EMPLOYER REPUTATION MANAGEMENT: CREATING EMPLOYER ATTRACTIVENESS IN IT SECTOR

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Abstract
This paper focuses on employer reputation management as an approach for the creation of employer attractiveness. Specifically, this paper analyses employer reputation management in IT sector. The aim of this paper is to answer the question how employer reputation is built and managed in IT sector for the creation of employer attractiveness. In pursuance to reach the aim, this paper employs scientific literature analysis and synthesis in the field of employer reputation management, as well as field analysis and expert interviews. Results of this research prove that employer reputation management is a very important tool for creating employer attractiveness and is commonly used by organizations in IT sector to attract talents. Thus, the most important advantage of building and managing good employer reputation for IT organizations is a possibility to reach a better competitive position over other IT organizations in nowadays global marketplace while attracting greatly demanded talented IT specialists.
Key words: employer reputation, reputation management, corporate reputation, reputation, employer attractiveness, IT sector.

Introduction

The construct of employer reputation is gaining an increasingly growing interest from the theoretical as well as practical point of view. Due to the fact that in today's global marketplace employees daily face new and appealing possibilities for employment, organizations aiming to build its attractiveness as an employer are forced to look for new ways to attract talented employees. Nowadays, in the field of marketing and business management, more and more attention is being given to employer reputation management.

In contemporary business environment we notice a growing demand for talents. Having good corporate reputation as an employer is particularly important for nowadays organizations to successfully operate in the market, grow business and stay competitive. With good employer reputation organizations from various countries and industries strive to attract potential and maintain existing talented employees.

In today's global marketplace, it is becoming increasingly difficult for organizations to build and maintain competitiveness and leadership in the market. It is becoming difficult for organizations to compete not only in the exchange of goods and services, but also in the rapidly growing competition for talented employees, who are considered as the main source for successful performance of organizations. Although employers fight to attract and retain talented employees in most industries, IT sector is particularly sensitive in today's business market.

Organizations from IT sector that are able to build and maintain good corporate reputation have more possibilities to operate successfully. Good corporate reputation helps organizations to secure a strong, long-term competitive advantage in the eyes of its stakeholder groups and is also a vital tool while

competing for talented employees who are greatly important for organization's success. It is therefore very important to have a good corporate reputation towards its main stakeholder groups, especially towards the most important. Since employees are one of the most important stakeholder groups of organizations from the IT sector, it is necessary to focus all available resources on the growing need to build and manage good employer reputation as it helps to increase the attractiveness of the organization to potential and existing employees.

However, changing needs and expectations of employees, intensifying competition for talents and the growing flow of employer marketing communication, stipulate organizations to look for effective solutions to build employer attractiveness. Organizations face the need to build good corporate reputation as employers not only convey a message about them as good employers, but also build good employer reputation that could help to compete successfully in the market for talents. For all the above-mentioned reasons, organizations face the need to build its attractiveness through building and managing its employer reputation.

Problem of the research. Since nowadays in Lithuania, other EU countries and even global marketplace the struggle of organizations for the attraction and retainment of talented employees is evident in many industries, a particularly sensitive sector is IT. This is attributed to the rapidly growing need for digitalisation of the economy, which is correspondingly increasing the need for employees in the IT sector. The shortage of talented IT employees in the labour market creates the conditions for employees from this sector to be very selective and carefully examine the employer while employing or leave the employer without any second thoughts if the

employer does not meet expectations. For employers from IT sector this situation creates reasonable demands to invest in building the attractiveness of the organization through building and managing its employer reputation.

Although Lithuania is not the only country in Europe that faces a huge shortage of IT specialists, Lithuania lacks them most compared to other Baltic countries. Lithuania is increasingly focusing its efforts on the digitalization of economy, in which the implementation of digital technologies in the business processes of various industries plays a key role. Digitalization affects all areas of businesses and society. In order to take advantage of the opportunities provided by digital technologies, it is very important to have sufficient level of competencies that are necessary for managing digital processes. But, for example, Lithuania lacks about 14,000 IT specialists (Infobalt, 2020; lrytas.lt, 2021; 15min.lt, 2021), And it is predicted that this need for IT specialists in Lithuania will grow 10 percent each year (LRT.lt, 2020). At the global level the lack of IT specialists is a much bigger problem. According to LRT.lt (2020) until 2023 the lack of IT specialists in the world will reach 4.3 million. Large mismatch between supply and demand in the labour market creates possibilities for IT specialists to choose employers very selectively and, requires from employers of IT sector to increase its attractiveness and improve employer reputation. According to a study conducted by Infobalt, Invest in Lithuania (lt. Investuok Lietuvoje) and MOSTA, over the past decade the need for IT specialists in Lithuania has grown ten times faster compared to the need of total workforce. From the Lithuanian organizations surveyed, as many as 78 percent reported they are looking for additional employees (15min.lt, 2018).

