Unlocking Employee Engagement: Key Drivers for Participation in Corporate Influencer Programs on LinkedIn

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Abstract: The nature of corporate communication has undergone significant changes in recent years. One notable trend is the increasing use of employees as brand ambassadors, as evidenced by the proliferation of corporate influencer programs. However, a critical question is often overlooked: under what conditions are employees genuinely willing to participate in such programs? This predicament poses a substantial challenge to companies, who must devise compelling strategies to attract and engage employees in these initiatives. This study aims to address this gap by examining the critical factors influencing employee participation in corporate influencer programs on LinkedIn through a conjoint analysis. More than 100 employees, representing a range of company types from start-ups to large corporations, were surveyed. The findings reveal that a modern and actively cultivated corporate culture is essential for employees, while external recognition and occasional support (such as social media guidelines) play only a minor role.

Keywords: Corporate Influencer Motivation, Corporate Influencer Programs, Conjoint Analysis

1. Introduction

An increasing number of companies are incorporating employees into their communication strategies as ambassadors for the organization. These employees voluntarily share insights about their work on their personal social media profiles, offering an authentic glimpse into the company's daily operations (Lüthy, 2023). This innovative approach to corporate communication is referred to as corporate influencing, which involves the dissemination of company-related information through employees (Knappe, 2021). Employee-driven communication is perceived as particularly credible, as these individuals also serve as relatable figures within their peer groups (Ebner & Eck, 2022). The objectives pursued by corporate influencers' posts may include strengthening the employer brand, increasing brand awareness, generating leads, or enhancing customer loyalty (Ebner & Eck, 2022; Knappe, 2021). Notable corporations such as IBM, Cisco, Siemens, and DATEV have already implemented corporate influencer programs, strategically engaging employees as company ambassadors for a variety of objectives (DATEV, 2025; Humphreys, 2023; Rashbass, 2024)

The professional networking platform LinkedIn has emerged as the ideal medium for corporate influencer communication. With its emphasis on professional connections, LinkedIn offers a solid foundation for corporate influencers to develop personal branding strategies. Its thematic orientation and range of technical features position LinkedIn as the leading platform for corporate influencer activities (Ebner & Eck, 2022; Klein, 2021; Radde, 2021). Since 2024, an exciting technical development has been the allowance for companies to sponsor content created by employees, thereby augmenting its reach (Agius, 2024). Despite these technical advancements and the significant investment in corporate influencer programs, it is noteworthy that one-third of such initiatives ultimately fail (Mathony, 2024). One possible reason for this is the reluctance to serve as a brand ambassador for the company. This reluctance stems from a variety of personal, professional, and cultural factors. At its core, this resistance reflects a complex interplay between the employee's relationship with the company, their perceived risks and benefits, and the broader dynamics of the workplace (Majka, 2024).

Corporate influencing remains largely practice-driven, with limited academic research on the subject. For instance, Nestler et al. (2021) explore a definition for corporate influencers and describe their tasks, objectives, skills, and characteristics. Other studies examine the tangible value corporate influencers bring to organizations. Durst and Klopf (2024), for example, found that corporate influencers in the skilled trades sector positively impact both the industry's image and career choices of potential applicants.

Research has focused on corporate expectations of corporate influencer communication, the ideal attributes of corporate influencers, and their role within the communication mix to date. However, understanding the conditions under which employees are motivated to participate in these programs is a critical prerequisite.

The limited and nascent literature on this topic has rarely explored the factors influencing employees' preferences for participating in corporate influencer programs, particularly on LinkedIn. While Lüthy (2023), Ebner and Eck (2022), Hoffmann (2020), Klein (2021), Sturmer (2020), and Zayats (2020) have described a range of factors influencing the success of such programs for both organizations and employees, as well as the various initiation and implementation strategies, their findings are largely experience-based and serve as practical guidelines. A qualitative study by Termöllen (2023) examines the organizational challenges of corporate influencer communication, developing a model based on nine expert interviews to aid inexperienced organizations in structuring their corporate influencer strategies.

