



Skills and work in the hospitality sector

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The case of hotel front office employees in China

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Kong Hai-yan

School of Business, Shandong University at Weihai, Shandong, China, and

Tom Baum

The Scottish Hotel School, University of Strathclyde, Scotland, UK

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to develop a picture of the skills profiles, work background, educational attainment, attitudes and plans of the employees in front office in hotels in China by means of a survey of employees in four and five star hotels.

Design/methodology/approach – Data was collected by means of a questionnaire survey conducted in major tourist cities in China, including Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Jinan, Qingdao and Weihai. In each selected city, four and five star rated hotels were chosen as those properties most likely to be operating in the international market. The survey focused on staff working in front office in four and five star hotels and all questionnaires were collected onsite. A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed and 276 of these returned were usable which form the basis of this analysis of hotel front office work in China.

Findings – Results show that the main workforce strength of front office in Chinese hotels consists of graduates from tourism colleges and professional schools. Front office work is a challenging and demanding area of work and oral communication is identified as the most important skill.

Practical implications – Gathering information about this important area of service and work in the hospitality industry provides first-hand data for improving training and career development. The paper concludes that high-quality human resources are lacking in the hospitality sector in China and it is essential for hotels to develop professional development and further training in order to improve the skills of staff in front office.

Originality/value – This paper is one of the first to look in detail at employees within the hospitality sector in China.

Keywords Skills, Career planning, Hotels, China, Hospitality services

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

People are one of the most important resources for businesses throughout the world. This is particularly true with respect to a service-intensive sector such as hospitality. It is only through focused developmental support of all staff with an emphasis on high-quality and high-skills that the hotel industry can reach its full business potential. The functional area of front office, with its roles of reception and marketing as well as acting as the centre for liaison and communication within the operating business, plays the role of the “brain” in the hotel. Employees working in front office undertake an important task in building up a hotel’s image and reputation. Therefore, skills and quality of staff are among the most important factors in underpinning the competitive success of the hotel. An increasing number of researchers in China and elsewhere



(Liu, 2002; Baum *et al.*, 2006) are focused on the study of the human resources and skills in hotel front office.

Because of the wide diversity of property types that sit within an umbrella definition of “the hotel”, front office is an area of activity that varies greatly from hotel to hotel, influenced by the size, location and market focus of the specific property. Vallen and Vallen (2004) define front office in terms of its role as the main contact point for guests within the hotel, irrespective of hotel type. Generally, front office can be taken to include those areas of activity which centre on the reception desk and its allied areas where the main focus is on “meeting and greeting” guests, providing information during their stay and processing their departure, including payment. It can also involve the concierge or portering function, along with back office activities in some smaller properties such as reservations and accounts.

Baum and Odgers (2001) report a study across eight European countries into the nature of work in hotel front office. They identified the central role of front office in the organisation of hotels, both in terms of the flow of management information and in relation to how the guest experiences the range of products and services on offer with the establishment. Baum (2005) undertook an international comparative study to look at the social construction of skills in hospitality and suggested that there was evidence to support the contention that hotel work, especially in front office, was socially constructed and work by multinational companies and international agencies that ignored such divergence was ill-advised. Woods (2003) conducted a study on the training of hotel employees and concluded that there was under-investment and neglect by many operators in this regard. Angelo and Vladimir (2004) analysed the responsibility of staffs in front office, conducting a research study of how to choose suitable professions and proposed ways to support training and development within operations. Johnson (2004) undertook a comprehensive analysis on the development of personal ability in this area of work. These examples support the contention that there is increasing international interest in the development of skills as a major factor in enhancing business success within the hospitality sector.

In China, scholars have undertaken considerable work into the study of skills and skills development in relation to hotel work generally (Zhang *et al.*, 2005) and the context of front office employees specifically. Liu (2002) suggests that people working in front office should be quick-witted, amiable, be good at foreign language and communication. Guo (2004) noted attributes with regard to the skills of employees. In order to improve the satisfaction of guests, first of all, all staff in front office should understand guests, then be familiar with the hotel product and further be proficient at marketing. In addition, employees should also exhibit skills of communication and emotion control. Lou (2003) analysed the structure of allocation of hotel manager and worked out appropriate measures. Xv and He (2005) undertook a study that proposed strategies to improve work quality in hotel front office. Lin and Dai (2005) made a study on the control of the hotel employees turnover based on psychological contract theory.

The tourism industry in China

China has developed to be one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world. The tourism industry has been developing rapidly since reform commenced with a policy of greater access to and from the outside world and has grown at rate higher than that of world tourism and that of GDP in China.

