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HR Practice Signals and Generation Z Talent Attraction: A Conceptual Review of Employer Attractiveness and Preemployment Advocacy

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Abstract
Purpose — *This paper develops a conceptual explanation of how communicated human resource practices inform employer attractiveness, application intention, and employer advocacy among prospective applicants commonly classified as Generation Z. It addresses the distinction between finding an employer desirable and being willing to recommend it to others.*
Design/methodology/approach — *A purposive integrative review connects employer branding, signaling, organisational attraction, recruitment word of mouth, and critical generational research published through 2025. Conceptual comparison distinguishes actual practices, communicated claims, applicant evaluations, and behavioural intentions. The synthesis develops a framework and eight propositions for subsequent investigation.*
Conceptual contribution — *Flexibility, compensation, career development, digital innovativeness, and recognition provide different information about prospective employment. Their relationship with overall employer attractiveness depends on relevance and credibility. Employer attractiveness is proposed to connect these evaluations with application and advocacy intentions, while recommendations additionally depend on confidence in the information communicated. Managerial expectations and applicant perceptions constitute separate empirical perspectives.*
Practical implications — *Employers should substantiate employment claims, clarify access conditions, and compare internal assumptions with applicant evidence. Recruitment success should encompass informed employment pursuit and voluntary recommendations.*
Originality/value — *The framework distinguishes evaluative attraction from the reputational commitment involved in recommending an employer and specifies the measurement and design choices needed to test this distinction.*
Keywords — *employer branding, signaling theory, Generation Z, employer attractiveness, HR practices, application intention, employer advocacy, conceptual review*

I. Introduction

Employer branding concerns the employment associations through which organisations become recognisable and desirable to current and prospective employees. Its relevance extends beyond vacancy promotion because applicants must assess an employment relationship whose everyday conditions remain partly inaccessible before entry. Early formulations connected functional, economic, and psychological employment benefits with the identity of the employer (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). Subsequent work positioned employer branding within organisational strategy and recruitment (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). These foundations make employment practices central to the credibility of recruitment communication. Organisations communicate flexibility, competitive compensation, career development, technological progressiveness, and appreciation as reasons to join. However, an available practice, a recruitment claim, and an applicant's favourable evaluation are analytically different. A flexible-work policy may be available only to selected roles. Training may exist without protected learning time. Recognition may be publicised while its allocation remains unclear. Consequently, the existence of attractive language cannot establish what applicants infer or whether those inferences encourage employment pursuit.

The literature provides extensive foundations for examining organisational image and attraction, including distinctions among instrumental benefits, symbolic meanings, general attractiveness, and pursuit intentions (Highhouse et al., 2003; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Nevertheless, conceptual precision becomes especially important when scholars combine these elements into broad HR-practice attractiveness models. Without separating information from evaluation, the explanation risks becoming circular. Attractive practices predict an attractive employer because both measures ask respondents whether the organisation is attractive. A further issue concerns the outcomes of recruitment communication. Application intention captures personal pursuit, whereas preemployment advocacy concerns recommending an employer or communicating favourably

about its employment offering. Someone may recommend a company to a peer while lacking a suitable vacancy personally. Conversely, someone may apply cautiously while withholding a recommendation. Word-of-mouth recruitment research establishes the importance of interpersonal information, but research on employee advocacy cannot automatically explain recommendations from people who have never worked for the organisation (Van Hoye & Lievens, 2009).

This paper asks how evaluations of five HR-practice domains relate to employer attractiveness and why attraction may translate differently into application and advocacy intentions. Generation Z provides a relevant recruitment population, but cohort membership is not treated as a sufficient explanation of preferences. The paper contributes a framework that separates practice information, evaluative attraction, and two intentional responses. It further proposes credibility as a boundary condition and distinguishes organisational assumptions from applicant evidence. The resulting model is applicable to knowledge-intensive employment, including Indian private IT organisations, without claiming that the propositions have already been established in that setting.

