

Internal Branding:

Does It Improve Employees' Quality Of Life?

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact of a burgeoning corporate practice, internal branding (IB), on employees' quality of life (EQOL), suggesting that a positive correlation between the two is necessary in order for IB programs to succeed. In order to provide some background into IB, its evolution and rationale for modern corporate practice is outlined. Then, the process is described in theoretical terms, based on one brand consultancy's approach to it. In turn, reactions of employees who were engaged in an IB project developed by this consultancy are explored: did the process positively affect their quality of life? Based on observed gaps between theory and practice, a perspective is offered for maximizing the positive effect of IB on EQOL and in turn the success of IB programs.

I. Introduction

In the corporate world, IB is justified by its return on investment. As *The New York Times* (25 July 2001), notes: “Companies have become painfully aware that sending the right message to their employees is just as important as making a good impression with customers, vendors and investors.” It is widely believed that financial rewards can be realized from a reputation built on the organizational cohesion that a brand can provide.

As IB is generally understood as a program for encouraging employee behaviors that align with “the brand”—as a corporate-sponsored, profit-driven, customer-facing image—one might think that the impact it has on employees’ quality of life is irrelevant as a marker of success. After all, if the program makes sense for the company, and there are employees who will go along with it, then those who cannot or will not can simply be dismissed: IB can be implemented without them.

The author of this paper argues that such a view reveals a fundamental misconception about what branding is and how it provides value to an organization. Originally intended to guarantee quality, brands now provide a sense of meaningful identity that is distinct from the particular product or service being offered. In other words, a brand adds value to the products or services a company offers by imbuing them with emotional, social, and even spiritual resonance. Branding adds a spirit and a soul to what would otherwise be a robotized, automated, generic price-value proposition. As Hamish Mcrae writes:

The genius of the manufacturers was to take a device used to provide a guarantee of quality and turn it into a symbol of status. So when you wear Levis you are making a statement about yourself: that though you are a solicitor in north London (or whatever) you have the rugged, independent values of the American west. (Source: "Comment," *The Independent* [UK], 21 November 2001, p. 4)

If branding is ultimately about the creation of human meaning, it follows logically that it is humans who must ultimately provide it. Moreover, these humans must deliver the brand meaning in a way that resonates as honest rather than forced or artificial. From this perspective, successful IB cannot merely be imposed on employees, who are in turn rendered passive, powerless, and organizationally peripheral in "forwarding the message" to the public. Rather, employees must *totally believe* in the brand's higher vision—one that goes beyond the product or service being sold. They not only "go along" with the program but *passionately advocate* for this vision, must see it as a means by which not only the company but they, themselves, can become self-actualized. In short, the brand must be so powerfully appealing that not only the organization but individuals within it find self-fulfillment in aligning themselves, and their behaviors, against it.

In short, this paper argues that the well-branded organization is necessarily composed of people who experience a high QOL. Although QOL can be defined in a variety of ways, here we measure it in terms of how meaningful the individual perceives their existence to be. Thus branding and QOL are viewed as sharing a

singular quality: the perception and pursuit of meaning. As the one increases, so should the other.

II. Methodology

This paper draws upon extensive primary and secondary research in the realm of IB theory and practice, including academic and corporate-sponsored research studies, media reports, and books centering on excellence in brand and business management.

Primary research includes exploratory interviews conducted with employees of a former client of The Brand Consultancy (sponsor of the Institute for Brand Leadership), a strategic brand consultancy offering a full range of brand-related services, which specializes in the growing field of IB. It also includes interviews with senior consultants at The Brand Consultancy, as well as executives at Hewitt Associates, a firm specializing in human resources ideas, services, and products, including IB (a.k.a. “employer branding”). Further, a qualitative survey of several message boards was conducted to gain insights from individuals working for well-known “internally branded” employers. Anecdotal, more general evidence for the relationship between work culture and employee quality of life was also obtained from this and other sites that encourage employees to discuss their feelings about the workplace.

The author notes that any conclusions drawn from this study should be viewed as preliminary and exploratory, rather than definitive. This is due to the scarcity of primary and secondary research on internal branding from the employees' perspective. Our topic resides within an emerging field of theory and practice, and far more in-depth study is warranted than the scope of this project could allow.

III. From Product Brands To The Branded “Organization (Wo)Man”

The idea that labor is more important than land or capital is not new. Today, some of the most highly respected leaders of Corporate America espouse it— Jack Welch, Dee Hock, and Richard Branson, and Howard Schultz are just a few examples. Decades ago, in fact, Procter & Gamble CEO Richard Deupree expressed this idea eloquently: “If you leave us our money, our buildings and our brands, but take away our people, our company will fail. But if you take away our money, our buildings and our brands, but leave us all our people, we can rebuild the whole thing in a decade.” (cited in Macrae, *Journal of Marketing Management*, 1999)

Together, employees create an organizational culture: a normative “way of life” that is transmitted from established members of the culture to newcomers. The recognized effect of culture on business performance has given rise to a number of discourses seeking to manage and control it, such as Total Quality

Management (TQM), internal marketing, and others. However, the mid- to late 1990s saw substantial change in emphasis in these conversations. What began as an attempt to control the behavior of generic people in a generic workplace, is metamorphosing into an attempt to control the beliefs of self-consciously branded individuals, operating in a branded work world.