However, no experimental research has yet analysed which factors employees prioritize and how these preferences influence their decision to participate in corporate influencer programs on LinkedIn. Understanding these preferences is crucial, as it not only helps organizations tailor their influencer programs to enhance employee engagement and endorsement but also provides deeper theoretical insights into the dynamics of corporate communication strategies and programs.

In our study, we quantitatively examine the factors that influence employees' preferences for participating in corporate influencer programs. Using a conjoint analysis with over 100 participants, we address the following research question: *Which factors influence employees' preferences when deciding to participate in a corporate influencer program on LinkedIn?*

2. Corporate Influencer and Corporate Influencer Programs

A **corporate influencer** is primarily an employee whose main responsibility lies in fulfilling the specific duties of their department. In addition to these responsibilities, they share content on their personal social media profiles—such as LinkedIn, Xing, or Twitter—on behalf of their organization. This content leverages their specialized knowledge to provide insights into their area of expertise (Ebner & Eck, 2022).

These employees consistently establish a connection to their company, either by explicitly mentioning or linking to the organization or by listing it in their profiles. This association ensures that they are clearly identifiable as employees of the company.

To act as a corporate influencer, employees should meet these three essential requirements:

1. **Alignment with tasks and organizational values**: Employees need to feel comfortable and satisfied within the organization, identifying with its core values such as trust, recognition, respect, transparency, and a sense of participation (Lüthy, 2020). (Tomczak et al., 2012) (Sturmer, 2020)
2. **Motivation and personal benefits**: Intrinsic motivation is essential for corporate influencing, as the process relies heavily on voluntary participation (Moormann, 2021). It allows employees to enhance their professional presence on social media, develop valuable networks, and potentially advance their careers (Ebner & Eck, 2022).
3. **Communication Skills**: Corporate influencers need to be creative, adept at using social media (especially LinkedIn), and skilled at distilling complex information into clear, engaging content tailored to their audience (Nestler et al., 2021)

Corporate influencer programs are internal initiatives designed to position employees as brand ambassadors and thought leaders, particularly in digital spaces. The objective of these programs is to establish a mutually beneficial scenario in which both the company and its participating employees experience advantages. Employees generate and share content that simultaneously promotes the company and positions them as experts in their industry (Knappe, 2021). Including employees from diverse roles and departments enhances the richness and inclusivity of the communication strategy (Ebner & Eck, 2022). Moreover, such programs are integral to employer branding, helping to attract prospective talent (Durst & Klopf, 2024). While corporate influencer programs are highly customizable to each organization's needs, it is recommended to establish guiding principles, a mission, and clear objectives collaboratively with participants (Knappe, 2021).

Based on insights from Lüthy (2023), Ebner and Eck (2022), Hoffmann (2020), Klein (2021), Sturmer (2020), and Zayats (2020) several factors significantly influence the success of corporate influencer programs:

1. **Transparency and leadership commitment**: Senior management must demonstrate clear support for the initiative. For example, in 2018, Tim Höttges, CEO of Deutsche Telekom AG, personally engaged with corporate influencers, which not only provided motivation but, more importantly, signalled his unequivocal commitment to the program.
2. **Social CEO and mentorship**: Companies can leverage experienced social media users, particularly on LinkedIn, as mentors to support and guide less experienced employees participating in corporate

influencer programs. Additionally, dedicated "office hours" or consultation sessions can be particularly beneficial.

3. **Structured onboarding process**: Employees should undergo a structured onboarding process before joining the program, starting with the definition of clear roles and responsibilities. This process provides participants with a clear understanding of what to expect and includes training on social media best practices.
4. **Social media guidelines**: Organizations should develop tailored social media guidelines that align corporate influencer activities with the company's values, incorporating elements of behavioural branding such as tone and conduct rules. These guidelines should extend beyond legal compliance to promote active communication and foster employee alignment with organizational values, thereby minimizing potential pitfalls.
5. **Content library and support**: Providing a content library or content hub is crucial for supporting corporate influencers. These resources offer a source of inspiration and guidance for creating relevant and engaging content.
6. **Dedicated time for corporate influencing**: Employees need sufficient time within their work schedules to create content and engage with their audiences.
7. **Internal community**: Internal corporate influencer communities provide social anchors, fostering trust and openness. Platforms like company intranets can support the creation and maintenance of these communities.
8. **Trust**: Corporate influencers should be given the freedom to operate independently on their channels, as this autonomy significantly enhances their motivation and engagement.
9. **Contractual agreements**: Clear contractual agreements are essential to protect corporate influencers legally and to define specific guidelines regarding liability, data protection, and compliance requirements. This reduces uncertainties and minimizes the risk of errors.

