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Increasing Awareness and Reputation of MERCK S.A. Portugal through Employee Advocacy

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ABSTRACT

Merck KGaA is a global Science and Technology company, focusing on the Healthcare Industry, Life Science and Performance Materials. Merck in Portugal is a relatively small subsidiary with a mid-sized office employing approximately 114 employees. Merck S.A. Portugal focuses mainly on the Healthcare Market. As the company went through a major transformation in 2016, it created a need to communicate on a low cost basis and in an efficient way, using digital as its main channel. The current paper shows the implementation of an employee advocacy strategic plan as a solution to digital communication. Employee Advocacy is a new communications concept derived from employee social media usage and employee word of mouth. It has been noted that employee networks are wider than company's own, and employee word of mouth is more trustworthy. Before the tool could be implemented a research on what motivates employees to commit to Brand Citizenship Behavior was performed. Findings revealed that in the case of Merck S.A. Portugal employees individual internal drive and brand knowledge are factors affecting willingness to share on social media. Based on the results a series of internal strategies were applied on- and offline.

Key words: Employee Word of Mouth, Employee Advocacy, Brand Citizenship Behavior, Social Media

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INTRODUCTION

Employee Advocacy is a new concept surging from Brand Citizenship Behavior and measures employee's willingness to commit to external, out of work-description, pro-brand behavior (Rokka, Karlsson, Tienari, 2014). An employee can commit to BCB in various social situations, either online or offline. It has been noted that employee WOM is stronger than company self-endorsement, or content created and shared by the company itself. Therefore, due to its potential impact on brand reputation, research on employee advocacy has gained momentum in the past years (Terpening, Li, Littleton 2016).

The purpose of the current paper is to test whether employee advocacy is in fact a powerful tool in today's corporate communication strategies. The paper looks at the case study of a multinational company operating in Portugal to check the drivers of such behavior in the Portuguese case.

Merck S.A. Portugal went through a major change during the year of 2016. Not only did the company change its visual layout, branding and identity (Pharmaceutical Company to Science and Technology Company), Merck S.A. Portugal also started a fast paced digitalization of its business. Digitalization opened new windows in communication and marketing to various stakeholders of the company, positioning Merck as an early adopter of a digital strategy among other Pharmaceutical companies in Portugal. Yet, before the digitalization took off at Merck in Portugal a Reputation and Positioning survey showed alarming numbers regarding awareness and reputation of Merck among stakeholders, therefore, the company decided to launch an employee advocacy program to reverse lack of awareness of Merck S.A. in Portugal.

An employee advocacy tool allows employees to share company content on social media without fear of endangering compliance. However, before employee advocacy is implemented, organizational readiness to commit to brand citizenship behavior (BCB) must be measured so that a proper plan may be devised. The current paper used the most important drivers in the employee advocacy literature to develop a set of steps implemented in the case of Merck S.A. Portugal. Managerial contributions stem from the fact that managers may use the current findings to establish their own employee advocacy programs based on the findings and the results obtained in the current case.

2. Literature Review

Employee conducted corporate communication is self-explanatory. It literally means people on the payroll of a company taking part in company related content. The ways in which employees can take part in communication are for example; sharing, liking, commenting, uploading employee generated text/photos and contribute to an already written article online (Rokka, Karlsson, Tienari, 2014) or sharing their knowledge within their social network offline with friends and family, for example (Morokane, 2014).

Burmann and Zeplin (2005) originally defined brand citizenship behavior (BCB) as a spur from a previously established concept known as OCB (organizational citizenship behavior). As a criteria for organizational citizenship behavior, an employee must 'live the brand', indicating

that employees exercise voluntary behaviors which are outside of role-expectations in their day-to-day work. However, brand citizenship behavior takes the concept of OCB further, claiming it to bring the brand to life. Therefore, brand citizenship behavior refers to additional employee conducted voluntary pro-brand behavior which takes place externally. The employees who commit to BCB are generally referred to as brand ambassadors or employee advocates. An antecedent or requirement of BCB is brand commitment (Burmam, Zeplin. 2005). Brand commitment is defined as an affective, psychological attachment to the brand which drives employees to feel responsible of communicating it to others, in order to reach the brand goals. Burmann and Zeplin (2005) also define the antecedents of brand commitment as; compliance (consistent behavior with code and conduct), identification (belonging to the group) and internalization (pairing brand values with self-concept). These three antecedents are not interdependent, and therefore fulfilling one of the three alternatives is sufficient for BCB. However, before BCB can take place, employees need a sufficient know-how and resources to be consistent.

