

CANINE CO-WORKERS: UNRAVELING THE CHALLENGES, BENEFITS, AND BRANDING DIMENSIONS OF DOGS IN THE WORKPLACE

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Nowadays organizations struggle with staff shortages, so the concept of internal marketing or its modern variant, employer branding (EB), is taking on importance in organizations. The concept is based on the effort to attract, engage and retain employees by satisfying their needs. On the other hand, many people (i.e. potential employees) own a pet and their bond is usually very strong. Accordingly, a new practice has emerged among employers, which allows or even encourages employees to bring dogs into the workplace. In the current research, a multiple case study analysis was performed to determine if organizations nurture this practice only to attract employees (EB activity) or if a positive attitude to pets is part of their identity. Moreover, the conducted research pointed out the specificities of this practice, the benefits derived from it and the challenges of having dogs at the workplace.

Keywords:
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1 Introduction

Nowadays, there is a shortage of workforce in many developed countries. At the same time, people i.e. employees are crucial for companies' growth and success. In fact, people still make the difference, despite artificial intelligence (AI), technology, digitalization etc. Accordingly, companies use all known approaches to creating an attractive work environment that will, in turn, attract, engage and retain employees, especially the talented ones. On the other hand, not only economies but also society changes as a whole. For example, the number of pets, especially dogs, increases year after year. According to Statista (2022), the number of people (Gen Z members) who have a pet increased from 16% in 2020 to 26% in 2021. Accordingly, the needs of people change because the circumstances change.

Due to all of the above, an old concept - the internal marketing concept - is gaining importance again. The term internal marketing was coined in the 1970s by Berry (Rafiq & Ahmed, 2000) and basically meant application of external marketing practices within an organization. As known, the primary external marketing goal is to satisfy customer needs (Kotler et al., 2014). Similarly, the primary internal marketing goal is to satisfy the needs of internal customers (i.e. employees). A contemporary extension of the old internal marketing concept is the notion of employer branding (EB) (Ružić & Benazić, 2021). The core goal of EB is to differentiate from other employers, in order to attract the best talents in the market. Behind a brand, i.e. the pillars of employer branding, are the organizational attractiveness factors and an employee value proposition (EVP). The EVP should, clearly, be in line with current and prospective employees' needs. So, given that more and more people own, like and are strongly bonded to their dogs, their need for affection and contact with their dogs can be satisfied if companies apply internal marketing and highlight their strive in employer branding activities.

At first glance, the pet-friendly policy is likely to require organizations to provide appropriate conditions for co-living of people and pets, but at the same time it might bring positive (and maybe some negative) outcomes. It can also be applied only for promotion purposes.

In the light of the above, the main aim of this paper was to identify the prerequisites for organizations, dogs and dog owners for a successful inclusion of dogs in the workplace, as well as the challenges and benefits of dogs in the workplace. Moreover, the goal was to investigate if this practice is underpinned by organizations with the purpose to develop an attractive employer brand (exclusively promotion) or whether it is a real value to them, a part of their identity.

The research can be helpful for organizations whose culture and brand may be reinforced by this practice and for managers who are insecure or even scared of introducing a pet-friendly policy, by outlining its prerequisites, challenges and benefits. The current research will also bring new insights on this contemporary, yet insufficiently studied, phenomenon.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 Internal Marketing and Employer Branding

The term internal marketing was coined in the 70's by Berry (Rafiq & Ahmed, 2000). It was seen as a remedy for low service quality or, more precisely, for service quality heterogeneity. Basically, internal marketing (IM) encompasses the use of the marketing approach within an organization. Similarly, as in external marketing, everything starts with the needs and wants of every single employee, based on the idea that by meeting their needs and wants, employees become more satisfied and motivated, which eventually brings to better service quality, customer satisfaction and loyalty and, in general, better company performance and results (i.e. higher profit) (Rafiq & Ahmed, 2003). Accordingly, the first step in internal marketing planning is the employee needs assessment (e.g. nowadays, the need to be close to their dog companion). Among the many available definitions of internal marketing, Bekkers and Van Haastrecht (1993, in Brooks et al., 1999, p. 5) stated that »IM is considered to be the process of creating market conditions within the organization to ensure that internal customer wants and needs are met«. Despite the fact that the notion of internal marketing has been present in theory and practice for a long time, the concept has not been fully implemented in organizations (Rafiq & Ahmed, 2000). There are many different approaches to the concept, different authors have provided different definitions and also different guidelines as to what it is, how it

should work and how it should be implemented and used within companies (Varey, 1995).

