

THE QUALITY OF HUMAN RESOURCES – A REQUEST FOR HOTEL INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENT. A THEORETICAL APPROACH

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Abstract

In this article we focus on the importance of human resource quality from hotel industry in obtaining quality services and further more in obtaining hotel industry development. We address this issue due to the fact that, usually, when talking about tourism or hotel industry development, the literature in the field offers macro solutions like, infrastructure development, service/product development and/or improving service quality. We consider that a micro approach is also important and from this perspective, we emphasis the role of human resource quality for industry development. The quality of human resources, as a dimension of service quality was not detailed extensively by the literature in the field but we found it relevant for hotel industry development, as this industry it is a service industry, and as Ritz-Carlton Company’s motto say “service comes only from people”.

We discuss some aspects about the frequency of human resource quality dimension in the quality measurement models and then we detail its’ dimensions. The three dimensions presented in this article are: “competence”, “physical appearance” and “behaviour and attitude”. For “behaviour and attitude” sub-dimension we identified some patterns in measuring studies and it looks like responsiveness, friendliness, empathy and service personalisation are the most used terms. Even though these dimensions were the results of literature review and are not empirical validated, we consider being helpful for future research in the field.

Key words: human resource quality, dimensions, behaviour and attitude, hotel industry.

JEL Classification M12, L83

Introduction

Romanian tourism development is a very common subject both in tourism literature and practitioners’ debates. This fact emphasise the importance it has acquired during the last decade. Many practitioners argue that besides agriculture, tourism is Romania’s chance to recover from the economic crisis, although this industry was one of its victims.

When approaching the Romanian tourism development issue at a national level, it’s arguing most often about infrastructure development, administrative frame development, tourism products/services improvements, information services improvement, international marketing, investments and finally about human resource development [24]. In other words, it is considering a review of macro-economic solutions.

On the other hand, in terms of hospitality industry, the most cited solution is to increase the service quality. We can argue that the literature in the hospitality field and also in the tourism marketing field provides numerous studies attempting to define or identify the dimensions of this construct, but they do that without giving enough proves about the importance of each dimension. Although the quality of human resources is recognized as being part of service quality model from hotel industry [22], unfortunately, it is often approached too superficial. This means that studies does not offer too much details about the definition or its components, due to the fact that, on one hand, there is no empirical evidence for human resource quality (HR quality) dimensions [12] and on the other hand only competence is seem to be HR quality [11]. Thus, when considering the development of the hotel industry at a micro-economics level, a potential solution would be improving HR quality.

These are the reasons why in this paper we first propose to define the quality of human resources and then to identify its components, as they been shown in the literature. Afterwards we will illustrate a possible theoretical link between HR quality and hotel industry development.

1. Service quality from hotel industry

Literature in the field shows that there is a tendency for separation the service hotel quality research from HR quality. So, considering service hotel quality research, studies stop at identifying its dimensions or its

components, at identifying the measurement methods/models or at proposing overall quality growth strategies. In contrast, human resource studies deal more with antecedents of HR quality, and less with the its impact on overall service quality. An exception is the research on relationship between human resource practices that determine HR quality and further the organizational performance (especially financier performance). For a better understanding about the way in which HR quality influence organizational performance and further more the influence on hotel industry development, we consider imperative to first define the service quality for hotels.

In this paper, the quality services in hospitality will be addressed in terms of: perception of customers on the service received, following an evaluation process of that service’s dimensions and sub-dimensions. (definition adapted from Brady and Cronin) [4]. Many studies that proposed quality measurement models in hotel industry have emerged during time. Those considered the most relevant for industry are illustrated in the table below (Table no. 1).

Table no. 1

The most important quality measurement models for hotel industry

Principal models		Follow-up models	
Authors	Models’ components	Authors	Models’ components
Sasser, Olsen and Wyckoff (1978)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • material performance/quality; • facility performance/quality; • HR performance/quality. 	Rust and Oliver (1994)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • service itself; • service delivery; • ambient of the service
Gronroos’ (1982)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • technical quality; • functional quality 	Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1983)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • process quality; • result quality
Parasuraman, Zeithaml, Berry (1985, 1988, 1991, 1996)	<p style="text-align: center;">SERVQUAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reliability; • responsiveness; • competence; • tangibility; • empathy <p>Q = P – E Q = quality P = performance; E = expectations</p>	Cronin and Taylor (1992)	<p style="text-align: center;">SERVPERF</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reliability; • responsiveness; • competence; • tangibility; • empathy <p>Q = P Q = quality P = performance</p>
Dabholkar et al. (1996)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ physical appearance: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • appearance • comfort. ○ reliability: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • promises; • right execution. ○ employee’ interaction: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • trust; • courtesy; • problem solving; • politics. 	Brady and Cronin (2001)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ interaction quality: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • attitude, • behaviour, • experience ○ physical ambient quality: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ambient conditions, • design, • social factors ○ results quality: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • waiting time, • tangibles, • valence

Source: Author’s synthesis

Table no.1 offers a synthesised image about the quality service models. It can be seen that each model has HR quality as a dimension. Even though there are no empirical evidence for the importance of this dimension, some authors [22] argue that service quality have to be seen as overall quality. The overall quality can be obtained only if we gain quality or performance on each dimension and sub-dimension and if just one dimension is not functioning right, the final result will be negatively affected. Therefore we consider that insufficient investment in human capital is not justified.

