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Exploring post-secondary students' perceptions of the quality of their summer tourism jobs

Introduction

Tourism is a labour dependent industry that relies on a young and flexible pool of workers to respond to seasonal fluctuations (Arasli & Arici, 2019; Murray et al., 2017). In Canada, tourism labour demands grow in the summer (Jolliffe & Farnsworth, 2003) and post-secondary students traditionally fill many of these seasonal roles (Tourism HR Canada, 2023). However, in recent years there has been a dwindling pool of students interested in working in the tourism industry which has contributed to a labour shortage (Tourism HR Canada, 2022). Labour shortages are a concern for tourism operators as they can lead to reduced service quality and operational capacity (Sheehan et al., 2018). It is imperative that operators create favourable job conditions that entice seasonal tourism workers to stay for the entire season and return the following summer. To help tourism operators navigate this challenge, the following exploratory research questions were developed: How do seasonal student tourism workers perceive the quality of their job throughout their employment term? How does the organizational commitment of seasonal student tourism workers change throughout the summer? Exploring how students perceive their summer tourism job will help to understand how jobs can be improved to ensure workers are retained throughout the entire summer and return the following seasons.

Literature Review

Muñoz de Bustillo et al. (2011) define job quality as employment factors that positively impact the worker's well-being. There are a variety of frameworks and indices proposed in the literature to assess job quality. This study uses the job quality framework identified by Chen and Mehdi (2019) which includes four indicators: compensation, employment security, job demands and job resources which includes training and managerial support. Incorporating the experiences of workers and their views towards their working conditions can capture perceived job quality (Guidetti et al., 2021). Perceptions towards job quality impact turnover intention, engagement, commitment, and motivation (Guidetti et al., 2021). In the past, students have reported feeling undervalued by their organizations, underprepared for the work and disappointed with the unpredictability of work and low pay (Grobelna & Skrzyszewska, 2019; Helleineir, 2009; Kuslivan & Kuslivan, 2000; Lashley, 2013; Reichenberger & Raymond, 2021). These conditions have caused many students to pursue jobs in other industries.

Methodology

Interviews were conducted with 14 post-secondary students working in seasonal jobs in the Canadian tourism industry in summer 2022. These students held positions as cooks, servers, front desk agents, housekeepers and tour operators. Interviews took place during the first month of employment (May), the middle of employment (July) and a month following the end of their summer employment (September) and followed longitudinal research protocols suggested by Dobrow and Weisman (2021). Each of the three participant interviews were 30 minutes long and asked questions about job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and job quality (Arasli & Arici, 2019; Nygen et al., 2021). Participants received a \$100 incentive at the end of the study. Interview transcripts were analyzed using deductive coding based on Chen and Mehdi's (2019) job quality

indicators. Within each indicator, thematic analysis took place to identify patterns in the data (Lune & Berg, 2016).

Results

The first study objective explored how the students perceive the quality of their jobs. Students felt that their compensation was fair if they were paid above minimum wage. In addition, a job with tips attracted many of the students to the tourism industry. Students also felt that they had job security due to industry wide labour shortages. However, several students experienced inconsistent scheduling and periods where they worked less hours than they were promised. This precarity created frustration and reduced job satisfaction. When discussing job demands, students reported that their jobs were often long, fast-paced and required them to be on their feet all day. Customer interactions also had a toll on the students. Students who had never worked in the hospitality and tourism industry were surprised by the demands of the job and felt like the hiring manager should have better explained the work conditions. Regarding training, 11 out of 14 students felt that they did not receive enough training when they started their job and only two students received training throughout the summer. Students working in large corporations had better experiences in their jobs because human resources departments were able to support their managers by developing training programs and employment standards. It was also discovered that students perceive their job to be high quality when their managers are respectful, trustworthy and provide constructive feedback.

The second objective explored how the organizational commitment of the students changed throughout the summer. Half of the students became more committed to their jobs as the summer progressed. These students felt valued in their role and could see how their work had a positive impact on their team, their organization, and their customers. These students were provided with opportunities to learn and grow, received the scheduled hours they were told they would receive, and had support from their managers. The other half of the students that became less committed throughout the summer felt frustrated with their employer due to a lack of organization, transparency, support, and training. These students were unsure whether they would return to work in the tourism industry the following summer.

Conclusion and Discussion

The results demonstrate that managers and tourism operators can improve the perceived quality of summer tourism jobs by improving training programs, providing supportive work environments, managing expectations about work conditions, and following through on any promises made during the hiring process. Managers should also receive leadership training to be better equipped at knowing how to provide support to their employees and reducing the 'say do gap'.

In addition, small, independent tourism operations appear to be at a disadvantage because they lack human resources departments to oversee employment practices and training programs. Without these programs, small operators are more likely to see lower commitment from their employees. It is recommended that more time is invested into on-boarding programs to ensure that students are prepared and feel supported from the beginning of their summer job. This is especially important for students who are entering the tourism industry for the first time. Companies that lack time and resources should consider filling training and employee development gaps by outsourcing some of their training programs to online certificate programs and micro-credentials.

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