How did this happen, and what does it mean?

It is widely recognized that we are living in an age where brand increasingly equals the business model itself. Advertising and marketing are losing their impact, because what is for sale is increasingly *not* the product or service. The marketplace moves so quickly to copy winning formulas that quality, relatively low cost, and even excellent service have become a price of entry for most items.

When it becomes impossible for a product to compete on the basis of its functional benefits—when the consumer begins to believe that there is no significant difference between a \$5 and a \$75 pair of sneakers—then brand becomes all important. Brands have equity because they imbue generic products and services with a unique soul; they offer the buyer a sense of meaning and identity. As a recent cover story in *BusinessWeek* (6 August 2001) proclaimed: “A belief in the power of brands and brand management has spread far beyond the traditional consumer-goods marketers who invented the discipline. For companies in almost every industry, brands are important in a way they never were before.”

Because brands are ultimately so personal, it is impossible to communicate them by advertising alone. As the Hebrew saying goes, “words that emanate from the heart are accepted by the heart.” It takes *people* to sell the Starbucks experience, to provide the Four Seasons feeling, the Nike sense of accomplishment, the McDonald's smile. The classiest logo, the funniest TV commercial, the most accessible website, even the cleverest product placement cannot replace the human touch.

Strapped for competitive advantage in an oversaturated market, organizations of all kinds, selling all manner of products and services, are catching on to this reality. They understand that only people can brand products effectively—that one must sell not just a branded product, but a mass of branded people who stand behind it. There is a growing understanding that success requires a *branded* corporate personality that is stamped, replicated, and irrevocably marked on the inside of each and every dedicated individual whose name is on the payroll.

Ironically, the idea that an organization must focus on branding its people can be traced to one of the leading proponents of “free agency” in this day and age: Tom Peters. In a landmark 1997 article titled “The Brand Called You” (which later evolved into *The Brand You 50*), Peters shared with *Fast Company* readers the secret of success: to market one's self as if it were a product. The article reads like a manifesto:

You're not an 'employee' of General Motors, you're not a 'staffer' at General Mills, you're not a 'worker' at General Electric or a 'human resource' at General Dynamics....You don't 'belong to' any company for life....You're not defined by your job title and you're not confined by your job description. Starting today you are a brand. You're every bit as much a brand as Nike, Coke, Pepsi, or the Body Shop.

Although aimed at the individual worker, Peters' article was also relevant to the management at the very corporate behemoths he urged people to liberate themselves from. Clearly, if successful individuals were the equivalent of a branded "Me, Inc.", the converse was also true: successful organizations were the equivalent of a branded human personality. Thus, the Holy Grail of branding has become the pursuit of one big collective "Me"—a massive organization that seems consistently, authentically human.

Viewed in this light, it is perhaps not so coincidental that The Brand Consultancy (TBC) was founded in the same year as Peters' article appeared. (Note: TBC established and continues to be the sole sponsor of the Institute for Brand Leadership, and this author is formally affiliated with both entities.) Looking back, cofounder and chief brand strategy officer Alan Bergstrom—who began his consulting career with futurist John Naisbitt (*Megatrends*)—comments:

Everyone was talking about branding as a way to create an image or identity through advertising. But that ignored the other places that the brand is tested, like distribution, packaging, quality, customer service, and so on. It was easy to make the case that presentation and distribution needed to be managed in a way

that was 'on-brand,' because nobody had a problem quantifying or controlling those tangibles. *But the intangible things—specifically, the conscious or unconscious messages created by employees of the organization—were not being addressed.* There was a desperate need for senior leadership to step in and be proactive about monitoring how people felt after dealing with customer service. (emphasis added)

Bergstrom gives the experience of buying a car to illustrate:

I drive up to the dealership and I can't find a place to park. So I drive out to find a place a park. I'm not thinking, God, this is a bad brand following what's happened. But something is going off in my mind subconsciously that may be a contributing factor.

Then I walk in the front door. Immediately as I walk in, three salespeople descend on me. I feel like I'm a piece of fresh meat that's just been thrown into a cage of hungry tigers. I'm not necessarily thinking, why, this is a horrible brand, but something is going on in my head that's forming an opinion.

Finally I find somebody who's interested in me, but he goes through a canned pitch. Now, I'm thinking in my head, this person is a jerk. Maybe not necessarily that the brand is negative, but subconsciously, again, the association is forming in my head.

So I sit in the car, maybe I test drive it, and I get some reassurance. Then I come back and say, well, I'm interested at least in exploring the cost, whether I can afford it. So, I sit down with the guy and we play a little game and we get to the point and then I get passed off to the finance person. And I don't like it.

This is just an example. But a lot of these negative experiences are tied back to what I would call internal branding. There are things that the company can control that currently aren't being considered part of that brand impression or brand perception activity, but nonetheless, they really are. Everybody within the organization is involved in delivering the brand in some way, shape, or form.

There is and should be a process and a discipline associated with it.

