

The perception of employer value propositions and the contrast between Dutch and Chinese graduates

A case study of TNT

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Introduction

TNT, an international logistics company whose headquarters are located in Hoofddorp, The Netherlands, focuses on mail and express delivery services. As with most businesses, the organization has an ongoing need to recruit talent, and is especially looking for smart graduates. However, the main problem facing TNT is that it is fairly low in the ranks of “ideal employer” surveys, even in its country of origin, and especially in the problem of recruiting from overseas.

It looks at this issue in terms of examining the values of Dutch graduates looking for a job; and the values of Chinese graduates, as examples of overseas recruits. What are the attitudes of prospective graduate employees towards the drivers attracting them to an employer, which we can see in terms of the employer value propositions (EVPs)? Therefore, the main question we are asking is: “What do Dutch and (by contrast) Chinese graduates value and see as important when applying for a job, and to what extent might these requirements be met with a position at TNT?”.

Joost is a typical high potential young Dutch graduate. At his university he met Li Ming, a smart and go-getting young Chinese lady. Both Generation Y – born in the 1980s – their friendship (and romance!) blossomed during their studies and they both want to stay together and work in The Netherlands. Joost agreed that they could spend a few years in his country, and then they could go to her country. They thought it might be a good idea to both work for the same multinational company, so they would have a greater chance of staying together. But they had quite different ideas about what they were looking for in a job. They were both ambitious, so they wanted to choose a company where they could be trained as future leaders. They wanted to work for a “good” company, but what does that mean? Joost saw Li Ming as very Westernized – but is she? Li Ming saw Joost as the sort of guy she could like and trust – but he was not Chinese! What did this mean for her?

Meanwhile, at TNT, Mr de Gijssel heads up graduate recruitment. He’s fighting the negative perceptions towards TNT of many of the graduates he’s interviewing, and he’s finding it difficult enough to attract young Dutch people, let alone Chinese. A few Chinese would be good, as TNT’s business in China is expanding rapidly. And then there’s the TNT EVP – a ponderous, unwieldy document prepared by Head Office, hard to explain to the graduates, and not always of interest to them. It seems to have been created by some bureaucrat who never met a fresh graduate.

TNT’s graduate recruitment department decided to use a survey to test what graduates – from both home and abroad – looked for in a job. In this survey, Joost and Li Ming were asked 25 questions by TNT, asking them as high potential graduates about what they value when applying for a job. Would they seriously consider applying for a position at TNT as a Dutch-based multinational? Why or why not?

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Initially, Joost thought that the image and status of the company he would join would be most important when applying for a job. Was TNT classy enough? Li Ming, a Chinese female a long way from home and wanting security of income, thought she would put a higher emphasis on job stability (especially in terms of having a fixed contract for a duration of time, guaranteed). Joost was responding in a typical function for his age group, Gen-Y. He liked brands and being able to impress his classmates and friends. Li Ming had a similar outlook, with Chinese characteristics. Both felt, when considering TNT, that awareness campaigns and advertising by the company was poor, that TNT's communication efforts were not very effective.

Meanwhile, TNT was making a great emphasis on CSR and supporting good humanitarian and environmental practices, but their stand on these issues did not impress either Joost or Li Ming. They had studied the issues of Business Ethics and CSR at university and found them attractive and interesting (Joost had written his thesis on the subject) but they rated TNT's attempts here as low. Either they were cynical and thought they saw some "green-washing" going on here, or when it came to the crunch it was simply not an issue in going for a job. Li Ming thought the advertising and by TNT was even worse than Joost did. Maybe Joost had grown up knowing about TNT and knew about them already, even if they did not advertise much. His father even used the expression "we'll TNT it" meaning he was going to send an urgent document. Li Ming was only vaguely aware of many foreign companies who had set up in China in recent years. Living in The Netherlands, she had become more aware of some of these brands, but she did not recall TNT making much impact on her. Overall, Joost was much less willing to seriously consider applying for a job at TNT than Li Ming was. He thought he could do a lot better. She thought, well – it is probably similar to other foreign companies, I need a job, I want to stay with Joost, it is his country, this company is based in his country, it is big and seems quite stable, and it does have operations in China. It is OK, I cannot be too fussy.

What is employer branding, and an EVP?

An EVP can be defined as "a set of attributes that that the labor market and employees perceive as the value they gain through employment in an organization" (OSP, 2006). Each year, companies spend millions of dollars on branding and advertising, hoping to build up their image and attract customers. However, many fail to establish a strong employer brand because they do not go after it with the same vigor as they pursue customers (Freeman, 2007). Employer branding is the perception that current and prospective employees have of the benefits of working for a company. An employer brand ultimately lies at the core of an organization, expressing the culture and values to employees, job applicants and the public (Freeman, 2007). It also has national cultural connotations (Jones and Barcham, 2007). Attitudes by employees to employers vary by age, gender and – very importantly for an international company – by nationality.

