

Existence of the Culture of Learning from the Perspective of Hourly Hospitality Employees

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ABSTRACT

The hospitality and tourism industries have been slow to integrate the practice of knowledge management, while other industries have embraced this concept well over the last ten years. In a global business climate where constant change is the norm, the concept of organizational learning culture (OLC) has never been more significant. This study will examine how hourly hospitality employees perceive OLC and to what extent they are supported by middle management.

Keywords: *knowledge management, organizational learning culture, and hospitality management.*

INTRODUCTION

To survive and prosper in an increasingly competitive global environment, business organizations stress the importance of leveraging intellectual capital for competitive advantage. As a result, the application of knowledge management (KM) has emerged as one of the fastest growing trends in business in the last decade. Under the umbrella of KM, the concept of organizational learning culture (OLC) is characterized by information acquisition and interpretation, which results in behavioral and cognitive changes within an organization (Skerlavaj, Stemberger, Skrinjar, & Dimovski, 2007).

The hospitality and tourism industries have been very slow to integrate the practice of KM and, as a result, have suffered the consequences in being reactive instead of proactive (Hallin & Marnburg, 2007; Cooper, 2006). In a business climate where constant change and innovation are the norm, embracing the concept of OLC has never been more critical. Terziovski, Fitzpatrick, and O'Neill (2003) explain that redesigning customer focused business processes is linked to an organization's ability to satisfy customers, and therefore increase profitability, especially if this effort is proactive rather than a "quick fix." In addition, for successful implementation of organizational change, the key challenges businesses face are changing attitudes and company culture, supporting extensive communication, and overcoming resistance to change at all managerial levels, particularly middle management (Terziovski et al., 2003).

OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES WITHOUT OLC

Cooper (2006) cites poor knowledge transfer between the hospitality industry and academic research in KM as the reason that the hospitality industry has failed to embrace OLC. According to Sambrook and Stewart (2000), organizations without OLC are susceptible to a multitude of challenges, particularly around training and learning activities. Among these difficulties are a lack of motivation and responsibility among employees for learning, lack of clarity regarding the role of human resource (HR) professionals, insufficient knowledge sharing, and a lack of financial resources and time allocation. Other factors that inhibit learning include an organizational culture of “short-termism,” bureaucracy, fear of change, senior management’s low opinion of training and lack of people management, poor managerial skills, cynical staff, lack of confidence, fear of exposure, resistance to change, sheer workload, business pressures, lack of time, limited HR resources, and an antiquated trade union approach to business (Sambrook & Stewart, 2000). Clearly, without OLC, the daily obstacles and challenges alone are enough to cripple the basic learning activities within an operation. The absence of OLC exacerbates an already challenging learning environment, which is prevalent within the majority of hospitality operations (Hallin & Marnburg, 2007). Because training initiatives are costly, both in time and financial resources, it is counterproductive to execute these initiatives without OLC.

INDUSTRY EXAMPLE OF OLC IMPLEMENTATION

One company that has made significant efforts to embrace OLC is the Hilton Corporation. Hilton’s current mission is to be the training and development leader in the hospitality industry. To that end, they established the Hilton University, an online learning portal, which is accessible to all Hilton employees (Baldwin-Evans, 2006). In an effort to reduce costly turnover, Hilton conducted a study to determine the link between employee development and staff retention via the employee’s accessibility to Hilton University. The study revealed that 37 percent of respondents felt career development opportunities were the most important factor in deciding to continue their career with Hilton, while another 50 percent claimed the opportunity was still important to them. Hilton also expressed that the creation of OLC was essential to the success of Hilton University and that 74 percent of the team members felt supported by their management (Baldwin-Evans, 2006).

The importance of the middle hospitality managers’ buy-in to OLC cannot be underestimated. Hourly employees comprise more than half the hospitality workforce and are responsible for providing products and services directly to the customer (McDonald, Hite, & Gilbreath, 2002), thus middle management may have the most significant impact on hourly employees’ perceptions of OLC within their operation. This exploratory study will focus on hourly service employees’ perceptions of their immediate managers’ commitment to OLC within their specific operation.

METHODOLOGY

Data will be collected via surveys in person, targeting a variety of hourly employees working in any service industry. By widening the net of industries beyond hospitality, the

sample will collect information across a broad spectrum of service operations, permitting a comparison in the organizational learning culture between the hospitality industry and other service industries.

The primary research questions guiding this study include (Egan, Yang, & Bartlett, 2004):

- What is hourly service employees' understanding of OLC?
- To what extent do hourly hospitality employees experience OLC within their organization?
- Do hourly hospitality employees feel supported in their efforts to engage in OLC within their organization?

This line of inquiry will establish whether there is OLC present and the extent to which it is supported by middle managers. In addition, while there may be opportunities for learning within these businesses, the effectiveness of training activities will be measured in this study to delineate the success of this learning in the absence or presence of OLC. The survey will include a seven-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree) and demographic questions.

CONCLUSION

It is anticipated that results of this exploratory study will reveal that hourly service employees do not recognize OLC within their places of employment, nor are supported in training and learning activities by their immediate management. Furthermore, based upon previous research (Hallin & Marnburg, 2007), it is posited that those hourly service employees in the hospitality industry will have less knowledge and recognition of OLC within their places of employment compared to hourly service employees within other industries.

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