Thus, there is a high risk that large investors will relocate their investments to other countries in the face of a shortage of IT specialists. This is especially a big risk because in Lithuania most of the investments are attracted from the information technology sector. Due to such a situation, this paper is dedicated to analysing employer reputation building and management in the IT sector, as this business area faces the greatest difficulties in finding and retaining talented employees and faces the greatest need to build its corporate reputation as a good employer.

Yet, employer reputation building and management as a tool for the creation of employer attractiveness is quite an underexplored topic in the scientific literature. Scholars argue that this field needs deeper knowledge and tools on how to build and manage employer reputation while creating employer attractiveness. Because of this scarcity in the theory, the question is not if employer reputation should be built and managed but how it should be done in order to create employer attractiveness. The absence of comprehensive theoretical and practical information on how employer reputation should be built and managed for the creation of employer attractiveness raises many issues for the owners and managers of various organizations, particularly in the IT sector.

Object and aim of the research. The object of the research is employer reputation building and management in IT sector for the creation of employer attractiveness. The aim of the research is to ascertain how employer reputation is built and managed in IT sector for the creation of employer attractiveness.

Objectives of the research. Objectives of this research are set in the following logic: (1) to analyse theoretical construct of employer reputation; (2) to conduct field analysis of employer reputation building and management in IT sector; (3) to conduct expert interviews in order to identify how employer reputation is built and managed in practice by IT companies for the creation of employer attractiveness.

Materials and Methods

The paper is organized using both theoretical and empirical research approach. In this paper employer reputation construct, specifics of employer reputation building and management, the use of employer reputation building and management for the creation of employer attractiveness, analysis of employer reputation building and management in IT sector and, application of employer reputation in practice by Lithuanian IT companies were examined.

At first, theoretical scientific literature analysis was performed in the field of employer reputation Theoretical analysis was followed by the field analysis of the market data from secondary sources. Findings from theoretical scientific literature analysis and field analysis were further discussed during the final step of research – conducting interviews with representatives of IT sector. Insights collected during expert interviews amended collected data with the point of view from within. Methods used for this paper are further explained in more detail.

Theoretical analysis. Pursuing to reach the aim of the paper, theoretical research methods that are used in this paper embrace scientific literature logical analysis and synthesis. The author of this paper used analysis and synthesis of scientific literature to execute research and assess the construct of employer reputation. For the theoretical analysis keyword search in Business Source Complete (EBSCO), Emerald Management eJournals Collection, SAGE Journals Online, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis and Web of Science databases was done in order to collect international scientific publications necessary for the research.

Field analysis. Secondary data from various Lithuanian trustworthy sources was used to perform qualitative field analysis, which focused on IT sector overview in Lithuania. While analysing secondary sources, problematic aspects of building and managing employer reputation of IT sector organizations in Lithuanian labour market were identified. When performing qualitative field analysis of the IT sector organizations in Lithuanian labour market the following sources of information were examined: reports of the IT sector employer reputation rankings; latest publications and reports of recruitment companies that provide staffing services to the IT organizations; media articles and reports published by employers from the IT sector.

Expert interviews. In order to collect primary data and gather opinion of experts from IT sector about the importance of employer reputation for IT organizations, dimensions shaping corporate reputation of IT organizations as employers, expert interviews were conducted. The interviews were conducted in the form of online meetings and discussions using MS Teams online meetings platform. An individually prepared questionnaire was used as the basis for the interviews and interviewed experts were provided with guidance when answering questions and, asked for clarification or elaboration when it was necessary. To obtain opinion of several different experts from the IT sector, two different experts from Lithuania were interviewed: (1) human resource manager that works with IT organizations and provides staffing services to them; (2) general manager of one large international IT company.