Far from a short-term campaign, then, IB is a long-term process of adjusting employee behaviors—*from the top down and side to side*—not merely to “conform” to a desired identity but to live, breathe, sustain, and revitalize it willingly. At a time when advertising is on the decline, IB is becoming a “hot commodity” in the world of consulting. “Everyone,” it seems, is joining the fray, from purebred brand consultancies like Interbrand, to specialized “boutique brands” like Banner McBride (owned by advertising giant WPP), Philosophy IB, and Trium; employment agencies, like the Bernard Hodes Group; Vanguard (known as much for its outstanding customer service as its mutual funds) and more.

IV. Where The Money Is

Starbucks, Disney, Southwest Airlines, Aramark, Saab, Holiday Inn, Host Marriott Services, Wal-Mart, Nestle, Home Depot, and GlaxoSmithKline are among the organizations that use IB techniques (although they may not use that term specifically). They do so as an investment:

- “I put it into two words—quality and loyalty. Our branding effort has increased the quality of our product and our processes. We never would have been able to do it without this initiative. Quality and loyalty are the key outcomes, and they are both measurable in terms of turnover, product, and everything else we do. —Allan Stefl, Nestle, quoted in “Engaging Employees With Your Brand: Preliminary Findings,” The Conference Board, 2001

- A Hewitt Associates survey of HR and corporate communications professionals found a strong belief that IB “retains current employees” (93%), “increases employee engagement or satisfaction” (91%), “attracts job candidates” (90%), “motivates employees in their work” (79%), and “leads to improved business results” (71%)—*Hewitt Magazine*, 2001

In this early stage of IB gone mainstream, companies tend to rely on it for particularistic uses, rather than in its more powerful, diffused incarnation, as a means for creating independent brand ambassadors. Such applications include:

- *Attracting highly qualified employees.* As Bernard Stamler writes in *The New York Times* (5 July 2001): “Despite cutbacks and layoffsmany companies are undertaking large-scale campaigns....aimed at creating a brand message for employees, just as they create one for consumers.”

- *Training employees to communicate a certain desired message.* A recent *CityBusiness* (6 July 2001) profile of Guidant, a manufacturer of implantable cardiac devices, discussed its use of internal branding to distinguish the company from competitors Medtronic and St. Jude Medical. One of its key goals, according to Jeff Sims, VP of reliability and quality assurance, is to

keep employees from saying things like, “We do the same thing Medtronic does.”

Some companies have gone farther than this, incorporating IB techniques into their organizations in order to transform personalities at the individual level, and the culture at a broader level. The idea is to create a system populated by the kind of people whose behaviors will support corporate messages both internally and externally. For example, at Home Depot, employees are encouraged to take on the entrepreneurial spirit of do-it-yourself customers by purposefully mingling with them; at Wal-Mart, morning meetings begin with a ritual company cheer.

(Source: *CIO Enterprise Magazine*, 15 January 1999)

Then there are a few pioneering organizations who have taken IB to the next level. In this kind of company, the brand creates a very strong, very personal sense of meaning that goes beyond enacting cultural norms independently and extends to a personal way of life for the employee. Virgin exemplifies this. As the author noted in a previous study (“Taking A Brand Global: Ten Steps To Success,” 2001):

Virgin is well-known as an outstanding example of living the brand. The company breathes its essence...throughout an extensive line of sub-organizations, products and services. How does the organization do it so well? In a recent interview with Martin Firrell and William Maughan of *Brand Strategy* [2 November 2000] Virgin Mobile’s brand director, James Kydd, shed some light on the operational factors that make it so resilient. First, he noted, founder Sir Richard Branson has a “long-term vision” fundamentally centered on the idea of “trust and

delivering.” Therefore, all corporate activity is about seeking to realize one goal: “to better the consumer experience.” With the brand essence clear, employees are given a great deal of autonomy in terms of reaching strategic goals along the way. The combination of a strongly articulated vision and “accountability and responsibility and freedom” among employees in terms of implementing that vision means that the company has tremendous latitude in terms of executing the brand in different arenas.

Southwest Airlines (SA) is another organization famed for the impact of its brand—whose essence is “freedom”—both internally and externally. For SA, Hewitt Associates helped translate the concept into HR programs meant to be personally relevant for the employees—so that the external brand line, “A Symbol of Freedom,” became “Freedom Begins With Me” on the inside. The idea was that just as SA employees create the conditions under which customers are free to fly, SA would in turn create programs to support personal freedom for its employees, in key aspects of their lives. These include: health, financial security, work/life balance, travel, learning/growth, making a positive difference, creativity/innovation, and connectedness. (Source: *The New York Times*, 5 July 2001)

V. A Theoretical Roadmap

As IB proliferates, so do the number of firms offering a unique approach for its implementation. This paper discusses one such methodology, that of TBC, in

order to illuminate the extent to which employee buy-in can be recognized as a key factor in the success of such programs. It can be briefly summarized as “the 5 C’s”: clarity, commitment, communications, culture and compensation.

(In a perfect world this researcher would be able to compare “theory” with “practice” and deliver points where the theory “worked” or “did not work,” but the reality of client engagements prevents such a sanitized comparison.)

Debra Semans, formerly of Holiday Inn Worldwide and TBC, has formally outlined these stages in a presentation to the American Marketing Association. Her explanatory comments have been adapted for the section below to provide a brief overview.

