



EMPLOYER BRANDING & COVID-19 : ARE THERE WINNERS?

While Covid-19 kept us apart, corporate communication on professional social networks has increased but shifted. Employers have taken a stand to more solidarity and acknowledgment to individuals. Can we expect an evolution on the employer brand in the long-run?

Covid-19 : communication to combat distancing

Social distancing has emerged as the iconic measure against the spread of the Coronavirus. During the lockdown, the notion of *presence* has been put to the test, until it became an intangible notion. However, "physical" distancing and social alienation do not necessarily go hand in hand.

To embody presence in a different way, the riposte was to communicate more. This idea applies to both private and professional settings. Actually, professional social networks have seemed more animated than ever during the Covid-19 crisis, filled both with individual voices and companies' stories.



Corporate communication on professional social networks: an impact on the employer brand

Communication as a marketing tool

By taking part on social professional networks, a company positions itself within an economic and social ecosystem. *Content marketing* for example, is proliferating on LinkedIn: by providing information based on experience within the organization, the company demonstrates its relevance and expertise to customers and other stakeholders. Thus, social networks are – rightly so - considered as important channels for marketing campaigns, especially to reach B2B clients.

Professional social network and audience duality

The intention may be only to communicate for commercial purpose. But doing so, organizations affect also - sometimes unknowingly- their employer brand. Indeed, a duality exists within the audience of professional social network: each active member is simultaneously standing as a professional representative of his/her employer and as an individual. He or she is thus either a potential collaborator or hater, advocating or opposing the company's position as an employer. Any content will bring the individual to form an opinion on the company in general, including in its employer dimension.

Perception of the organization as an employer

That means that corporate communication shapes also the employer brand.

HR leaders already acknowledge the importance of employer branding and how it can be a strong lever for recruitment purposes. Furthermore, academic studies show that employer brand is a key factor for employee retention¹, employees' efficiency and corporate reputation².

Employer brand

The employer brand embodies the identity, image and distinctiveness of the organization as an employer. It stands as the result of individuals' perception on these items.

Employer branding

Employer branding is the active shaping of *employer brand*. It includes the firm's values, systems, policies and behaviours to attract, motivate and retain current and future employees.

¹ Tanwar K, Prasad A, 2016, Exploring the Relationship between Employer Branding and Employee Retention

² KOYS, Daniel J. Human Resources Management and Fortune's Corporate Reputation Survey, *Employees Responsibilities and Rights Journal*, 1997, Vol 10, No. 2, pp 93-101.

We need to go beyond the professional social network as a pure marketing or recruitment tool. By integrating the foundation elements of a solid HR strategy into the external communication, organizations can maximize their impact on all audiences, including the broad working public.

Employer brand under pressure

For these reasons, Sia Partners has launched a thorough review on employer branding contents. We analysed the content publicly available on LinkedIn of 16 companies during April 2020 and April 2019. We came to the conclusion that Covid-19 impacted massively – yet confusingly- company’s employer branding.

The Covid-19 health crisis has turned many organizations upside down, and has also profoundly changed employer’s communication practices. Yet, in the absence of a clearly stated HR strategy in external communication, the positive impact of Covid-19 on the employer brand can be considered merely as a happy coincidence.