A single questionnaire was prepared for conducting interviews. The questionnaire for expert interviews consisted of 10 open questions. Experts were asked to share their opinion about employer reputation and its importance to employees in IT sector as well as to organizations itself, by what means IT organizations build and manage their employer reputation, how they attract IT talents, what are the most important dimensions for building IT employer reputation, what is the role of salary vs. employer reputation, etc. Before starting interviews, experts were introduced with the aim of the interview, its logic and expected result were highlighted. Expert interviews were organized in February, 2022. The duration of each interview was approximately 20–40 minutes.

Results and Discussion

This section provides results from three stages of research: theoretical scientific literature analysis, field analysis and expert interviews.

Many researchers agree that nowadays employer reputation is extremely valuable to organizations of any industry as it helps to build employer attractiveness. According to Kot *et al.* (2021) the literature has given attention to employer reputation and described that it is not only related to attracting or hiring the potential workforce, but it also impacts the retention level of qualified human capital. Dögl & Holtbrügge (2014) agree that employer reputation is relevant not only to attract but also to retain qualified employees. Thus, according to Xie, Bagozzi, & Meland (2015) employer reputation plays a really important role in the recruitment process.

Theoretical conceptualizations on employer reputation

Employer reputation can be defined as the general public's evaluation of the company as an employer (Cable & Turban, 2001). Organizations with a good employer reputation tend to be associated with higher levels of organizational identification. Attraction of employer reputation may apply to companies' current and potential employees, when perceived or anticipated reputation is evaluated. Therefore, positive and strong reputation of an employer is likely to attract identification from job applicants (Xie, Bagozzi, & Meland, 2015).

Dudharejia (2019) believes that the perception that job candidates have towards business could determine whether or not they pursue an opportunity to work for. Nugroho & Liswandi (2018) agree that employer attractiveness and corporate reputation has significant influence towards intention to apply for a job. Dudharejia (2019) adds that everyone wants to work for a company that they love and admire. Therefore, improving employer reputation can help to not only attract highly talented candidates, but also keep them more engaged with business operations in the long run. This can directly lead to a more productive workplace, greater employee satisfaction, and higher retention rates.

Research results of Xie, Bagozzi, & Meland (2015) show that both instrumental attributes (i.e. evaluation of job attributes) and symbolic attributes (i.e. company reputation and identity congruence between self-identity and perceived organizational identity) of an employer brand significantly affect its attractiveness (i.e. applicants' intention to search for information and to apply for a job). Nugroho & Liswandi (2018) agree that as employer reputation progresses, employer attractiveness increases in the eyes of job seekers, and this improves the quality of a company's recruitment. Dudharejia (2019) lists ways to build and maintain good employer reputation. According to him, active response to all employee reviews, share of real employee stories, showcase what makes an organization unique, not better, and usage of employees as recruiters are great ways to build and maintain good employer reputation.

Results from field analysis on employer reputation building and management in IT sector

Human resources are considered as the most important factor of an organization's competitive advantage. Thus, organizations should care about its employees, listen to their feedback, suggestions, show how important everyone is for an organization and invest in employer reputation building. Although in recent years almost all organizations in Lithuania are facing difficulties in finding qualified employees, there is a particularly large shortage of qualified IT specialists. Currently, IT sector in Lithuania is facing really problematic situation with human resources, as large international organizations come to Lithuania, which offer better working conditions and salaries, and create difficulties for Lithuanian capital organizations in competing for employees. However, we should keep in mind that IT specialists are not only needed by IT organizations, but also by organizations from any industry.

Since organizations have diminishing possibilities to attract and retain IT talents by offering high salaries, it is very important for organizations to start looking for non-financial means of motivation. Human resource managers agree that there is a great need for the development of a long-term strategy for attracting and retaining experienced IT specialists. It is very important nowadays for organizations to invest in building and managing good employer reputation. However, organizations should be aware that corporate reputation is built over many years but can be destroyed in one day. This is also applicable in the case of employer reputation. Good corporate reputation is a very important strategic and long-term asset of an organization. Due to this, it is much easier for organizations having good corporate reputation to achieve their strategic goals. Thus, organizations put big efforts in building their corporate reputation with their stakeholders, especially with most important ones. And in the case of IT organizations or organizations that need IT specialists the most important stakeholder group is employees.

