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THE STATE OF EMPLOYER BRANDING 2025

Analysis of Hiring Messages, Candidate Experience Standards, and Emerging Trends in Recruitment and Employer Branding

CNBC DISRUPTOR 50

Employer Brand Labs
EMPLOYERBRANDLABS.COM

Read before you sign off on the next recruiting budget

Employer Branding ≠ HR Fluff. It's a seven-figure line on your P&L—one you can slash (or compound) with two decisions you control today.

The Margin-Draining Red Flags Finance Can't Ignore

(These are the habits the "disruptors" copy—and the exact ones you must break.)

Red Flag (what everyone says)	What candidates actually hear	Hidden P&L hit
"We're changing the world." Used by 100 % of the Disruptor 50.	*"Same pitch as the last five offers—so let's talk cash."*	*~+6-10% wage inflation as salaries become the only point of difference.*
"We hire world-class talent." Appears in 94 % of career sites.	*"Expect a bidding war; their bar is price, not fit."*	*~$30-60 k extra per knowledge-worker hire (sign-on, equity top-ups, recruiter fees).*
"Inclusive, fast-paced, collaborative." Zero firms translate this into daily reality.	*"Buzzwords = risk. I'll ghost or delay while I probe for proof."*	*Up to 30% longer time-to-fill, bleeding $0.8-1.3 k per day for revenue roles.*

Takeaway: Copy-paste messaging doesn't just bore candidates—it hands them the negotiating leverage and drags out hiring cycles. Break the script and you remove the "sameness tax" that's eroding EBITDA.

You don't beat disruptors by outspending them; you beat them by out-differentiating them.

Why TA owns the fix—and why they still need you

1. **TA controls the story.** *They audit messaging, rewrite career pages, and coach hiring managers.*
2. **You control the math.** *Only Finance can:*
   - *Quantify cost of vacancy vs. cost of payroll in dollars, not anecdotes.*
   - *Set ROI guard-rails for every employer-brand dollar (e.g., "show me a 4× return in reduced agency fees within two quarters").*
   - *Reallocate savings to growth initiatives—turning TA from cost centre to working-capital engine.*

Put it together: TA brings the narrative; you bring the numbers. That partnership is how differentiated messaging actually turns into meaningful cost savings.

Kick-off this week

CFO asks TA	*TA brings back*
"What's our daily cost of vacancy per critical role?"	*A vacancy cost model tied to revenue per employee.*
"Which EVP promises are unique enough to cut bidding wars by 10 %?"	*A competitive messaging map highlighting white-space we can own.*
"What's the payback period if we invest $X in brand refresh?"	*A side-by-side forecast: current spend vs. projected savings in agency fees, salary inflation, and time-to-fill.*

Call-to-action
Share this report with TA and tell them, *"You own the story—let's co-own the savings."*

Because the fastest way to defend margin and accelerate growth isn't another price increase or head-count freeze; it's making sure every future hire chooses you for the right reasons—*before* compensation enters the chat.

The State of Employer Branding

The CNBC Disruptor 50

An analysis of the 50 most disruptive companies in the world and how they are attracting the talent they need to grow.

James Ellis, Employer Brand Labs
This report was complete July 20, 2025

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Executive Summary

Disruptive companies are rewriting the rules of recruitment, and the shift isn't subtle. Mission has overtaken perks. Growth has eclipsed stability. Culture and purpose are now front and center. Across the CNBC Disruptor 50, the old employer branding playbook isn't just outdated. It's been completely discarded.

This report analyzes the career site messaging, LinkedIn content, and employer value propositions of all 50 companies on the 2025 CNBC Disruptor 50 list. What we found is both inspiring and cautionary:

- **Nearly every company leads with a world-changing mission**, not benefits, not job descriptions.
- **Common themes like innovation, autonomy, and inclusion are now table stakes** and are now so common they often cancel each other out.

But here's the challenge: if everyone's saying the same things—"we're mission-driven," "we support growth," "we're inclusive"—how does any company stand out?