The academic literature regarding employee conducted communication is fairly new. Terminology assigned to the act of employees emitting company information voluntarily or participating in corporate communication online varies depending on the author. The most commonly used term is 'brand ambassador'. Which signifies an employee who, on behalf of the company, delivers the brand accordingly to stakeholders of the company (Rokka, Karlsson and Tienari 2014; Dreher 2014; Xiong, King, Piehler, 2013; DuBois Gelb, Rangarajan 2014). Other names encountered in literature are 'työntekijälähettiläs' /'employee advocate' (Isokangas, Kankkunen, 2011; Terpening, Li, Littleton 2016). Other antecedents of brand ambassadors/employee advocates source from literature discussing brand citizenship behavior which is the basic driver for brand ambassadors/employee advocates. Another parallel trend source from an employee WOM –study which focused on what drives brand citizenship behavior (Morokane 2014). In this case, positive word of mouth is the outcome of BCB. The employee is called brand ambassador, -endorser or advocate.

Piehler, King and Xiong (2013), studied employees as brand ambassadors from service companies' point of view where employees are in direct contact (face-to-face, over the phone) with the final customer. The authors research on what motivates employees to speak favorably of the company using the terminology; brand ambassador. Piehler, King and Xiong (2013) present three psychological states related to attitude and behavior; 1. Employee perceived brand knowledge, 2. Employee perceived brand importance, 3. Employee perceived brand role relevance. It was found that 2. Employee perceived brand importance and 3. Employee perceived brand role relevance affected employee brand commitment, whilst 1. Employee perceived brand knowledge had an impact on employee brand equity (EBE). The employee commitment to the brand (employee brand commitment) is related to EBE. Employee Brand Equity directly affects brand endorsement, brand allegiance and brand consistent behavior, which are the factors generating brand ambassadors. The findings show that when employees believe that the brand is important and relevant, the employees are more committed to the brand. Whereas, knowledge of the brand itself leads directly to employee brand equity. Thus, when employees personally feel as part of the whole organization and have sufficient brand knowledge they are motivated to emit their perspective of the company to the clients. Without the identification and symbiosis with the organization and the brand, the employee does not feel necessary to conduct favorable additional company endorsement. The knowledge provided to employees comes from inside the company, indicating good brand communication and training of job position and relevance to the whole organization. The same results were found in the research made by Morokane (2014) where employee willingness to commit positive

WOM of an organization was studied. However, Grace and King (2012) proved in their research that solely activeness on behalf of the company is not enough for employees to conduct brand citizenship behavior. Employees need a personal motivation to participate as brand ambassadors.

Rokka, Karlsson, Tienari (2014) studied three Finnish companies in their research entitled "*Balancing Acts: Managing employees and reputation in social media*". The authors found out that the three businesses studied (bank, food and consulting) had already incorporated social media in their businesses. Nevertheless, because the companies were from different sectors and had varying vulnerability they had different presence on social media. The findings of both studies by Rokka, Karlsson, Tienari (2014) and Piehler, King and Xiong (2013) articulate the need of employees to identify with the brand, and the value of employee word of mouth. Although Rokka, Karlsson, Tienari (2014) discuss the subject from an online perspective whilst Piehler, King and Xiong (2013) have an offline stance on the matter. The research proved that employees are seen as the main reputation builders and brand ambassadors on social media due to their personal voice giving an authentic flavor to the message. It is vital to say that, there is nothing artificial that can be communicated authentically, if it is not. Thus, an important finding was that leadership, internal culture and recruitment play an important role on who says and what is said online. Also Piehler et al. (2016) suggest that internal culture is vital for brand citizenship behavior, which is an antecedent of employee advocacy or brand ambassadors. The internal culture can be enhanced through training on brand and values, however it was also noted that social activities and mentoring play a significant role in enhancing internal culture. (Piehler et al. 2016) Digging into the internal communication, employees need to voluntarily identify themselves with a brand. Such finding suggests a need to be successful in internal branding to start with. The conclusion of the study was that employees can make or break the brand. It all depends on which approach regarding employee conducted corporate communication the organization decides to take, and what resources it wishes to allocate. (Rokka, Karlsson, Tienari 2014)