The quality of hotel services is often determined by what is called in the literature “moment of truth” (concept introduced in the literature by Richard Norman). The most rewarding experiences, for a customer, are those that occur when employees “break the rules” to respond quickly and flexibly to the particular needs of the service [3]. These experiences occur when direct interaction between employees and customers happens, which actually means "moments of truth". Each such "meeting" is an opportunity for the organization to demonstrate superiority in service quality or a risk of losing customer loyalty and trust [Bitner, 1995 as cited in 14]. This is the reason why HR quality dimension in hospitality industry is very important.

Often, the customer-employee interaction is the service itself offered by the company, in terms of the client perspective. It is therefore necessary that the front line human resources to be trained to understand the

customer, to have the freedom and discretion to relate to it, to have "aesthetic ability" required [17]. In other words, the orientation towards quality human resources hotel should be a request. Particular attention offered by management to these meetings comes from the statement that the service' employee is considered inseparable from the service itself, the most important resource for providing dedicated customer service [25]. Highly important management decisions should be correlated, in this case, with the human resource practices as: selection, promotion, motivating and rewarding employees.

2. The quality of human resources

2.1. Components defining the quality of human resources

As it been mentioned above "human resources quality" dimension is one of the general dimensions of service quality, which involves its existence in any measuring model of hotel quality. However, it is not known to what extent its sub-dimensions, also are general or rather contextual. Thus, in the literature customer-employees interactions are evaluated by the customer in three ways: the employee's appearance (e.g. clothes, hair, makeup, cleaning), competence (training and experience gained, mainly due to communication skills) and behaviour [6]. This leads us to define the quality of human resources through the three components mentioned above.

To study the validity of these dimensions we turned to the literature in the field. In this consent, Ekinci and Riley having a series of studies (1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002) have proposed to review and retest results obtained by other researchers in studying hotel service quality, using Q methodology (e.g. the procedure Q-sort) and Guttman scale. The results were quite different from one study to another being validated four (physical quality, staff behaviour and attitude, speed, output quality) [10] or three (behaviour and attitude, physical quality / output quality, speed) [4] dimensions. The general recommendation was to achieve three-dimensional models [11] because they seem to be more valid.

In this context, we selected 11 studies which provided details on the items defining and measuring the quality of human resources and we have analyzed them taking into account the three components (competence, physical appearance, behaviour and attitude). We placed each item into one of three sub-dimensions and because of the vast and comprehensive content of "behaviour and attitude" component, we elaborate it more. (Table no. 2)

Table no. 2

Details on components of HR quality	
Dimensions	Definition
<u>Competence</u>	employees know what they need to do, they are trustfully, they do the right thing the first time
<u>Physical appearance</u>	employees' general appearance, dressing
<u>Behaviour and attitude</u>	
- responsiveness	employees always solve the customers' requests, rapidly, they offer prompt answers
- willing to serve	employees stop doing persona task and answer to clients, they are interested in request solving
- empathy	employees understand customers' needs
- friendliness	friendly attitude and communication, friendly welcome
- hospitality	courtesy, respect, polite, protective attitude
- personalisation	service personalisation

a) Behaviour and attitude

Regarding employee "behaviour and attitude" items content proposed by Ekinci and Riley (2001) refer to the lack of professional competence. Their analysis (using the Guttman procedure), which was based on three criteria (coefficient of reproduction, reproductive marginal minimum and coefficient of scalability), showed that only three of the six proposed dimensions - physical quality, staff behaviour and attitude, accessibility, speed, reliability, quality of the result - are validated. These are: physical quality, behaviour and attitudes of employees and quality of the result, where the result quality has predictive power on other dimensions invalidated [11]. Items used in this study, together with those used in another study by Ekinci [7], have led to a questionnaire with

high internal consistency (Cronbach alpha = 0.88) that were subsequently used in other studies. The items refer to the customization service, competence, friendliness, empathy.

Following the analysis of these studies it can be concluded that the "behaviour and attitude" dimension was validated as an overarching dimension [7], since it applies to every situation of service and may be defined as: degree to which hotel's employees demonstrate, on one hand, competence in performing their tasks, and on the other hand, quality of empathy shown in interaction with customers [11].

b) Competence

Since the direct interaction between employees and customers, these "moments of truth" in service industry, plays a crucial role in selling a service, employees must demonstrate skills such as flexibility, availability, discretion, communication, emotional competence. Research in the emotional intelligence field demonstrated the impact of emotional competence on customer satisfaction [12], based on the idea that employees with such skills will be able to create a positive and pleasant feeling to customers, that will lead to a positive evaluation of interaction and furthermore to overall satisfaction.

