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The Desired Characteristics of Hospitality/Tourism Management Employees: A Review of Research Quality

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ABSTRACT

Numerous studies have sought to measure the characteristics most desired by employers of hospitality and tourism management graduates. For the results of these studies to be meaningful, they need to conform to generally accepted principles of science. While there is no a priori reason to suggest that the research is flawed in any meaningful way, a preliminary examination can nonetheless confirm the level of research quality and help identify any limitations. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine the quality of the research evidence with particular attention to: (1) the characteristics selected for measurement, (2) the measurement techniques used, (3) the characteristics of the sample, and (4) the reporting of results. The results indicate limitations in each area. Recommendations for addressing these in future research are discussed.

Keywords: *desirable characteristics, measurement, research quality, reporting*

INTRODUCTION

Professional programs in higher education, such as those in hospitality and tourism management, have an obligation to provide students with a set of relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities that are desired by the profession (Christou & Eaton 2000; Ricci 2010; Alonso & O'Neill 2011; Kwok, Adams, & Price, 2011). It is not surprising, therefore, that numerous studies have sought to identify desirable employee characteristics. Unfortunately, no study could be identified that specifically evaluates the quality of the overall evidence. While there is nothing to suggest that the quality of the research will be found to be suboptimal, a review of some of the major research design issues will help validate the evidence. If the review finds that

the quality of the research conforms to accepted standards of science, then researchers and managers alike can be reasonably assured that the evidence is both reliable and valid. Conversely, should the review uncover limitations, researchers and managers would be cautioned to interpret the evidence in this context.

Although there are numerous ways to evaluate the quality of research, a relatively straightforward way is to examine issues that are common to all empirical investigations. For example, were the appropriate techniques of measurement applied? Additionally, are the results accurately reported and are they generalizable?

Answers to these and other relevant questions can provide useful guidance for future research as well as clarify managerial and research implications. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to conduct a review of scholarly articles that have measured the desirable characteristics of employees in the area of hospitality and tourism management.

METHOD

A sample of relevant articles was obtained through a search of library databases using relevant keywords to identify studies that measured the importance of characteristics. In total, 25 articles were harvested for review. The articles were reviewed using four indicators of research quality: (1) the characteristics selected for measurement, (2) the measurement techniques used, (3) the characteristics of the sample, and (4) the reporting of results. Two members of the research team examined each article independently and recorded relevant information pertaining to each indicator of research quality. The results were then compared and any discrepancies resolved through consultation with a third member of the team.

RESULTS

The Selected Characteristics

The review revealed little consistency in how characteristics were selected except that it was common to state that they were derived from a review of the literature. Although some of the general constructs were similar (e.g., knowledge, skills, abilities), the individual items were often asked differently making cross comparisons more difficult. The variance may be partially explained by the fact that there are numerous subdomains within hospitality and tourism management (e.g., club managers, restaurant managers, etc.). Aside from that, there was considerable variance in the number of characteristics with a mean of 42 and a median of 36. The range was from 6 to 144 characteristics.

The Measurement Techniques

The majority of studies (96 percent) utilized Likert questions with numerical categories to individually measure the importance of a characteristic. In one study, six hypothetical resumes were manipulated to determine how treatments influenced perceptions. No study could be identified that utilized a choice modeling approach (e.g., Best/Worse scaling), which is regarded

as the preferred method since it allows for greater analytical rigor (Lee, Souter, & Louviere, 2008).

The Sample Characteristics

Most samples were obtained through convenience and most were dedicated to a particular geographical region (e.g., city, country, resort area). Sample sizes were relatively small with average size of 169 and a range of between 20 and 850. The median sample size was 118.

The Statistical Analysis and Reporting

Sixty-eight percent of the studies reported mean differences without conducting appropriate tests, while only 20 percent of the studies conducted testing. Twelve percent did not make any within-group comparisons and, as a result, statistical testing was not required (these studies were making comparisons among, rather than within, groups).

DISCUSSION

The primary objective of this paper was to conduct a preliminary investigation of the quality of research in the area of desired characteristics for employment in the hospitality and tourism management industry. The results suggest that the quality of research is unnecessarily limited. First, there was little consistency with regard to the characteristics selected for the study. While part of this may be due to the numerous subdomains within hospitality and tourism management, variance was found within similar domain settings as well. This represents a unique opportunity for researchers to start identifying a common set of characteristics that could form the standard for future investigations. In doing so, it will facilitate cross comparisons among studies.

Second, it was common for samples to be based on convenience, to be relatively small, and to be largely context specific. Together, these factors limit the ability of the results to generalize to the wider population of interest. Additional research, therefore, is needed to enhance generalizability through the use of more cross-sectional and random samples.

Third, the use of Likert scaling to measure the importance of characteristics has inherent theoretical limitations. In particular, when asked how important a characteristic is, a logical response is ‘compared to what’? Because rating the importance of each characteristic independently through Likert scaling doesn’t require respondents to consider such comparison, the result is a tendency for respondents to rate many (or even most) of the characteristics toward the high end of the scale, a phenomenon known as ‘endpiling’ (Lee, Soutar, & Louviere 2008).

Finally, it was not uncommon for researchers to make inferences of mean differences without conducting the appropriate statistical tests. That is, inferences were based on observance of raw mean scores rather than on statistical tests that measure whether or not the differences are significant. Given the relative ease of such testing, it is surprising that they are seldom conducted. Perhaps just as importantly, errors of this type would seem to reflect poorly on the review process itself. As such, the results should serve as a gentle reminder to reviewers (and

editors) when evaluating empirical studies that involve mean differences. In conclusion, the four issues addressed in this study appear to have provided insights that can help improve and guide future research.

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