

Issues Affecting Omanization of the Hotel Sector

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Abstract

The Government of the Sultanate of Oman focuses on two main areas: To diversify the country's economy away from its reliance on oil, and to focus on the Omanization plan which aims not only to ensure jobs for citizens but also to reduce dependence on expatriates in search of self-dependence in human resources. The economic benefits generated by tourism have encouraged the Government of the Sultanate of Oman to consider it as a sector of strategic importance. Tourism development has been given special attention by the Sultanate of Oman's government aspiring that the industry would assist in executing the Omanization plan, create direct job opportunities as well as to boost the economy. The study tried to unveil the issues that affect Omanization of the hotel sector. The following issues were found to have a serious impact on Omanization of the sector: Turnover and retention, continuity and job security, working conditions, education and training, skills gaps and shortage, social attitudes (socio-cultural issues), and image of hospitality career. Based on the study, recommendations and courses of actions were offered to the Government, Industry, and Educational institutions.

Keywords: Tourism, Hotel, Hospitality, Oman, Omanization, Turnover, Skills, Career

Introduction

The Sultanate of Oman is located on the South-Eastern tip of the Arabian Peninsula and has a population of 4.64 million (November 2017), 45.40 % of whom are expatriates. A third of the population lives in the capital "Muscat". The Government of the Sultanate of Oman focuses on two main areas: To diversify the country's economy away from its reliance on oil, and to focus on the Omanization plan. The Omanization plan aims not only to ensure jobs for citizens but also to reduce dependence on expatriates in search of self-dependence in human resources.

The need for Omanization emerged as a consequence of the enormous inflow of foreign labor and the high number of annual graduates from different educational levels who need jobs. The plan includes public and private sectors equally. The key objective of the Omanization plan in tourism is to nationalize the labor force in the sector in a way that maintains its productivity and absorbs the Omani workforce, in the short, medium and long-term. The plan comprises the following different sub-sectors: airlines, tourist restaurants, travel agencies, hotels, and car rental companies. The Omanization process for the tourism industry in general, and for hotels specifically takes place on three levels: Front line and semi-skilled, middle management, and top and executive management level (Omani Ministry of Tourism, 2002). The hotel sector represents a corner-stone of the tourism industry in Oman. The Omani government has been keen to expand this sector as a means of economic diversification. The number of licensed hotels reached 318 in 2015 (Omani Ministry of Tourism, 2016).

The total number of employees working in the accommodation services segment reached 10,763 in 2014. Of the total number of employees working in accommodation services 31.4% or 3,381 were Omani, compared to 68.6% or 7,382 who were non-Omani (National Centre of Statistics & Information (NCSI), 2015).

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With respect to the Omanization plan, the Omani tourism and hospitality sector has made some progress but has not achieved the desired levels of Omanization, See Table 1 for tourism and hospitality Omanization targets (2006-2010) (Omani Ministry of Manpower, 2009; UNWTO and Omani Ministry of Tourism, 2011; Tanfeedh, 2016).

Table 1: Tourism and hospitality Omanization targets

Sector	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	
	Target (%)	Achieved (%)				
Airlines	81	84	86	88	90	60
Tourist Restaurants	55	65	75	85	90	36
Travel Agencies	55	65	75	85	95	50
Hotels (3-5 stars)	65	70	75	80	85	48
Car Rental Companies	65	75	80	85	90	53

Adapted from: Omani Ministry of Manpower (2009); UNWTO and Omani Ministry of Tourism (2011); Tanfeedh, 2016

Omanization of the tourism and hospitality sector faces a number of key challenges: The domination of expatriates on the industry, the unfavorable image of the industry among Omanis, and the industry work nature and reality (Al-Balushi, 2008; Atef and Al-Balushi, 2017). This study tries to unveil the issues that affect Omanization of the hotel sector.

Literature Review

The hospitality industry globally has been confronted with the issue of attracting and retaining high quality employees (Lewis and Airey, 2001; Ferris et al., 2002; Qui and Lam, 2004), which led to a shortage of skilled employees to staff the ever-growing number of hospitality businesses. Richardson (2008) has highlighted 11 factors that influence the skills shortage issue:

- Poor or non-existent career structures
- Low levels of formal qualifications
- Low pay
- Poor perception of the industry
- High labor turnover
- Seasonality
- High levels of part-time and casual labor
- Unusual working hours
- A young transient workforce
- A high proportion of low skilled positions
- Poor utilization of students and graduates

Hospitality employers are often compelled by an immediate need to hire poorly-skilled people, or those without formal training, to fill vacancies, especially in the high season (Moyle, 2008). Some hotels deliberately use part-time labor to achieve flexibility and to manage labor cost, but while this approach meets their financial needs, it reduces employees job security and projects an image that the industry is only interested in cost and nothing else (Ashford et al., 1989; Boella, 2000; Brien, 2004).

