

THE HOTEL SERVICE CHALLENGES IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract

Sri Lanka is one of the world famous holiday destinations for its remarkable natural tourism resources and authentic food culture. Despite the fact that tourists enjoy a significant tourism experience in Sri Lanka, the hotel industry has faced issues with the limited management concern on human resources (HR) and employees' low motivation to provide professional services. Considering the lack of academic research focused on the improvement of service in Sri Lankan hotel industry, this study aims to identify the current key challenges from the three perspectives of hotel organizations, employees and guests. Secondary data are qualitatively collected and analyzed from the travel review websites, blogs and several other sources. This study also, conducts interviews with Sri Lankan Tourism Board, Hotel management training institute executive officers and tourists around the Island. In addition, reviewed the findings from the previous literatures and empirical researches on the service improvement and the HR practices in the context of hospitality industry. Recommendations have also been put forward on the following three aspects: (1) hotel management and relevant HR-practices, (2) hotel career aspects of employees, and (3) guests' perception. Finally, this study emphasizes that deeper consideration on the three parts can be a foundation to strengthen the human resources of the Sri Lankan hotel industry.

Keywords: Hotel service, hotel employees, guests' perception.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism industry has brought the country higher returns and economic investments in Sri Lanka since the three-decade internal conflicts ended up in 2009. Now Sri Lanka is an ideal holiday destination where travelers could be impressed by blue beaches, sightseeing, and authentic food culture. These aspects enhance the tourist arrivals to Sri Lanka recently and remarkable credits as an international tourism destination (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, Sri Lanka Tourism in 2013: Record year for Sri Lanka Tourism in 2012/Daily mirror 2013, Sri Lanka Tourism set for another record breaking year/2013/ Aviation voice).

Even though the tourism industry has successfully offered natural and cultural tourism and hospitality resources to tourists, inadequate human resources (HR) and unprofessional service intention are key challenges in Sri Lankan hotel industry (Key challenges facing the tourism sector in Sri

Lanka/2014/Daily mirror news). Thus, it is necessary to take account of adopting the global trends, and to improve the services and to increase the professional service providers, which might be the best practices for current Sri Lankan hotel industry to make it competitive against other south Asian destinations.

The current issues associated with the tourism industry identified and highlighted are poor awareness of tourism and hospitality job opportunities among the overall community, low paid and low wages jobs, seasonal and temporary jobs, lack of training facilities, lack of private sector investments and involvement, high labor turnover, negative social attitudes on tourism employment, more specifically in women employment.

In addition, from travelers' perspective, the major issues findings are related to repeated complaints on the different aspects of hotel services including unpleasant welcome, poor attitudes on understanding the customers' needs and specific requirements, inadequate communication and interactive skills,

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slow check in, delayed food service and delivery, and unwillingness of management to help guest in certain situations.

Considering the lack of research interest on the topic of the Sri Lankan hotel industry, the current study addresses the reasons of low motivation for the potential employees to build careers in the hotel industry and the challenges caused by the low number of current employees in the industry. Therefore, the aims of this study are

- To identify the current service key challenges in the Sri Lankan hotel industry
- To find the ways to overcome the challenges from the three perspectives: Hotel, Employees and Guests

METHODOLOGY

In order to provide suggestions to the industry to raise and train professionals in Sri Lankan hotel services, the study qualitatively summarizes the findings from the literature in the context of hospitality HR and prior empirical researches on several tourism destinations. In order to support the objectives of the study, information related to current hotel service issues was collected in August 2015 through different methods including direct interviews and discussions with relevant high officials in Tourism Authority of SL government, hotel service training officers' and overall opinions and suggestions from tourists.

Furthermore, issues of travelers which focused on the employees – customer interaction and service aspects were analyzed based on the travelers' reviews. In order to collect the data, hotel review related information were collected for star-rated and other lodging accommodations located in selected 15 major tour cities and extracted information about the employees – customer related issues was organized by manually.

And also, tourist review website (Sri Lanka Hotels – Trip Advisor, posted from January 2013 to January 2015) and, several sources including industry related conferences, forums, news, articles, travel magazines, previous meetings, direct interviews with hospitality management, tourism board and annual reports were

also included in data gathering (Impending human resource crisis in Sri Lanka tourism industry /2011/Global travel industry news, Challenges of tourism industry in Sri Lanka/2010/Daily News, HR in hospitality should be prioritized/2014/Daily news, Developing tourism in Sri Lanka and challenges/2010/Daily News).

