



## Authentic employer branding: How to make it work with storytelling

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Announcing the results of the first-ever study to show that storytelling improves employer brand. PathMotion and Immersion Neuroscience offer the science behind how storytelling works for HR and practical ways for talent attraction teams to start using stories to build an authentic employer brand.

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# INTRODUCTION

Talent professionals know that employer branding is important. 80% of talent leaders believe employer branding is a key driver of making quality hires, companies have been increasingly setting up HR teams dedicated to employer branding, and there are now numerous conferences worldwide dedicated to this topic. Yet only 50% of companies surveyed believe they have a proactive brand strategy. We know employer brand matters, but there's a gap when it comes to execution.

The same is true of authenticity, particularly when it comes to millennials and Gen Z.

The Boston Consulting Group says, "Millennials increasingly require a holistic and authentic experience across all the ways they interact with a company".

However, "*if a company does not have confidence that it can present itself authentically, it should not use them until the advantages outweigh any potential damage*".

Employer branding and talent attraction teams increasingly put a great deal of work into trying to present an authentic employer brand to candidates using a wide range of tactics, but does that effort pay off? Where should teams focus their energy to have the most impact alongside other budget considerations?

This research is intended to reinforce the evidence base behind how to effectively make use of storytelling for employer branding and talent attraction; something which is not yet fully established. This will enable professionals in the field to make more informed decisions and secure internal buy-in more easily.



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of talent  
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said that employer branding was a key driver of making quality hires.  
LinkedIn, 2017



50%  
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believe they have a proactive brand strategy.  
LinkedIn, 2017

IN THIS GUIDE, WE TAKE A DETAILED LOOK AT HOW STORYTELLING WORKS FOR HR TO IMPROVE EMPLOYER BRANDING AND AUTHENTICITY. KEEP READING FOR:



1

Case studies from other industries.



2

The results of an exciting, first-of-its-kind study on storytelling in talent attraction conducted in cooperation with Immersion Neuroscience and Citi which proves that authentic employer branding – through storytelling – can work.



3

Concrete steps organisations can take to bring the right kind of stories to life in their employer brand strategy, including pitfalls to avoid.



4

The evidence talent teams need to get internal support for initiatives around authentic employer branding and the use of storytelling.

# THE PERSUASIVE POWER OF STORYTELLING

Storytelling works. It's a powerful tool to help persuade, drive empathy, and lead people into action – and we've seen it work in a number of different industries.



## Ⓐ Stories get our attention by triggering empathy

When it comes to standing out in a sea of competing information, using a strong narrative to get your message across is your best bet. They grab and hold our attention by putting us in the driver's seat, engaging our empathy, and they're stickier, because we feel like we experienced the story ourselves.

*"Interestingly, the more absorbed in the story the readers were, the more empathetic they behaved in real life. Johnson tested this by "accidentally" dropping a handful of pens when participants did not think they were being assessed. Those who had previously reported being "highly absorbed" in the story were about twice as likely to help pick up the pens."*

*CODY C. DELISTRATY, THE ATLANTIC*

## Ⓐ Stories are better remembered

Stories don't just engage us more, they're also better remembered later than statistics alone. [A Stanford research study](#) found that statistics on their own have a retention rate of 5 – 10%, but when brought together with anecdotes, retention rate rises to 65 – 70%.



## Ⓐ Affinity toward the characters in a story is carried to the brand

With stories, we identify with the characters, and that empathy transfers to the brand at the centre of the story. [The John Lewis Christmas advertisements](#) are a great example of this in action. Scientific author Jonathan Gottschall says, “*If you slide a person into an FMRI machine that watches the brain while the brain watches a story, you'll find something interesting – the brain doesn't look like a spectator, it looks more like a participant in the action*”.

## Ⓐ Narrative arcs trigger emotions, driving decisions

An emotional appeal is at the centre of most holiday and charity related advertising for good reason – [a dramatic arc that triggers an emotional response](#) from the viewer drives action. You're [more likely to donate to a children's charity that tells you a story about the life of the child you could be supporting](#) than if you heard the facts alone.

“We discovered that, in order to motivate a desire to help others, a story must first sustain attention – a scarce resource in the brain – by developing tension during the narrative. If the story is able to create that tension then it is likely that attentive viewers/listeners will come to share the emotions of the characters in it, and after it ends, likely to continue mimicking the feelings and behaviors of those characters.”

