Perspectives on foreign training: middle managers in Jordan's international hotel chains

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Abstract

Despite the importance of employee training in the hospitality and tourism sector, there has been little research exploring the training of middle managers in hotels. The present research paper aims to explore this under-investigated topic in order to shed light on training practices in international hotel chains (IHCs) in Jordan, as well as company and management attitudes towards out-of-country training (OCT). This article focuses on a qualitative study in which guided focus group discussion was used to identify the determinants of upper management's decisions to invest in OCT for middle managers in Jordan's IHCs. The three groups each included six department heads from 18 IHCs. The interview data revealed five key themes affecting management's decision-making: management and company attitudes; barriers; selection criteria; nature of training; and benefits and usefulness of out-of-country training to managers and hotels. Focus groups results revealed middle managers' overwhelming support for out-of-country training along with some of the perceived barriers, including lack of company and upper management support. This is the first study of its kind investigating middle managers' attitudes toward out-of-country training. As such, it offers insight into this little-investigated demographic, which serves a key organisational role as intermediaries between hotel management and front-line staff. The paper offers useful data and analysis to researchers and/or practitioners of hotel management, with practical implications for improving human resource management in hotels.

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Introduction

A growing body of research has demonstrated the essential role of human resource development in achieving organisational goals.

However, there is relatively little research devoted specifically to the hospitality industry - despite the importance of tourism as one of the most vital sectors in the global economy (Aktaş

et al., 2001; Conrady and Buck, 2008). The training of middle managers in hotels remains a largely neglected subject, despite their pivotal role in the success of any hotel. Without research, it is difficult to improve hotel management and human resource management practices, which would enable hotels to attract more visitors and increase profit.

One of the key elements in the hotel industry, especially in developing countries, is to attract more international guests, mostly from developed countries. One important way to achieve this goal is by making international visitors feel "at home", that is, providing them with the same standards and quality of service that they are used to in their own countries. Unless the local staff and management in hotels are aware of the international standards, they can hardly provide that. Thus, the present research project investigates the determinants affecting international hotel chains' (IHCs') decisions to invest in out-of-country training (OCT) for middle managers. The study draws upon the perceptions of middle managers in IHCs in Jordan, where a robust and expanding tourism industry plays a major role in economic development. IHCs are dominant in today's global hotel markets (Pine and Qi, 2004), and middle managers are the likeliest employees to receive OCT. In Jordan, where IHC upper management often consists of foreign labour, middle managers generally come from the region, and are therefore logical candidates for training in Western countries. Their position as intermediaries between upper management and front-line staff also offers distinctive insights into their organisations' training and business management practices. Creelman (1995: 6) portrays middle managers as

'the oil that lubricated the top-down flow of corporate commands and information ...who ensured the smooth running of the company. Take them out and the engine would fail.'

Denham *et al.* (1997) also stress middle managers' key function as intermediaries in the structure of authority. Department heads need to be better-informed about their departments

and share decisions and information with all other levels of the organisation.

Therefore, a number of questions arose: how big is the demand for OCT among middle managers? Is that demand met? If not, what are the obstacles of sending middle managers abroad for training? Is it only money? If hotels send staff on OCT, who is the most likely candidate, what are the selection criteria? What are the after-training benefits of OCT? These questions form the core of the research and by answering these questions the author hopes to be able to use the findings to advise upper management, to find solutions to the barriers that might exist and to improve management practices in the hotel industry in Jordan.

Literature review

Although there are a number of studies investigating training practices in various industries, there is presently little research devoted specifically to the hospitality sector. Data on human resources in the hotel industry is difficult to come by (Litteljohn, 1997; International Labour Organization, 2012; Magablih, 2006) and in Jordan such data was and is still almost entirely non-existent (Alwahidi, 1990; Magablih, 2006). As McGunnigle and Jameson (2000) argue, further research is needed at all levels of management in order to better understand hotel management practices. Given that, management and professional positions involve specialised training requirements, the need for middle management training programmes in chain hotels - to respond to future needs and personnel potential - is high (Garavan, 1997, Boella and Goss-Turner, 2005). Ramos, Rey-Maqueira and Tugores (2004) and Kuruüzüm, Anafarta and Irmak (2008), for instance, report a high demand for middle management training in high-quality hotels. According to Ladkin and Juwaheer (2000), IHCs would benefit from training a larger number of their middle managers abroad as such training exposes managers from developing countries to the latest industry techniques and 'best practices' which can then be passed on to subordinates through daily interaction or through in-house training programmes.

