

HR Challenges Facing the Tourism Sector in the 21st Century

The need to develop a professional tourism workforce that can meet emerging labour market issues has never been greater, given the rapid changes in our industry. Changing visitor expectations and the significant impact that social, political and economic events can have on tourism all create staffing and professional development challenges that supervisors and managers must address.

“It is important for the industry to realize that the events of September 11, 2001 and their aftermath have been a catalyst for more fundamental changes in market behaviour and travel patterns that have been emerging since the mid-1990s. Demographic shifts and lifestyle trends are altering the characteristics of [travel and tourism] markets, while technology and the Internet revolution have changed the way we do business and expanded travel horizons for the consumer”. [World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), Progress and Priorities 2003, London: WTTC, 2003, p. 5.]

There is something all businesses need to do as a first step in dealing with these HR challenges: they must recognize that their employees are their greatest asset. Management must also understand the importance of committing to effective training and the impact that this can have on guest satisfaction and the company's bottom line.

HR professionals can play a major role in creating workplaces where all employees can see meaning in and experience satisfaction from their work, develop their individual potential and be productive workers. Achieving this starts with good people management practices being incorporated into the company's strategies.

According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) Human Resources Task Force, HR is possibly the single most critical issue facing the tourism industry over the next decade. Their research concludes that the biggest challenges facing the global tourism industry are:

Economic impact

- Fierce competition for tourist dollars

Human impact

- Travellers' changing needs and expectations regarding services and value

Attracting and retaining staff

- The industry's often poor image of career opportunities
- Staff lured away to better-paying industries
- Public perception of the industry's stability as a result of long-term impacts from world events, current changes in the airline industry and other global challenges
- Restrictive immigration policies and limited labour mobility

Education and training

- Requirement for quality on-the-job training and job enrichment
- Need for formal management – and vocational-level training that meets industry needs
- Convincing businesses to invest in training
- Need for government involvement in national education and training programmes to better match labour supply and demand

Leadership and management development

- Talent drain of skilled managers and technical leaders
- Require visionaries to develop the leaders of tomorrow

Discrimination

- Gender, racial and age discrimination

Future roles of HR

- Need to manage the knowledge economy and different organizational structures
- Need to develop technology to support the delivery of HR services electronically
- Need to improve the public's knowledge of the industry's economic impacts

Source: Human Resource Task Force, HR Opportunities and Challenges, London: WTTC, 2002, pp. 3-4 and 7-11

The Caribbean Tourism Organization conducted a study in March 2001 that focused on HR issues in Caribbean tourism, and the findings are still valid today. The following are some of the key issues that were raised in this study:

Economic impact

- The Caribbean is highly dependent on tourism and will likely be more so in the future.

Human impact

- Today's tourist is more discerning, more environmentally conscious and less likely to accept a third world standard and mentality.

Attracting and retaining staff

- Acquiring and maintaining a workforce capable of delivering high quality tourism services in a competitive environment is a major challenge.

Attitudes and feelings

- Attitudes towards tourism remain generally positive throughout the region.
- Working conditions – both physical and economic – have to be paid attention to since they influence attitudes towards tourism/tourists.
- Critical issues appear to be feelings of being undervalued and sometimes underpaid, which are held simultaneously with feelings of pride in being a part of the industry.
- Workers in general see a connection between the quality of service provided and the income that they earn, the survival of the business and the survival of the industry.

Rewards, recognition and employee motivation

- Money is a powerful motivator, as are recognition, appreciation and the opportunity for job mobility/ growth.
- Motivation is influenced by whether or not the job holders perceive that their needs are being met by the organization.

Education and training

- Caribbean governments are very involved in operating training institutions to develop tourism and hospitality skills.
- Significant gaps in training are in the areas of foreign languages, marketing, food preparation and managerial skills.

Organizational culture and management style

- Companies that consistently provide high levels of service have a management culture that rewards, supports, plans for and expects service excellence and provides tangible evidence of equipment, supplies and facilities to deliver this kind of service.
- The kind of management that involves a high degree of worker involvement in decision-making is not often part of the Caribbean tourism workplace experience.
- A major deficiency evident among tourism enterprises is inadequate attention to the HR management function, particularly among smaller enterprises.
- Highly skilled HR professionals often complain that their advice is ignored by top management. Even when they are accorded high status on paper, they are frequently not given the opportunity or resources to operate effectively.

Highlights of the Handbook's Good HR Practices

- At the **Malibu Visitor Centre**, a screening programme factors in employees' opinions to select the best candidates for job openings and help this organization to make better hiring decisions.
- Staff involvement in the customer service programme at the **Accra Beach Hotel** is responsible for the continued enthusiasm that employees have towards the programme.
- The **Trinidad Hilton Hotel and Conference Centre** created its own programme to attract and develop the best talent in the organization for future managerial positions.
- To improve the status of its room attendants, the HR department at the **Amaryllis Beach Resort** found a way to give these employees a higher and more appreciated profile.
- Within the Sandals chain, the **Ocho Rios Resort & Golf Club** raised guest comment scores to 95 per cent through a programme called PEGS.
- **Bahamas Experience Tours & Transfers** has been focusing its attention on delivering a consistent level of service among its employees.
- Strong leadership at the **Belize Zoo and Tropical Education Center** has its entire team focused on running an efficient and sustainable organization.
- Weekly evaluations and employee of the month awards are part of why staff have to be reminded that their shifts are over and it is time to go home at **Sammy T's Resort**.
- Monthly cash incentives and other strategies encourage employees to provide service and actions above and beyond the call of duty at the **Bucuti Beach Resort, Aruba**.
- You have probably heard of an understudy in a play, but what about at a hotel? **Beaches Turks & Caicos Resort & Spa** pairs inexperienced workers as understudies with experienced employees from one of the company's other properties.
- **Stafford Creek Fishing Lodge** is slowly breaking down old stereotypes and successfully helping employees to get a better sense of the career opportunities that are available within the tourism community.
- A sensitive HR issue was tackled by **Atlantis Submarines** through the establishment of a drug-testing policy that has the support of employees because it keeps guests and staff safe.