FINDINGS

Hotel Industry

There are several reasons for the trends of poor intention and employment in tourism and hotel industry in Sri Lanka. According to the tourism and hotel industry annual evaluation refers, by 2016 estimates to reach the number of hotel rooms, the level from 26,700 to 40,000 to manage the required demands for hotel accommodation facilities and service. However, the key challenge is rise that whether, the Human resources are adequate to meet this required demand.

The Sri Lanka institute of tourism and hotel management (SLITHM was established in 1964 as the Ceylon Hotel School and School of Tourism, nearly 50 years ago) to educate and train hotel staff annually to 4,000 to create trained personals. Some of the Universities like Sabaragamuwa University and Uva-Wellassa University also educate 50 to 150 tourism -graduates per annum. In addition, the existing private colleges related to tourism also support for trained personals. However, all of these outputs of trained human resource is not adequate to meet the demands of expanding hotel industry.

Moreover, the quality of training, especially the proficiency in English and some other key languages, does not appear to receive much attention in the current training programs. Further, after the qualifying with the tourism, and hospitality related training, such as, front desk, housekeeping, managers, cooks, waiters, gardeners, room boys, hotel car drivers etc., most of the skilled and semi-skilled workers in the hotel industry have significantly migrated to overseas. Other aspects includes, negative social attitudes on tourism employment, more specifically women in employment, lack of private sector investments and involvement to promote or marketing tourism and related services.

According to the study objective, to identify and understand the current HR key challenges in order to find the ways to improve the quality of service in the hospitality in Sri Lanka, the study conducted the initial interview at Sri Lanka Tourism Board, Colombo on August 2015. The views, key ideas and suggestion from Sri Lankan Tourism Authority and development Bureau relevant Government officers and Sri Lanka institute of tourism and hotel management (SLITHM) officers were also taken in to the consideration.

Thus, the study addresses the recent trends and issues and some suggestion from the relevant high officials in both government and industry. In Government officers' perspective, since 2010, the tourism industry is blooming around the Island and several infrastructural related projects (e.g. Trincomalee, Pasikuda regional tourism projects) are ongoing with the aid of international collaborative supports. Moreover, there is an increasing interest in developing homestay plans currently. The main objective of these projects would be to increase the tourism and hospitality career or job opportunities among the local community by providing the proper educational and technical training in order to enhance the standards of living of local communities' island widely.

Hotel Employees

The data from the employees' perspective empathized that the low paid and low wages jobs, high labor turnover, seasonal and temporary jobs, lack of training facilities and approaches as the potential problems associated with tourism sector. Thus, the hospitality human resource remains with the several in-depth issues in Sri Lanka.

In general, tourism human resource studies (tourism employment and impact assessments) express the economic growth in each country. Research in human resources of tourism has been generally measured

under two dimensions: human resources requirements (industry's staffing needs) and employment impact studies (Elkin, Roberts, Ritchie, & Goeldner, 1987). And also labor market is an essential fact in dynamic nature of tourism to understand the tourism employment (Liu & Wall, 2006; Riley, Ladkin, & Szivas, 2002; Szivas & Riley, 1999; Szivas, Riley, & Airey, 2003), which includes high labor mobility between organizations, wide range of salary scales and seasonality, *etc* (Brotherton, Woolfenden, & Himmetoğlu, 1994; Kuslivan & Kuslivan, 2000). In many countries around Asia Pacific region, economic growth highly depends on tourism Industry. For instance, the studies conducted in China identified that lack of experienced catering service providers and lack of trained professionals and service culture are the major challenges against the growth of tourism industry (Choy & Gee, 1983; Liu & Wall, 2006; Oudiette, 1990).

Similarly, in Komodo Islands, Indonesia, authorities and lacking the appropriate skills and education, the islanders were unable to participate in the new development'' (Hitchcock, King, & Parnwell, 1993). Even though Thailand has sufficient manpower supply, there is shortage in trained professionals to fill the different levels of skills, capabilities and professionalism and the status seems make unfavorable situation (Esichaikul & Baum, 1998). A sub-Saharan African study indicated that a shortage of skilled labor was responsible for the dismal performance of the tourism industry (Ankomah, 1991).

Therefore, based on these prior research reviews, the study summarize that many developing countries globally face issues such as lack of either technical specialists or the systematic education and training programs in order to train tourism and hospitality professionals and enhance standardize the quality of tourism industry service.

