

ONLINE PERSONAL BRAND IN THE KAZAKHSTANI HR CONTEX

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Abstract. The purpose of this paper was to study the importance Kazakhstani HR specialists place on the competitive advantage of an online personal brand of a job candidate provides compared to a CV (Resume). The results showed that the majority of the respondents find the online personal brand of a job candidate valuable. It also influences HR specialists' preselection decisions. However, the CV (Resume) remains as a more informative source compared to an online personal brand. HR specialists rarely or occasionally do online screening. However, they always screen a candidate for top managerial positions. Negative/abusive language, sexually provocative pictures (risqué pictures) or videos, or controversial political, religious, or social opinion posted online might be a reason for disqualification. The research urged the need for implementing a more insightful source of behavioural information about a candidate.

Keywords: online personal brand, competitive advantage, CV (resume), Human resources in Kazakhstan.

JEL codes: M51, M12, M59

Аңдатпа. Бұл жұмыстың мақсаты қазақстандық HR-мамандарының жұмысқа үміткердің онлайн-дербес брендінің түйіндемемен салыстырғандағы бәсекелестік артықшылық беретін мәндерді зерттеу болды. Зерттеу нәтижелері респонденттердің көпшілігі үміткердің жеке брендин маңызды деп есептейтінін көрсетті. Бұл сондай-ақ кадрлық мамандардың алдын ала шешімдеріне әсер етеді. Алайда, түйіндеме онлайн-жеке бренспен салыстырғанда ақпаратты толығырақ беретін көзі болып қалады. Кадрлық мамандар сирек немесе кейде онлайн-іріктеу жүргізеді. Алайда олар әрдайым жоғары басшы лауазымына үміткерлерді тексереді. Негативтік/қорлайтын лексика, сексуалдық-арандатушылық фотосуреттер немесе бейнелер, сондай-ақ интернетте орналастырылған даулы саяси, діни немесе әлеуметтік пікірлер, үміткерді алыстатуға негіз болуы мүмкін.

Түйін сөздер: онлайн дербес бренді, бәсекелестік артықшылық, түйіндеме, Қазақстандағы адами ресурстар. **JEL кодтар:** M51, M12, M59

Аннотация. Целью данного исследования является изучение значения, которое казахстанские HR-специалисты придают конкурентному преимуществу личного бренда в социальных сетях претендента на вакансию в сравнении с CV (Резюме). Результаты показали, что большинство респондентов оценивают личный бренд кандидата в интернете, что также влияет на предварительные решения кадровых специалистов. Однако CV (резюме) остается более информативным источником по сравнению с информацией претендента в социальных медиа. Специалисты по кадрам редко проводят онлайн-скрининг, но это не относится к кандидатам на высшие руководящие должности, чьи социальные страницы проверяются. Негативная/оскорбительная лексика, сексуально-провокационные фотографии или видео, а также спорные политические, религиозные или социальные мнения, размещенные в интернете, могут быть причиной дисквалификации.

Ключевые слова: личный бренд в социальных сетях, конкурентное преимущество, резюме, человеческие ресурсы в Казахстане.

JEL коды: M51, M12, M59

1. Introduction

1.1 Online personal brand and CV (Resume)

Globally the war for talent is raging more fiercely than ever. Hiring talent has become more competitive and costly for companies. Relying on anachronistic recruitment practices such as a CV (Resume) intensifies these challenges in developing countries such as Kazakhstan. Unfortunately, the area of innovative sources of information such as online personal branding is understudied in Kazakhstan and Central Asia as a whole. Therefore, the purpose of the research was to study the importance Kazakhstani HR specialists hold

for an online personal brand as more informative of a job candidate.

An online personal brand is more than just a set of job-specific skills. It is an authentic personal image created via a strategic process of a proactive narration of a brand promise [1]. It is communicative and more insightful of a candidate's behaviour. The brand becomes a unique personal promise of value. It allows HR specialists to build up a profile of both the individual, with whom others will work, alongside their professional capacities. The demand and price of an established personal brand grow higher in the war for talent. The online personal brand can provide more

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abundant and more diverse behavioural information.

The CV is considered as a marker providing rich information of the professional development and knowledge value [2]. However, it provides passive communication. The self-reported information in a CV often is highly polished, and in some cases, purely fake [3]. It hardly allows for visual evaluation of a candidate's level of skills and competencies compared to an online personal brand.

1.2 Social media and hiring

Social media has changed the hiring process allowing both job seekers and HR managers to reach out globally. Social networking sites (SNS) have freed the application and pre-selection process. Segal [4] stated that social media is no longer cutting-edge. It is mainstream. SNS has opened opportunities for students' self-presentation and promotion. They not only allow applicants to create web-based professional profiles where they can market themselves and interact with potential employers [5]. SNS has become a useful tool for online personal branding.