[PAUL ZAK FOR HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW](#)

## Ⓐ A story allows you to arrive at the conclusion yourself, which is more persuasive

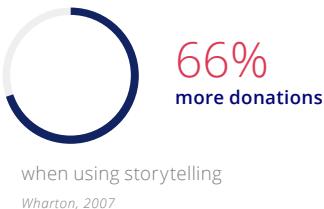
“Stories allow people to persuade themselves, and that's what it's really all about. You might say that we never convince anyone of anything—we simply help others independently decide that we're right. Do everything you can to tell better stories, and you'll find that you are a terribly persuasive person.”

[BRIAN CLARK OF COPYBLOGGER.COM](#)

There's a long-running joke about letting managers believe they came up with an idea themselves if you want to persuade them to support it. And it turns out that joke carries weight – people are more likely to be persuaded when they've arrived at the conclusion on their own, and a story acts as a map to the conclusion you'd like them to reach.

IN PRACTICE

# THE IMPACT OF STORYTELLING IN OTHER SECTORS



The beneficial impact of using stories has already been proven in other sectors – you can see it in advertising for non-profit organisations, fitness centres, consumer brands, and even political campaigns. It's so effective that a quick search for "storytelling for brands agencies" returns thousands of businesses whose main service is developing stories that drive sales, subscriptions, and donations.

## CASE STUDY: SAVE THE CHILDREN'S MALNUTRITION CAMPAIGN

[Wharton Business School performed a study on the impact of stories](#) on donations by creating two different types of brochure for the same "Save the Children" campaign against malnutrition.

Version A stuck to the facts: "Better childhood nutrition could cut stunting by 1/3 and reduce health issues, from diarrhoea and pneumonia to deaf-mutism", whereas Version B told Rokia's story: "Any money that you donate will go to Rokia, a 7-year-old girl who lives in Mali in Africa. Rokia is desperately poor and faces a threat of severe hunger. Her life will be changed for the better as a result of your financial gift [...]" **Those who read the story donated 66% more than those who got just the facts.**

"At Nike we see Brand Communication as developing purposeful storytelling."

NIKE WEBSITE



"[This is] an emotive narrative around a father and his son realising the limitless creative potential offered by LEGO."

BARE FILMS ON THE LEGO "LET'S BUILD" CAMPAIGN



# STORYTELLING FOR EMPLOYER BRANDING: THE SCIENCE BEHIND THE THEORY

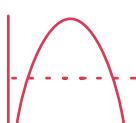
We know that storytelling works for other sectors, but how does it work in HR? How can talent teams leverage the power of a narrative to improve employer brand and drive more, higher quality applications? With the help of Immersion Neuroscience, neuroeconomist and leading figure in storytelling, Paul J. Zak, and multinational banking organisation, Citi, we conducted the first ever research to show that storytelling works in employer branding and to attract talent.

## WHAT WE TESTED: WHICH SITE WILL CANDIDATES FIND THE MOST PERSUASIVE?

The research was conducted with undergraduate candidates in a controlled lab environment at Claremont University. The study was set up to test across three different conditions:

- Group 1: Browsed [Citi's careers site only](#)
- Group 2: Browsed [Citi's careers discussion platform](#) and featured stories from that platform
- Group 3: Participated in a [Live Chat with Citi employees](#) about what it's like to work at the company

Each participant's immersion level was monitored throughout the task, and then five components of immersion were compared across all four groups:



**Average Immersion**  
The average immersion level through the task  
(must be high)



**Peak Immersion**  
Time and depth of high immersion  
(must see at least one peak)



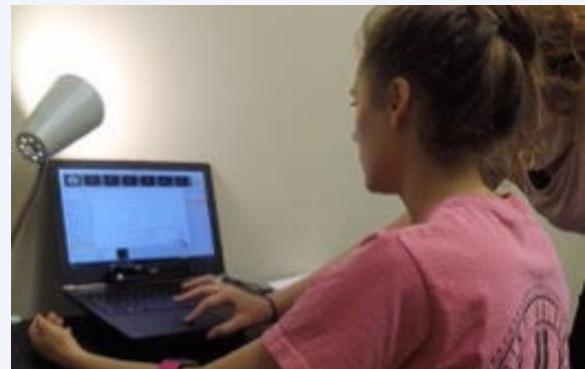
**Frustration**  
Time and depth of anxiety and stress  
(must be low)



**In-Vangelists**  
People who are extraordinarily immersed in the experience  
(should have at least one)



**Trend**  
How immersion dissipates or builds over time  
(must be constant or upward)



## WHAT IS IMMERSION?

[Immersion is a leading indicator of positive outcomes](#) (desired action taken) from an experience. It's measured second-by-second using an intuitive 0 – 10 scale called the "Immersion Quotient".

