brands spanned the telecommunications, healthcare, insurance, banking and motor vehicle industries.

Within each of these participating companies, purposive, non-probability sampling was used to identify research participants that are seen to be experts in talent attraction and retention through brand building and would thus provide the most valuable insights (Sharma, 2017). The literature indicated that there were three central role players in talent attraction and retention through brand building: a strategic-level brand leader, strategic-level human resources or talent leader and a strategic-level line manager (Andrianova et al., 2018; Bafaro et al., 2017). As such, clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to a purposive sampling approach in order to identify these expert participants. As this was a brand study, the first point of contact was the head or most strategic-level leader in brand or marketing, who was instrumental in recommending the appropriate strategic-level human resources or talent management and line management leaders to interview. Leaders who were directly involved in and responsible for annual strategic planning and review sessions for either talent or brand were deemed strategic-level. To ensure that the participants could offer the level of expertise required, the tenure of recommended research participants was also considered. This saw the exclusion of two proposed participants, one of which was a new recruit, whilst the other was newly promoted. Research participants who had a proven track record in leadership positions in the company were favoured – in fact, eight of the 15 participants held the most senior position obtainable in their field of expertise in their company. Research participants were promised that their identity, demographic profile and job roles would not be disclosed to anyone aside from the researcher and her supervisory support.

### Research instrument

A semi-structured interview guide provided a structured, consistent approach to interviewing research participants (Flick, 2018; Stuckey, 2013). The interview guide comprised seven questions, created in context of the research purpose, questions and literature review insights and probed participants' subjective views around talent identification

criteria, strategic leadership alignment in talent and brand building, employer, internal and corporate brand building practices used to attract and retain talent and challenges experienced in this regard. Participants were encouraged to provide their own insights, experiences and opinions and enrich their responses with examples (Rahi, 2017; Stuckey, 2013).

### Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three strategic-level leaders across five companies that are top South African brands. Interviews were conducted face-to-face where possible, or telephonically if the geographical distance was a factor, or if expert participants requested it. The average interview duration was 43 mins. Interviews were recorded with the permission of participants and transcribed thereafter.

It must be noted that the initial decision to conduct 15 interviews had been informed by the literature that recommended a manageable sample size of between six and 16 for qualitative interviews with experts (Guetterman, 2015; Robinson, 2014). A sixth company was identified, but kept as an optional additional sample, pending primary research data saturation (Babin & Zikmund, 2015). The researcher started experiencing data saturation between interview eight and 10. It initially manifested as the realisation that the responses were starting to sound similar (Robinson, 2014). By interview 11, the researcher felt comfortable to declare that data saturation was imminent and the sample of 15 was sufficient.

### Data analysis

Data were collected and analysed during the period May 2018 to October 2019.

Content from transcribed interviews provided data, which were analysed through thematic analysis with inductive reasoning. Data were manually coded by assigning notes with meaning or summary statements to large chunks of text (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017; Percy et al., 2015). A further abstraction of the meaning of these notes and the grouping of the notes together on colour-coded excel spreadsheets allowed categories to emerge, into which notes were sorted (Nowell et al., 2017; Rahi, 2017). Finally, the categories were reviewed in order to establish patterns, link constructs and create themes and subthemes (Rahi, 2017; Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

### Measures to ensure quality and rigour

To ensure a high level of trustworthiness in the inductive thematic analysis of data, the researcher implemented a rigorously documented data analysis process, transparently showing the motivation and literature review support for every step and decision made (Elo et al., 2014; Nowell et al., 2017; Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

Member checks saw the sharing of themes and subthemes with participants (Nowell et al., 2017), inviting comment and feedback. Three of the five brands provided feedback, which indicated support for the findings as well as some additional insights. Feedback firstly revealed an affirmation of key themes and specifically the extent to which they 'reflect the reality'. One of the top brands accordingly reasoned that the development of an employer and internal brand strategy was now 'more important than ever', adding that 'we really need to get this right in South Africa and top brands should be leading the way'. One of the three brands found it 'interesting' that the research did not show a 'greater disjoint between the talent and marketing functions'. A research recommendation from this study is deeper exploration into the collaboration between talent and brand leadership. This particular brand requested to be 'kept in the loop' in this regard as the business aims to 'charter a new working relationship between the marketing and brand team'. A line manager from another brand furthermore reasoned that it is 'heartening to see that all the top brands are taking talent assessments seriously', adding that her leadership team had been concerned that they may be 'too hard' on talent with 'impossibly difficult' assessments. In response to the research results, the leadership team have accordingly decided to formalise their assessment approach and agree on minimum standards without the 'normal debate about whether we're assessing ourselves out of the talent marketplace'.