The increase of employer communications during the Covid-19 crisis

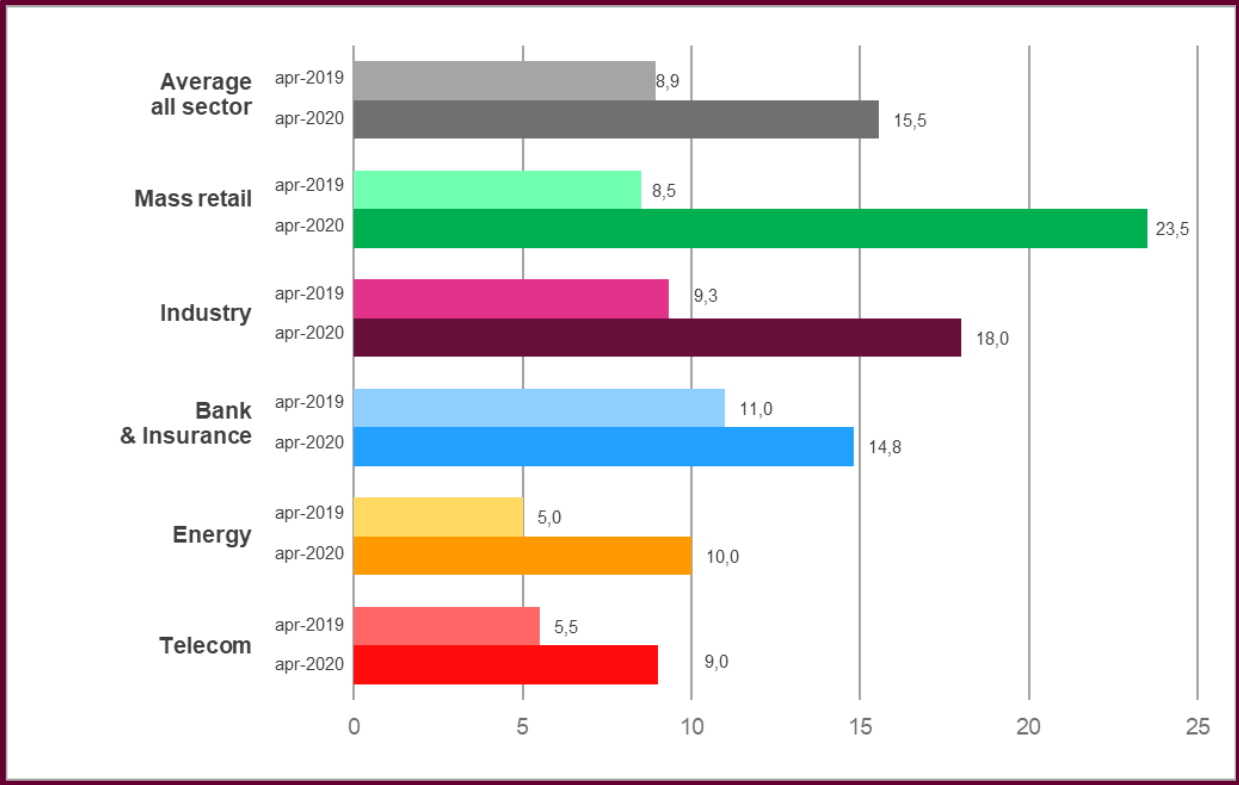
Increasing employer publications

Corporate communications have proven to be an essential tool to create stability during the Covid-19 lockdown period. Hence, we observed that the number of **LinkedIn publications, linked to employer branding, doubled between April 2019 and April 2020.**

It appears that the bigger the impact of Covid-19 on the nature and volume of the company’s activities, the greater the increase in employer branding content.

Limited increase in Banking & Insurance and Telecom

The volume and nature of activities of the Banking & Insurance and Telecom businesses have remained relatively stable. The Banking & Insurance and Telecom sectors hence experienced a modest increase of **+35%** and **+64%** respectively.



Evolution of the number of employer brand-related content on LinkedIn, by sector, April 2019 - April 2020

Banking & Insurance companies have had an established presence on LinkedIn for long. The relative evolution then remains low compared to other sectors. Telecom, on the other hand, have mainly communicated on adjustments to products and services. These pure commercial communications have little impact on the employer brand as such and are thus not considered as employer branding content.

Strong increase in publications for sectors impacted in the nature of their operations

The companies operating in Industry and Energy saw their operations strongly impacted by the Covid-19 crisis. As a result, **the number of their employer publications doubled**.

For both sectors, activities shifted to meet emerging needs during the crisis. Energy focused on household consumption, Industry companies often operated a pivot of activity to meet health needs (creation of breathing valves for the automotive industry, manufacture of masks in the textile industry ...).

The increase of employer branding publications hence account for a thoughtful explanation of the company's purpose and activities. Energy and Industry activities might be obscure to the general public; the Covid-19 crisis has shown an opportunity to highlight the reality and the societal benefits of their activities.

Boom in employer branding posts for the Mass Distribution sector

Finally, by the "essential nature" of their activities, mass distribution companies have strongly communicated on employer-related topics. The publications rose from an average of **8.5 to 23.5 per company** between April 2019 and April 2020.

The contact between customers and companies has remained during the crisis: either through a laptop or mobile phone screen, or at grocery shops checkout. the daily service provided by mass distribution was one of the most tangible during the Covid-19 lockdown.