Consumer demand patterns in hotels and restaurants impose working conditions that are frequently characterized as unsocial and irregular working hours in the form of split shifts, weekend shifts, nightshifts, or work during holiday periods. These working conditions heighten stress on workers with family responsibilities, particularly women who carry the majority of the care burden for children as well as for household chores. It is not unusual for full-time hotel employees to work 60 hours or more per week, such hours are not only excessive, but they are also unsocial hours which limit normal social activities (Jogarathnam and Buchanan, 2004; Busquets, 2010). Turnover rates in the hospitality industry range from 32% to 300%, employees leave for many reasons including low job satisfaction, poor working conditions, and a lack of work motivation (Fortino and Ninemeier, 1996; Kusluvan and Kusluvan, 2000), long and anti-social working hours, the physically demanding nature of the job (Wildes, 2007; Kim et al., 2009), Shift work that leaves little time for non-work commitments are frequently cited reasons for job dissatisfaction and the high turnover rates (Bothma and Thomas, 2001). Studies have identified many reasons leading to staff turnover. These reasons have been categorized into three major groups: causes related to the enterprise, to the individual and to the industry (Birdir, 2002; Gustafson, 2002).

Labor turnover varies greatly from one country to the other, but in developed economies it tends to be significantly higher in relation to other sectors. In developing countries, workplace turnover is strikingly low, leading to greater employment stability. Turnover can lead to a number of negative outcomes including decline in the quality of work and worker loyalty as well as in generating considerable costs to employers in terms of loss of skills and sunk costs in recruitment and training (Tracey and Hinkin, 2006).

Many hospitality graduates leave the industry for other careers (Atef, 2018). A study in the Netherlands reports that about 70 per cent of all hospitality graduates leave the industry within six years of graduation and one of the major issues is the pay level (Pavesic and Brymer, 1998, Blomme et al., 2009). Negative industry image has been noted as a turnover reason. Although the industry has its glamour image in terms of work in airlines, tour guiding, and the heritage sector, the image of the tourism sector is negatively affected by the routine uncomfortable work in hotels and restaurants (Pender and Sharpley, 2005).

It is worth noting that parents and families have an important influence on an individual's career choice (Haven-Tang and Botterill, 2005). The level of influence and involvement of family vary, offering both positive and negative influences (Lankard, 1995). Researchers found that parental attitudes about the hospitality industry are often negative, and these negative assumptions are often passed on to youngsters (Cothran and Combrink, 1999). The industry is often viewed as a negative employment option, there is a tendency to consider it as a temporary solution till a real job is available (Brien, 2004; Atef and Al-Balushi, 2015).

To overcome the labor shortage and skills gap issues, many countries started to recruit expatriates with the required qualifications and with minimum cost. On one hand, recruiting expatriates might resolve the problem temporarily, but on the other hand, this issue might have serious implications on the political, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions (Zhao and Merna, 1993).

The employers save money by recruiting expatriates with low wages instead of hiring locals with higher wages (Al-Balushi, 2008). The impact of expatriates' employment on a nation's economy is multifaceted, in the case of the local employees, the salaries and wages remain within the country, but this is not the case with expatriates as the salaries and wages take different paths (Barber and Pittway, 2000). Although expatriates' income outflows to their country of origin, there is a positive impact on the host country economy in different ways as they pay taxes and enhance demand for goods and services (Ahn, 2004).

However, expatriates cause a dual social impact, they bring with them their culture, language, costumes, habits, and traditions. They also transfer knowledge, culture and other values learnt in the host country to their home country (Baruah and Cholewinski, 2006). Meanwhile, there are legitimate concerns that employing expatriates can limit employment opportunities for locals. For example, there is evidence that the employment of expats in Taiwan in manufacturing, construction and social services increased unemployment amongst local labor force (Heher, 2005).

Education, training and professional development of employees of all levels within the tourism and hospitality industry are important factors in maintaining the industry's competitiveness in the international arena (Baum, 2006). Training facilitates employees' adaptation to a new work environment and increase productivity (Lam et al., 2002). The relationship between training and business performance is very strong but estimating the benefits of training particularly in the context of potential contribution to improved business performance is clearly difficult to determine (Lashley, 2002).

Historically, the hospitality industry has not been known for its high standards of training (Wood, 1997). The situation has not changed much in recent years. Organizations train their staff, and most of this training is centered on the mandated, and for all employees: health and safety for example. Beyond that which is mandatory, management and professional staff training is relatively poor (Warhurst et al., 2004). Some organizations think that if employees are going to leave anyway, it does not make sense to invest heavily in their training and development (Baum, 1995). It has been observed that there is a gap between the importance of training and development, and the willingness to do something about it (Nickson, 2007).