A. Clarity

Step one is to arrive at a binding decision as to what the brand represents and how that should be communicated in words and images. It can be divided into two stages.

First, there is constituency assessment, meaning comprehensive interviews of groups who are engaged with the brand to talk about what it means to them. This includes senior management, middle and lower-level employees, partners, vendors, clients, industry analysts, regulators—the whole gamut. “You look at where the company is grounded,” says Diane Beecher, senior partner and chief brand communications officer at TBC, “what promises it can certainly keep. Then

you ask what it might be able to do if it tried—and face up to what is never, realistically, going to happen.” The viewpoints of employees, including disaffected and former employees, are viewed as critical in this stage. In fact, merely doing the interviews is seen as a means of promoting support among employees for the culture change that will need to occur if the brand engagement is to be successful. For this reason, it is key that personnel are interviewed in a confidential, anonymous manner, so that they can say what they have to say without fear of retribution.

Second, senior leadership must decide on key brand attributes, for translation into language and visual symbols that become the cornerstone of the brand’s “face” and “voice” (TBC calls this Face of the Brand™ and Voice of the Brand, respectively). These are taken to a strategically chosen team—“people who think branding as opposed to advertising,” Beecher notes, adding: “Every single person involved in putting the brand together really has to get that this is a long-term, meaningful, strategic, business effort—not ‘Whassup,’ or the pet sock, the creative flavor of the day.” By this stage, it is viewed as critical that the attributes chosen are relevant, believable, and desirable to employees at all levels (not just senior management), because if people do not live the brand then it merely becomes another document, sitting on a shelf.

B. Commitment

Step two, commitment, is the process of building consensus within the organization as to the meaningfulness and relevance of the “new”—revitalized, integrated, refocused—brand. Here again, the buy-in of employees is the difference between success and failure. To overcome skepticism about organizational commitment to IB, Semans recommends a variety of tools, including a brand task force as well as educational programs that talk about the relationship between people and the seemingly abstract brand they are supposed to serve.

It may seem, from this description, that a robot-like commitment to “brand behavior” is the goal. However, the real goal is independent belief in its meaning. Bergstrom notes that commitment to the brand goes hand-in-hand with experiencing a personal sense of reward as a result. At Saab, feeling empowered turned 16,000 employees into “brand owners”:

They were engaged in a conversation about what the brand stands for, what the brand is trying to accomplish externally, and began to understand that each and every employee was part and parcel of delivering that. It came down to the fact that if they didn't develop the right kind of relationship with the customer fast, their company was going to go out of business. The company is only good as the brand.

So they felt engaged. They felt energized. And they then asked to create the initiatives for keeping the brand strong. It wasn't management telling them what to do, but management supporting them in figuring out what to do. And the beauty of it was, the same people who generated the ideas were the ones

responsible for implementing them. Not only that, they set their own rewards. It's really, really powerful when you do it that way.

In the end, they were completely into the brand, they understood it. They were connected and working on that assembly line for the brand, in effect for themselves, because they were part of the brand.

As time passes, and the initial enthusiasm for the brand initiative fades away, it is also believed that having a brand-educated workforce and dedicated brand team will keep the momentum going. In addition, these should serve to lessen conflict around future brand-related decisions, as the question becomes "what is 'on-brand?'" rather than "who is right?"

C. Communications

Once the brand has been codified, and there exists a basic commitment to its importance throughout the organization, TBC's next programmatic step is to communicate it.

Today, effective communication of the brand is perceived as so important (and perhaps even so risky), that corporations may even hire external specialists to talk to their own employees. As Thom Weidlich reports in *The New York Times* (25 July 2001), General Motors has tasked an external consultant with the "crucial management task" of overseeing internal employee communication, Nextel has retained PR firm Porter Novelli to communicate the three-year business strategy internally, and Delta Air Lines recently hired workplace

communications specialist Banner McBride to build consensus for its 2000 rebranding effort. Dan Lewis, director of corporate communications at Delta, told the *Times* that hiring the outside consultancy helped them to communicate “what a brand is and why it makes any difference at all to a front-line employee.”

At TBC, again, general guidelines for brand communications reflect a deeply felt need for employees to approve of and appreciate the process. The following elements demonstrate this emphasis:

- *Leader example:* The people in charge of the business are also asked to take charge of the brand. (If they don't care, the thought goes, why should the employees?)
- *High frequency:* Telling people over and over again what the message is, over an extended period of time, rather than relying on a one-shot brochure or mass voicemail or email.
- *Multiple channels:* Communicating in as many ways and across as many media as possible, preferably implicitly rather than explicitly (“let's talk about the brand”). Appropriate messages are ideally reflected in emails, reports, presentations, brochures, reference manuals, employee guidelines, and so on.
- *Environmental management:* Not only logo and typeface communicate the brand, but everything from office furniture to work location sends a message.

There are also some very formal ways for communicating the brand internally.

These might include brand “launch” events, brand reference materials, and even a brand “help desk”. (When The Brand Consultancy worked with Visa, for

example, a brand “rulebook” with a built-in whistle was issued so that people could literally “call” off-brand behavior.)