Gelb DuBois and Rangarajan (2014) approach employees as brand ambassadors from the point of view of sustaining and enhancing brand equity. In the study they refer to 'brand equity' as the level of distinguishing a product from others and elevating the favorable perception stakeholders have towards a brand. Although the study had a focus on service brands it also discussed the importance of delivering the brand in B2B markets and online. According to Gelb DuBois and Rangarajan (2014) maintaining brand equity through employees is a vital act hence to the possibility of company reputation being damaged for some reason. At the moment the reputation becomes tainted, employees are in the front line of the company, telling their personal networks about the situation from their point of view. The personal network of the employee trusts more in the word of the employee than in the universal negative message spread (Morokane, 2016; Gelb DuBois, Rangarajan, 2014). Moreover, on the B2B arena the impact and trustworthiness of employees is even more important since clients and other stakeholders of the company have a bond of trust with the employee and therefore also have more faith in his word. However, a negative incidence can lead employees spreading content online which, on the other hand damages the reputation and the brand. Therefore, it is considered beneficial to train staff about the message that is aimed to be delivered, online and offline.

A parallel can be drawn from Gelb DuBois and Rangarajan (2014) to previously discussed *Balancing Acts*, where the authors Rokka, Karlsson, Tienari (2014) commented that employees can make or break the brand. Gelb DuBois and Rangarajan (2014) suggested managers should implement an internal culture which can be reflected externally by employees. Employees as

brand ambassadors are created by the company through thorough training. However, there are also employees who willingly and without asking contribute to the brand beyond their own job description. These employees were earlier discussed in the literature review as receptive employees. According to the study made by Grace and King (2012) the employees who are receptive (already willing to participate) should be identified and trained into becoming brand ambassadors. Therefore, Gelb DuBois and Rangarajan (2014) suggest that companies should invest in their employees and train them.

Morokane (2014) studied the reason employees engage in WOM on behalf of the company to stakeholders (family, friends) and social network. The author defines employees as 'employee endorsers.' As indicated in the previous studies, brand ambassadors and employee advocates are referred to be trained by the company. Therefore, internal management is seen as the corner stone in the process. Morokane (2014) studied employee willingness to take part in favorable WOM from the point of view of internal marketing and internal engagement. Internal marketing referring to employee's overall knowledge of the brand. Thus, internal marketing is claimed to create a base for the employee to feel satisfaction due to alignment of own values with the company's. A parallel can be drawn from engagement with the organization to engagement with the organization's brand. Internal engagement, on the other hand refers to a psychological state of the employee of meaningfulness, availability and safety. The findings of the research indicate that internal marketing does affect employee word of mouth (employee endorsement). Moreover, the findings made by Grace and King (2012) agree with Morokane's (2014) findings that employees who identify themselves with the organization are more likely to commit positive WOM. It was also found that internal engagement positively affects employee endorsement. Another relevant finding revealed is that stakeholder's view of the organization affects the employee's view of the organization, indicating that the overall image of an organization is imposed from both sides, employees and stakeholders.

The research paper by Dreher (2014) is considered vital in the process of discussing findings related to employee conducted corporate communication because, Dreher's (2014) research gives guidelines of 'how' and 'why' to implement social media into an organization and therefore is a practical view of the matter. A valuable observation of Dreher (2014) is that although employees would be banned access on social media it does not restrict them from using personal devices to access social media platforms at work. Like Gelb DuBois and Rangarajan (2014), Dreher (2014) found out that social media is emotional. Thus, if there is a negative thought about a company, it can be shared. Like previously discussed studies, Dreher points out that employees are a vital part of reputation building and brand delivery. The author suggests that employees, 'embody' the corporate character, thus employees are vital brand ambassadors of the company. Dreher (2014) suggests eight managerial steps (research, access, commitment, social media team, guidelines and policies, training and education integration and goal setting and measurement) to strategically implement social media into an organization. The kick-off principle introduced is gaming. The employees need positive reinforcement to participate. In Dreher's case, employees are rewarded after conducting various tasks in establishing a presence on social media. For example, a reward follows when a Google+ account is created. On the other hand, the gaming principle may cause employees a sensation of being forced by the company to implement social media. Rokka, Karlsson, Tienari (2014) claimed in their study that employee participation on social media and communication needs to be voluntary. Grace, King (2012) pointed out that the employee needs to be receptive, in other words, accept the rewarding. Therefore, the social pressure and gifts handed out need to be thoroughly thought of before implementation.

