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Brand Differentiation in German Online Job Boards

An Exemplary Evaluation of Siemens' Efforts at Stepstone.de to illustrate how a Differentiation Score Model can support Employer Brand Management

Verfasser Tami Palinkas, Florian Botzenhardt & Jens U. Pätzmann

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die zunehmende Überlastung der Menschen mit Informationen berührt auch Unternehmen, die auf Jobbörsen wie Stepstone präsent sind. Obwohl der Nutzen derartiger Online-Angebote kaum anzuzweifeln ist, besteht die Gefahr, als Unternehmen in einem Meer aus ähnlichen Stellenanzeigen unterzugehen. Insbesondere vor dem sich abzeichnenden Fachkräftemangel stellt sich daher die Frage, ob es nicht Möglichkeiten gibt, eine Arbeitgebermarke mit den auf Online-Jobbörsen möglichen Funktionen stärker zu differenzieren. Der vorliegende Artikel beschreibt ein Modell zur Berechnung eines Differenzierungswertes anhand der beispielhaften Kombination der Siemens AG und Stepstone.de mit dem Ziel, dem interessierten Leser aufzuzeigen, wie sich die Markendifferenzierung in Online-Jobbörsen steigern und messbar machen lässt. Das Modell ist dabei als Blaupause und Vorschlag für ein Analysetool zu verstehen. Aus der Untersuchung ergeben sich sieben Differenzierungsmerkmale auf Seite der Jobbörse und sechs Einflussfaktoren auf Seite des Unternehmens. Es wird aufgezeigt, welchen Einfluss die Features von Stepstone.de auf die Wahrnehmung eines Arbeitgebers haben. Das Beispiel der Siemens AG zeigt, dass sich auch für einen DAX-Konzern Verbesserungspotentiale identifizieren lassen.

Due to the increasing internet access – 2.497.000.000 internet users worldwide in 2012 (ITU World Telecommunication 2013) – people can receive easily plenty of information about a certain topic or question. Regarding search engines like Google, they offer information to almost every topic one can think of.

This new access to information entails both advantages and disadvantages. Especially companies find themselves more often in an information competition rather than in a traditional production or service competition (Pispers & Riehl 1997, p. 51; Esch 2012, p. 34). In this context brands receive a high value.

Brands endow companies the possibility to differentiate themselves from other companies (Esch 2012, p. 18ff, 25 ff).

This also becomes relevant when companies are searching for qualified employees or people are seeking for a job. As early as in 2010 over 72 percent of the Germans were already looking for a job on the web (S+H Medienstatistik 2010). More important, in 2012, 54,3 % of the German job-seekers thought that online job boards like Stepstone.com offered them high chances to find a new job, followed by corporate websites and recommendations by friends (CHRIS 2013). But there exists a significant problem: If in 2012 somebody, for example, entered the search item "Ingenieur" – limited to jobs in Germany - at StepStone he or she received 11,892 hits (StepStone 2012b). Even though this number is significantly reducible by applying more regional filters, it still illustrates perfectly that companies urgently need methods to guarantee a good visibility of their own job offers.

For the user it is really difficult to distinguish between these thousands of advertisements and companies do encounter the threat of perishing in this flood of offerings. Therefore, the aim of this article is to show starting points and recommendations of how companies can differentiate their brand respectively company from others at German online job boards. Based on the research question "Can companies differentiate their brands at German online job boards in times of information overload?" the hypothesis is that companies can do this. Like the research question reveals, the study is limited to Germany which means it is a national field research. As it is an actual one time investigation and uses a case study it can also be called an applied ad-hoc research (Koch 2012, p. 4).

After defining the fundamental terms information overload and online job boards the study will continue with identifying the possibilities of brand differentiators at online job boards in Germany. Therefore, the authors illustrate which possibilities are offered

by the job platforms themselves but also which possibilities companies have additionally resulting in a model to calculate a differentiation score for one particular online job board regarding one company. This model will finally be applied to the example of StepStone and Siemens in Germany. StepStone has been selected because this investigation focuses on commercial job markets and excludes non-commercial job markets. Furthermore, the StepStone is a general and very well-known job board with a high number of job advertisements, which means information overload is highest there (Kenk 2011, p. 52; Nielsen 2010). Siemens has been chosen because it publishes a sufficient high number of job advertisements at StepStone.

