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## **An Application of Internal Marketing for Sustainable Competitive Advantage in Johannesburg Construction Firms**

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## **Abstract**

The concept of internal marketing has received much attention from researchers and academics alike. This study, therefore, investigated internal marketing as a strategy to achieve sustainable competitive advantage in the construction industry. The research was based on a quantitative approach, which involved a sample of 260 construction managers who participated through a kwiksurvey online questionnaire link. The research instrument measured internal marketing dimensions, which include internal communication, employee empowerment, inter-functional coordination, employee training and development and organisation commitment against sustainable competitive advantage. Data analysis techniques comprised of structural equation modelling which focused on confirmatory factor analysis to confirm conceptual relations and causal relations between each internal marketing element. This research thereby contributes to the existing literature on internal marketing and the attainment of a sustainable competitive advantage by organisations. Managerial implications were presented and future research direction was proposed.

**Keywords:** *Internal Marketing, Sustainable Competitive Advantage*

**JEL Classification:** M31, M1

## **Introduction**

Internal marketing is a philosophy in the management field of study which posits that employees are customers of the firm (Conradie, Roberts-Lombard & Klopper, 2014). The context of the present research focuses on internal marketing within the construction industry and sustainable competitive advantage. Sustainable competitive advantage is when a firm gains higher economic benefits in comparison to its competitors (Besanko, Dranove, Shanley & Schaefer, 2000). Construction firms are aware of the importance of involving marketing in their management functions to adapt themselves not only to the continuous changes in the industry, but also to satisfy their clients' demands, while being competitive and improving their business strategy (Naranjo, Pellicer & Yepes, 2011). Construction firms, therefore, stand to benefit significantly from internal marketing practices. Internal marketing promotes products primarily to employees, and when these employees are satisfied, they then channel them to the customers (Belias, Vasiliadis

& Velissariou, 2020). Furthermore, internal marketing can enable the business to achieve their targets such as enhancing customer satisfaction through innovation (Jalilvand, Vosta, Khalilakbar, Pool & Tabaeian, 2019; Tajeddini, 2011). The construction industry everywhere faces problems and challenges due to the increasing competition and globalization and changing client demands (Aloini, Dulmin, Mininno & Ponticelli, 2012; Nguyen & Chileshe, 2015; Ofori, 2000). Matching the growing complexity of the business environment requires the construction firms to provide improved service quality and greater responsiveness to client demands (Ghoniem & El-Tabie, 2014). So, construction firms must emphasize the centrality of clients by putting them first and anticipate future needs. However, most firms are so busy focusing on and communicating with clients, that they forget what the firm's most important asset is, its people. Zubair, Kazi, Karim and Siddiqui (2012) suggested that firms need to change their thinking regarding their employees and assume them as an important and integral part of the organisation.

Internal marketing is a major activity in the development of a client-oriented firm. However, despite the critical role of internal marketing as a link between the firm's external marketing objectives and its internal capabilities, very few firms use internal marketing in practice (Gounaris, 2008). Internal marketing is based on the satisfaction of employees that eventually leads to the retention of the best employees that help a firm achieve a sustainable competitive advantage in a highly competitive globalised environment (Luigi, Oana, Mihai & Simona, 2013). Several authorities have identified the importance of internal marketing as a recipe for business success. Internal marketing has been explored in prior research on varied issues. Rafiq and Ahmed (2000) focused on how the concept of internal marketing has evolved while Bernstein (2005) explored public health and Bowen and Sethi (2020) looked at cybersecurity. The conclusion reached by Rafiq and Ahmed (2000) was the development of criteria necessary for an effective internal marketing program. Also, they proposed a scale to measure internal marketing using factors such as service quality, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and profitability. As for Bernstein (2005) they concluded that internal marketing is key for recruiting and retaining employees ultimately providing a sustainable competitive advantage. Last, the conclusion in Bowen and Sethi (2020) made a case for how internal marketing can

counter cybersecurity threats since employees would be well equipped to tackle such challenges.

The present research was in the construction industry showing how dynamic the topic of internal marketing is? Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml (1991) view internal marketing as the process of treating employees as customers. They add that it is both a philosophy and an approach necessary for conducting work.