Table 1. *Hotel Career trends in developing countries*

Country	Key issues	Study
Turkey	In balances between the demand for, and supply of skilled tourism staff	Brotherton, Woolfenden, & Himmetoğlu, 1994; Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000
China	Lack of experience of tourism personnel in catering Managing tourism facilities Unfamiliarity with tourism service culture	Choy & Gee, 1983; Liu & Wall, 2006; Oudiette, 1990
Thailand	Sufficient manpower supply But, shortage of trained personnel to fill the jobs for different skills Capabilities and levels of professionalism	Esichaikul & Baum, 1998
Philippines	Lack of trained human resources at the required standard and quantity	WTO,1994
Komodo Islands, Indonesia	Lacking the appropriate skills and education The islanders have been unable to participate in the new development	Hitchcock, M., King, V. T., & Parnwell, M., 1993
Africa	Shortage of skilled labors	Ankomah, 1991, Lipscomb, 1998

The findings of hotel employees’ perspective are in different aspects. First one, which is related to employees’ turnover, intention and job satisfaction, concludes that the fairness of personal outcomes that employees receive from hotel management may have more impact on turnover intentions, job satisfaction.

Turnover model has been suggestion by Mobley, Horner and Hollingsworth clarify as dissatisfaction produces a series of withdrawal cognitions in which employees examine the costs and benefits associated with leaving their jobs. Ultimately, this cognitive appraisal results in employees’ withdrawal from the organization. Hence, job satisfaction is essential because when employees have their job satisfaction would not lead to employees’ turnover (Mobley, Horner, & Hollingsworth, 1978).

Further studies were summarized in the employee – customers communication and interaction views. Degree of emotional labor display plays a major role in customers’ future positive behavioral intention. Especially, surface and deep acting service attributes are essential in hotel service settings. Whereas, the

deep acting has a positive influence on the requirement to display positive emotions which could enhance a positive hotel’s service assessment (Rupp, McCance, Spencer, & Sonntag, 2008).

Initially, employees’ expectation begins from feelings and impression of individuals. (Geers, Weiland, Kosbab, Landry, & Helfer, 2005). Based on the individual’s desire and wish, their degree of expectation about their future work or job related information might vary. This includes life experiences, post – work impression, career developmental stage, and personal characteristics. Thus, employee expectation highly focuses on the probabilities of job, working place concern which directs to job satisfaction strongly.

Thus, job satisfaction process is in regard to one’s feelings or state-of-mind regarding the nature of their job and working environment. It can be influenced by several factors, such as pay practice, interaction between employee - supervisor, quality of the physical environment and facilities and financial-non-financial benefits. Hence, degree of employee

satisfaction is high, which credits to managers who believe that “an organization has a responsibility to provide employees with jobs that are challenging and intrinsically rewarding” (Robbins, Odendaal, & Roodt, 2001). According to Oshagbemi’s study “individual’s positive emotional reaction to particular job”. Further, Oshagbemi & Gill reveals that employees with higher degree of trust will have higher levels of job satisfaction in the hospitality industry. Job satisfaction can affect has an indirect influence on turnover (Gill, 2008; Oshagbemi, 2000).

In addition, intention to leave refers that as a person’s stated to leave the organization within some specific time period. Basically, it would be a psychological process and part of a sequence in the withdrawal cognition process (Mobley et al., 1978; Van Breukelen, Van der Vlist, & Steensma, 2004). Where, Carmeli and Weisberg also noticed that three elements in the withdrawal cognition process – thoughts of quitting, the intention to search for another job elsewhere and the intention to quit – but not the element of turnover itself (Geers et al., 2005; Stashevsky, Burke, Carmeli, Meitar, & Weisberg, 2006).

And also, prior research provides consistent support for intent to leave influences on an actual turnover (Tett & Meyer, 1993). Similarly, in meta-analysis by Steel and Ovalle also finds, seems strong positive relationship between intention to leave and actual turn over and also relied to predict of actual turnover intentions as well (Steel & Ovalle, 1984). However, high turnover in hospitality industry, effects on replacement and recruitment costs (Deery & Iverson, 1996; Deery & Shaw, 1997). And also, most critical intangible costs is the loss of employee morale for the employees who prefer to stay with the organization (Tanova & Holtom, 2008).

Hotel Guests’ Perspective

Interview

Further, the study conducted a few interviews with foreigners around Colombo and Northern Province in Sri Lanka. The purpose of this interview is to understand the foreigners’ overall satisfaction, especially regarding the accommodation facilities and service experience. The finding suggest that the travelers are satisfied with their travel experiences and impressed with the tour destinations, nature, cultural diversity and resources, public transportation and authentic food culture in overall. However, hotel accommodation facilities (e.g. basic needs) physical environment as well as employees’ service interaction and communication, empathetic service facts were repeatedly indicated as required to be improved a lot. Moreover, tour information centers and tour map facilities were highly expected by the tourists.