D. Culture

An aspect of the organization that is notoriously difficult to change, cultural modification is nevertheless necessary if IB is to take place rather than be “just another program.” As Howard Schultz, the chairman of Starbucks, has said: “If we want to exceed the trust of our customers, then we first have to build trust with our people. Brand has to start with the culture and naturally extend to our customers.” (Source: *BusinessWeek*, 6 August 2001).

At TBC, it is believed that the role of the brand is to give employees freedom to choose, saying, in effect: “Our company reflects a higher order of values. Those values fit together, they create a personality, that makes our brand real. We need for you to share in those values and in that personality in order to help us grow.” Then there is a rationale, and consequences, for opting in or out.

A good example of the branded culture, says TBC’s managing director Jack Shoptaw, is homebuilder NV Ryan (not a client of the firm). The company embodies discipline and long-term commitment:

Back in the early '90s they were totally under. Chapter 11. But they...learned from their mistakes and spent their money appropriately—on building a brand and a culture to go with it. Now, upon the freshmen coming in to Penn State—where The CEO, as well as a lot of the senior executives, originally went to

school—NVR will literally send up trucks and they will actually help move these college students in. They solicit them year after year after year until they graduate, that this is who they want to work for. And they retain them forever...They're investing four years in that relationship before that person even starts to work.

E. Compensation

Debra Semans comments: “To find the most important people in a branded culture, reverse the organizational chart....(because) they're (customer service employees are) the ones people are most comfortable asking questions of.” Ironically, however, the employees who tend to be paid the least—customer service representatives—are actually the most critical conduits of brand.

As Gallup's William McEwen notes:

Marketing 101 reduces the main determinants of customer loyalty to the familiar Four Ps: Product, Place, Promotion and Price. These are all critical factors, but marketing orthodoxy is myopic....The result is that a fifth P is typically left out of the reckoning: People. Specifically, I mean the people who actually deal with the customer during any part of the transaction. The delivery of the brand promise often happens by human agency at the point of sale and proceeds through service, complaint and resale. Yet marketers, who have the bottom-line responsibility for brand health, rarely focus on the Fifth P. (Source: “The Power of the Fifth P,” Gallup Journal, www.gallupjournal.com, Issue 1)

As companies become more sophisticated about the importance of frontline employees in delivering the brand, Alan Bergstrom believes, they will also become more sophisticated about compensating them appropriately: “There is a cost associated with engaging your employees.”

At the same time, he believes, it works the other way as well: just as customers who feel “a strong affinity” for a certain brand are willing to pay more in order to have it, so too employees may be willing to accept somewhat less in terms of benefits and compensation in exchange for being aligned with a brand they feel connected to.

In effect, brand is a medium of exchange that works both ways: companies that uphold it can demand higher prices (and offer less pay); but they can only do that if employees feel rewarded for upholding the brand. This fifth element of TBC’s IB program emphasizes that the only way to sustain a strong brand is to offer a payback for those who deliver on it.

VI. Practical Effects

Clearly, at least in the theoretical terms of one consultancy, TBC, IB success rests on the active, willing, enthusiastic participation of employees. Also clearly, in this model, participation cannot be coerced in order to work; rather, it must be spontaneous and honest in order to convincingly enhance the brand.

If employees are convinced that the brand has meaning and value, it follows that delivering on the brand should create a sense of meaning in the employees' life, and in that sense enhance its quality.

In order to understand how the theory—that IB should positively affect EQOL—can best be translated into practice, we now turn to a small follow-up study on an IB engagement conducted by TBC. (Again, it is noted that the sample was nonrepresentative, and that its conclusions are therefore preliminary and speculative.) For this purpose, ten employees with varying levels of involvement in the IB project were recruited; five were ultimately interviewed by telephone, for approximately 30-45 minutes each, in November 2001. Three were human resources professionals, one was a management executive, and one was a communications specialist. All were full-time employees who had been with the company for at least 1 year. Three were female, and two were male.

Each person was promised anonymity, and that the name of their company would be kept confidential. They were then asked to provide some descriptive information about their position with the company; define IB; describe the purpose of the project, how it unfolded, and their role in it; share their feelings about the process; and tell whether it had any impact on their own quality of life, in any respect, or on the quality of life of anyone they knew of.

Overall, the interviews yielded a “mixed bag” of results, which we will now explore in some detail. Rather than using pseudonyms, respondents will be designated R1 through R5 to reflect comments distinctive to each.

What does IB mean to you?

Definitions of the term varied, as did the level of clarity that respondents felt about it.

R1, a human resources professional, said that the term was generally clear in her mind, but that she had difficulty articulating it. This was because she saw a conflict between the idea that a brand should be consistent, with the reality that the people who live and deliver it are (and should be) diverse: “I think it should be about the tangible and then the corporate culture, but that’s the tricky part about it because at the same time to be diverse, you don’t necessarily want everything to look alike.”

R2, a communications manager, had greater involvement in the project than R1 and an easier time defining it as well. In her version, IB meant “ensuring our reputation is consistent with our values, or maybe even protecting our reputation among our internal stakeholders.” For R2, brand should be articulated in the same way regardless of the audience (external or internal), although “employees are our #1 audience.” She believes “our brand is our reputation....internal branding (is)...the same thing as branding, reinforcement of a culture.” (As R2 is

heavily involved in the IB project, it seems worthwhile to note that she avoided references to herself, preferring to refer to it in collective terms: “we,” “our,” and so on.)

