

Using employee feedback to build effective employer branding strategies: a mixed method approach

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USING EMPLOYEE FEEDBACK TO BUILD EFFECTIVE EMPLOYER BRANDING STRATEGIES: A MIXED METHOD APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – Addressing the limited empirical research using a data-driven approach for Employer Branding (EB), this study analyses employee opinions and sentiments to develop effective strategies that attract and retain qualified and socially skilled employees.

Methodology – Qualitative and quantitative research methods are employed in this study. A concurrent mixed-methods approach is implemented, integrating structured survey data with unstructured employee reviews to comprehensively analyse employer perceptions. Data mining and natural language processing techniques are applied to extract and analyse employee opinions and sentiments within a Portuguese retail company, addressing critical questions regarding constructing a compelling Employee Value Proposition (EVP), its impact measurement, and continuous improvement.

Findings – The discussion highlights that the survey and Glassdoor reviews largely support previous findings on EB, indicating that employees value both psychological benefits and economic stability. The results show that the analysed employees appreciate factors such as a stable environment and development opportunities, reflecting positive internal perceptions. However, low salaries, poor work-life balance, and staffing shortages detract from its attractiveness. The convergence of survey data and Glassdoor review analysis underscores the need to align internal branding efforts with external employer reputation.

Originality/ Value – This study advances EB research by integrating data-driven methodologies. Combining structured employee survey data with unstructured online reviews offers a novel approach to analysing employee perceptions and creating targeted authentic EB strategies.

Keywords Employer Branding; Data-Driven; Employee Value Proposition; Employee Feedback

INTRODUCTION

Eurostat estimated an unemployment rate of 6.7% in Portugal in 2022, around the same value for the Euro Zone, at 6.6% (Gabinete de Estratégia e Estudos, 2022). Despite this value (higher in other European countries) and the fact that workforces around the globe span four generations (Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y/Millennials, and Generation Z), companies worldwide face a talent shortage – and Portugal is no exception. Employees with high qualifications and developed social-behavioural skills are experiencing high demand in the labour market, which results in radical changes in talent management (Stopochkin et al., 2022), such as companies competing against one another and with those employees' ability to go solo, driven by new technologies (Goffee & Jones, 2015).

Although many individuals still feel they have no choice about where they work and what they do, companies are starting to realise that, rather than asking or forcing people to adapt to the organisation's needs, they are the ones who need to adapt and transform to attract the right people, keep them, and inspire them to do their best work (Goffee & Jones, 2015). In this "war for talent," companies must work towards an Employer Branding (EB) strategy, where they convey a realistic internal and external brand message and, at the same time, present the organisation as a "great place to work" (Junça Silva & Dias, 2022). Determining the effectiveness of an EB strategy requires aligning organisational values with employee expectations to create a compelling Employee Value Proposition (EVP) (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). EVP encompasses the unique benefits and experiences an organisation offers its employees, together with employer branding's external communication of this proposition, enhancing talent attraction and retention (Binu Raj, 2021). As the labour market becomes increasingly global and competitive, companies must adopt strategic marketing principles to attract and retain talent, similar to how they attract customers (Cappelli, 2001). Psychological concepts, such as reputation, attractiveness, image, and brand equity, influence job seekers' decisions (Moro et al., 2021; Sivertzen et al., 2013), highlighting the need for targeted EB efforts.

EB is a concept that first appeared circa 1996 and was coined by Ambler & Barrow (1996). It has been gaining much attention these last few years. The most recent literature review about EB (Špoljarić & Ozretić Došen, 2023) identified some recurring research topics, especially on international EB. Since 2016, research has mainly focused on using EB for existing and potential employees, with more focused studies on recruitment or employee engagement and social media's role in these constructions and strategies (Saini et al., 2022). More recent studies have been focusing on internal EB (for a company's current employees), and very few have used specific company data when the topic is related to the importance of distinct aspects of EB (Špoljarić & Ozretić Došen, 2023).

While some companies have advanced in developing effective EB strategies, others struggle to create approaches that authentically reflect their core values (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). Authenticity is essential for an EB strategy to be effective, requiring a clear understanding of what employees value most. This understanding includes designing appropriate surveys, integrating online data from social media and review platforms, and identifying relevant Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to measure effectiveness. Combining employee feedback with brand monitoring, a data-driven approach, enables organisations to identify strengths, address weaknesses, and develop a more authentic and impactful Employer Brand.

Despite multiple studies about EB and its importance for employee retention and standing out in the current "war for talent," there is little empirical, data-driven research on the matter. Cappelli (2001) had already referenced that applying brand marketing strategies to the labour and recruitment market could play an essential role in building an effective EB strategy; however, it was not possible to identify any research papers focused on the effectiveness of data usage to apply those marketing techniques to build an Employer Brand and an EVP.

Focusing on a Portuguese retail company with over 1,000 employees (“Barnes” for confidentiality), the research employs a concurrent mixed methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data to analyse employee opinions and sentiments. Data from the company’s annual employee survey and Glassdoor reviews were processed using data mining and NLP techniques, allowing for a comprehensive examination of key pain points and touchpoints. This methodological approach enables a deeper understanding of the research problem, facilitates comparisons across different data sources, and supports the generalisation of findings while ensuring practical insights into Employer Brand effectiveness (Creswell, 2009).

Overall, this study addresses a critical gap in the literature by integrating traditional EB models with data-driven methods to develop authentic and responsive EB strategies in today’s dynamic labour market. The research examines employee and public perceptions of Barnes by analysing both structured survey data and unstructured digital reviews. This study explores the effectiveness of EB efforts and enables continuous adaptation to shifting workforce expectations.

Specifically, this study aims to answer the following questions:

RSQ1: How does one create an EVP using data?

RSQ2: How can the impact of the EVP be measured?

RSQ3: How can the EVP be continuously improved to ensure it is authentic and follows the company’s core values?

LITERATURE REVIEW

EMPLOYER BRANDING (EB)

The Employer Branding (EB) concept, first introduced by Ambler & Barrow (1996), encompasses the functional, economic, and psychological benefits associated with employment at a company. Similar to how product brands fulfil consumer needs, organisations provide employees with developmental opportunities (functional), material or monetary rewards (economic), and a sense of belonging and purpose (psychological). Ambler & Barrow (1996) laid the foundation for EB as an academic and practical discipline by exploring the application of marketing principles to human resources. Early research primarily focused on corporate culture, internal marketing, and brand reputation as mechanisms for attracting and retaining talent. However, while Ambler & Barrow (1996) conceptualised EB as a static set of benefits, subsequent studies expanded this view. Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) highlighted EB’s dual role in attracting external talent and fostering internal employee commitment, while Azhar et al. (2024) described EB as a dynamic system that adapts to workforce expectations, employer attractiveness, and corporate reputation. More recent studies further emphasised the importance of continuous feedback and cultural adaptation to ensure EB remains relevant and effective (Hein et al., 2024; Reis et al., 2021).

EB plays a crucial role in aligning internal culture with external perceptions, ensuring consistency in messaging, and fostering employee engagement. Research suggests strong EB strategies enhance brand equity and reinforce the link between employee satisfaction, productivity, and customer loyalty (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). Recent empirical evidence further supports this view, demonstrating that employer attractiveness boosts talent acquisition while strong EB strategies improve retention and advocacy, creating a self-reinforcing cycle (Azhar et al., 2024). However, achieving authenticity in EB requires organisations to recognise employees as workers and active brand ambassadors, which is central to the brand-building process.

Employee behaviours directly influence perceived authenticity, reinforcing or undermining the Employer Brand's credibility (Sultan, 2022). (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). This challenge is at the core of the "Authenticity Paradox," which emphasises the necessity of aligning EB efforts with actual employee experiences to prevent discrepancies between internal culture and external messaging (Alonso et al., 2022).

The interplay between internal marketing and EB is also essential. Foreman & Money (1995) introduced a 2x2 matrix classifying internal marketing approaches with "Type IV," where an organisation markets itself internally as the closest approximation to EB. In this model, employees are both customers and stakeholders, reinforcing the idea that EB is not merely a top-down initiative but an interactive, organisation-wide effort. Reputation, a key component of EB, is more stable than brand image and accurately represents brand performance (Yu et al., 2022). EB thus operates as a strategic process involving multiple stakeholders across all organisational levels.

A well-structured EB strategy follows a three-step process. First, it develops a compelling EVP based on the organisation's core values, accurately representing what the company offers its employees. This EVP is the foundation for external employer marketing while strengthening internal engagement and organisational culture. Modern EB strategies now integrate continuous feedback mechanisms, such as pulse surveys and social media analytics, to refine the EVP in response to evolving employee expectations (Azhar et al., 2024). EB efforts enhance talent attraction, position the company as desirable, and drive employee commitment to corporate culture, strategy, and values (Rodrigues and Sousa, 2023). However, unlike traditional products or corporate branding, which primarily target external stakeholders, EB must balance both internal and external audiences. Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) highlight this distinction while emphasising the interdependent nature of these efforts, aligning with Ambler & Barrow's (1996) "virtuous circle" model.

For EB to be effective, all employees must embody the organisation's brand identity. This necessity requires clear leadership communication of the brand's vision, values, and culture, ensuring alignment between employee behaviour and corporate messaging. A strong Employer Brand not only serves as a competitive advantage but also fosters a consistent brand personality, which is essential for attracting talent and maintaining employee engagement. Research suggests that individuals are more likely to connect with brands that align with their self-concept, reinforcing the need for authenticity and coherence in EB efforts (Nazish et al., 2023). By ensuring alignment between internal culture and external messaging, organisations can build a sustainable and credible Employer Brand that enhances recruitment, retention, and long-term business performance (Rodrigues and Sousa, 2023).