According to Dreher (2014), the major factor of launching an employee advocacy program is to provide 'access' on social media at work and enhance its usage during working hours. Employees can be asked to update profile information during working hours. On the other hand, management has to be committed to the new culture. Therefore, 'commitment' from the management is an extremely important aspect on launching employee advocacy. In order to have a team to follow up and take care of the steps in implementation as the back office of the project a 'social media team' is necessary, according to Dreher (2014). The participating employees need to be communicated clearly the rules of the game to avoid misuse and misunderstandings. Thus, 'guidelines and policies' which agree with the company standards. The employees need to have corresponsive 'training and education' to thoroughly internalize employee advocacy and their role in it. Nevertheless, communication goes through 'integration' when all messages are combined with the knowledge of all employees and the company message is constant. In the end it is vital to have a feedback of how employee advocacy worked, both short run and long run, 'goal setting and measurement'.

3. MERCK S.A. Portugal

Known as the world's oldest pharmaceutical and chemical company, Merck was founded by Friedrich Jacob Merck in Darmstadt, Germany in 1668. Still today, the original founding family remains the majority owner of the company.

Today, Merck operates in 66 countries and employs close to 50 000 employees globally. The organization is divided into three businesses; Healthcare, Life Science and Performance Materials. In the past year Merck has gone through a corporate wide image and identity change. Nowadays, Merck is known as a Science and Technology company (instead of former; pharmaceutical and chemical company). In general terms, Merck should not take any chances regarding communication which might leak information that can be understood as promotion or advertising of products that are not allowed to be promoted. Thus, a communication plan made for Merck in Portugal should use social media to increase general awareness of Merck such as: position Merck as a Science and Technology Company, increase knowledge of research and innovation in Portugal, social responsibility, workplace, events and activities open for general public.

Employees as Brand Ambassadors at Merck

Merck S.A. in Portugal conducted a reputation survey in 2015 in order to obtain an overview of its situation regarding positioning and reputation. The positioning and reputation study was divided into three subcategories; HCP (Health Care Professionals), Media and Generic Public. The results obtained showed that the generic public were lacking knowledge of Merck, and the media had also low awareness of the company itself. On the other hand, HCP's (health care professionals) were familiar with the pharmaceutical company. Until today, Merck in Portugal has not actively engaged in external communication, due to the company working in the pharmaceutical business in Portugal. The business of Merck in Portugal is divided into Consumer Health (over the counter products) and Biopharma (prescription medicine). The main business area is biopharma which limits communication possibilities due to legal restrictions in Portugal.

Results obtained from "Brand Familiarity" indicated that, only 19% of the Generic Public knew Merck and 2% separated Merck from its competitor, Merck Sharp and Dome (MSD) (responses 42 510). Media recognized the brand better, 83% were familiar with the brand but only 13%

knew that Merck and MSD are two different companies (responses 56). (Positioning & Reputation, 2015)

On behalf of reputation, several aspects of improvement were identified. Emotional Reputation (recommend, trust, say something positive, buy products, invest, work) and Rational Reputation (products & services, innovation, workplace, governance, citizenship, leadership and performance) both scored average in the study. Figure 1 shows the main results.

Figure 1. Overall reputation and awareness / Generic Public (Positioning & Reputation, 2015)



The gravest aspect needed to be improved, was awareness among generic public. It needs to be pointed out that generic public includes many important stakeholders for the company: old acquaintances, colleagues from current and former businesses, family members, friends, colleague friends, possible future employees, opinion leaders, students, un-recognized patients, caregivers, etc. These profiles were regarded as having an importance to the company, but had not been actively targeted in means of communication before. Therefore, evidence from the positioning and reputation study indicated that a change needed to be made. Furthermore, pointing out that Merck conducted the brand and image change in 2015-2016, a more proactive stance was to be taken regarding communication.

