EMPLOYER BRANDING OPERATIONALIZATION: IDENTIFICATION AND VALIDATION OF AN EMPLOYER ATTRACTIVENESS SCALE
(adapted from Berthon et al., 2005)

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Abstract: *Since the 21st century, the competition for recruiting and retaining the most talented employees in organizations has increased considerably. Organizations are making sustained efforts to meet the new expectations of potential and existing employees. Through **employer branding,** a strategic tool available to organizations, organizations can attract and retain employees on a long-term. **Employer attractiveness**, perceived as an antecedent of an effective employer brand, assumes the perceived benefits that a potential employee identifies with an organization. **The objectives** of this study are to identify the dimensions of employer attractiveness that employees and potential employees (from Western Romania) consider important when choosing an employer, by testing and validating a scale starting from the EmpAt scale of Berthon et. al. (2005), and to investigate the differences that may occur depending on professional status. In a sample of 152 respondents (employees and students), the EFA provided a number of **4 dimensions of employer attractiveness**: social value, interest value, management value and benefits value. Regarding the differences in professional status (student vs. employee) they do not exist, except for the value of management which is more important for students than for employees. The adapted scale showed good reliability and stability but required future confirmation and validation with a new sample of respondents. These results provide organizations with a deeper understanding of how they can develop their employer branding strategies in order to attract, retain and motivate employees and offer a reliable instrument for assessing employer attractiveness.*

Keywords: Employer branding; Employer attractiveness; Organizational attractiveness; Employer brand; Employee attraction*.*

1. Introduction

In today's business environment, the *"war for talent"* (Michaels, Handfiels-Jones and Axelrod, 2001), remains the hottest topic in strategic human resource management and is expected to remain for the next 20-30 years. The labor market is changing, jobs are evolving and becoming more complex due to the increased demand for rare and very specific skills. Organizations do not need any kind of employees, but the most talented employees to be able to survive in the future in a very competitive market and in a continuous change due to the technological boom, progress and increasingly sophisticated needs. The organizations' management may use employer branding in approaching this competition to attract and retain talents. Employer branding, defined as the application of a long-term branding strategy in human resources, specifically in recruitment and retention (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004), has as an ultimate goal to strengthen a recruitment position and differentiate the company as an employer from competitors. In this context, companies need to remain attractive in order to attract the best and most appropriate talent in the organization.

Organizational attractiveness, seen from employment perspective, helps build and communicate a more consistent employment experience and retains current employees, ensuring their commitment to the culture and strategy of the company they work for (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004).

In general, people want to work for organizations with a good reputation, which offer high salaries, opportunities for professional development and a pleasant working environment. Given that talent is scarce and their attractiveness is becoming increasingly complex, employer attractiveness is becoming a winning strategy applied by companies and certainly recommended for "*the millions of other companies around the world which have similar challenges*" (Minchington, 2011). An emphasis on communicating with current and potential employees and a consideration of the expectations of both target groups are incorporated in the practice of employer branding. By establishing a precise picture of what makes a company a desired job, the attraction of new employees and the increased retention of the existing ones is ensured. Due to its potential, management has embraced employer branding as a useful tool to strengthen the preservation and commitment of human resources. This study aims to identify employer attractiveness' dimensions in a Romanian context, on a sample of employees and potential employees, by testing and validating a scale of employer attractiveness adapted from the EmpAt scale of Berthon et al. (2005). The differences that may occur depending on professional status were also investigated.

2. Literature review
2.1. Employer Brand. Employer Branding
The term "*employer brand*" was first conceptualized by Ambler and Barrow (1996) in their work, *The Employer Brand*. After conducting in-depth interviews with respondents from several companies (managers and HR responsible), they concluded that the branding concept can be applied to human resources management. Ambler and Barrow defined the employer brand as "a package of functional, economic and psychological benefits offered by an employment experience and identifiable with the employing company".

Employer branding emerged as a result of the application of marketing principles in human resource management, initially called internal marketing (Cable and Turban, 2001). The practice of employer branding is based on the assumption that human resources bring value to the company and, through skillful investments in human capital, the company's performance can be improved (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). In addition, companies with strong employer brands can reduce employee recruitment costs, improve employee relationships, increase employee retention, and even offer lower employee salaries comparable to firms with weaker employer brands (Ritson 2002).