EMPLOYER ATTRACTIVENESS, BRAND EQUITY, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

In an era of rapid technological advancements and shifting economic landscapes, organisations must redefine their moral purpose to meet evolving workforce expectations (Goffee & Jones, 2015; Stopochkin et al., 2022). Employees increasingly seek more than financial compensation, expecting meaningful careers that align with their values. Meanwhile, companies' strategies, such as downsizing, outsourcing, and flexible work arrangements, reshape the psychological contract between employers and employees (Laulié & Pavez, 2024) (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Goffee & Jones, 2015).

A critical aspect of EB is employer attractiveness, which refers to the perceived benefits of working for a specific organisation. Employees assess organisations based on personal values, needs, and career aspirations, with a stronger alignment, increasing employer appeal (Sharma and Tanwar, 2023). Berthon et al. (2005) conceptualised employer attractiveness through the EmpAt scale, which identifies five key dimensions: interest value (innovation and creativity support), social value (work environment and coworker relationships), economic value (salary, benefits, and job security), development value (learning and career growth), and application value (knowledge-sharing

opportunities). With increasing competition for talent, these factors play a crucial role in how organisations differentiate themselves.

The rise of digital platforms has intensified the need for transparency in EB. Global standards now evaluate companies, making authenticity a crucial element in talent attraction (Goffee & Jones, 2015; Stopochkin et al., 2022). Research indicates that workplace authenticity significantly influences employer attractiveness, as employees seek organisations that allow them to express their true selves (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Reis et al., 2017). Reis et al. (2017) found that authenticity ranked higher than economic and development value in employer attractiveness, reinforcing the importance of psychological benefits in EB strategies. However, while workplace authenticity was rated highly, its advantage over other employer attributes was not statistically significant.

Recent work by Hein et al. (2024) and Reis et al. (2021) further enriches these insights. Hein et al. (2024) introduced the Preference Congruence Theory, which suggests that aligning EB messages with candidates' preferences while considering geographic factors enhances employer attractiveness. Similarly, Reis et al. (2021) argue that embedding EB within a comprehensive talent management framework that accounts for cultural differences strengthens brand equity and improves retention. These findings highlight the need for organisations to continuously adapt their EB strategies based on workforce expectations.

However, poorly managed EB efforts result in backlash and empty promises, a phenomenon Alonso et al. (2022) referred to as career-washing, a deceptive practice where companies overstate workplace benefits while concealing negative aspects of the job. This approach can damage trust if candidates' expectations are not met upon employment. Organisations must engage in open, transparent discussions online, addressing concerns honestly and avoiding censorship of critical feedback to maintain authenticity (Alonso et al., 2022). Companies can build stronger, more credible Employer Brands that attract and retain top talent by fostering meaningful interactions and ensuring consistency between brand messaging and actual workplace culture.

The Internet has also revolutionised talent acquisition, enabling recruiters to reach active and passive job seekers while reducing hiring costs (Sivertzen et al., 2013). Social media, in particular, plays a central role in modern EB, allowing organisations to manage their brand image while engaging directly with potential candidates. Platforms like LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Glassdoor enable companies to showcase employee testimonials, highlight sustainability initiatives, and communicate their brand values, fostering emotional connections with their target audience (Alonso et al., 2022). When employees share their workplace experiences online, potential candidates can relate to them and, by extension, to the organisation itself (Reis et al., 2017).

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs a concurrent mixed methods design, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative online reviews from Glassdoor. Although Glassdoor is not a traditional social network, it facilitates two-way communication by allowing employees to review companies and enabling employer responses, fostering transparency and engagement (Holland et al., 2022). Studies focusing specifically on this web platform are scarce. However, several investigations provide valuable insights into various aspects of such platforms. Filbeck & Zhao (2023) examined how the platform ranks "the best places to work," while Saini & Jawahar (2019) explored the influence of these platforms on prospective employees' decisions to apply to or work for specific companies. This approach was chosen because it enables triangulation, validating and enriching quantitative findings with qualitative insights while bridging theory and practice (Dahler-Larsen, 2023). The study provides a holistic view of EB

strategies by combining structured survey responses with unstructured digital reviews, which neither method could achieve alone.

A workflow was developed to guide the process: (1) Data Collection (survey administration and Glassdoor web scraping); (2) Data Preparation and Cleaning (eligibility filtering, weighting, duplicate removal); and (3) Data Analysis (application of data mining and NLP techniques), and (4) Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings.

DATA COLLECTION AND SAMPLING

Survey

The survey was conducted over two weeks in July 2022. It comprised 55 questions, focusing on employee engagement and loyalty to calculate the probability of employees recommending the company to their friends and/or family as a “good place to work.” The responses were measured on a Likert scale (1 to 5, with 1 being “Strongly Disagree” and 5 being “Strongly Agree”). The survey measured key EB dimensions, including company and brand image and perception, diversity and inclusion, learning and development, employee relationships, and working conditions. Employees must have been employed by the company for a minimum of four months and possess a binding contract to be eligible for participation in the survey. Interns and external service providers, including temporary workers from third-party companies, were excluded from eligibility. The survey, administered entirely in digital format, required complete submission for an answer to be considered valid. Following data preparation and cleaning procedures, the final sample was curated by eliminating responses from employees who failed to meet the eligibility criteria or whose answers did not align with the established weighting scheme.

Sample weighting is a process done on a non-representative sample of the studied universe to adjust it to said universe, making it possible to compare results from different surveys, even if the samples are different. For this analysis, the sample is first segmented about the individuals and the characteristics to be considered (area, gender, seniority, and age). Then, the total answers in the sample are weighed considering the overall population, the weight certain individuals with specific characteristics have in the overall population, and how many people with said characteristics should be in the sample to represent everyone in the company. Each respondent then combines the four main characteristics to define how much their opinion weighs, considering their weighted value in the sample vs. the overall population.

The final sample is then weighted according to its relative weight for the studied sample, crossing characteristics such as area, gender, age, and seniority, ensuring an approximation of the results from the sample to the overall universe. This process obtains an efficiency indicator between 0 and 100. For this survey, the efficiency indicator was 83.6%, and the response rate was over 50% (more than 16,000 employees).

While the company initially created the questionnaire and managed the distribution, the research team reviewed it to ensure that the items accurately captured dimensions of employee engagement and employer branding, thereby addressing potential technical limitations.

Glassdoor

This study integrates data from Glassdoor, a platform where current and former employees review companies based on their work experiences. A structured data collection workflow was designed to extract and analyse these reviews:

1. Review Extraction – A web scraping tool was developed to systematically collect 320 reviews from Barnes’ main Glassdoor page (290 reviews) and its leading competitor brand’s page (30

- reviews). The extracted data included overall ratings, pros and cons, job titles, and timestamps to capture employee sentiment and workplace perceptions. Reviews were restricted to English-language entries to maintain consistency in sentiment analysis and facilitate cross-comparisons, as supported by previous research (Sivertzen et al., 2013).
2. Data Cleaning & Preprocessing – 60 duplicate entries were identified and removed, and non-English reviews were excluded to maintain consistency in sentiment analysis. The final dataset comprised 320 rows and five structured columns with no missing values, ensuring accuracy in subsequent analyses.
 3. Sentiment Analysis & Keyword Extraction – Natural Language Processing (NLP) and Text Mining techniques were applied to identify key themes, classify sentiment scores (positive/negative), and extract frequently used words and phrases. Sentiment analysis algorithms assessed emotional tone in the reviews (Mogyorosi, 2021), while bi-gram analysis identified common word pairings to reveal recurring themes (Hiemstra, 2009).
 4. Comparative Analysis – The processed Glassdoor data was analysed to identify trends in employee sentiment over time, determine which job titles had the most positive and negative perceptions, and uncover key themes in employer reputation. These insights were cross-referenced with survey data to identify alignment and discrepancies between internal and external employer perceptions.
 5. Visualisation & Interpretation – The findings were synthesised through graphical representations, highlighting patterns in sentiment scores, keyword frequency, and reputation shifts over time to support the study's conclusions on EB effectiveness.

SURVEY SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

As explained above, the data sample used results from an annual Portuguese company survey under the pseudonym “Barnes”. The last survey, conducted in July 2022, had 16,801 respondents – over 15,000 were frontline workers, and more than 1,300 were office workers.

It is possible to observe the demographic representation of respondents in *Table 1* – primarily female, aged 25 – 54 years old, and have been in the company for more than 11 years.

Baseline characteristic	Full sample	
	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Female	11,576	68.9
Male	5,225	31.10
Age		
<24 years	3,191	19.0
25-34 years	4,611	27.4
35-44 years	4,120	24.5
45-54 years	3,597	21.4
>55 years	1,282	7.6
Time in the company		
4-12 months	2,854	17.0
1-5 years	5,668	33.7
6-10 years	1,416	8.4
>10 years	6,863	40.8

Table 1. Sample's demographic characteristics.

Source: Own work

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

SURVEY

Company brand image and perception

The first dimension, company brand image and perception, focuses on how employees view Barnes as a company and is the most comparable with Berthon et al.'s (2005) Employer Attractiveness Factor 1, "Interest Value." The questions address topics such as innovation, stability, impact on the community, the sense of pride, and job safety (Figure 1).