II. Review approach and scope

The paper follows a purposive integrative review and conceptual model-development approach. Jaakkola (2020) explains that conceptual research requires explicit justification of the concepts and relationships used to construct an argument. Snyder (2019) similarly distinguishes review approaches according to their purpose. Here, the objective is to integrate explanations and develop testable propositions. The evidence base is selective rather than an exhaustive inventory, and no database-wide screening counts or pooled effects are claimed. The synthesis includes scholarly sources published through 31 December 2025, using the final bibliographic publication year where available. Public scholarly discovery and publisher or institutional records were consulted using combinations of employer branding, employer attractiveness, HR practices, Generation Z, signaling, application intention, advocacy, and recruitment word of mouth. Foundational sources establish construct boundaries, while later work illustrates flexible employment, innovation, applicant heterogeneity, and organisational advocacy. Publisher metadata, abstracts, and accessible article text informed verification. Detailed methodological conclusions were limited where only abstracts were accessible. Sources were selected for their explanatory relevance to at least one of four questions. What information does a practice convey? Who evaluates that information? Which employment stage and outcome are examined? What relationship is supported or proposed? Employee retention studies were used as adjacent evidence, with their employment stage retained in the interpretation. Broad claims that particular cohorts uniformly prefer particular practices were assessed against critical generational scholarship. The procedure prioritises conceptual fit and explicit comparison, while acknowledging selection and accessibility limitations.

The analytical sequence first separates organisational practices from communicated claims and applicant evaluations. It then compares five employment domains, identifies overall attractiveness as a possible intervening evaluation, and distinguishes application from recommendation. Finally, it derives propositions and a research agenda. This process does not rank practices by an assumed universal effect or infer causal contradictions from studies examining different populations and outcomes. Table 1 summarises the roles of the principal literature streams.

Table 1 Literature streams and their explanatory roles

Literature stream	Role in the synthesis	Ssources
Signaling	Distinguishes employment claims, receivers, and credibility.	Spence (1973); Connelly et al. (2011); Celani and Singh (2011)
Employer branding and attraction	Separates employment attributes, overall evaluation, and pursuit.	Berthon et al. (2005); Highhouse et al. (2003); Lievens and Slaughter (2016)
Specific HR domains	Identifies benefits and implementation conditions.	Kröll et al. (2021); Ek Styvén et al. (2022); Pandita (2022)
Advocacy and word of mouth	Distinguishes employee evidence from proposed preemployment recommendations.	Van Hoye and Lievens (2009); Choudhary and Joshi (2025)
Generational critique	Locates heterogeneity and alternative explanations.	Rudolph et al. (2021); Lassleben and Hofmann (2023)

Source: Author's conceptual synthesis.

III. Theoretical foundations and construct boundaries

3.1 Signaling under recruitment information asymmetry

Spence's (1973) original labour-market formulation examined how observable characteristics convey information about otherwise difficult-to-observe qualities. Employer-branding applications reverse the familiar direction of educational signaling by considering organisations communicating employment attributes to applicants. Celani and Singh (2011) provide a recruitment-focused application. Connelly et al. (2011) emphasise

the importance of specifying senders, signals, receivers, and the surrounding informational environment. These distinctions prevent treating every favourable organisational attribute as an effective signal by definition.

For the present framework, organisations communicate claims, applicants encounter and interpret them, and credibility affects the confidence attached to resulting inferences. Credibility means the perceived believability and verifiability of a specific employment claim. Relevance concerns whether the attribute matters to the applicant's needs. The two can diverge. An applicant may believe a sabbatical policy exists but consider it unimportant, or value remote work highly while doubting access. Both conditions matter to the proposed evaluation process.

This distinction also separates substantive provision from communication. A practice can improve the employment experience yet remain unknown to outsiders. Communication can raise awareness without ensuring implementation. Employer attractiveness depends on what applicants understand and believe, whereas organisational practice quality also concerns what employees actually experience. The framework therefore treats communication exposure as a prerequisite for evaluating a claim and recommends independent evidence of implementation when studying its accuracy.

3.2 Practice attractiveness and employer attractiveness

Practice attractiveness is the perceived desirability of a specific employment provision for the evaluating individual. Employer attractiveness is a broader favourable orientation towards the organisation as a workplace. Berthon et al. (2005) operationalised different anticipated employment benefits, while Highhouse et al. (2003) distinguished attractiveness, prestige, and behavioural intentions. The present synthesis preserves these conceptual boundaries rather than assuming that all measures can be combined without loss.