Attention increases activity in the brain's prefrontal cortex, which causes an increase in heart rate. Emotional Resonance is associated with the brain's synthesis of the neurochemical oxytocin, which increases activity of the vagus nerve. A high Immersion Quotient predicts that the person is likely to take the desired action (in our case, more likely to signal intent to apply for a role with Citi).<sup>1</sup>

Immersion levels indicate that **ATTENTION + EMOTIONAL RESONANCE** predict persuasion and likelihood of taking the desired action.

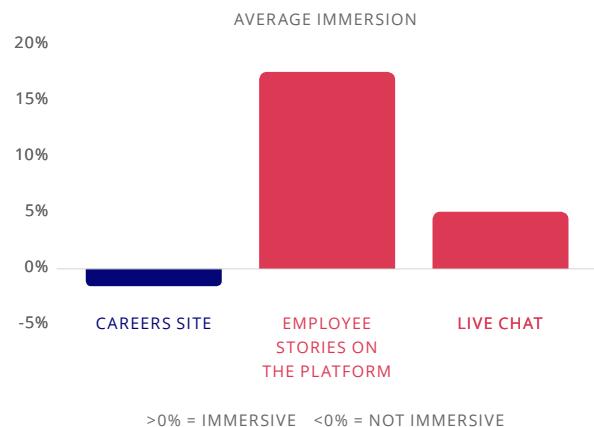
These components are key driving factors of immersion, which in turn, drives persuasion and action. However, when frustration occurs, it interrupts immersion and must therefore be addressed – when it comes to a careers site, it can be the difference between receiving an application from your target candidates and those same candidates clicking away to another page.<sup>2</sup>

# THE BOTTOM LINE: HOW STORYTELLING STACKS UP

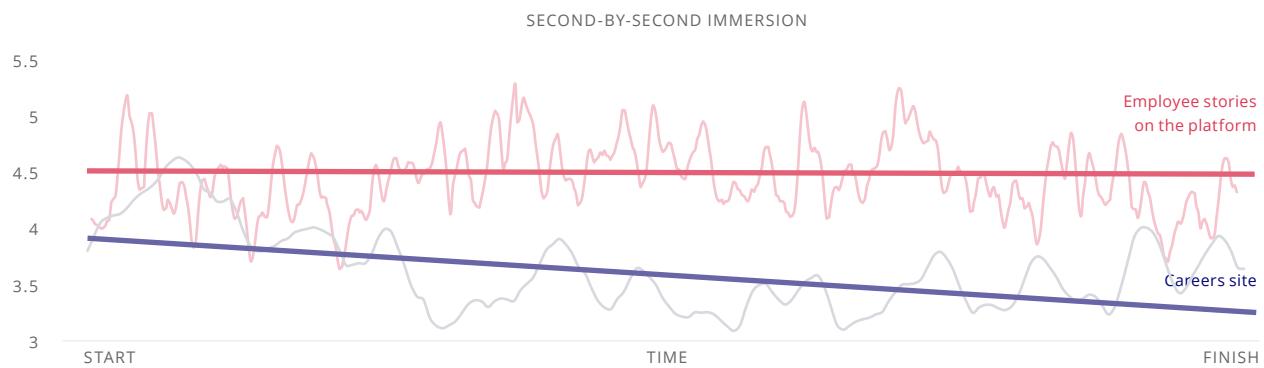
## Result #1: Employee stories are immersive. The career site is not.

Candidates who read employee stories on the discussion platform and those who participated in live exchanges with Citi employees had significant levels of immersion. In contrast, those browsing the Citi career sites were not immersed.

Bottom line: The careers site on its own wasn't immersive, but employee stories in both the discussion platform and Live Chat format were. And they were up to 20% more immersive than the career sites alone.



## Result #2: Employee stories drive higher and more constant immersion



As shown in the graph, we found that the Citi Discussion Platform achieved higher and more constant immersion, with a flat trend line – meaning that, on average, immersion remained stable over time. This indicates that interest in the content of the platform remains constant.