In response to the research purpose and related research questions, 10 practices employed by companies that are top South African brands were abstracted from critical reflection on the themes, the feedback from participants and the review of literature.

## Ethical consideration

The Independent Institute of Education, Research and Postgraduate Committee. Ethical clearance number: 14011704.

## Results

During the thematic analysis process, the frequency with which certain topics or points were made was reflected in

the amount of notes allocated to it. As such, some categories were more robust than others and the themes extracted from these categories were seen to be more dominant or important. It is interesting to note that the first theme presented hereafter comprised approximately half of all the coded data and emerged as the dominant theme common to all companies and participants.

Thematic content analysis allowed six themes with underpinning subthemes to emerge. The findings are presented in order of importance, ranked according to the strength of each theme's data, as informed by the frequency with which it occurred. The themes and subthemes are presented in Table 2, followed by a discussion of research results.

## Discussion of themes

### Theme 1: The value of the corporate brand in talent attraction and retention

Theme 1, the most dominant theme across companies and participants, suggests that companies that are top South African brands are primarily leveraging their corporate brand to attract and retain talent.

Whilst the literature holds that corporate branding is important to build relationships of trust with all stakeholders, including talent (Balmer, 2017; Merrilees, 2017), employer branding and internal branding are considered equally important, aligning into a triangle of strength (Balmer, 2017; Charan et al., 2018). In South Africa, corporate branding however appears to overshadow other branding platforms.

South African talent seems to be attracted to strong corporate brands that could potentially provide stability and financial security in an otherwise economically volatile employment marketplace. A brand manager summarised this well when he said: 'the corporate brand does very well and has a very good reputation of being stable', offering people what he terms a 'safe haven in a world where things are quite chaotic'.

Local talent resonates with purposeful corporate brands that provide the opportunity for talent to contribute to a larger

**TABLE 2:** Themes and subthemes.

Theme	Subthemes
1. The value of the corporate brand in talent attraction and retention	1.1. The lure of a successful corporate brand 1.2. Corporate branding appears to be more important and/or well-developed than other brand building platforms 1.3. Purposeful, value-based corporate brands resonate with talent
2. Brand-aligned practices to articulate and assess aspirational talent	2.1. A clear, brand-aligned articulation of what talent is 2.2. Assessments to identify talent 2.3. Brand-aligned aspirational element of talent
3. The employer brand, employee value proposition and internal brand: relevant but still a work in progress	3.1. Employer brand and employee value proposition are relevant to attracting talent 3.2. Internal brand is relevant to retaining talent 3.3. Employer brand, employee value proposition and internal brand are under construction
4. Strategic leadership alignment for talent and brand	4.1. Brand and talent are CEO-driven 4.2. Cross-functional leadership collaboration emerging 4.3. Line managers are taking ownership
5. Talent retention through engagement and meaningful work	5.1. Talent retained through employee engagement 5.2. Talent retained through meaningful work, allowing talent to contribute to purpose and brand
6. Talented brand ambassadors contribute to brand coherence	

CEO, chief executive officer.

purpose (Rosethorn, 2018). A human resource leader stated that 'people are attracted by the fact that we're a purpose-driven brand', a sentiment echoed by another human resource leader who stressed that working for their corporate brand allows a talented employee to become 'a citizen of the society in which you live and a contributor to the economy that you enjoy'. A line manager articulated this well when she said that 'people want to be part of something that gives them purpose, that's bigger than them, that they contribute to'.

### **Theme 2: Brand-aligned practices to articulate and assess aspirational talent**

Companies that are top South African brands articulate their talent requirements clearly and these requirements are informed by the leadership team, the brand and the values of the organisation. All participants across all five brands spoke about a 'brand person' that displays the 'brand DNA', which comprises desirable values and behaviours.

Prospective and current talent undergo rigorous assessments that ascertain their capability and suitability. Only the best talent makes it through this assessment process, lending an aspirational element to talent. As one line manager puts it: 'if you have to spend ... on a psychometric prognosis to understand the potential of an individual, we don't think that's a high investment to make for the return you're going to get'.

Not only do talent aspire to work for top brands, but also top brands only select the best of the best. Whilst this theme echoed the global literature in so far as talent identification is concerned (Bali & Dixit, 2016; Keller & Meaney, 2017), there was no evidence of an anticipated lowering of talent requirements in context of the acute shortage of local skilled talent (Subban, 2016; Tshilongamulenzhe, 2017). A participating brand manager said: 'we want the best and we don't settle for anything less than the best'.