R3, a management executive, viewed IB somewhat differently from R2. Rather than using the discourse of “self-protection” (e.g., we should behave this way to protect our reputation), she talked the talk of “conformity”: “Internal branding is a way that people can relate to each other...be...part of something, part of a unity, an image, and that everything I do or say to a customer or another employee, I’m representing that image.” In this view, the brand is delivered in top-down fashion: “If the company creates that branding image...then there’s just a behavior and education followup from employees to get to that point.”

R4, a human resources professional, viewed IB in more strategic, less “magical” terms than the others, calling it simply: “The common understanding of the direction of the company with its employees.”

R5, also a human resources executive, defined IB the same way as R4 had, although he was a bit more specific about why a “common understanding” matters to the employee: “People knowing who you are, what you do, where you’re going...from that perspective they (employees) know how to contribute.”

What was the purpose of the IB project?

In terms of the overall purpose of the project, R1 did not recall being aware that it centered on IB. Rather, she remembered being involved in tagline development: an IB-related item, more limited in scope. She recalled being shown a sample tagline, with the group then asked to discuss their opinions of it. Asked what the criteria were for its assessment, she responded by noting that the purpose was to encapsulate “what we do, and who we are” in one line, “Sort of like how people knew that ‘Be all you can be’ was associated with the Army.” At the time, R1 did not believe that the line “was geared toward internal cultural change,” although “that had to be part of the consideration.” Primarily, the group “struggled with how do you...because we’re a diversified company, how can one line tell you who we are?”

For R2, who was more professionally invested in the IB project than R1, the purpose of the project was both clear and broad, and included “getting people to understand it’s not just advertising, it’s your reputation, and reputation management....to help people understand how the company is perceived externally,” and by extension the role of employees in supporting positive perceptions of the company.

R3, like R1, did not view IB as a key element of the branding project for the company, but rather as a “piece that would fall along with it.” Primarily, as she understood it, the point was to enhance the market value of the company by unifying its identity, particularly in light of the diverse industries it operated in. IB

would be a productive side effect for the employees, particularly for those who primarily identified with their “old” organizations (newly or recently acquired), as well as for executives who required a great deal of training in order to get “on board.”

R4, unlike any of the others, saw the purpose of IB primarily in communications terms:

The marketing group sent a memo to try and tie in our messages....we had too many different logos. The initiative was to try to coordinate the brand, get one logo, and then really do a lot of marketing around that particular brand, and that also included the internal communications as well.

At the same time, he recalled that what was being communicated had a great deal to do with the culture. There were “a lot of messages around our culture, core values and beliefs....a consistent message that goes through external and internal branding....to consolidate (them)...raising the awareness level.”

R5, unlike any of the others surveyed, drew a clear connection between the general purpose of branding and its specific application to employee productivity:

Initially I think it was born out of (the need of) most organizations need to be clearer about what it is they do and what it is they are trying to accomplish, so that both internally and externally people employees can be engaged and externally people can partner, invest, and become a part of the organization, based on clarity of your objectives and goals....

(At a time) when organizations are asking more of employees for less....(it's) important to make sure that employees know where they're going so employees know how can contribute to that.

One caveat raised by R5 was the need for brand to be as clear to leaders as to the people who work for them, if it is going to be effective: "The flipside of that is that leaders of organizations have to be able to articulate that (the IB), and understand and know it as well. It's got to be as important for employees as for leaders, and when there is a gap internally, then there's usually a lack of productivity."

How do you feel about the IB project today?

For R1, involvement in the project was limited to a single meeting, and she referred to it in the past tense. Asked how she felt about it afterward, today, R1 seemed dismayed that there was little follow-through: "It just got pushed aside for other things, and we seem to sometimes as a company, grab a hold of something, and try to launch it or make it work, and then you get people involved, going to this meeting, and then you hear nothing." Asked how that made her feel, R1 responded that she hadn't thought much about it at all, "probably because there's a zillion other things to be thinking about," but that bringing the topic up again made her "wonder if that was a waste of time." R1 also believes that corporate activity at higher levels may have prevented the follow-through from taking place. At the same time, R1 explicitly appreciated the positive effects of what she called "the tangible side of internal branding," particularly the intranet.

R2, in contrast, perceived the IB project to be ongoing, and even accelerating: “In the past year it’s really kind of heated up.” Interestingly, for someone so engaged, vocal, and clear about the process, R2 had some difficulty expressing her feelings about it: “It’s personal, talking about who you are as a company and your value system....I’m having a hard time thinking about how to describe that.... it’s difficult to translate (personal feelings about it), sometimes confusion, but pride, certainly.”

R3, like R2, perceived IB to be an ongoing process. In contrast to both R1 and R2, however, she recalled strong positive emotions associated with it, in three respects: she felt educated, she felt validated, and she felt pride in working for a company that had integrity.

When I worked on it, it did bring up emotions – it was the most exciting project I ever worked on. It educated me a great deal on what branding really was....

