Investigating HRM practices role towards customer service excellence in the Mauritian Hotel Industry

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Abstract
Purpose: The hotel industry is one of the pillars of the Mauritian economy. Being in the hospitality and service sector, to sustain competitive advantage, hotels should ensure customer service excellence. Service quality and customer satisfaction are closely linked to employee satisfaction implying human resources management (HRM) practices are crucial to customer service excellence (Heskett et al., 2008). Hence, this paper investigated the extent to which HRM practices in the Mauritian hotel industry are customer service excellence oriented.

Based on Zeithaml and Bitner (2000) Human Resources (HR) Strategy wheel framework, HRM practices were studied in relation to the identified four core HR strategies namely hiring the right people, develop the people to deliver service quality, provide needed support systems and retain the best people. Key HRM practices such as recruitment and selection, training and development, performance management and reward systems have been identified as significant to customer service excellence and service quality (Browning, 1998; Tsaur and Lin, 2004). Thus, the HRM practices in the hotel industry are expected to be aligned with the core HR strategies and their sub-strategies.

Design / Methodology / Approach: For the purpose of the study, a qualitative research paradigm was selected to guide the exploratory study of role of HRM practices in hotel industry towards customer service excellence. Hotels representative of different group of hotels and star-ratings were selected as the unit of analysis. Data were collected during depth, unstructured and semi-structured interviews with HR Managers. The sample size was of 20 hotels, namely 12 hotels from groups of hotel in Mauritius and hotels belonging to international chain of hotels and 8 individual small hotels were targeted. The response rate was 60%. The process of analysing the data collected for this study was characterised by the fact that it began as soon as the researcher started collecting data, it was ongoing and inductive.

Findings: It was observed that the HRM practices adopted by the hotels addressed to varying degrees the four core HR strategies and their sub-strategies identified in the HR strategy wheel. Furthermore, qualitative analysis undertaken helped to uncover the specific HRM practices and initiatives adopted by the hotels and the implications for HR managers to ensure their HRM strategies deliver customer service excellence are discussed.

Research Limitations: The study was limited to only 20 hotels; hence the qualitative research can be investigated on a larger scale. Furthermore, there has been a poor response rate from small hotels.

Managerial Implications: The qualitative analysis identified the different approaches and initiatives hotels adopted about their specific HRM practices which were benchmarked against the HR strategy wheel framework and successful strategies from hotels globally. Hence, HR managers will be able to reflect on their HRM practices and strategies towards devising a cluster of innovative HRM practices, approaches and
strategies to support the delivery of customer service excellence in the Mauritian hotel industry.

Originality: The hotel industry contributes heavily to the Mauritian economy and human resources are considered to be a key asset of tourism and hospitality organisations towards the delivery of customer service excellence. This study offered an assessment of the trends in HRM practices and strategies, and the degree to which they are customer service excellence oriented, to ensure that the Mauritian hotel industry sustains its competitive advantage.

Keywords: HRM, HR strategy wheel, Service Quality, Hotel, Mauritius.
Introduction
The hotel industry is one of the pillars of the Mauritian economy. The Ministry of Tourism and Leisure (2009) targeted 2 million tourists’ arrivals by 2015, under its Mauritius Sector Strategy Plan (2009-2015). Being in the hospitality and service sector, to sustain competitive advantage, hotels should ensure customer service excellence. Service quality and customer satisfaction are closely linked to employee satisfaction implying human resources management (HRM) practices are crucial to customer service excellence (Heskett et al., 2008). In a new publication from Harvard Business Press, Nayar (2010) stresses about putting employees first and customers second since it is through the employees that value is created within the organisation. Hence, this paper investigates the extent to which HRM practices in the Mauritian hotel industry are customer service excellence oriented.

Literature Review
From a strategic human resource management perspective, an organisation’s human resource management strategy must be integrated with the business strategy to ensure that the human resource management practices add value to the organisation. There are various ways to ensure that link among which the notion of a bundle of HR best practices that would enhance the performance of the organisation by blending together and develop a synergy towards generating competitive advantage. This bundle of HR best practices have been referred to under several concepts namely high involvement management and high commitment management captured under the term of high performance work systems (Wood, 1999). Schneider and Bowen (1993) supported that for service organisations superior HRM practices can be a key to competitive advantage. Thus, in the hotel industry there must a bundle of HR best practices that would ensure enhancement of organisational performance through the delivery of excellent customer service.