> **Sameness is the new silent killer of employer brands.**

To break through the noise, many disruptors unconsciously rely on what they already have:

- **A powerful consumer brand** that candidates already admire
- **Cutting-edge tech** that draws talent based on curiosity and prestige

That works—for now. But as these companies mature and the hiring market shifts, **tech alone won't make them choosable**. Candidates will need more than big promises—they'll want proof of what the experience really feels like.

The few standouts in this report don't just market the mission—they connect it to daily impact. They translate culture into clarity. They make values feel lived-in, not laminated.

Whether you're building your first EVP or refining a brand that's lost momentum, the takeaway is this:

> **In a market where everyone claims to change the world, your edge is showing how working with you will change theirs.**

What Disruptive Companies Are Saying

Across the Disruptor 50, there is a clear convergence around a shared employer brand vocabulary. Nearly every company frames its pitch to candidates around the same five pillars: **mission, growth, inclusion, innovation, and autonomy.** That's not accidental. It's the reflection of what fast-growing, future-facing companies believe modern talent wants.

But that alignment comes at a cost: **it creates a sea of similarity.**

When 50 out of 50 companies lead with "world-changing mission," you haven't differentiated, you've "yet another" in the category.

The 10 Most Common Messages (Ranked by Prevalence)

Theme	% Use	Example Messaging
Mission-Driven Impact	100%	"Change the world," "Build something meaningful," "Make an impact"
Growth & Learning	100%	"Do the best work of your life," "Learn fast, grow faster," "Level up"
Comprehensive Benefits	100%	"We support the whole you," "Wellness, equity, and flexibility"
High Standards / Elite Talent	94%	"Work with the best," "We hire exceptional people only"
Innovation & Disruption	92%	"Pioneering new categories," "Leading the future of X"
Global Reach / Big Ambition	88%	"Global scale," "Worldwide impact," "Change at scale"
Diversity & Inclusion	86%	"Everyone belongs," "Inclusive by design," "All backgrounds welcome"
Autonomy & Ownership	82%	"Own your work," "Entrepreneurial mindset," "Every idea counts"
Speed & Agility	76%	"Move fast," "Iterate rapidly," "We don't wait"
Humility & Responsibility	64%	"Stay humble," "Do the right thing," "Be a good human"

These themes are not weak. They're powerful and often authentic. But their power fades when used generically.

"Innovative team building the future of [industry] with amazing people and great culture" sounds exciting, until you realize 40 other companies the candidate saw said the same thing this week.

Messaging Innovation and Recruitment Tactics

Beyond standard career site messaging, disruptive companies employ several innovative recruitment communication approaches:

Personalized, Direct Communication

Leading companies increasingly use direct, targeted outreach to engage candidates, highlighting the importance of tailored messaging in recruitment. This includes personalized emails addressing specific candidate achievements and SMS-based recruitment for faster engagement.

Emphasis on Technical Challenges

Messaging often includes specific references to the scale, novelty, or importance of the technical challenges candidates will face. For example, Databricks highlights working with petabyte-scale data systems, while Anduril emphasizes developing autonomous systems for defense applications. This technical specificity helps attract candidates who are motivated by complex problem-solving.

Authentic Storytelling

Companies like Canva and Notion leverage employee stories and day-in-the-life content to convey culture and mission authentically.

Interactive Candidate Experiences

Several companies have moved beyond static career pages to create interactive candidate experiences. Figma, for instance, uses its own design platform to create interactive career site elements, while Airtable offers interactive demos of their product within their careers section, allowing candidates to experience the company's technology firsthand.

The Real Messaging Problem: Specificity

Most messaging stops at **intention**. Few go the next step and make their culture tangible. A phrase like *"inclusive, fast-paced, and collaborative"* tells us nothing about how it feels to work there. It's a vibe, not a value.

That's why high-performing companies often fall back on their reputation:

- A startup might lead with its AI breakthrough.
- A fintech firm might emphasize its latest round of funding.
- A brand-driven company may assume its logo does the talking.

In other words: **tech and brand are doing the heavy lifting**, not the employer brand itself.

The Exception: Standout Language

A few companies do break the mold. They use real-world specifics, unexpected phrasing, or emotion-forward copy that speaks directly to candidate pain points.