Edwards (2010) defines employer branding as activities where principles from marketing, especially within branding, are used for human resources initiatives regarding both existing and potential employees and Brett Minchington (2010) describes the concept of employer brand as "*the image of the organization as a wonderful place to work in the minds of employees, active and passive candidates, customers and other stakeholders*". The art and science of employer branding is correlated with attraction, employment and retention, initiatives aimed at improving the employer brand (Minchington, 2010). Even if companies face global economic

conditions that are both difficult to predict and subject to extreme variations, there is a growing need to attract, retain and motivate staff (Moroko and Uncles, 2009).

Employer branding essentially involves the application of marketing and communication concepts in exchange for the promise of an employment experience that makes an organization distinctive and attractive to new and existing employees, ensuring that employees identify and develop commitment to the organization, corporate brand, mission, values and beliefs and thrive with it. Having a strong employer brand is like the organization has a charismatic personality (Barrow and Mosley, 2005). These unique criteria of the job offer or the package of rewards and benefits associated with employment are often referred to as the "*employer value proposition*" (Barrow and Mosley, 2005; Edwards, 2010). Employer branding refers to an organization's reputation as an employer and the value of employment offered to employees. (Barrow and Mosley, 2011).

Employer branding refers to the strategic branding processes that create, negotiate and establish sustainable relationships between an organization and its existing or potential employees under the influence of different corporate contexts in order to co-create sustainable values for the individual, organization and society as a whole (Aggerholm, Andersen and Thomsen 2011).

Several studies have found that organizations with a good employer brand will attract and retain more potential employees (Cable and Turban, 2003; Sivertzen, Nilsen and Olafsen, 2013; E. Alniacik, Ü. Alniacik, Erat and Akcin, 2014). Theurer et al. (2016) define the employer brand as a "*package of employment attributes that target potential and existing employees, which are attractive and unique enough to distinguish an employer from its competitors in the labor market*".

2.2. Organizational attractiveness

Because competition for the best employees has become almost as fierce as competition for customers (Berthon et al., 2005), organizations need to differentiate themselves from their competitors and be seen as attractive employers for potential and current employees (Lievens and Highhouse, 2003). It is important for organizations to understand what attracts potential jobseekers. Employer branding is used to increase organizational attractiveness and improve the organization's reputation. Organizational attractiveness refers to the expected benefits that a potential employee sees working for a particular organization. This construct is seen as a precursor to the concept of employer brand equity or value associated with an employer brand. In other words, the more attractive an organization is to potential employees, the stronger the employer's brand will be (Berthon, Ewing and Hah, 2005). Berthon et al. (2005) developed and validated a multidimensional scale to identify and operationalize the components of organizational attractiveness (as an employer). The authors identified five distinct dimensions of organizational attractiveness. This scale will be the starting point for our adapted scale.

There is a fairly abundant literature focused on organizational attractiveness and employer branding (Ambler and Barrow, 1996; Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Lievens et al., 2007; Davies, 2008; Moroko and Uncles, 2009; Edwards, 2010; Mosley, 2007; Roy, 2008; Arachchige and Robertson, 2011; Alniaçik and Alniaçik, 2012; Sivertzen et al., 2013; Biswas and Suar, 2016). However, despite the scientific interest in organizational attractiveness and its growing popularity among practitioners, research

in the field still raises a number of critical questions and issues. Contemporary researchers consider the attractiveness of employers as a multidimensional construction. There are various attempts to identify the distinct dimensions of employer attractiveness (Berthon et. al., 2005; Roy, 2008; Arachchige and Robertson, 2011; Alniaçik and Alniaçik, 2012; Sivertzen et al., 2013) that may differ depending on the tool used (measurement scale), local culture, professional status of respondents (employee or potential employee) and gender. But these dimensions are dynamic and influenced by major changes in the labor market through the emergence of new digital generations, the technological boom that brought major changes in society, staff shortage and an ageing population, which bring with them an epic change in the norms, values and work-related attitudes of individuals and it is important what determines the organizational attractiveness in the new context of labor market volatility and uncertainty.

This study identifies how employers can become and remain attractive in an employment context for potential employees (in a sample made of employees and students), by identifying the values (benefits) they expect from a potential employer or, in other words, the dimensions of employer attractiveness. The study brings an element of novelty by testing the organizational attractiveness on a Western Romanian population, by taking over and modifying an existing scale in the field.