Out-of-country training also enhances managers' career potential within an organisation. Generally it would be expected that, having undertaken training abroad, the newly-trained manager would be welcomed and eventually be promoted to the top level of the hierarchy (Rowley and Purcell, 2001). Ladkin and Juwaheer (2000) have a similar view, and state that working abroad is very important for career advancement in the hotel industry. Furthermore, it has been stated that out-of-country training helps managers to learn about other cultures (McCarthy, 1990). Analoui (1999) considered that training abroad can serve as a motivator that often leads managers to be more effective in their work.

The possibility of taking OCT is particularly important in developing countries since they lack the infrastructure to conduct local training for hotel staff (Baines, 1998). This view is supported by E. Jones (personal communication, May 11, 2007) who explained that out-of-country training can be a feasible approach to train middle managers since in-country training may not be a viable option. Moreover, Terterov (2004:130) indicated that there is a 'real value' in training outside of the local environment of developing countries.

One major study investigating training abroad and foreign replacements conducted by the German Federal Institute for Vocational Training (Study highlights benefits of foreign placements for young trainees, 2003) found that training abroad is beneficial for trainees as well as for their employees. In the study, when trainees were asked about the major obstacles encountered in connection with training and working abroad, the following were the most prevalent: lack of money, lack of adequate language skills as well as lack of appropriate contacts. When companies were asked the same question, they cited financial costs as the key obstacle to training staff abroad. Unsurprisingly, the study of the German Federal Institute for Vocational Training revealed that men appear to have a significantly higher proportion of opportunities to get training and work abroad (65%) as opposed to women (35%).

An alternative approach to training hotel staff abroad is the view that expatriate managers endowed with western management are necessary for training indigenous staff (Littrell, 2002), as it has been stated that the training programmes carried out by expatriate trainers are profitable and work to the hotel's advantage (Huyton and Ingold, 1999). However, training techniques and methodological and pedagogical models brought along and conveyed especially by expatriates coming from western countries do not always fit in well with employees in developing countries (Huyton and Ingold, 1999; Magnini and Ford, 2004). For instance, under no circumstances can the training methods and educational systems of Jordan be equated to those of Britain or the USA. For example, Galagan (1983) noted that training abroad is practical for those who would learn from developed countries, and she argues that transferring training methods from developed countries to less developed countries would not succeed, recommending instead that the best way to learn about training methods is by going abroad.

Methodology

As the first study of its kind, this research project used qualitative methods, consisting of comprehensive focus groups, to explore the determinants of IHCs' top management decision-making. Focus group discussion, as a method, was chosen because it enables the researcher to 'drill' more deeply to attain in-depth insights (Barrows, 2000), as well as to collect information (Krueger, 1994; Gibbs, 1997; Barrows, 2000) and opinions (Hines, 2000) from a small number of people in a short time. Focus group discussions are exploratory, a particularly useful strategy in the absence of existing research on specific topics or when the topic has been minimally researched (Nassar-McMillian and Borders, 2002).

For the discussions the researcher invited one representative from each IHC in Jordan (18 in total), selected randomly from a list of all middle managers, to give their opinion about OCT. The total of 18 participants was divided into three focus groups with six managers each, and the groups convened in meeting rooms in three different places. The first focus

group discussion was conducted in a meeting room in a hotel, the second and third in university meeting rooms.

The participants were all department heads but were predominantly male: 17 male middle managers and 1 female middle manager. They were the actual participants in the three sessions after one selected manager, a woman, cancelled her participation and she was replaced by a man. The participants were of a diverse age-group (ranging from 23 to 61), education level (ranging from secondary education to master's degree), and length of experience in the hotel industry (ranging from 2 to 23 years). They were also diverse with regards to the length of work-experience in their current hotels (from 6 months to 17 years). Participants were assured anonymity in order to encourage them to express their thoughts and opinions freely. Prior to the commencement of the actual focus group research, the group discussion questions were subject to a pre-test with 6 managers of the target population who did not participate in the actual focus groups, in order to establish validity.