Results from annually organized elections in Lithuania "The Most Desired Employer" show that IT organizations care about their employer reputation as organizations from IT sector have been receiving excellent evaluations from employees for the last several years. When analysing results of 'The Most Desired Employer' elections in Lithuania from the last two years, it is noticeable that in 2021 there were 3 organizations from information and telecommunications sector that were listed between winning organizations as best employers in Lithuania: Tele2 (3rd position), Telia Lietuva (8th position) and All Media Lithuania (14th position) (Verslo žinios, 2021). When analysing the results of the year before, it is noticeable that in 2020 there were 5 organizations from information and telecommunications sector that were listed as best employers in Lithuania: Tele2 (4th position), All Media Lithuania (8th position), DevBridge LT (10th position), Telia Lietuva (14th position) and TIA Technology (17th position) (Verslo žinios, 2020).

In 2020, CVbankas.lt which is a leading job listings portal in Lithuania announced its rankings 'Leader in labour market' for the first time. In a list of the top 30 most sought after employers in 2020 published by CVbankas.lt (2020) there were 4 organizations from information and telecommunications sector that were listed between most sought after employers in Lithuania: Telia (3rd position), Bitė (13th position), Tele2 (19th position) and Tesonet (26th position). In a list of the top 30 most sought after employers in 2021 published by CVbankas.lt (2021) there were 4 organizations from information and telecommunications sector that were most sought after employers in Lithuania: Telia (4th position), Bitė (17th position), Transcom (29th position) and Tele2 (30th position).

First research of corporate reputation of Lithuanian IT sector was conducted by TNS LT together with Infobalt in 2015. Research results showed that reputation index of the Lithuanian IT sector is one of the best in Europe. Reputation index of the Lithuanian IT sector reached 67 points, while the average reputation index of the European IT sector was 56 points (Kantar, 2015). During the research of the following year it was identified that Lithuanian IT sector reached 69 points, while the average reputation index of the European IT sector was the same – 56 points (Tnews.lt, 2019). Research of corporate reputation of Lithuanian IT sector in 2016 showed that companies in the IT sector are trusted by 47 percent of all interest groups, also known as reputation ambassadors, and their evaluation is critical to maintaining good corporate reputation (Kantar, 2016). Head of insights and research, J.Račkytė-Vilimė, pointed out that Lithuanian IT sector is perceived by different groups of society as one of the most promising and extremely reputable. High level of corporate reputation reflects the potential for further successful development of this sector. A good corporate reputation for the players in the sector is not only an achievement but also an obligation to maintain high standards of performance and an incentive to further strengthen the trust of their audiences (Kantar, 2016). The top three companies in the IT sector that stood out in Lithuania in 2019 were Barclays, NFQ Technologies and Microsoft Lithuania (Tnews.lt, 2019). From this we can see that the first three companies with the best corporate reputation are large international companies.

While commenting research results on Lithuanian IT sector's corporate reputation, J.Račkytė-Vilimė

stated that good corporate reputation in the IT sector is determined by several key factors. From the point of view of stakeholder groups most important things for maintaining good corporate reputation are honesty and responsibility of business principles, focus on the needs of customers and financial stability. The responsible activity of the organization and the culture of customer service outweigh the importance of the impeccable reputation of the CEO, the company's leadership in its field or concern for the protection of intellectual property (Kantar, 2016).

Recruitment company Amston made a research in 2020 on what motivates employees most during the pandemic. Žvaginytė & Sirgedaitė (2021) pointed out that in the IT sector, competitive salary with additional financial benefits remained a key factor for both junior and experienced professionals. They also noticed that IT specialists expect from employers to invest in their skills and competencies improvement. Experienced specialists additionally expect health insurance and a package of other options offered by the organization. Žvaginytė & Sirgedaitė (2021) highlight the importance of non-monetary incentives during the pandemic as it became an important tool for increasing employee motivation and involvement in the IT sector. Expectations of younger and more experienced IT specialists coincide. IT specialists attach the greatest importance to the opportunity to contribute to the development of interesting projects. Also, specialists desire to get a sense of security from the organization which can be ensured by the stability of the organization's operations and a professional and periodically growing team. To younger IT professionals a clear career plan put together with managers and identified growth opportunities are also important. For experienced IT professionals, freedom of decision-making plays an important role in the list of motivating non-financial factors. IT representatives also expect flexibility from the employer regarding scheduling and teleworking.