Mass distribution companies took advantage of all the channels available to reassure on the measures taken to protect employees on the "front line". The gain is twofold: being perceived as a responsible company and increasing customers' trust. According to a Social Listening study conducted by Sia Partners, employee protection is the second most appreciated **corporate** measure by consumers, after donations to hospitals. ³

The increase in employer branding content also goes with a shift in themes: there are more and more posts on daily activities and protections towards workers. Indeed, the health crisis has opened up new topics for employer communication, as much as it has limited some messages.

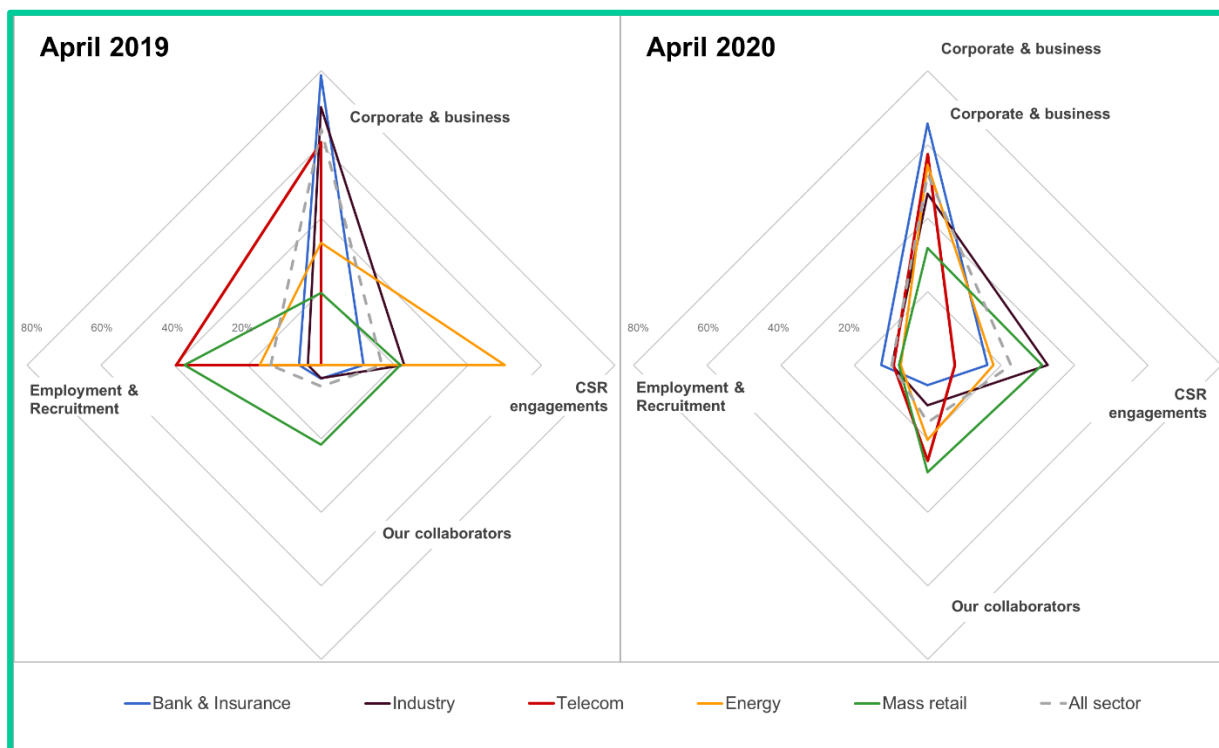


³ Meet new expectations and build long-lasting relationships with customers, Sia Partners, avril 2020

Themes evolution for employer-brand related content

We have observed an evolution of the themes present in the LinkedIn publications relating to the employer brand between April 2019 and April 2020. Each employer publication uses one or more of the following themes:

In 2019, the sectors communicated in a rather differentiated way on the 4 themes. During the crisis, it seems that all sectors have preferred the following themes. The institutional aspect is still the main element of employer communication; however, CSR commitment and publications about collaborators are strongly increasing in number and share. On the other hand, the Employment and Recruitment share is decreasing for almost all studied sectors.