Employer branding is described as "the development and communication of an organization's culture as an employer in the marketplace" (Mamarchev, 2004) and:

[. . .] a set of attributes and qualities – often intangible – that makes an organization distinctive, promises a particular kind of employment experience and appeals to those people who will thrive and perform to their best in its culture (CIPD, 2007).

Another definition sees Employer Branding as "a collection of ideas and beliefs that influence the way current and potential employees view an organization, and the employment experience that an organization is offering. It communicates the company's culture and values and helps to ensure employees are passionate about, and fit in with, the organizational culture to help move the company forward" (Jones and Barcham, 2007).

A good reputation in general is difficult to build up and easy to destroy. Although it is an important factor for a company's survival and growth, reputation is difficult to itemize in the accounting books. Reputation involves perceived value, and this value has to be emphasized to existing key employees and future high-potential employees, such as graduates. Employees are behaving more and more like customers; there is a wide range of choice for them and job-hopping is common. A positive employer brand can help in retaining

employees. An employer brand has to be distinctive, attractive and strong so employees can easily identify themselves with it.

Recent's leading employers recognize the importance of EVPs and employer branding, but there is still considerable potential for researchers and CEOs to explore this concept. Even though good PR can "window dress" the reputation of an organization, problems will be identified in the long run. Employees currently working in organizations, and other stakeholders, recognize the real matters going on in an organization over time, and this comes through to potential employees.

Asia-Pacific companies are more aware of employer branding than the rest of the world (*The Economist*, 2006); 48 per cent of companies were aware of employer branding, compared with 42 per cent in the USA and 38 per cent in Europe. About 74 per cent of companies in Asia-Pacific believe that developing an employer brand leads to higher staff retention; and 54 per cent of companies in Asia-Pacific believe that developing an employer brand reduces recruitment costs. Globally, 32 per cent of companies currently have an employer branding strategy in place. The UK (44 per cent) and Japan (42 per cent) currently lead the world while Germany lags behind with 47 per cent having no plans to implement an employer branding strategy in the future. About 25 per cent of companies globally believe HR policies are the best way to reinforce employer branding, followed by word of mouth (21 per cent). Research conducted by Hewitt (2008) shows that companies who have already made use of employer branding strategies found that it was very beneficial to retain current employees (93 per cent) and to attract job candidates (91 per cent).

EVPs are based on employer branding efforts. There are five elements of EVP: rewards, opportunities, the organization, the people and the work. Organizations with strong EVPs are able to effectively source from more than 60 per cent of the labor market while organizations with poor EVPs are able to source from only 40 per cent of the labor market. If the organization presents an effective EVP, the newly arrived employee will have 29 per cent more commitment to his job than when an organization presents its EVP poorly. So EVPs can be a powerful tool to build up a company's brand. The key word in EVP is "value". What could these values be?

Research conducted by OSP (2006) aimed at determining the factors attracting people to a company, and retaining them (Table I).

Generation Y and the perception of personal needs of graduate talent

When recruiting fresh and fairly recent graduates, companies need to think in terms of the characteristics of "Generation Y", people born in the 1980s. This is the first generation exposed to the free flow of communication brought by the internet. Nigel Barcham, Managing Director of Robert Half (a consulting firm advising on employer branding and EVP) remarked that:

Gen-Y really focus on the ethical stance of companies when considering potential employers. They look at things like annual reports to assess the gender and age make-up of the board

Table I

	<i>Attraction What brings people to the organization</i>	<i>Commitment What keeps people at the organization</i>
1.	Compensation	Job-interest alignment
2.	Health benefits	People management
3.	Organizational stability	Respect
4.	Work-life balance	Manager quality
5.	Future career opportunities	Development opportunities
6.	Respect	Future career opportunities
7.	Job-interests alignment	Senior leadership reputation
8.	Location	Ethics
9.	Retirement benefit	"Great employer" recognition
10.	Ethics	Meritocracy

members to form an opinion of the corporate culture. In terms of attracting these people, they will want to work for organizations that are socially responsible. This should be demonstrated in the various channels that potential employees come into contact with an organization if you are going to be best placed to attract these people (Jones and Barcham, 2007).

