

Brand You World

There is the firm you work for, and then there is you

By Christopher Bray



Branded applications operating on a branded platform: the new metaphor for a law firm

Here's an interesting thing. Whenever a new technology comes along, we adopt it as a metaphor for the world around us. The invention of the clock, for example, brought with it the idea of systems 'running like clockwork' and astronomers went on to develop an entire 'clockwork theory' of the universe.

Then came the industrial age, bringing its mechanical metaphors. Le Corbusier imagined houses as 'machines for living' and management theory became dominated by concepts of efficiency. It became common for employees to be thought of (or at least think of themselves) as 'cogs in the wheel.'

Now, the Internet is our new technology, changing not only the way we work, but also the way we *think* about work. We've moved from the enterprise as a machine to the enterprise as an ecosystem: a web within a web. Perhaps no surprises then, that what was once called 'meeting people' is now called 'networking'.

When we understand this double impact of the Internet we can see why it is upending many long established norms. We can understand why John Hagel III and John Seely Brown (www.edgeperspectives.com) say, "sources of economic value are moving from 'stocks' of knowledge, to 'flows' of new knowledge." 'Stocks' of knowledge is an old-world, bricks-and-mortar

description of a law firm: experts in a tower, whereas ‘flows’ of knowledge is a new-world, ecological, concept of co-creation.

So it is that the relationship is changing between the firm and the people who work there. In the old world, where the firm was a repository of knowledge, the brand on the box was what mattered. But today the enterprise is more organic, more porous, and the brands of the individuals who comprise it have assumed much greater significance.

In fact, it is helpful to think of the firm not as a corporate entity—a box—at all, but rather as a platform, or operating system, on which its community of professionals collaborates, creating new knowledge for, and with, their clients.

What we realise, therefore, is that today the corporate brand delivers only half of the value to the client: the personal brands deliver the other half. And we can see the increasing importance of the personal brand...

Corporate brand	Personal brand
Scale	Expertise
Breadth	Empathy
Depth	Responsiveness
Confidence	Accountability
Solidity	Trust

It’s not that the idea of the personal brand is new: the reputations of the firm’s key individuals have always been emphasised. Rather, what’s new is the idea that the individuals no longer work within, or for, the firm (‘cogs in the wheel’) but rather, they operate *on* the firm. (“Have you met our latest app from litigation?”) The firm is no longer a branded box, but a branded platform, creating the right operating environment for its people to do their best work.

Conversely, of course, this new paradigm increases the responsibility on the individuals to consciously nurture their personal brands. Not because the stronger their personal brands, the stronger their employment prospects (although that is unquestionably true) but because potential clients will give at least as much weight to the personal brands as they do to the corporate brand when considering who they want to work with.

It means that individuals have to do a better job of 'marketing' themselves than they might in the past. It is no longer a task that can be 'outsourced' to the corporate marketing team. As one social media expert complained, "Clients have to understand that companies don't Tweet; people do." But, more to the point, trusted relationships are always going to be built between individuals as much as between enterprises.

Equally, the firm has to be willing to give the space to the individuals to develop their personal brands. In particular, perhaps, to move beyond the corporate uniformity of the machine age and embrace and celebrate the biodiversity of the ecological age. How about, for example, every individual having their own personal website, running on the corporate platform, rather than the cookie cutter personal profiles of today? What about individuals publishing their own thought pieces, quite explicitly labeled 'not necessarily the opinion of the firm?'

You may well respond by saying that the best people have always understood the need to build their personal reputations or brands and of course that is true. Nevertheless, it remains worth noticing that the Internet is changing not only the nature of work, but also the nature of enterprises. And considering discarding the metaphor of the firm as a closed box where the brand on the label is what matters most, and adopting instead the paradigm of the firm as a platform, with the primary function of creating an abundant ecosystem where individually branded knowledge workers can gravitate, collaborate and flourish.

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