Five practice domains organise the framework, but they are not asserted to exhaust employer appeal. Job security, meaningful work, inclusion, location, and occupational fit can independently matter. Moreover, a higher-order construct requires a theory of its indicators. If an overall evaluation explains covariance among dimension scores, reflective specification may be defensible. If distinct provisions jointly compose an employment offering, a composite interpretation may be more appropriate. Correlation and high reliability alone cannot decide between these meanings.

Application intention is the willingness to pursue a suitable employment opportunity. Advocacy intention is willingness to recommend the organisation as an employer or share favourable employment information. Neither implies completed behaviour. Advocacy is narrower than general positive word of mouth because it concerns employment, yet a recommendation does not necessarily imply willingness to defend every organisational action. Measures should therefore avoid mixing recommendation, organisational defence, online posting, and actual referral counts without justification.

3.3 Generation Z as a heterogeneous recruitment population

Generation Z is frequently used to designate younger labour-market entrants, but birth-year categories cannot independently establish a psychological mechanism. Rudolph et al. (2021) identify theoretical and methodological problems in attributing work differences to generations, including difficulty separating age, period, and cohort influences. The framework accordingly treats career stage, financial circumstances, occupation, and individual values as plausible explanations of variation within the target population. Lassleben and Hofmann (2023) examine variation in employer expectations within a Generation Z sample, reinforcing the need to investigate heterogeneity. Pandita (2022) discusses innovative employer-branding approaches for attracting this population. Read together, such research motivates investigating contemporary employment expectations while avoiding the claim that digital familiarity automatically creates a uniform preference for particular technologies or working arrangements. Sampling boundaries should be stated explicitly and examined alongside career and demographic characteristics.

IV. Synthesis of five HR practice domains

4.1 Flexible work practices

Flexible practices convey information about discretion over time, location, and work organisation. Their possible meaning includes autonomy, trust, and support for responsibilities outside work. Kröll et al. (2021) examine German job seekers through a field study and scenario experiment and find relationships involving particular flexible arrangements and anticipated organisational support. The evidence supports attention to the type of provision and intervening evaluation rather than a single undifferentiated flexibility benefit. A claim of flexibility becomes informative when its operating conditions are clear. Applicants need to understand role eligibility, managerial discretion, availability during probation, and expected working hours. Ambiguous flexibility can conceal unpredictability or constant availability. The conceptual expectation is therefore conditional. Relevant, believable discretion should improve practice evaluations, but a remote-work

label need not produce attraction when the applicant values workplace learning or doubts implementation. These qualifications make null or varied findings theoretically interpretable.

4.2 Compensation competitiveness

Compensation provides information about immediate economic value, benefits, and the organisation's exchange relationship. Economic value is a core component of employer-attractiveness research (Berthon et al., 2005). However, competitiveness must be anchored to a comparison, such as similar roles, alternative employers, or an applicant's attainable options. An unqualified claim that rewards are attractive may capture overall favourability rather than a meaningful assessment of relative compensation. Transparency can affect how compensation claims enter employer evaluation. Salary ranges, variable-pay conditions, and benefit eligibility help applicants assess the offer. An impressive maximum incentive may lose informational value when its likelihood is unclear. Compensation may also have a threshold role. Once a minimum acceptable package is secured, applicants can attach greater importance to development or autonomy. The framework allows such nonlinearities without assuming that compensation becomes unimportant to younger workers.

4.3 Career growth opportunities

Career-development provisions communicate potential access to training, mentoring, promotion, and transferable competence. Their relevance can be particularly pronounced when applicants have limited occupational experience or face uncertainty about future skill requirements. Employer-branding scholarship connects the employment offering with career management (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). This supports treating development as both a prospective benefit and information about organisational investment. Credible development claims require more than the existence of a learning platform. Protected time, transparent selection, mentoring availability, and examples of internal progression provide stronger grounds for evaluation. Transferable development may attract applicants who anticipate organisational mobility, while promotion opportunities may appeal to those seeking an internal career. These are distinct benefits and should not be treated as perfectly interchangeable indicators. Their relative contribution depends on the individual's career horizon and employment alternatives.