Brands and Information Overload

Due to the rise in media and brand variety the world has seen over the past decade, the interest in information about brands and products is on a steady decline (Walter 2007, S. 55f). Also, the overall quality of products and brands has reached a relatively high level with the consequence that risk of buying a poor product has dropped. As Esch outlines, customers transformed into information pickers and prefer information which is easy to digest. The combination of this restricted intake capacity and the enormous information flood leads to a dramatic information overload within the customers' minds. Brand communication needs to become more attention-grabbing, pictographically and strikingly (Esch 2012, p. 28f).

Online Job Boards

Online job boards are platforms for the articulation and publication of the needs regarding the supply side and the demand side of the labour market (Beck 2002, p. 24). Typically, applicants can create a profile to display their curricula vitae whereas companies can publish their job advertisements. The job boards in the World Wide Web can be classified into commercial and non-commercial, general and specialised or intersectoral and sectoral platforms (Beck 2002, p. 36; Laudon & Traver 2010, p. 9, 62). Well-known

examples for online job boards targeting the German market are monster.de, job24.de and stepstone.de, being the general and intersectoral job boards this analysis focuses on.

According to a market research of S + H Medienstatistik in 2010, 72,1 percent of the respondents stated that they use online job boards when informing themselves about current jobs and employers, whereas 68,1 percent of companies use online job boards for publishing their job advertisements in 2011, according to CHRIS (2012a).

Brand Differentiators: Typical Offerings by the Platforms

To identify all theoretically possible offerings for differentiation at an online job board the first step in this work has been the analysis of the employer website sections of Monster (2012), StepStone (2012a), Rekruter (2012), Stellenanzeigen (2012a), and Jobscout24 (2012) as they are among the 25 largest job boards (Kenk 2011, p. 52), which led to the following possibilities for differentiation:

- **Key wording:** Some job boards offer key word campaigns to assure that the job advertisements of a company are at the top of the result list.
- **Ranking optimization:** The result lists can always be sorted according to different criteria, e.g. title or date, according to the entered key word. Additionally existing job boards offer regular updates to guarantee that an advertisement is being displayed at the top of the search results or the offer to feature a company's logo to generate higher attention, following the trend of visualization.
- **Employer branding options:** Offerings in this field are banners respectively image adverts directly on the website of the job board, on partner websites or in newsletters as well as in target group mailings of the job board (Beck 2002, p. 78). Further common possibilities are company profiles or company videos.
- **Advertisement formats:** All analysed job boards distinguish between different advertisement for-

ats (Beck 2002, p. 53f). In the opinion of the authors, the best formats for differentiation are the ones with individual design possibilities, so that companies can use their corporate design instead of a standard-layout.

- **Linking possibilities:** Job boards often offer possibilities to link the job advertisement with the company website and / or a company career website, social networks, like Facebook, career networks, like XING. This enables possible applicants to get more information about the company (Beck 2002, p. 65).
- **Multiple publications:** If job boards offer multiple publications, for example on partner websites, this could be beneficial in terms of visibility because companies are more present in the digital job world.
- **Contact possibilities:** Some job boards offer forums which are very good differentiators because the companies become touchable and offer a space for asking questions (Beck 2002, p. 71). A new idea is a live company presentation.