Research done in Lithuania by the recruitment company Peoplelink in 2019 distinguished the key factors that influence the willingness of IT specialists to work for an organization (Figure 1). Results of the research published by Peoplelink (2019) revealed that employer reputation and organization's ability to generate added value to employees are becoming increasingly important to IT specialists. Salary remains very important, but it is not the only factor for recruiting IT talent. Candidates in the IT sector tend to evaluate managers in the organization from a personality, leadership style and professionalism in the field point of view when making a decision. Research highlights that candidates will never agree to come to work in the organization if they have experienced negative feelings during a meeting with an employer. Peoplelink offers to the employers to reward IT specialists in the same way that salespeople reward customers. Another factor shaping employer's reputation, according to Peoplelink research, is flexible working conditions and this aspect is increasingly emphasized by candidates from the IT sector (Peoplelink, 2019). Head of Peoplelink, J.Lemešiūtė, adds that properly managed employment, introduction of newcomer, training and release process protects against negative feedback about the employer and contributes to maintaining good employer reputation (Delfi, 2020). All most important dimensions influencing IT specialists from Lithuania willingness to work for organizations are seen in Figure 1.

Results from expert interviews on employer reputation building and management in IT sector for the creation of employer attractiveness

Second stage of empirical research – expert interviews – were done to gather insights from IT sector about the importance of employer reputation for IT organizations and IT specialists, dimensions
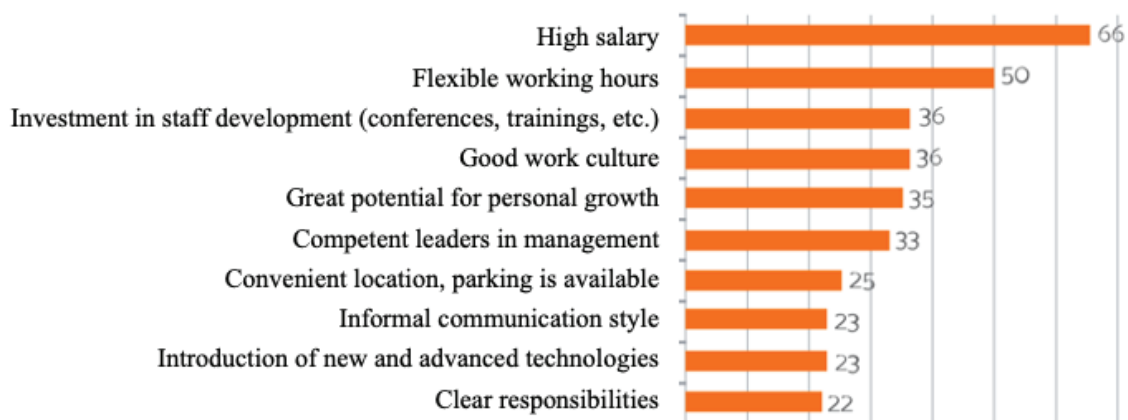

Figure 1. Most important dimensions influencing IT specialists from Lithuania willingness to work for organizations (n=120) (Source: Peoplelink, 2019).

on which IT organizations build and manage their employer reputation and how IT talents are attracted to employ. Online informal expert interviews have been performed with two different experts from Lithuanian IT sector: (1) human resource manager providing staffing services to IT organizations and (2) general manager of one large international IT company.

When experts were asked about the main reasons for the lack of IT specialists in Lithuania, experts indicated several reasons. One of the reasons for the shortage of IT specialists in Lithuania could be the entry of large foreign capital IT organizations into the Lithuanian market. This causes problems to local organizations because it is difficult for them to compete for IT talents as they cannot offer salaries of the same level, nor same working environment. Another reason for the shortage of IT specialists in Lithuania, according to experts, is that IT specialists can work remotely in organizations from all over the world. In addition, international IT organizations rely heavily on IT talents, so they are willing to pay high salaries and offer various motivational packages, which often makes it impossible to attract such employees to work for local organizations.