Heskett et al. (2008) posited that highly satisfied customers drive growth and profitability in a service business and that all aspects of the operation that affect customer satisfaction should be managed under what they called the service profit chain. The way this chain operates is that employee satisfaction increases, when internal service quality is enhanced, which in turn strengthens employee loyalty, raising employee productivity. Higher productivity results into greater external service value for customers improving customer satisfaction and loyalty. They have seen that a 5% increase in customer loyalty can raise profits by 25%-85%. Hence to generate profitability the hotel industry should be paying attention to its employees with effective HR practices. Nayar (2010) reinforces this notion of employees being the focus of the organisation’s attention.
Key HRM practices such as recruitment and selection, training and development, performance management and reward systems have been identified as significant to customer service excellence and service quality (Browning, 1998; Tsaur and Lin, 2004). Hoque (2000) investigated HRM practices to be adopted by the hotel industry based on the high commitment management, high involvement management and high performance work systems, and identified a bundle of HR practices for hotels covering the following issues: terms and conditions of employment, recruitment and selection, training, job design, quality management, communication and consultation, and pay systems. Hinkin and Tracey (2010) identified six categories of innovative HR practices used by hospitality and service companies as a culture of caring for employees and open communication; flexible scheduling to meet the needs of a changing workforce; innovative methods to attract, select, retain a loyal and competent workforce; training programmes viewed as investment in people emphasising career tracks and promotion from within; performance management systems aligned with organisational objectives; and compensation programmes reflecting the organisational values and linking pay to performance.

When investigating the service quality gaps, Zeithaml and Bitner (2000) identified human resource issues as a major cause of the provider Gap 3 which referred to the company employees not delivering to the developed customer-driven service standards. Hence, they coined the Human Resources (HR) Strategy wheel framework which represents a complex combination of HR strategies required to improve service employees’ willingness and ability to deliver quality services as well as remaining customer service oriented. Thus, HRM practices that should be customer service oriented, form part of four core HR strategies namely hiring the right people, develop the people to deliver service quality, provide needed support systems and retain the best people. These core HR strategies hold sub-strategies which should be the focused of the key HRM practices. The sub-strategies for each core strategy are as follows: Hiring the right people – compete for the best people, hire for service competencies and service inclination, be the preferred employer; Develop people to deliver service quality – train for technical and interactive skills, empower employees, promote teamwork; Provide needed support systems – develop service-oriented internal processes, provide supportive technology and equipment, measure internal service quality; Retain the best people – measure and reward strong service providers, treat employees as customers, include employees in the company’s vision.

**Hiring the right people**

This core HR strategy refers to ensuring that the service company starts with the right service delivery people from the very beginning and it encompasses three sub-strategies to be pursued namely compete for the best people, hire for service competencies and service inclination, and
be the preferred employer. It has major implications for the HR practices of human resource planning, recruitment and selection. To compete for the best people, organisations would have to view their recruitment and selection process as a marketing exercise directed at attracting targeted employee market segments so as to ensure that candidates with the competence and commitment to add value are drawn to the organisation. So organisations can communicate to prospective employees by visiting university campus, participating to career fairs, creating web pages on their company sites focused at recruiting potential applicants where they can get online job previews providing them with a realistic perspective about the work life, and using referral awards by providing financial incentive to existing competent employees to attract others to the organisation. This will ensure that companies are hiring for organisation fit.

To hire for service competencies and service inclination, organisations should ensure that they select the best people with skills and knowledge for the job as well as holding an interest in performing service related work reflected in the right attitudes to service and orientation to serving customers and others on the job. Russ-Eft (2004) identified customer service competencies within the SERVE model (See the big picture and how customer service fits into it; Establish an authentic human connection with each customer; Render timely, accurate and thorough service; Value and respond to unique customer needs; and Extend a hand to repair and strengthen relationships with customers who are upset and angry). Service inclination implies that the right candidates should possess personality traits such as conscientiousness, agreeableness, emotional stability, openness to experience, extroversion, empathy, self-efficacy authenticity, the need for activity, self-control, and adjustment. Thus, the organisations can use selection methods like personality tests and cognitive ability tests for prescreening, and then engage in situational and structured interviews with questions focusing on service experience. Furthermore, rigorous selection procedures could be used with not just managers interview but also team interviews and peers involved in the selection process. With a realistic job preview, work simulations, and role playing, the candidates can engage in some self-selection which will ensure that the hired people are committed to and fit the organisation’s culture.