According to the statistical reports from the China National Tourism Administration (CNTA), in 2004, the total number of inbound tourists reached 109.04 million, not only up 18.96 per cent over the previous year (2003), but also up 11.37 over 2002, representing the highest level on record. Tourism foreign exchange income reached \$25.7 billion, up 47.8 and 26.26 per cent, respectively, over 2003 and 2002. The scale of outbound tourism in 2004 was also great, with a total number of 28.5 million outbound travelers and a growth rate of 42.7 per cent over 2003. China's domestic tourism developed rapidly in 2004, with a total number of 1.1 billion visitors, up 26.66 per cent over 2003 and 25.51 per cent over 2002 with total income of 471.07 billion RMB (\$56.7 billion), up 23.89 and 30.43 per cent, respectively, over 2003 and 2002 (Green Book of China's Tourism).

In 2004, China became the tourist destination developing with the highest increase rate in the world and was recognised as the best tourist destination in the world by the Travel Trade Gazette (TTG), Asia. With the rapid development of domestic, inbound and outbound tourism, China continue to play a leading role in the world of tourism. It has already become the largest tourist destination and tourist generating country in Asia. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) forecasts that by the year 2020, China will rank first in the world with total number of 3.6 billion domestic tourists and 139 million inbound travelers. China will also be the fourth largest tourist generating country, contributing 100 million outbound visitors.

The hospitality industry in China was one of the first areas of economic activity to open to the outside world and to obtain advanced international management skills as a result. It is evident that China has a bright future in this area, as the rapid development of tourism has been based on a solid foundation. By April 2004, the number of graded star level hotels had reached 8,880 with total turnover of 1,000 billion RMB (\$120.48 billion).

Human resources in the tourism industry in China

Tourism and hospitality has provided many job opportunities and has become one of the main ways to resolve the problems of employment in China. In 2003, the tourism industry supported more than 38.9 million jobs. The strength of tourism human resources in China continues to develop and the number of employees continues to increase. About 24.1 per cent of skilled staff are graduates from college or university and the number of qualified professional technical staff has doubled in recent years. However, though human resources in tourism have developed rapidly, China is still faced with the problem of a shortage of qualified personnel. Service quality, management skills and quality of staff cannot meet the needs of rapid tourism development.

At the same time, the hospitality industry is also confronted by a series of problems that need to be resolved fast, such as low quality and skills of employees, imbalanced allocation of human resources as well as low level of training. A key to resolve these problems is to survey the specific situation of employees and to find out what skills will be required in the future so as to take advantage of new opportunities and to enhance the development of Chinese tourism.

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to find out more about the skills profiles, work background, idea, attitude and plan of the people in front office in hotels by conducting a survey. By gathering information about this vital area of service and work in the

hospitality industry, it will provide first-hand data in order to improve training and career development. The research findings will not only enrich the knowledge of front office but also be useful for policy makers to gain some insights into human resources management.

This study was based on a survey that was conducted in major tourist cities in China, including Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Jinan, Qingdao and Weihai. In each selected city, four and five star rated hotels were chosen as those properties most likely to be operating in the international market. A questionnaire was distributed to staff working in front office in four and five star hotels and all questionnaires were collected onsite. A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed and 276 of these returned were usable which form the basis of this analysis of hotel front office work in China.

In the sample, female represent 64 per cent of the respondents and 79 per cent of the total group are single. The hotels where respondents work include 65 per cent that are business hotels, 20 per cent that are beach resort hotels, 6 per cent that are conference hotels and 1 per cent that are country resort hotels.

Research findings

Responses were received from front office staff across arrange of levels in all three research locations – management and supervisory level, senior staff members, junior staff and trainees (Table I).

Job scope of the respondents was generally wide, with all staff being directly involved with reception work. All staff hold responsibility with respect to the reception. About 21 percent are involved with accounts; reservations and cash desk exchange, respectively, engage 16 per cent of the sample; concierge 11 per cent; telephone operator 9 per cent; and sales and marketing 9 per cent. Other responsibilities included portering and night auditing.

About 99.4 percent of the respondents work full-time in the hotel office, only 0.6 per cent have a part-time job in hotel. This is quite different from that in other counties, In Northern Ireland, for example, only five of all the 64 respondents (7.8 per cent) work full-time in the hotel office (Baum *et al.*, 2006). Of the respondents, 97 per cent have no other job in addition to the work in this hotel and only 3 per cent have another job in addition to their main employment.

Front office employees and their education

The survey shows that the main strength of the front office in China is made up of graduates from tourism college and professional schools. Of the employees surveyed, 49 per cent have been educated to college certificate/diploma level and 26 per cent employees graduated from vocational/technical school. On the other hand, the result

Position of respondents	Number (<i>n</i> = 276)	Valid per cent
Department manager	9	3.3
Supervisor	28	10.2
Senior staff member	44	15.8
Junior staff member	168	60.9
Trainee	27	9.8

Table I.
Position of the respondents

also reflect the fact that China's hotels are lacking of staff with higher level qualifications such as primary degrees and masters. Of all the respondents only 17 per cent have got bachelors degree and master degrees are even less at only 1 per cent (Table II).