When experts were asked if publicly available information about organizations is important to IT specialists when choosing where to go for a job interview, experts mutually agreed that potential employees from IT sector tend to evaluate employers based on the information found in media, social networks, various groups, and blogs. IT specialists are aware that there is a shortage of IT specialists, so they are very selective when choosing an organization to work for. Experts also highlighted that candidates not only analyse feedback about the employer itself, but also how profitable organization is as well as other publicly available information. Due to this, experts believe that good corporate reputation of the employer is important for potential IT employees when deciding on applying to work. Corporate reputation of employer is even more important when aiming to attract talented, highly experienced IT professionals, as IT talents receive much more job offers and are very selective. According to experts even smaller organizations must take care of their employer reputation because it is a long-term strategy to compete in the job market. Meanwhile, organizations from IT sector are simply forced to invest in their employer reputation if they want to stay competitive. Talented IT specialists are highly important for the success of organizations in the IT sector, so even a loss of one highly experienced IT employee is a big loss for an organization in this sector.

Experts distinguished the main means by which employers compete to attract talented IT employees. The most common means on top of competitive salary used by Lithuanian employers to attract IT talents are: flexible work schedule, opportunity to work from home, bonuses for timely completed projects, paid health insurance, paid life insurance, additional days off, workplace equipped to the highest standards, stylish resting zones in the office, free food, free snacks, free drinks, various free leisure activities, free trainings.

When asked about how IT organizations build good employer reputation, experts pointed out that first of all IT organizations invest in creation of work environment that creates positive emotions to employees, where it is good to work and even relax. Employer's ability to be flexible in various situations, the creation of a comfortable work and leisure environment, and maintenance of friendly relations are also very important aspects shaping employer reputation. Another aspect that helps to build good employer reputation is the fulfilment of promises given to employees, because unfulfilled promise might destroy good employer reputation very quickly. On the other hand, happy and loyal employee is very valuable when it comes to having brand ambassadors for the organization and, this is also important for building good employer reputation. Such IT organizations don't have difficulties in finding IT specialists, because brand ambassadors tend to invite their friends or relatives to come to work for the organization. It is very important to be close to all employees and listen to their complaints or suggestions. Experts pointed out that IT organizations often look for new ways to encourage, reward, maximize development, advance career possibilities, and make sure that employees feel good in the organization.

Experts distinguished the most important dimensions of corporate reputation that they believe for the most part help to build good employer reputation and attractiveness of the employer in IT sector. They believe that the most important dimensions for a potential employee in the IT sector are: working conditions, salary and good atmosphere in the organization. On the other hand, experts pointed out the importance of corporate communication in the media while broadcasting success stories and promoting corporate brand.

When experts were asked whether a competitive salary can compensate poorer employer reputation of an IT organization, both experts agreed that this depends on how experienced potential employee is. Experts believe that competitive salary can only compensate poorer employer reputation of an IT organization for less experienced IT specialists. They emphasized that IT specialists with big knowledge and experience will not come to work for IT organization with poorer employer reputation. To conclude, experts from IT sector stressed out that good employer

reputation is very important for IT organizations as it greatly helps to build its attractiveness to potential and existing IT employees.

Conclusions

Analysis of scientific literature allows to conclude that attraction of employer reputation applies to potential and existing employees. Employer attractiveness and employer reputation have significant influence towards intention to apply for a job. As employer reputation progresses, employer attractiveness increases in the eyes of employees, and this improves organization's recruitment possibilities. Theory also distinguishes ways to build and maintain good employer reputation, which are: active response to all employee reviews, sharing of real employee stories, showcasing what makes an organization unique, and usage of employees as recruiters.

Results from field analysis showed that the importance of employer reputation building and management are taken into account by many Lithuanian organizations from the IT sector. IT organizations in Lithuania make great efforts to shape their employer reputation. IT organizations, especially international ones, invest in creating an attractive value proposition for candidates, offering both financial and non-financial benefits, and actively communicate about it in the media. Overall, IT sector in Lithuania is a sector with a very good corporate reputation compared to other sectors. However, this is more applicable to large international organizations, while local organizations still have room for improvement when building and managing their employer reputation.

Results from expert interviews confirmed that good employer reputation is very important for potential IT employees when deciding on applying to work. Employer reputation is even more important when aiming at attracting talented, highly experienced IT professionals. According to experts, even smaller organizations must take care of their employer reputation because it is a long-term strategy to compete in the job market. The most important dimensions of corporate reputation that for the most part help to build good employer reputation and attractiveness of the employer in IT sector are working conditions, salary, and good atmosphere in the organization.

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