To be the preferred employer the organisation must strive to be known as such in a particular industry or location. This tie in with the HRM policy goal of quality where the organisation must work towards building a public image of providing high quality treatment to employees, customers and all stakeholders (Guest, 1987). Organisations could strive to be branded as an employer of choice by publicising awards they received through their web page, creating a fun, friendly and family-like place to work, providing attractive incentives and above average benefit plans, offering training programmes supporting career advancement opportunities,
ensuring many job advancement opportunities for internal candidates and providing flexible work arrangements that would facilitate work and life balance.

The recruitment and selection process should end with a proper induction or orientation, ranging from several days to several weeks, that would get the new recruit acquainted to their work roles, job-related tasks, and organisational values, beliefs and social norms, and even be prepared to face cultural differences of various customer and employee groups.

Therefore, the HR practice of recruitment and selection in the hotel industry is expected to be aligned with the above-mentioned core HR strategy of hiring the right people and its sub-strategies (Browning, 1998; Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000; Mayer, 2002; Russ-Eft, 2004; Tsaur and Lin, 2004; Anh and Kleiner, 2005; Johanson and Woods, 2008; Browning et al., 2009; Hinkin and Tracey, 2010; Kusluvan et al., 2010).

**Develop people to deliver service quality**

In this core HR strategy, the organisation must train and work with the hired employees to ensure service performance and it includes the sub strategies of train for technical and interactive skills, empower employees, promote teamwork. Training for technical and interactive skills implies providing employees with ongoing training in the required technical skills and knowledge and in process or interactive skills. Formal and informal programmes, on and off the job training, as well as online learning, are provided to employees and managers about the company’s culture of service quality, a variety of tasks, knowledge of the workplace, leadership skills and executive coaching, people management skills, problem solving skills, listening skills, teamwork skills, communication and interpersonal skills, and customer relationship skills which can help employees and managers assist customers. Training through job rotation, and knowledge sharing via seminars, can also facilitate career development opportunities, and thus be viewed as a long-term investment in the organisation’s key asset.

Empowering employees would mean to give employees the desire, skills, tools and authority to engage in customer service. Employees in customer oriented organisations are given the authority to resolve all customer issues with the managers getting involved only in extreme cases, and providing feedback 1-1 to employee at a later time. They are provided with training to teach them they hold the authority for problem solving. Organisations need to celebrate, applaud, and reward empowered employees, and this would require measuring specific service issues. Empowerment initiatives could include self-esteem and communications training, open-door policies, self-directed work teams, cross-training, task forces, management by walking around, employee surveys, sensing groups, information sharing, delegation strategies, involving employees in identifying causes of poor service quality, encouraging and
rewarding employees for suggestions and innovative ideas, and empowering employees to respond to customer needs.

Getting employees to work in teams, by promoting teamwork, will enhance customer satisfaction, since employees will feel better supported, reducing the stress and strains of service jobs. This will maintain their enthusiasm, through camaraderie and support, improving their inclination to provide service quality. The promotion of teamwork may require a restructuring of people around clusters of customers, where the work for the majority of employees is organised around teamworking on specific customer segment. The dominant mode of structuring work becomes self-managed teams and team working which will encourage better decision-making and facilitate creative problem-solving.

Therefore, the HR practice of training and development in the hotel industry is expected to be aligned with the above-mentioned core HR strategy of developing people to deliver service quality and its sub-strategies (Browning, 1998; Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000; Mayer, 2002; Russ-Eft, 2004; Tsaur and Lin, 2004; Anh and Kleiner, 2005; Johanson and Woods, 2008; Browning et al., 2009; Hinkin and Tracey, 2010; Kusluvan et al., 2010).