It also reinforced my feelings of coming from a field office...I (had) always felt alienated, not involved....

It also brought out, I guess I could say more a proud image.... I felt proud to work for company that had integrity, honesty, a history showing fair players....these aren’t just people who earn a huge amount of money every year to run a company. They are very personable, caring about the company as well as the employees.

It was interesting to note that R3 felt privileged in learning about the company at this more human level, but did not feel that others in the company had been offered the same opportunity: “I had the advantage of seeing it, I don’t think others had the same chance.”

R4, like R1, did not feel much about the process at all, although he did have some awareness of it as an ongoing matter. He felt well-treated, and realizes that the IB is there (“it’s in front of you on the internet site everyday”), but it had little emotional impact on him. “It’s fine, I’m fine with it, it’s great, it’s wonderful, am I going to sit there and study it or analyze it, no. Like when McDonald’s changes their logo, fine. Great. You still have hamburgers and french fries, I’ll eat there.” At the same time, he did perceive several key benefits of IB to the firm, among them greater efficiency and “alignment” among the employees:

Will the project fit into core values and beliefs? No, then we’ll walk away from it.

Culture is so front and center that if you do stuff that raises that integrity eyebrow, it is known and it’s almost like a peer pressure of hey, that doesn’t fit.

R5, like R4, believed that he was fairly treated in the IB process (which he also perceived as ongoing). Even if his was only one of many opinions as to what the result should be, “I think I got an opportunity to contribute.” Moreover, like R3, he felt “engaged” with it: “The emotions were really around, I think this is something important and...we have to do it right and it’s going to be challenging.”

How did IB affect your quality of life?

Did IB ultimately effect R1's quality of life? "Not really," she said, with a few exceptions. On the positive side, technology was harnessed for greater benefit overall: "for quality of life at work, it makes it simpler when you're going to look up something on the intranet, that causes less frustration and stress." Moreover, R1 was no longer "bombarded with emails," a communication issue that the focus group she participated in had mentioned. On the negative side, though, R1 was left feeling something of a disconnect between what the process was supposed to do ("make us look like we're becoming one company") with what it actually did—mask the conflict between coordinated activity and autonomy among individual operating units:

You can say, we're one company to the outside world, and they probably have the perception that we are. But inside, it's not like that. The wrapping paper all looks the same, but inside this box are...different groups.

For R2, the tendency to discuss her role in IB in the collective, and to avoid personal reflections in terms of its impact, translated into her response to this question. (In fact the author found herself rephrasing the question in more circuitous terms to elicit an answer.) Similarly to R1, she believed that IB had delivered a tangible impact, although she discussed it in broader terms: "a

consistent look and feel for all our communications.” Also like R1, she perceived less of an intangible change-effect, although from her point of view this was purposeful: “it hasn’t been something that’s been flashed up, and said, new initiative, flavor of the month. Hopefully we’ve done a good job of protecting it.” Asked to distinguish between visual impact and cultural effect, R2 asserted that “our hope is that we aren’t just doing this for visual effect, but that it makes an employee feel like they’re a part of” the company. And although she said that “it’s still pretty early to tell,” R2 mentioned that a recent employee survey indicated a high level of alignment between the company’s ideal and real values.

Interestingly, although R3 felt very positive and excited about IB at the time that she actively participated in the process, she did not feel that it had affected her personally, and had not changed her quality of life. “I don’t think it made a big impact.” She seemed to have drawn a line in the sand, between her a work identity where IB was very meaningful, and a personal identity where it was irrelevant. “I think about it when working on it, otherwise it’s not in my consciousness.”

R4 had a similar comment as R3 when asked about its impact on his quality of life, in terms of distinguishing between a work identity and a personal one: “It’s more of a business thing. No personal impact, no emotions.” Then, he added a thought which struck the author as significant: that the process had been

undertaken in a rational manner, offering up a rational result—consistency. There was no sense of “magic” here:

I buy into a consistent look, OK, but wouldn't have said we couldn't do business unless it gets done....

I don't want to come off saying it's been a waste of time, it hasn't. Has it been a watershed moment in my life—no. I think it went fine, I think it's fine the way they did it. I think it's pretty systematic the way they did it, no hipshots or darts against the wall. They communicated very well, came up with a final product, but do I count the days (until the next version of the brand), no.

R5, like R1, R3, and R4, felt that the IB initiative was really a business matter, rather than a personal one, and thus viewed its effects on himself in terms of how it affected the company. “I saw the business as being the ultimate thing. I hadn't thought a lot about, other than a business perspective, do the outcomes reflect what I think and feel.” He saw the question of how IB had affected his quality of life as “difficult,” because the company already had a heightened awareness of its culture:

Clearly as we talk more about who we are, you feel better about where you are, (but) branding was just another aspect of that....even before without brand, there was a somewhat wholesome and good aspect around on the culture here. Branding enhanced it.”

One similarity that emerged between R3, R4, and R5, in thinking about the effect of IB on their QOL, was the sense that IB was an “add-on.” Not a culturally transformative program, IB was integrated into a pre-existing culture, raising their awareness of it.

VII. Discussion and Recommendations

Clearly, this study was small, exploratory, and nonrepresentative. This is true both of the emerging field of IB—we only looked at one consultancy’s approach to it—and of the experiences reported by employees.

