

UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE  
CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

**Expert Meeting on Human Resources Management and Training**

02 October 2024

14-16 October 2024, Geneva, Switzerland

---

## **External employer branding through internal events**

Wendy Schelfaut, Statistics Belgium

*Wendy.schelfaut@economie.fgov.be*

### ***Paper***

Throughout my career in external communications, I have consistently recognized the significant influence of internal communication. The way an organization communicates internally not only shapes how employees perceive the company but also how they speak about it—both within and beyond its walls. This internal narrative can extend to potential new hires, making it a key factor in shaping the organization's reputation. As such, establishing strong internal communication is essential for effective Employer Branding.

There are countless strategies to enhance Employer Branding through internal communication, just as there are many paths to achieve any goal. In this paper, I will explore the initiatives undertaken by Statbel (Statistics Belgium) in response to the challenges introduced by COVID-19 and the strategic approaches the organization has adopted. These examples highlight the vital role internal communication plays in fostering a positive and cohesive workplace culture, especially in times of change.

### **Abstract**

Employer branding is critical in attracting, retaining, and engaging talent within an organization. However, the internal component of employer branding—how the company's current employees perceive the brand—has often been neglected in favour of external branding efforts. This paper explores the importance of a strong employer brand and how it can be cultivated through effective internal activities, both formal and informal. Internal communication enhances employer branding by fostering employee engagement, increasing organizational commitment, and creating a cohesive corporate culture. The activities that Statistics Belgium has developed in these last years, have built a sound employee engagement.

## **Introduction**

The more complex Belgian state structure has made branding in general, and employer branding in particular, a challenging path for Statistics Belgium. It was not until 2018 that we adopted a clear, distinct name with "Statbel" (Statistics Belgium in English). Structurally, we are a part of the Federal Public Service (FPS) Economy. Even in terms of recruitment, we are dependent on the FPS and collaborate with a federal recruitment agency, Selor. Establishing our own unique identity in external employer branding has not been straightforward.

However, when it comes to internal communication, there are far more opportunities. This is a path that I began exploring alongside a small team when I first joined Statistics Belgium in 2016. In 2020, the world was confronted with a major health crisis—COVID-19—which led to mandatory remote working. While this was a convenience for some, it resulted in greater isolation for others. As employees gradually returned to the office, we noticed both a reluctance to come back to the workplace and a growing need for more personal contact.

We translated this combination of factors into a series of initial, cautious actions, which have since grown into a substantial part of our organizational culture.

Employer branding refers to the strategies that a company uses to position itself as an attractive place to work. It serves two core functions: externally, to attract potential talent, and internally, to retain and engage current employees. While much attention is given to external branding (advertising, public relations, and marketing to potential candidates), the internal dimension—how the employer brand is perceived by current employees—is equally important, if not more so, for long-term business success.

A strong internal employer brand is largely driven by the quality of internal communication within an organization. Internal communication can be formal, such as newsletters, official announcements, training programs, or performance reviews, or informal, such as spontaneous conversations, casual meetings, or social gatherings. Both forms of communication serve crucial roles in shaping how employees perceive the employer brand and their place within the organization.

In this paper, we will explore how a strong employer brand can be cultivated through deliberate efforts in internal communication, balancing both formal and informal channels but with a focus on gatherings and activities.

## Step 1: creating a team

The first and most essential step is to ask: who is responsible for internal communication? In my view, this is not solely the responsibility of the HR department, which traditionally communicates about matters like employment regulations, new colleagues, and other practical aspects related to the internal workings of the organization.

The external communications team must also take on a portion of internal communication. This ensures that employees are informed about what the organization is communicating externally. In the case of Statistics Belgium, this includes key figures, major press coverage, organized events, or important visitors and meetings that colleagues have attended.

This approach makes internal communication a shared responsibility. At Statistics Belgium, we formed a coordinating team in 2021 consisting of four members: the head of HR, the head of communication and dissemination (myself), an HR staff member, and a communications officer. The Director-General is kept informed throughout the process and is involved in decisions about messages sent to all employees. Since 2021, we have seen changes in leadership, with a retiring Director-General, two interim Directors-General, and a new Director-General appointed in April 2024. The current collaboration model for internal communication is part of ongoing discussions with the new Director-General to clarify task allocation and refine the communication objectives.

Beyond the central coordinating team, we quickly realized that internal communication could only thrive through a stronger internal network. As a result, we created a group of internal communication ambassadors. The goal at the start of this initiative was for ambassadors to gather ideas and information from their respective departments to ensure a diverse range of internal communication activities. We asked each department to nominate a representative for the ambassador group, which allowed us to start with around 15 internal communication ambassadors.

However, over time, we noticed that not every ambassador was equally invested in internal communication. Some were engaged from the beginning, while others attended meetings only because they were required to by their supervisors. We have since restructured the group to include only those who have shown an active commitment. Everyone was given the opportunity to take on a concrete role in a specific activity. Those who preferred not to were respectfully excused from the group. This transition also provided an opportunity to invite new members—sometimes from the same departments—to join the internal communication ambassador group.