Organizations have to take Gen-Ys seriously, as they are the new high-potential talent who are entering the employment market. The challenge can be seen as troublesome, or as a new opportunity for companies to employ new fresh minds. Demanding young people from Generation Y can, on the other hand, help the organization to improve. Avril Henry, executive director of AH Revelations.6 (another consulting firm) considers that “Gen-Ys are sending the message to the corporate and public sector: If you’re not willing to have good leadership . . . challenging work, not willing to mentor me, then I’m not coming to work for you.” Cross-functional training, career development, work-life balance and opportunities for overseas travel are all priorities for Gen-Ys (Jones and Barcham, 2007). Employers such as Mr de Gijsel at TNT worry that this might create a “job hopping” culture where people are more difficult to retain.

Other issues such as CSR and business ethics are also considered as important by Gen-Ys. Flexibility and job rotation, future focus and organizational transparency are further issues of interest. Avril Henry suggests having “a weekly meeting where you invite Gen-Ys to tell them what is happening in the organization. Tell them what is coming up in the future. Allow people to job share or rotate through jobs or to try new things they have not tried before. Invest in training and development. The challenge for organizations means that they have to change the way they think and behave”. The Robert Half Workplace Survey (2007) concluded that 95 per cent of companies surveyed believe that a cross-section of ages has a positive impact on company culture. About 36 per cent of organizations responded that flexible hours are a motivator, as is career development (32 per cent) and having regular performance appraisals (33 per cent). About 50 per cent of organizations surveyed believe Gen-Ys would leave a company that did not provide them with sufficient career development opportunities.

Joost and Li Ming are typical Gen-Ys – they are very technology-savvy. They are concerned about ethical issues. They want to know what’s going on in their organization. They are interested in fairness and equal opportunity. They want plenty of chances for learning, promotion, travel but want to have time for fun as well. They want to work for an organization where they can admire their leaders and feel good about working there. They are interested in market-driven and entrepreneurial organizations which offer exciting challenges, and are turned-off by bureaucracy, secrecy and elitism.

National cultural differences: Dutch and Chinese

According to Hofstede (2009), Chinese people in general have the highest long-term orientation in the world, defined as “the extent to which a society shows a pragmatic future-oriented perspective rather than a conventional historical or short-term point of view”. In Hofstede’s study, Chinese people were 118 points on LTO (long-term orientation) and Dutch only 44. Thus, Dutch are short-term oriented and Chinese are long-term oriented.

Does this help explain Li Ming’s interest in job security and having a job contract? And what about Joost’s interest in status and image – does this relate to personal needs or culture?

Li Ming is typical as a Chinese in her longer-term orientation, her tolerance of uncertainty, and having a more collectivist than individualist attitude. She’s also highly respectful of authority and is quite happy with the concept of remote and powerful bosses – she’s “high-power-distant”. She comes from a masculine culture, where achievement, consumerism, assertiveness, independence, and insensitivity to feelings can be a dominant value. Employees from high-masculinity cultures value money and material recognition, performance and growth, self-accomplishment and independence. Li Ming is probably more ambitious than Joost. Many of her friends back in China are more successful in their careers than their husbands and boyfriends, especially in Shanghai. Some do not even want the one child they are allowed to have, because it might have a negative impact on their careers.

By contrast, Joost is the opposite – he has a more short-term, here-and-now orientation. He is also low in uncertainty-avoiding like Li Ming, but is much more of an individualist. He is “low power-distant” in that he would not easily tolerate a boss who behaved like a king in his castle. He would expect his boss to be friendly and accessible. Employees from low-masculinity cultures focus on people, life quality, service and interdependence. They can be more sensitive, caring and nurturing in their behaviors.

Introduction to TNT: background and image for attracting graduates

TNT operates all around the globe, offering efficient network infrastructure especially in Europe and Asia, and is expanding its operations worldwide to maximize its network performance. TNT serves more than 200 countries and employs more than 163,000 people. In 2008, the organization reported €11.1 billion in revenues and an operating income of €982 million. TNT is officially quoted on the Amsterdam Stock Exchange. TNT picks up, transports, sorts, handles, stores and delivers documents, packets, parcels and freight by combining physical infrastructures such as depots and trucks, electronic infrastructures such as billing and track-and-trace systems, and commercial infrastructures to attract and retain customers.

So, for Mr de Gijssel, who heads up graduate recruitment at TNT, why do not high-potential graduates want to work for this organization while it has so much potential? Especially, why does the company have trouble recruiting overseas? The company's ranking in terms of attractiveness as an employer, in 2007, was 42 in the top 50 Dutch companies, which had improved slightly by 2008 to 39. Mr de Gijssel knew that must be done, and does try to address Gen-Y concerns. One of his ways of trying to improve TNT's attractiveness to fresh and recent graduates is a CSR initiative, forming partnerships with the United Nations World Food Program and the United Nations Environment Program to fight hunger and pollution in the world. The company also contributes substantially to the Maastricht School of Management annual CSR Workshop.

