

Agile talent management in the Irish hospitality industry – closing the skills gap

Patrice O'Reilly Duffy

Faculty of Business and Law, Liverpool John Moores University

P.OReillyDuffy@2020.ljmu.ac.uk

1. Introduction - Background to the research

The hospitality industry is very important to the Irish economy and is a major source of employment. In recent years, there has been massive growth in the industry which is now experiencing difficulties in the recruitment and retention of staff. The Hospitality Skills Oversight Group in their final report 'Ireland's €5 Billion Hospitality Industry, Skills, Careers, Growth', 2018, acknowledged the chronic staff shortage. The report recommended that the industry itself had a role to play in promoting opportunities and a sustainable, structured strategy is required to promote careers and opportunities within the industry (HSOG, 2018). The difficulties experienced have been compounded further by the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Literature Review

Some of the challenges faced by the hospitality industry, such as high levels of labour turnover and problems recruiting employees, could be attributed to ineffective/outdated human resources management practices. Many hospitality organisations are reluctant to invest in training (Choi & Dickson, 2009; Jaworski, Ravichandran, Karpinski, & Singh, 2018), coupled with the fact that the industry has increasingly found it difficult to attract and retain suitable employees (Gupta, 2019; McGinley, Hanks, & Line, 2017; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2019). Employees are fundamental to the success of a hospitality organisation. The survival and success of an organisation is therefore highly dependent on the supply and retention of quality talented employees. If talent is identified and acknowledged as key to business success, managers should place it at the top of the agenda (Denning, 2018). 'Talent management' has been identified as contributing significantly to creating organisation competitive advantage (Gupta, 2019) and can help hospitality organisations attain their strategic goals (Nur Lyana & Wan Noordiana Wan, 2018).

General human resource management research has seen an increase in the exploration through strategic lenses of how human resource practices may be leveraged to achieve business success (Tracey, 2014). However, Ahammad, Glaister, and Gomes (2020, p. 2) found that "*scant research exists exploring the connection between strategic agility and human resource management*". Gaps have also been identified in the literature specific to the Irish hospitality industry. According to Nolan, Garavan, and Lynch (2020) limited research has been carried out on human resource development in the Irish tourism sector. There has also been calls for more research on talent management approaches and practical talent management practices (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016; Harsch & Festing, 2020).

The Hospitality Skills Oversight Group (2018) called for industry specific programmes to be developed and for the introduction of flexible accreditation options and life-long training logs to support skills development within the industry. The report also suggested that tailored education and training programmes would assist unemployed hospitality workers return to work in the sector. Talent management strategies for hospitality organisations to attract and retain employees have been identified by Goh and Okumus (2020), they include the provision of relevant training and a visual career path for employees. The introduction of such a cultural change would require organisations to have an agile and strategic response to the management of employees. Harsch and Festing (2020 p. 44) state "*talent management is a dynamic capability fostering agility through the continuous shaping of this talent*". The talent management challenges the hospitality industry is facing requires strategic, agile responses (Dannunzio-Green & Teare, 2018). Collaboration with academia to review, design and develop learning opportunities would be mutually beneficial to the hospitality organisation, the employee and

the academic institute (Baum, 2019; Nachmias, Walmsley, & Orphanidou, 2017). Studies have found that creating a positive learning environment for employees, in the areas of skill enhancement, motivation and providing opportunities have direct beneficial impacts on the organisation's financial performance (Tracey, 2014).

3. Focus of this study

This study will seek to investigate how an agile approach to talent management can be utilised by the Irish Hospitality Industry to close the skills gap. There will be particular focus on workplace-based training and education initiatives derived from industry and academia collaboration. Furthermore, it will assess the impact of this form of engagement in terms of retention and career progression on hospitality employees and the hospitality organisation.

4. Research Question

The primary question of the study is 'How can agile talent management play a strategic role in addressing the skills gap in the Irish hospitality Industry?' The primary aims of this study are (1) To evaluate how agile talent management could play a strategic role in the Irish hospitality Industry and (2) To create a conceptual framework of strategic agile talent management for hospitality organisations.

5. Research approach

This study takes the form of a mixed methods research approach. Phase One consists of interviews with hospitality human resource managers in organisations that have been part of an industry-based education and training initiative and interviews with academic staff involved in developing and delivering the programme. Focus groups will be held with hospitality employees to investigate the attitudes of the participants towards the programme. Phase Two builds on the findings from phase one. During the second phase, an on-line survey approach will be used to investigate the opinions and attitudes of managers in the wider hospitality population.

6. Contribution to theory

From an analysis of the extant literature, it is evident that a gap exists between the needs of the hospitality industry and the hospitality curricula offered by education institutions. The review also shows that this gap is not a new phenomenon and has been found by researchers on a regular basis over the past 20 years. Amongst other issues, this research will investigate why such differences persist between educators and industry and how can they be addressed in an efficient and effective manner.

This study will present an up to date critical analysis of literature in the area of talent management in the hospitality industry. The evolution of theories will be examined, highlighting gaps in the literature. A conceptual framework of strategic agile talent management for hospitality organisations will be presented. The study will evidence the benefits of agile talent management for an industry known for very traditional human resource practices.

7. Contribution to practice

This research will offer a robust practical solution to address the skills gap in the Irish hospitality industry. This will be achieved by adopting a holistic approach to the research, involving hospitality employees, managers and academics. A practical workplace-based training and education initiative involving collaboration between industry and academia will be presented, as a mechanism to support the hospitality industry in closing the skills gap. This programme will also be of benefit to educational institutions. It will provide them with a framework upon which to build relevant education and training programmes. It will allow the educators to fulfil their remit relating to the development and delivery of curricula that will enable their graduates to successfully contribute to their own careers and to the industry in general.

8. References

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