

EMPLOYER BRANDING IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION. THE ISTAT CASE

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Abstract. The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) and the digital transformation are imposing on the Public Administration (PA) the need to accelerate the modernization process, which also involves improving the technical-scientific skills of its employees. It will therefore be important for the PA to develop an effective culture of Employer Branding (EB). Istat's recruitment and employer branding strategies were studied in this work. In order to understand the appeal of the Istat as a potential employer, a survey was carried out on a voluntary sample of about 600 students, Istat's recruitment and employer branding strategies were identified through a questionnaire drafted online by the General Director.

1. Employer Branding

1.1. Theoretical reference models

The employer branding is a "Marketing strategy aimed at creating a corporate image consistent with the company's identity as an employer (workplace), in tune with the reference target and clearly distinct from that of competitors, through which to attract and retain talented people (E. Amendola 2008). According Bonaiuto et al. (2010) this Strategy is developed in relation to two distinct targets, potential candidates and employees and follows two main guidelines: present the company as an attractive workplace in the eyes of the target audience (attraction); minimize conflict between colleagues and maximize the sense of belonging to the company (retention).

Among the main theoretical reference models for understanding and investigating the components of EB, Lievens (2007) highlights how "attractiveness towards an employer is influenced by instrumental attributes and to a greater extent by symbolic ones: the first are the aspects that describe the job or the employer in an objective, concrete and tangible way (remuneration, location, organizational structure); the second are the subjective, abstract and intangible aspects that derive from the evaluations and inferences of the subjects". Berthon et al. (2005) also analysed the components of the attractiveness of employers by developing an EB measurement scale, Employer Attractiveness Scale, defined by the Authors as "the benefits of an organization perceived by potential candidates as the best place to work" and

includes five dimensions: interest value, economic value, social value, development value and application value”.

The interest value measures the attractiveness of an organization linked to the work content, the innovativeness of the working methods and the stimulating nature of the working context; social value measures the attractiveness of the employer based on the possibility of creating positive working relationships with one's superiors, with one's team and of having a working context that favours interpersonal relationships; economic value evaluates how the attractiveness of the company depends on factors such as remuneration, safety at work and any promotions; development value considers the dimensions of personal development and career advancement; finally, the application value represents the attractiveness of an organization based on its ability to offer the opportunity to apply its knowledge and transmit it to others.

1.2. Employer branding in Public Administration

Private organizations have long understood the importance of EB to survive in a globalized and competitive market, while the public is only recently showing interest in this strategy.

“Theories of motivation for public work make an important contribution to the construction of EB policies in the recruitment phase. The first studies identify some factors that would make people available to work in the public sector, such as: working for the common good and the progress of society, the absence of profit logic, the protection of national interests, the value of public service, social justice, the attraction for public policies” (Ingrassia R. 2017). Over time, the concept of Public Service Motivation (PSM) has developed in the literature. “Public service motivation is a form of motivation that refers to an individual's desire to contribute to society. More specifically, Perry and Hondeghem (2008) define PSM as “an individual's orientation to provide services to people for the purpose of benefiting others and society.” According to the OECD, the “positioning of the public administration as an employer of first choice, through the promotion of a brand that recalls the values, motivation and pride of contributing to the public good among candidates” (2019) is one of the levers on which it is necessary to invest in order to develop an effective and reliable public sector.

2. The Istat Case

2.1. Introduction

Being a public research authority and, at the same time, the main producer of official statistics, a public good to support citizens and public decision-makers and

an essential tool for the development of democracy, allows Istat to focus on attractiveness factors that surpass the rigidities of the purely economic.

Furthermore, the results of the competitions announced by Istat, go in a completely different direction of the recent competitions managed by FormezPA: total coverage of positions with a high percentage of those hired with a Stem degree or in the economic field (Camisasca M., Screpante I., 2023). Therefore, the analysis can represent an interesting case study.