Influencing Possibilities for Companies

Although companies are very dependent on the offerings of the platforms, there are several capabilities how they can influence their visibility and differentiate themselves from their competition:

- **Job title and key words:** Companies need to find the best fitting job title and add the right key words to the text of their job advertisements in order to attract the right users. According to Achilles (2008, p. 69) it is eminently important that job advertisements are assigned to the correct working place and occupational field. If users scroll through the result list the main attention catchers are title, location and the company's name (Achilles 2008, p. 69). Although this seems to be obvious, the definition of job titles and keywords can be very difficult. Today's business world led to the development of literally millions of highly specified job fields and job titles, that may only be used in one company. For example, in the field of advertising

agencies for twenty years there was a common understanding about the role of an account planner which has been now completely frayed out into dozens of subtypes, following the change in the media and consumer behaviour landscape (Botzenhardt & Pätzmann 2012, p. 37). Apparently, it is impossible for employees to know all possible job titles for a desired position. Hence, companies need to ensure that their offers are easy to find for all possible applicants.

- Design of the advertisement: Job advertisements that use graphic elements and pictures, clearly branding it for the issuing company, offer great opportunities for differentiation (Blackman 2006, p. 370). On the one hand it is important that the adverts fit the corporate design to achieve consistency and recognition. But on the other hand online job advertisements have to consider some more aspects to be successful: As the attention span for a job advert is very low, companies can support the users to catch the relevant facts by highlighting important information, listing the tasks and requirements and illustrating the value proposition as employer. Additionally colours and moving images can lead to a higher attention – also the mentioned company videos (Achilles 2008, p. 70f). In the case of entry-level positions, the inclusion of a possible career path to illustrate how employees can develop themselves has been proved to be very useful by a US study (Blackman 2006, p. 384).
- Text of the advertisement: The job advertisement should be very target group specific and release positive emotions when reading. Of course, there are basic rules which have to be regarded, e.g. texts without any faults in orthography or grammar which show a high quality level and are displayed well on electronic devices (Achilles 2008, p. 69f). Also, companies should keep in mind that short texts concerning the job description are very successful, whereas the company description can be more detailed. There is a high evidence that the best level of specificity of information leads to great advertising effectiveness (Feldman et al. 2006, p. 134f). Finally, studies show that gender-aware wording and text design can improve the attractiveness in advertisements for specific target groups like female applicants dramatically (Born & Taris 2010, p. 496f).
- The company image: According to Nolan & Harold (2010, p. 654f), there is evidence that applicants tend to be attracted more by companies which display a personality which is similar to the actual or desired applicant's own. This leads to the recommendation for the development of strong employer brands, a fact that still faces a lack of interest in the economic landscape although the ability of hiring qualified employees can be as mission-critical in terms of economical success as being able to market a company's products.
- Application options: Companies can offer multiple application options and thereby differ from others. Normally the options are an application via paper and an online application, while the online seems to be more and more the most important one.
- Time frame: According to Achilles, online job adverts are mostly read on workdays between six and eight a.m., during lunchtime, and in the evenings. Companies should have this in mind while determining the moment they publish their adverts. It is crucial to be at the top of the results in the peaks (Achilles 2008, p. 74).
- Offerings beyond the job board: Thinking one step further, users of job boards may want broader information about the company or have a look at all current job announcements. According to Achilles (2008, p. 72f), it is very important that all job advertisements which are published at online job boards, are also available at the company career website to reduce uncertainty. These company and career websites should fulfil the requirements of a good website and offer all important information but also content which distinguishes them from other companies. This could be reports or videos about an employee telling about his job and the company. In the best case, the information should be target group specific as an engineer may not be interested in information designed for marketing professionals. Also, an increasing number of companies communicates via social media like Facebook and Twitter to distribute job offers (CHRIS

		Differentiator	Weighting	Rating	Score	Estimated score
jobboard		key wording	5%	5	0.25	0.25
		ranking optimization	5%	1	0.05	0.05
		employer branding options	10%	10	1.00	0.10
		advertisement formats	10%	10	1.00	1.00
		linking possibilities	10%	8	0.80	0.60
		multiple publications	5%	9	0.45	0.45
		contact possibilities	5%	2	0.10	0.10
		subtotal	50%	45	3.65	2.55
		Differentiator	Weighting	Rating	Score	
company		job title and key words	10%	7	0.70	
		design of the advertisement	10%	10	1.00	
		text of the advertisement	10%	9	0.90	
		application options	5%	3	0.15	
		time frame	5%	1	0.05	
		offerings beyond	10%	8	0.80	
		subtotal	50%	38	3.6	
		total	100%	83	7.25	6.15

Table 1: Differentiation score model – using the example of StepStone and Siemens Inc.
Source: Own representation

2012b), although the benefit of using these channels has to be closely evaluated for every individual case and cannot be generalised.