## **Identification of Research Gaps and Problem Statement**

Conditions in the South African construction industry remain difficult and less prosperous compared to a few years ago, although several companies have reported improved margins, it is mainly as a result of forced restructuring to improve internal efficiencies (South Africa Industry Insight Report, 2011). The research study aims to contribute towards bridging two identified gaps in the literature. First, the gap in internal marketing in the construction industry. This is an industry that has generally been neglected in marketing. There have been several studies in a global context that have investigated on internal marketing as a strategy to achieve sustainable competitive advantage (Alhakimi & Alhariry 2014; Caldwell, Licona & Floyd, 2015; Al-Azzam, 2016), however, a lack of knowledge exists on this topic in South Africa. Second, the gap in internal marketing from a South African context. Swanepoel and De Jager (2008) investigated the levels of satisfaction in respect of pre-identified internal marketing related variables in a large provincial hospital in South Africa. However, these studies in South Africa did not explore the variables under consideration in this study. Empirical objectives of the present study are provided in the following section.

## **Empirical Objectives**

Given the purpose of the study, the empirical objectives underlying the study are to investigate the relationship between:

- internal communication and sustainable competitive advantage;
- employee empowerment and sustainable competitive advantage;
- inter-functional coordination and sustainable competitive advantage;

employee training and development and sustainable competitive advantage

Organisational commitment and sustainable competitive advantage.

## **Literature Review**

The literature review is presented in the section below. First, the concept of internal marketing will be discussed, followed by a discussion of the theoretical grounding underpinning the study. Last, the proposed conceptual framework and hypothesis for the study will be presented.

### ***Internal Marketing***

The concept of internal marketing has been around for over two decades in academia, with Joseph (1996) and Paul and Sahadev (2018) suggesting that this is when a firm sells and promotes itself to its employees. Internal marketing is also referred to as internal branding or employee branding and is crucial for external brand building and management in the eyes of the customers (Conradie et al., 2014; O’Callaghan, 2009; Witt & Rode, 2005). Furthermore, internal marketing viewed as a key player in enabling productive partnerships, salespeople and members of other functional units in the organisation (Kadic-Maglajlic, Boso & Micevski, 2018). Internal marketing practices, therefore, is considered to have a positive impact on organisational culture (Fortenberry & McGoldrick, 2016). The importance of internal marketing is widely recognised by academics in their role in ensuring that organisations achieve a sustainable competitive advantage in their business environment (Rafiq & Ahmed, 2000). Internal marketing is also playing a central function during the implementation of marketing strategies by firms. The successful implementation of marketing strategies by a firm is directly influenced by the nature and effectiveness of its internal marketing efforts within the organisation (Rafiq & Ahmed, 2000; Papasolomou, 2006).

For internal marketing to effectively occur within an organisation an organisation must possess effective internal communication practices. Communication within the organisation is an essential prerequisite for the well – functioning of internal activities in the organisation and job satisfaction (Tourani & Rsat, 2012). Rafiq and Ahmed (2000) posit that communication should be featured at all levels of the organisational

hierarchy so that the behaviour of all employees can be influenced. The power of effective internal communication should not be undermined because it serves as a vital tool as far as internal marketing practices are a concern (Dwairi, Bhuian & Jurkus, 2007). Successful companies attach great importance to human resource management and internal communications because they are aware of the value of those activities and the strategic advantage they can bring to the organization. Also, these successful companies are encouraged to fully embrace the internal marketing philosophy, if they seek to offer quality products and services to both markets: internal and external.

Effective communication is linked to better knowledge sharing, which in turn is a critical component of success and even more competitive advantage (Kalla 2005). From this perspective, internal communications can be defined as the interplay between individuals and groups at various levels and in different areas of specialization, with the intention of designing (and redesigning) an organization and to coordinate day to day activities for both strategic and operational planning processes. This is done with a strategic focus on building favourable relationships between management and employees in that organization. In this vein, internal marketing is characterised by high levels of employee empowerment and inter-functional co-ordination (Aldehayyat, 2011; Mgxaji, Chinomona & Chuchu, 2016).