3. Research methodology

In order to meet the objectives of the study quantitative research was chosen for developing and validating a scale to assess employer attractiveness starting from a scale already tested and validated with good results (EmpAt Scale) on other populations. In this study the EmpAt scale has undergone some changes and has been adapted according to the results obtained so far in other similar studies and the recommendations made by other researchers. The study was conducted at the end of 2019 on a number of 152 participants, one-part employees in private organizations in the Western part of Romania and the other being students at the Faculty of Sociology and Psychology (Social Sciences) at West University of Timisoara in final years of study. Students in final years and younger employees are the right target for organizations as potential employees. The tool used was the questionnaire composed of 29 questions, 22 forming the new proposed scale and the rest demographic questions. The data were collected through an online form. Messages containing the questionnaire link were sent to students and employees through internal communication groups in the university / organizations and through social networks.

Out of a total of 152 employees and students, 40% of the respondents had the quality of employees and 60% students at Faculty of Sociology and Psychology from Timisoara West University in final years. Among the respondents, 36.8% were between 18 and 24 years old and 63.2% between 25 and 45 years old, equivalent to the two types of generations in the labor market, respectively generation Z (18-24 years old) and generation Y (25- 45 years). The sample was non-probabilistic build on the age criteria because generation Y and Z represent 60% of the total workforce and potential employees for organizations.

The scale used in this study is the EmpAt (Employer Attractiveness) scale validated and tested by Berthon et al. (2005) on final year students, which measures organizational attractiveness. The initial scale included a number of 25 items that

correspond to the functional, economic and psychological benefits associated with employer branding, grouped into 5 dimensions (values) of organizational attractiveness: economic value, interest value, social value, development value and application value. This scale has been tested and validated in other studies and has proven robustness and stability (Alniaçik and Alniaçik, 2012; Arachchige and Robertson, 2011; Roy, 2008; Sivertzen et al., 2013; Reis and Braga, 2016), less the the applicative dimension value that recorded low scores in most studies. Based on the recommendations of these studies and research showing that the new generations in the labor market attach great importance to the value of supervision, management and feedback, 14 items were removed from the initial scale and 11 new items were added. The items removed correspond to the application value from the initial scale and vaguely defined items such as: "An attractive overall compensation package" which have been replaced by items that more specifically define the benefits related to the salary package and other types of benefits: "An above average basic salary", "Extra - salary benefits (bonuses, performance bonuses, 13th salary, etc) " and the items "Hands-on interdepartmental experience" or "Good promotion opportunities within the organization" replaced by "Training and development programs within the organization". A number of 4 new items have been added that refer to the value of management, which includes the component of communication, feedback, motivation and competent management, based on the conclusions of Myersi and Sadaghian (2010) who, referring to Generation Y, the majority in the labor market, emphasizes that "strong relationships with supervisors must be fundamental in negotiating their initial roles and organization". Also, two new items were added that refer to the value of work-life balance characterized by flexible schedule and remote work, mentioned by some researchers in previous works as important. In the end, a number of 22 items resulted, which were measured by the Likert scale from 1 to 5 (1 = not important / 5 = very important).

4. Research objectives and hypotheses

This study has two objectives. The first is the testing and validation of the new scale by identifying the dimensions of organizational attractiveness among employees and potential employees (students) in the Western part of Romania. Thus, we have the following research question: What are the perceptions of employees and potential employees regarding the dimensions of organizational attractiveness of an employer in general?

The second objective is to explore the statistically significant differences between the dimensions of organizational attractiveness observed depending on professional status (student vs. employee) and the research hypothesis is following:

H1: There are no significant differences in the perception of the dimensions of organizational attractiveness depending on the professional status of the respondents (students and employees).

5. Findings and results

In the preliminary analysis, in the descriptive statistics, the Kaiser – Meyer – Olkin coefficient (KMO = 0.868) was calculated using SPSS 20, which indicates an excellent value (Kaiser, 1974) and it is suitable for factor analysis. Bartlett's Test of

Sphericity was used to determine the relevance of the data (Approx. Chi Square 3272.6683, df 300, p = 0.0000). Bartlett's Test of Sphericity showed significant value of 0.000, indicating p <0.05. Thus, it shows that the correlation between items is sufficient to run the factor analysis.

