



Avoiding the hospitality workforce bubble: Strategies to attract and retain generation Z talent in the hospitality workforce

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ABSTRACT

Survival of the hospitality and tourism industry is highly dependent on a stable workforce to service the tourists and customers. In a shrinking workforce market faced with traditionally high staff turnover and increased departure of older workers, the key focus of this paper serves to provide practical recruitment strategies to attract the next Generation of hospitality talent – Generation Z. This opinion piece provides 10 key talent management strategies on how to appeal to Generation Z and entice them to join the hospitality sector. It presents practical solutions adopted by the industry and innovative recruitment strategies to address the war on talent in hospitality.

1. Introduction

Despite Generation Z being the largest proportion of hospitality and tourism workers, limited studies have examined this particular workforce cohort (Goh & Jie, 2019; Goh & Kong, 2018; Goh & Lee, 2018; Self, Gordon, & Jolly, 2019). More importantly, Solnet, Baum, Robinson, and Lockstone-Binney (2016) strongly emphasised the need for ongoing hospitality workforce research to address the evolving workforce issues especially in the demographical area of older workers retiring from the hospitality industry. This is supported by the meta-analysis conducted by Baum, Kralj, Robinson, and Solnet (2016) where only 27% (458 of 1700 articles) of hospitality journal articles were workforce related, and only 40 out of 1700 articles were personal traits, attributes and characteristics related workforce research. This sees a paucity of workforce related studies despite the call for more research 10 years ago where only 2% of 2868 articles were categorized as HRM related in the meta-analysis of hospitality and tourism discipline (Ballantyne, Packer, & Axelsen, 2009).

From a talent management perspective, Thunnissen (2016) labelled the complexity of understanding the 'black box' in talent management and encouraged more research on the multiple levels and stakeholders (such as prospective employees) involved in talent management. More importantly, only a paucity of studies (9 out of 96 articles) in a meta-analysis study on talent management publications between 2006 and 2014 examined talent management practices around recruitment, attraction and selection. In his 2033 vision, Baum (2019a) identified the

high turnover culture and eternal problems in recruitment as key problems of the hospitality industry that must be addressed by employers. Hence, this is an urgent call for more research into providing practical talent management practices in the battle for talent (Baum, 2019b; Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016; Giousmpasoglou & Marinakou, 2019; Tracey, 2014).

The authors look to pursue these practical recruitment strategies to attract the Generation Z hospitality workforce through an exploratory literature search. It is important to highlight that this opinion piece is not about conducting a systematic review but rather an exploratory review (Hjalager, 2010) of some of the academic literature on attracting and retaining Generation Z hospitality workers. Given the aim of this opinion paper, the keywords 'Generation Z employees' OR 'Generation Z talent' 'hospitality workforce' OR 'hospitality recruitment' were used in titles, keywords, and abstracts to search for relevant literature. The literature search adopted a similar approach recommended by Deery and Jago (2015) to focus on main hospitality journals (Chang & McAleer, 2012; McKercher, 2012). Next, five other databases (Scopus, EBSCO, Elsevier, Proquest, and Emerald) as recommended by Yung and Khoo-Lattimore (2017) were used to extend the literature search. The search was not time-bound due to the emerging nature of Generation Z workforce in hospitality research (Goh & Lee, 2018). The paper then identifies ten practical recommendations issues that might help to drive future directions to attract and retain Generation Z hospitality employees.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Hospitality and tourism contribution to the economy

The workforce talent running the hospitality and tourism engine creates 322 million jobs worldwide and contributes an astounding \$2.3 trillion to the economy (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2018). The magnitude trickledown effect sees 1 in 10 jobs associated to hospitality and tourism, and contributes to 11.5% of the world's Gross Domestic Product by 2028 (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2018). In Australia, the hotel ecosystem employs 380,000 talented hospitality professions across 6807 hotels throughout the six states in an industry worth \$14 billion (Australia Hotel Association, 2015). Currently, there is a hospitality skills shortage in Australia experiencing a shortfall of 123,000 hospitality jobs needed to be filled by 2020 (Deloitte, 2015). This workforce shortage is exacerbated with a further 45,134 hotel rooms (272 hotels) to be constructed by 2025 in Australia (Tourism Accommodation Australia, 2018). This optimistic forecast unlocks promising career prospects underlining vital workforce gaps for eligible and competent Generation Z talent to meet the labour demand of a developing hospitality industry.