For HR professionals, a candidate's SNS profile provides a rich source of information for screening, disqualification, pre-selection, or direct hiring. They provide HR managers with a powerful screening instrument for exploring professional and personal information about job candidates. It enables human resource specialists to gain deeper insights into an applicant's personality in a more comfortable, faster and cost-effective way. Information, which can be left out from the CV/Resume and the Motivation Letter can be found on the internet and lead to disqualify a candidate [6]. Cybervetting has become a usual practice for collecting candidate's information from unofficial web sources such as social media or SNS to make a pre-selection decision. However, some consider this approach as an invasion of privacy and warn against the possible negative effect it can have on the organizational image and the brand, and even bring legal actions [7].

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) [8] identified that recruiting via social media grew with 84% of organizations using it, and 9% planned to use it in 2015. SNSs allow for access to candidate's public information; speeding up

the monitoring and pre-selection processes and providing a channel for direct communication and hiring [9]. The most preferred SNS for recruitment in 2019 were LinkedIn (87%), Facebook (55%), and Twitter (47%) [10]. SNSs also play an essential role in applicants' evaluation of their potential future employer. Corporate SNS pages allow candidates to build their perceptions of the organization's reputation and attractiveness as a workplace. Therefore, companies need to put extra effort into their SNS informative and engaging presence to win the talent war. "An organization that can provide relevant and useful information to job seekers might be perceived as more professional and competent, and hence a more attractive place to work" [11]. The high internet and social media penetration in Kazakhstan provide a fertile environment for SNS recruitment.

1.3 Kazakhstan context

Kazakhstan is one of the fastest developing countries in Central Asia. For 2020, CEOs in Kazakhstan are expecting a 55% increase in newly hired employees. It has intensified the rivalry for talent among Kazakhstani companies. It happens despite the high numbers of qualified (holding a higher education diploma) prospective employees. Between 2013 and 2018, Kazakhstani universities produced three times more students than the market needed (including vacancies) and could accommodate. Unfortunately, "the share of the unemployed with higher education and with secondary vocational education tends to increase". Unemployed are mostly young people aged 25 to 29 years. Despite the large pool of prospective employees, Kazakhstani business is in an intense competition reflects a chronic challenge of the adequacy of candidates' critical professional skills in Kazakhstan. It "impairs standards and quality and means organizations spend more than expected, and this, in turn, affects their ability to innovate effectively" [12] and remain competitive. It affects both small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) and large businesses. SMEs in Kazakhstan employs nearly 38% of all the labour force in the country in 2019. Financially, Kazakhstani SMEs depend on bank loans with high-interest rates. "SMEs are the main

borrowers from banks and account for over 80% of their business loans portfolio" [13]. Therefore, pre-selecting candidates based on a CV is a luxury they cannot afford with their limited resources.

2. Literature review

2.1 Brand and branding

A brand is a set of identifying attributes, which differentiate a company or a product from its competitors. Those tangible and intangible attributes are value-driven and resonate in consumers' expectations and fall in four main dimensions. These four leading dimensions form a brand as "a *badge* of origin that entails a *promise* of quality and performance, which *reassures* the consumer and may transform their *experience*" [14]. Brands provide organizations with a durable competitive advantage. They offer cognitive heuristics, which help people to reduce the intensity of processing new information about an organization and reach conclusions faster.

Therefore, branding is an essential process for building up a viable and distinguishing brand narrative, which takes the consumer on an online (primarily) shared journey of memorable visuals and engaging stories, which transforms an organization into a brand. Branding is a strategy of creating brand value in the eyes of the audience. It is the most durable and most effective tool used by large for-profit and non-profit organizations as well as individuals [15].

2.2 Personal branding in social networking sites

Personal branding as a concept dates back to the early 20th century. However, it was at the end of the 90s of that century when personal branding has fully emerged. Individualism, reflexivity, self-promotion, entrepreneurialism, and self-governance promoted it [16]. Social media and social networking sites enabled personal-branding to become accessible to everyone with access to the internet and social media. It is not a privilege of politicians and celebrities anymore.

A personal brand is more than just a set of job-specific skills. It is an authentic personal image that consists of perceptual, cognitive, conative, and affective components, which allows for diverse interpretations. This approach adds value

because it provides a sense of the individual with whom others will work, alongside their professional capacities. For university students, personal branding offers a valuable tool to make them stand out from the crowd with an "authentic image to be sold on the labour market" [17]. A personal brand is a social capital asset created via a strategic process of a proactive narration of a brand promise reflected in a positive personal image. The demand and price of an established personal brand grow higher in the war for talent.