More than half of the respondents (54 per cent) had studied formal full-time school/college/university programmes in hotel/front office studies before they joined the hotel industry. And of the 54 per cent respondents, 47 per cent have certificates in hotel/hospitality/tourism studies and 34 per cent have diploma/higher diploma in hotel/hospitality/tourism management.

Of the employees, 46 per cent who had not studied any formal fulltime school, college or university program in hotel or front office work before entering into their position, have got transferable skills for front office work such as: accountancy 21 per cent, computing/ICT 17 per cent, business studies 14 per cent, office administration 10 per cent, law 4 per cent and other educational area 34 per cent such as language, media and personal resources, etc.

With respect to part-time or short courses, the employees who have been able to avail of taking external courses in front office and tourism are less than those who have not had this chance, with respective rates of 41 and 59 per cent. This points to the demand for further education and training for staff in hotels.

Respondents careers and plan

For 75 per cent of the respondents, their current employer was their first experience of hotel work. But only 30.9 per cent employees surveyed plan to remain in their current job for between one to five years, 27.4 per cent want to remain in their current employment for less than one further year. This reflects potential instability in the hotel working environment. Table III also points to uncertain plans of respondents in their current job and the degree of uncertainty of the hotel workforce.

Educational level	Number (n = 276)	Valid per cent
Primary/elementary	0	0
Secondary/high school	11	3.9
Vocational/technical	72	26.1
Certificate/diploma	135	48.9
Bachelors	47	17.1
Master degree	3	1.1
Others	8	2.9

Table II.
Educational attainment

How long do you plan to remain in current job	Number (n = 276)	Valid per cent
Less than 6 month	22	8.0
6 month-1 year	54	19.4
1 year-5 year	85	30.9
No plans at this stage	115	41.7

Table III.
Plans to remain in current
job

In terms of the career plans, Table IV indicates that a majority (68.1 per cent) see their future firmly within the hotel sector.

Though most of the staffs plan to commit themselves to the hotel industry in China, Table V further demonstrates uncertainty from a career perspective. Almost half of the respondents thought opportunities for promotion and development in their current job are poor or uncertain.

Perspectives of work in hotel front office

The survey was designed to collect responses to a series of statements about front office work from the employees surveyed. All the respondents were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement or disagreement with each statement by circling the appropriate number on a scale of 1-5, where 1 equates to "disagree strongly" and 5 equates to "agree strongly". Table VI shows the result of the mean response.

Table IV.
Next career move

Career move	Number ($n = 276$)	Valid per cent
Promotion in my current job	147	53.3
Move elsewhere in this hotel	26	9.4
Move to another hotel	15	5.4
Move out of the hotel sector	49	17.8
Other	39	14.1

Table V.
Opportunities for promotion and development in the current job

Promotion and development in my hotel are	Number ($n = 276$)	Valid per cent
Excellent	23	8.3
Satisfactory	118	42.6
Poor	27	10.1
Don't know	108	39.1

Table VI.
Working in hotel front office

Statement about hotel front office work	Mean response on five-point scale	Number ($n = 276$)
Front office work is a challenging and demanding area of work	4.30	276
I enjoy meeting and greeting customers within my job	4.19	276
I enjoy the organisational parts of my job	4.16	276
I enjoy the use of technology within my job	4.11	276
I would like the opportunity to work in other areas of the hotel industry	3.94	276
Most work in front office is common sense	3.93	276
Front office work is all about personality	3.84	276
My area of work is well respected by my family and friends	3.77	276
Front office is my preferred field for work and career progression	3.74	276
A specialist college course (in hospitality) is useful for front office work	3.60	276
I was familiar with most of the tasks in front office before I started work in this area	3.38	276

Table VI indicates that staff were strongly in agreement with the statement that “front office work is a challenging and demanding area of work” and they hope to improve their ability and skill in this specific area. In addition, many respondents enjoy meeting and greeting customers within their job and think it to be one of the most interesting part of their job. By contrast, those surveyed largely disagree with the statement “I was familiar with most of the tasks in front office before starting work” ranking it at the lowest level and also affirm low agreement with the idea that “ a specialist college course is useful for front office work”. This points to the importance of training before and within work and also suggests the need for college course reform.

Importance of specific skills in front office work

Respondents were also asked to respond to statement about skills requirements for work in front office, based on a scale of 1-5, where 1 equates to “very low importance” and 5 equates to “very important”. Table VII presents the mean rating of each identified skills area.