2.2. The appeal of working at Istat for young university students

In order to understand what Istat's appeal is as a potential employer and therefore what organizational factors it must monitor to attract and retain young people, a survey was conducted on a voluntary sample of students from public and private universities. The student survey was conducted in the months of April and May 2023 by completing online questionnaire implemented on the Google Forms platform.

The questionnaire was structured into four sections:

1. Information on the study path, which contains information relating to the University and the degree course
2. Knowledge of Istat, which detects knowledge of Istat and the area in which it operates, possible participation in the Institute's activities and the use of statistical data.
3. Interest in working at Istat. In the section, reserved for those who had declared to know Istat, the appeal of Istat as a potential employer of the interviewees is highlighted. Both in case of a positive and negative response, were asked to specify the reasons. The items of motivations favorable to working at Istat were structured taking into account the Employer Attractiveness Scale defined by Berthon, Ewing and Lian Hah. In particular, 11 response methods have been identified, aggregated into 5 categories, according to the scheme shown in Table 1.
4. Data on the student, in which the student's age, gender, high school diploma obtained, and region of residence were recorded.

2.3. Characteristics of the respondents

584 students from 18 universities participated in the survey. The distribution of respondents by university attended and region of residence is affected by the student recruitment method that had to be adopted. Two out of three students attend universities in Campania (377 students, 64.6%), with the University of Salerno in the lead (180 students, 30.8%). Considering the southern universities as a whole, the share of students rises to 78.8%; there are 122 students from universities in the Centre-North, mostly attending private universities (the "Luigi Bocconi"

Commercial University, 70 students and the Catholic University Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, 23 students).

Table 1 – *Reasons for interest in working at Istat, by categories of the Employer Attractiveness Scale.*

Item response	Category
1. To work in stimulating atmosphere	Interest value
2. To have the chance smart working	
3. To work for innovative organizations	
4. To work for research-oriented organizations	
5. Seren working environment	Social value
6. Work life - balance	
7. Employment stability	Economic value
8. Appropriate career development	Development value
9. To have the opportunity to develop skills and competencies	
10. Pertinence to the learning path	Application value
11. Interesting work	

Table 2 - *Students by university attended.*

University	Students		University	Students	
	v. a.	%		v. a.	%
University of Salerno	180	30,8	University Cattolica del Sacro Cuore – Milan	23	3,9
University of Campania "Luigi Vanvitelli"	88	15,1	University of Basilicata	16	2,7
University "Luigi Bocconi" – Milan	70	12,0	University of Bologna	10	1,7
University of Bari "Aldo Moro"	60	10,3	University of Milan "Bicocca"	9	1,5
University "Federico II" – Naples	57	9,8	University of Pavia	6	1,0
University of Naples "Parthenope"	52	8,9	Other	13	2,2
			Total	584	100,0

Source: our processing of sample survey data

The sample is made up of 55.1% females and 44.9% males. The average age is 22 years. A third of the students achieved a scientific high school diploma, 11.1% an

economic-administrative high school diploma; followed by classical high school diplomas (8.9%) and linguistic high school diplomas (8.2%).

Of the 584 students who filled out the questionnaire, 472 are attending a three-year degree course, 109 are attending a master's degree course, 2 are enrolled in a doctorate course and only one is attending a single-cycle course. The most represented degree courses are those in economics-business (60.1%) and statistics (14.9%). Other fields of study include Tourism Sciences (6.2%), Political Sciences and International Relations (6.8%), Public Administration Sciences (3.3%).

2.4. Knowledge of Istat

The survey shows an excellent positioning of Istat as the reference body for statistical production in our country. In fact, only 23 students, of which 15 enrolled in the first year of a three-year degree course, declared that they did not know ISTAT. 96% of respondents, however, know the Institute. The level of knowledge grows as a function of study progress. In fact, the share of students enrolled in a three-year degree course who declare that they know the institute rises from 90.1% of first-year students to 97.7% of third-year students.