It is evident that the phenomenon of corporate influencers and their corresponding programs has captured the business community's attention and has also become a focal point of empirical research. This body of work has illuminated the characteristics of such programs and the factors crucial for their success. However, one bottleneck of these initiatives remains the willingness of employees to participate actively. Therefore, continued research is essential to unravel the motivations and incentives that drive employee engagement in these programs, ensuring their effectiveness and sustainability in the evolving landscape of corporate communication.

3. Research Model and Hypothesis

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), developed by Icek Ajzen in 1991, extends the earlier Theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen, 1991). Originating from social psychology, it explains how human behavior is influenced by intentions and perceived control. Intention, defined as the motivation or willingness to engage in a specific behavior, is considered the strongest single predictor of actual behavior. This intention is shaped by three determinants: attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2011). The TPB is a widely utilized framework for the prediction and modification of human actions. Consequently, it is particularly well-suited for investigating and understanding the motivations behind employee participation in corporate influencer programs. By employing the TPB, we can methodically explore and quantify the relative impacts of decision-relevant influencing factors. This, in turn, offers actionable insights into designing more effective corporate influencer programs that align with employees' preferences and organizational objectives.

To identify and determine the factors that are relevant to the decision-making process, the present research model was developed using the results of preliminary expert interviews with corporate marketing professionals and corporate influencers. The analysis approach that was applied was qualitative and inductive, and this approach led to the identification of three major determinants from the data: sense of belonging to the organization, recognition from others, and support from the organization. We apply and contrast these determinants to the TPB framework in the following way:

1. **Sense of Belonging to the Organization**: This represents *the attitude toward the behavior*, i.e., the individual's positive or negative evaluation of performing the behavior. In the context of corporate influencer programs, this is reflected by the employee's emotional connection and identification with the organization, which positively or negatively influences their attitude toward participating in the corporate influencer program.

2. **Recognition from Others**: These represent the *subjective norm*, i.e., the perceived social pressures or expectations from significant others regarding the behavior. In the presented case, it is concluded that this pertains to the perception of whether significant individuals or groups, such as colleagues, supervisors, or peers, acknowledge and value participation in the corporate influencer program.
3. **Support from the Organization** representing *perceived behavioural control*: This determinant reflects the ease or difficulty of performing the behavior, as perceived by the individual. Our insights suggest that this construct refers to the extent to which organizational resources, encouragement, and structural support enable or hinder the employee's ability to participate effectively in the program.

By integrating these determinants within the TPB framework, our research elucidates how individual perceptions, and organizational dynamics interact to influence employee participation in corporate influencer initiatives. This holistic approach validates the theoretical model and enhances the practical understanding necessary for optimizing corporate influencer programs.

Based on this context, we develop three hypotheses to explore the determinants of employee participation in corporate influencer programs on LinkedIn. The conjoint analysis methodology will be utilized to test these hypotheses by examining how each determinant (independent variables) influences the part-worth utilities of employee decisions regarding the likelihood to participate in a corporate influencer program on LinkedIn (dependent variable).

- **H1**: The attitude toward organizational culture influences the (individual) part-worth utilities when deciding to participate in a corporate influencer program on LinkedIn. It is hypothesized that a positive attitude toward organizational culture increases the likelihood of participating in a corporate influencer program.
- **H2**: Subjective norms influence the (individual) part-worth utilities when deciding to participate in a corporate influencer program on LinkedIn. It is hypothesized that positive recognition from others increases the likelihood of participating in a corporate influencer program.
- **H3**: Perceived behavioural control influences the (individual) part-worth utilities when deciding to participate in a corporate influencer program on LinkedIn. It is hypothesized that the lower the perceived barriers and the greater the organizational support, the higher the likelihood of participating in a corporate influencer program.