Barnes' employees' perception of these aspects seems quite positive, with most responses in the "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" categories. For instance, while approximately 70% of respondents strongly agree that Barnes delivers on stability and safety, only about 55% strongly agree that they feel proud working at Barnes. However, on the affirmation "I am proud of working at Barnes," it is possible to observe a rise in the number of "Neutral" answers, as well as a slight increase in the number of "Disagree" and "Strongly Disagree" answers. This 15-percentage point gap between objective stability and personal pride is significant; it suggests that although employees recognise Barnes' operational strengths, there is a measurable deficiency in emotional commitment, which could affect turnover and overall organisational commitment (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

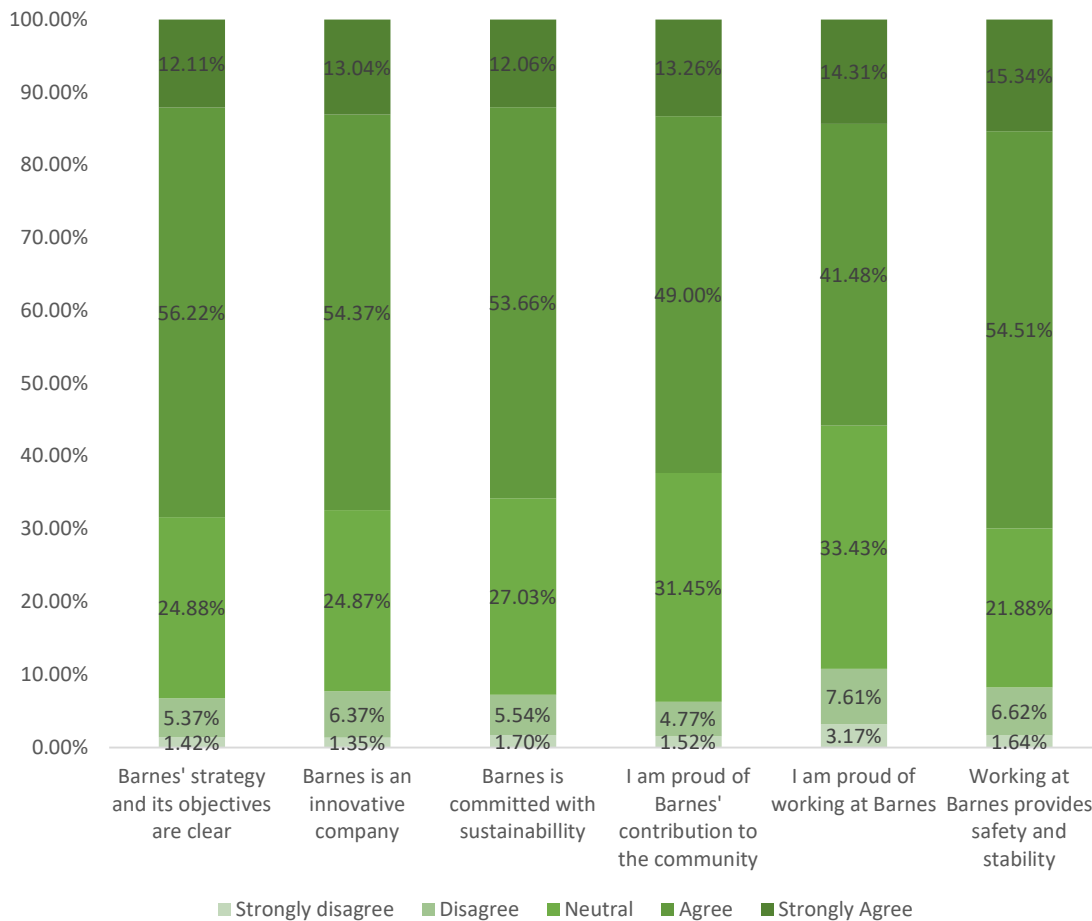


Figure 1. Barnes' brand image and perception.

Source: Own work

Diversity and Inclusion

The second dimension focuses on the importance of diversity and inclusion for Barnes and its employees and how they view it. According to Figure 2, roughly 65% of respondents “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” that Barnes is an inclusive place, yet about 20% acknowledge experiencing discrimination or verbal harassment. This discrepancy points to a potential gap between the overall perception of inclusivity and certain employees’ lived experiences. Most of Barnes’ employees have never experienced harassment; nonetheless, there appear to be relevant levels of discrimination, verbal abuse, and violence (Figure 2). However, most Barnes employees see the company as an inclusive place where one’s singularity is respected. These contrasting results may relate to Cassell et al.’s (2022) conclusions in their study about inclusion in the retail industry, where the results have shown the customer’s impact on employees’ perceptions about inclusion at work. Their findings show that, despite managers’ and teams’ efforts toward a more inclusive workplace, customers’ attitudes and behaviours may enhance retail employees’ perceptions of inclusion and make them feel excluded in some situations (Cassell et al., 2022). Moreover, the survey data do not clarify whether these instances of discrimination or violence originate from peers or customers, suggesting a need for more granular follow-up to address the root causes. It should be noted that the survey did not clearly distinguish whether instances of discrimination, violence, or verbal harassment occurred between peers or in customer-employee interactions, which may warrant further investigation.

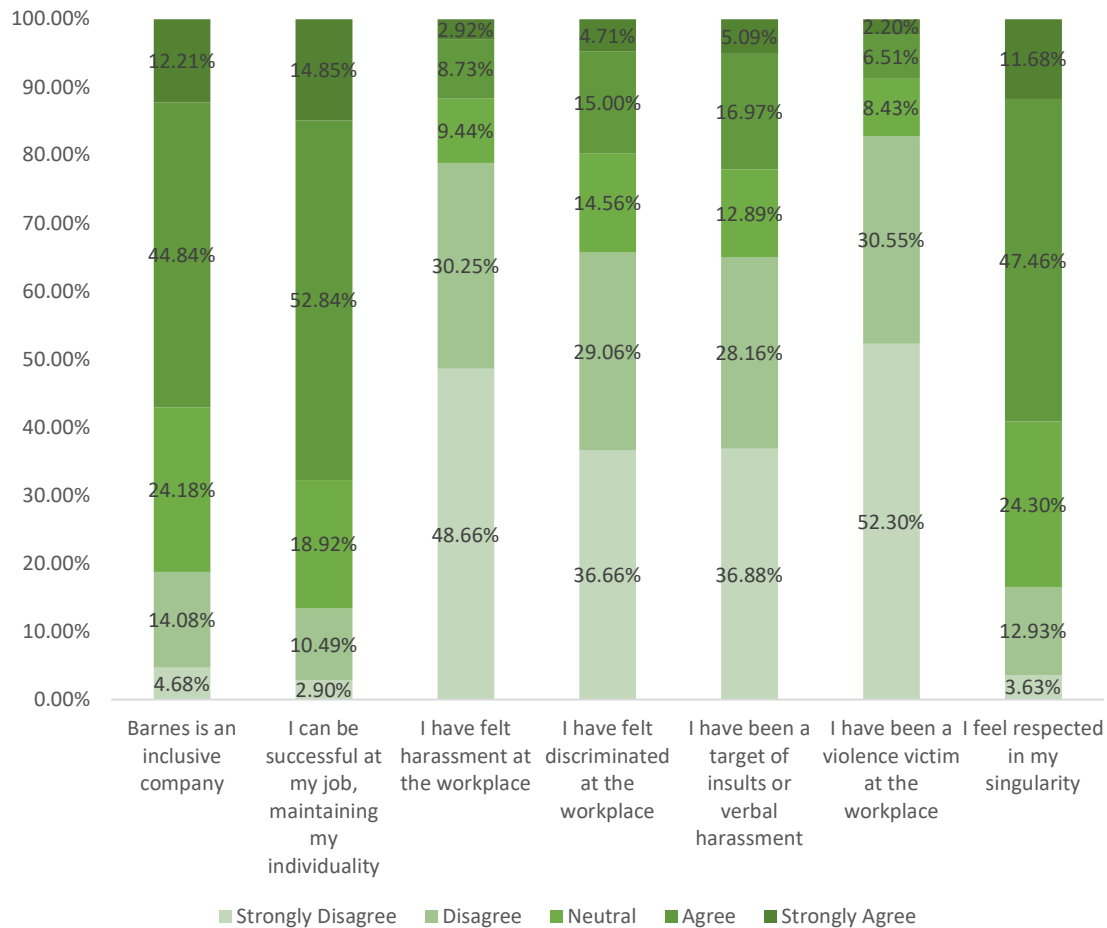


Figure 2. Barnes' Diversity and Inclusion characteristics.

Source: Own work

Learning and Development

The third dimension focuses on Barnes' learning and development opportunities (Figure 3), reflecting Berthon et al.'s (2005) Factors 4 and 5 of Employer Attractiveness, which *emphasise* individual learning and development rather than the company's societal role. Most employees expressed neutral or moderately positive sentiments regarding Barnes' strategies for learning and development, with most of *their* opinions being neutral. For instance, only about 35% strongly agree that they have adequate training and clear advancement pathways, while nearly 40% remain neutral or disagree that performance impacts salary. Interestingly, most employees feel their performance does not impact their salary (almost 40% of employees disagree or strongly disagree with this information) and do not believe growth opportunities are based on merit. This result suggests a significant disconnect between employee expectations and the company's developmental initiatives, highlighting an area for strategic improvement. Nonetheless, some employees acknowledge *promising career and/or professional development* possibilities, indicating that a subset of the workforce perceives upward mobility.