However, as a contemporary extension or derivation of the concept, a new approach has emerged - Employer Branding (EB). Ambler and Narrow (1996), the authors who coined the term, stated that an employer brand has a personality and represents the whole package of psychological, functional and economic benefits provided by a specific employer. Lievens and Slaughter (2016, p. 410) highlighted that »employer branding is considered to be a synonym for employer image management«.

In today's environment with the ongoing "war for talents" (Van Hoye & Lievens, 2007) and personnel shortages in many developed countries, employer branding is gaining importance. EB showed many potential benefits for employers such as developing an image of a "great place to work", reducing acquisition costs, improving employee retention, facilitating recruitment, improving commitment and attraction of talents and positively influencing job seeker attitudes (Ružić & Benazić, 2023). The employer brand should at first instance attract new employees, especially talented employees, but also engage and retain the existing ones. Organizational attractiveness factors and employee value proposition (EVP) are tightly connected with the term EB. An EVP is the unique set of benefits that an employee receives from a company in return for his/her skills, capabilities and experience (Pawar & Charak, 2015). Each brand is based on the company's identity, but as well on attractiveness factors that are important for its employees and potential employees. Therefore, every company should know what their current and prospective employees deem important and based on this (and on its own value and identity) it should shape a unique value proposition that should be clearly communicated to the audience (at first instance, employees and potential employees). The communicated brand impacts the company's perceived image and can generate attractiveness and desirability. Being aware of this, more and more companies build their image by carefully researching the market needs (i.e. customers' and internal customers' needs) and developing their brand in line with the identified needs.

2.2 Dogs in the workplace - what we know so far

Despite the fact that nowadays the number of pets is increasing worldwide, the bond between owners and their pets, due to different reasons, is getting stronger, and some of the most successful companies (like Google and Amazon) allow their employees to bring pets to work, research on the impacts of pet-friendly practices is scarce (Junca-Silva, 2022). Most research about dogs' impact on people was conducted outside organization settings. Studies showed a positive impact of dogs on children's activity and obesity (Gadomski et al., 2016). In their research, Lakestani et al. (2014) demonstrated that young children cannot adequately interpret dogs' behavior, hence they can be more at risk for dog bites. Pali-Scholl, Dale, Viraniy (2023) argued about the positive effects of pets (dogs) in prevention of asthma and allergies (if dogs live with children during infancy, the impact is positive), social interactions and mental health. Arhant et al. (2017) in their research focused on children and dog interactions, argued about the importance of promoting dog bite prevention activities directed toward caregivers very early in the child-dog relationship. In their research on changes in oxytocin level before and after interaction with dog, While, Miller et al. (2009) showed that the oxytocin level while the owner interacts with dog is similar to the level of oxytocin produced when receiving a massage.

Charles and Wolkowitz (2023) argued about the impact of dogs on university students and vice versa. Namely, the practice of bringing dogs to work and school is getting more popular nowadays (Pali-Scholl et al., 2023). Bringing dogs into the workplace is a contemporary practice, so most of the research on the topic is quite recent. Dogs-in-the-workplace policies and practices show potential to positively impact employee satisfaction and wellbeing and, by doing this, to improve performance and financial and/or overall results of organizations. According to Hall and Mills (2019), employees who brought their dogs to work were more engaged (vigor, dedication, absorption, total) than employees who sometimes or never took their dogs to work. Moreover, people who often take their dogs to work score higher in general wellbeing, job satisfaction, home-work interface, working conditions, control and overall work quality of life (Hall, Mills, 2019). Furthermore, Hall and Mills (2019) in their paper highlighted that it can be beneficial for organizations to include dog demographics in their "bring the dog into the office" policies, such as weight, size, breed type, and experienced training. Junca-Silva et al. (2022) in their