2.2. Decline of the older workforce talent

According to the Australia Department of Employment (2014), 20% of the hospitality workforce are aged 45–64, and majority (43%) of hospitality workers are aged between 15 and 24. In Europe, 19.6% of the hospitality workforce are aged 25 years and below (HOTREC, 2019). This figure is higher in the US where 33.1% of the hospitality labour force is below 25 years old (United States Department of Labour, 2018). This presents the hospitality workforce dominated by young talent and will continue to be younger as older workers retire and leave the industry. Hospitality workforce experts have labelled this phenomenon as the “perfect storm” where older workers will leave due to natural life cycle attrition as younger hospitality talent enter the workforce (Solnet et al., 2016). A younger workforce will bring along generational traits such as increased willingness to provide 24 h / 7 days per week / 365 days service to hotel customers. In addition, there will be a hierarchical power shift where older workers report to younger employees who will hold managerial positions (Solnet, Kralj, & Kandampully, 2012). This can create tension and disrespect from older workers viewing younger hospitality workers as inexperience and adding little value (Mooney, 2016) but the reality is that a younger workforce will replace older workers and be a major demographic stronghold in the hospitality sector in the near future.

2.3. Generation Z workforce talent

Attracting and retaining hospitality talent is a perennial and pertinent issue as there is a workforce shortage and limited career longevity of hospitality graduates. Upon graduation, 29.1% of hospitality graduates leave the hospitality sector within 10 years (Brown, Arendt, & Bosselman, 2014). Other similar studies have reported 10%–20% (Wu, Morrison, Yang, Zhou, & Cong, 2014) to 32% (Ly & Adler, 2009) of graduates' intention to leave the industry and 48% (King, McKercher, & Waryszak, 2003) to 70% (Blomme, Van Rheede, & Tromp, 2009) of actual turnover. Hospitality companies in Australia are facing recruitment challenges in an industry facing rapid expansions and high labour turnover. According to The Australia Department of Employment Survey (2014), there is a 28% vacancy rate among hospitality employers. This sees a heavier reliance on the younger employees to ensure workforce continuity in the hospitality sector.

A pivotal emerging workforce is the Generation Z (year of birth between 1995 and 2009) where majority are about to graduate and enter the workforce (Goh & Lee, 2018). In the next four years, Generation Z will take up over 20% of total jobs (Deloitte, 2017). This is a

significant workforce cohort to be reckoned with, as they will be the future hospitality leaders. Despite the pivotal role of Generation Z in the workforce, limited studies have been conducted to reveal general workplace attitudes. Such studies have found workplace traits of Generation Z to display confidence, embrace team dynamics, seek future career assurance, desire workplace delight, and prefer independence to being micro managed (Ozkan & Solmaz, 2015). This demographic cohort has an appetite for career progression and is ready to put in the hard yards but may lack particular essential hospitality crafts needed at work (Deloitte, 2017; Park & Gursoy, 2012). Generation Z also wants companies to acclimate to social media, provide opportunities to work in more than one country, and provide ongoing feedback over formal annual appraisals (Self et al., 2019).

The reality is that after more than four decades of hospitality workforce research, the perennial concerns of poor working settings such as low salary, irregular working times, and labour intensity still exist (Goh & Lee, 2018; Jose & Hipolito, 2016; Pizam & Lewis, 1979; Richardson, 2009; Solnet et al., 2016). So what should recruiters do to entice Generation Z talent to join the hospitality sector? Based on reviewing relevant research and practical articles on Generation Z and talent management, this paper recommends ten strategies for hospitality recruiters to engage with prospective Generation Z talent in hospitality.