Travel Reviews

The summary of travel reviews shows that the employees’ service related issues are very high in star-rated hotels (1246), especially the 4-star rated hotels (743), compared to those of lodging facilities (216). Even though the demand of star-rated hotel increases, these findings highlight the increasing negative evaluation on the poor customer services. Major findings are repeated complaints on the different aspects of hotel services including unpleasant welcome, poor attitudes on understanding the customers’ needs and specific requirements, inadequate communication and interactive skills, slow check in, delayed food service and delivery, and unwillingness of management to help guest in certain situations.

Table 2. Summary of current issues in Sri Lankan hotel service

Tour Destination	City Hotels	No of hotels*	No of issues (Hospitality & employees related)				
			5-star	4-star	3-star	Others	Total
Capital	Colombo Hotels	34	42	217	92	14	365
Beaches	Galle Hotels	44	11	41	43	102	197
	Hikkaduwe Hotels	23	18	55	45	12	130
	Bentota Hotels	27	Nil	79	29	19	127
	Mt. Lavinia Hotels	9	Nil	27	30	Nil	57
	Matara Hotels	15	4	20	13	Nil	37

	Kalutara Hotels	8	15	73	7	10	105
Pilgrimage travel	Sigiriya Hotels	8	4	21	16	Nil	41
	Dambulla Hotels	11	Nil	51	8	7	66
	Polonnaruwa Hotels	12	Nil	34	11	14	59
Wild life & safari tour	Yala National park Hotels	2	Nil	7	4	Nil	11
Nature scenes and Historical places	Kandy Hotels	51	3	78	76	27	184
	Trincomalee Hotels	6	Nil	27	15	2	44
	Batticola Hotels	1	Nil	Nil	9	3	12
	Jaffna Hotels	6	Nil	13	8	6	27
Total		257	97	743	406	216	1462

* Number of hotels located in a city analyzed in this study

Empirical Findings

The customer's overall satisfaction is a key resource to the service industry. Customer satisfaction means a positive status of emotion perceived by customers that develops a long term relationship between service firm and customers (Barsky & Nash, 2002; Davidow, 2000; Lepp, Gibson, & Lane, 2011; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008; Mano & Oliver, 1993). Hence, service industry highly depends on the customers' perceived satisfaction.

In general, customers' overall assessment of the service is based upon perceptions of what is received or experienced (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). Further, the customer's behavioral approach includes all types of consumer actions that are possible to deliver in either positive or negative manner. An "expression of satisfaction or dissatisfaction" is addressing the hotel service experience either to appreciate or to condemn by directly communicate with third party or spreading positive or negative word of mouth. The satisfied customers enhance the business and services engaged in positive chain process as retain customer loyalty with positive recommend driven to positive word of mouth. Indeed, the study assume that satisfaction should be measured during the consumption of hotel services which attached to emotions in-process

Further, it is important for hotel employees to have professional appearance with a nice manner to make hotel guests satisfied. Well-groomed employees

project a sense of confidence to the guests. Depending on different operational units, it is worthwhile to check if changes need to be made in dress color, design, and intensity to enhance physical appearance of employees. Cool colors can be used to project the image of friendliness, poise, and warmth, and warm colors may be used to project the image of activity and excitement (Tanova & Holtom, 2008). Hotel managers should make sure that hotel employees should undergo continuous quality training to recognize potential shortfalls in hotel product and service quality rendered to the guests.

The findings from the tourism, hospitality industry employment and career which highlights that, HRM practices in hospitality industry would be a significant factor for employees' job satisfaction which creates the negative relationship with employees' turn over intention.

In addition, developing countries' tourism and hospitality HRM practice and development strategy indicated that, those who implementing HRM practices such as labor management participation program, incentive plans, and pre-employment tests are more likely to experience lower turnover rates for non-managerial employees. The key findings from 5 star hotels' HRM practice system (Tooksoon, 2011), shows that best quality of HRM practices which influence the hospitality industry's internal and external and global strengths.

The results further show that the correct market selection and an appropriate response to its needs are critical for success. In addition, employee-

management aspects such as a carefully integrated strategic human resources approach, training of employees, empowerment, and behavior-based evaluation are important elements. The results further suggest that strong employee commitment, marketing synergy, and the tangible aspects of the hospitality innovation are related to the success of hospitality innovations (Guest, 2002)

RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the prior empirical findings, the current study provides the possible recommendations to Sri Lankan hotel industry. Initially, the study suggests that hotel HR management needs to develop continuing education opportunities for current employees to encourage them to obtain higher (degree) certification, to learn multi-skills, as well as customer oriented advanced training (Chung, 2000; Herington, McPhail, & Guilding, 2013). Financial and non-financial benefits should also be upgraded through modern HR practices to retain professional hospitality employees (Iverson & Deery, 1997; Kandasamy & Ancheri, 2009; Nadiri & Tanova, 2010)

Hotel management should develop specific monetary compensation guidelines while training both full- and part-time employees to quickly and properly react to various service failure situations. Depending on different levels of complaints and different situations of guests, hotel management needs to train front desk staff to offer proper arrays of compensations with similar values and let their guests select the best compensation. This creates the possibilities for a win-win situation in hotel service settings.