4.4 Digital innovativeness

Digital innovativeness concerns perceived technological progressiveness and openness to improving work through digital tools and ideas. It should be distinguished from applicants' personal technology confidence and from the mere presence of software. Ek Styvén et al. (2022) investigate employee perceptions of creativity and innovation in tourism and hospitality. Their work supplies adjacent evidence on the employment value of innovation, while its transfer to applicant evaluations in IT requires explicit reasoning. A digital signal may suggest competence, learning, and preparedness, but it can also raise concerns about monitoring, work intensification, or skill obsolescence. These interpretations depend on what technology enables and how implementation is described. Accordingly, the framework locates attractiveness in the anticipated work experience associated with technology. Employer communication that connects tools with effective collaboration and supported learning should be more informative than an unsubstantiated claim to be technologically advanced.

4.5 Recognition culture

Recognition concerns expected acknowledgement of effort, achievement, ideas, and contribution. Applicants can encounter information about recognition through recruitment examples, employee accounts, or selection interactions. Because appreciation is difficult to verify before entry, the fairness and consistency of visible examples may influence their meaning. Recognition should also be distinguished from financial rewards, since combining them indiscriminately can blur the boundary with compensation. Research on organisational advocacy among existing IT employees provides a relevant neighbouring literature. Choudhary and Joshi (2025) connect employer-branding dimensions, organisational advocacy, and talent retention. This establishes the relevance of employee-facing employment evaluations to advocacy research, but does not demonstrate that prospective applicants have equivalent information or attachment. The conceptual extension requires investigating whether credible expectations of appreciation inform overall employer attractiveness before organisational entry.

Table 2 HR practice domains and proposed applicant inferences

Domain	Potential inference	Condition requiring examination
Flexibility	Discretion and support for work–life needs	Role eligibility and dependable access
Compensation	Economic value and exchange quality	Comparison standard and reward conditions
Career development	Investment in future competence	Protected time and progression access
Digital innovativeness	Technological capability and learning	Employee benefit and implementation support

Recognition	Appreciation of contribution	Fairness and consistency of acknowledgement

Source: Author's conceptual synthesis.

V. Conceptual framework and propositions

5.1 Practice evaluations and overall attractiveness

The proposed mechanism begins with applicants evaluating practice information against their needs. Favourable evaluations provide reasons to expect a desirable employment experience. Overall attractiveness summarises this judgement while allowing other organisational information to contribute. Lievens and Slaughter (2016) review employer-image formation through organisational and nonorganisational sources. Their synthesis supports locating HR-practice communication within a broader informational environment rather than treating it as the sole cause of attraction.

P1. Favourable applicant evaluations of flexibility, compensation, career development, digital innovativeness, and recognition are positively associated with overall employer attractiveness, with relationship magnitudes varying by individual relevance.

This proposition concerns five distinguishable evaluations. It does not require every domain to have the same coefficient or every applicant to value each domain positively. Researchers can test the relationships separately before deciding whether a higher-order representation is warranted. Competing organisational information can also weaken a domain's association with the overall judgement. For example, an attractive learning policy may have limited influence if applicants anticipate poor treatment during selection.

5.2 Attractiveness and two intentional outcomes

A favourable employer evaluation gives applicants a reason to seek further information and pursue suitable vacancies. Nevertheless, occupational eligibility and practical constraints affect whether attraction becomes application intention. Prestige can coexist with limited personal suitability, making separation between evaluation and pursuit necessary. Highhouse et al. (2003) provide a measurement foundation for examining these distinct responses.

P2. Employer attractiveness is positively associated with application intention when applicants perceive a suitable employment opportunity.

Advocacy involves an additional interpersonal judgement. Recommending an employer makes the recommender accountable, at least informally, for the quality of information passed to others. The recipient's needs may differ from the recommender's own needs. Recruitment word-of-mouth research establishes the relevance of such interpersonal sources (Van Hoye & Lievens, 2009). The distinctive theoretical claim here is that attraction supplies favourable content, while confidence in that content helps make recommendation acceptable.

P3. Employer attractiveness is positively associated with preemployment employer advocacy intention, conditional on the perceived relevance of the employer to the intended recipient.