3. Talent management strategies to attract generation Z

3.1. Focus on job functional attitudes

Employees from Generation Z view the hospitality profession as fun, interesting, exciting, fulfilling, and encompasses travel opportunities over salary bands (Goh & Lee, 2018). This offers a different perspective to other hospitality workforce cohorts (such as Baby-Boomers and Generation X) who reportedly held undesirable outlooks about the hospitality industry as low remunerating with poor working conditions ((Robinson et al., 2014) Robinson, Kralj, Solnet, Goh, & Callan, 2016; Sheehan, Grant, & Garavan, 2018). To combat this negative stigma, recruiters should draw away negative attention to emphasize on the fun aspects that entails and the hospitality industry is not a typical 9 to 5 job.

The fun factor is important among workers as identified in a meta-analysis of 143 hospitality research articles, where 10% (14 journal articles) have highlighted the importance of a fun workplace as a determinant of job satisfaction in hospitality (Kong, Jiang, Chan, & Zhou, 2018). Given the importance and benefits of workplace play, it has become increasingly ubiquitous among companies (Petelczyc, Capezio, Wang, Restubog, & Aquino, 2018). One of the easiest way to create fun at work is through activities such as weekly sporting events between divisions (Vermeulen, Koster, Loos, & Van Slobbe, 2016) or Lego Serious Play to allow staffs to express their ideas and enhance bonding through Lego bricks construction (Wengel, McIntosh, & Cockburn-Wooten, 2016). In the age of digital technology and social media, some companies use gamification as an aided play at work to resonate with Millennials and Generation Z employees to enhance employee learning, motivation and engagement (Robson, Plangger, Kietzmann, McCarthy, & Pitt, 2016). For example, the Marriott Hotel Group uses social media as a technology apparatus to attract younger prospective employees, where players are able to run their own kitchen called “My Marriott Hotel” on Facebook (Freer, 2012).

3.2. Provide a visual career pathway

The Generation Z employee expects healthy trajectory in her/his career pathway and expects to move up the career ladder quickly. More importantly, there is a pre-established perception that hospitality as a profession is more of a temporary occupation as compared to a well-defined career pathway (Tung, Tang, & King, 2018). Younger

hospitality employees are more impatient about climbing the career ladder, and more likely to leave the company if they are not promoted within 6 months (Smith, Clement, & Pitts, 2018). This sees the importance of career counselling by HRM in hospitality to engage with Generation Z about their future career pathway through reliable management traineeships such as the established Graduate Management Traineeship program and professional advancement programs.

The appetite for career success is clearly documented in past research where 40.2% of hospitality graduates rated “holding a very high level powerful job” as the most important career goal upon graduation and 88.4% expected to be a department manager within 5 years of graduation (Ly & Adler, 2009). One solution is to provide career acceleration courses. For instance, the Toga Far East Hotel Group (2019a, 2019b) offers accelerated leadership courses such as the “Future leaders’ course”, and “Senior management leadership course” for current staff to advance their management abilities and talents to rise up the career ladder.

If employees are unable to visualise their career pathway with a company, they will eventually leave the company (Reilly, 2018). Hotels should continue to offer and strengthen their graduate management traineeship program as this traditional career trajectory is well recognised and accepted among hospitality students as a career pathway in the industry (Nachmias & Walmsley, 2015). The customised pathway must show progression throughout the various hierarchy and not simply stop at middle management as it is important to demonstrate a long-term career planning trajectory as past studies have reported hospitality managers experiencing stagnation and are disengaged due to a lack of meaningful career planning (McGuire, Polla, & Heidi, 2017).

3.3. Travel opportunities/flexible scheduling to allow travel

The future hospitality worker is a global employee expected to work across properties in different countries. In fact, most studies have identified the opportunity to travel in hospitality and tourism jobs as a motivational factor in joining the industry (Brown et al., 2014; Buzinde et al., 2018; Tung et al., 2018). The freedom to travel during work can be seen as a lifestyle mobility, which is attractive to younger employees who sees little distinction between work and leisure aspects and changing jobs is seen as a positive lifestyle choice (Cohen, Duncan, & Thulemark, 2015). Concomitantly, employees are prepared and believe that they will be in a more favourable career advancement position if they are willing to be more mobile (Cassel, Thulemark, & Duncan, 2018). Hospitality recruiters must continue to offer inter-departmental training and work opportunities in different countries. This is essential for Generation Z as they yearn for a dynamic hospitality environment faced with excitement. Given the ever-increasing expansion of hotel conglomerates such as Wynham, Marriott, ACCOR and IHG, the prospects of working between departments, hotels, and countries must be strategically designed as part of career planning for Generation Z hospitality employees. However, the desire for global mobility can encounter barriers amidst the increasing restrictions to immigration policies in countries such as Australia, US, and the UK. Even though some countries such as Australia provide flexible work options for international students, there is a restriction of a maximum 20 h per week within the country (Ruhanen, Robinson, & Breakey, 2013).