- Job title and key words, design and text of the advertisement and the offerings beyond the job board.

The Model to Evaluate the Differentiation Score

In the next step, the discussed platform features and their influencing possibilities are connected in a model which can be used to evaluate a company's differentiation score at one particular job board. Each differentiator has a certain weighting according to its importance, whereby 50 percent fall onto the job board part and 50 percent on the company part. The highest weighting has been allocated to the following aspects because of their high importance for the job candidates and their suspected potential in terms of differentiation:

- Employer branding option, advertisement formats and linking possibilities,

Of course these weightings should be understood as a general recommendation and can be altered to fulfil special requirements – for example an analysis in a different market sector or cultural environment.

In a second step, each differentiator is rated on a scale between one – which means very bad – and ten – which means very good. The score is the result of multiplying the weighting as decimal number with the rating number.

In the third step, companies can do some corrections by transmitting the score into an estimated score considering influencing factors like the budget. Maybe the platform offers a key wording campaign but the company has no budget to afford this campaign. The budget is also a highly influencing factor when

it comes to the advertisements formats. Often, individual advertising formats provide great opportunities on ad awareness but of course are also the most expensive ones.

The fourth step is the evaluation of the differentiators regarding the company part where a certain risk of subjectivity has to be mentioned if the rating is done by a company itself. To reduce this risk and gain more objectivity, companies can base the evaluation on research results asking independent representatives about the six factors. Finally the total score and total estimated score are calculated and can be judged according to the classification shown in table 1.

StepStone and Siemens AG in Germany

As an example, the model is being used to evaluate the performance of the Siemens AG, well-known German multinational engineering and electronics company, on StepStone, which is one of the most successful job boards in Germany and Europe with around 20,000 customers. In 2009 the whole StepStone Group was acquired by the Axel Springer AG. The platform is present in twelve countries within Europe (Axel Springer AG 2012, p. 170). In Germany StepStone engages around 250 employees (StepStone 2012h).

Siemens AG is one of the leading technology companies in Germany and operates in four markets: Energy, Industry, Health-Care and Infrastructure & Cities. In 2012 the company generated fourteen percent – 11,072 billion Euros – of its revenue with 119,000 employees in Germany (Siemens AG 2012a, p. 3, 6). At the time of investigation Siemens AG had 160 job advertisements published on StepStone (StepStone 2012e).

The following evaluation is based on an analysis of the company profile and job advertisements of Siemens AG at StepStone (StepStone 2012e, f, g, i) and on the analysis of the Siemens career website (Siemens AG 2012b, c, d). The results are shown in the columns Rating, Score and estimated score of table 1.

StepStone does not offer any key word campaign but an indexing of the advertisements is a standard offering by what they reach five points. There is also no offering or at least no information regarding a ranking optimization which leads to a rating of one.

When it comes to employer branding options, StepStone has numerous options for banner advertising, an option for adding a company video and an option for establishing a company profile. The advertisement formats include an individual format. Therefore, these two differentiators can be rated with ten.

Job advertisements at StepStone can be linked with the company website, career website an e-mail address or the online application tool and also with social networks, like Facebook. But it is not clear whether these opportunities depend on the chosen advertisement format which results in a rating of eight, or not.

With a publication also on up to 200 partner websites, StepStone can be rated with nine regarding the differentiator of multiple publications. In contrast, there is no offer regarding contact possibilities of interactive communication between company and applicant directly on the platform. Nevertheless, a StepStone blog exists where companies could maybe publish an article and discuss with the users which causes a rating of two.