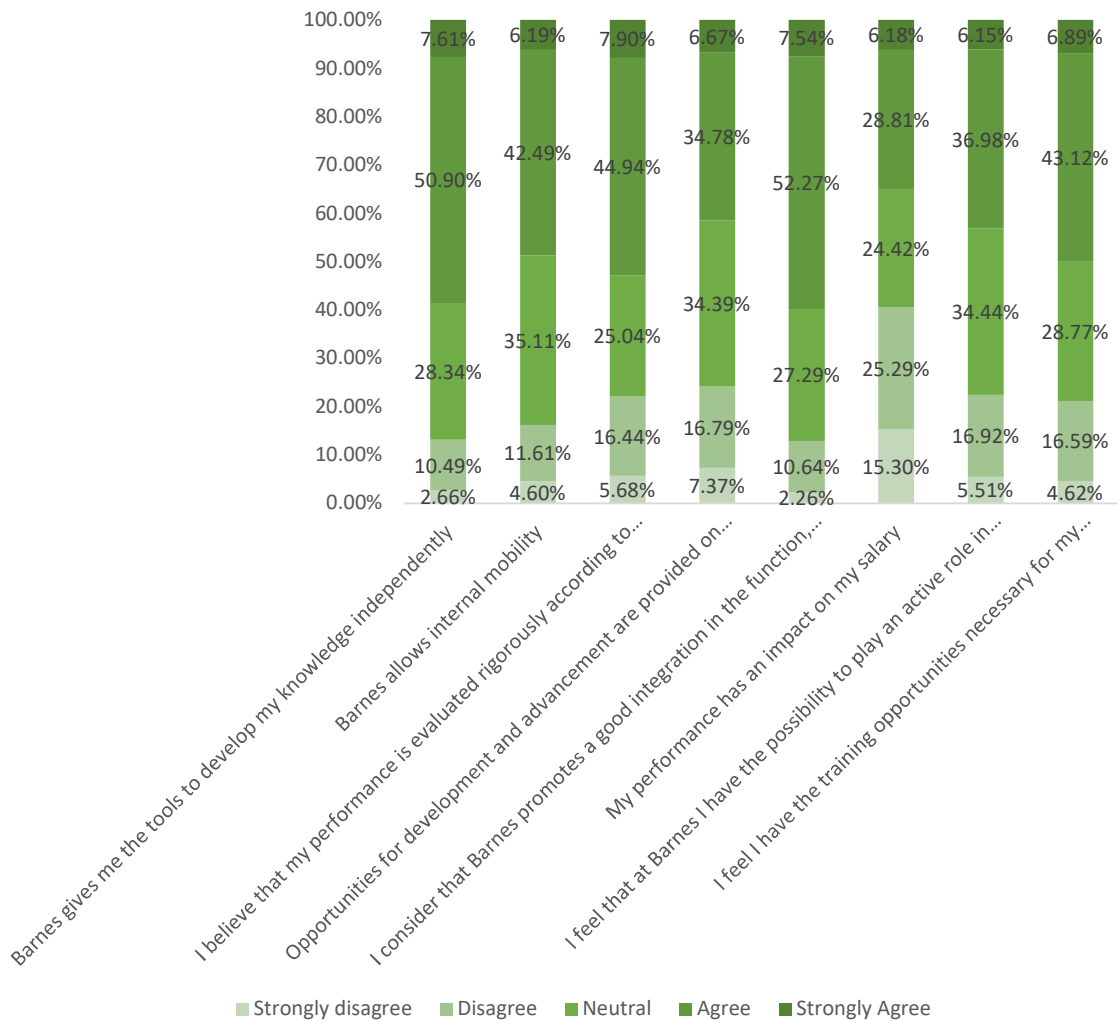


Figure 3. Barnes' Learning and Development Characteristics.

Source: Own work

Relationships between Employees

The fourth dimension focuses on the relationships between employees (Figure 4) and corresponds with Berthon et al.'s (2005) Factor 2 of Employer Attractiveness, "Social Value". The questions primarily examined the relationships between employees (excluding leadership and management) and the overall environment in the company amongst people. Barnes' employees' perceptions about these matters are generally positive, with around 75% agreeing or strongly agreeing that they are respected in the workplace by their peers, regardless of hierarchical level, transparency between coworkers, and freedom and space for self-expression. Notably, this strong sense of interpersonal respect does not fully translate into effective cross-team collaboration: nearly 40% remain neutral or disagree with the statement about collaboration across different teams. This discrepancy suggests that while employees feel comfortable within their immediate teams, communication and coordination may not be as strong between different departments, highlighting a hidden gap between interpersonal rapport and broader organisational cohesion.

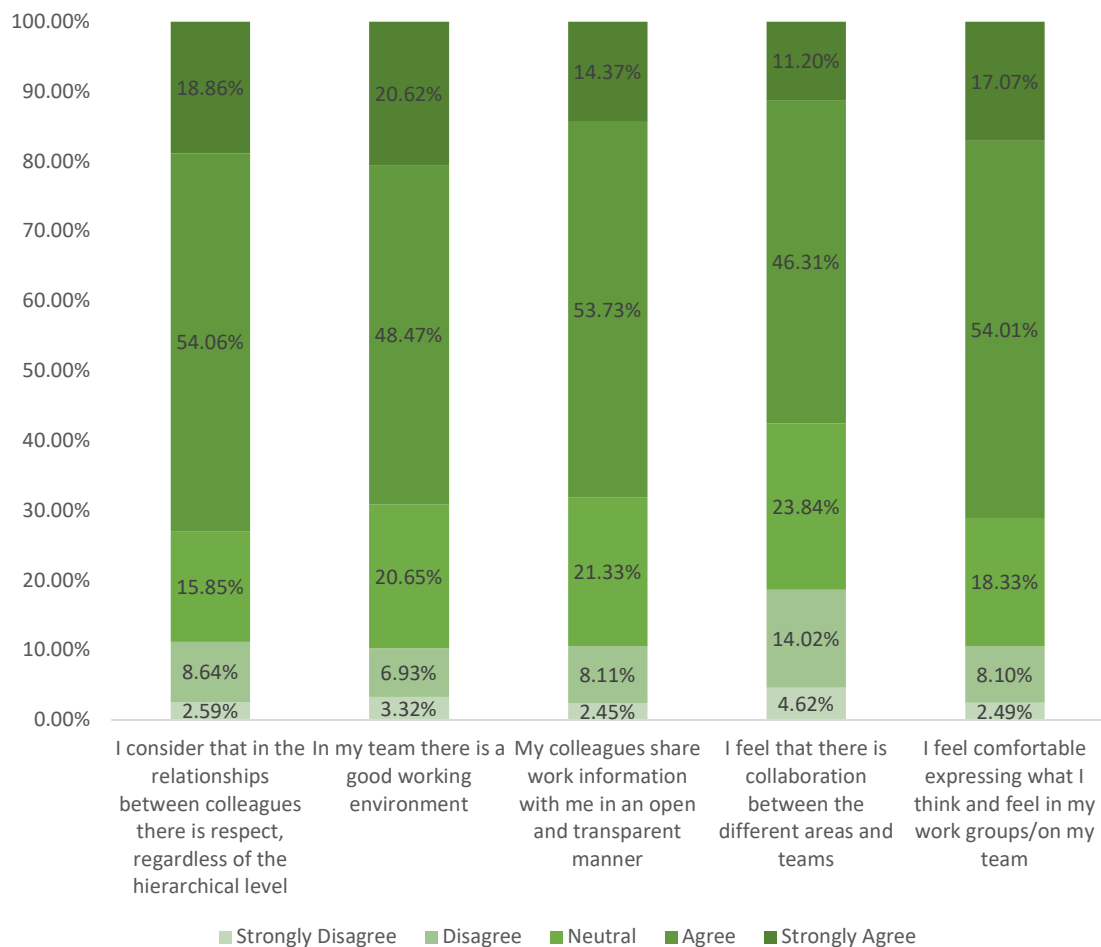


Figure 4. Barnes' relationships between employees.

Source: Own work

Working Conditions

This analysis's fifth and last dimension focuses on Barnes' working conditions (Figure 5). Although roughly 70% of respondents agree or strongly agree that they have the physical tools and training necessary to perform their roles, only about 45% report feeling psychologically and emotionally healthy at work.

