ISSN (Online) 2456 -1304

International Journal of Science, Engineering and Management (IJSEM)

Volume 13, Issue 09, September 2026

Talent Management Strategies in Emerging Technology Start-ups: The Role of Employer Branding with respect to Attractiveness in Eastern India

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Abstract*— Employer branding has emerged as a critical talent management strategy for technology start-ups operating in resource-constrained, competitive environments. This study examines how employer branding — operationalised through employer attractiveness — functions as a strategic talent management lever in emerging technology start-ups in Eastern India. Drawing on the Employer Attractiveness framework of Berthon et al. (2005) and using a quantitative, cross-sectional design with data collected from approximately 150 founders, HR managers, and senior executives across Odisha, West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Bihar, the study employs Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) to test the relationship between employer attractiveness and two talent outcomes — talent acquisition and talent retention. Employer attractiveness emerged as the dominant predictor of talent acquisition ($t = 7.201$, $p < 0.001$) and significantly predicted talent retention ($t = 2.215$, $p < 0.05$), together explaining 95.5% and 84.0% of the respective outcome variances. The findings confirm that employer branding is not merely a communication exercise but the central strategic driver of talent outcomes for Eastern Indian technology start-ups. Practical implications are offered for founders, HR practitioners, and policymakers seeking to build sustainable talent pipelines in India's growing start-up ecosystem.

Index Terms: Employer branding, employer attractiveness, talent management, talent acquisition, talent retention, technology start-ups, Eastern India.

I. INTRODUCTION

India's technology start-up ecosystem has grown to become the third largest in the world, yet talent acquisition and retention remain among the most persistent operational challenges for start-ups, particularly those located in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities in Eastern India [1, 2]. Unlike established technology firms, start-ups in this region cannot rely on compensation competitiveness alone to attract and retain talent — they must differentiate themselves as employers in a crowded and increasingly competitive labour market.

Employer branding — the process by which organisations communicate and signal their value as employers to prospective and current employees — has been identified in the global literature as a cost-effective and strategically powerful talent management tool [3, 4]. However, its empirical role in the specific context of Eastern Indian technology start-ups remains underexplored. This study addresses that gap by examining employer attractiveness, the outcome measure of effective employer branding, as a predictor of both talent acquisition and talent retention in this context.

The study makes two contributions. First, it provides quantitative evidence of the magnitude of employer attractiveness as a talent management driver in Eastern Indian start-ups — a context where employer branding has been theorised but rarely tested empirically. Second, it demonstrates that employer branding operates as a unified talent management strategy, delivering returns across both the acquisition and retention dimensions of the talent lifecycle simultaneously.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

A. Employer Branding as a Talent Management Strategy

Employer branding refers to an organisation's efforts to communicate a distinctive and compelling employer identity to both current and prospective employees [5]. It encompasses the articulation of the organisation's culture, values, growth opportunities, work environment, and employee value proposition in ways that differentiate it from competing employers [6]. In start-up contexts specifically, where formal HR systems are still developing and compensation budgets are constrained, employer branding serves as a primary differentiator in talent markets [7].

Ambler and Barrow (1996) first introduced employer branding as a formal concept, defining it as the package of functional, economic, and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing company [8]. Subsequent research has consistently demonstrated that strong employer brands reduce recruitment costs, improve

ISSN (Online) 2456 -1304

International Journal of Science, Engineering and Management (IJSEM)

Volume 13, Issue 09, September 2026

candidate quality, and increase employee engagement and commitment [3, 9].

B. Employer Attractiveness — The Outcome of Employer Branding

Employer attractiveness is the degree to which a prospective or current employee perceives an organisation as a desirable place to work — it is the measurable outcome of employer branding efforts [10]. Berthon, Ewing and Hah (2005) developed the most widely cited and validated framework, defining employer attractiveness across five dimensions: interest value (stimulating and innovative work), social value (team atmosphere and collegial culture), economic value (salary and job security), development value (career growth and recognition), and application value (the opportunity to apply knowledge and teach others) [11].

In the Indian technology start-up context, the interest and development value dimensions are particularly critical — candidates evaluate whether the start-up environment will offer learning, growth, and purposeful work that established firms may not provide, compensating for the salary and stability advantages of larger organisations [7, 12].

C. Employer Attractiveness and Talent Acquisition

Talent acquisition effectiveness depends on an organisation's ability to attract a sufficient pool of qualified and culturally aligned candidates. Employer attractiveness shapes candidates' perceptions before they apply and influences their willingness to accept offers once made [3, 10]. Start-ups with strong and clearly communicated employer brands achieve better recruitment outcomes even when competing against larger, better-resourced firms [12]. Based on this evidence:

H1: Employer attractiveness significantly influences talent acquisition in emerging technology start-ups in Eastern India.

D. Employer Branding, Attractiveness and Talent Retention

Beyond attracting candidates, employer branding sustains retention by continuously reinforcing the value proposition that originally attracted employees [9, 13]. Employees who experience alignment between what was communicated during recruitment and what they encounter in employment report higher organisational commitment and lower turnover intentions [13, 14]. In Eastern Indian start-ups where career mobility is high and competitors actively recruit from each other's talent pools, a strong employer brand that delivers on its promise is the most durable retention mechanism available. Based on this evidence:

H2: Employer attractiveness significantly influences talent retention in emerging technology start-ups in Eastern India.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A quantitative, cross-sectional research design was adopted. The study focused on technology start-ups in Eastern India — Odisha, West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Bihar — with data collected from Bhubaneswar, Kolkata, Ranchi, and Patna. The target population comprised founders, HR managers, and senior executives directly involved in talent decisions. Approximately 150 respondents were selected using convenience sampling, appropriate given the accessibility constraints of the start-up context [15, 16].