Whereas, the Citi corporate careers site achieved a lower average immersion with a downward trend – meaning that, on average, immersion decreased over time. After an initial peak of immersion,

the careers site saw a drop in average immersion levels, indicating waning interest in the content of the site.

The Bottom Line: Stories are more immersive – both over time and on average, which means a higher chance of conversion.



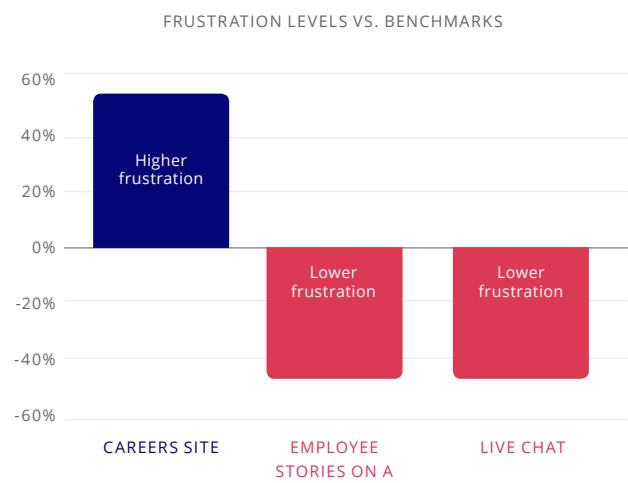
### ✓ Result #3: Employee stories cause less frustration than the career site

Despite Citi's website showing a relatively high peak immersion score, it also scored high on frustration compared to market benchmarks. In contrast, the discussion platform stories and Live Chat sessions both scored significantly below market benchmarks and half the level of frustration as the careers site.

The frustration levels reported in this research aligns with [our research earlier this year and market studies on candidate experience](#). According to the 300 candidates we surveyed, getting sufficient information about the company and the role is the most important driver of a good candidate experience.

When candidates don't get what they're looking for from a careers site, they're experiencing a content gap, and are likely to have a poor candidate experience as a result.

**The Bottom Line:** Employee stories on both platforms are significantly less frustrating for candidates than the corporate careers site, which performed worse than the market benchmark.



### ✓ Result #4: Real time engagement with employees is most immersive

Overall, Live Chat performed better than reading stories on the discussion platform and the career site – it achieved low frustration, a high relative Immersion Quotient, an upward average immersion trend (it became more immersive over time), and it netted the highest number of in-vangelists.

**The Bottom Line:** Real-time engagement with employees is the most immersive way to tell stories.

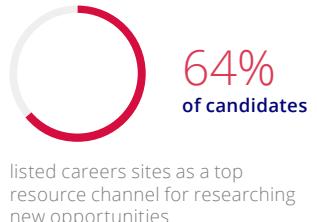


# WHY SHOULD I USE STORYTELLING IN MY TALENT ATTRACTION STRATEGY?

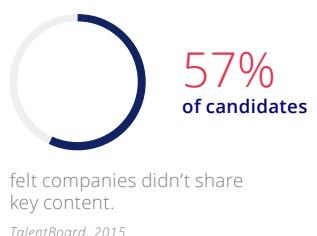
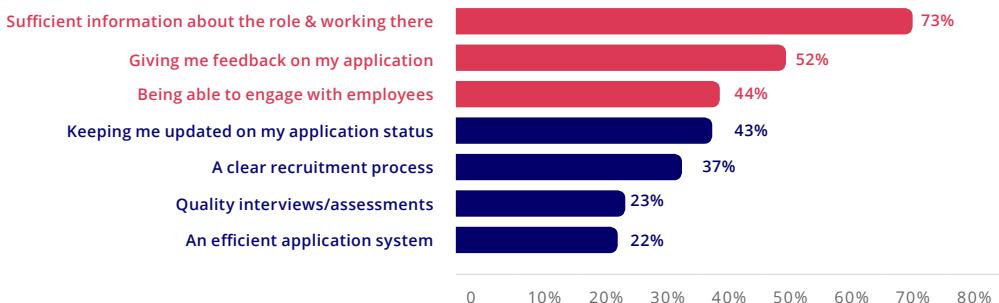
## >Your corporate communication is not enough

64% of job seekers surveyed by the Talent Board listed career sites as a top resource channel for researching new opportunities. However, 57% of candidates<sup>3</sup> reported that companies didn't share content like key day-in-the-life information on their careers site – a clear content gap. This chimes with our [research on candidate experience](#), which shows that candidates want a valuable experience more than an efficient one.