Provide needed support systems

This core HR strategy focuses on providing service employees with the required internal support systems aligned with their need to be customer oriented, and it encompasses the sub strategies of develop service-oriented internal processes, provide supportive technology and equipment, measure internal service quality. In the latter case, the predominant HR practice is performance management where the criteria based on tasks, accountabilities and behavioural requirements, for assessing effectiveness of the employees are clearly defined and understood by all employees, comprehensive performance measures address both individual and collective contributions, providing a transparent process of feedback on both employees and organisation’s performance. Annual performance standards, aligned with customer satisfaction and service quality indices, are based on behaviours directly related to organisation’s mission and values. Outcomes of the performance management can be both for developmental and reward purposes. Services companies have been found to engage in 360 degree feedback process where performance data is obtained from multiple sources and employees have an opportunity to voice out their opinions and discuss suggestions to improve the organisation. This will help in building a customer centric culture in the organisation. The organisation may be required to demonstrate a commitment to open-book management, encouraging employees to share ideas and concerns that would be useful to solve problems and improve performance.
Providing supportive technology and equipment, that would not fail them, to employees would enhance their enthusiasm to deliver service quality. Thus, designing the workplace and the workstation can facilitate access to the required state of the art information technology that will support all areas of the employees’ work to operate much faster and be more efficient. So HR will need to look into the organisation and job design to ensure that the necessary facilities are available for employees to perform in their task of delivering customer service excellence.

For developing internal service-oriented internal processes, the organisation’s internal processes should be worked out to provide customer value and customer satisfaction. Thus internal procedures must support quality service performance. So rules and procedures, like standard operating procedures to build consistency in employees’ job performance, must be facilitating customer service delivery and this could mean reengineering them to meet the needs of the internal employees to drive customer satisfaction.

Therefore, the HR practices of performance management, organisation and job design including reviewing the rules and procedures, in the hotel industry are expected to be aligned with the above-mentioned core HR strategy of providing needed support systems and its sub-strategies (Browning, 1998; Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000; Mayer, 2002; Tsaur and Lin, 2004; Anh and Kleiner, 2005; Johanson and Woods, 2008; Browning et al., 2009; Hinkin and Tracey, 2010; Kusluvan et al., 2010).

Retain the best people

This core HR strategy emphasises the need to retain the best employees who have been recruited, developed and supported, and it includes the sub strategies of measure and reward strong service providers, treat employees as customers, include employees in the company’s vision. Here, the significant HR practice is reward management. Management should develop attractive incentives that reflect the values of the organisation, will motivate employees, and maintain high morale and teamwork spirit. Performance related pay, performance bonuses, gain-sharing programmes, profit sharing and generous retirement programme are prevalent in service companies. A wide range of benefits can be offered to employees that would include health insurance plans, life insurance, subsidised child and elder care, etc. Reward and incentive programmes could also be family friendly and community based where employees will get support for their families needs like child care programmes and on-site care, as well as are encouraged to engage in community service through incentives, awards for green initiatives and flexible work schedules supported by formal corporate social responsibility policies. There are also recognition programmes, like service recognition awards, peer recognition programmes, attendance awards, etc., that could allow employees to praise and
reward co-workers for successfully completing their project or task. These rewards and recognition could take place in front of co-workers and family members to enhance the employee’s motivation and pride towards the company’s success.

Treating employees as customers would imply making them feel valued and taken care of by the organisation, enhancing their willingness to stay in the company. Hence the organisation can create a fun and rewarding work environment. From reward and recognition programmes to employee training seminars, the organisation should be creating a family-like atmosphere. The backstage work environment in the organisation should be up to the standard of the on-stage work environment. This will send the message that facilities which are exclusively for employees are just as important as those available to customers.

For employees to remain motivated and interested in sticking with the organisation and supporting its goals, they need share an understanding of the organisation’s vision. Leaders and managers should ensure employees understand how their work fits into the big picture of the organisation and its goals, that they commit to the vision of the organisation meaning that the vision cannot be kept secret from the employees, and that it should be articulated through frequent communication to employees by top managers, CEO, etc.

