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'Free Food and Beer': Fair contracts in hospitality work

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Abstract

Hospitality work blends formal structures with informal practices shaping employee experiences in complex ways and raising important considerations around fair contracts and equitable treatment. This chapter critically examines the intersection of legal entitlements and additional perks, two concepts often blurred in the industry's employment practices. Drawing on survey data from 383 hospitality workers across Australia, we explore how they navigate a landscape where fair contracts are rare, casual labour is prevalent, and access to formal protections is inconsistent. The widespread use of perks raises important questions about whether these informal advantages compensate for or distract from the absence of written agreement and enforceable entitlements. Our findings reveal non-compliance, variability in agreements, and persistent challenges across businesses. We contribute to the literature by highlighting how the reliance on informal perks is linked with the absence of fair contracts and enforceable entitlements, exposing inequities in hospitality employment practices that warrant deeper critical scrutiny.

Introduction

Former hospitality workers often look back on their careers with mixed emotions. Despite the challenges of long hours and low pay, many recall fondly the unique dynamics within the industry, where the perks of being 'behind the scenes' played a role in fostering a sense of belonging and appreciation. The authors of this chapter, reflecting on their early careers in the hospitality industry, shared personal accounts of these dynamics. One recalls the routine of being handed a free alcoholic drink at the end of a long shift, a small gesture that made the hard work feel appreciated. Another remembers the lavish end-of-year parties for which management covered all expenses, creating a sense of camaraderie and celebration, and the third, delighting in a fillet of premium reef fish