**Breakdown of employer-branding content themes by sector
April 2019 – April 2020**

	Description	Impact on target audiences
Institutional & business	These publications position the company in its economic ecosystem: structuring project, acquisition, annual report, experts analysis of market trends...	These publications are an indicator of the company's good economic health. They establish the company's prestige and reassure about its economic capacity.
Our CSR commitments	These publications publicise the commitments made with regard to Corporate Social Responsibility: they clarify the company's vision of its place and impact in society.	More and more workers pay attention to aligning the company's social and environmental commitments with their own value system.
Employment and Recruitment	These publications highlight the company's actions for employment: announcements and recruitment events, information on social benefits, measures to protect workers...	These publications bring along engaging and reassuring perspectives on the company as an employer, through involvement for a better form of employment.
Our collaborators	These publications celebrate the individuals within the company: their work, their achievements, their initiatives. This can take the form of a testimonial, a direct tag or a visual portrait.	Employees embody the company. Them being put in the spotlight, helps external professionals to imagine the day-to-day work in the company. These publications also highlight how the values carried by the organization are translated into business life for all its employees.

Recruitment content "on hold"

Unsurprisingly, the Employment and Recruitment dimension declined between April 2019 and April 2020, from 14% to 10% as a share of total employer publications.

The economic context is uncertain, as is the recruitment outlook. Many companies have put hiring *on-hold* as a result of the Covid-19 crisis. This can be seen in the proportion of posts specifically aimed at candidates: campus events, active advertising for critical -even in the context of a crisis- vacancies (IT, data, etc.) have been put on hold.

However, the sharp drop in these publications is partially offset by the messages focused on protective measures towards employees' health. These publications provide reassurance about the ability to work, as much as they embed the organization's responsibility as regards to employees' safety.

Collaborators' Acknowledgements

The employees were particularly brought to the fore during Covid-19 lockdown. The number of employee-related publications increased sevenfold between 2019 and 2020, and their relative share jumped from 6% to 16%.

The Energy sector, which showed little to no activity in 2019, initiated its efforts in 2020, with a strong focus on employees: 20% of their publications feature employees in their daily work or their CSR commitment. The same applies to the Telecom sector, which has increased from 0% to 26% of communications referring to one or more individual employees.

We have seen an increase in appraisal messages, particularly from the mass distribution sector. For many, lockdown has translated into a secluded and secure working life. Comparatively, work "on the field" is perceived and celebrated by all as risky and essential, therefore heroic. Delhaize, has for instance adapted its communication strategy

and shares every Friday "*verbatim messages*" from all employees and customers in a #feelgoodfriday post focused on employees.



Sustained corporate and CSR communications

Among the other employer communication themes, Corporate Social Responsibility commitments continue to play an increasingly important role, accounting for a quarter of employer communications in 2020 on LinkedIn. It should be noted that in the Industry and Retail sectors, this theme is becoming almost as important as traditional institutional and business communication.

This institutional & business communication still remains the major axis of employer communication for any sector. Despite a decrease in share compared to 2019, it continues to represent the largest topic of LinkedIn publications in 2019 and 2020.

Firms that communicate on the institutional and business aspects meet two expectations of the working public: to reassure on the economic capacity and to establish expertise, in other words assert the leading position of the organization in the economic system. In the context of this social crisis that the world has experienced, it can nevertheless be argued that such communications seem rather cold compared to the other themes.

Transitioning from a passive employer brand to an active employer branding platform

Employer communication during Covid-19, common intentions and weak differentiation

If employer communications reassured individuals while they needed it, what messages are left today to working public? Have companies managed to influence their perception as employers in the long-run?

The thematic shift in employer publications is a common movement across sectors studied and does not have a strong differentiating character. It is therefore questionable whether the positive impression of employer communication at Covid-19 is and will remain associated to a particular organisation.