Therefore, the HR practices of reward management, recognition and awards, as well as communication strategies by management, in the hotel industry are expected to be aligned with the above-mentioned core HR strategy of retaining the best people and its sub-strategies (Browning, 1998; Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000; Mayer, 2002; Tsaur and Lin, 2004; Anh and Kleiner, 2005; Johanson and Woods, 2008; Browning et al., 2009; Hinkin and Tracey, 2010; Kusluvan et al., 2010).

**Research design and methodology**

The aims and objectives of any research project are largely determined by how much is already known about the topic selected. Consequently, the extent to which existing knowledge and understanding can be used to develop hypotheses which can be confirmed or refuted must be considered (Easterby-Smith et al., 1991; Patton, 1987). For the purpose of the study, a qualitative research paradigm was selected to guide the exploratory study of role of HRM practices in Hotel industry towards Customer Service Excellence.

As such, the design used to guide the collection and analysis of data had to be flexible enough to permit the researcher to uncover and explore issues which emerged as interesting and potentially capable of understanding the substantive research problem, which in the current study is identifying HRM practices presently implemented in Mauritian hotels in order to
ensure customer satisfaction through service excellence. In this respect depth-interviews were conducted, as according to Holliday (1992), depth interviews, participant observation and conversation, for example, have become popular tools for collecting data rich in detail.

However, as it is “impossible to embark upon research without some idea of what one is looking for” (Wolcott, 1994), decisions regarding the unit of analysis and the methods used to collect qualitative data were taken prior to the researcher’s entry into the field. Patton (1987) asserts that the key factor in selecting and making decisions about the appropriate unit of analysis is to decide “what unit it is that you want to be able to say something about”. As this research was interested in the role of HRM practices in Hotel industry towards Customer Service Excellence, hotels representative of different group of hotels and star-ratings were selected as the unit of analysis. Data were collected during depth, unstructured and semi-structured interviews with HR Managers.

In considering those firms to be involved it was decided that purposive rather than random sampling would be an effective way of selecting case-firms “rich” in data pertinent to understanding the research problem (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). While the logic of probabilistic sampling lies in “selecting a truly random and representative sample which will permit confident generalizations from the sample to a larger population” (Patton, 1987), the logic of purposive sampling is suited to research with different aims. Its power lies in the selection of cases “rich” in information about the substantive research problem. As such, purposive sampling was suited to developing a comprehensive understanding of the impact of HRM practices in Hotel industry towards Customer Service Excellence in Mauritius. To ensure that participating case-firms would be rich in data about the HR strategies adopted for service excellence, criterion sampling tactics were used (Patton, 1987). It was decided that the following set of pre-determined criteria would help the researcher, when in the field, make objective decisions about the firms approached, so ensuring that a purposive sample of case-firms participated: one hotel from each group of hotel; one hotel belonging to international chain of hotels; and individual small hotels.

The sample size was of 20 hotels, namely 12 hotels from groups of hotel in Mauritius and hotels belonging to international chain of hotels and 8 individual small hotels were targeted. The use of a sample of this size was justified by the logic of purposive sampling. As a sampling strategy that permits the researcher to spend lengthy periods of time with individual cases, purposive sampling encourages the collection of data rich in detail about the substantive research problem (Shaw, 1999). Consequently, the criteria used to assess the findings generated differ from those applied when using probabilistic sampling (Lincoln and Guba, 1986; Yin, 1994). While the value of the latter is judged by the degree to which they can be generalised to the wider population, the value of the understanding which emerges from the
detailed study of a purposive sample of small firms is properly determined by the degree to which it “fits and works” with the perspectives of participants (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

The response rate was 60%. Data were collected during depth, unstructured and semi-structured interviews with HR Managers. The method by which data were collected dictated the way in which they were recorded. Depth interviews were recorded by transcription that is the researcher had notes written up.

**Inductive data analysis**

The process of analysing the data collected for this study was characterised by the fact that it began as soon as the researcher started collecting data, it was ongoing and it was inductive. Lofland’s (1971, p. 121) explanation that when undertaking qualitative research, “during the observation or interviewing phase, one is at the same time trying to make some kind of (abstract) sense ... of the raw reality one is encountering” is a fitting description of the overlapping activities of data collection, analysis and interpretation which occurred during this exploratory study of small firm networks. As soon as the researcher began the process of collecting data, she simultaneously engaged in analyzing and interpreting the perspectives of those she was talking with and observing.