Web 2.0 and social networking websites, in particular, positioned the person in the public spotlight. SNS with their key activities such as identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups facilitate self-presentation for professional growth. It happens in an immediate and overarching process of enforcement and continuous maintenance [18]. Therefore, SNS help users to leave a visible and memorable personal brand social footprint with the content they create, consume or share. The SNS provides fertile soil for "the profile owner's social status, physical attractiveness, credibility, cultural tastes and political affiliation" [19] to grow into a personal brand.

3. Purpose, method, and theoretical framework

The purpose of this inquiry was to study the importance Kazakhstani HR specialists hold for an online personal brand. The research employed a survey to achieve the purpose. It included a *purposeful volunteer sampling* of HR specialists working for different size business organizations in Kazakhstan. The sample was reached via a self-administered questionnaire created in a Google form. The link of it was shared via LinkedIn personal message. Fifty-two responses were received. However, only 41 were filled in. Therefore, the research does not claim representativeness. The research asked two research questions:

RQ1. What importance do Human Resources Officers business organizations in Kazakhstan hold for a job applicant's online personal brand?

RQ2. What online behavior do Human Resources specialists of Kazakhstani business organizations perform about an

online personal brand during the preselection of job candidates?

The study approached the online personal branding from brand positioning and capability-based view of competitive advantage theoretical perspectives. *Brand Positioning* is a communication process. It maintains an associative perceptual framework of reference within the target audience minds in comparison to the competition. The outcome of effective positioning is a “distinctive brand image or mental picture of the brand in consumers’ minds” [20]. The Brand positioning theory from personal brand perspective helps “the deployment of individuals’ identity narratives for career and employment purposes [21]. It enables individuals to build their professional image to demonstrate personal brand’s competitive benefits to a future employer.

A *competitive advantage* is a superior position, which an organization holds within the value expectations framework of customers. It relates to the generic strategy of differentiation [22]. The strategy allows an organization to outperform competitors in meeting customers’ expectations. The *Capability-Based View (CBV)* propagates that the effectiveness with which an organization can demonstrate its knowledge and resources, allows it to gain a competitive advantage [23]. At an individual level, capabilities build up the “the bundle of knowledge, attributes, and capacities that enable individuals to successfully and consistently perform an activity or task” [24]. Therefore, companies are looking for candidates with capabilities and not so many skills. Skills are useful in a stable economic environment. However, the global economic climate and business dynamics in Kazakhstan are far from being predictable.

4. Limitations

The research limits itself only to the scientific value of the results. The topic is scientifically underexplored within the context of Kazakhstan. This particular research does not pursue any practical implications in the sense providing a blueprint for Kazakhstani companies, specifically SMEs.

5. Results

RQ1. What importance do Human Resources Officers business organizations

in Kazakhstan hold for a job applicant’s online personal brand?

Kazakhstani HR specialists found the online personal brand of job candidates important. It indicated 61% of the respondents (n=35). Respectively, 37% of them viewed it as moderately important, and 24% perceived it as very important. The rest 39% of the respondents (n=16) found a little value in an online personal brand. Ten per cent (n=4) of all respondents did not have a clear-cut stance on the importance of the personal brand. For 29% of all respondents, an applicant’s brand was of little importance. Respectively, these were 24% (n=10) of them who indicated a personal brand has low importance. For 5% (n=2), the online personal brand was not important at all.

The online personal brand has some influence on HR specialists’ preselection decision of candidates. The online personal brand was very influential for 15% (n=6) of all respondents. However, for the majority, 34% (n=14) of the HR specialists, it was moderately influential. Twenty per cent (n=8) were not sure about their answer. Low influence the online personal brand had for 20% (n=8). Not influential at all it was for just 12% (n=5).

RQ2. What online behaviour do Human Resources specialists of Kazakhstani business organizations perform about an online personal brand during the preselection of job candidates?

Despite the overall positive opinion and the influence, a client’s personal brand has on HR specialists during the preselection process, the CV (Resume) remains the best recruiting instrument. For 98% (n=40) of the respondents, the CV (Resume) was a better source of information for pre-selecting an applicant for an interview compared to an online personal brand. However, 79% of the respondents spend a maximum of four minutes on a CV. Respectively, 53% of them devote 1-4 minutes, and 26% pay less than a minute.

Forty per cent (n=21) of the respondents rarely, in less than 10% of the cases, online screen a candidate. However, Kazakhstani HR specialists *always* screen a candidate’s online persona when hiring for a top managerial position, 57% (n=30) and mid-managerial level 15% (n=8). Three are the online sources they screen the most -

public profile of a candidate (91%), personal blogs (30%), pictures (30%), and a personal website (28%). The top three reasons HR specialist can disqualify a candidate are negative/abusive language 66% (35), sexually provocative pictures (risqué pictures) or videos 64% (n=34), and controversial political, religious, or social opinions 55% (n=29). The most significant number of respondents were from the financial sector (15%), and the telecommunication sector (13%).