## Step 2: creating content

Internal communication is the bedrock of employer branding. It refers to the way an organization interacts with its employees to share information, make announcements, and maintain dialogue on various topics, from company goals to day-to-day operational updates. The central role of internal communication is not just information dissemination, but also relationship building and trust development.

It is these last two elements that this paper focuses on. Internal communication, of course, operates on multiple levels, such as top-down or bottom-up communication. Both forms have long been present at Statistics Belgium. However, since 2021, we have placed a stronger emphasis on **peer-to-peer communication initiatives**. These can take the form of both formal interactions as well as more informal moments.

While formal communication is essential, informal communication is equally important in shaping the internal employer brand. Informal communication refers to spontaneous and casual interactions that occur among employees. These interactions contribute to the social fabric of the organization and have a profound impact on how employees perceive the company. Employees who are satisfied with their jobs are likely to share their positive experiences with colleagues, contributing to a more supportive and engaging workplace environment. This can have a ripple effect, enhancing the overall internal employer brand.

### *Concrete Actions*

**2021** | After an extended period of remote work, employees began gradually returning to the office in 2021. This return coincided with the launch of our internal communication ambassadors group. We initiated small, introductory actions such as "welcome back" cards placed near the elevators, postcards sent to employees' homes encouraging them to share photos with the internal communication ambassadors, and a Christmas photo booth. To foster informal reconnections among colleagues, we also organized virtual coffee breaks and lunchtime gatherings.

**2022** | In 2022, the range of activities expanded, and the internal communication ambassadors took on a more active role in organizing them. A series of enjoyable summer activities were introduced. Due to the widespread adoption of teleworking, the summer months had become a quieter time in the office, making it less common to bump into colleagues at the coffee machine. To address this, we organized meetups during the summer, including a walk through Brussels, a museum visit, and a stroll to a nearby artisanal ice cream parlor. Additionally, one ambassador proposed a KUBB tournament on the square in front of our building, where small teams competed against each other throughout the summer. Activities continued into the fall and winter, featuring a Halloween contest and a visit to the Christmas market. We also introduced more formal peer-to-peer

exchanges with the launch of \*Statbel Connect\*. During these lunchtime sessions at the Brussels office, colleagues gave presentations about their work and recent accomplishments, offering others the opportunity to gain insight into what different teams were working on.

**2023** | Interest among employees continued to grow, along with their enthusiasm to participate in activities. The ambassadors also took on more responsibilities, helping to expand the range of events: more summer activities (including a visit to the Brussels Parliament, picnics, and walks), increased participation in the KUBB tournament, a board game tournament in the winter months, and a bake sale fundraiser, which included a small "Christmas drink" with hot chocolate at the bake sale event. \*Statbel Connect\* became more structured, with regular lunchtime sessions drawing interested audiences.

**2024** | These activities have now become a permanent fixture of our internal communication efforts. Upon the arrival of our new Director-General, we organized a breakfast event for employees, allowing everyone to meet her in the same informal setting as with our other activities. The KUBB tournament has become a summer tradition, not only attracting many players but also enthusiastic supporters. The scoreboard is eagerly followed within the organization. Other summer events, such as a visit to the Parliamentarium, after-work drinks, and picnics, have drawn increasing numbers of participants. The \*Statbel Connect\* sessions have also become well-attended and continue to engage an interested audience.

As you can see, none of these activities are particularly grand or expensive. We were given a very limited budget, which was enough to purchase necessary materials (two KUBB sets, a gift card for the winners, hot chocolate for the winter events, etc.). However, this proves that limited resources do not need to be a barrier to effective internal communication and employer branding.

## **Step 3: Integrating Activities into a Comprehensive Internal Communication Strategy**

We have now reached the third step. At this stage, we are seeing high levels of engagement from our internal communication ambassadors and a strong curiosity from employees about upcoming activities. A structured set of initiatives is in place that brings people closer together, allowing them to connect frequently, whether through more formal channels like Statbel Connect or through informal events like the summer and winter activities.

We are already noticing the positive impact this has on how employees perceive our organization: there is a sense of movement, a feeling that people are approachable, and our Director-General is frequently present at these activities, engaging with many employees. This has had a positive effect on the organizational atmosphere. However, there is still work to be done. Many employees have yet to be reached by these efforts, and we need to embed these successful, bottom-up initiatives into a broader framework for internal communication.

Our next step is to unify our internal communication strategy. Both formal and informal channels must be aligned in terms of look and feel, tone of voice, and timing, so they reinforce one another. This will ensure that no communication initiative stands in isolation but is part of a larger narrative.

## **Conclusion**

A strong internal collaboration between different departments involved in communication, supported by a group of enthusiastic internal communication ambassadors, can achieve great results. It is important to take action and continuously foster connections between employees. At Statistics Belgium, teleworking and a less-than-ideal office environment created a sense of distance. Through a mix of formal and informal activities, we ensure that colleagues get to know each other better, and that new employees can integrate more quickly. The support of the Director-General allows us to continue building on these initiatives and place them within a larger internal communication strategy. This will also create room for new ideas and initiatives to further grow and develop.