In terms of the important skills in front office, respondents in China see “communication (oral) skills” as the most important while “professional and ethical standards” are also important for hotel staffs. In addition the skills of team work, leadership quality, use of FO equipment, customer care and interpersonal are also listed among the more important skills in front office. By contrast, communication (written) and legal issues were rated relatively low.

With regard to the use of languages, some staff surveyed could speak English, Japanese or Korean besides their mother tongue (Chinese). The level of fluency in English was higher than that of other foreign languages. But few respondents had a second language though they were quite aware of the importance of foreign languages.

Conclusions

The outcomes of this study of front office workers in Chinese hotels points to a number of conclusions and recommendations:

Importance of skills	Mean response on five-point scale	Number (<i>n</i> = 276)
Communication (oral)	4.56	276
Professional and ethical standards	4.43	276
Team work	4.33	276
Leadership qualities	4.31	276
Use of FO equipment	4.29	276
Customer care	4.25	276
Interpersonal	4.25	276
Accounting	4.18	276
Marketing	4.17	276
Use of technology	4.12	276
Health and safety	4.02	276
Communication (written)	3.92	276
Legal issues	3.67	276

Table VII.
Importance of skills in
front office work

- High-quality human resources are lacking in the hospitality industry in China. Many employees, especially those who have got bachelor or higher degrees do not want to stay long in hotel front office because of demanding work, low wages and uncertain opportunities for promotion. As a result, the main skills strengths of front office are to be found in students from professional schools, vocational schools or even senior high schools which inevitably leads to a relatively low educational level and low quality of workers in the industry. So a competitive system and effective measures such as providing a supportive environment to staff together with a flexible salary package should be established as soon as possible in order to attract and keep better talent.
- Professional development is vital for the hotel to develop its human resources. The survey notes that many staff feel uncertain about their hotel career and complain about promotion opportunities due to the unstructured employment and development system. Many employees do not know what to do for their next step or where they will be working in the future. Therefore, it is necessary for hotels to clarify to staff their own prospects and the long-range plans for their hotel. The result of an effective professional development system will make most workers more optimistic and confident both with regards to their career and their hotel.
- Further training is essential to develop skills of staffs in front office. Over China as a whole, more attention has been paid to pre-work training while less stress has been laid on training in the process of work. The result of “nearsightedness” in training can be seen in the shortage of advanced skills. With rapid development of tourism and the globalisation of services, it is important for all employees to grasp not only the skills needed at present but also skills to be used in the future.

Taking a wider perspective, this study points to a workplace in hotel front office in China that is dominated by female employees, with a combination of general and vocational education and with fairly extensive experience of hotel work. The underpinning level of educational attainment of hotel front office workers in China, prior to commencing work in the sector suggests a requirement to have better employability skills to meet the demands and challenges of the job. In particular, due to the importance placed on both the technical and generic skills requirements for the job, it gives recognition to the need for a specialist front office training qualification with more focus given to the level of language skills offered. As an integral part of any organisation’s attempt to achieve competitiveness is to invest significantly in the skills of their workforce, this study showed that most of the respondents have not been able to avail of taking external courses in front office or tourism and thus, the skills required for front office work were acquired exclusively in-house. This reinforces the notion that effective training is costly and requires expertise. The study also points to the fact that front office work offers unstable prospects in terms of career developments due to relatively limited promotional prospects and low wages.

This study suggests that front office work is undertaken by employees with a degree of focus on this work area. There is evidence that the work area attracts people with a clear career focus on the front office area but there may not be a long-term commitment to front office work among those currently in employment in the area.

The challenge for the hotel sector in China as it becomes increasingly international in focus is to attract personnel with the range of language, communications, emotional and wider generic skills that are necessary for effective work in the contemporary global industry. The evidence here points to some gaps in this regard. This analysis is of considerable interest when set alongside the growing literature on hospitality employment internationally, typified by the work of Hoque (1999) in the UK and Adler and Adler (2004). This latter work, located in Hawaii, points to clear stratification of employment within hospitality on a variety of grounds including gender, ethnicity and vocational motivation. The study of front office in China, in part, confirms aspects of the Adler and Adler study but also points to far greater labour market parochialism and stability than is to be found in “idyllic” resort locations.

In conclusion, an employee skills set is a vital operational tool because service determines the success of the hospitality industry. When hospitality establishments compete for business, it's the service levels that staff provides, that will set it apart from the competition, encouraging repeat business and increasing profitability. However, this paper suggests that there is evidence to support the contention that hotel work, specifically in front office, is constructed by a combination of economic, political, cultural and other factors in the local economy.

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Corresponding author

Tom Baum can be contacted at: t.g.baum@strath.ac.uk