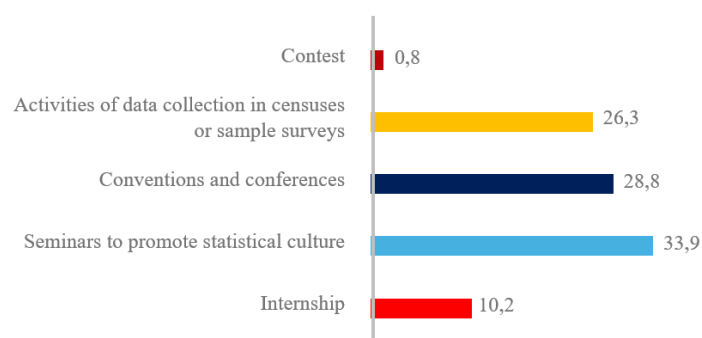
Table 3 - Knowledge of Istat by type of degree course and year of course.

Knowledge of Istat <i>type of degree course</i>	Year of course				Out of course	Total
	I	II	III	IV subsequent ones		
No	15	4	4			23
Bachelor	15	4	4			23
Yes	181	166	176		38	561
Bachelor	136	106	173		34	449
Master	44	59	2		4	109
Single cycle			1			1
PhD	1	1				2
Total	196	170	180		38	584

Source: our processing of sample survey data

Of the 561 students who declared that they knew Istat, 95% were also aware of the area of activity in which it operates and 72.5% used Istat data. Proportionately, master's students used Istat data more: 89.0% compared to 68.4% of bachelor's students. 87 students (15.5%) also participated in initiatives/activities of the Institute: seminars to promote statistical culture (33.9%), conventions and conferences (28.8%) organized by Istat or collaborated in the activities of data collection in censuses or sample surveys (26.3%).

Figure 1 - Students who participated in Istat activity initiatives by type of activity (percentage values).



Source: our processing of sample survey data

2.5. Interest in working at Istat

Of the 561 students who declared they knew Istat, 397 (70.8%) were interested in working there. On the other hand, there are 164 (29.2%) interviewees who do not find a job at Istat interesting, because they are not attracted by the type of activity carried out (50.3%) or not interested in working in the Public Administration (44.7%). As documented by Collins' studies (2006), the interest in working for an organization is influenced by the direct knowledge that potential candidates have of it. In fact, the share of students interested in working at Istat rises to 82.8% among those who have had a direct relationship with the Institute or mediated by other bodies and reaches 100% among those who have participated in training internships

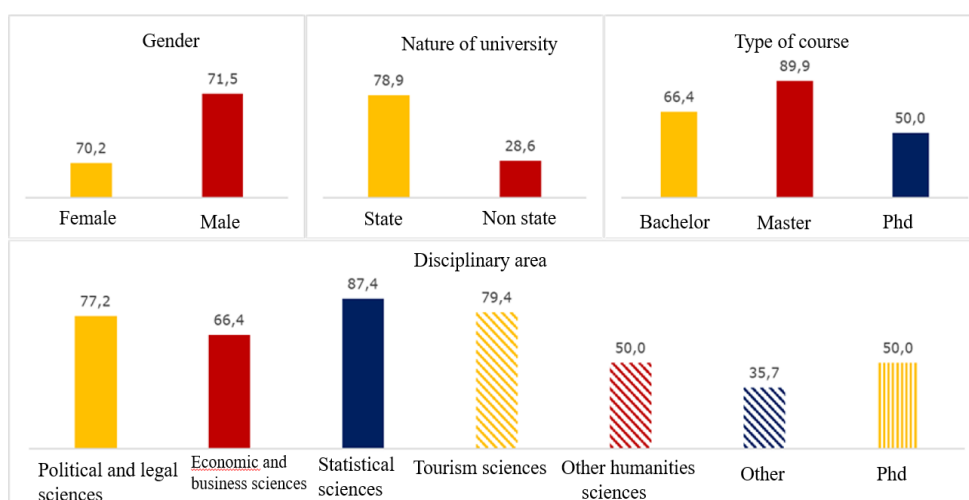
Table 4 - Interest in working at Istat.