HR tools for the employer brand

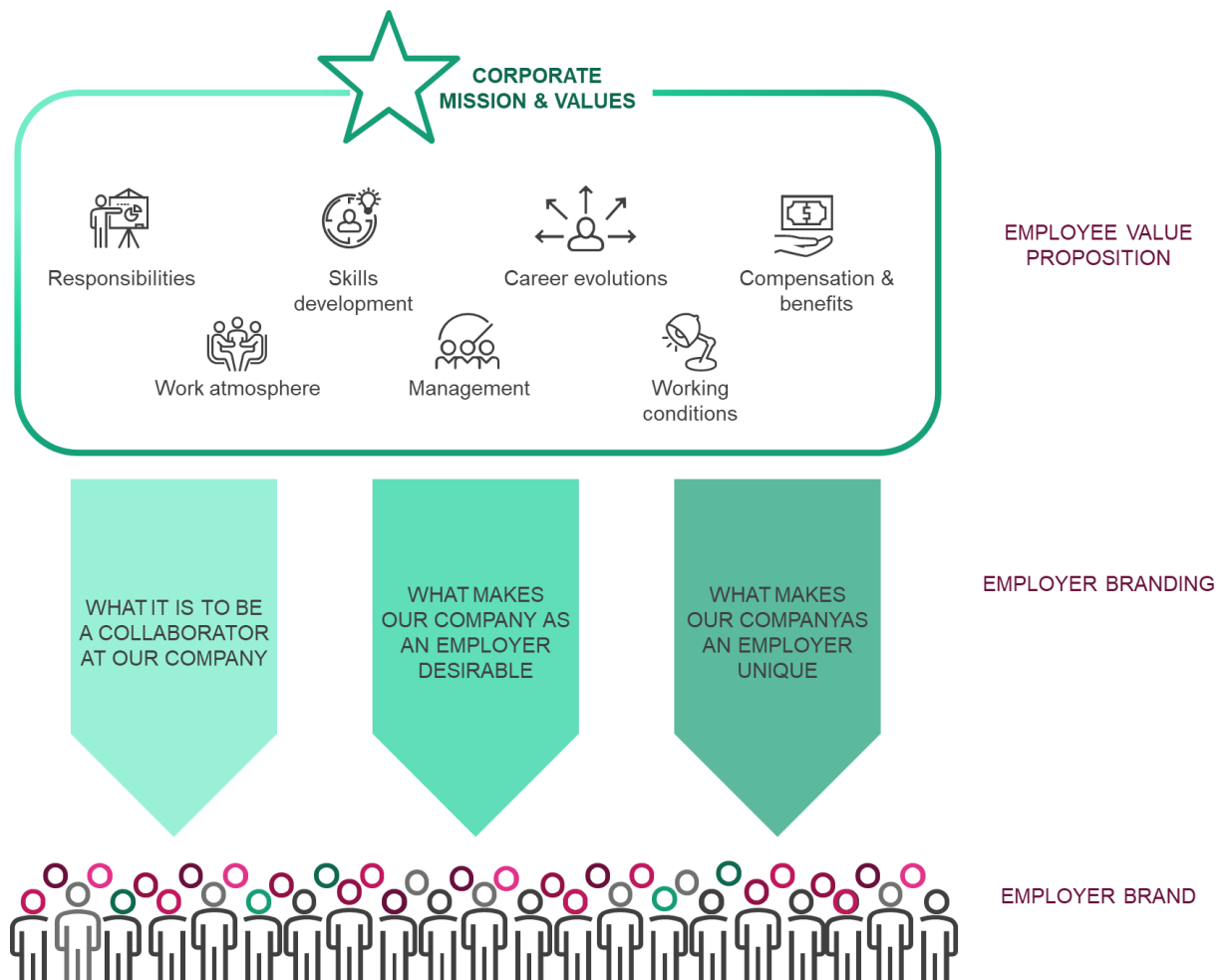
However, it is to be noted that the movement initiated in terms of employer branding addresses a general need for transparency and intimacy. While the post Covid-19 era brings its

HR issues, good crisis initiatives might provide solutions or alternatives.

This period can become an opportunity for collective self-reflection. HR departments must ask the questions: how does the company work with its employees? What does it offer them and what does it demand of them? What can it offer to the rest of the workers?

While collectively answering these, HR leaders will be brought to foresee the gains linked to a strong employee value proposition – it is also part of their responsibility to warn the rest of management of the costs and risks of not having one. Once the unique employee value proposition is settled, a clear employer branding platform must be built to rationalize any communication touching the working audience. Methodologies exist, and they come to structure a reflection sometimes charged with a strong emotional value.

By raising awareness of the nature and potential of their employer brand, organizations will strengthen their collective of employees. The aim is to be capable of mobilizing all resources to participate collectively in the corporate mission, even in hard times.



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