P4. Employer attractiveness mediates relationships between favourable HR-practice evaluations and application intention.

P5. Employer attractiveness mediates relationships between favourable HR-practice evaluations and preemployment employer advocacy intention.

The indirect pathways allow direct effects to remain. A specific salary range can make applying practically feasible, and a specialised training opportunity can give someone a concrete reason to recommend the employer. These examples motivate estimating direct and indirect effects jointly. The conceptual model makes no claim that employer attractiveness completely explains every relationship or that statistical mediation in cross-sectional data establishes the proposed temporal process.

5.3 Credibility and the cost of recommending

Credibility is proposed to influence how much weight applicants attach to favourable practice information. Specificity, consistency across sources, and evidence of implementation can support belief. These features may be particularly consequential for advocacy because a recommendation exposes the speaker to possible social or reputational consequences. The argument extends signaling concepts to distinguish evaluating information privately from transmitting it to another potential applicant (Connelly et al., 2011).

P6. Perceived claim credibility strengthens the positive relationship between favourable HR-practice evaluations and employer attractiveness.

P7. Perceived claim credibility strengthens the positive relationship between employer attractiveness and preemployment employer advocacy intention.

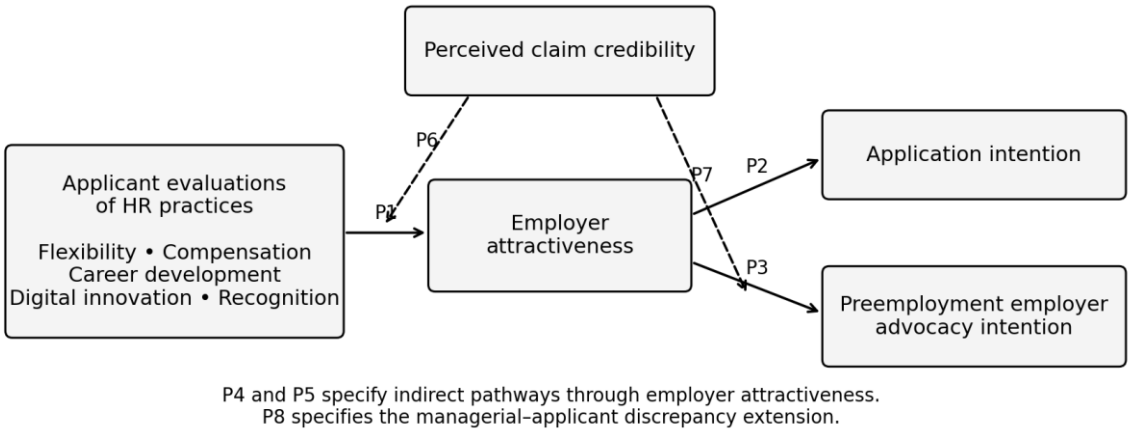
The second moderation is conceptually distinct from the first. Credibility can affect the formation of attractiveness and the willingness to communicate an already favourable evaluation. An applicant might remain attracted by uncertain opportunities but hesitate to recommend them. Testing both paths can reveal whether

credibility mainly changes evaluation, interpersonal transmission, or both. Credibility should be measured for the relevant claims rather than inferred from generic trust in employers.

P8. Discrepancy between managerial expectations and applicant evaluations is associated with weaker correspondence between communicated HR-practice claims and applicant-reported employer attractiveness.

P8 establishes a cross-perspective extension rather than treating managers as substitutes for applicants. Paired organisational and applicant evidence is necessary to assess it. Figure 1 depicts the central relationships. The propositions are theoretical expectations for future testing, and no previously generated survey results are presented as evidence for them.

Figure 1 Proposed conceptual framework



Note. Solid arrows indicate proposed associations. Dashed arrows indicate moderation. Direct practice-to-outcome paths may be estimated alongside the indirect pathways. All relationships require empirical testing.

VI. Discussion and implications

6.1 Theoretical implications

The framework contributes through conceptual separation and conditional explanation. First, distinguishing actual provisions, communicated claims, practice evaluations, and overall attractiveness clarifies the proposed signaling process. This reduces the risk that predictor and mediator measures repeat the same general favourability judgement. It also enables research to investigate where communication fails, whether through poor visibility, low relevance, disbelief, or weak conversion into intention.