research highlighted the positive effects of dogs on teleworkers, because employees who owned a dog perceived their work more positively and reported higher self-perceived performance. Moreover, companies with pet-friendly practices achieve higher employee organizational identification which in turn influences employee well-being and even life satisfaction (Junca-Silva, 2022). Junca-Silva (2022) in their research showed further positive effects for individuals, like reduced stress and better work-life balance. At the same time, pet-friendly practices show potential to positively impact organizational outcomes such as to improve employer brand, improve talents attraction, offer a healthier work environment and better integration with the community (Junca-Silva, 2022). Krause-Parello et al. (2019) highlighted the role of pets in facilitating interactions, boosting positive emotions, improving job satisfaction and perception of organizational support. Hall and Mills (2019) stated that pets-at-work policies enhance work engagement, decrease turnover intentions and increase friendship within organizations. Applebaum et al. (2021) in their research showed that the presence of a dog in a group enhances positive emotions and positively impacts emotional climate. Barker et al. (2012) suggested that dogs at work positively impact the stress level of their owners during working hours and also contribute to higher job satisfaction of all employees in the organization (not only pet owners).

Along with many benefits, there are many challenges too connected with the dogs-at-work policies (Foreman et al., 2017). In order to reduce the possibility of negative effects (interference with job duties, bites or fear felt by colleagues), preparation of the workplace, instructions to employees and dog training courses are advisable (Pali-Scholl et al., 2023). In their paper, Foreman et al. (2017) analyzed the existing literature about dogs in the workplace and provided very useful guidelines for organizations that allow dogs at workplace, such as the need to establish a procedure for assessing employee attitudes concerning dogs in the workplace, to develop procedures that will take into consideration employees with special concerns (i.e. cultural beliefs, fears, phobias) and policies regarding owners' responsibilities in the workplace, to establish a "Dog Committee" forum as a place for discussion between employees and management about questions regarding dogs in the work environment, to establish dogs' temperament/behavioral requirements (e.g. passing the Good Dog Citizen course for dogs and owners), to establish procedures for continuous assessment of the impact of dogs on well-being, productivity etc., to continuously improve the process to address concerns and to improve the

cohabitation of dogs and employees, to develop policies to prevent slips, falls and similar in the dog area, to develop training materials for dog owners to educate them about their responsibilities in maintaining a safe environment, to establish eligible criteria for dogs and their owners (e.g. the need for special training based on breed requirements), and to understand and follow the law (law regarding individuals with disabilities or law regarding vaccination etc.).

However, as stated at the beginning, despite the number of dogs in the workplace is increasing and the practice of “bringing dogs to work” is gaining in application, there is limited evidence on this practice (Hall & Mills, 2019; Foreman et al., 2017).

3 Investigating the effects of dogs in the workplace – multiple case studies

3.1 Methodology

‘Dogs in the workplace’ policies are nowadays gaining interest, yet the number of dog-friendly organizations is low. In order to gain more extensive knowledge on this contemporary phenomenon, a multiple case study analysis was conducted. Case studies and interviews were chosen to collect empirical data, because the focus of the research was on phenomena that are infrequent (Wagner & Cunha, 2021). The main goal of the research was to identify the prerequisites for organizations, dogs and dog owners for a successful inclusion of dogs in the workplace, as well as the negative and positive effects of dogs in the workplace. Moreover, one of the aims was to realize if the “dogs in the workplace” practice is solely an employer branding activity or a genuine part of their identity.

The case study method was chosen because the “dogs in the workplace” phenomenon was studied in a real life context. The presented case study is exploratory and descriptive. Five organizations were included in the multiple case study analysis, all of them from Croatia in order to minimize cultural differences. The author did an online research to identify which organizations in Croatia allow dogs in the workplace. The online research was conducted via Google (using key words) and Adorio (a job search/offer app listing all the benefits offered by a specific employer). Moreover, the author’s previous knowledge about an organization that applies this practice was used to establish contact. After compiling a list of

organizations with this policy in Croatia, each of them was contacted by the author via email, phone or LinkedIn. Five out of seven companies answered positively about the interview request. In the email or during the phone call, the scope and type of research was explained and the anonymity of the interviewees and their organizations was guaranteed. Moreover, the author kindly asked in the email to be connected to someone within the organization who is familiar with the practice; HR manager was suggested.

A total of 5 persons were interviewed. All informants were highly knowledgeable about the topic (dogs at the workplace) in their organizations. The interviews were conducted in October and November, 2023. One interview was conducted face-to-face and the other four interviews were conducted online via Zoom. All the interviews were recorded (with the permission of the interviewees). In order to protect their anonymity, the organizations' names were replaced with names of Croatian dog breeds.