Not only did candidates highlight content as an area for improvement, we also now know that there is a persuasion gap.



### WHICH 3 FACTORS ARE MOST IMPORTANT TO ENSURE A GOOD EXPERIENCE WHEN YOU APPLY TO A COMPANY?



## THE CONTENT AND PERSUASION GAPS IN ACTION

Rebecca is a recent graduate from Cambridge University, and she has a First in Computer Science. She's looking at graduate programmes around the UK, [and has heard mixed things](#) about what it's like to [work in financial services](#). She's worried that she might have trouble being taken seriously in the company as a woman in technology, and she's also concerned about the potential for long hours, but the promise of an intellectually challenging job and high salary are a draw.

You're an international bank with a big hiring push in your IT department – you need programmers yesterday, and your graduate programme is keen to hire from the top universities.

How do you make sure that you stand out in a market crowded with other, similar institutions all promising very similar benefits packages and similar working environments?

The job descriptions and careers site typically try to focus on key messages, but they don't delve into the issues that Rebecca needs answers on. For example, there's very little information about the women's networks at the bank and the difference in working hours across different teams – you've never seen the tech team pulling the same hours as the investment bankers.

This is the content gap – the information that will help persuade Rebecca to apply for a role with, and eventually accept an offer for, the programme is missing from the corporate site. Additionally, because the only contact information on the site is a general [careers@corporateemail.com](mailto:careers@corporateemail.com) account, Rebecca cannot engage with someone she trusts to get answers to her questions, creating a persuasion gap. She's less likely to apply because she can't find the information she needs and there's no opportunity to be persuaded by a credible source.



## IMPROVE CANDIDATE EXPERIENCE

Use story-driven approaches like the discussion platform or Live Chat, where employer brand is established through employee stories and addresses candidates' real questions.

## IMPROVE THE PERCEPTION OF YOUR COMPANY

Candidates each have their own specific concerns about what it would be like to work for a company, but it's impossible to anticipate every possible question. Stories improve the perception of your company by dismantling preconceptions, providing more detailed information about working culture, and making the experience more personal.

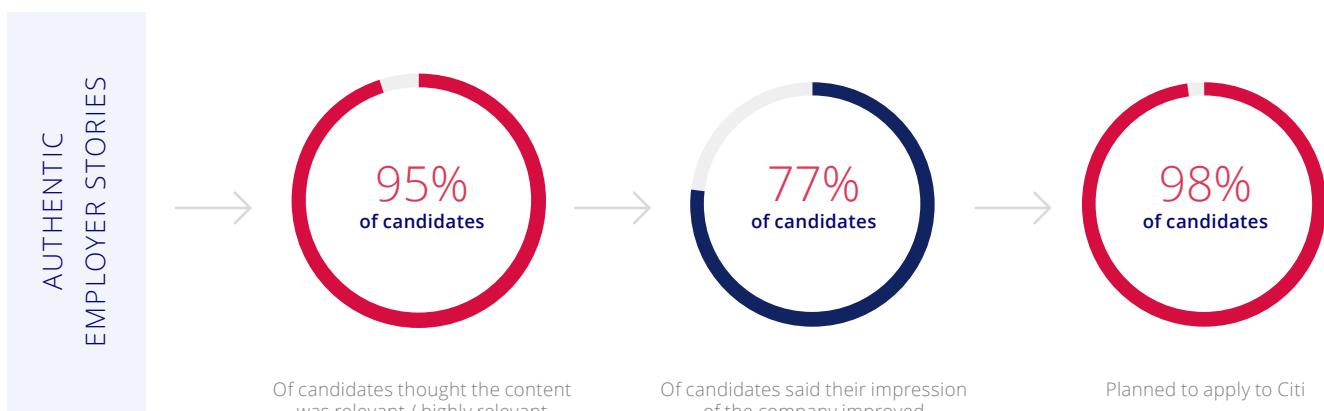
## CLOSE THE CREDIBILITY GAP WITH AUTHENTICITY TO PERSUADE CANDIDATES TO TAKE ACTION

The employer brand that you build through story-driven approaches is authentic. Employees are seen as the most credible source of information about what it's like to work for your company (according to research from Edelman), and through their stories and their experiences of working for you, a clear and credible employer brand will emerge to persuade candidates to apply.