Nevertheless, some intriguing findings emerged. Most notably, there is a disconnect between the consultancy’s theoretical, employee-centric approach to IB, and its actual, employer-centric practice within the organization. However, the overall sense from this author’s research is that such a disconnect is the norm rather than the exception. An organization may understand *hypothetically* that programs aimed at employees must ultimately serve the employees’ interests—ultimately eliciting voluntary participation, rather than coerced cooperation. Yet when “push comes to shove,” allowing employees to take the reins is risky. Senior leaders may think, consciously or unconsciously: “What if they want to change things we don’t want to change?” “What if I must lose (compensation, authority) so they may gain?” Or they may relegate such programs to departments whose authority is limited to creating conformity rather than provoking change—e.g. human resources and corporate communications.

The result of this disconnect between what organizations say they need to do, and what they actually *feel comfortable* doing, is exactly the “mixed bag” of results described above. Although the individuals interviewed were involved to various degrees in formulating the IB project (as well as employee-recipients of it), it is as if they were able to impute whatever meaning they felt comfortable with on to it. Thus IB is variously perceived (both in meaning and in purpose) as a consistency project, image initiative, identity creator, reputation enhancer, culture reinforcer, and productivity tool. The one thing they did have in common was to decidedly *not* view IB as a tool for personal QOL transformation—something that changed the culture in which they worked, which expressed a significant part of themselves, which changed their lives for the better. It was “outside themselves,” (or their personal selves at least) and stayed outside, with its impact restricted to creating greater simplicity and ease of operation on the job.

The lack of clarity surrounding IB is related, in a broader sense, to a lack of clarity surrounding branding itself. Just as IB tends to mean whatever people want it to mean, branding has become not only a trendy but also a rather flexible term, one that communicates seemingly anything the user wants to. Thus, a “branding” project can be anything from a new product launch, to a name change, to an organizational restructuring, and more.

In this author’s view, this fuzziness around “brand” has become part of a collective corporate unconscious, and it serves a purpose that is at once

psychological, sociological, economic and political. For while *saying* that the company is “branding” itself implies a powerful collective transformation, in real life that assertion can be diluted and muted, so that conformity rather than change is the result. When functional conformity becomes the desired effect, IB “success” can surely be defined in terms of consistency of message, ease of finding information, even rise in productivity as employees better understand what they must deliver (a result that we saw above). As Ray Baumruk, of Hewitt Associates’ Global Listening Practice, notes:

In our qualitative research with employees, we are hearing that employees are quite positive about these efforts citing clearer expectations and the ability to hold the organization accountable to the internal brand (and external brand when alignment of these are achieved).

When transformation or change is the desired effect, Baumruk notes that IB success will likely include *disengagement* among those who cannot accept the new reality being created. This may be because the brand is fundamentally unappealing, or because the employee does not believe the promise:

I suspect, and this has some anecdotal confirmation, that organizations pursuing an internal brand effectively might expect to experience some declines in employee attitude or quality of life in certain segments—those that may not find that value proposition appealing. They might also expect some declines due to the fact that most organizations likely want to create a somewhat aspirational brand (something to strive for) that may not at the beginning completely reflect

reality and therefore create a rise in cynicism or reduce trust. It is a difficult balance between setting a brand and working the delivery quickly.

This author argues that branding is fundamentally *not* about conformity to the status quo, but rather *about changing the status quo* to make meaning where it is currently lacking. It is about lending a certain magic to an otherwise unglamorous product or service. And as, in a human world, meaning can only be made by humans for humans, organizations in the process of truly “getting brand” must be populated by people who are committed to evolving in a very comprehensive way—both personally and professionally. The “ideal type,” or “supremely branded” organization would consist of self-consciously branded individuals, who have chosen to align their personal sense of meaning and worth with that of the company as a whole.

Looked at in this way, brand success is inextricably linked with human self-actualization. To be defined as successful, therefore, an IB project must improve EQOL—and not only on the job. TBC’s Bergstrom comments:

People don't feel any sense of loyalty to their employers anymore, but that's because we don't give them a reason to. I think people are longing for that, for a lost sense of community. They're looking for it in religion, special interest groups, or in other ways. They are searching for relationships because a lot of the historical and traditional relationships that we once had in our workplace have disappeared. We are treating people as if they are in fact commodities. So here's an opportunity, I believe, and certainly where we have seen it, not only to give people back that sense of connection, but to reward them for it.

There are many specific recommendations that can be made to improve the effect of IB on EQOL, but more important, this author believes, is changing the overall perspective that organizations adopt as they begin this process. While searching for meaning is uncomfortable and putting power in the hands of frontline employees is risky, it may also be the only way to actually find the kind of meaning that transforms employees' lives. If employees "can live with it or without it," then the brand is not living up to its potential. As Bergstrom points out, people are looking to be a part of something special, something connected, something that they can be a proud of building. Brand, and its particular application internally, has the potential to be wielded in that way. Although at its worst, IB can prove a cynical exercise, at its best there is potential for more than just profit. IB can provide a basis for mutual respect, community, and honest win-win relationships that profit the organization precisely because it improves the quality of people's lives.