### **Theme 3: The employer brand, employee value proposition and internal brand – relevant but still a work in progress**

A significant insight from this study was this: most companies that are top South African brands admit that their employer and internal branding platforms have taken a back seat to corporate branding and are still being developed. A brand manager offered this sobering comment: 'the honest truth is that the business puts greater emphasis on the retail brand because that's what attracts customers, which ultimately attracts profit'. He adds that they have come to realise that they can't 'just build a good brand externally and not build a good employee proposition'.

Companies that are top South African brands agree that employer, internal and corporate brand building is relevant to talent attraction and retention, but it seems that, as one brand manager stated, 'we are spending 80–90% of our time on establishing the corporate brand' and added that they are using the corporate brand to attract and retain talent.

Perhaps the most revealing quote around the employer and internal brand is this one from a talent leader: 'if you have to ask everybody what our employer brand is, you're going to get a thousand different responses because it's not well defined'.

There does seem to be agreement amongst participants that the employer and internal brand is focused on learning and development opportunities and career development and growth, as these are key value propositions for South African talent.

### **Theme 4: Strategic leadership alignment for talent and brand**

Whilst this theme was not as strong as the three preceding themes in terms of frequency of comments, there appears to be an emerging pattern of leadership up to Chief Executive Officer (CEO) level that is owning and driving talent in companies that are top South African brands. This is heartening, especially given the local literature suggesting that a lack of leadership commitment to talent and a poor leadership style may be negatively affecting talent retention (Mazibuko & Govender, 2017; Tladinyane, 2016). One brand manager referred to talent as a 'battleground' for their CEO and shows their CEO and board's commitment to talent when she says that 'the CEO takes talent management and people very seriously and it would be very silly for any leader in our business to take a superficial approach to how they manage their people'.

### **Theme 5: Talent retention through engagement and meaningful work and Theme 6: Talented brand ambassadors contribute to brand coherence**

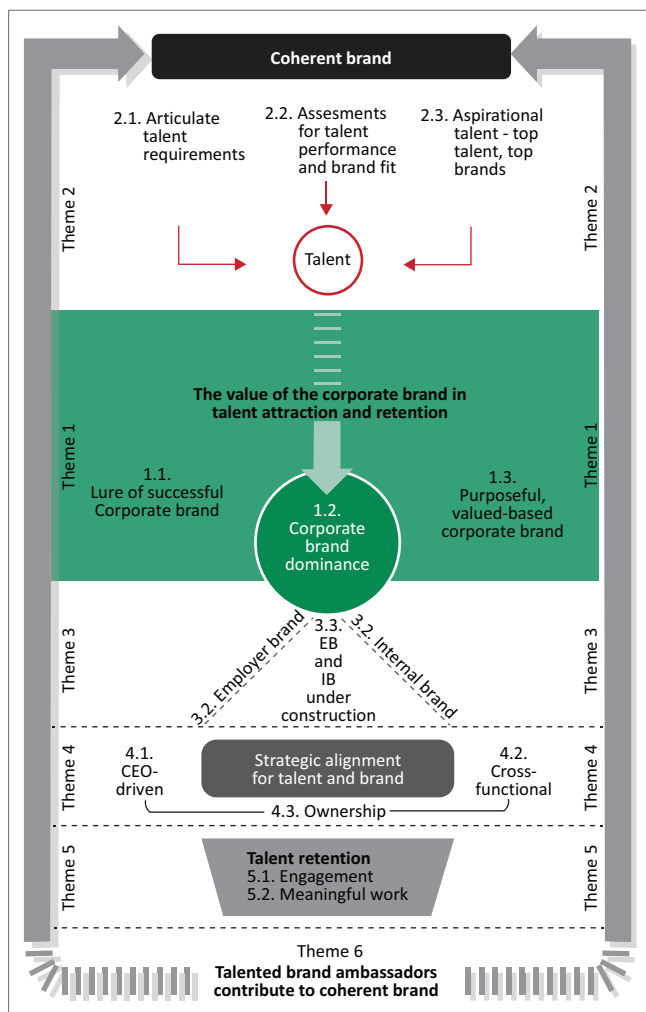
The themes are presented in order of importance, with theme 1 emerging as the overall dominant theme, theme 2 the second strongest, followed by themes 3 and 4. Whilst themes 5 and 6 did not match the strength of other themes, a pattern of interesting insights emerged to underpin these themes.