Methodology

Interviews were conducted to achieve the study aim. The interviews were done on two stages: On the first stage, nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with tourism experts and tourism academics, See Table 1. For this stage, a snowball sampling technique was used (Brewerton and Millward, 2001).

Each person the researchers interviewed was asked who else might be willing to be interviewed about the topic. This was a very helpful way of gaining access to people whom without such personal contact, might otherwise refuse to be interviewed (Seale and Filmer, 1998).

Table 1: Interview with Tourism Experts and Academics (Stage One)

Respondents Job	Gender		Number
	Male	Female	
Tourism Experts	3	1	4
Tourism Academics	5	0	5
TOTAL	8	1	9

On stage two of the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with hotel human resource managers and hotel employees. The sample chosen was purposive (Saunders et al., 2003), where the researcher already knew something about the specific people, and deliberately selected particular respondents because they are seen as those who are likely to contribute valuable data (Denscombe, 2003). The purposive sampling technique was also used with hotel employees. Although, the hotel employees interviewed in this research were chosen by the human resource managers, selection criteria were: Omanis-only, and mixed sample of males and females.

To conduct stage two interviews, a sample of nine hotels was chosen for the study. The total number of hotels in Oman is 318 in 2015, the total numbers of 5, 4, and 3-star hotels in Oman are illustrated in Table 2 (Omani Ministry of Tourism, 2016). The interviews were done with human resource managers and employees in 5, 4 and 3-star hotels. Three hotels of each class were chosen to be studied, See Table 3.

Table 2: The total number of 5, 4, and 3-star hotels in Oman

Category	5 Star	4 Star	3 Star
Number	11	23	20

Source: Omani Ministry of Tourism (2016)

Table 3: Number of Interviews with Hotel Human Resource Managers and Hotel Employees (Stage Two)

Job Category	Hotel Category			Gender		TOTAL
	5 Star	4 Star	3 Star	Male	Female	
Human Resource Manager	3	3	3	9	0	9
Hotel Employees	8	8	11	20	7	27
TOTAL	11	11	14	29	7	36

All interviewees were asked about their opinions regarding: Turnover and retention, continuity and job security, working conditions, education and training, skills gaps and shortage, social attitudes (socio-cultural issues), and image of hospitality career. During the interviews all interviewees were given a chance to express their thoughts and opinions regarding any other related points of concern, this approach allowed interviewees to openly reflect on their personal experiences and observations.

Some of the interviews were conducted in Arabic and some of them in English. With the interviews conducted in Arabic, they were transcribed in Arabic, and then the Arabic transcriptions were analyzed in Arabic, then translated into English. The analysis was done in Arabic before the translation to give the text more interpretation credibility.

Findings and Discussion

In an attempt to unveil the issues that affect Omanization of the hotel sector and to understand the reasons behind the lack of local representation in the hotel sector in Oman and the high numbers of non-Omanis working in the industry, the following issues were pointed out, discussed, and interpreted:

1. Turnover and retention

One of the most enduring problems of human resources in the hospitality sector is labor turnover and staff retention, and in Oman the sector suffers from the same issue.

“...We recruit Omanis, we train them for few months, until they become familiar and used to the job, but suddenly after a few months, they inform us that they want to move to another company or they have found a job in the government sector...” (Personal communication, a hotel human resource manager - Male - 5star hotel)

He further commented on the impossibility of increasing the salary to the level of government salaries, or like other government hotels (buildings owned by the government), because of the private ownership of the hotel.

“...But unfortunately, it is not possible to increase their salaries; our hotel is a private owned property and cannot be compared to government hotels or match their salaries...” (Personal communication, a hotel human resource manager - Male - 5star hotel)

The level of staff turnover in hospitality organizations has been shown to be high (Fortino and Ninemeier, 1996; Kusluvan and Kusluvan, 2000). In the Sultanate, hotels suffer from the consequences of high employee turnover leading them to depend in some cases on part time employment to fill the gaps and replace job leavers. Turnover can lead to a number of negative outcomes including decline in the quality of work and worker loyalty as well as in generating considerable costs to employers in terms of loss of skills and sunk costs in recruitment and training (Tracey and Hinkin, 2006).

“...It is not easy to replace the employees, especially during the high season, we resort to recruitment of part-time employees from different companies or other hotels ...” (Personal communication, a hotel human resource manager - Male - 4star hotel)

Graduates from colleges and universities refuse to work in hotels due to low salaries. Together with the poor reputation of the hotel careers, the result is that hotels recruit low qualified employees and provide them with in-house training to fill job vacancies. Purcell and Quinn (1996) asserted that many higher education students pursuing qualifications within tourism and hospitality do not voluntarily look for employment in these sectors and if they do, they look for a managerial post.

