

The role of values in sustaining the hospitality labour market: The case of Austria

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Abstract

The role of human resources in sustaining hospitality enterprises has long been recognized (Hjalager und Andersen 2001; Baum 2007). Personnel are considered vital for the delivery of touristic experiences, thus being a central ingredient of the product offer (Baum 2007). Despite the high unemployment in the sector (Smeral, Huber et al. 2008), several researchers have reported on difficulties of hospitality enterprises to fill their vacancies (Hjalager und Andersen 2001; Smeral, Huber et al. 2008) and retain their employees (Iverson und Deery 1997; Hjalager und Andersen 2001; Smeral, Huber et al. 2008). While turnover may have positive effects for the employees in terms of competence development (Deery und Shaw 1997) and hence somewhat also benefit the companies, exiting the sector might be considered a “brain drain” in the hospitality industry (Ross 1997).

The generally identified competition with other sectors for qualified personnel (Hjalager und Andersen 2001), on the one hand, and the profound global trends that challenge hospitality enterprises (Dwyer, Edwards et al. 2009), on the other, in particular demographic changes drive the present study. Suggesting a decrease in the availability of the “traditional” labor force (Smeral, Huber et al. 2008) and an intensification of employee driven mobility (Baum 2007), the research aims to understand the mobility from the hospitality sector to other industries, in order to develop strategies of how to retain and attract workers. The study explores the employees’ and former employees’ perceptions of the work in the hospitality industry attempting to identify the underlying beliefs and attitudes that shape peoples’ behavior in regards to their continuance or abandonment of the industry. Being frequently termed as a “women industry” (Stuppäck 2005) and recognizing the unused potential of female labor in the case study country of Austria (Ramb 2008), the focus of the study lies on females, hence excluding gender-related differences in perception as suggested by Purcell (1996) by examining a purposeful female sample.

The study adopted a qualitative approach conducting altogether eight focus group discussions in different parts of Austria. Based on a review of the literature, a discussion

guide was developed and slightly adapted based on the type of focus group. Three of eight rounds were realized with females that had left the hospitality industry and the remainder with employees. While the research design does not allow conclusions for the whole female workforce in the hospitality industry, especially in light of the socio-cultural values underlying the voiced opinions and the focus on the Austrian hospitality industry, the study supplements the discussions on human resource management and planning.

The focus group participants addressed the issues examined in earlier national and international studies regarding work in the industry. These included:

- Image of occupations and the sector overall (Purcell 1996; Airey und Frontistis 1997; Riley, Ladkin et al. 2002; Baum 2007);
- Working time and conditions (Purcell 1996; Deery und Shaw 1997; Zellmann und Schlögl 2001; Vogt 2003; Hesselink, Houtman et al. 2004; Vogt 2004; Baum 2007; Vogt und Klambauer 2007);
- Legal framework (Doherty und Manfredi 2001; Vogt 2003; Hesselink, Houtman et al. 2004);
- Career and development (Brownell 1994; Purcell 1996; Hausberger und Gerhard 1999; Zellmann und Schlögl 2001; Nolan 2002; Biehl, Kaske et al. 2003; Ng und Pine 2003; Vogt 2003; Vogt 2004; Baum 2007; Vogt und Klambauer 2007);
- Remuneration (Burgess 2000; Iverson 2000; Vogt 2003);
- Human Resource Management (Deery und Shaw 1997; Iverson und Deery 1997; Baum 2007; Smeral, Huber et al. 2008);
- Gender-related aspects and differences (Brownell 1994; Purcell 1996; Iverson 2000; Doherty und Manfredi 2001; Adib und Guerrier 2003; Ng und Pine 2003; Biehl, Schöberl et al. 2006; Baum 2007).

While agreement prevailed regarding the existence of most of the challenges, the discussion of those issues diverged. Females that thought themselves satisfied with their job in the hospitality industry stressed the positive attributes and frequently compared the “problems” with general challenges in society (“people do not want to work anymore”, “women get lower wages in other industries, too”) and the situation of workers in other, especially social services (“in the hospital you also have to work at weekends”), while females that had deliberately left the industry voiced very rigid absolute statements.

Agreement prevailed as to the belief that “one has to be made for the job”, which indicates a set of personal characteristics that are considered to be important for hospitality occupations.

Motivation to join the industry did not seem to have had a direct influence on how the work was perceived. Rather age, as a possible indicator of alterations in life structure, and changing priorities, expectations and wishes, seemed to have had an influence on perceptions. Even women that declared themselves satisfied with their work, did mention that they could not (have) imagine(d) themselves to work in the industry for “the rest of their life” (“after 40 I either leave the industry or have my own little hotel”). Those statements were mainly voiced in connection with family plans (“I don’t want to be viewed as a bad mother”), job requirements and the image of the hospitality industry as a “young” industry (“I’m too old for the work”, “The job gets too hard”). The statements reflected beliefs about work in the hospitality industry and society overall. The working conditions of the hospitality industry were considered highly stressful and unfavorable for a “normal” family life. These assessments indicate that, in addition to personal values, perceived organizational and societal values shape workers’ behavior.

The findings support a critical reflection of questions such as whether tourism is an industry in which life-long employment is desirable or whether it might be a favorable employment opportunity only for certain phases in life (e.g. during studies and travels). Not examined within the study but indicated by focus group statements was the question, of whether employers support, favor or even instigate the wide held view among the focus group participants regarding age and employment in the industry.

Another critical question arises around the concept of having to be “born” for hospitality related jobs. Does that mean that workers have to have “the right personality”, i.e. the right values, beliefs, attitudes and behavior, to contribute to a hospitality enterprise? If so, how can suitable candidates be identified?

In addition, strategies to retain and attract workers in/to the hospitality have to consider the prevailing entrepreneurial and societal values that form the working environment. To change those is a very challenging and long-term aim. The discussion of whether there is a need and a wish to change them must be initiated before any measures can be taken to profoundly impact the perception and reality of work in the sector, and hence sustain the supply of labor in the Austrian hospitality industry.

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