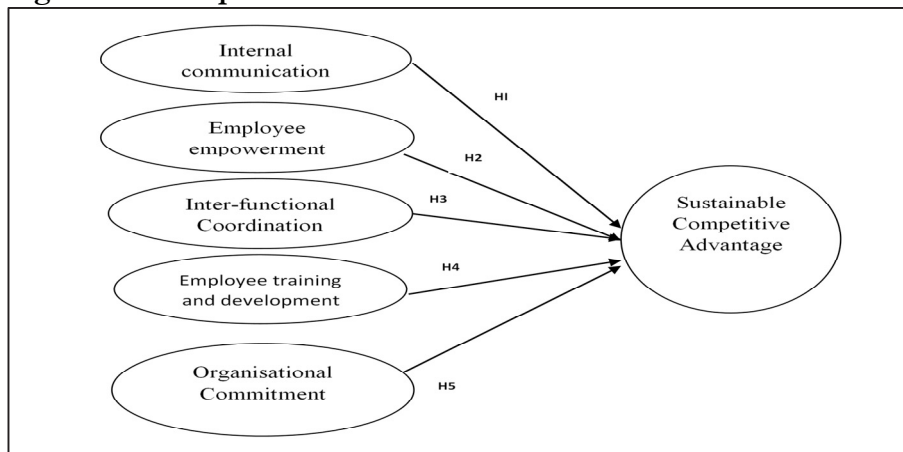
Furthermore, Parasuraman (2004) identified attracting, developing, motivating, and retaining qualified employees as relevant internal marketing dimensions. Rafiq and Ahmed (2000) also suggested strategic rewards, internal communications, training and development, inter-functional coordination, incentive systems and empowerment. On the other hand, Chang and Chang (2007) proposed training, administrative support, internal communication and human resource management as key internal marketing dimensions. Service training programmes and performance initiatives were also identified as internal marketing dimensions (Tsai & Tang, 2008). Ghoneim and El-Tabie, (2014) argued that for organisations to gain a competitive advantage in the business environment internal marketing dimensions were key. These dimensions included inter-functional coordination, customer orientation, marketing-like approach, empowerment and organisational commitment. Similarly, Barney (2002) and Martey (2014) proposed that internal marketing dimensions (namely, retention policy, training, motivation, organisational commitment, empowerment and communication) enabled organisations

to be competitive in the business environment. The theoretical grounding for the research is explored in the following section.

### Theoretical Grounding

For this research, two theoretical models underpinned the theoretical grounding of the study, namely, the models on internal marketing by Berry (1981) and Grönroos (1985). The model on internal marketing developed by Berry (1981) purported that employees should be perceived and treated as clients. On the other hand, client mindedness and interactive marketing within the organisation guide the model developed by Grönroos (1985). Drawing from the theoretical models and literature the researchers proposed the conceptual framework, which consists of five dimensions of internal marketing, namely, internal communication, employee empowerment, inter-functional coordination, employee training and development and organisational commitment. The study's conceptual model is presented in the following section in figure 1.

**Figure 1: Conceptual Model**



### Hypothesis statement

Based on the above conceptual model the following hypotheses are stated where they were all expected to produce both positive and significant outcomes.

H1: There is a positive relationship between internal communication and sustainable competitive advantage

H2: There is a positive relationship between employee empowerment and sustainable competitive advantage

H3: There is a positive relationship between inter-functional coordination and sustainable competitive advantage

H4: There is a positive relationship between employee training and development and sustainable competitive advantage

H5: There is a positive relationship between organisational commitment and sustainable competitive advantage

## Research Methodology and Design

A quantitative research design was followed in the study which was underpinned by the positivist paradigm. This was because it was imperative to obtain objective findings as they could be used for business decision-making. Due to the absence of a dataset of all construction firms in Johannesburg and the difficulty in obtaining a sampling frame, convenience sampling was used to select suitable participants. The research sample was made up of 260 managers of construction firms based in Johannesburg, South Africa. The sample was based on an acceptable sample of 250 respondents required for SPSS 25 as well as a prior similar study (Zimuto & Maritz, 2019) who used a sample of 224 managers. An online survey (kwiksurvey) was sent to the participants via email to collect data from them.

The questionnaire was developed through the adaptation of previous instruments (King & Zeithaml, 2001; Seliman, 2000). The questions were, therefore, covering to aspects. First, were demographic questions on gender, years that the organisation has been in operation as well as whether the respondent identified as a manager or supervisor? The second aspect of the questionnaire was made up of Likert-type questions based on a 5-point scale. These were on *internal communication, employee empowerment, inter-functional coordination, employee training and development, organisational commitment and sustainable competitive advantage*.