Figure 1 provides a visualization of our research model, illustrating the relationships between the constructs.

Figure 1: Research model based on theory of planned behavior

4. Conjoint Design and Survey Structure

To examine the conditions under which employees are more likely to participate in a corporate influencer program on LinkedIn, a choice-based conjoint analysis is conducted. This multivariate analysis method is designed to estimate part-worth utilities based on holistic evaluations. It allows for the determination of the part-worth utilities of factors influencing participation in a corporate influencer program, as well as the relative importance of individual factors (Hauser et al., 2019). Conjoint analysis was developed as a methodological framework for studying consumer preferences, with the objective of estimating the respondent's metric utility functions. The analysis can be carried out either through a direct survey of preferred alternatives or indirectly.

For this study, we have chosen the indirect approach, known as choice-based conjoint analysis (Louviere & Woodworth, 1983). This method simulates various scenarios (stimuli) composed of combinations of the independent variables and their attribute levels. Respondents are presented with different alternatives (choice sets) from which they must select their preferred option.

4.1 Design of the Choice Situation

For a choice-based conjoint analysis, it is essential to define the attribute levels and choice situations clearly (Raghavarao et al., 2010). We opted for two attribute levels, "high" and "low," as the distinction is easier to interpret compared to "low," "medium," and "high." To enhance understanding, the "high" and "low" levels were described in detail based on the assigned influencing factors (see Table 1).

Table 1: Choice experiment design: Attributes and attribute levels

Attribute		Sense of Belonging to the Organization	Recognition from Others	Support from the Organization
Attribute Levels	Low	I feel little to no connection with the organization's culture and values. We do not foster an internal community.	Participation in the corporate influencer program neither advances my personal brand nor my network. It has no impact on my future career.	I receive little to no support for corporate influencing. The organization dictates what I should post and controls all related activities.
	High	I fully identify with the organization's culture and values. We foster a strong internal community.	Participation in the corporate influencer program significantly enhances my personal brand and network. It positively impacts my future career.	I receive full support for corporate influencing, including guidelines, a content hub, and additional resources. The organization trusts me and allows me autonomy in deciding what to post.

By combining the number of attributes (J) and their levels (M), eight distinct stimuli (S) can be generated to differentiate the selection scenarios within the choice experiment (Backhaus et al., 2015):

$$S = M^J = 2^3 = 8$$

These eight stimuli represent all possible combinations of the attributes at their respective levels, enabling the analysis of preferences across varying scenarios.

In the survey design for this study, each choice situation comprised two choice sets, accompanied by an additional "none of the above" option (see Figure 2). This fallback choice allows respondents to opt-out if they do not prefer any of the presented scenarios. Excluding the opt-out option, the calculation using the formula for pairwise combinations yields a total of 28 paired choice sets, with S representing the set of potential stimuli (Backhaus et al., 2015):

$$S \cdot \frac{(S-1)}{2} = 8 \cdot \frac{(8-1)}{2} = 28$$

Due to the complexity and the cognitive load it would impose, presenting all 28 pairwise choice sets to each participant is impractical. To maintain the respondents' focus and prevent fatigue, it is recommended to use a maximum of 12 to 15 decision situations per participant (Backhaus et al., 2015). In this study, we opted for seven choice sets per participant because additional questions were included in the survey. The 28 paired choice sets were randomized and divided into four distinct questionnaires, each containing seven choice situations. At the beginning of the survey, respondents were randomly assigned to one of these four questionnaires. This approach ensures a manageable workload for participants while preserving the robustness of the study design.

4.2 Questionnaire Design

For this study, the tool LimeSurvey was chosen, as it is a leading open-source survey tool that enables the creation of diverse online surveys with extensive question and answer options, flexible logic, and evaluation rules (LimeSurvey, 2023). To facilitate later comparison of responses, only closed-ended questions were used. With the exception of the filter question and demographic items, all relevant survey questions included the additional option "none of the above" to ensure that participants were not forced to choose an answer (Roemer, 2014).