It seems that leadership support of talent has enabled high levels of employee engagement in companies that are top South African brands. Brand love and commitment are pivotal to engaging and thus retaining South African talent, who also appreciate meaningful work that allows them to live the brand. These findings align with global leading practices that advocate leadership support and employee engagement in talent retention (Balmer, 2017; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2017). In companies that are top South African brands, engaged, talented employees are likely to reinforce the brand message through word of mouth testimonies and co-creation of brand purpose through their work. It would seem that this brand ambassadorship strengthens the corporate brand of top South African brands even further, as talented employees present the brand consistently and coherently to all stakeholders (Li et al., 2017; Merrilees, 2017).

The discussion around the themes and subthemes is wrapped up and presented visually in Figure 2, which shows the themes in relation to each other.

## Local leading practices

To address the research purpose and related research questions, the interrelated themes and the feedback from top brands were critically reflected upon in the context of



EB, employer brand; IB, internal brand; CEO, chief executive officer.

FIGURE 2: Themes and subthemes in relation to each other.

the review of literature. It was thus possible to uncover, in the context of global leading practice, the talent attraction and retention practices pertaining to employer, internal and corporate brand building in companies that are top South African brands and specifically, to bring to light the practices being used to attract and retain talent through brand building.

In companies that are top South African brands, the following 10 local leading practices in talent attraction and retention through brand building emerged, as presented in Table 3.

## Practical implications

To follow in the footsteps of companies that are top South African brands, it seems vital that the corporate brand celebrates its commercial success widely. Most of the top brands boldly position their corporate brand as the best, or as market leaders, reinforcing achievements and growth wherever possible. The top South Africa brands interviewed furthermore position their corporate brands as purpose-driven, aiming to add value to all stakeholders. All companies included in this study could clearly articulate the company's purpose and values and mention ways in which the corporate brand mobilised the purpose and vision tangibly.

Talent requirements should be informed by leaders across functional departments. It is key that talent and brand collaborate in order to create a persona of the ideal talented employee. Most participants interviewed in companies that are top South African brands referred to the '(Brand name) person' as the ideal brand-aligned talented person.

Once talent requirements in terms of performance, potential and brand alignment are agreed upon, it is essential to invest in psychometric, numeracy and/or literacy assessments to evaluate the skill set and behavioural attributes of talent. One of the companies amongst the top South African brands applies talent screening tests uniformly and consistently across the organisation as a 'gate' to entry and stresses the importance of upskilling all line management in the importance of these assessments and the application thereof during the recruitment process.

TABLE 3: Local leading practices in talent attraction and retention through brand building.

Number	Local leading practice
1	Human resource/talent management and leadership <b>co-create and articulate the specific talent requirements</b> to enable brand building and organisational success. This articulation includes performance and potential requirements, as well as personal attributes that will ensure the optimal brand fit.
2	Prospective and current talent undergo <b>psychometric assessments to evaluate their suitability in terms of performance, potential and brand alignment</b> .
3	Prospective talented employees are viewed as an <b>important corporate brand stakeholder</b> who should be positively influenced by the corporate brand.
4	The corporate brand is positioned as <b>commercially successful, as well as purposeful and values-based</b> , which attracts talent.
5	<b>Employer branding</b> and employee value proposition leads with opportunities for learning and <b>development and career growth</b> .
6	<b>Internal branding</b> initiatives are enabled by regular leader-led brand communication, reputable human resource practices and a culture of belonging driven by supportive leadership.
7	<b>Leadership</b> owns and drives <b>employee engagement</b> , ensuring that current talented employees are viewed as an important brand stakeholder who should be positively influenced by the internal brand to ensure brand coherence and <b>talent retention</b> .
8	Talented employees are provided with <b>meaningful work</b> that gives them the opportunity to <b>contribute to the brand purpose and values</b> .
9	Engaged current talented employees are deployed as <b>brand ambassadors</b> , providing them with opportunities to spread word-of-mouth messages that <b>reinforce the brand's purpose and values and build coherent brands</b> .
10	<b>Cross-functional leadership alignment is driven from the CEO downwards</b> , encouraging collaboration and leader-led initiatives for talent and brand building.

CEO, chief executive officer.



Practical implications for employer branding would be driving learning and development opportunities in a unique and compelling way in the employee value proposition. Internal brand-building strategies should integrate brand communications with leadership and human resource behaviours and outputs. Employee engagement surveys are a vital tool to ensure that companies keep a finger on the pulse of the internal brand building efforts – another helpful practical suggestion. Given the role of employee engagement in talent retention, companies should review the job profiles and performance indicators for all leaders and ensure that employee engagement becomes a central part of their role and deliverables and that leaders are held accountable for results.