In terms of data analysis, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 23 was utilised for generating descriptive and reliability results. Additional analysis was conducted by Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS) 24 for structural equation modelling (SEM). The SEM was done through a two-step procedure, starting with confirmatory



factor analysis followed by path modelling. Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to establish whether adapted scales were still reliable while path modelling was conducted to test hypotheses of proposed relationships between factors. The following section presents the results of the study.

## Results of the study

This section presents an overview of the respondent profile, scale accuracy analysis, model fit and hypothesis results.

### *Respondent profile*

The profile of the respondents in terms of gender, level of education, number of years employed (tenure) and duration of business operations in the industry will be discussed.

**Table 1: Gender of Respondents**

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	182	70%
Female	78	30%
Total	260	100%
Years employed	Frequency	Percentage
< 5 years	26	10%
5-10 years	189	73%
>10 years	45	17%
Total	260	100%
Firm's years in operation	Frequency	Percentage
< 5 years	1	0%
5-10 years	12	5%
>10 years	247	95%
Total	260	100%
Education Level	Frequency	Percentage
Matric	5	2%
College Diploma	46	18%
Degree	136	52%
Master's or higher	73	28%
Total	260	100%

In the study, there was a total of 260 respondents, 70% of the respondents were males and 30% of the respondents were females. In terms of years in operation, it can be noted that the majority of the organisations had been in operation in the construction industry for more than 10 years (95%). None of the organisations had been in operation for less than a year (0%). As for years of employment, the majority of the respondents had been employed in their organisations for 5-10 years (73%). On the other hand, 17% of the respondents had been employed for more than 10 years. The smallest percentage of employees had been employed for less than 5 years (10%). The educational level of participants showed that the majority of the respondents had a degree (72%). On the other hand, 28% had a Master's degree and above, 2% had a Matric and lastly 18% had a college degree.

### **Reliability and validity**

To assess the reliability of the measurement scales used in the present study, Cronbach Alpha coefficients and the composite reliability test were computed. As presented in table 1, Cronbach Alpha coefficients ranged between 0.858 and 0.889 exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.7 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

**Table 2: Reliability Results**

Factor	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	Items
Internal Communication	0.887	0.882	7
Employee Empowerment	0.880	0.891	5
Inter-functional coordination	0.858	0.807	5
Employee Training	0.884	0.860	8
Organisational commitment	0.889	0.858	6
Sustainable competitive advantage	0.881	0.840	6

The composite reliability values as ranged from 0.807 and 0.891, which is acceptable as this exceeds the threshold of 0.7 (Hair, Anderson, Tatham & Black, 2008). The inter-factor correlation values for all the paired latent variables in the study were lower than 0.7, suggesting the existence

of discriminant validity (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The inter-factor correlations are presented in table 3.

**Table 3: Inter-factor correlations matrix**

	IC	EE	IFC	ET	OC	SCA
IC	1					
EE	0.3606	1				
IFC	0.36415	0.28911	1			
ET	0.41946	0.28585	0.56515	1		
OC	0.37806	0.23566	0.43034	0.46229	1	
SCA	0.44043	0.30131	0.44370	0.39882	0.55040	1

**Key:** IC; Internal Communication, EE; Employee Empowerment; IFC; Inter-Functional Coordination, ET; Employee Training, OC; Organisational Commitment; SCA; Sustainable competitive advantage

### Assessing measurement model fit

The analysis of the model fit was performed through various indices, namely chi-squared, normed fit index (NFI), incremental fit index (IFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) and the Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation (RMSEA). Table 4 presents the results of the model fit indices.

**Table 4: Model fit indices results**

	NFI	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
Outcome	0.914	0.968	0.953	0.046
Accepted level	>.90	>.90	>.90	<.06 or <.08

**Key:** NFI; Normed Fit Index, CFI; Confirmatory Fit Index, TLI; Tucker Lewis Index, RMSEA; Root Measure Standard Error Approximation

From Table 4 above, it can be noted that all the model fit indices reached acceptable thresholds. A chi-square of below 3 was obtained as required for model fit. Furthermore, NFI, CFI, TLI and RMSEA all met the recommended threshold of 0.9 or higher? (Hair et al., 2008). The following section presents results from hypothesis testing.