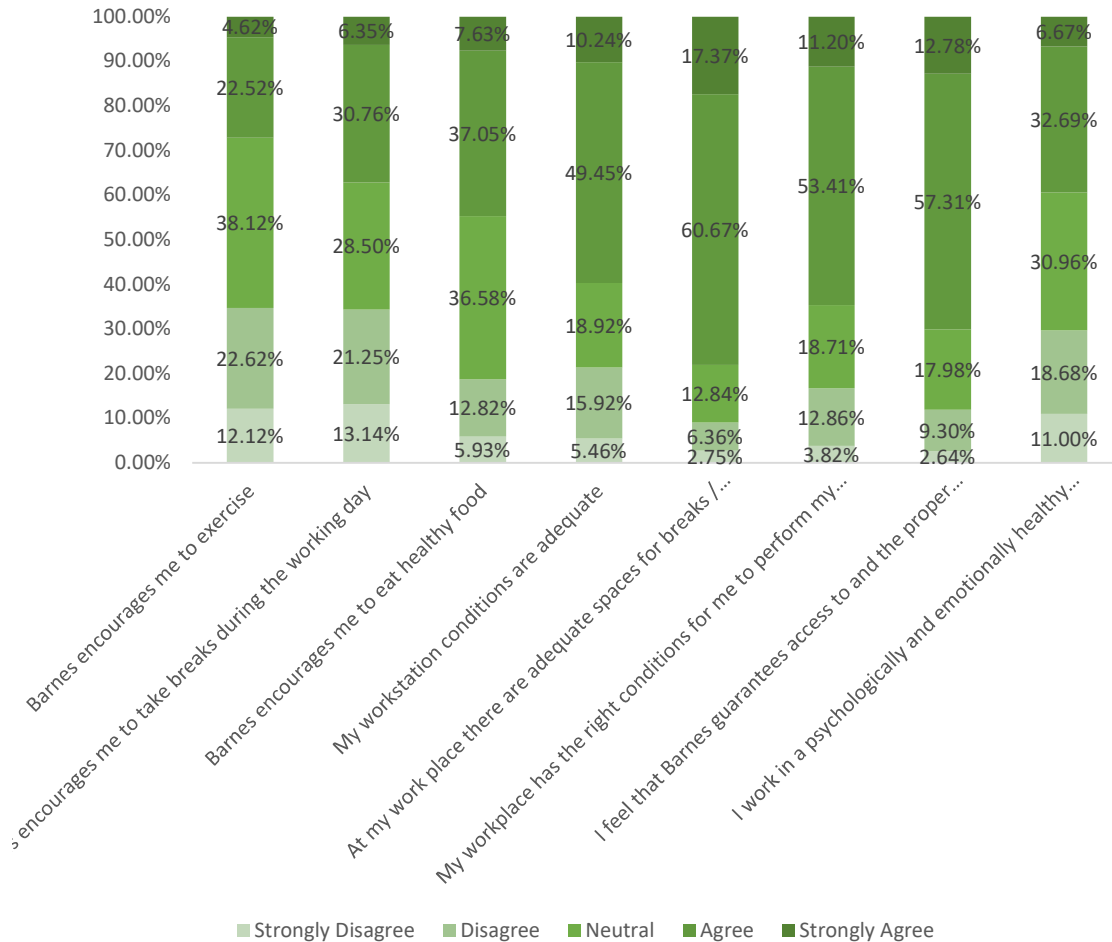


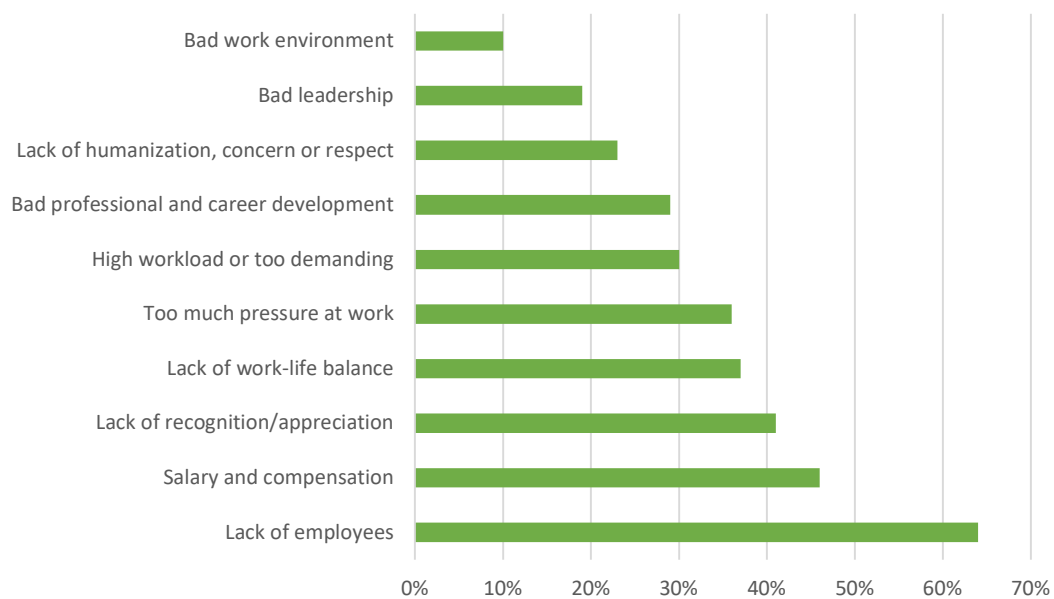
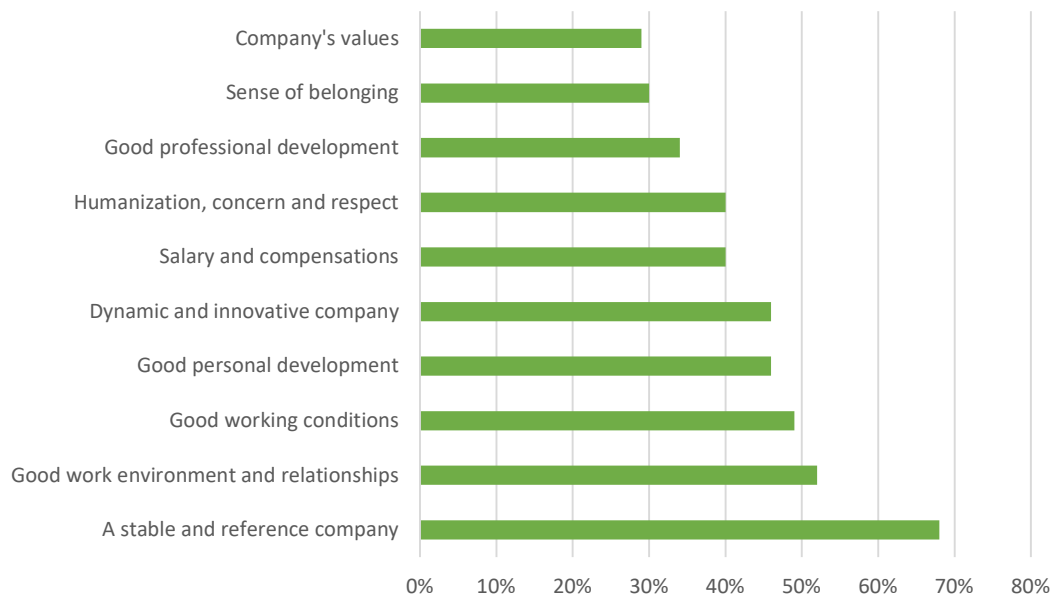
Figure 5. Barnes' working conditions.

Source: Own work

With people's job satisfaction currently being about more than a paycheck and employees looking for a stronger psychological contract (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004), organisations must work toward workplaces holistically supporting their employees' well-being. They already expect good working conditions, and organisations like Barnes should create well-designed and meaningful jobs for workers where managerial support is crucial. The results in Figure 5 and Figure 2 show that the organisation should focus on initiatives that promote a safe space for employees to discuss the psychological pressure they feel in their everyday lives while working toward an environment that fosters well-being. In the last part of the survey, Barnes' employees were asked to sort 11 characteristics of Barnes, from the most to the least important. As shown in Figures 6a and b, approximately 70% of respondents rank

“A stable and reference company” among their top three reasons to recommend Barnes, followed closely by “Good working environment” (about 65%) and “Good conditions” (around 60%).

On the other hand, over 40% of employees indicate insufficient workers for specific tasks or teams, with 35% expressing that their salary is incompatible with their work. Additionally, roughly 30% of employees note a lack of recognition and appreciation, which mirrors the distribution observed in the figures above. These insights underscore the tension between Barnes’ strong market positioning and work environment versus persistent concerns about staffing, compensation, and acknowledgement.



Figures 6a and 6b. Aspects of recommendation and non-recommendation.

Source: Own work

GLASSDOOR

Exploratory Data Analysis

The Overall Rating classification on Glassdoor is one of the most critical indicators in the reviews. It offers a concise gauge of overall employee sentiment, calculated from multiple sub-ratings (Work/Life Balance, Culture and Values, Diversity and Inclusion, Career Opportunities, Compensation and Benefits, and Senior Management). In the exploratory data analysis of the scraped reviews, the average “Overall Rating” hovers around 3.7 stars across the entire timeframe. Grouping the reviews by yearly mean, Figure 7 shows that the best reviews occurred in 2012 at approximately 3.9 stars, dropping significantly by 2014 to around 3.2 stars. After slightly recovering to about 3.6 in 2015, the rating stabilised around 3.7–3.8 from 2016 onward, never falling below 3.6 through 2023. Notably, the 2014 slump suggests a potential organisational or market-related factor that negatively impacted employee sentiment, while the steady rise after 2015 may indicate successful adjustments in Barnes’ policies or broader economic improvements.

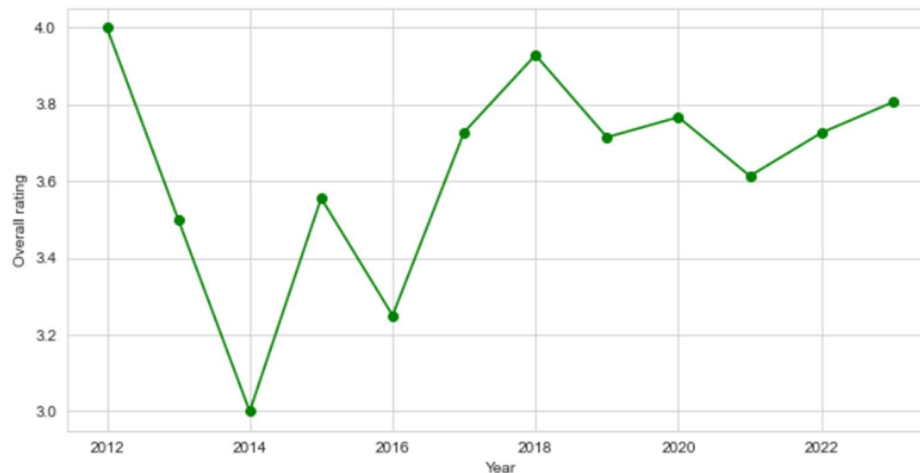


Figure 7. Barnes’ overall average rating per year.

