

## BRAND SPANKING

You may recall that a few years ago there was a vogueish interest in the idea of employer branding. The idea was popularised in the first book on the subject in 2005. By 2008 Jackie Orme, the head of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, was calling it 'an integral part of business strategy'.

It appears to have dropped off the radar a bit over the past couple of years, which we can put down to the effect of the recession. Firms certainly seem to have their mind on other things than attracting and retaining the best staff. Research published recently by PriceWaterhouseCoopers showed that in 2009, 54 per cent of businesses said they placed a special focus on retaining talent; this year that's dropped down to 36 per cent.

This is odd, for a couple of reasons. Firstly, it seems perverse that in a knowledge economy firms are placing less emphasis on recruiting and keeping hold of the best knowledge workers. Secondly, it makes no business sense. The CIPD recently reported that more than a third of employees plan to change jobs once the recession is over. The recent report from PWC emphasises how costly this might be for employers. Despite the ongoing uncertainty in the economy, the proportion of UK workers resigning from their jobs has increased from 7.7 per cent to 10.4 per cent in the past year.

This matters to us because there has always been a close link between the labour market and office design. In the wider business community, the conundrum that has dominated management thinking over the past 20 years is this: if your main asset is knowledge and that knowledge is largely locked up in people's heads, how do you attract those heads to your organisation? Then, once they are in your employ, how do you make them stay there or at the very least empty some of the contents into computers and other people's heads before they go?

It is this riddle that has led to the dominance of 'soft' issues in management thinking and why workplace design has focused increasingly on softer business issues such as corporate culture, the environment and knowledge management. It has driven the growth of flexible work practices as organisations have tried to give people a better work-life balance. It has driven the softening of the workplace itself, the growth of breakout space and the focus on the team. And, of course, it has pushed on the idea of employer branding.

I'd like to suggest that employer branding is a straightforward idea for those involved in workplace design and management to address, but it is anything but. As with many of the issues that we have to manage it is complex, multifaceted, ongoing and demands a multidisciplinary approach. It is likely to require input from FM, HR and IT and will attract the interest of general managers across the organisation. It incorporates a range of factors from working culture, working methods, interior design and the physical environment.

My own firm works in only one of these areas, but when it comes to employer branding nothing can be achieved in isolation. That may have been the case in the past, when branding in the workplace focused on replicating a corporate identity, but now there is a far greater focus on reflecting important values to staff. Where once you had logos in the carpet and walls in corporate colours, now we have visualisations of how the company



addresses business and environmental issues, the intelligent use of colours and materials to convey ideas and emotions, imagery from packaging and marketing campaigns and manifestations of the outside world.

It is new technology that makes all this feasible, both in terms of the designs it makes possible and in the equipment and materials needed to deliver them.

What is needed is a holistic approach. It demands people who can integrate and resolve the demands of its many elements and stakeholders, develop clear briefs and ensure delivery of complex and potentially conflicting objectives. Much of that will depend on the development of clear objectives and a clear brief in the first place.

It is important to understand how employer branding works in its many facets and recognise the role it can play in achieving organisational success. Creating the right environment to attract and retain the best staff has always been important but the growth of the knowledge economy and the recovery from recession will make it increasingly important in the coming years.

It is a situation that is both challenging and an exciting opportunity for those of us involved in the design and management of offices to further demonstrate our value to the organisation.

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