## Hypothesis testing

**Table 5: Hypothesis testing results**

Proposed Hypothesis	Hypot hesis	Estim ate	P- Value	Outcome	
<i>Internal Communication &gt; Sustainable Competitive Advantage</i>	H1	0.233	<0.05	Significan t	Suppo rted
<i>Employee Empowerment &gt; Sustainable Competitive Advantage</i>	H2	0.079	0.191	Not significan t	Reject ed
<i>Inter-functional Coordination &gt; Sustainable Competitive Advantage</i>	H3	0.239	<0.05	Significan t	Suppo rted
<i>Employee Training and Development &gt; Sustainable Competitive Advantage</i>	H4	0.027	0.636	Not significan t	Reject ed
<i>Organisational Commitment &gt; Sustainable Competitive Advantage</i>	H5	0.600	<0.05	Significan t	Suppo rted

*Significance level  $p < 0.05$*

## Discussion of Hypothesis Testing Results

From the results presented in Table 9, it is evident that three of the five hypotheses are supported (H1, H3 and H5). From the findings, the first hypothesis (H1) is supported ( $p < 0.05$ ). This implies that internal communication has a positive influence on achieving sustainable competitive advantage. This is in line with previous literature and research (Dwairi, Bhuian & Jurkus, 2007) which purports that internal communication positively influences the ability of an organisation to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage in the business environment. The second hypothesis (H2) in the study is not supported. This implies that employee empowerment does not positively influence the ability of an organisation to achieve a competitive advantage. This finding is not in line with the assertions by Martey (2014) that employee empowerment is a key element of internal marketing efforts that lead to a competitive advantage by organisations.

The findings from the third hypothesis (H3) was supported ( $p < 0.05$ ). In this vein, inter-functional coordination has a positive influence on

achieving sustainable competitive advantage. This is in line with the assertions by Aldehahay (2011) that effective inter-functional coordination embedded in internal marketing processes enables the effective functioning and competitiveness of an organisation. To achieve a sustainable competitive advantage, an organisation needs to have effective inter-play and co-ordination of functions (Aldehahay, 2011). The fourth hypothesis (H4) was not supported in the study. This implies that employee training and development do not have a positive influence on the attainment of sustainable competitive advantage by an organisation. This finding is not in line with the findings and assertions by (Parasuraman, 2004) that training and development as functions of internal marketing lead to organisations achieving a sustainable competitive advantage in the market. From the findings, the fifth hypothesis (H5) was accepted ( $p < 0.05$ ) in the study. This implies that organisational commitment has a positive influence on achieving sustainable competitive advantage.

### **Managerial Implications**

The insight gained in the study implies that organisations in the construction industry need to ensure that the elements of internal marketing (specifically, internal communication, inter-functional coordination and organisational commitment) are harnessed for the organisations to gain a competitive advantage in the environment. Internal marketing could, therefore, aid in enhancing the performance of firms. This is because understanding the requirements for business performance generally allows management to measure and the firm's performance (Kotler & Armstrong, 2011; Maziriri & Chinomona, 2016). Organisations need to ensure that the internal communication processes they adopt encourage internal communication throughout the organisation. Internal communication throughout the organisation should not only be in the form of a top-down approach but instead, the organisations need to encourage a multi-dimensional approach to communication. Furthermore, organisations in the construction industry need to ensure that they provide work-related tasks and rewards that keep employees engaged and committed to the organisation.

## Recommendations for Future Studies

Future studies can be in the form of longitudinal studies to identify the influence of internal marketing on the competitive advantage of time. Future studies can involve using managers of construction companies from all provinces in South Africa, and not only the Gauteng province. A mixed-method in the form of both quantitative and qualitative research techniques can be employed in future studies. Qualitative research techniques in the form of in-depth interviews with managers of construction companies can be conducted.

## Conclusion

The study contributes to the literature in the field of internal marketing by highlighting the influence of internal marketing on the attainment of competitive advantage by organisations in the construction industry. The study shows that the elements of internal marketing (specifically, internal communication, inter-functional coordination and organisational commitment) positively influences an organisation's ability to attain a competitive advantage. In this vein, the implementation of internal marketing practices enables an organisation to outperform competitors in the business environment and gain a competitive advantage. Construction organisations need to ensure that internal marketing processes become core processes within the organisations to ensure effective functioning and success in the business environment.

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