## ✓ Employer branding through storytelling will drive conversion

Using stories creates an authentic employer brand, and increases the likelihood of application by closing the content gap (and improving candidate experience), improving the perception of your company, and driving candidates to take action.

We saw this in the research conducted with Immersion Neuroscience and Citi, as well as in our own survey of candidates who participated in Live Chat events with Citi in Q3 and Q4 2017. This survey found that:



# HOW SHOULD I USE STORYTELLING IN MY TALENT ATTRACTION STRATEGY?

We've shown that storytelling works for HR, but how do you get started? As shown below, effective storytelling is not necessarily what employer branding teams believe it is. Here, we show some best practices to guide teams in implementing storytelling.

## ✓ Produce great stories

Many brands create a series of "talking head" testimonials – videos of employees talking about how great it is to work for X company, often shot from the shoulders up and covering the same handful of talking points. Whilst certainly helpful, what evidence do we have that they work to persuade candidates to apply?

"Here's what I mean by "good": psychological studies show that we don't get infected by a story unless we are emotionally transported—unless we lose ourselves in the story."

*JONATHAN GOTSCHELL FOR FAST COMPANY*

## WHAT MAKES A STORY PERSUASIVE?

According to our own analysis of over 100,000 stories across the PathMotion platform and [research conducted by the Wharton Business School](#), a persuasive story should have five characteristics. Here, we use real stories from Citi's platform to highlight those five characteristics:

### WHAT WERE YOUR EXPECTATIONS VERSUS REALITY WORKING AT CITI?

When joining Citi, one of the main expectations I had was mobility. From what I heard, Citi was the perfect place for that thanks to its global network.

I was not mistaken as I indeed had the opportunity to do a rotation: I started in the M&A team in Paris and then did two rotations in London two years later, one in Equity Capital Markets and one in Leveraged Finance. Some people from my class also did rotations in NYC, South Africa...

A narrative  
There should be a clear arc to the story

### HOW HAVE YOUR COLLEAGUES REACTED KNOWING YOU'RE PART OF LGBT?

To be honest it is total non issue – in my first 2 years with the company because of my own insecurities I was closeted, but then I just decided that this was not working for me, so I started becoming more open to my colleagues in normal coffee chats about weekend activities etc. and when I opened up I never ever felt uncomfortable or not included because of being gay. Citi's culture is very inclusive.

Authenticity  
It should feel real, like it comes from lived experience

## HOW MANY DAILY HOURS DO YOU SPEND IN THE OFFICE?

ANSWER 1

Hi, that depends on the workload of the day. But in general I get in between 7.15 – 7.30 and I am out around 18.30. Hope this helps :)

ANSWER 2

Hi, agree with Eva! Usually, I get in at 9:30 AM and leave by 6:30 PM – so about 9 hours. And the great part about working in teams spread across countries and time zones, is that we all adjust our timelines to suit those of the team at large and complete global projects in time.

ANSWER 3

In IB it all depends on live transactions and sometimes can be quite late. I usually come around 8am and trying to be out at 8pm.

### Detail

The story should contain details and not be vague

## WHAT ARE SOME KEY CHALLENGES IN YOUR ROLE WHEN YOU FIRST JOIN CITI AND HOW DID YOU MANAGE TO OVERCOME THOSE CHALLENGES?

I started in Middle Office before moving to Markets. It was a challenge but I managed to do it. I overcame these by working more and longer than colleagues and ensuring that I showed enthusiasm for all asset classes. I did my CFA while working to show that I was hard working.

### Meaningful challenges

Rather than just painting a rosy picture of what it's like to work for a company, there should be a sense of possible challenges that were overcome

## WHAT CAN WE EXPECT IN THE CASE STUDY EXAMPLES IN THE ASSESSMENT CENTERS?

Case studies are structured in such a way to assess your ability to analyse provided information. The study will provide you with situation description and give you alternatives to choose from....

In my experience, no particular M&A knowledge was required, it was focused on general analytical skills. Hope this helped!