3.4. Provide training on the customer service skills and emerging hotel technology

Remember that Generation Z is young and may not have sufficient work experience to provide service excellence. Given the increased employee / customer contact and inseparability nature of the service industry, a lack of customer training can further exacerbate helplessness and burnout among hospitality employees (Koc & Bozkurt, 2017). Although tertiary education providers equip graduates with

theoretical and technical skills (Goh & King, 2019), soft skills such as ‘script acting’ are often underdeveloped (Nyanjom & Wilkins, 2016). Good customer service training can therefore enhance employees’ ability and confidence to meet complex demands from customers. More importantly, customer service training will increase service orientation and employee engagement (Johnson, Park, & Bartlett, 2018).

Therefore, talent managers should depict the veracity of the service intensive industry in hospitality, which is the crux and fundamental reason hospitality businesses exist. Hospitality firms must be prepared to invest in training new talent to bring them to speed with current service orientations and brand mantras, and how to engage in service excellence. For instance, hotel conglomerates such as ACCOR established a training compendium titled ‘Peopleology’ and ‘Heartist’ focusing on the concept of customer engagement through stories, where all employees must undergo (ACCOR, 2019). Other hotel groups such as TFE Hotels have introduced their ‘Go MAD – Go make a difference’ training to empower employees to step outside the norm and provide service to create memorable experiences for their guests (TFE, 2019a, 2019b).

Although Generation Z has been labelled as techno-savvy, it must not be taken for granted that they are well positioned and knowledgeable about technology in the hospitality industry. It is important to acknowledge that technology will continue to alter the hospitality work environment with a shift towards more automation (Baum, 2019a). Hence, recruiters must reassure Generation Z that the use of hospitality technology is to leverage system efficiencies (Wirtz et al., 2018), and the core personal human contact remains an important hotel service constituent (Golubovskaya, Robinson, & Solnet, 2017). Therefore, training should emphasize on basics such as property management software - OPERA (Sharma, 2016), to keyless check-ins to increase the guest experience (Ivanov, Gretzel, Berezina, Sigala, & Webster, 2019; Solnet et al., 2019), using OTA platforms (Huang, Goh, & Law, 2019), and understanding big data to support strategic management decisions such as forecasting room occupancy (Leung, 2019). More importantly, the focus should be using technological innovations that is actually meaningful for customers to increase satisfaction and loyalty (Lemy, Goh, & Jie, 2019).

3.5. Organise “open days” to have a taste of hospitality work

Hospitality recruiters can invite prospective employees to visit their hotels by organising ‘open days’ to have a composition of their potential workplace and visualise working conditions. In fact, this concept is very common in hospitality educational institutions as a form of student recruitment strategy as it allows prospects a showroom experience and to ‘test drive’ the product (Goh, Nguyen, & Law, 2017). This will address the anxiety of possible OH&S (occupational health and safety) issues and help gauge the perceived risk that they are willing to take. This will also give them a reality check to see if they are ‘cut out’ for the hospitality industry and self-assess their emotional intelligence.

The offering of open day training helps to provide transparency on job expectations, which reduces turnover. For example, the Australian Department of Jobs and Small Business (2019) has introduced a new employment readiness scheme “Youth Jobs PATH” designed to support youths in being successful in their job outcomes. This is delivered through 3 stages: 1). prepare job seekers with necessary skills and qualifications; 2). trial to allow young job seekers with voluntary internship opportunities to gain real experience to see how they fit in the workplace; and 3). hire to motivate employers with \$10,000 financial incentive to hire suitable young job seekers. Hospitality companies can take advantage of such recruitment schemes to invite eligible job seekers to volunteer as a form of screening and evaluating suitable fit with the organisation.