As the aim of the research was to generate a comprehensive understanding of the research problem, “rather than forcing the data within logico-deductively derived assumptions and categories” (Jones, 1985, p. 25), it was important that data were inductively analysed. As a result, based on Zeithaml and Bitner (2000) Human Resources (HR) Strategy wheel, the responses of HR managers interviewed were grouped under the following HRM practices, which ensure customer service excellence: hiring the right people, develop the people to deliver service quality, provide needed support systems and retain the best people.

**Findings**

It was observed that the HRM practices adopted by the hotels addressed to varying degrees the four core HR strategies and their sub-strategies identified in the HR strategy wheel. When considering the hotels that claimed to engage in hiring the right people core HR strategy, 57% ‘compete for the best people’, 43% ‘hire for service competencies and service inclination’ and 57% strived to ‘be the preferred employer’. The second core HR strategy of developing people to deliver service quality was a popular claim among the hotels, and it was noted that 83% ‘train for technical and interactive skills’, 67% ‘empower employees’ and 42% ‘promote teamwork’. Among the hotels claiming to undertake the third core HR strategy of providing needed support systems, 33% ‘develop service-oriented internal processes’, 22% ‘provide supportive technology and equipment’ and 67% ‘measure internal service quality’. For the
final core HR strategy, hotels which embarked on this strategy did their utmost to ‘retain the best people’ with 92% ‘measuring and rewarding strong service providers’, 50% ‘treating employees as customers’ and 67% ‘include employees in the company’s vision’.

For hotels engaging in hiring the right people the recurrent theme was that they were recruiting the right people in the first place, consistently aiming to select and deploy the right people in the right positions. In a group hotel, candidates were assessed on personality, competencies, leadership and managerial skills as well as maturity and expertise in job. In a small hotel also qualifications were given a lesser priority compared to ability to handle critical situations which was addressed through an interview suggesting situational interviews being used. Service inclination was also a criteria for hiring employees since the individuals’ unique attributes and motivational drive were taken on board, implying personality traits as well as a disposition to serve customers are crucial to work in this industry. Human values, attitude, aptitude, traits, punctuality and experience were considered as an advantage to be working in this industry. Some hotels worked towards being seen as a preferred employer since they prioritised internal over external recruitment. Unfortunately the selection techniques used were heavily reliant on traditional interviewing methods which could limit the extent to which the industry is availing itself of the best practices in recruitment and selection since there were no mention of a realistic job preview and other strategic approaches to hiring that would enhance the reputation of organisations in that industry as employers of choice. In addition they did not seem to be approaching their recruitment and selection as a marketing initiative which would enhance their effectiveness in competing for the best people.

With regards to the core strategy of developing people to deliver service quality, some hotels (mainly the ones belonging to the groups of hotel) had their own training centre providing technical training. Employees were provided with both on and off the job training to ensure quality of service delivery and refresher programmes were run to boost customer service. Ongoing training seemed to be prevalent but emphasis was on technical training to maintain working performance more than interactive skills since only one hotel stressed that employees were groomed on product knowledge, dress code, behaviour and use of elegant language. One hotel mentioned the use of induction programme to treat employees as guests which could be an opportunity to build empathy. As for empowering employees, they seemed to be involved in decision making on tasks as a way to increase commitment, participation and involvement. Managers do allow employees more authority, and furthermore ongoing training is provided sometimes like traineeship in other hotels, multi-skilling through cross training, as well as in the form of sponsored further studies, to support the empowerment of employees since they get an opportunity for promotion as employees coming through the ranks. Promoting teamwork seemed to be through training so as to enhance team spirit, but there were also
regular departmental meetings held where employees got opportunities to share ideas and voice their opinions. There is also a sense of pride and camaraderie engendered by the promotion of teamwork since employees are treated as team members which facilitates the view of the workplace as a community. Overall this core strategy has been fairly dealt with although training geared towards interactive skills need be reinforced.