In order to enhance the service practices, a training program should focus on emotional labor by reacting to customer problems quickly and handling guest complaints in a timely manner. And also hotel managers should implement a training program, which demonstrating empathy and attentiveness, and offering a genuine apology. Situational questions and role playing can be an effective way for guest-contact employees to learn what to do and what not to do in non-routine situations. Hotel managers should consider suitable rewards and recognition for their staff's smart choice of exemplary recovery efforts to stimulate their voluntary participation (Karatepe,

2006). Next would be consider on guest-contact employees should be empowered in such a way as to provide a quick recovery resolution for any service breakdown circumstances. When hotel managers empower their guest-contact employees, it is important for them to clearly identify authority and decision-making boundaries. A caveat for managers is to meet basic needs of employees and to make sure that employees are not under-compensated, undertrained, overworked, and underappreciated (Karatepe, 2006).

Secondly, in any organizations' higher productivity depends on the employees' as functioning organizational system. The idea that motivated and committed workers are the essential condition for accomplishing the organizational goal. The human resource management practices or HRM practices have to be addressed in this position, in order to examine the behavior and performance of the employees. Three main variables of HRM practices namely supervision, job training and pay practices have play a crucial role to enhance job satisfaction of employee. The strongly positive relationship between HRM practice and job satisfaction provide a wisdom way on how an organization can motivate an employee to work efficiently (Cho, Woods, Jang, & Erdem, 2006).

Thirdly, in order to promote the value of employment in tourism and hotel industry, the key emphasizing ideas regarding the career opportunities have to be listed in different education levels such as higher school-, college-, university- and hospitality training institute-levels. Developing the tourism curricula in secondary education and introducing a dual credit system for tourism and hospitality subjects between high schools and post-secondary institutions could encourage students to initiate career opportunities in tourism industry (Chung, 2000). In addition, it is advised to expand continuing professional standards and customer oriented service knowledge, and to promote the training departments at large hotels, with the support of government agencies, like Sri Lanka Institute of Tourism & Hotel Management (SLITHM), as well as private institutions (Chung, 2000; Tosun, 2006)

Finally, to build a vibrant image about hotel industry, tourism professionals should consider about

promoting the key job market strategies. Current study also recommends conducting awareness programs widely including seminars, workshops and campaigns about multi-hospitality career opportunities, which would be the possible way to motivate new job seekers to start their career in the hotel industry. Assuring the better income and job security could be the other ways to strengthen hotel job market, and an overall community's positive perception about employments in hotel industry (Aycan, 2001; Liu & Wall, 2006; Tosun, 2006).

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, the study addresses that employee's attitudes and motivation to provide better service should be essentially improved in Sri Lankan hotel industry. Unfortunately, a limited number of institutions are currently operating the training and development programs relevant to hospitality. The quality of trained professionals, especially the proficiency in multilingual skills and customer service oriented modules, does not appear to receive much attention in the current training programs in Sri Lanka. Necessary steps have to be planned and implemented toward an innovative internal local promotion of the industry's image to change the community's perceptions within Sri Lanka and to motivate them to initiate careers in tourism industries. (The HR challenge in Sri Lanka/2013/Daily mirror)

Of course, there are certain limitations in this study which could be extended as future research. First, the findings of this study might be affected by several secondary resources. The future study might be extended with the focus to evaluate employees' overall expectation on hotel service in Sri Lanka hotel industry in depth.

Therefore, this is the right time for Sri Lanka to adopt global trends and to upgrade the HR in hotel industry. This study assessed and identified the importance of HR related issues in hotel industry of Sri Lanka.

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Resources related to tourism and hospitality in Sri Lanka:

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- <http://www.ft.lk/2014/06/27/key-challenges-facing-the-tourism-sector-in-sri-lanka/>
- <http://www.ceylontoday.lk/22-31939-news-detail-another-tourism-master-plan-needed-for-sri-lanka.html>
- <http://www.eturbonews.com/21536/impending-human-resource-crisis-sri-lanka-tourism-industry>
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