Content analysis techniques (Krippendorff, 1980; Weber, 1990) were applied to analyse the data emerging from the focus groups by analysing the statements made by the members of the groups and supporting them with some illustrative verbatim quotations. Further, the author of the present study adhered rigidly to the guidelines outlined in Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003) for conducting a qualitative data analysis of focus groups. Content analysis included meticulous readings of each tape transcript, from which 5 major themes were identified inductively based on participant responses to the different questions guiding the group discussions (open-ended format); accordingly, the discussion could be divided into five parts (key areas). Therefore, the next step was to group the findings under these five headings, and then highlight the data in each text and sift out the 'data' that had no relevance to the topic. Thus, some parts of the discussion were left out; however, the initial research objectives were covered. Afterwards, all the identifying

information was removed in order to maintain confidentiality.

Findings

The results are presented according to five key themes that emerged from the interview data: management and company attitudes; barriers; selection criteria; nature of training; and benefits and usefulness of out-of-country training to managers and hotels.

Managers, management and company attitudes

When managers were asked an introductory question, 'What do you think of out-of-country training?', most were enthusiastic, nodding pronounced approval or exclaiming 'good'[P08], 'excellent'[P03] 'important'[P11] 'needed'[P17], and others saying simply, 'Who can refuse it'[P10] 'I wish I could get it'[P07], '...difficult to get it, you need big Wasta'[P18] (favouritism, defined below), 'I went abroad for training and it was amazing'[P01], 'I'm not lucky enough to get it'[P03] , 'I reckon it's fantastic and I personally support this type of training'[P09].

Overwhelmingly, from the sample of 18 international hotel chains, 14 were identified as using OCT. These included 5-or-6-day training courses for middle managers in Dubai, Lebanon, Egypt, Europe and the USA. Today, training often takes place within the country or the Middle East region - despite the benefits of OCT in Western countries, according to managers. One noted:

'I participated in two training programmes outside Jordan... the one in France was more valuable than the one in Egypt.' [P01]

Hotels abroad were reportedly dissimilar to those within Jordan, despite belonging to the same chain. In this context, several comments illustrated the importance and necessity of training abroad:

'...training abroad is an investment in developing and upgrading managers' [P14]

'According to my experience with my colleagues, training here is deemed as

a day off, whereas when it comes to training abroad, everything is organised and serious.' [P08]

'...training methods, techniques and instruments, unlike in the developed countries, are not widely available in Jordan' [P12]

Participants felt that training out-of-country, particularly in Western countries, would help fill a gap in expertise and resources. Out-of-country training is of particular significance for countries where training resources and structures may be unavailable (Baines, 1998), and participants who had trained abroad reported superior qualifications and professionalism. Furthermore, some felt that training in nearby Arab countries was essentially similar to that available in Jordan, and that, despite the disadvantage of language barriers; training in Western countries may be preferable. Currently, the majority of OCT programs take place in regional Arab countries, of which participants were critical:

'...we are only talking about changing scenery for the trainee: the information is the same. For example, the hotel X either in Amman or Beirut work on the same standards, the information is basically the same.' [P10]

'Training outside Jordan in Arab countries is basically the same work I do at the hotel, it is just a matter of changing places' [P16]

'Arab societies are relatively similar, whereas western societies are entirely dissimilar in terms of language and training frame.' [P18]

However, other participants said:

'We need the right training, either in Arab countries or in western countries' [P15]

'...the trainee should be given the training that suits his work system, irrespective of the country' [P17]

Meanwhile, several interviewees pointed out that nearly all five-star hotel and chain hotel general managers are expatriates. These employees are a financial burden in terms of

travel costs, residence, and so on, while local managers demand a quarter of the salary:

'There is too much money spent on foreign managers who additionally find it hard to communicate with the employees: such out-of-country training will help upgrade managers and thus enable replacement of expatriate by indigenous managers' [P03]

According to the groups, there is some company support for out-of-country training. In all three focus group sessions, the managers indicated that the hotel chains could afford OCT.