3.6. Be transparent about the pay structure

The perceptions of hospitality as a low paying industry has been a perennial image among hospitality workers since the 1970s (Pizam & Lewis, 1979) to the 21st century (Barron, Leask, & Fyall, 2014; Richardson, 2009). Although the issue of low pay may not be of immediate importance at this stage, this could be an interim phase until Generation Z faces more financial pressure from life commitments. Recruiters must be pragmatic about the perennial concerns about hospitality being a low salary industry, and honour the minimum wages stipulated under the Hospitality Industry General Award 2010 (Australia Fairwork, 2019).

Another alternative to make the pay structure more attractive is to offer monetary incentives and bonuses to reward service excellence. This can be implemented and formally communicated across different departments with clear transparency (Jaworski, Ravicandran, Karpinski, & Singh, 2018). For example, housekeepers who pass their room inspections, front office agents who upsells a room, or food and beverage attendants who sells a top shelf wine. This will stimulate service performance and encourage healthy competition in the workplace.

3.7. Equal opportunities and fairness/sustainable work environment

The concern about potential discrimination needs to be embraced strategically by hospitality recruiters given the diverse pool of the hospitality labour force. There are various types of discriminations reported in the hospitality industry such as sexual discrimination (Ineson, Yap, & Whiting, 2013), salary (Campos-Soria, Garcia-Pozo, & Sanchez-Ollero, 2015), gender identity (Remington & Kitterlin-Lynch, 2018), age (Poulston & Jenkins, 2016), and physical appearance (Chiang & Saw, 2018). Generation Z view equality and fairness highly in the society. As hospitality companies become more global, their workforce becomes increasingly diverse to cater to their international environment. A diverse workforce sees several benefits such as superior quality ideas generated from alternative decision-making (Madera, Dawson, & Guchait, 2016; Madera, Dawson, Guchait, & Belarmino, 2017; Manoharan, Gross, & Sardeshmukh, 2014). Hence, companies have made it a priority to recruit a diverse workforce (Reynolds, Rahman, & Bradetich, 2014). For example, large hospitality companies such as Marriott, Wyndham and Hilton who are highly ranked on their diversity management, focus on integrating more minorities (such as Blacks, Latinos and Asians) into their workforce ratio (Gajjar & Okumus, 2018).

Another diversity strategy that hospitality companies can adopt is to ensure more women representation in leadership positions, and the inclusion of indigenous community groups in their human resource planning growth. For example, the ACCOR Hotel group has initiated diversity strategies to bridge the indigenous employment gap by committing to help develop indigenous talent through the AccorHotels Indigenous employment program to train (over 5 days) and prepare prospective indigenous employees for a job at ACCOR (Australian Government Jobactive, 2016). Other hotel groups such as TFE Hotels aims to increase their indigenous workforce representation to 32% by 2018 at Adina Vibe Hotel Darwin (Indigenous Business Australia, 2017). In order to tackle gender diversity, companies such as ACCOR has committed to achieving a 50% representation of female General Managers (Wilkinson, 2015). Therefore, it is important for talent managers to ensure the inclusion of a diverse labour force in recruitment paraphernalia, and physical presence during career recruitment expos.

The positive correlation between employee engagement in sustainability practices and a hotel's environmental policies must also be acknowledged (Chan, Hona, Chan, & Okumus, 2014). Research has reported younger generation of employees to better embrace green and sustainable practices, and would prefer to work in a hotel that adopted sustainable business decisions and culture (Goh, Muskat, & Tan, 2017)

such as company initiatives on minimising food wastage (Goh & Jie, 2019), and increased social responsibility (Self et al., 2019). Hence, hotels should consider emphasising on their sustainable practices to attract like-minded Generation Z workers.

3.8. Getting family members and friends involved

This might sound cliché but Generation Z hold on to the opinions of their family and friends with high regards when seeking a hospitality career. Research shows that employees communicate and seek approval about their hospitality career with family members before (Lee & Lee, 2018) they begin their career and during their career (McGinley, O'Neil, Damaske, & Mattila, 2014). Hence, talent managers must involve family and friends of prospective Generation Z in the early stages of the job seeking decision process even while they are studying their hotel degree (Goh, Nguyen, & Law, 2017).