### Practical tips

If answering a question, steps or advice for the reader/listener to take that are achievable



## ✓ Close the content gap by covering sufficient topics

Take a hard look at your careers site and try to think like a candidate. Your corporate channels probably say things like;

*"We continually reevaluate our training model to ensure that we are always offering the most relevant and effective training."*

- Banking Careers Site

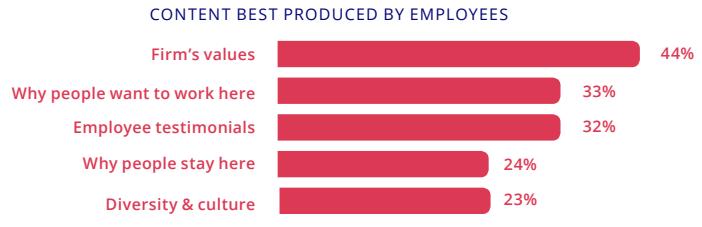
But what does that actually tell a candidate? A candidate will want to know what specific kinds of training will be available to them in the role they're applying for. What the individual

training budget is, and whether it can be used for conferences, books, or just for courses. This is also where testimonials and corporate videos have their limit – they rarely provide effective answers to the specific and individual questions candidates have. Stories are the perfect opportunity to address the content gap because they can cover the wider range of candidate questions and do so persuasively.

## ✓ Involve Employees

According to a survey conducted by Edelman, your employees are the most trusted source of information about your firm. Conveniently, they're also best-placed to respond to most of the top questions that candidates have about what it's like to work for you.<sup>4</sup>

% OF CANDIDATES FINDING THIS MARKETING CONTENT MOST VALUABLE



## ✓ Make the most of real-time, two-way engagement

Whatever channel you use – Facebook Live, Live Chats, Live Streaming on YouTube – ensure that you're getting the most from it by bringing stories and storytelling into your dialogue. Our study showed that storytelling combined with real-time, two-way engagement is the most immersive experience.

*"As Citi is a huge group with a lot of employees, having a conversation with someone makes it more human"*

LIVE CHAT PARTICIPANT

## Include stories across all of your careers channels

Stories are effective across every recruitment channel – your corporate careers site, a discussion platform or forum, social media channels, and live engagement events. However, the two channels candidates will turn to first when searching for information about your company are:

1. Your corporate careers site
2. Social media – including websites like Glassdoor and Yelp.

64% of job seekers surveyed by the Talent Board listed career sites as a top resource channel for researching new opportunities. And 67% of candidates use social media to gain insights into company culture. Candidates come to your official channels first for information about what the culture, values, and life at the company is like – but when they can't find what they need, they go elsewhere.

Research from CEB global shows that candidates find 80% of the information they use in assessing a potential employer from sources other than the company itself. The content gap drives candidates to seek information from third parties, which you have no control over. By providing engaging, persuasive stories across your own careers site and social media channels, you can regain control of your employer brand.

Assuming that stories and people-related content shouldn't be too prominent on a careers site because the latter should remain "corporate" is a common misconception.

For example, when we conducted an audit of a multinational consultancy's careers site, we found that candidates spend 13% more time on "people" related content than on any other part of the careers site.



felt companies didn't share key content

TalentBoard, 2015



candidates use when assessing a company comes from third parties

CEB Global, 2015



spent on "people" related content pages

PathMotion, 2017

## HITTING THE RIGHT BALANCE

Telling great, persuasive stories is only one part of developing an authentic employer brand, and implementing them doesn't have to be a huge project. There are different ways to deploy storytelling, and at various paces. Following the launch of this ebook, PathMotion will engage with HR leaders worldwide in

their Leadership Series of events in London, Paris, New York City, and Los Angeles to get their best practices in authentic employer branding. The debrief from these sessions will be shared after the June events take place.

#### About PathMotion

PathMotion is a discussion platform where employees engage and share stories with candidates.

It generates trusted authentic content, which is used to enhance your employer brand and attract top talent, while reducing the workload for your talent attraction teams.

Organisations worldwide, and across 10+ sectors, use the platform, including universities, whose students engage with applicants in order to attract them.

#### About the Survey

68 undergraduate students from the Claremont Colleges participated in the research that was conducted by Immersion Neuroscience. All participants majored in business or economics, were in the last two years of study, and expressed an interest in a banking career. Participants were compensated \$20 for their time.

The research participants engaged with the Citi corporate careers site, the Citi PathMotion discussion platform, or participated in a

Citi Careers Live Chat while their neurologic immersion levels were monitored using physiological data captured through use of Immersion Neuroscience's sensors and software platform. Sessions ran for 30–60 minutes.

The research was conducted in March and April 2018.



80% OF CANDIDATES  
WOULD RECOMMEND USING  
PATHMOTION

Want to know how PathMotion can help improve your candidate experience and talent conversion?