
3

Talent Management in the Hospitality and Tourism Curriculum

John Swarbrooke

Learning objectives

At the end of this chapter the reader should be able to recognise the current issues in tourism and hospitality education and the likely future challenges in relation to talent management. They will have read a number of proposed solutions which they will then be able to critically evaluate. Finally, they should have deepened their understanding of what talent management means in tourism and hospitality.

Student learning activities

Students should, in groups, discuss the programme of study they are undertaking and evaluate its relevance to talent management. They should then present their findings face-to-face to a tutor and an industry representative and take feedback from both. In light of this feedback they should then finalise their conclusions and present them through the medium of a written report.

Assessment: Essay question

Critically evaluate the statement that 'talent management in tourism and hospitality relies heavily on the tourism and hospitality curriculum in higher education institutions'.

Introduction

This is a fascinating topic to be discussing during a period of great, and perhaps even unprecedented, uncertainty and change in politics, business and society. It is against this volatile background that this chapter is set.

The author will argue that the traditional approaches to tourism and hospitality education are failing to meet the needs of the two industries in terms of talent management. Indeed in some cases they are in danger of becoming irrelevant

to the nurturing of future talent in tourism and hospitality due to their focus on research and bureaucratic quality systems

At the same time it will be suggested that the two industries are struggling to attract and retain the best talent due to outdated and sometimes downright unethical approaches to managing people. We are seeing improvements here but they are not fast enough to be effective in a rapidly changing labour market.

We therefore appear to be heading towards some kind of 'perfect storm' in which, if we are not careful, tourism and hospitality sectors will become the preserve of those with few other career options, not a desired destination for the brightest and most talented in our countries. However, the author does not wish to simply present a critique of current practice. Instead the intention is to highlight the challenges and suggest ways in which they might be tackled in future.

While the author is UK based and most familiar with the UK situation, the chapter will endeavour to present a global view of the subject and it will be up to the reader to judge how successful he has been in this, based on how what is said relates to where they are reading this book.

The author wishes not to offer a traditional chapter with references but instead to present a personal view as a basis for discussion and debate. However, suggestions for further reading will be found at the end of the chapter.

Finally, it is important to stress that the major focus in this chapter will be on higher education and particularly universities, and is not meant in any way to devalue what is done in other types of institution.

A brief history of the subject areas

By general consensus, formal hospitality education is said to have originated in Switzerland in 1893 with the creation of the *Ecole Hôtelière de Lausanne* or EHL. This was created to help meet the demand for skilled labour for the growing tourism industry in Switzerland, which catered for rich and demanding clients. Switzerland later went on to develop a very strong hospitality education 'brand' with the opening of further hotel schools, particularly in the 1980s. In the Netherlands the *Hotel School the Hague* commenced operations in 1929. Across the Atlantic, the *Culinary Institute of America* opened its doors in 1946 while in the UK the first university in the country to launch a hospitality programme accepted its first students on to a Hotel and Catering Administration undergraduate programme in 1966.

Tourism, by contrast, was a somewhat later development and often started out as an elective subject on hospitality programmes. However, it became widely accepted in universities quite quickly, so that the University of Surrey, a pioneer in the field, awarded its first PhD in tourism in 1972 and launched its first postgraduate programme in tourism in 1981, two years before it launched the equivalent programme in hospitality.

The historical evolution of the two areas perhaps provides hints as to how they have developed in different ways since their early days. Hospitality education has its roots in the 19th century and has a longer heritage than tourism, which may partly account for its more traditional and conservative nature. It also grew out of industry needs rather than academic interest unlike tourism, which probably explains why it has developed differently to tourism in the ways we will discuss in the next section.

As a further comment in this section, it is perhaps worth noting that when EHL opened its doors there were no aeroplanes or motels, when the Culinary Institute of America launched there were no fusion cuisine restaurants or Mc Donalds and when the University of Surrey started its first postgraduate tourism programme there were no budget airlines or mobile devices! In other words, most of the leading players were created before the developments that have revolutionised tourism and hospitality were even in existence!

Finally, we also need to note that, until recently, tourism and hospitality education was dominated by institutions in Europe and the USA. Yet it is in other parts of the world, notably Asia and the Gulf States, that we have seen the most growth and innovation in the tourism and hospitality sectors.

Key differences between tourism and hospitality education

The author has always been intrigued by the fact that hospitality and tourism education are often so different, when the subjects are so closely related. What follows is a highly generalised view that is not true for everywhere, but is a fair summary of the global situation as a whole.

Hospitality education is not accepted as a university level subject in many countries and is seen as a subject to be taught at vocational rather than academic institutions. It is rooted in business as a subject and is concerned mainly with operational management and customer service. Industry links would have been strong on such programmes traditionally but research would have been a very low level priority. Hospitality academics have largely refrained from criticising the hospitality industry in terms of salary levels, for example. A major concern of educators concerned about the employability of graduates has been the social skills and appearance of students, as employers have stressed the importance of these in recruitment decisions.

One result of the lack of conventional university level hospitality education in many countries has been the rise of alternative providers, often private sector organisations, who have sought to offer degree programmes in cooperation with universities in other countries. At the same time some hospitality corporations have developed their own higher education level programmes through partnerships with universities

Tourism education by contrast is accepted as a university level subject much more widely, although not universally. As a result one does not see equivalents of the Swiss hotel schools in the tourism field. It is rooted in the social sciences and is generally concerned with policy and the role of the public sector. Research has usually been quite high on the list of priorities but industry links, particularly with the private sector, have often been limited. Tourism academics have often been critical of the actions of the tourism industry. Tourism educators have generally been more concerned with the intellect of their students and have been largely unconcerned about their social skills or appearance.

This is not to say that all hospitality and tourism academics have taken these approaches. Conrad Lashley has long campaigned for hospitality education to take a broader, more philosophical view of hospitality and its role in society, while Harold Goodwin has had great success in building links between academia and the tourism industry in the field of sustainability. However the existence of these two rather lone voices perhaps proves the point being made by the author.

In terms of talent management therefore, we might make the following observations. Hospitality educators may have focused too much on the practical side of employment roles and have encouraged compliance without too much questioning of how employers operate. Tourism educators have encouraged questioning and critical analysis but perhaps have rather neglected to give sufficient attention to developing the business management skills and experience of their students

What 'talent' does hospitality and tourism need?

This is an obvious question but it is more complex than one might expect. Traditionally the word 'talent' was not used and the focus was on individuals with a set of technical competences, together with a general 'service mentality'. It was expected that over a period of years those who did particularly well in their areas of technical expertise or departments would rise to management positions. The difficulties of the transition from technical specialist to departmental manager were often underestimated, which partly accounts for the poor reputation of our industries in terms of management quality, and particularly the ability to motivate and manage people. The traditional manager was often someone who had to focus on regulation and discipline to ensure a diverse workforce worked as a team and did not indulge in bad behaviour. The emphasis was on consistency at routine tasks and following set procedures.

There is no doubt that there is still a place for elements of this traditional management practice. However, for these industries to be successful in a modern economy and attract the best talent there is a need to take a rather different approach as many leading organisations have realised.

First, if managers are there to manage and plan strategy, do they all need to start at the bottom in the industry and work their way up? Maybe some should be brought in from other sectors to bring new thinking into the industry.