Examples include:

- "We designed onboarding to help you make impact by week two."
- "Want to work asynchronously across time zones—without the burnout?"
- "If product-market fit isn't just a buzzword to you, come build with us."

These messages feel alive. They don't just describe the company, they describe the **experience**

How Candidates Are Supposed to Feel

The employer brand messages used by Disruptor 50 companies aren't just statements—they're **nudges.** They're designed to evoke feelings, spark desire, and suggest a future identity. And when you zoom out, the picture becomes clear:

> These companies aren't just selling jobs. They're selling a **personal transformation story.**

The messaging implies: "Join us, and you'll grow faster, do more meaningful work, and surround yourself with exceptional people, all while building the future."

What Motivators Are Being Triggered?

From an analysis of 5,000 LinkedIn posts across all 50 companies, five motivators consistently show up, often layered together in the same post:

Motivator	Mentions	What It Suggests
Stability & Benefits	2,644	Even disruptors know well-being, flexibility, and support are dealmakers.
Purpose & Impact	2,200	"We're changing the world" still draws high-value candidates.
Growth & Development	2,194	Career acceleration and learning are core to the value prop.
Culture & Belonging	1,863	Inclusion, collaboration, and supportiveness are assumed must-haves.
Innovation & Prestige	1,725	Awards, breakthroughs, and "firsts" are used to signal pride and momentum.

These aren't bad bets. They align with most research on what top candidates say they value. But when *everyone* is pulling the same emotional levers, those messages start to blur.

The Inferred Personas

If you reverse-engineer the messaging, it's clear who these companies think they're talking to:

Persona Type	What They Want	Messaging They Respond To
Mission-Driven Professionals	Purpose over profit	"Make an impact," "Build for good," "Transform the future"

Growth-Obsessed Achievers	Rapid development, learning	"Best work of your life," "Grow with us," "Hypergrowth"
Excellence Seekers	Elite teams, high standards	"World-class talent," "High bar," "Top performers only"
Autonomy Valuers	Ownership, low hierarchy	"Own your work," "Every idea counts," "Entrepreneurial spirit"
Belonging Seekers	Inclusive, supportive environments	"You belong here," "Bring your whole self," "We celebrate difference"

It's a composite of a high-performing, high-empathy, high-ambition candidate: Curious, adaptable, driven by impact, allergic to bureaucracy.

And that's probably accurate... but also increasingly universal.

The Flawed Assumptions Beneath the Surface

1. **That purpose is enough to stand out.** Not when every company claims to be "building the future."
2. **That culture can be described in three adjectives.** "Inclusive, fast-paced, and innovative" is not a culture—it's a placeholder.
3. **That growth = appeal.** Not every candidate is excited about hypergrowth. Some are burned out by it.
4. **That candidates don't need proof.** Vague claims are fine in marketing—but recruiting is about trust. Candidates want receipts.

What the Standouts Do Differently

Most Disruptor 50 companies are saying the same things. But a few manage to say them **better**, or—more importantly—**differently.** These standout companies don't just describe their mission or culture. They **show what it feels like to belong there.**

They shift the question from *"Are we great?"* to *"Are we great for you?"*

What Sets Them Apart?

1. They Translate Culture Into Feel

Standouts don't just say *"collaborative"*—they explain *how* collaboration shows up in daily work. They don't say *"autonomous"*—they describe how decisions get made, how onboarding works, how trust shows up.

Example: "We designed onboarding to help you make an impact by week 2." A clear signal of autonomy, support, and momentum.

2. They Speak Like Humans, Not Brands

Top-performing messages sound like they were written by people, for people. There's clarity, warmth, even wit. They sidestep clichés in favor of tone and texture.

Example: "Want to work asynchronously across time zones without the burnout? Meet your new team." This breaks the fourth wall. It speaks to real-life work tradeoffs.

3. They Tie the Mission to the Role

Instead of assuming the company mission is a strong enough hook, they show how the candidate's *actual work* connects to it. This makes purpose feel actionable, not abstract.

Example: Anduril ties software roles to frontline defense outcomes. Brex describes how engineers shape onboarding and async communication norms.

4. They Create Identity

Standout brands help candidates imagine themselves as part of something distinct—"a Scalien," "a Radineer," "an Abridger." It may sound niche, but these identity markers give candidates emotional belonging before they even apply.