Table 1: Companies overview

	Croatian Sheepdog	Dalmatian	Posavac Hound	Istrian Hound	Tornjak
Interviewee's position within organization	People & Culture Director	Executive Director	Business Development Manager	CEO, HR Director	HR Manager
Organization's main activity	Digital marketing	Youth projects (non-profit)	Digital agency	Marketing	Creative agency
Year of incorporation	2002	2001	1995	2009	1995
"Dogs in the workplace" policy in place	for more than 10 years	for more than 3 years	for more than 2 years	since 2009	for more than 5 years
No. of employees	100<	1	25	140	51
Market	International	International	International	International	International

Source: Author

The interviews lasted from 25 to 35 minutes. All interviews were held in Croatian and then translated into English for the purpose of the research. The interviews were semi-structured (with 12 basic questions). The questions were about specificities connected with the practice, about culture, empowerment, rules, pros and cons of such practice, and they were also directed to determine whether the policy was more of a marketing initiative or a genuine, internally-felt action.

3.2 Research results

In order to achieve the research goals and to answer the posited research questions, the interview transcripts were analyzed. Moreover, informants' quotes were collected, clustered and compared.

RQ 1: What are appropriate organizational settings for a pet-friendly policy?

In all the analyzed companies, all employees, regardless of position, are allowed to bring their pets to work (from a student to the CEO position). Moreover, the analyzed organizations have from 1 to 140 employees, so the number of employees does not impact the application of this policy. It was further realized that companies that have this policy in place have an open, relaxed, friendly, respectful, inclusive and pleasant culture. Even though their cultures promote mutual respect and good relationships among employees and the strive to understand the holistic needs of a person, an informant stated that the organization's culture did not fit to all people (i.e. employees), but they were trying to attract people with a similar mindset. One informant stated that their business was similar as their culture (informal, relaxed, inclusive). Moreover, all the interviewees pointed out that their employees were empowered and had freedom (to a certain degree) to decide on their own and their attitudes were listened to and included in company's policies.

Although all employees - no matter the type of office they work in (open space, closed office, office with colleagues) - can bring their pets to work, most of the informants said that the space should be adequate for the pet-friendly policy, e.g. no carpets, pets allowed in elevators, a park or a meadow nearby, or a dog waste bin available on-site.

Regarding formal policies, regulations or procedures, most organizations have formal policies in place. However, two of the analyzed organizations do not have a formal regulation for the “dog in the workplace” policy. Based on their statement, the practice is part of their culture (i.e. the respective cultures define accepted attitudes, beliefs and behavior) and the practice relies on employees’ “common sense” behavior.

Table 2: Quotes leading to the above conclusion

You can't have a “dog in the workplace” policy if you work in a rigid environment.
We are all on first-name terms.
...we are open and flexible.
....we co-create company policies.
...for something that is “business as usual” we do not have to ask for permission every time ... in this sense both I and my colleagues are independent.
There is a park nearby, so this is how we solve it...
When we had to move and were looking for a new office...we look for spaces that are dog-friendly; when we had to relocate the office, there was one place that did not allow dogs in the elevator, meaning that it was not the right place for us...
There are specific rules in place, because anything can happen if we don't follow a certain structure...

Source: Author

RQ2: What are the challenges of a pet-friendly policy?

Although all the interviewees were aware of the possibility of employees’ or customers’ allergies, only one of them actually faced a situation where an external associate was allergic (they solved the problem by putting the dog in a nearby office while the associate was there). One of the interviewees stated that a crucial condition to allow dogs at work is that none of the employees is allergic to dog hair (they asked all of them). Moreover, another interviewee stated that there were a really small number of allergic people and the space was pretty big, so if the allergy was not too severe there shouldn't be any problem. One of the informants had an employee with a “bad experience” with dogs and in this case all other people knew about it and did not bring their dogs near the colleague.