	Interest in working at Istat		
	No	yes	Total
Absolute values	164	397	561
Percentage values	29,2	70,8	100,0
Participation in ISTAT initiatives/activities (percentages)			
No	31,4	68,6	100,0
Yes	17,2	82,8	100,0
of which, students who participated:			
- to censuses and sample surveys as municipal surveyor/manager	29,0	73,3	100,0
-to seminars, conventions/conferences	14,7	85,3	100,0
-to seminars, conventions/conferences	12,5	87,5	100,0
-to training internships	-	100,0	100,0

Source: our processing of sample survey data

The interest in working in the Institute, like the knowledge of it, grows according to the progress in the studies. In fact, the share of students who look to Istat as a possible employer rises from 66.4% of bachelor's students to 89.9% of master's students. Significant differences are recorded when analysing the responses by nature of the university. Only 28.6% of students enrolled in non-state universities are interested in working at Istat. This result is quite predictable if one considers the greater orientation of these universities towards the private sector and the consolidated network of relationships with the same for the purposes of professional opportunities for their students. On the contrary, almost 80% of students enrolled in state universities are interested in working at Istat.

Figure 2 - Interest in working at Istat, by gender, nature of the university, type and disciplinary area.

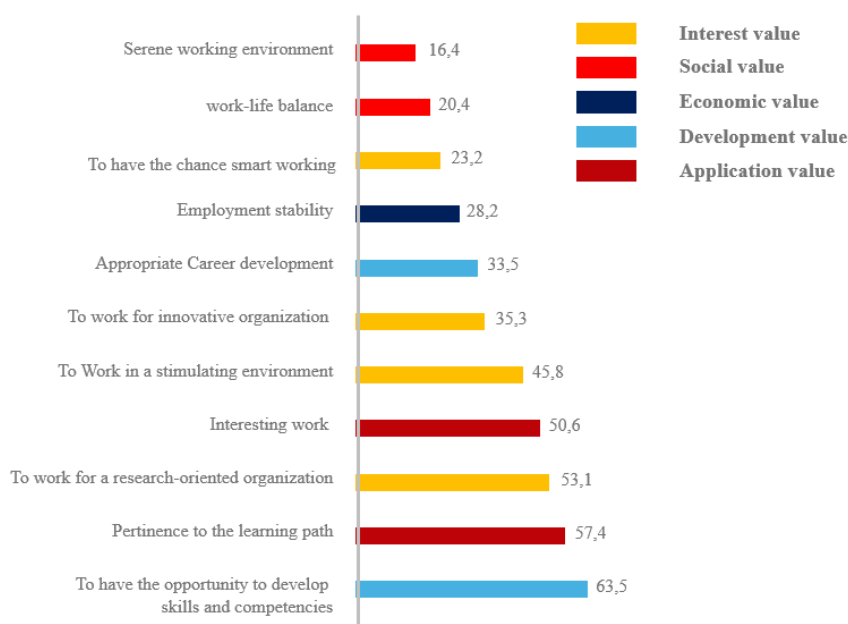


Source: our processing of sample survey data

Finally, looking at the disciplinary areas of the degree courses, the majority of Statistical Sciences students (87.4%) see Istat as a potential employer, followed by Tourism Sciences students (79.4%), Political and legal sciences (77.2%) and Economic and business sciences (66.4%). As already highlighted, the reasons for the interest in working at Istat were revealed with a multiple-choice question. From the answers provided, it emerges that young people are interested in working at Istat because they believe that it offers the possibility of developing skills and competences (65.5%) and that it is an activity consistent with their studies (57.4 %),

carried out in a research-oriented institution (53.1%), with an interesting work content (50.6%). However, factors such as job security (28.2%), the opportunity for smart working (23.2%), the possibility of working in a peaceful working environment (16.4%) or to reconcile work with the needs of private life (20.4%).