For the core strategy of providing needed support systems, performance appraisal systems were adopted for both reward/evaluative and developmental purposes since the feedback gathered based on employees skills and attributes were used to sanction, take disciplinary actions, or allocate organisational awards and salary increases to employees, as well as allow the identification of training needs for employees. Line managers seemed to be closely involved in the management of employee performance but more as a supervisor than a coach. However there seemed to be mainly one to one performance management process and no 360 degree feedback process was implemented although one hotel mentioned that they had an open door policy for feedback purposes. For developing service oriented internal processes, rules and regulations were in place to be strictly adhered by employees to maintain consistency in service delivery and achieve the company’s goals. Standard of procedures were also available for example in the case of the recruitment and selection process, and on/off the job training. Technology and equipment were claimed to be provided to employees by both large and small hotels but with the large ones having more state of the art technology like a minute meeting management system to follow up proper supervision of employees. In this core HR strategy, performance management seemed to be in place but used more for evaluative than developmental purposes since there were no multi-rater feedback process which would have enhanced the development of a customer oriented workforce.

With regards to the final core strategy of retaining the best people, it seemed that there were some performance related pay/bonuses in place as well as a form of gain sharing since total tips were shared with all employees. But most of the hotels emphasised the use of awards or prizes like employee of the month and year, and benefits such as preferential rates for hotel and honeymoon stay, a medical plan, overseas holidays, duty free cars, and free stay at hotels to retain their people. As for treating employees as customers, one hotel claimed that its HR manager acted as an employee advocate ensuring non discriminatory rules and regulations were applied with regards to health and safety, discipline, terms and conditions of work whereas other hotels declared to be treating employees as valued assets, a source of competitive advantage and an integral part of the company. Employees’ health seemed to be high on the agenda of another hotel claiming to provide a balanced diet to its workforce. Furthermore one hotel emphasised that in annual parties, the employees’ families were invited so that the latter as well felt part of the organisation. With regards to including employees in
the company’s vision, most hotels claimed that employees’ well-being formed part of their core values while others stressed that executives and managers should live the vision, mission and core values of the organisation, and be seen as living them as well as constantly communicating them to their employees. So in this particular core strategy, performance related pay did not seem to be a predominant feature although benefits, awards and recognition strategies were heavily emphasised, but career development opportunities were not fully addressed.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Based on the findings above the hotel industry as a whole seemed to address the four core HR strategies of the Human Resources Strategy wheel framework but there is much room for improvement. The HR practices of recruitment and selection, training and development, performance management and reward management need be approached strategically within the HR sub categories. For hiring the right people, hotels should exert more efforts to attract the best people by adopting a marketing approach to targeting potential applicants and develop their reputation as an employer of choice. This could be enhanced with the use of realistic job previews, selection methods as assessment centres which would include personality tests, situational interviews, role plays, and even a one day on the job experience where peers will be able to give feedback on the applicants and thus, participate in the selection of their future colleague. Such an approach can also incorporate a self-selection step to ensure both job and culture fit.

As for training and development, too much emphasis were placed on technical skills which would require hotels to strike a balance with interpersonal skills development, especially the service competencies based on the SERVE model. This could be achieved with the performance management approach focusing on development of employees rather than evaluation. Instead of a traditional 1-1 appraisal system, hotels must devised a 360 degree feedback process which will ensure a customer oriented approach to managing employee performance as well as allowing for developmental needs to be identified.

Finally, reward management approaches should be refocused on performance based pay/bonus but also create opportunities for promotion with career development programmes for employees.

To conclude this paper aimed at uncovering the bundles of effective HR practices that the hotel industry in Mauritius were adopting to ensure customer service excellence. The HR strategy wheel framework was the basis for investigating the hotels’ approaches to human resource management. The hotel industry could be said to cater for the core HR strategies although the bundles of HR practices adopted need be coherent and mutually reinforcing, in
line with the core HR strategies and their sub categories, which would result in an integrated and strategic HRM approach towards building customer centric organisations where employees and managers will be customer service oriented. The study was limited to only 20 hotels; hence the qualitative research can be investigated on a larger scale. Furthermore, there has been a poor response rate from small hotels which would imply that future research about effective HRM practices could be undertaken within this category of hotels.
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