In subtotal StepStone reaches a score of 3.65 which can be interpreted as a middle to high differentiation score. The scores for key wording, ranking optimization, multiple publications and contact possibilities remain the same for the estimated score because there are no influencing factors which could cause changes.

The employer branding score is downgraded to 0.1 as Siemens definitely does not use the possibilities of a company profile or company video. As it can be assessed by the authors, Siemens AG does not use any banners on the StepStone website, result lists or target group channels. It cannot be said if they do

advertising in e-mail products of StepStone but the assumption is that Siemens AG does not use any banner options.

Siemens AG publishes its job advertisements in the premium format or at least in the individual format, which enables a publication in the corporate design. Therefore, this score remains 1.0. All job advertisements of Siemens AG at StepStone have links to the company website, to Siemens AG at Facebook and to the online application tool of Siemens AG but no links to the career website, further networks or an e-mail address whereby the score is downgraded to 0.6.

Siemens AG has very precise job titles – although there are also short ones – and the location and occupational field are clearly visible. Unfortunately the key wording cannot be evaluated whereby the first differentiator is rated with seven. In terms of graphic design, Siemens AG uses its Corporate Design for all advertisements, highlights the important information, structures the adverts through subheadings concerning the tasks and requirements as well as describes its value proposition as employer. This leads to a rating of ten for the design of the advertisements.

Regarding the text of the advertisement Siemens AG shows a high quality as they have no faults in grammar or orthography and respect the requirements of the web so that everything can be read without problems. Although Siemens AG adapts the texts to the different business units the applicant would work in, the advertisements could be a bit more target group specific through different illustrations at the head of the adverts. So this score is rated with nine.

The only application option is an online application which results in a rating of three. Although this application option is very commonly used today, further possibilities could help to trigger additional applications.

Due to the publication dates of the job advertisement – they publish on all days of the week – it is clear that Siemens AG does not respect the optimal time frame

of a publication between Monday and Wednesday. Therefore, this differentiator is rated with one.

Expanding the view, Siemens AG offers a huge amount of employer branding communication beyond StepStone. A career website contains videos with employees telling about "working at Siemens" and provides a lot more information about Siemens in general and as an employer. Furthermore, the same job advertisements which are available on StepStone can be found here, along with a link to the Siemens career Facebook page. The website's usability uses a target group specific navigation model: It offers special categories for "professionals", "graduates", "students" and "school graduates". Nonetheless, Siemens offers no special hotline for questions around jobs and no specific information about the employer brand. All together this leads to a rating of eight.

Summing up StepStone and Siemens AG reach a total score of 7.25 and a total estimated score of 6.15 which are high and middle to high differentiation scores.

Discussion and Further Research

Due to supernatant research the research question can be answered with yes respectively the hypothesis that companies can differentiate their brands at German online job boards is confirmed.

The identification of seven differentiators on the job board side and six differentiators on the company side seems to work well for the analysis. These factors and the model that calculates a differentiation score for one job board and one company allows to detect strengths and weaknesses and opens up opportunities for improvement. The applicability of the model has been proven on the examples of StepStone and Siemens. Still, there is room for improvement: The factor of the employer brand itself and its impact has not been incorporated into the model as strong as the authors think it should be, mainly due to the lack of an already developed model of evaluation.

Looking at the example test subjects, StepStone's main opportunities for improvement lie within offering a key wording campaign, options for a ranking optimization and more contact possibilities between company and applicant directly on the platform. Siemens could use more of the platform's employer branding options and maybe also link to the career website to connect its efforts more seamlessly. Another recommendation would be to publish the job advertisements with regard to the optimal time frame between Monday and Wednesday.

Further research possibilities should evaluate other job boards to maybe find more differentiators respectively affirm the mentioned aspects. An expansion of the research to non-commercial or specific job boards to find similarities or differences seems to make sense, as well as a closer look on the situation in other countries and cultures. There is also a necessity for further research regarding the model to answer the question if it is in its current form really useful for companies or if it needs adaptations or changes.

At the end, both the contest about getting the best employees and the information overload will remain or even get worse, making it more important to differentiate a brand and company from others.



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