Therefore, an employee advocacy program was decided to be implemented to Merck in Portugal. The employee advocacy program allows employees to participate in the company's communication on social media through sharing company content from a platform called SMARP. The employee advocacy program was believed to be lucrative due to the possibility of speaking to stakeholders in an authentic manner and obtaining a wider audience than through traditional advertising, and for a lower cost. (Reputation study Merck S.A. Portugal, 2015)

Smarp is a social media sharing tool which allows employees to share content on various social media channels. Each employee uses his own social media account for sharing, in other words, the content shared is personal and the choice to share is individual. Smarp was created in 2011 by two Finnish students. Initially the focus was on professional branding and creating a role for employees on social media. The idea behind Smarp was the potential in employee's networks, which tend to be 10-15 times larger than corporate social media accounts. Nowadays the company is focusing on mutual benefit for the employing organization and the employee, following the mantra "humanizing brands". It was also discovered that the employee word of mouth is far more trustworthy than the communication conducted by a company. Shortly after launching the platform the company started to grow its business. Nowadays Smarp is a highly successful and acknowledged Employee Advocacy tool. The company is located in Finland, Sweden, Singapore, Dubai, England and New York. Smarp comes with several features, the most known is gamification. Each time an employee shares content, he gains points for sharing, which are displayed on the platform on a leader board. The positive reinforcement of gaining points is believed to drive the employee participation. The platform measures analytics of content shared through engagement measures and spread of content on social media, allowing companies to set up KPI's for success. (SMARP, 2017)

Hypothesis Formulation and Conceptual Model for Merck Case

According to Grace and King (2012) an employee needs to be exposed to internal communication, and participate in internal training regarding the brand, to have adequate brand knowledge. Brand knowledge is an antecedent for employees to commit brand citizenship behavior. (Grace and King 2012), (Burmam and Zeplin 2005). Also Xiong, King and Piehler (2013) claim that brand knowledge affects Employee Brand Equity, which is an antecedent of brand endorsement, brand consistent behavior and brand allegiance, a parallel is drawn to brand citizenship behavior. Hence,

Hypotheses 1: Brand knowledge positively affects Brand Citizenship Behavior in the case of Merck.

Rokka, Karlsson and Tienari (2014) found out in their study that employees need to identify themselves with the brand in order to become brand ambassadors, which means to say, speak favorably of the company/brand/workplace. On the other hand, Burmann and Zeplin (2005) point out that self-identification leads to BCB since a person feels a personal obligation to perform extra-role behavior. Helm, Renk and Mishra (2014) claim that the employee has to go through self-brand congruity, which means having the same values in order to be engaged to the organization. A similar engagement idea surfaced in the research of Xiong, King and Piehler (2013), where the authors found that if an employee does not identify himself and create a sense of unity with the organization, he will not conduct brand citizenship behavior. The author chooses to follow Burmann and Zeplins (2005) example (previously discussed) by defining corporate brand as the organization itself to avoid confusion, since the organization holds several brands under a common name. Therefore,

Hypotheses 2: Self-identification with the organization positively affects brand citizenship behavior, in the case of Merck.

Dreher (2014), Dubois Gelb and Rangarajan (2014), Helm, Renk, Mishra (2014), Rokka, Karlsson, Tienari (2014) and Burmann and Zeplin (2005) claim that employee advocacy is emotion based. A positive feeling towards an organization/brand or company affects the willingness to contribute positive word of mouth of a company in other words, BCB. Therefore,

Hypotheses 3: Affective brand commitment positively affect employee willingness to commit to brand citizenship behavior, in the case of Merck.

Grace and King (2012), Burmann and Zeplin (2005) and Piehler et al. (2016) claim that employees are to be given the right training to commit BCB, but also the right environment, which needs to be supportive. Both Piehler, King and Xiong (2013) and Rokka, Karlsson and Tienari (2014) found out that the employee willingness to commit BCB comes from inside the company, indicating a good and supportive culture. Apart from formal training, internal culture can be spruced up by social events and mentor programs. These activities help employees enjoy the company and develop a sense of belonging which affect BCB (Burmam and Zeplin 2005). Hence,