Almost all the interviewees experienced some kind of challenging situation related to pets in the workplace, e.g. a puppy peed in the office; a dog, in only one situation,

had diarrhea; there were few chewed cables, barking, hair on the floor, but nothing more than this. A lot of responsibilities are put on the dog's owner such as the owner is responsible for dog walking or defecation, damages done by dogs, for informing other people if the dog likes to be touched, petted and the like. Moreover, many interviewees highlighted that they had specified in their handbooks the duties of pet owners and what is expected of them, but if there was not a written policy, employees would act in accordance with common sense rules (as in many other areas within a company).

The interviewees were aware of the fact that someone might avoid choosing their company, especially if he or she is afraid of dogs or does not like dogs/pets, but they were sure that they would find a solution (remote work, distant office or even respectful coworkers). The same applies if they knew a customer is allergic, then they would react promptly and the dog owner would stay to work from home when there is a meeting with this customer.

Table 3: Quotes leading to the above conclusion

There are very few people allergic to dogs; it is more likely that someone is allergic to peanuts and then you mustn't have peanuts anywhere in the premises.
Every dog owner is responsible for taking it out for a walk so the dog can do its business...
The handbook says that you are liable for your dog and any damages that may be done by the dog.
Dogs are tied up if necessary, people use their common sense; it's like when talking on the phone – I don't talk loud and long in an open space because that would bother my coworkers; the same goes for dogs, people have to use their common sense...

Source: Author

RQ3: What are the benefits of a pet-friendly policy?

The interviewees stressed out that apart from some minor challenges, in their opinion and from their experience there are many benefits.

First, among others, a satisfied employee. Secondly, a better work-life balance (you do not have to hurry home to feed the pet), and also employees stand up a few times a day to pet the dog or take it for a short pee walk. Moreover, petting a dog helps people feel better and the atmosphere is more relaxed, employees socialize more

thanks to dogs, they are willing to talk about pets and their stories, dogs bring positive energy and “warmth”.

On the other hand, customers usually react positively, some of them even ask before the meeting if the dog would be there (if he/she met the pet before). But in case employees know the client is allergic to hair/dogs, they act accordingly, e.g. the colleague who brings the dog to office will stay at home on the day of the agreed meeting.

Table 4: Quotes leading to the above conclusion

...the point is the dog is satisfied and the employee as well.
...it is in your interest (as employer) that the employee feels good in order to do their job to the best of their ability.
It is about accepting that you don't only have a job, but also a life outside of the workplace – you have to pick up your child from kindergarten early because he or she got sick, or you have to go home early because you've got a handyman coming over or because you have a dog – these are all parts of the work-life balance.
When I need a five-minute break from work, I go and pet my dogs...or I use my one-hour lunch break to take my dogs out for a walk and I completely reset myself.
One of the benefits of bringing the dog to work is that you have to get up and stretch your legs now and then...
When there is a dog in the office, people will get up and go pet it at least a few times a day.
People socialize more...they have a story about the dog and want to share it ...you know, I got my dog from a rescue..
The atmosphere is more pleasant and relaxed even if the dog just lays there without reaction throughout the entire working hours.
Dogs bring great energy.
Our clients are international so this is normal for them and they mostly see it as a plus, unless they are allergic, but in that case we find an ad hoc solution (e.g. the employee with the dog stays to work from home when the client is coming).

Source: Author

RQ4: Is the implementation of a pet-friendly policy mostly an employer branding activity or does it represent a real value for organizations?

Based on the interviewees’ answers, it can be concluded that the practice is underpinned with the aim of meeting today’s employee needs and the practice reflects their identity and culture. They communicate to their potential employees that they have a “pet friendly” policy and the reactions of job candidates are mostly positive, but the practice is not a game changer based on which potential employees decide to join the company. They are aware of the possibility that they could miss a quality candidate because of this practice, but they are flexible and able to arrange things to satisfy the needs of an employee who is not a pet lover. It can be concluded that this policy is a real organizational value which is particularly important for young employees and it is, as well, communicated to potential employees, but it is an important value and part of company culture for the companies that implement the policy.

Table 5: Quotes leading to the above conclusion

With this policy we communicate who we are; the question is whether somebody will find it more or less attractive.
People who come for a job interview often mention it (dog friendliness) as something that attracted them to us, even the candidates that don’t have a dog, because they would like to work in a dog-friendly environment.
I think that potential employees see it as a plus, but probably it is not something that makes a difference in deciding about the job, it’s not crucial, but it is a part of our culture.
...we blazed the trail, long before all this buzz about employer branding..
Doing something just for show is not a smart thing to do.
We communicate it publicly, in our job ads it is always mentioned that dogs are welcome.
I think that’s written in our company’s DNA...most people have a dog..
EB is just a presentation of what you’ve got.