In making further efforts to understand and try to offset TNT's struggle to attract Gen Y's from The Netherlands and around the world, Mr de Gijssel launched his 25-question survey, trying to capture both Gen-Y personal needs issues and cultural matters. But what did it really tell him and what can he do with the results?

The attitudes of Joost and Li Ming – their answers to the graduate survey

For Joost in particular, the image and status of a future employer was most important. Prospects for promotion were also considered as essential. Joost also wanted to have friendly colleagues at work, a supportive working environment, to be involved in the provision of high-quality services to customers, to be assured of a certain level of job security, and to have opportunities for job rotation. Li Ming, on the other hand, valued job security more highly than other factors. Job security, for her, was followed by having friendly colleagues, a work/home balance and personal development opportunities. Mr de Gijssel thought this remarkable, because he expected status to be rated higher. In China, there is often a clear hierarchy in organizations as well as in society, and thus image and status is seen as very important (Ripmeester, 2004). But Joost, the Dutch Gen-Y, rated this issue as the most important.

In terms of respecting high-quality services delivered by the organization and seeing this as an employment attraction, Joost scored high here while Li Ming rated this factor the lowest. Other factors were nearer each other between them, such as valuing friendly colleagues, and the need for personal development opportunities. Wanting to work for an organization with CSR interests and integrity was rated low by them both, despite TNT's efforts. Joost valued good facilities and a fun working environment higher than Li Ming; he also valued employee benefits and job rotation more than Li Ming.

“People in my community know TNT” – in terms of awareness, this was higher among Dutch graduates than among the Chinese in Mr de Gijssel's survey – no surprises here. But TNT having a high reputation and TNT being considered one of the best in its sector was rated low

by both Joost and Li Ming, who both considered that TNT did not invest in enough advertising. Li Ming thought that TNT was worse here than Joost did. However, in terms of seriously considering applying for a job at TNT, Li Ming was more interested than Joost. Although Li Ming was not impressed by TNT, she was more interested in a job here.

The reason why Li Ming was more willing to apply for a job at TNT than Joost is not clear. It could be that Chinese perceive TNT as an international organization while Dutch perceive TNT as less international compared with its competitors on the local job market in The Netherlands. Another reason could be that Chinese have lower “Uncertainty Avoidance”. According to Hofstede’s (2009), study these people feel more comfortable with uncertainty or “trying something new”. TNT is an international organization with potentially high-compensation packages and opportunities to learn – good enough for Li Ming.

Both Joost and Li Ming equally value the importance of good colleague relationships, and good colleague-superior relationships. Yet Joost saw the importance of the working environment factor differently: a working environment with fun and good facilities was more important for him than for Li Ming. Joost also put more emphasis on the importance of job rotation as an attractive employment feature. He was also more interested in the quality of the services that the organization provides than Li Ming. Both valued work/life balance, job security, working for an organization which gives back to society, and the importance of the integrity of the company. Joost was more interested in a high-basic salary in comparison to bonuses, and thought more about employee benefits than Li Ming did. Both of them valued the importance of good promotion opportunities and training (Table II).

The challenge for TNT

Based on his findings, Mr de Gijssel thought about TNT’s offering. TNT’s language on the work-floor in the main building is English, but it was still not very well-established as an international organization because it is run in a decentralized way. Attracting international talent and placing these people is difficult, even though talent is widely available for recruitment, including in The Netherlands. He had made a strong emphasis on TNT’s CSR practices. This was why he personally joined the company. Yet although many Gen-Ys value an organization which gives back to society, this was not seen by Joost and Li Ming as significant.

Mr de Gijssel concluded that communicating EVPs by TNT was fairly ineffective. Awareness of TNT and the image of TNT was weak. Many respondents did not know that TNT offered jobs unrelated to logistics. The importance of logistics as a business was not widely appreciated. Perhaps, TNT could improve its marketing campaigns. TNT could consider decreasing these

Table II Summary of Joost and Li Ming’s choices	
<i>Joost</i>	<i>Li Ming</i>
Image and status	Job security and a contract
Prospects for promotion	Friendly colleagues
Friendly colleagues	Bonuses and basic salary
Colleague/superior relationships	Work/life balance
Knows TNT	Colleague/superior relationships
Fun working environment	Personal development opportunities
Good facilities at work	Willing to work for TNT
Employee benefits	Prospects for promotion
Basic salary then bonuses	Fun working environment
Work/life balance	Good facilities at work
High-quality services for customers	Knows TNT
Job security and a contract	Employee benefits
Job rotation	CSR/business ethics practices
Personal development opportunities	Image and status
CSR/business ethics practices	Job rotation
Willing to work for TNT	High-quality services for customers

efforts on CSR and putting more emphasis on advertising and other areas that need attention – but would this work?