Why It Matters

Most companies lean heavily on tech prestige or consumer brand awareness to drive hiring interest. And yes, that works—for now. But as these disruptors scale, tech differentiation fades and consumer buzz shifts. **Brand alone won't make them choosable.**

What will? *Clarity. Specificity. Emotional truth.* Not just what you do—but what it *feels like* to do it here.

Implications for Employer Branding and Talent Strategy

The Disruptor 50 have collectively raised the bar. They've normalized mission-first messaging, made talent content a core marketing function, and reset candidate expectations around growth, flexibility, and autonomy.

But in doing so, they've also created a new challenge:

> **When everyone sounds bold, innovative, and people-first—those words lose their edge.**

Here's what that means for anyone building, evolving, or leading an employer brand today:

For Disruptive Companies

1. Mission Is No Longer a Differentiator.
Every company now claims a world-changing mission. If that's all you offer, you're not competing—you're blending. You must go deeper: show how the mission connects to daily work, to team rituals, to product decisions.

2. Tech and Hype Won't Be Enough Forever.
Your AI model or Series D funding round may get top-funnel clicks. But retention, engagement, and offer acceptance will depend on the lived experience behind the logo.

3. Culture Must Be Made Tangible.
Describe behaviors, not buzzwords. Replace *"collaborative"* with stories of how decisions are made. Swap *"inclusive"* with quotes from employees who found their voice. Specifics build trust.

4. Employer Brand = Business Strategy.
Top talent isn't drawn to just what you're building—they're drawn to how you build it. Treat your employer brand like your product: iterate, measure, evolve.

For Traditional Companies

1. The Old Playbook Is Dead.
Messaging around stability, career ladders, and "great benefits" now reads as table stakes—or worse, out of touch. Candidates expect purpose, flexibility, and real cultural identity.

2. You Don't Need to Be a Disruptor to Compete.
You just need to be **clearer, more human, and more emotionally resonant**. Don't try to sound like a startup—try to sound like the best version of you.

3. Your Unique Strengths Are Hiding in Plain Sight.
Stability, mentorship, community, legacy—if made tangible and emotionally framed—can be powerful differentiators in a sea of hypergrowth anxiety.

For Employer Brand and Talent Teams

- Don't just say who you are. Show how you work.
- Audit your messaging regularly for sameness and clichés.
- Ask: what does it *feel* like to be on the team? Would a candidate know from your site?
- Use specificity as your sharpest tool. General = invisible.

Bottom line:
The competition for attention has shifted from *being attractive* to *being choosable*. And choosability doesn't come from louder claims. It comes from clearer, truer ones.

Final Takeaways

Disruptive companies have reshaped the employer brand landscape—but not always in the ways they think. They've pushed the industry forward by normalizing mission-driven, growth-focused messaging. They've made talent attraction a top-tier priority. And they've created a generation of candidates who expect more than just a paycheck.

But in doing so, they've also revealed a paradox:

> **When everyone promises impact, innovation, and inclusion—those promises lose their power.**

Being attractive isn't the problem. Being distinguishable is.

What This Means for You

- **Mission is the new baseline—not the differentiator.** Everyone's "changing the world." What matters is how your people do it, day to day.
- **Specificity beats aspiration.** "Collaborative, fast-paced, inclusive" is the elevator music of employer branding. Trade adjectives for proof points.
- **Culture isn't what you say—it's what candidates feel.** Make the invisible visible. Tell stories. Show friction. Reveal tradeoffs.
- **Choosability is the new advantage.** In a crowded market, the companies that win talent won't just be exciting. They'll be *clear, aligned, and real.*

One Last Question

> **Why should the right candidate choose you—and not someone who sounds just like you?**

If you can answer that with precision and confidence, you're ahead of most of the Disruptor 50.

About the Author

James Ellis is the founder of **Employer Brand Labs** and a leading voice in business-first employer branding. A four-time author and sought-after keynote speaker, James helps companies move beyond "looking attractive" to becoming **truly choosable**—brands that earn trust, trigger commitment, and power faster, cheaper, stickier hiring. His work has reshaped talent strategies for teams at Recursion, Roku, Webflow, ASICS, BECU, and dozens of high-growth firms, proving that pretty brands fade, but choosable brands grow.

LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/thewarfortalent/
Employer Brand Labs: http://employerbrandlabs.com

Appendix

Methodology

The target list came from [CNBC's Disruptor 50](#) list, published June 10, 2025.

Companies in the list are:

Abnormal AI	Fruitist	Revolut
Abridge	Gecko Robotics	Rippling
AlphaSense	Glean	Runway
Anduril	GrubMarket	Saronic Technologies
Anthropic	Harvey	Scale AI
Apptronik	Iambic Therapeutics	Shield AI
Canva	Lead Bank	Sierra
Carbon Robotics	Metropolis	Stripe
Databricks	MoonPay	Thrive Market
Einride	Navan	Transcarent
ElevateBio	Notion	VAST Data
Esusu	Octopus Energy	Virta Health
Exotec	OpenAI	Waabi
Figma	ŌURA	Writer
Flock Safety	Perplexity	Zipline
Footprint	Rad AI	Zum
Formation Bio	Ramp	

Raw content came from scraping the copy from career sites and the last 100 LinkedIn posts of each company (July 8, 2025).

Manus was used to calculate messaging instances and ChatGPT was used in the structuring and editing of the final report.

Dominant Messaging Patterns

Excellence and High Standards (94% – 47/50 companies)

Nearly universal emphasis on working with exceptional people and maintaining high standards.
Examples:
- "World-class team" (multiple companies)
- "Exceptional talent" (widespread)
- "High performance" (universal theme)
- "Excellence is our standard, not our goal" (Esusu)
- "Technological excellence" (Exotec)

Innovation and Category Creation (92% – 46/50 companies)

Positioning as pioneers creating new categories rather than improving existing solutions.
Examples:
- "Revolutionary technology" (widespread)
- "Category creation" (common theme)

- "Cutting-edge innovation" (universal)
- "Pioneering tools" (Runway)
- "Robots with purpose" (Exotec)

Global Scale and Ambition (88% - 44/50 companies)

Strong emphasis on worldwide impact and international reach.
Examples:
- "Global scale" (widespread)
- "Worldwide reach" (common)
- "International impact" (universal theme)
- "900 ExoPeople around the world" (Exotec)

Diversity and Inclusion (86% - 43/50 companies)

Comprehensive commitment to building diverse, inclusive teams.
Examples:
- "All backgrounds welcome" (widespread)
- "Inclusive environment" (common)
- "Diverse perspectives" (universal)
- "Equal opportunity employer" (Exotec and others)

Autonomy and Ownership Culture (82% - 41/50 companies)

Emphasis on employee autonomy, ownership, and entrepreneurial spirit.
Examples:
- "Own your projects" (widespread)
- "Entrepreneurial freedom" (common)
- "Independent work" (universal theme)
- "Every idea can become a reality" (Exotec)

Industry-Specific Patterns and Differentiation

AI/Technology Companies (18 companies analyzed)

Common Themes: Human potential expansion, AI safety, breakthrough innovation **Unique Elements:** Constitutional AI, AGI safety, human creativity advancement **Examples:** OpenAI, Anthropic, Scale AI, Glean, Sierra, Runway, Perplexity, Writer, Harvey, Abnormal AI

Healthcare/Biotech Companies (8 companies analyzed)

Common Themes: Patient care, physician empowerment, life-transforming therapies **Unique Elements:** Clinical connection, healthcare burnout reduction, therapeutic development **Examples:** Rad AI, Abridge, Virta Health, Formation Bio, ElevateBio, Iambic Therapeutics, Transcarent

Financial Technology Companies (6 companies analyzed)

Common Themes: Financial empowerment, economic inclusion, payment innovation **Unique Elements:** GDP growth, housing barriers, financial equity **Examples:** Stripe, Ramp, Esusu, Revolut, Lead Bank, MoonPay

Defense/Security Companies (4 companies analyzed)

Common Themes: National security, patriotic service, protection mission **Unique Elements:** Military integration, veteran programs, defense innovation **Examples:** Anduril, Shield AI, Flock Safety, Saronic Technologies