Source: Own work

As shown in Figure 8, approximately 25% of the Glassdoor reviews are done anonymously. Among the remaining reviews, “Cashier” and “Part-Time Cashier” are the only frontline roles with significant representation (over 30 combined reviews), while most other titles belong to office-based positions.

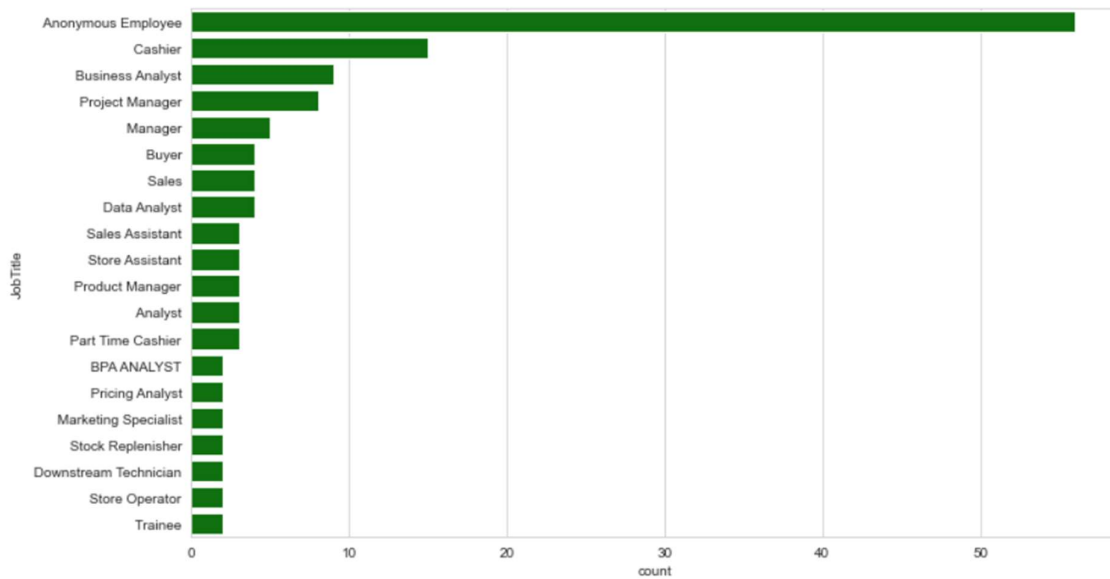


Figure 8. Most Frequent Employee Job Titles in Barnes' Glassdoor Reviews.

Source: Own work

Although job titles such as Stock Replenisher, Pricing Analyst, or Analyst register fewer than five reviews each, they boast the highest overall ratings—consistently above four stars (Figure 9). This small sample size may introduce bias, yet it also suggests that employees in these specialised roles, albeit fewer in number, report a notably positive experience. Downstream Technician shows the lowest satisfaction level, at around three stars, indicating potential job-specific challenges or conditions.

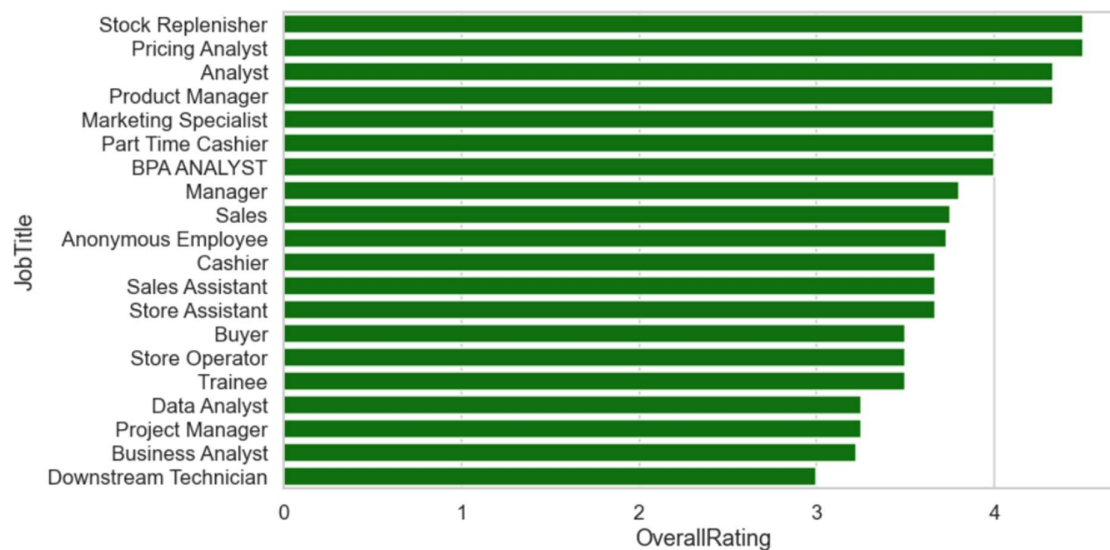


Figure 9. Overall Rating by Job Family.

Source: Own work

Sentiment Analysis

Most reviews in the Summary column are positive, with around 70% showing a polarity above 0.25, and a substantial portion are also pretty subjective. As illustrated in Figure 10, the more polarised the comment is, the higher its subjectivity tends to be, while more factual titles yield lower polarity and subjectivity.

A scatterplot combining the most frequent 10 job titles and their average polarity/subjectivity scores (Figure 10) was drawn to understand whether the job title impacts the reviews' polarity and subjectivity. Most job titles cluster around moderate polarity (0.2–0.4) and subjectivity (0.4–0.6), with Project Manager showing the lowest polarity (~0.15) and highest subjectivity (~0.6), indicating notably negative yet opinionated feedback. Conversely, Anonymous Employee reviews hover around 0.3 in polarity and subjectivity, suggesting a neutral yet moderately subjective stance. An anonymous review could be particularly persuasive in giving more negative feedback because there is no fear of retaliation.

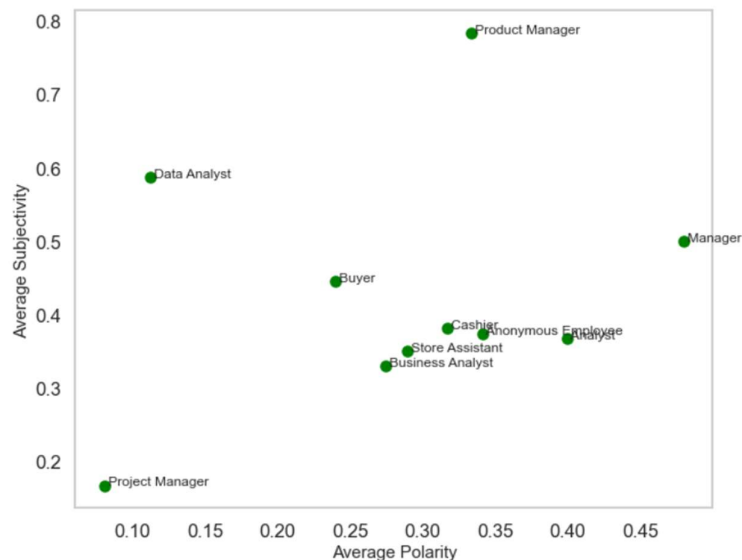


Figure 10. Scatterplot of Polarity and Subjectivity of the most frequent ten job titles.

Source: Own work

Afterwards, it is essential to understand the polarity and subjectivity of the Pros and Cons columns (Figure 11a and b). Approximately 70% of pros reflect a polarity above 0.2, indicating a generally positive sentiment, while the remaining 30% remain neutral or slightly negative. However, nearly half of the cons also cluster near the neutral quadrant, suggesting that even “negative” feedback may not be strongly detrimental. This somewhat favourable outcome could mean employees do not perceive these cons as severe or struggle to articulate substantial drawbacks (since the cons field is mandatory).

However, people do not find the cons bad enough, or they do not find any cons (the field is mandatory when writing a review).