Hospitality recruiters can utilise open days to invite family and friends to provide parents a quick understanding and present possible career journeys for their young adults who are about to embark on a hospitality career. Another strategy is through internal referral programs where current staff can recommend their family members or friends who have the right aptitude, certifications and experience as a prospective candidate. For example, ACCOR Hotels has an employee referral program where current employees get a bonus for a successful referral (ACCOR, 2019).

3.9. Establish a mentorship/buddy program

One of the entry barriers is fear of the unknown. Therefore, mentoring programs such as Graduate Management Trainee (Chang & Busser, 2017) can help mentees improve job performance (Li, Wong, & Kim, 2016), and service quality (Kong, Wang, & Fu, 2015). A mentoring program also benefits the mentor in feeling recognised, which increases occupation engagement and commitment to the company (Jung & Yong, 2016).

A common mentoring practice in hospitality is through a buddy system where existing staff mentor new hospitality employees. A buddy system helps new employees get up to speed on service performance expectations, and helps new employees manage their emotional labour more effectively. For example, as reported by Bratton and Watson (2018), the General Manager of a Hotel Chain mentioned the benefits of a buddy system for Department Heads and Team Leaders as a way to nurture new employees in cultivating understanding, not to get flustered, and to be able to keep calm.

3.10. Share their success stories and testimonials

The use of successful alumnus that have gone through the hospitality journey is a great way to bond with Generation Z undergraduates through hospitality institutions. This area of alumni contribution is valued (Wang, Kitterlin-Lynch, & Williams, 2018) but under researched (Kim & Jeong, 2018). Furthermore, hospitality students are motivated and consider a long-term employment as an important factor when they graduate (Frawley, Goh, & Law, 2019). Talent managers can feature alumni students in hospitality career prospectus through endorsements and recruitment expos to establish interest and recruitment leads for Generation Z to look upon as role models. This useful recruitment strategy serves as concrete proof of attainment and inspiration for Generation Z when deciding on a hospitality career.

4. Conclusion

This opinion piece has responded to the calls for research by various leading studies in talent management and workforce studies in hospitality. First, this paper addressed the demographical shift into understanding the 'perfect storm' of younger employee talent replacing older

workers (Goh & Lee, 2018; Solnet et al., 2016) and more personal characteristics of various hospitality workforce segments (Baum et al., 2016). This paper also focused on a particular exclusive talent management group, Generation Z to help distil the 'blackbox' complexity of talent management (Thunnissen, 2016). More importantly, the crux of this paper contributes to the scarcity of practical talent management studies (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016) by developing practical recruitment strategies for hospitality companies to better attract and lure Generation Z talent to the hospitality industry.

It is imperative to acknowledge the 'perfect storm' happening in the hospitality sphere, where mature employees (Baby Boomers and Gen X) are retiring from the hospitality industry. Talent managers should invest in young emerging talents such as the Generation Z as they will be the hospitality leaders of tomorrow. If there are not enough new employees entering to replace the older workforce in a developing hotel industry, there is a potential 'hospitality workforce bubble' that will burst. As a result, there will be a huge human capital vacuum in the hospitality sector that has historically suffered from a high turnover rate. As the war on hospitality talent intensifies, talent managers must ask the pivotal question 'What must be done to charm and keep Generation Z talent in the hospitality and tourism business?'

5. Limitations and future research

While this paper provides insights into recruiting Generation Z talent, there are limitations for future researchers to cogitate. First, the literature search only included publications in English, which presents the possibility of publications in other languages, which may produce divergent outcomes. Second, only peer-reviewed journal articles were considered given the time constraints. Future researchers may consider including other sources such as conference proceedings, books, thesis, and dissertations in their literature search to cover a wider scope. Third, the literature review was exploratory in nature given the nature of the paper being an opinion paper. This presents a pivotal gap for future researchers to conduct a full comprehensive systematic review with structured reporting categories. Finally, the interpretation of literature studies presents an element of subjectivity. Nevertheless, the authors have provided strong referencing support to substantiate the analysis with an objective lens.

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