The first objective was achieved by running an exploratory factor analysis using the technique of parallel analysis and the method of analysis of the main components of the program R version 4.1.0. These techniques resulted in a number of 4 factors with 4 components. Further, the factorial analysis was performed in R with the minres technique and the oblimin rotation. Thus, the total number of indicators (items) was reduced and 4 factors were identified, which explains 54% of the total variance of the data. All item loads in factors are above 0.60 except items Q4_6 "Training programs" which has a load of 0.41 and Q5_5 "A competent and honest manager" with a load of 0.49 and Q5_4 "A manager who appreciates employees' merits" with a load of 0.43 which were removed because they loaded in several factors. With respect to item loads in factors, although loads of 0.70 or above are considered the most desirable, loads between 0.50 and 0.70 are also acceptable and, in such cases, items may be still maintained (Chin, 1998; Hair et al., 2011; Hulland, 1999) especially if we are talking about social sciences. Three items with loadings under 0.50 were removed from the scale. The descriptive statistics and factor loadings of the items are presented in Table 1. The internal consistency of the scale and subscales was tested using the Cronbach Alpha coefficient. The results can be seen in table no. 1. Estimates of internal consistency (reliability) exceed the value of the 0.7 threshold recommended by Nunnally (1978) indicating an appropriate scale structure.

The convergent validity (internal consistency of the items) was also verified by the average variation extracted (AVE), the internal consistency of the scale and subscales (Cronbach Alpha-table no.1) and the discriminant validity of each latent construct by calculating $\sqrt{AVE}$. The results can be found in table no. 2. According to these results, AVE values are over 0.5 and $\sqrt{AVE}$ values over latent factor correlation values, which indicates convergent and discriminant validity (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988; Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Nunnally, 1978). Also, in table no. 2, the correlations between the factors can also be found, below the diagonal.

Table 1. EFA on Attractiveness employer scale (adapted from EmpAt)

	Scale items	M	SD	Loadings	Cronbach Alpha
F1: SOCIAL VALUE (SOC_VAL)					
Q2_1	Having a good relationship with your colleagues	4,61	,719	0,74	
Q2_2	Happy work environment	4,68	,592	0,65	
Q2_3	Supporting and encouraging colleagues	4,20	,822	0,84	**,898**
Q2_4	A fun working environment	4,50	,681	0,65	
Q2_5	Acceptance and belonging	4,53	,745	0,80	
Q2_6	To be helped when I need it	4,43	,742	0,74	
F2: INTEREST VALUE (INT_VAL)					

Q3_1	The organisation both values and makes use of your creativity	4,43	,843	0,64	
Q3_2	The organisation produces high-quality products and services	4,32	,843	0,72	
Q3_3	Innovative employer-novel work practices/forward-thinking	4,33	,828	0,81	**,862**
Q3_4	The organisation easily addapts to market changes	4,29	,881	0,76	
Q3_5	Job security within the organisation	4,66	,701	0,60	
F3: BENEFITS VALUE (BEN_VAL)					
Q4_1	An above average basic salary	4,18	,833	0,72	
Q4_2	Extra - salary benefits (bonuses, performance bonuses, 13th salary, etc)	4,37	,786	0,70	
Q4_3	Other benefits (private medical insurance, sport allowance, meal tickets, etc.)	4,40	,824	0,64	**,785**
Q4_4	Flexible schedule	4,39	,877	0,65	
Q4_5	Work from home / remote	3,88	1,173	0,59	
F4: MANAGEMENT VALUE (MGM_VAL)					
Q5_1	Having an open communication with your manager	4,74	,546	0,62	
Q5_2	Regular feedback offered by the manager	4,33	,867	0,74	**,768**
Q5_3	A manager who constantly motivates the team	4,57	,668	0,68	
OVERALL					**0,9**
Q4_6	Training programs	4,41	,833	0,41	out
Q5_4	A manager who appreciates employees'merits	4,72	,542	0,43	out
Q5_5	A competent and honest manager	4,81	,485	0,49	out

Source: *generated by the authors*

Factor 1, called "Social Value" measures the degree to which an individual is attracted to an employer that provides a pleasant and fun work environment, a good relationship with colleagues, support and encouragement, acceptance and membership in the organization. Factor 2, "Interest Value" measures the degree to which an individual is attracted to an employer who has quality and innovative products / services, encourages creativity, adapts easily to change and provides safety and security. Factor 3, called "Benefits Value" measures the degree to which an individual is attracted to an employer who offers an above average salary, extra-salary benefits (premiums, bonuses), other benefits (health, sports, etc.), flexible hours, remote training and work. Factor 4, called "Management Value" measures the degree to which an individual is attracted to an employer who has competent management, who communicates, provides feedback, motivates and recognizes the merits of employees. The internal consistency of the scale is good (α = 0.91). The social value (α

= 0.898), the value of interest (α = 0.86) and the value of management (α = 0.81) and the value of benefits (α = 0.797) have a good consistency. Following the results obtained from the factorial analysis, 4 compound variables were created: SOC_VAL = social value, INT_VAL = interest value, BEN_VAL = benefit value and MGM_VAL = management value, by calculating the average of the items in each factor. These compound variables will be used to test the research hypothesis. The means and correlations between the compound variables are presented in Table no.2.