“...Some graduates, after getting trained, decide to resign either because they do not like the job or sometimes, they find better jobs in the government sector or any other company for better pay and better conditions...” (Personal communication, a tourism expert - Female)

“...Graduates with high qualifications from Sultan Qaboos University, for example, refuse to work in hotels, and they may accept a job in one of the other tourism sectors: airlines, travel agencies, but not in hotels, unless it is a high position job...” (Personal communication, a tourism academic - Male)

Due to the limited working hours and the substantial benefits associated, Omani tourism and hospitality graduates prefer to join the labor market in the government (public) sector than the private sector, and few of them head towards entrepreneurship (Atef and al-Balushi, 2015).

2. Continuity and Job Security

Most of the interviewees mentioned that Omanis do not like to work in the hotel industry; they think that any job in the government sector would be more secure than a job in the private sector. The recruitment laws in the government sector offer a better work environment for its employees, with a guarantee that at the end of the month, they will get a fixed salary, and with no fear that the government establishment or the institution will be shut down. In case such things were to happen, the government would find them another placement under the same conditions. Most of hotels in the country are privately owned which makes them less attractive to Omanis because of job insecurity.

“...It is about living secure, they think they will be more secure to work in the government and even when they have to work in hotels they like to work in Al-Bustan hotel or Intercontinental hotel, the hotels which are almost owned by the government...” (Personal communication, a tourism academic - Male)

From the perspective of tourism academics, employees are not so reluctant to work in government owned hotels, but if the hotel is privately owned, employees are hesitant to work in it due to job insecurity. This confirms that the special attributes of the government sector such as; lifelong employment, wages, working conditions and working hours make it more attractive to employees than the private sector.

"...We do face challenges with Omanis recruitment, they do not prefer to work in hotels. But the government requires us to arrange placements for them, so we send them to work in the hospitality section of ministries as they prefer to work in the government sector..." (Personal communication, a tourism expert - Female)

3. Working Conditions

Working hours are considered another area of discrepancy between the private sector and government jobs. The hospitality industry working hours is seen as anti-social and, in particular, public holidays because employees are not able to get time off to spend with their families, due to industry work nature.

"...They complain of long working hours, and night shifts. Another complains is that the government sector gives longer holidays in some occasions (notional holidays). They also cannot have holidays whenever they want because of the business seasons..." (Personal communication, a hotel human resource manager - Male - 5star hotel)

A tourism academic further added that most graduates prefer to work in the government sector jobs, as they think that working conditions in the government sectors are more suitable than the private sector, since the first offers better pay, and limited working hours from 7:30 am- 2:30 pm with a two-day weekend holiday:

"...The problem is that any graduate wants to start at least with a salary similar to any governmental job, and finish work at 2:30 pm, with a two-day weekend..." (Personal communication, a tourism academic - Male)

Some employees complained about standing for long times, especially in hotel receptions, which affects their health.

"...Working in the reception requires standing for long hours, this makes me feel tired and very exhausted by the end of the day..." (Personal communication, a hotel employee - Male - 4star hotel)

Work environment stress may lead to turnover. This issue is also common in the hotel sector in the Sultanate. Some employees declared that:

"...One of the major reasons behind turnover in hotels is the level of work stress..." (Personal communication, a hotel employee - Female - 5star hotel)

The same issue is asserted and supported by a tourism expert:

"...We always get complaints from hospitality industry employees that the work stress is high, and the pay is low, and they want to leave the industry, and find another comfortable job elsewhere..." (Personal communication, a tourism expert - Male)

A deep understanding of the labor market is essential in developing any future plans and setting goals. At the present time, the variation of the workforce in the tourism and hotel industry in terms of workers' nationalities, backgrounds, cultural differences and qualifications at all different levels, including senior management position exacerbates the issue. The structure is mostly dominated by low-wage earner expats.

"...Expats are prepared to work unsociable shift patterns and can stay day and night and work during the weekends..." (Personal communication, a tourism expert - Male)

The statement above shows that expats are easier to manage than Omani workers, as they are prepared to work unsociable shift patterns and can stay day and night and work during the weekends. Hence some managers hire Omanis in accordance with the Omanization Plan implementation; meanwhile the expatriate does the work, with no complaints, at a minimum cost. Thus, companies may attempt to apply the labor laws by hiring Omanis, but at the same time they are aware of the cost-benefits of hiring expats to do the real work.