Employer attractiveness was measured using the validated five-dimension scale of Berthon et al. (2005) [11], adapted to the start-up context. Talent acquisition and talent retention were measured using validated outcome scales on five-point Likert items. The instrument underwent pilot testing prior to main administration. PLS-SEM was employed using SmartPLS 4 for its suitability with moderate samples and its high predictive accuracy [17]. The two-stage approach — measurement model assessment followed by structural model evaluation — was followed as recommended by Hair et al. (2019).

IV. RESULTS

A. Sample Profile

The majority of start-ups operated in the B2B segment (44.3%), with 39.6% using mixed B2B/B2C models. Most firms employed 11–50 people (53.7%), indicating early to growth-stage organisations — consistent with the study's focus on emerging start-ups. Mid-level retention rates of 70–80% were reported by 45.0% of respondents, with senior-level retention marginally higher.

B. Measurement Model

Cronbach's alpha (0.947) and composite reliability (0.948) confirmed excellent internal consistency for the employer attractiveness construct, well above the 0.70 threshold. The AVE value of 0.634 confirmed convergent validity. Factor loadings ranged from 0.726 to 0.896, all above the 0.70 benchmark. HTMT ratios were below 0.85 across all construct pairs, confirming discriminant validity. VIF values (1.561–4.100) ruled out multicollinearity. The measurement model was fully validated before proceeding to structural analysis.

Table 1: Reliability and Validity

Construct	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Employer Attractiveness	0.947	0.948	0.634
Talent Acquisition	0.895	0.897	0.616

ISSN (Online) 2456 -1304

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Construct	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Talent Retention	0.800	0.801	0.625

C. Structural Model Results

The structural model demonstrated exceptional explanatory power. Employer attractiveness explained 95.5% of the variance in talent acquisition ($R^2 = 0.955$) and 84.0% in talent retention ($R^2 = 0.840$). Model fit was confirmed with SRMR values of 0.065–0.066, below the 0.08 threshold. Both hypotheses were supported (Table 2).

Table 2: Structural Model Results

Hypothesis	Path	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	Employer Attractiveness → Talent Acquisition	7.201	0.000	**Accepted**
H2	Employer Attractiveness → Talent Retention	2.215	0.013	**Accepted**

Employer attractiveness was an overwhelmingly dominant predictor of talent acquisition ($t = 7.201$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1. The t-value of 7.201 is approximately four times the minimum significance threshold of 1.645, confirming not merely statistical significance but practical dominance. Employer attractiveness also significantly predicted talent retention ($t = 2.215$, $p < 0.05$), supporting H2. Both hypotheses were accepted, confirming employer branding as a unified talent management strategy that simultaneously drives acquisition and retention.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that employer branding, as operationalised through employer attractiveness, is the cornerstone talent management strategy for emerging technology start-ups in Eastern India. The exceptional explanatory power of employer attractiveness — accounting for 95.5% of variance in talent acquisition — demonstrates that in this context, how attractive the start-up appears as an employer is effectively the whole story of talent acquisition. No other factor comes close to this level of predictive dominance.

This result is explained by the structural conditions of Eastern Indian start-up ecosystems. Candidates evaluating a start-up versus an established IT firm face a fundamental risk calculus — the start-up cannot match on salary or job security, so the decision hinges entirely on whether the employer proposition is compelling enough to justify the risk. Berthon et al.'s five dimensions capture exactly this evaluation process: is the work interesting? Is the culture good? Will I grow here? Will I be recognised? Can I do meaningful things? When a start-up can answer these questions convincingly through deliberate employer branding, it wins the talent competition.

The significant retention effect ($t = 2.215$, $p < 0.05$) confirms that employer branding is not merely a front-door strategy. Employees who joined because they found the employer attractive continue to be sustained and motivated by that same value proposition, creating loyalty and reducing attrition. This suggests that employer branding investments deliver returns across the full talent lifecycle — not only at the point of hire but throughout employment.

For start-up founders in Eastern India, the practical implication is clear and urgent: invest in employer brand development from the earliest stages, not after reaching scale. The most cost-effective channel is social media — founder visibility, authentic storytelling about organisational culture, and transparent communication of growth opportunities build employer attractiveness at minimal cost. Policymakers supporting the Eastern India start-up ecosystem should consider regional employer branding initiatives and infrastructure investments that address the location disadvantages faced by start-ups outside the major metropolitan hubs.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study establishes employer branding — measured through employer attractiveness — as the dominant talent management strategy for emerging technology start-ups in Eastern India. Both hypotheses were supported: employer attractiveness significantly predicts talent acquisition ($t = 7.201$, $p < 0.001$) and talent retention ($t = 2.215$, $p < 0.05$), together explaining exceptional proportions of variance in both outcomes. These findings provide both theoretical and practical evidence that employer branding is not a supplementary HR activity for start-ups — it is the primary strategic lever through which Eastern Indian technology start-ups can compete for and retain talent in a resource-constrained environment.

Limitations include the cross-sectional design, geographic confinement to Eastern India, and reliance on self-reported data. Future research should examine employer branding longitudinally across start-up growth stages, extend the geographic scope to include Tier-1 ecosystems for comparison, and investigate the specific employer branding practices that most effectively build attractiveness in the

Eastern India context.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the technology start-up founders, HR managers, and senior executives who participated in this study. No funding was received for this research.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no financial or non-financial conflicts of interest.

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