Figure 3 - Motivation of interest in working at Istat.



Source: our processing of sample survey data.

The distribution of motivations according to the main classification variables (sex, nature of the university, type and disciplinary area of the course of study) highlights some specificities. The possibility of developing skills and competences, for example, is more important for students of public universities (64.2%) than for those of private universities (53.8%); instead, working in a research institution is more important for those who attend a private university (65.4%, versus 52.3%). Relevance with the study path has a more relevant role for males (62.8%), for those enrolled in a public university (58.5%) and for those following a master's degree course (67.3%) or doctorate (100%). Significant differences also emerge from the analysis of the motivations according to the disciplinary area of the course of study. For those enrolled in a degree course in statistics, consistency with their studies (92.1%) is more important than the possibility of developing skills and competences (63.2%). Even in the case of students in the political-legal area, the possibility of

developing skills and competence (62.3%) ranks second in the ranking of motivations, surpassed by the opportunity to work in a research-oriented organization (67.2 %). As expected, given that they represent 55.7% of students interested in working at Istat, the impact of the motivations of students in the economic-business area closely follows the average values of the sample interviewed.

2.6. Recruiting and employer branding in Istat

Istat's recruiting and employer branding strategies were surveyed through a structured questionnaire, completed online by the General Director. The interview was aimed at understanding how Istat positions itself with respect to the variegated PA panorama and to analyse any overlaps between student expectations and the organisation's strategies.

For the interview was used the same questionnaire as the survey: "Attracting talent and enhancing people: employer branding strategies in the Public Administration¹", in order to be able to compare the position of Istat with that of the 67 public administrations that participated in the survey conducted by FPA Indeed. The questionnaire was aimed at capturing the recruiting strategies, the specific EB activities carried out in the last two years and the organisation's assessment of the levers to be activated to improve recruiting and the organisation's attractiveness. Regarding candidate search channels, Istat, unlike the majority of organizations interviewed in the Attracting talents and enhancing people survey, uses sponsorship channels for tenders and competitions in addition to those provided for by the legislation. In particular, social networks are used, but also solutions of a more sectoral nature such as job supply and demand matching portals and other institutional portals, the latter solutions not very widespread among the 27 organizations that declared they make use of different promotion channels from institutional ones. With reference to employer branding activities, it emerges from the interview with the General Director that Istat, like the majority of respondents to the Attracting talents and enhancing people survey, recognizes the importance of activities aimed at promoting the image of the company organization with employer. From the FPA-Indeed survey, however, the contradiction between the importance recognized by the organizations in EB activity and the actions undertaken is evident. In fact, only 21 organizations declared that they had carried out EB activities in the

¹ Survey, carried out in April 2023 by FPA on behalf of Indeed, on a non-representative sample of 67 human resources managers from as many public administrations, selected from the main central and local administrations and public companies in our country. See: <https://www.forumpa.it/webinar/attrattare-talenti-valorizzate-le-persone-quali-strategie-di-employer-branding-nel-settore-pubblico>

last two years, mostly using traditional methods (e.g. dedicated sections of the organisation's portal).