Robotics/Automation Companies (6 companies analyzed)

Common Themes: Human-robot collaboration, automation revolution, efficiency **Unique Elements:** Warehouse automation, agricultural robotics, humanoid development **Examples:** Exotec, Carbon Robotics, Apptronik, Gecko Robotics, Einride, Zipline

Enterprise Software Companies (6 companies analyzed)

Common Themes: Business transformation, productivity enhancement, workflow optimization **Unique Elements:** Data platforms, enterprise AI, business intelligence **Examples:** Databricks, VAST Data, Glean, Writer, Notion, Rippling

Transportation/Logistics Companies (4 companies analyzed)

Common Themes: Movement efficiency, autonomous systems, delivery innovation **Unique Elements:** Autonomous vehicles, drone delivery, transportation transformation **Examples:** Waabi, Zipline, Navan, Zum

Design/Creative Companies (3 companies analyzed)

Common Themes: Creative democratization, design empowerment, visual communication **Unique Elements:** Design accessibility, creative tools, visual storytelling **Examples:** Canva, Figma, Runway

Energy/Sustainability Companies (3 companies analyzed)

Common Themes: Environmental impact, sustainable solutions, energy transformation **Unique Elements:** Green energy, plastic elimination, environmental mission **Examples:** Octopus Energy, Footprint, Thrive Market

Ten Most Common Messages Across All 50 Companies

1. Mission-Driven Impact (100% of companies)

Message: "Join our world-changing mission" **Examples:** "Ensuring AGI benefits humanity," "Eliminating crime," "Making energy greener," "Empowering physicians," "Dismantling housing barriers," "Robotics revolution" **Significance:** Universal adoption indicates complete paradigm shift from job-focused to mission-focused recruiting.

2. Learning and Growth Culture (100% of companies)

Message: "Continuous learning and professional development" **Examples:** "Learn and grow," "mentorship programs," "skill development," "learning stipends," "career development," "give purpose to your skills" **Significance:** Learning agility valued over existing expertise in rapidly evolving industries.

3. Comprehensive Benefits (100% of companies)

Message: "Extensive benefits and support" **Examples:** Health/dental/vision, equity, 401(k), flexible time off, wellness support, parental leave **Significance:** Benefits are table stakes, not differentiators.

4. Excellence and High Standards (94% of companies)

Message: "Work with exceptional people and maintain high standards" **Examples:** "World-class team," "exceptional talent," "high performance," "excellence is our standard," "technological excellence" **Significance:** Team quality and performance standards are primary value propositions.

5. Innovation and Category Creation (92% of companies)

Message: "Pioneering breakthrough innovations" **Examples:** "Revolutionary technology," "category creation," "cutting-edge innovation," "pioneering tools," "robots with purpose" **Significance:** Incremental improvement insufficient; transformation expected.

6. Global Scale and Reach (88% of companies)

Message: "Worldwide impact and international presence" **Examples:** "Global scale," "worldwide reach," "international impact," "global workforce," "around the world" **Significance:** Local focus insufficient; global ambition expected.

7. Diversity and Inclusion (86% of companies)

Message: "Diverse, inclusive teams and belonging culture" **Examples:** "All backgrounds welcome," "inclusive environment," "diverse perspectives," "equal opportunity employer" **Significance:** Diversity and inclusion are core values, not compliance requirements.

8. Autonomy and Ownership (82% of companies)

Message: "Take ownership and work with autonomy" **Examples:** "Own your projects," "entrepreneurial freedom," "independent work," "every idea can become a reality" **Significance:** Candidates expect ownership and autonomy, not micromanagement.

9. Speed and Agility (76% of companies)

Message: "Fast-paced, agile environment" **Examples:** "Move fast," "rapid iteration," "dynamic environment," "why not faster?" "dynamic company" **Significance:** Speed and agility valued in competitive, rapidly evolving markets.

10. Humility and Responsibility (64% of companies)

Message: "Humble, responsible, ethical behavior" **Examples:** "Stay humble," "ethical practices," "social responsibility," "honor humanity," "trust and transparency" **Significance:** Character and values matter alongside performance and capability.