The structure of a standardized questionnaire generally consists of six parts: title, instructions, (socio-) demographics, content, feedback, and closing remarks (Döring & Bortz, 2016). Before the actual questionnaire began, participants were introduced to the topic through an introductory section, where the concept of the corporate influencer program was defined, and the upcoming scenario was briefly explained. A total of 15 questions were asked, divided as follows:

- One filter question
- Seven questions on the scenarios
- Seven questions on demographic characteristics

Next, a specific scenario was described, requiring participants to immerse themselves in the context of the study. As part of this, the Theory of Planned Behavior and the three attributes with their respective levels were explained to help participants better understand the scenario. Respondents were presented with seven situations, each requiring them to choose between three alternatives. Each situation featured two scenarios (choice sets) and the option "none of the above." A sample section of the questionnaire showing one of these choice situations is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Choice situation in the questionnaire

5. Sample and Results

For this study, data was collected using an online questionnaire. During the two-week survey period, from December 7, 2023, to December 21, 2023, the survey link was distributed via LinkedIn, and a total of 202 participants accessed the link. Of these, 71 questionnaires were incomplete, leaving 131 datasets. These were further evaluated against various quality criteria. For example, participants were excluded if their completion time was excessively short, indicating that they may not have engaged thoughtfully with the questionnaire. Finally, we obtained a final dataset of 112 valid responses. The distribution of gender, age and company size within the sample is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Gender, age, and company size distribution of the sample

Gender			
Male		Female	
31 (28%)		81 (72%)	
Age Group			
18-26 years	27-42 years	43-58 years	59-73 years
43 (38%)	50 (45%)	16 (14%)	3 (3%)

Company Size (Number of Employees)					
2-10	11-50	51-100	101-500	500-1000	> 1000
5 (4%)	25 (22%)	8 (7%)	20 (18%)	10 (9%)	40 (39%)

The part-worth utilities, which influence the composition of the overall utility, aim to explain an individual's choice behavior as accurately as possible. The highest part-worth utilities in each category represent the range of results compared to the null category. In this context, the respective part-worth utilities always reflect the difference from the baseline category. Typically, the final level of an attribute is chosen as the baseline category. In the present study, since only two levels exist for each attribute, the "high" level was consistently defined as the baseline category. The data result in a cumulative total of -1.802 (see Table 3). This value serves to quantify the overall impact of unfavourable circumstances on the decision to participate in the corporate influencer program. Consequently, this cumulative disutility underscores the importance of maintaining high standards across all key attributes to foster employee participation in corporate influencer programs.

Table 3: Estimated part-worth utilities compared to the null category

	Low	High
Sense of Belonging to the Organization	-1.066	0
Recognition from Others	-0.505	0
Support from the Organization	-0.231	0
None		-0.270

By calculating the ratio between the overall total and the individual values, the relative importance of the attributes can be derived. The largest share (59.15%) is attributed to **sense of belonging to the organization**. **Recognition from others** ranks second with 28.12%, while **organizational support** accounts for the smallest relative importance at just 12.82% (see Table 4).

Table 4: Relative importance of attributes

Attribute	Relative importance
Sense of Belonging to the Organization	59.15%
Recognition from Others	28.12%
Support from the Organization	12.82%

Based on all values, it is possible to calculate the total utilities of the choice sets in the next step (see Table 5).

Table 5: Overall utility values of the choice sets

Choice Set	Sense of Belonging to the Organization	Recognition from Others	Support from the Organization	Overall utility of choice sets
1	High	High	High	0
2	High	High	Low	- 0.231
		None-Option		- 0.270
3	High	Low	High	- 0.505
4	High	Low	Low	- 0.736
5	Low	High	High	- 1.066
6	Low	High	Low	- 1.297
7	Low	Low	High	- 1.571
8	Low	Low	Low	- 1.802