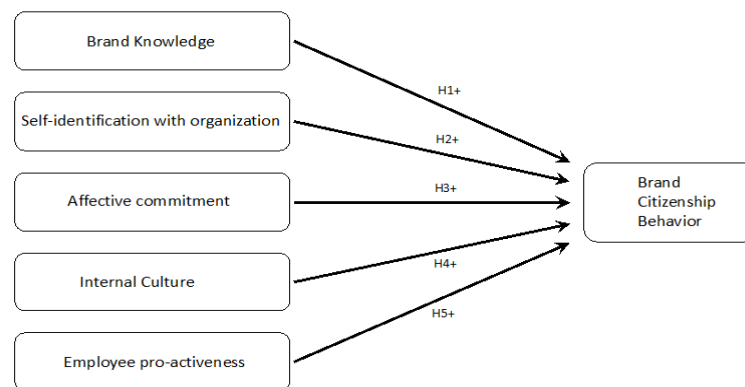
Hypotheses 4: Internal culture positively affects brand citizenship behavior in the case of Merck.

Rokka, Karlsson and Tienari (2014) found out in their study that employee advocacy needs to be voluntary. Employees forced to contribute brand citizenship behavior will result in revolt and most likely adverse communication. Also Morokane (2014) proved that employees need to be receptive. It means to say, the employee must have an internal will to contribute to BCB. Employee receptiveness is an individual character which cannot be affected by the company. Also Grace and King (2012) suggest that employees need a certain level of engagement towards the work to contribute in BCB, which signifies an internal drive. Thus,

Hypotheses 5: Employee pro-activeness positively affects brand citizenship behavior in the case of Merck, S.A.

Based on the following five hypotheses the conceptual model in Fig. 2 was drawn accordingly:

Figure 2. Conceptual model



4. Methodology

Secondary data was collected from the following sources; Positioning and Engagement survey (2015), Merck Corporate Engagement Survey (2015) and extensive literature review conducted by the author. In the primary data, the author wanted to measure the correlation between five established hypotheses and Brand Citizenship Behavior. The answers were measured on a 1-7 Likert Scale, which was previously used and validated in the studies presented in the literature review. The primary data was collected via a questionnaire, divided into seven sections; **Demographics**, **Brand Citizenship Behavior** (Scale from Van Dyne et. Al (1994), **Brand Knowledge**. (Scale from Merck Engagement Survey (2015) and Baugmarth and Schmidt (2010)). **Self-Identification** (Scales from Soane et. Al (2012); Williams & Anderson (1991); Ganesan & Weiz (1996)). **Affective Commitment** (Scales from Soane et. Al (2012), Merck Engagement Survey (2015) and Meyer and Allen (1997)). **Internal Culture**. (Scales from Merck Engagement Survey (2015)). **Employee Pro-Activeness**. (Scales from Bettencourt (1997), Diamantopoulos and Lonhdorf (2014) and Merck Engagement Survey (2015)).

5. Results

The respondents of the survey came from different age groups (20-30 y/o, 30-40 y/o, 40-50 y/o, 50+) the biggest age group being 40-50 y/o, gender (53,4% male, 46,6% female) and they had spent varying time working for Merck in Portugal (0-57, 5-10y 10+y). The respondents had different behavioral patterns on social media sharing, 52,4% of the employees like to share

content which is related to the pharmaceutical industry. 52,4% like to share corporate content. 63,1% like to share content related to Merck S.A. Portugal. The most popular social media channel is LinkedIn 61,2%, Facebook 59,2% and Twitter 4,1%, other social media channels 23,5%.

In order to validate the internal consistency of the Likert Scales (1-7), Cronbach's alpha was performed. The results obtained proved that all scales have high internal consistency with BCB items having an $\alpha = .78$, brand knowledge items having an $\alpha = .82$, self-identification with the organization an $\alpha = .85$, affective commitment $\alpha = .87$, Internal Culture $\alpha = .86$ and employee pro-activeness, $\alpha = .87$. Therefore new compound variables were derived from the original items using the mean (Luo Y. 2003). The results obtained for Pearson's correlation shows that there is a positive correlation among all the independent variables and the dependent variable, indicating that a growth in value for the independent variables also increases the value of the dependent variable. The p-value value for all correlations was below $p < 0.05$ indicating that there are significant correlations between the dependent and independent variables. A forward-stepwise method was used to fit a linear regression on the dependent variable (BCB). Table 2 shows the linear regression results with the significant independent variables identified in the model. Results show that **H1** and **H5** were supported by the regression model while the remaining hypothesis were rejected in the case of Merck.