Source: Author

4 Discussion

Research results showed that organizations that allow this practice really promote an open, inclusive and warm culture, based on the strive to satisfy employee needs. And precisely this strive is at the basis of the Internal Marketing and Employer Branding concepts. Only a satisfied employee can achieve customer satisfaction and, similarly, only an attractive organization can more successfully attract young talented people

(i.e. employees). The conducted research showed that the implementation of the internal marketing philosophy is still alive and kicking, more than ever before.

Junca-Silva (2022) suggested that the dogs-in-the-workplace policy can improve the employer brand and talent attraction. The current research reinforced, for the most part, these findings, as the analyzed organizations communicate their pet-friendly policy through their communication channels and employees (even on interviews) highlight this policy as extremely interesting and positive for the employer perception. Nevertheless, organizations are aware that said practice could be an unattractive factor for some potential employees. In line with the previously mentioned Junca-Silva's (2022) »integration with the community« factor, the research confirmed the analyzed organizations strive to inclusivity. Moreover, the positive impacts of dogs and dog petting on the owners' feelings were pointed out, which is in line with Miller et al. (2009), even though they analyzed the dog – owner relationship and impact outside organizations. Furthermore, the results highlighted many perceived benefits such as general wellbeing and an improved work-life balance, which is in line with Hall and Mills (2019) and Junca-Silva (2022). However, although most of the analyzed organizations have policy guidelines about the practice, they do not specify the weight, size, breed type and trainings for dogs in order to be allowed in office, which is not in line with suggestions given by Hall and Mills (2019). The conducted research partially confirmed the findings of Krause-Parello et al. (2019); namely, pets facilitate interactions among employees and boost positive emotions, as also stated by Applebaum et al. (2021). In order to avoid negative effects and enable implementation of the policy, workplaces are slightly adjusted (removed carpet, required pet-friendly commercial buildings to rent), there are handbooks with instructions for employees and even sessions with the HR manager for those who want to bring their pets to work, which is in line with Pali-Scholl et al.'s (2023) suggestions.

Based on the research results, HR managers and CEOs can plan to allow or even promote the dogs-in-the-workplace practice, but only if in line with their identity and culture. The benefits of the practice are many, but at the same time it requires some degree of flexibility and adjustment. There may also be some challenges and even the possibility of a negative potential employee reaction, but only from candidates that do not share the same values as the organization, so maybe the policy can be seen as a filter for the ones who do not fit the organizational culture. The practice, which is particularly attractive for young employees, can be used within the

scope of employer branding activities in order to attract people with same shared values, no matter how many employees the employer employs. The current research expanded the body of knowledge about this insufficiently studied practice with new insights. It can be seen as the first step in further study of the phenomenon.

5 Conclusion

Staff shortage and war for talents are among the most important challenges in today's business world. In these settings, only an employer that is focused on employees' and potential employees' needs and wants can be seen as attractive and eventually increase its prospects to attract employees in general, and especially the talented ones. At the same time, human and societal needs are changing. In order to satisfy the changing needs, organizations should offer practices that align with these needs. A policy allowing the presence of pets can be one of the responses to the modern employee needs, but it should not be viewed solely as a means of attraction. It should be aligned with the genuine values and identity of the company. Only if the values and needs of employees correspond to the values and offerings of the organization (i.e. employee value proposition), the final outcome will be positive. Besides several challenges, a pet-friendly policy brings many positive effects such as positive mood, support to employees, a kind of stress release, stronger bonds between employees, better work-life balance, increased activity and the like.

The current research has several limitations that could be a basis for future research. One of the limitations is based on the fact that only five companies were studied and most of them were in the same industry. Furthermore, the interview was conducted only with the organization's manager. Future research should encompass interviews with employees and specifically with the employees who bring their dogs to work and with the ones who don't bring their dogs or do not have a dog, within the same company. Moreover, quantitative research can be conducted among potential employees to determine the impact of »dogs in the workplace« policy on their perception about the attractiveness of the organization. Finally, differences based on demographics should also be analyzed.

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