Second, the distinction between application and advocacy adds an interpersonal transmission stage to employer-attraction models. A private evaluation can influence personal pursuit, while recommendation also involves the needs of another person and confidence in the information shared. The proposed credibility condition gives this difference a testable mechanism. It avoids treating advocacy as an automatic consequence of attraction or as employee loyalty transferred unchanged to prospective applicants.

Third, the model treats Generation Z as a recruitment population with meaningful internal variation. Theories of information and evaluation explain the relationships, while cohort labels identify sampling boundaries. This positioning responds to the concerns raised by Rudolph et al. (2021) and permits direct examination of competing explanations such as career stage and economic constraints. Finally, the managerial–applicant distinction enables organisational employer-branding assumptions to become objects of study rather than unexamined measurement shortcuts.

6.2 Implications for employers and career services

Employers can begin by auditing a limited set of recruitment claims against implementation evidence. Flexibility claims should specify access conditions, compensation should distinguish guaranteed and contingent rewards, development should explain actual opportunities, digital claims should describe work implications, and recognition should identify how contributions are acknowledged. An effective audit links each claim to a policy owner, available evidence, and feedback from employees in the relevant roles.

Applicant research should examine which information people encountered, understood, valued, and believed. These questions diagnose different problems and support more precise changes than a single employer-brand score. Organisations can compare managerial expectations with applicant feedback and recruitment behaviour, including completed applications and withdrawals. However, applicant privacy,

voluntary participation, and separation from selection decisions are necessary to obtain credible feedback without pressuring favourable responses.

Advocacy should be voluntary and information-based. Employers can make accurate information easy to access and share, while avoiding expectations that applicants publicly endorse the company. Career services can teach students to compare eligibility conditions and seek corroboration for employment claims. The framework does not justify dividing recruitment messages into stereotyped generational packages. Segmentation should follow demonstrated needs and role circumstances rather than assumptions that age categories determine preferences.

VII. Research agenda and limitations

Future studies should prioritise temporal and source separation. A longitudinal design can measure exposure and credibility first, employer attractiveness subsequently, and intentions or behaviour later. Randomised recruitment scenarios can vary the specificity and corroboration of claims while holding the substantive benefit constant. Such designs can distinguish whether evidence changes credibility or whether the benefit itself changes perceived desirability. Actual application opportunities are needed when examining translation into employment pursuit.

A second priority is construct development for preemployment advocacy. Items should identify recommendations to others, favourable employment information sharing, and the intended recipient. Researchers should assess whether these behaviours form one dimension and distinguish intentions from observed referrals or public posts. Employee advocacy measures require adaptation and validation before use among nonemployees. Interviews can establish whether reputational concern is salient and whether it explains hesitation to recommend an otherwise attractive employer.

Matched studies can collect organisational policy evidence, managerial expectations, applicant evaluations, and recent-recruit accounts. Multiple respondents per organisation require attention to nesting and a clearly stated unit of analysis. Reflective and composite specifications of the five domains should be compared using conceptual reasoning, measurement evidence, and sensitivity analyses. Within-cohort variation and cross-age comparisons should control career stage and relevant circumstances before attributing differences to generational membership.

This review has limitations. Purposive source selection and variable full-text accessibility restrict completeness and may privilege established English-language frameworks. The review does not estimate effect sizes or demonstrate that credibility operates identically across occupations and cultures. The five domains omit other important employment attributes, and the India–IT application remains a proposed setting rather than a verified contextual result. Evidence published after 2025 is outside scope. These boundaries make the framework a basis for focused testing rather than a universal account of employer attractiveness.

VIII. Conclusion

Employer-branding explanations require attention to what organisations provide, what they communicate, and what applicants infer. This conceptual review connects five HR-practice domains with employer attractiveness and two distinct intentional outcomes. It proposes that credibility conditions both the evaluation of claims and the willingness to recommend an employer. Separating managerial expectations from applicant perceptions and recognising variation within Generation Z makes the framework more precise. Its propositions provide a route for investigating credible employment communication, personal pursuit, and preemployment advocacy through subsequent empirical research.

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