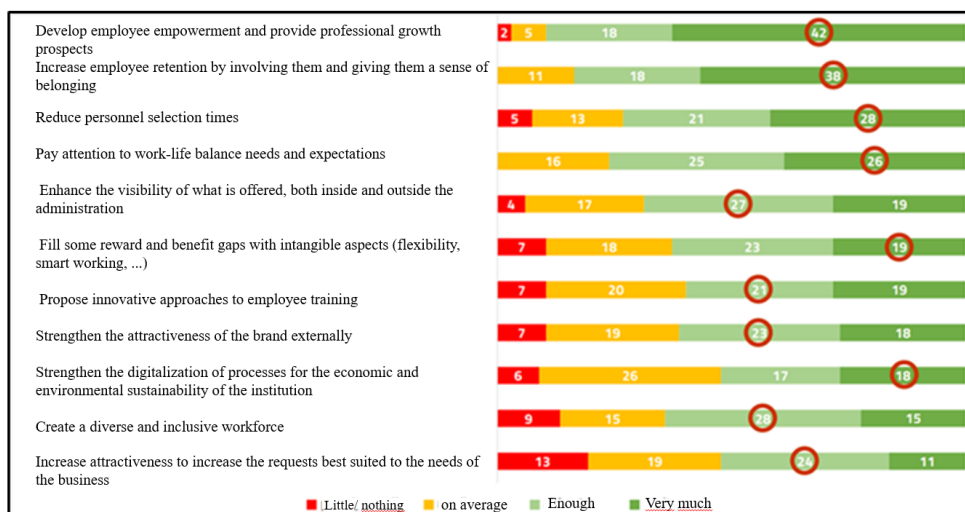
Istat, on the other hand, constantly carries out corporate communication initiatives to "speak its story" and make itself known also through the use of innovative methods.

In particular, the Institute, in addition to scientific conferences aimed at a specialist audience, organizes seminars and dissemination events aimed at promoting statistical culture and presenting its activities and dissemination data warehouse. The curricular training internships which take place at the Istat offices are also very important. Istat has started the Employee Advocacy project, which makes employees voices and face of the Institute. In this way, in line with what is expressed in the relevant literature, employees become "ambassadors" of the Istat brand. Istat is therefore strongly engaged in corporate and EB communication activities both towards direct external audiences and towards indirect external audiences, i.e. towards those who have no interest in working at the Institute but who, in any case, making a positive idea of the organization can promote it as a workplace.

With regard to growth prospects and the levers for improving recruiting and the attractiveness of the organization in general, Istat's position reflects the modal values revealed by the FPA-Indeed survey. The interview with the Director General of Istat confirms the significant role of recruiting and EB policies in the strategic choices of the Institute. In fact, in line with the staff development policies already highlighted previously, all 11 areas of improvement of the working environment examined in the FPA-Indeed survey are considered by Istat to be quite or very important. The culture of the centrality of the person and the recognition of human resources as an "intangible" asset essential for achieving objectives are now consolidated assets of the organisation.

Like most of the entities that participated in the FPA-Indeed survey, Istat believes it is very important to develop empowerment and delegation to employees, provide prospects for professional growth and increase their loyalty. In the General Director's assessment, however, Istat must also focus heavily on the speed of personnel selection times, on work-life balance, on intangible benefits that allow bridging the reward and benefit gaps typical of public work, on digitalization of processes, all areas that the majority of human resources managers interviewed do not consider priorities for improving the working environment

Figure 4 - Importance attributed to the areas of improvement of the working environment by Istat and by the participants in the survey "Attracting talent and enhancing people" by FPA-Indeed (*).



Source: our processing of sample survey data

(*) The symbol identifies the response of the Director General of Istat

Discussion

In a general framework of a not yet fully mature PA about the adoption of EB policies, Istat seems to differentiate itself on choices and paths taken. In light of what has been analysed so far, what emerges is the Institute's desire to promote the corporate image and a clear ability to "know how to tell its story" and to develop, through various initiatives, a good "reputation". From the analysis carried out, several strong points emerge including a clear vision and mission; a working context oriented towards organizational well-being, employee empowerment and professional growth prospects; careful internal communication and external, the promotion of work-life balance. The data of the survey to the students, moreover, shows Istat's optimal positioning as the agency of reference of the statistical production in our Country. It is also interesting to note how the areas of improvement of the working environment in which Istat considers it a priority to engage directly influence some of the factors (possibility of developing skills and competences, working for a research-oriented and innovative organisation, which offers interesting in a stimulating environment) indicated by students as potential elements of attraction of working in the Institute. A possible future application of this work may include implementing a stratified

probabilistic sample to investigate the observed results employing inferential statistics tools.

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