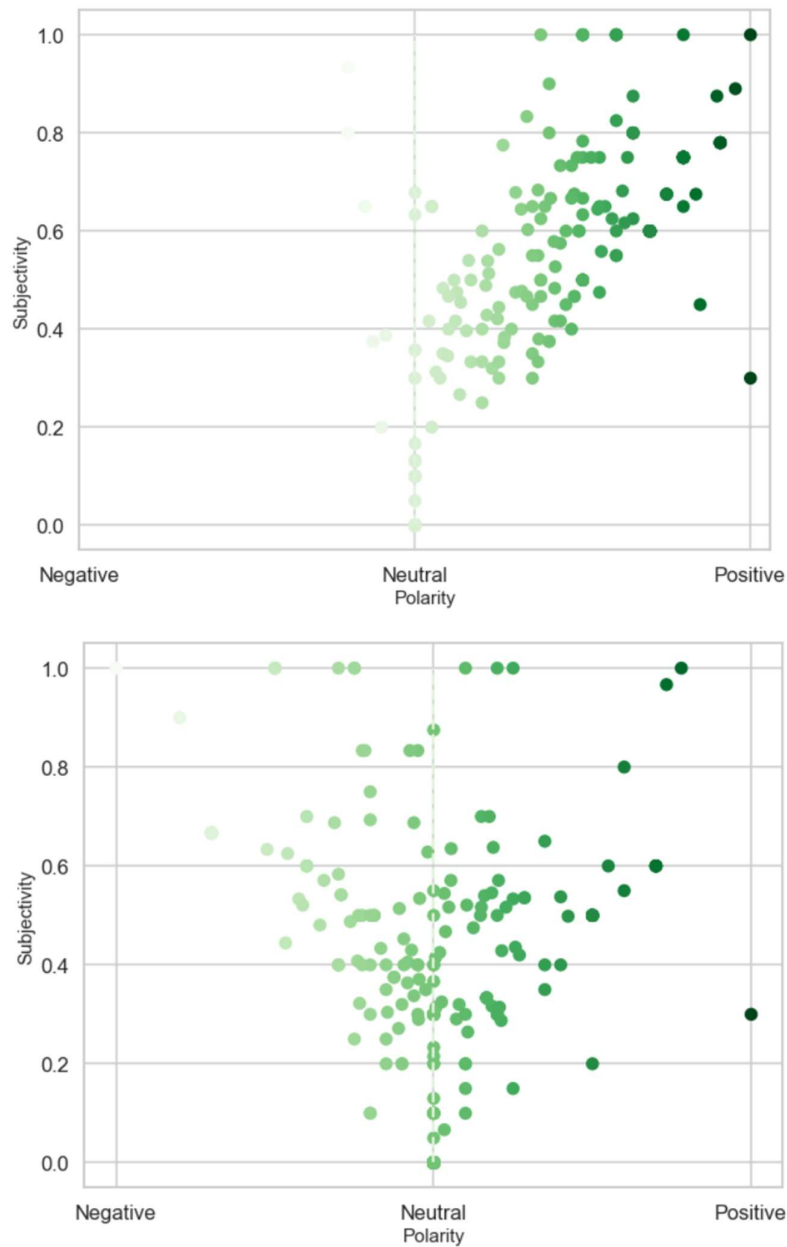


Figure 11a and b. Pros and Cons polarity vs. subjectivity.

Source: Own work

In the “Summary” column, the most frequent terms are “good” and “great,” appearing in roughly 20–25% of the entries, contributing heavily to the overall positive skew seen in Figure 12. Other words, such as “experience,” “nice,” and “bad,” also stand out, although they appear less frequently (each under 10%) and reflect a mixed sentiment. Meanwhile, the top bi-grams in this column (Figure 13), including “good company,” “great place,” and “great company,” each appear around 5–8 times, reinforcing the generally favourable tone. These findings suggest that while negative terms like “bad”

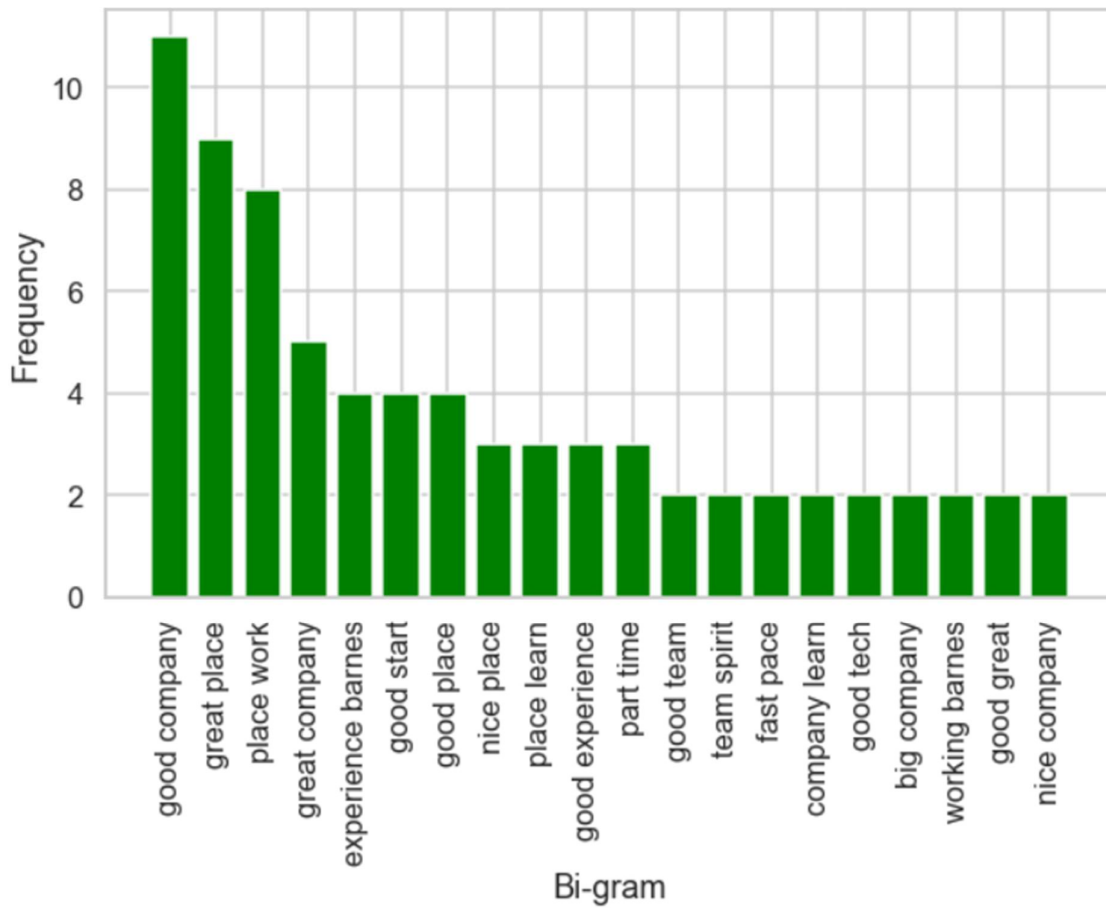


Figure 13. Top 20 bi-grams – Summary.

Source: Own work

In the pros’ column, “environment,” “good,” “great,” and “team” stand out, each appearing in approximately 40–50% of the entries (Figure 14a). “Learn” and “learning” also register a high reference frequency, showing up in around 30% of the pros. When analysed in a bi-gram view, “good team,” “good environment,” and “great environment” each appear at least five times, underscoring the positive sentiment (Figure 14b). This predominance of upbeat descriptors in the pros column aligns with the tendency for employees to highlight positive experiences—especially regarding workplace culture and learning opportunities—when discussing favourable aspects of their employment.

Such a distribution strongly suggests that inadequate compensation and extended working hours are the primary concerns among reviewers, overshadowing other potential issues (Figure 15b).

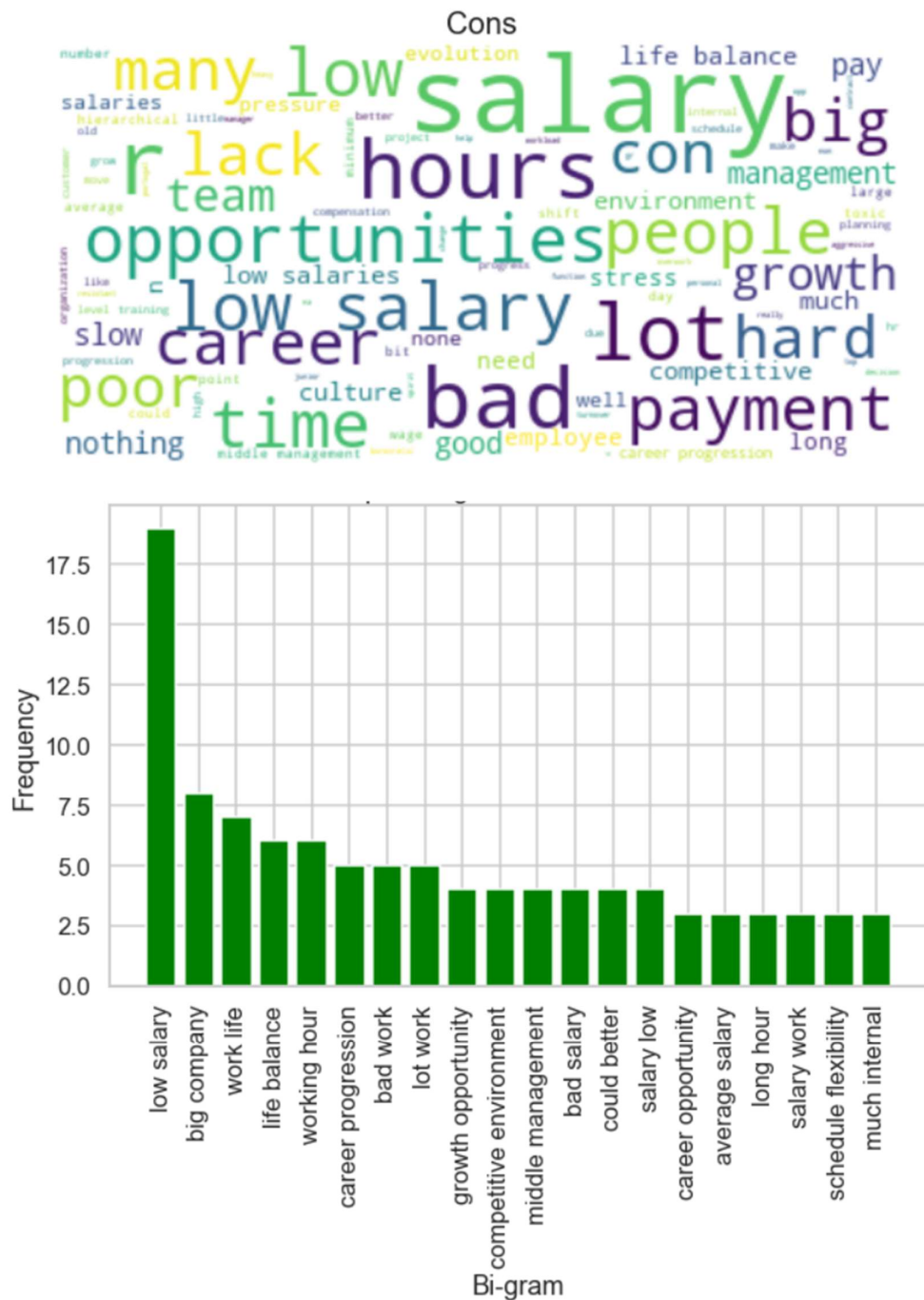


Figure 15 a and b. Most used words and bi-grams – Cons.