Maybe TNT should visit student job fairs and advertise on the internet, such as on www.monsterboard.nl. Students often join student clubs; TNT could provide opportunities or sponsorship for the club. Meanwhile, the decentralized nature of the organization clearly causes problems for international recruitment. A central HR project team for international affairs could be a recommendation. Yet centralization generally would involve many costs and a change of the entire organization's structure, and there could be a risk of losing close contact with local affairs. This central HR team must have fast access to global resources and contact in order for such a project to be successful.

TNT hires 60 high-potential graduates per year, providing them with clearly defined tasks. Perhaps, it would be better to clarify the main tasks, but not go into details so that new high-potential talent would have a better chance to develop new possibilities for themselves.

Conclusion

In this case study, we looked at two young graduates – one Dutch, one Chinese – and their contrasting concerns when considering a new job possibility at a European-centered multinational company, in this instance the well-known courier and logistics company TNT. This presented a difficult recruiting problem for TNT, operating worldwide and therefore facing conflicting employee demands for different aspects of employer branding and EVPs. TNT already suffered from negative perceptions in employer branding reports. TNT thought that emphasizing CSR would attract Gen Y's of any nationality – they were not necessarily correct here. They struggled to understand Gen Y needs. They found it challenging to express their offering to employees in terms of a clear employer branding statement – an EVP. In this case study, through conducting a survey, TNT gained insights into the employment needs and criteria for job choice of young graduates – and from graduates from contrasting cultures. They now have an opportunity to try to attract young graduates in a more targeted and scientific way. These are important insights for human resource specialists.

From the point of view of you, as a graduating student, the case provides an example of how two students prioritized their employment concerns, ranking the criteria most and least attractive to them – which presents insights into national cultural, personal and possibly gender-based concerns. Thinking these through can be a constructive way to choose the right job.

Keywords:

Recruitment,
Retention,
Employee attitudes,
Corporate social
responsibility,
National cultures

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Further reading

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Exhibit. Notes on the case preparation – the survey

In this case study, a survey was conducted with 25 questions, asking the target group of graduates about what they value when applying for a job. Would these graduates seriously consider applying for a position at TNT? Why or why not?

A total of 201 Dutch and 199 Chinese graduates responded to the survey. For the Dutch sample, image and status is considered most important when applying for a job, and the Chinese were more interested in job stability (especially in terms of having a fixed contract). The Dutch sample, valuing status and image, were responding in a typical fashion for their age group, Generation Y. In both samples, awareness and advertising by TNT was rated low, indicating that TNT's communication efforts are perhaps not effective in this area. TNT emphasizes CSR and humanitarian practices, but these issues are rated low by both sample groups of graduates. The Chinese sample rated awareness, popularity and advertising by TNT lower than the Dutch sample. The overall result shows that the Dutch graduates are much less willing to seriously consider applying for a job at TNT than Chinese graduates.

The total target group is personified in the case as Joost (Dutch) and Li Ming (Chinese).

In this case study, the main aim of the survey was to compare Dutch and Chinese graduates to understand their decision-making preferences in choosing an employer, and the EVP they value most. The total response from all universities in the Netherlands was 606, but the sample analyzed was only 399 respondents. This sample was chosen because non-Dutch and non-Chinese were filtered out, also respondents younger than 20 and older than 32 were discarded (to include only Generation Y). In the survey, each of the 25 questions represents one factor which may have an influence on whether the graduate chooses to work at TNT or not. Through comparing two sample means, the relationship between population means was predicted. *t*-Tests were run to test the hypothesis for the population means. Two samples assuming unequal variances were analyzed and *t*-tests were run to test all the hypotheses about population means. The population variances are unknown, and it is not certain whether the two population variances are equal or not. All the tests are run with a confidence level of 95 per cent. Because the two sample sizes are big enough, a degree of freedom of 500 can be chosen for these *t*-tests. A reliability test was conducted. The gender distribution of the respondents was equally balanced, and only responses from graduates aged over 20 and under 32 were considered (Generation Y). Graduates had Bachelor's degrees, Master's, DBAs and PhD. About 94 per cent of respondents were Master's graduates.

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