4. Education and Training

In the Sultanate of Oman, there are number of established training and education institutions capable of providing the necessary hospitality and tourism training and education:

1. Colleges of Higher Education
2. German University of Technology in Oman
3. Gulf College
4. Khimji Training Institute
5. Majan College

6. National Hospitality Institute
7. Oman Tourism College
8. Tourism Department at Sultan Qaboos University

However, with regard to hospitality education efforts in Oman and the training of the employees in the industry, various issues emerged. One of the most important issues faced by the employers in the hospitality industry is the lack of qualified Omani employees available to work in hotels. This issue was mentioned by all of interviewees and was identified as one of the major reasons behind recruiting expatriates to fill the vacancies for some occupation levels.

“...Most of the new graduates possess the knowledge, but they do not know anything about the practical part. They are supposed to know at least a few things, but they look as if they know nothing. It might be the difference between what they learned and the hotel work reality...” (Personal communication, a hotel human resource manager - Male - 5star hotel)

The statement above illustrates a discrepancy between what the institutions provide and what the industry needs. Obviously, there is a lack of communication between educational institutions and industry affiliates.

Human resource managers of four and three-star hotels revealed that they have issues related to the cost of training and development of their employees. These hotels do not have enough financial resources to provide their employees with enough training. Forcefully, they provide training to their front-line employees to improve their skills as they are in direct contact with customers.

“...We cannot provide all of our employees with the training required, as the income is not as in big hotels, and the room rates are not very high compared to five-star hotels. So, we cannot spend too much on training...” (Personal communication, hotel human resource managers - Male - 4, and 3star hotels)

Three-star hotels only offer their employees orientation programs to familiarize new hires with the job before they start to be in contact with customers.

“...We have a vigorous new hire orientation program that set our expectations squarely in front of these employees before they ever see a customer...” (Personal communication, a hotel human resource manager - Male - 3star hotel)

Interviewed employees from the same hotel showed that although the hotel is concerned about the orientation program for new employees before they meet any customers, they are less concerned about any further employee training or development.

“...The hotel does not provide us with any professional development training, so we are not able to ask for any promotion or salary increment...” (Personal communication, a hotel employee - Male - 3star hotel)

While employees are willing to pursue further education and get extra training to be promoted and consequently get salary increments, employers do not want to do so for the same reason. This results in employee dissatisfaction and lack of job motivation. Omani employees revealed that the training which is provided is more operational in nature and that supervisory and managerial training is rarely given to Omanis.

“...We are only provided with operational trainings, no management-oriented trainings, as all the managerial positions are occupied by expats...” (Personal communication, a hotel employee - Male - 5star hotel)

A human resource manager complained that training and development is the direct reason for employees' turnover. In other words, employees seek to secure higher/better salary or better work environment elsewhere after they get a number of qualifying trainings.

“...Employees ask for the training for their own sake to find a better job elsewhere...” (Personal communication, a hotel human resource manager - Male - 5star hotel)

Employers think that employees training and development is an expensive investment. And could encourage them to leave the organization afterwards; consequently, it does not make sense to do so. Previous studies (Zhang and Wu, 2004), show that well-trained hotel managers or supervisors with good English language and management skills are very much welcomed by banks and other organizations. This is the reason that those who are running or managing the hotels are unwilling to invest in developing their employees.

Some Omani employees declared that when trainings were provided by expatriates, they never get any benefit or learn the skills required, as expatriates fear they might lose their jobs for the trained Omanis. In effect, local employees were considered to be a threat to expatriates' jobs.

"...The expatriate senior workers in the hotel are not always willing to teach us everything, as they think that we might take over their places one day..." (Personal communication, a hotel employee - Male - 5star hotel)

This issue is one of the obstacles that face Omanis working in hotels, as they receive little career development and advancement, and therefore they always lack the required skills to secure promotion. Skills shortages and skills gaps have serious negative implications on the hotel sector in general, in terms of service quality and delivery.

5. Skills Gaps and Shortage

It was observed that most of the managerial and supervisory positions are occupied by expatriates, 100% of General Managers of the sampled five and four-star hotels were not Omanis, as well as 90% of General Managers of the sampled three-star hotels. Sampled human resource managers connected this to skills shortage among Omanis.