Source: Own work

Nonetheless, “opportunities” also stand out in the word cloud. When comparing the word cloud and the most used bi-grams, “career progression,” “growth opportunity,” and “career opportunity” each

appears at least 5 times, *as well as* “schedule flexibility” (about 4 mentions). Additionally, “work-life balance,” despite being split into two separate bi-grams, collectively appears in over 6 instances, underscoring employees’ focus on maintaining personal well-being. These recurring positive terms, centered on professional growth and flexible schedules, may explain the generally optimistic distribution observed in Figure 11b.

Recalling the previous analysis, “Project Manager” is one of the top 10 job titles giving reviews (Figure 8), yet it holds an average rating near 3.1 stars (Figure 9) and shows the lowest average polarity (about 0.15) among the job titles (Figure 10). Comparing the keyword analysis with those findings, it is probably safe to say that Barnes should pay particular attention to this position and consider ways to improve compensation and bolster work-life balance, given that the data consistently highlight “salary” and “hours” as significant concerns.

DISCUSSION

The survey results indicate that around 70% of Barnes’ employees perceive the company as a stable and secure workplace, a sentiment echoed in Glassdoor reviews, where positive bi-grams such as “big company,” “good place,” “great place,” and “great school” reflect a generally favourable perception of the employer (Figures 3, 4, and 5). Employees highlight a good work environment, career opportunities, and professional development, reinforcing that Barnes’ EB strategy effectively communicates stability and growth potential. However, while generally positive, the 3.7-star average rating on Glassdoor reveals fluctuations over time, with a notable drop to 3.2 stars in 2014 before stabilising at 3.7 to 3.8 (Figure 7). These shifts suggest that employer reputation is not static but shaped by internal policies and external labour market dynamics. Factors such as market conditions, corporate restructuring, or evolving employee expectations may have contributed to these variations, highlighting the need for continuous adaptation in EB efforts to maintain a competitive and stable employer image (Bharadwaj et al., 2022; Kucherov et al., 2022). Also, job-specific variations in satisfaction, with roles such as Project Manager receiving lower sentiment scores, support the need for a segmented approach to EB, as different employee groups experience workplace policies differently (Hein et al., 2024).

Our study also uncovers significant areas of concern. Approximately 40% of survey respondents and public reviews highlight issues such as low salaries, long hours, poor work-life balance, and inadequate staffing (Figures 6b, 15a, and 15b). This dual-source evidence suggests that while Barnes creates a positive work environment, it struggles to meet critical economic and organisational needs that impact overall retention. These findings align with Sivertzen et al. (2013), who emphasises that while a strong employer brand can attract talent, long-term retention depends equally on financial incentives, career growth opportunities, and a sustainable work-life balance, areas where Barnes faces persistent challenges. In addition, Nabawanuka & Ekmekcioglu (2021) concluded that perceived supervisor support significantly influences work-life balance and employee well-being, reinforcing the need to involve managers in promoting a healthier work environment. Furthermore, recent studies (e.g., Hein et al., 2024; Reis et al., 2021) highlight the necessity of continuously adapting EB strategies to address both economic and psychological employee needs, reinforcing the importance of aligning compensation structures, career development opportunities, and well-being initiatives with evolving workforce expectations.

The findings on diversity and inclusion present another notable inconsistency. While 65% of employees view Barnes as an inclusive workplace, 20% report experiences of discrimination or verbal harassment (Figure 2). These results echo Cassell et al.’s (2022) study, which found that customer interactions significantly shape employees’ perceptions of inclusivity in the retail sector, sometimes leading to feelings of unfair treatment or lack of belonging despite formal company policies promoting diversity.

This result suggests that Barnes' EB strategy may require stronger mechanisms for internal accountability and employee well-being, ensuring that inclusion efforts extend beyond messaging to tangible workplace improvements.

In addition, the study highlights gaps in learning and development opportunities. While 35% of employees strongly agree that they receive adequate training, nearly 40% remain neutral or disagree that performance impacts salary or career growth (Figure 3). This finding indicates a misalignment between employees' expectations for advancement and Barnes' career development framework, aligning with Reis et al. (2021), who emphasise that employer attractiveness is reinforced when training and development efforts are tied to visible career progression and incentives. This discrepancy may reduce employee engagement and long-term retention if unaddressed, as professional growth is a key determinant of organisational commitment (Berthon et al., 2005).

Furthermore, while 75% of employees report positive relationships with peers, nearly 40% indicate challenges with cross-team collaboration (Figure 4). This difference suggests that the lack of communication between departments or teams can hinder efficiency and innovation (Hein et al., 2024). Hein et al. (2024) argue in the Preference Congruence Theory that strong intra-organizational cohesion enhances employer attractiveness by reinforcing shared values. Addressing communication barriers through effective interdepartmental initiatives may enhance collaboration and contribute to a more integrated EB strategy.

Overall, the findings reinforce the importance of aligning EB strategies with actual employee experience. While Barnes has successfully positioned itself as a stable and reputable employer, it must address critical compensation, career development, inclusion, and work-life balance challenges. These results support recent studies by Rzemieniak & Wawer (2021) and Ahmed et al. (2022) while emphasising the evolving nature of employee expectations in contemporary labour markets (Reis et al., 2021). To strengthen its EB strategy, Barnes should consider strategic compensation adjustments, enhanced career development programs, stronger workplace inclusion measures, and well-being initiatives.

CONCLUSIONS

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This study advances EB theory by integrating structured employee survey data with unstructured online reviews, providing a multi-perspective evaluation of employer attractiveness. Expanding on Ambler and Barrow's (1996) conceptualisation of EB as a combination of functional, economic, and psychological benefits, the findings reinforce Backhaus and Tikoo's (2004) dual-process model, showing that while Barnes maintains a strong external reputation, internal challenges in compensation, career development, and work-life balance affect long-term retention.

Our findings align with Berthon et al.'s (2005) Employer Attractiveness framework, demonstrating that stability and career opportunities enhance employer appeal, but job-specific variations in satisfaction necessitate a segmented approach to branding (Hein et al., 2024). In addition, inconsistencies between Barnes' external image as an inclusive employer and reports of discrimination highlight the need for authenticity in EB, supporting dynamic feedback models (Reis et al., 2021). These findings reinforce that EB must continuously evolve to meet both economic and psychological employee expectations (Azhar et al., 2024). Furthermore, the study underscores the role of psychological contracts in shaping employer reputation, particularly in work-life balance and supervisor support (Nabawanuka & Ekmekcioglu, 2021). The historical fluctuations in employer ratings also confirm that employer attractiveness is influenced by external labour market conditions as much as internal corporate strategies.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings provide actionable insights for organisations aiming to strengthen their EB strategies to improve talent attraction, retention, and workplace engagement. While Barnes demonstrates a strong external employer reputation, internal challenges in compensation, career development, and work-life balance highlight the need for strategic interventions to ensure alignment between employer messaging and employee experience. First, organisations must adopt a more data-driven approach to EB by integrating internal employee feedback with external employer reputation monitoring. Tracking Glassdoor ratings, employee surveys, and sentiment analysis can help companies identify discrepancies between their EVP and workforce perceptions, enabling proactive adjustments to recruitment and retention strategies. Second, the findings underscore the importance of enhancing career development and compensation transparency. Organisations should implement career progression frameworks, link performance evaluations to salary growth, and communicate internal mobility opportunities. Providing employees with clear pathways for advancement can increase engagement and commitment, reducing turnover caused by dissatisfaction with stagnant career prospects. Third, the study highlights the importance of managerial training in fostering employee well-being. Given the connection between work-life balance and perceived supervisor support (Nabawanuka & Ekmekcioglu, 2021), companies should invest in leadership development programs that equip managers with skills to support employee well-being, recognise workplace stressors, and create psychologically safe environments. Finally, a segmented approach to EB is necessary to address job-specific variations in employee sentiment (Hein et al., 2024). Instead of a one-size-fits-all EVP, organisations should tailor employer messaging, benefits, and career opportunities to different employee groups.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, the study focuses on a single company in Portugal, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other industries, regions, or cultural contexts. EB perceptions are influenced by cultural values and economic conditions, which

may shape employee expectations differently across markets (Yasin et al., 2023). Future research should expand the scope by conducting cross-industry or multinational studies to examine how EB effectiveness varies in different economic and cultural environments. Second, while this study examines historical fluctuations in Glassdoor ratings, it does not systematically track how specific EB initiatives influence reputation over time. Although shifts in employer perception may be linked to market conditions or internal policies, the study does not establish causal relationships. Future research should adopt a structured longitudinal approach, tracking EB efforts alongside employee sentiment and retention metrics to assess their long-term impact. Third, this study focuses on current employees and does not consider external stakeholders like job seekers, customers, or competitors. Since EB also shapes external perceptions, future research should examine candidate experiences, employer reviews, and brand reputation metrics for a more comprehensive understanding. Lastly, the study encountered several data-related constraints. Limited access to raw survey data prevented advanced statistical analyses and cross-data examination, hindering insights into audience-specific patterns. The lack of a Glassdoor premium account and company name confusion resulted in a reduced dataset. Also, confidentiality issues restricted access to key performance indicators, limiting the assessment of Barnes' EB strategy's impact. Future research should address these constraints to provide a more holistic understanding of EB effectiveness.

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