By aggregating the overall utility of the individual stimuli, choice set 1, "High Belongingness / High Recognition / High Support," achieves the highest overall utility score of 0. This is followed by the stimulus "High Belongingness / High Recognition / Low Support," indicating that the combination of a strong sense of belonging to the organization and high external recognition provides greater utility than high organizational support alone. Interestingly, the "None-Option" ranks third, with a partial utility value of -0.270. This suggests that employees are unlikely to participate in a corporate influencer program on LinkedIn unless they feel a strong sense of belonging to the organization and receive significant external recognition. The subsequent choice sets further highlight the critical role of belongingness. The utility of a strong sense of belonging alone outweighs the combined impact of low recognition from third parties and low organizational support. The next choice set's utility score is driven solely by a low sense of belonging, as both "High Recognition" and "High Support" are treated as neutral, contributing no additional value. The final three stimuli emphasize the relatively minor roles of third-party recognition and organizational support compared to the importance of belongingness. While recognition and support contribute to the overall utility, their influence is secondary to the foundational impact of an employee's sense of connection to the organization.

In evaluating the performance of the conjoint analysis model applied to understand employee preferences in corporate influencer programs, several statistics are of importance. The log-likelihood (LL) of the model at convergence was -771.137, compared to the null log-likelihood (LLO) of -861.312. The difference between these values, yielding a likelihood ratio (LLR) of -180.35, is statistically significant (p-value < 0.001), indicating that the model fits the data significantly better than a model with no predictors. The McFadden R^2 value, at 10.47%, although appearing modest, is within the acceptable range for conjoint analysis models, where explanatory powers are typically lower than those observed in other types of regression models due to the complexity and variability in choice data. The model's hit rate, defined as its classification accuracy, is 59.95%, indicative of its acceptable predictive capability, particularly in light of the unaccounted factors influencing such employee decisions in a real-world context. The collective significance of these metrics underscores the efficacy of the model in capturing and interpreting the decision-making processes of employees when contemplating participation in corporate influencer programs.

6. Discussion, Limitations and Implications

Our study provided clear insights into the importance of influencing factors that determine whether employees are willing to participate in a corporate influencer program. The findings suggest that a sense of belonging to the organization has a significant impact on the preference to join a corporate influencer program on LinkedIn, making it the decisive factor in the decision-making process. Our results are in line with Lüthy (2020), Tomczak et al. (2012) and Sturmer (2020) who state that the alignment with tasks and organizational values is an essential requirement to act as a corporate influencer. This also underlines the findings of Termöllen's qualitative study (2023) who found that if a strong corporate culture is not established as a prerequisite, employees may not only feel unmotivated to speak about the organization but also struggle to identify positive aspects to share publicly. Considering the nine influencing factors derived from the insights of Lüthy (2023), Ebner and Eck (2022), Hoffmann (2020), Klein (2021), Sturmer (2020), and Zayats (2020), we hypothesize that transparency and leadership commitment (Factor 1) and internal corporate influencer communities (Factor 7) can foster the sense of belonging. E.g., by positioning the CEO and leadership management as first movers in a corporate influencer program or by organizing peer-learning sessions for experience sharing. According to our results, the influencing factors social CEO and mentorship (Factor 2), structured onboarding process (Factor 3), social media guidelines (Factor 4), content library and support (Factor 5), dedicated time for corporate influencing (Factor 6) or contractual agreements (Factor 9) play a minor role to raise motivation or willingness to participate in corporate influencer programs. We assume that these factors primarily function as hygiene factors for employees.

Regarding our limitations, participation in the survey was voluntary, meaning that respondents were free to decide whether or not to participate. Consequently, it is likely that individuals with an interest in the topic of corporate influencer programs were more inclined to take part in the survey. Furthermore, the results have limited generalizability, as the study specifically focused on corporate influencer programs on LinkedIn.

We conclude that employees will only engage in a corporate influencer program if the organization successfully cultivates a deep and enduring sense of belonging. Building such a culture—founded on trust, mutual respect, flexibility, and collaboration on an equal footing—takes time and cannot happen instantly. It requires time to create an environment where employees not only feel comfortable but are also motivated and willing to actively represent their organization to the outside world.

Future research could explore the long-term sustainability of corporate influencer engagement by analysing how employee motivation, organizational support, and external recognition evolve over time.

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