"...None of the Omanis have the skills required for those positions..." (Personal communication, a hotel human resource manager - Male - 4star hotel)

"...The hotel general manager is not Omani, and this is because none of the Omanis can manage a large chain hotel like this..." (Personal communication, a hotel human resource manager - Male - 5star hotel)

This scenario confirms the difficulty of career progression and career advancement opportunities for Omani employees. As a result of this, there will be no role model to inspire Omanis to work in hotels as long as the managerial positions are occupied by expatriates. Employers also reported hard-to-fill vacancies amongst some jobs such as IT professionals, and technicians which also required high level skills, skills which locals were not felt to offer:

"...The hotel uses a high technical system which requires highly skilled personnel, none of the Omani applicants suits this job. So, we recruit expatriates to fill the gap in these jobs..." (Personal communication, a hotel human resource manager - Male - 5star hotel)

Additionally, hard-to-fill vacancies were featured in positions other than the managerial and supervisory positions, such as restaurants and kitchens where professional waiters and trained chefs are needed.

"...Well, there are some jobs like chefs I think will not be filled by Omanis for the next ten years..." (Personal communication, a hotel human resource manager - Male - 5star hotel)

Consequently, the hotel sector is forced to rely on expatriates to fill job vacancies. The issue of skill gaps is a worldwide problem. In India, for instance, the shortage of skilled manpower poses a major threat to the overall development of tourism (Subbarao, 2008). In Dubai, a shortage of manpower poses the biggest challenge to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) tourism industry, according to industry management studies (Sinclair, 2008). Brien (2004) also indicated that chef's positions were the hardest to fill in the hotel sector in New Zealand.

The skills gap in Oman seems to be of a unique nature in that the industry is undergoing difficulties in recruiting the workforce not because of a lack of education but due to competition from other economic sectors, the lack of adequate management of human resources, and the unattractive working condition in tourism and its sub-sectors. Notwithstanding that in the Sultanate, there are different institutions which train and educate human resources to enter the labor market. However, the outputs of these institutions do not enter the hotel industry, but they choose different career path which therefore create skills shortages amongst hotel employees.

The interviews revealed that the majority of hotel employees were either graduated from a vocational institution or high schools or lower, reinforcing that the hotel industry provides unattractive employment opportunities for college and university graduates.

6. Social Attitudes (Socio-Cultural Issues)

Many of the social attitudes towards the hospitality sector are unfavorable and negatively affect the growth of qualified employment in the hospitality industry in the Sultanate. The following section discusses the points raised by interviewees and categorized as Social Attitudes towards Hospitality Careers:

Family Influence on Career Choice

In the Sultanate, the parental influence on an individual's career choice is obvious. Some of the families are conservative to the extent that they ban their family members from working in hotels. A hotel human resource manager said that:

"...Some Omani males and females applied to work in the hotel, after a while, they withdrew their applications due to family disapproval..." (Personal communication, a hotel human resource manager - Male - 5star hotel)

Another hotel human resource manager mentioned that his father refused to talk to him when he resigned from his job to work in a hotel:

"...I like hotel work...I resigned my job, and worked in a hotel, my father got angry and refused to talk to me for a long time, because of the way people look at hospitality careers..." (Personal communication, a hotel human resource manager - Male - 5star hotel)

It is not only the parents that have a direct influence on the career choice of young Omanis, but other relatives and friends influence them as well. So even though high school graduates or university graduates would want to work in the hotel business, the choice is not always theirs. A human resource manager stated that:

"...It is not only their families, but when their families talked to their neighbours or their friends; the negative remarks they got: "How can you let your kids work in such a place?" ... "What will people say..." made them withdraw their applications..." (Personal communication, a hotel human resource manager - Male - 5star hotel)

Interestingly, region of origin is significant in the willingness to view hospitality careers favorably. Some of the graduates are willing to work in hotels, but this is because they are from the capital area (Muscat), which is more open-minded than other regions in the country. If graduates are from the interior or any other areas far from the capital, they are less likely to consider work in the hospitality industry because their families would refuse it.

"...Some students are anxious to work in hotels, maybe because they are from the capital region, because if they were from another region, their families will not allow them to work in hotels..." (Personal communication, a tourism academic - Male)

Family Obligations

For women, the situation is even more complicated. Whilst in the first instance, women may opt for employment in the hospitality industry; this is not perceived to be a long-term career choice. Family obligations is one of the constraints of the choice of hospitality as a career for females in Oman.

"...Currently I do not mind working at a hotel because I am not married, but if I get married, I will try to find another job, or I will just stay at home..." (Personal communication, a hotel employee - Female - 4star hotel)

The long working hours, shifts, and working on holidays were reasons raised by female employees as constraints in going on in the job especially if they have children. Family obligations may be legitimate reasons for females to feel less freedom of movement in their careers (Hjalager, 2003). A female employee asserted that:

"...It will be very difficult for me to work in the hotel if I have children especially on holidays..." (Personal communication, a hotel employee - Female - 5star hotel)

On the contrary, A female respondent indicated that her manager showed an understanding of her family obligations and social commitments. The work-family culture that prevails within an organization is an important factor in employee perceptions of work-family conflict and balance.