Opportunities for employees to engage in word-of-mouth testimony or represent the brand also rise to the fore, with some participants who outlined how their brand selects an employee ‘spokesperson’ for a particular business area, or a particular benefit or aspect of the work experience, and then allows them to share their authentic views. This allows, as one brand manager stated, ‘thousands of brand ambassadors’ as multiple employees lend their support publicly and contribute to brand coherence.

Findings underline the prominence and importance of talent discussions in leadership meetings. Two of the top brands stated that people discussions are around talent and not on what one leader referred to as ‘people administration’. As much as financials, operations and marketing are key to all board meetings and leadership sessions, talent should feature too. Focus the people aspect of leadership discussions on talent and not on administrative human resources matters.

## Limitations and recommendations

### Limitations

The limited current literature in the field of talent and brand building in South Africa presented a limitation to the discussion of findings in the context of local literature. Furthermore, it is regrettable that the participating brands cannot be disclosed, as the five participating brands are top brands that have clearly built a strong reputation with the South African public and mentioning these brand names could motivate the importance or significance of research insights. This study was also limited to the experience and views of five of 20 corporate brands that held the number one brand position per industry or brand category in The *Sunday Times* top brands survey 2017. It is worth noting that all five of the brands still feature as top brands in the latest The *Sunday Times* top brands survey 2019/2020. A broad-based study encompassing a larger sample of top brands in South Africa can hone in to validate exploratory insights presented in this article.

### Recommendations

The collaboration between South African brand and human resources/talent leaders in employer and internal branding was not the focus of this study, but insights emerged that suggest a measure of cross-functional alignment yet low levels of brand engagement in employer and internal branding. Further research is recommended into this brand/talent collaboration and alignment. A second research recommendation stems from the revelation that attracting and retaining of millennial talent is a major challenge for South African leaders. Research is recommended into the integration of millennials into company culture, the tailoring of employer brand building to appeal to millennials and the popularly held opinion that the relationship between millennials and corporate brand purpose and values is especially significant and strong. Research is recommended into global brands in the local context, sparked by two of the companies included in this study that are multinationals, but expressed frustration in adopting or executing the global brand’s way of work locally. Further research could examine the impact of the global/local disjoint on brand building for talent. Research is also recommended into how compensation and/or benefits should be featured in the South African employer brand and employee value proposition. Most participants admitted that salary and benefits are not disclosed or even mentioned in brand building to attract talent – most surprisingly, considering that South African talent wants financial stability and job security. A final recommendation for research is what is labelled talent gaps in the middle layers. Participants indicated focus and activity at the most junior talent entry level and at the most senior leadership level, where talent is groomed for succession. Further research would shed light on talent practices in the middle layers, accounting for the bulk of employees, supervisors, leaders and specialists.

### Conclusion

It is encouraging that companies that are top South African brands are managing to attract and retain the talent required to achieve success in the organisation, despite the critical shortages of talent and the socio-economic challenges at play in South Africa. The insights gained from these brands could provide South African companies and their top management with valuable local leading practices towards the attraction and retention of talent, through brand building.

A key insight from this study, underscored by the literature, is the leading practice of clear articulation and the consequent assessment of talent. Even in a talent marketplace markedly short of skills, South African companies do not have to settle for second best or have to recruit talent at face value. The approach is to be very clear about the talent profile, set firm requirements and expectations and invest in the confirming assessments. At a time of deep socio-economic challenges, these investments not only are worthwhile but could also forestall the hiring of talent not adding value or performing according to brand or business expectations.

This research study also reveals the primary significance that the top South African brand companies predominantly attract and retain talent through their corporate brands, by positioning their corporate brands as purpose-driven and by being commercially successful. South African companies and their top management could do well to explore and pursue these leading practices and optimally leverage their corporate brands.

In respect of noticeable development and positioning of the employer and internal brand, South African companies still lagging behind in this strategic practice seem to be amongst many others. Even those companies that are positioned as top South African brands admit that their employer and internal brands are still under construction. However, the leadership of these top brands do recognise the critical role of attracting and retaining talent through brand building and are in the process of engaging their teams in the development and positioning of the employer and internal brand.

The theoretical framework of this study, the research themes, and the practical and applicable insights into the leading practices of top South African brands collectively aim to guide and serve all cross-functional business leaders – human resources and brand and line management – in the vital function of attracting and retaining talent through brand building.

## Acknowledgements

Although the companies that are top South African brands and their participating leaders may not be mentioned in order to protect their anonymity and ensure confidentiality, the researchers would like to thank these brands and their leaders for their valuable contributions and willingness to participate.

## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

## Authors' contributions

M.B.W. and C.E. collaborated in the research design that informed this jointly written article. This article derives from the MA dissertation of M.B.W. and C.E. was the supervisor of this study.

## Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

## Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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