Table 2. Convergent and discriminant validity. Correlation matrix between variables

Variable	M	AVE	CR	SOC_VAL	INT_VAL	BEN_VAL	MGM_VAL
SOC_VAL	4,49	0,55	0,80	**0,74**	-	-	-
INT_VAL	4,41	0,50	0,72	0,51***	**0,71**	-	-
BEN_VAL	4,24	0,44	0,63	0,51***	0,28***	**0,66**	-
MGM_VAL	4,6	0,46	0,55	0,48***	0,39***	0,29***	**0,68**
The correlations are significant at the level ***<0.001							
√AVE values can be found in bold on diagonal							

Source: *generated by the authors*

To verify the fulfillment of the second objective, the following hypothesis was tested: There are no significant differences in the perception of the dimensions of organizational attractiveness depending on the professional status of the respondents (students and employees). To test this hypothesis, we compared the averages of each factor (size) of attractiveness according to the professional status of the respondents (employee vs. student). Table 3 shows the averages, standard deviations and results of the T test. The results show that there are no significant differences depending on the professional status (occupation), except for the size-value of management which is significant for students. Thus, hypothesis 1 is confirmed.

Table 3. Mean, SD scores and t-test results of employer attractiveness dimensions by professional status

Dimension	Occupation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
SOC_VAL	student	89	4,536	0,563	0,107	1,110	0,269
	employee	63	4,429	0,615			
INT_VAL	student	89	4,485	0,594	0,190	1,764	0,080
	employee	63	4,295	0,733			
BEN_VAL	student	89	4,297	0,614	0,125	1,142	0,255
	employee	63	4,171	0,733			
MGM_VAL	student	89	4,629	0,545	0,095	2,111	0,036
	employee	63	4,429	0,621			

Source: *generated by the authors*

6. Conclusion

In this study, a scale of organizational attractiveness (employer attractiveness) was tested and validated on a Western Romanian population starting from the scale of

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employer attractiveness of Berthon et al. (2005). Also were identified 4 dimensions of employer attractiveness in a Romanian context and were tested any differences that may exist depending on the professional status of respondents. Thus, the first objective of this study was achieved by validating the scale in an exploratory approach using exploratory factor analysis and a number of 4 factors (dimensions) were identified that explain 56% of the total variance. These dimensions are, in order of their importance: social value (good relationships with colleagues, pleasant working environment, support and membership, etc.) followed by the value of interest (the organization encourages creativity and innovation, has high level products / services, adapts to market changes and provides security), the value of benefits (above average salary, other extra salary benefits, flexible schedule and remote work) and the value of management (good communication with the manager, feedback, team motivation). Even the scale of this study was adapted from EmpAt Scale and applied on different category (employees +students) from Western Romania, the results regarding the employer attractiveness dimensions are in line with previous research that use EmpAt scale and students as respondents: Berthon et al. (2005) (Interest Value, Social Value, Economical Value, etc.) on Australian population and Eger, Micik an Rehor (2018) (Social Value, Interest Value, Application Value) on Czech population. This study's findings emphasize social value and interest value among important benefits that potential employees see as elements of employer attractiveness. This adapted scale showed good reliability and validity for all dimensions researched but would be recommended for future studies to test in a different sample the model proposed in this study through a confirmatory factor analysis. As far as the second objective is concerned, to investigate possible differences in professional status, no significant differences were identified in the dimensions of organizational attractiveness, except for the value of management which is significant for students, which may mean that it is important for students to have good communication with the manager, feedback and to be motivated. Considering their lack of professional experience, these results are in line with the business practice of supporting and guiding new employees. The scope of our research has a few limitations. As we regarded one sample of employees and students and analyze results based on exploratory factor analysis, the robustness and validity of our 4-factor solution remains to be established by surveying another independent and different sample with a confirmatory factor analysis for further generalization and validation of the factors model. Our respondents were Romanians from the Western part of the country and as employment situations are subject to cultural differences, the factor structure would also have to be reassessed in different national settings especially for international brand building. The main contribution of this study is to provide practitioners and academics with a valid instrument to assess employer attractiveness for potential employees (both employees and students) and provide good insights for organizations regarding employer attractiveness dimensions that can be used in building employer branding strategies for attracting and recruiting prospective employees.

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