"...My manager understands our culture, so he does not let me work till night..." (Personal communication, a hotel employee - Female - 3star hotel)

Marriage Opportunity

The hotel industry working conditions are associated with limited marriage opportunities for male and female hotel managers, the long and anti-social hours managers spent at work, make it difficult to meet people outside the industry. This issue is obvious with females rather than males even if they are not in managerial positions, they think the long time they spent at the hotel lessens their marriage chances as men like their wives to spend most of her time with family and children. Besides they also think since they do not have time to attend all the different social gatherings with their friends and relatives this will also affect their chances of getting married, as some arranged

marriages happen through friends or relatives during wedding ceremonies, or family visits. Asserting this issue, a female hotel employee stated:

"...I spend a long time here in the hotel, especially during the high season, which makes it difficult for me to participate in any social gatherings. So, my absence in such occasions will lessen my marriage chances. Another thing is that I do not think any man will like to marry a female who stays late at work. Although, they get married to female physicians, the case is different as the latter get more paid which might be an advantage for them..." (Personal communication, a hotel employee - Female - 5star hotel)

7. Image of Hospitality Career

The industry is often viewed as a negative employment option, there is a tendency to consider it as a temporary solution till a real job is available (Brien, 2004). Hospitality jobs amongst Omani society are considered of low rank and status. The issue of the hospitality career image was raised by most of the interviewees.

"...We have few Omanis working in the hotel, but they are always looking to move to another job out of the industry, because they say that their friends and relatives look low at them because they work in the hotel as housekeepers or porters or waiters..." (Personal communication, a hotel human resource manager - Male - 3star hotel)

The tourism industry and its hospitality sub-sectors suffer from a very poor image amongst potential job seekers.

"...Although students are studying hospitality, they always say that they do not want to work in the hospitality industry because of the image that hotels have...unfavorable image!..." (Personal communication, a tourism academic - Male)

Although the hospitality industry, offers a variety of different jobs and career opportunities to suit everyone, for many people, the thought of a career in the hospitality industry may bring up the images of chefs, waiters, and housekeepers. Various employees referred to the issue:

"...My friends are always teasing me because I serve people in the restaurant, while most of the Omani families are being served by housemaids..." (Personal communication, a hotel employee - Male - 3star hotel)

A hotel human resource manager supported that issue about hospitality careers and said:

"...Hospitality careers do not have a good and acceptable reputation in Oman..." (Personal communication, a hotel human resource manager - Male - 4star hotel)

Another perceived image of the hospitality industry is the lack of career advancement:

"...We work in the same job for several years, but we do not get any promotion, even when we get training...We thought that when we get trainings and take courses, the hotel will promote us..." (Personal communication, a hotel employee - Male - 5star hotel)

Due to the perceptions of the Omani society that hotel business is dominated by expats and that the salaries are low; the industry became less attractive to Omanis.

"...I only work in the hotel because I could not find another job anywhere else, even my friends always comment on my job, and say "How come you work in a job which is usually only for foreigners..." (Personal communication, a hotel employee - Male - 3star hotel)

A tourism expert added that; although nowadays some young Omanis work in the hospitality industry, their attitude towards their jobs is negative. They only work there because it is the only job available for them.

But if they have the choice they will not work in this sector, because of the reputation of the industry. In cases where they work in the sector, there are certain jobs that they do not like to do because of the perceived low status:

"...Omanis started to work in hotels but not in all jobs, they still do not like to work as chefs, waiters, or in the bar or any other job they think of as a low status job..." (Personal communication, a tourism expert - Male)

Conclusions

The study tried to unveil the issues that affect Omanization of the hotel sector. The following issues were found to have a serious impact on Omanization of the sector: Turnover and retention, Continuity and Job Security,

Working Conditions, Education and Training, Skills Gaps and Shortage, Social Attitudes (Socio-Cultural Issues), and Image of Hospitality Career.

The hotel sector (including 5, 4, and 3-star hotels in the Sultanate of Oman) face enduring issues of high labor turnover and staff retention for different reasons including; low wages, reputation of the hospitality jobs, working hours, and security and continuity of the job.

The research findings also highlighted working conditions and hours as major issue that deters graduates or young Omanis from working in the hospitality industry, and as a barrier to the achievement of Omanization planned figures.