Table 2: Stepwise method, included variables, R² and Durbin Watson

Coefficients ^a								
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics		
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF	
2 (Constant)	2,111	,438		4,817	,000			
H5:Employee pro-activeness	,432	,083	,503	5,198	,000	,559	1,789	
H1:Brand knowledge	,235	,093	,244	2,522	,013	,559	1,789	
Adjusted R2:	,465							
Durbin-Watson	2,250							

a. Dependent Variable: H0:BCB dependent

6. Discussion of Findings

The research questions were collected from validated and published research and the Merck Corporate Engagement survey. In the case of Merck S.A. Portugal, only two hypothesis remained impactful on Brand Citizenship Behavior. The results of the last analysis conducted excluded three out of five established hypothesis. **H1** and **H5** were supported, indicating that these two hypotheses have a direct impact on Brand Citizenship Behavior in the case of Merck employees. *Brand Knowledge* was noticed to be a critical factor affecting employees internal will to share. Personal networks are full of personal connections, recognizing the employee sharing. Therefore, all content placed into SMARP is previously communicated internally. On the other hand, Employee Pro-Activeness is fed by messages showcasing what a good and interesting place the employing organization is. An employee sharing content which he is familiar with and considers interesting, places the sharer in the shoes of an opinion leader making him look like an expert.

Actions Taken for Merck Portugal

Taking the results into consideration, Location Room Portugal (intranet) was reconstructed to a site where all employees could participate in communication and brand knowledge was passed on the platform. *Employee Pro-Activeness* was enhanced through engaging writing and activities. The above mentioned activities were in line with findings made by Dreher (2014), DuBois Gelb, Rangarajan (2014), Helm, Renk, Mishra (2014), Rokka, Karlsson, Tienari (2014) and Burmann and Zeplin (2005) who all claimed that employee advocacy is emotion based. A positive feeling towards the employing organization increases willingness to commit word of mouth.

The authors also followed Dreher's (2014) eight steps in the implementation of EA at Merck; *Research*, Merck Portugal conducted a Digital Footprint survey on Survey Monkey before conducting Employee Advocacy & Social Media training to employees. *Access*; Employees were helped to establish social media platforms and encouraged to use them. *Commitment*; The senior management was "bought in" the employee advocacy project with the help of the General Manager to encourage use of SMARP. *Social Media Team*; A group of administrators for SMARP was established and trained for the use of the tool. *Guidelines and Policies*; Part of the external digital training was Compliance and Social Media rules by Merck (conducted internally by Regulatory Affairs). *Training and Education*; an intensive 1-day training on Employee Advocacy and Social Media was organized for the entire organization at Portugal. *Integration & Goal setting and measurement* was conducted after the launch of SMARP. By only using SMARP for external Merck Portugal communication, all company messages (corporate and local) could be aligned.

7. Conclusions and Future Research

The purpose of the current paper was to test whether employee advocacy was in fact a powerful tool in today's corporate communication strategies. The paper shows the successful case of Merck, Portugal that made a proper assessment of the drivers of BCB and used Dreher's (2014) pillars to implement a tailored program of employee advocacy.

As of future research the authors suggest to dig deeper into employee pro-activeness and look into the psychological aspects of internal drivers and motivation. As of brand knowledge, it is considered important to have a specific view of what is included in brand knowledge and what topics regarding the brand and company are considered interesting.

It is also thought of interest to research the concept employee advocacy and the employee advocacy tool to note how employee engagement to the platform can be affected by different company activities offline, which are later on shared online to discover the most "interesting" content shared. From a practical perspective, implementing a tool such as SMARP is an ongoing project. After implementation the owner(s) of the tool needs to further develop the usage strategy, content mapping and engagement. Employees need to constantly be informed about the existence of the platform, if not it will be forgotten. SMARP can be used for both internal and external communication.

The main contributions of the paper are twofold. First, it shows what are the main drivers of BCB at Merck S.A. Portugal. Although findings reflect only the views of Merck's employees, they may also carry a cultural effect of the workforce relationship with social media in Portugal. Therefore future research may broaden up the current findings to other companies in other sectors to check if the same drivers hold on such cases. Second, findings helped the company

to engage in an action plan to create a successful employee advocacy program. Such results highlighted in the current paper may be used by other managers to also create their own programs based on the success of Mercks' Portugal case study.

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