5. Discussion

The online personal brand is an open-source of information about a job candidate. Unfortunately, the issue was not explored in the Kazakhstani HR context. It is a more transparent and communicative source of information compared to a CV (Resume). Properly developed, it could demonstrate the capabilities of a candidate and provide him or her a definite competitive advantage. Thus, large companies could break the vicious cycle of hiring with a compromise, which in turn affects their performance. For SMEs, it could mean their market survival. The CV (Resume) is a passive and limited source of information, which continues to be used as a significant source of data on a job candidate. However, the provided self-reported information in a CV frequently is highly polished and, in some cases, purely padded, which at the minimum wastes a company's time and money. It would have the most substantial adverse effect on small and medium-sized enterprises (SME). SMEs in Kazakhstan employs nearly 38% of all the labour force in the country in 2019. Every four out of ten employees work for a small or medium-sized Kazakh business [25]. They can hardly afford the luxury to spend their limited human, financial, and time resources on pre-selecting candidates based on a CV. Financially SMEs in Kazakhstan depend on bank loans with high-interest rates. "SMEs are the main borrowers from banks and account for over 80% of their business loans portfolio" [13].

CV is a passive way of communication compared to an online personal brand of a candidate. Therefore, sifting through hundreds of applicants' CVs and Motivation Letters is hardly the most effective way to find those candidates with skills and competences at a satisfying level. Moreover, experience in one corporate

cultural context can hardly predict future high level of job performance. An online personal brand is communicative and far more informative and insightful about the candidate's behaviour. The brand becomes a personal calling card - a unique promise of value [26]. Consequently, this would increase the chances of large companies to break the vicious cycle of hiring with a compromise, which affects their level of performance. For SMEs, it could mean their market survival.

6. Conclusion

The current research has opened the research niche the contemporary phenomenon of online personal branding as an alternative to the CV (resume). Globally Human resources managers have started actively using social networking sites and social media for screening candidates for a job position. Human resources departments bear the burden of high responsibility for making the right selection of job candidates for their companies.

Labour markets of developing countries can be characterized with intense rivalry (graduates, job movers), high threats of new entrants (national and foreign graduates from international universities), and substitutes (silver employees – pensioners). The changing labour market dynamics in Kazakhstan require HR specialists to reconsider certain "quick selection" instruments. These, usually turn out to be ineffective with millennials and generation Z employees. More refined and insightful sources of behavioural information demonstrating to a certain extent the capabilities and so much the skills of the candidates are needed. Online personal brands demonstrating candidate's capabilities help HR specialists and recruiters to find talents who better "understand the context, to tinker with alternative solutions, and to develop and creatively apply new amalgamations of techniques to achieve better results" [27]. Contrary, skills are tactical and effective in a stable economic environment. Therefore, HR departments compete for "one or more attributes that many buyers in an industry perceive as important and uniquely positions itself to meet those needs" [22].

On an oversaturated with diploma holders job market, it is insufficient to rely on the CV, diploma, and the overall image

of the university candidates graduated. The CV provides hard-to-track padded information. The diploma does not necessarily signify its holders' skills and capabilities. The university is a giving and requiring institution. However, how much a candidate has taken and returned as a quality learning does not directly correlate with their personal and professional development as university students. However, it is a fact that "students' lack of knowledge about how to communicate their skills to employers and how to seek out employment opportunities" [24].

The significant theoretical implication is that the current paper opened a scientific niche for exploration, specifically within the context of Central Asia. Directions for further research are abundant. One possible

direction might be what Kazakhstani culture-specific features affect personal brand development. Another direction of inquiry could be the positive or negative historical influences of the Soviet Union on the current HR management perception of online personal branding. A third research direction could be how much and how well do universities prepare students to stand out from the job crowd. A fourth direction that could be pursued in research is the level of effectiveness of particular SNS (Vkontakte, Instagram, LinkedIn, Facebook) in finding the best talent as well as the most preferable employer. A fifth, direction may follow the research line of social media literacy as well as recruitment literacy of Kazakhstani SMEs owners, for improving their hiring practices.

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ҚАЗАҚСТАНДЫҚ HR ОРТАСЫНДАҒЫ ОНЛАЙН ДЕРБЕС БРЕНДІ

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ОНЛАЙН ЛИЧНЫЙ БРЕНД В КАЗАХСТАНСКОМ HR-КОНТЕКСТЕ

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