Another issue commonly raised by all stakeholders is job continuity and security. Which is a key reason why Omanis prefer to work in the Government sector, rather than choosing careers in tourism and hospitality which is predominantly privately owned. This is based on the idea that the Public sector is more secure than the private sector and offers a better working environment for its employees. Parents have a major influence on their children with regards to their choice of study and choice of career. parental attitudes about the hospitality industry are often negative, and these negative assumptions are often passed to children. Furthermore, it is not only parents that have direct influence on career choices of young Omanis, but also relatives and friends. Family obligations is one of the constraints on the choice of hospitality as a career for females in Oman. The long working hours, the shifts, and working during holidays were issues raised that conflict with family obligations. For single females, working in the hotel industry lessen their marriage opportunities, based on the idea that the hotel industry is not a preferred work environment for females, this therefore affects the females' reputation and reduce their marriage opportunity.

Notwithstanding the Omani government efforts to attract Omanis towards the sector, socio-cultural factors are influential in attracting and retaining Omanis to hotel careers. the industry image is unfavorable, for Omanis, hospitality jobs are considered to be of the lowest jobs. It has been revealed from the study that even if the hotel industry offers a better environment and conditions in terms of pay, working condition, job security, and career progression, Omanis will still be deterred from working in the hotel industry because of different socio-cultural issues. Herein, lies the paradox with the Omanization Plan. At the highest levels, the Omanization Plan is promoted, yet the characteristics and the nature of the hotel sector failed to attract and retain Omanis.

Recommendations

Recommendations for the Government

- Since wages was one of the most important internal factors involved in the findings and discussed by all parties, immediate action needs to be taken to increase the minimum wage in the hospitality industry for number of reasons. Most obviously the industry needs to offer its employees a good standard of living. This will encourage and attract Omanis including (high school leavers and graduates) to work in the sector, which in turn will decrease the dependence on expatriates. This will also help to reduce the turnover amongst the Omani employees in the sector.
- A stronger link and closer relationship need to be built between tourism and hospitality educational institutions and the industry, to understand the deficiencies and weaknesses of hotel graduates in order to reach the required standards in line with labor market needs of the hotel sector. This will encourage employers to recruit Omanis and will restore the issue of skills gaps and skills shortages among Omani employees.
- A follow up from the Ministry of Manpower and Ministry of Tourism of Omani employment records in the industry is very essential to make sure that the Omanization plan is effective.
- The poor image of the industry was a common issue raised by all interviewees; therefore, the Omani government should integrate tourism and hotel studies into the national education system, in order to increase the awareness and improve perception of tourism and hotel jobs.
- It is important to draw the attention of the officials at the Ministry of Manpower to outline measures that would preserve the rights of the private sector. Otherwise the Private sector might become a bridge through which trained and qualified Omani youths pass on to work eventually in the Public sector. Therefore, the need to specify a period for the Omanis working in the Private sector to remain in their establishments before they are allowed to apply for vacant posts in the Public sector. Such measures would preserve the private sector right in benefiting from trained staff for as long as it could. This would also enable the Private sector to train other workers who would fill the gap created by the transfer of employees to the Public sector.

Recommendations for Employers (Industry)

- Hotel employers should develop incentives to attract and retain qualified employees, which can be achieved through increasing benefits over wages, special compensations for long working hours, or for working during national and religious holidays.
- Furthermore, the employers need to pay attention to the training and development of their employees to provide them with career progression opportunities within the hotel sector, and to ensure that career paths are visible to existing and potential employees.
- Hotel employers need to provide more chances for Omani graduates with the required qualifications, to work in hotels, and pay them acceptable levels of remuneration which should help to encourage them into the sector, hence replacing the expatriates in the sector.
- It is important to reach the students in schools and provide them with the right information about the industry. In addition to the student, information is also absorbed on a regular basis by the teachers, guidance counselors, parents and school administrators, and the industry should provide them with the required knowledge and information about the industry, portraying the hospitality industry as a vibrant business, offering young people great career opportunities.
- Hospitality stakeholders should not only strive to change society's misperceptions about the industry, but they should also concentrate their efforts on improving the actual conditions of the industry by increasing pay and improving the conditions of the work in line with cultural perspectives.

Recommendations for Educational Institutions

- Hospitality educators could visit secondary schools in order to conduct informative speeches and presentations to students. This face-to-face interaction would most certainly enhance students' awareness since it will enable them to express their concerns regarding the industry and receive comprehensive responses by professionals.
- Hospitality education institutions should maintain a relevant curriculum in order to meet the needs of the hotel industry labor market and the hospitality industry needs to share their experiences with educational institutions.
- It is important to build a closer link between educational institutions and stakeholders (government, industry, and society) to move towards the professionalization of the entire sector and to improving the knowledge base and innovative and economic capabilities.
- The educational institutions not only need to educate potential students about the industry, but they must also accurately inform parents as they have an important influence on their children career choices. Parents must understand that the industry provides desirable management level careers.
- To increase awareness amongst Omani society, information campaigns should be started at the elementary or pre-school level, targeting children from 3 years old.

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