Both theorists and practitioners in the field considered that to have competent employees, a firm must invest money and time and one of the key human resource practices in this area is extensive training of employees [13]. The analysis of models for measuring service quality in the hospitality industry (Table no. 1) it can be seen that there is at least one dimension that refers to human resources skills. Although in the literature there this dimension was not validated, there are items that are used to measure human resource quality hotel that refer to it.

c) Physical appearance

Physical attractiveness has been studied more closely by Söderlund and Julander (2009), Koernig and Page (2002) and they shown that it affects customer attitude towards the service employee, it has effect on customer satisfaction and on global assessments of organization providing services. Researchers claim that the physical attractiveness of a person in an advertisement take effect not only on the perception and evaluation of that person, but also on related objects [19]. Another supporter of the idea above is that the customer service quality evaluation is influenced by unconscious factors, analyzed when meeting with staff [19], and physical attractiveness may be one of them. It can also be seen that in defining the "quality human resources" dimension validated by Ekinci, there is an item that refers to the physical appearance of employees.

2.2. Components' identification of "HR quality" dimension in literature in the field

After studying the literature in hospitality field on quality we selected eleven studies which deal with this subject. For each one of it we evaluated whether the three components listed above (competence, physical appearance, behaviour and attitude) is considered in HR quality measurement. We summarised the information collected in Table no. 3, by adding a tick for each HR quality component, including for those that detailed the employee "behaviour and attitude".

Studying the table below (Table no. 3) it can be observed that on an average, there are four components in studies selected, and that there are also some extreme values like, for the minimum is one and the maximum is seven. These numbers differs especially because of the purpose of the paper.

Table no. 3

The presence of components of "HR quality" dimension in literature in the field

No	Authors	No. of items	Components of "HR quality" dimension								No. components
			compe tence	appea rance	comportament și atitudine						
					respons iveness	willing to help	friendl iness	hospital ity	empa thy	personal ization	
1	Akan, 1995	7	X	X			X	X	X		5
2	Mei et al, 1999	11	X		X	X		X	X	X	6
3	Ekinci, 1999	6	X			X			X	X	4
4	Tsang and Qu, 2000	7	X	X		X	X			X	5
5	Ekinci 2001	5					X		X	X	3
6	Ekinci and Riley, 2001	5	X								1
7	Juwaheer, Ross, 2003	9	X	X		X	X				4
8	Akababa, 2006	11	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	7

9	Albacete-Saez et al, 2007	7	X		X	X					3
10	Tsang and Ap, 2007	10	X			X		X	X	X	5
11	Wilkins et al, 2007	4	X		X	X	X				4
	Frequency		10	4	4	8	6	3	6	6	mean 4

To be mentioned that these researches did not aim to validate the “HR quality” dimension, but the hotel quality measurement in general and/or proving the relationship between quality and other elements from human resource management - performance chain (human resource practices, commitment, organizational performance). As it was expected, “competence” component is taken into consideration in 10 from 11 studies, second place is for “willing to help” with eight appearances, and the third place is for other three components: “friendliness”, “personalization”, “empathy” (frequency is 6). Even though physical appearance is considered important for some authors, its’ frequency is less than half for the studies taken into consideration. Same thing it can be said about “responsiveness”.

Conclusions:

Hospitality is, at first sight, one of the industries that cannot justify the need for investments in HR quality: human resources expenditure share in total expenditures is high and any additional budget allocated to this section shall be considered only an additional cost. When speaking of investing in HR quality, often means investing in training and skills building (which inevitably leads to financial resources), but in reality it is more than that: it means investing time, effort, availability of management, trust investment, emotional investment, it means investing in management creativity in order to create better working conditions and better non-financial motivational HR practices. Of course, everything can be turned into money if we try, but this is not actually the purpose. These forms of investments will take us not only to a better evaluation of service provided, but on long term, it will lead us to raising the tourist number (which implies organizational performance), to business development in order to answer the customers’ needs (old and new), to new hospitality business openings, and finally to hotel industry development. We are aware that there are a lot of many other factors that influence this theoretical chain, but we consider that human resources are at the basis of every action the business wants to take and once you gained their commitment and their quality nothing else can stop you.

The purpose of this work was to emphasize the importance of human resources quality in providing quality customer services, and hence the hotel industry development in Romania. Since this dimension was considered to define only the employee’ competence, we considered appropriate to define it as shown in the literature. Although it was a theoretical approach, this paper will help managers in making decisions about investing in employees’ quality and will also be helpful to research seeking to measure this construct. Future research may focus on validating these dimensions and sub-dimensions.

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