'I think the high revenues to the hotel chains do tolerate out-of-country training.' [P09]

Feedback during focus groups indicated that support from upper management is paramount, and some interviewees felt that top management supported OCT, particularly expatriate managers:

'...local general managers do not encourage this training, whereas foreign general managers give it their support.' [P11]

Barriers to Out-of-Country Training

One of the major topics that arose during the discussions was what kind of barriers do the participants consider significant that prevents one from training abroad. This issue has two sides: there are external barriers that are beyond the influence of the likely candidates, and there are internal barriers – personal characteristics or circumstances that might prevent one from either being selected, or being sent on OCT.

External barriers

The most common barrier mentioned that hotels might encounter to OCT was cost. Some participants reported that:

'...training abroad is more costly...but the beneficial outcome is more.' [P05]

'...training outside Jordan costs a lot of money... but its beneficial outcome is worth the costs.' [P11]

This bears out the findings of another research study in which trainees listed lack of money as the number one obstacle to training abroad (Study highlights the benefits of foreign placements for young trainees, 2003). As McColl-Kennedy and White (1997) have found, hotels generally spend too little on training and may be reluctant to support initiatives away from hotel premises. Moreover, there was disagreement among the focus group participants as to whether the company would bear all or some of the cost of training; middle-managers' own financial limitations were thus noted as a possible barrier:

'Challenges often lie upon the manager, for he has not got the means to cover external expenditures' [P18]
'Compared to Jordan, life in other countries is more expensive, so this is a high burden for the managers despite the fact the company bears part of the costs...' [P09]

However, another participant argued:

'The hotel bears all expenses: the trainee has nothing to do with it... For example transportation, taxes, meals are paid for the trainee, they are totally covered by the hotel' [P12]

Diverse responses regarding the cost of OCT presumably reflect different practices across various chains. Nevertheless, some participants observed that the company could well afford the cost, particularly since trainees had access to lodgings and other facilities from the same hotel chain:

'...the training program will be held in a hotel of the same chain, hence minor costs. He will be able to stay, be trained and eat in the same hotel.' [P07]
'I think trainings abroad are not costly since they are held in the chain hotel.' [P08]

Participants were optimistic overall about companies' support for the practice. In general,

larger and chain hotels generally invest more in human resource management compared to smaller ones (Carbery *et al.*, 2003; Zhang and Lam, 2004; Lockyer and Scholarios's, 2004), and while this was not explicitly noted, participants' optimism may reflect this corporate culture.

The next most frequent barrier facing hotels cited by managers was language. Sometimes hotels opt for bringing in trainers from abroad and using interpreters. It was said:

'A firm called X was debating security appliances costing: the general manager recommended one manager and a supervisor be trained in Britain for 20 days to be able to handle the machines well. Since these managers were not good at English it has been decided they are to be trained in Amman, despite that fact that training in Britain will cost the hotel much less than bringing trainers from Britain.' [P06]

Fear of the unknown was another consideration from the perspective of companies:

'...they are concerned about the political situation...you never know what tomorrow will bring in this unstable region' [P16]

Visa procedures and availability were also mentioned as external barriers, and the political situation in Jordan sometimes negatively affects OCT - for instance, when the embassy refuses to issue the manager's papers. One manager noted:

'The hotel X intended to send 4 managers for training to the USA. Despite the fact that the hotel X is an international company only 2 could go.' [P06]

Internal barriers

Family concerns can be a major hindrance for an individual:

'A person who has a family cannot undergo training for more than one or two months since he or she has a family to look after.' [P13]

Cost was mentioned as well, since in some cases the expenses of the training have also affected the trainee. According to some participants:

'Challenges often lie upon the manager, for he has not got the means to cover external expenditures' [P18]

'Compared to Jordan, life in other countries is more expensive, so this is a high burden for the managers despite the fact the company bears part of the costs...' [P09]

However, another participant argued:

'The hotel bears all expenses: the trainee has nothing to do with it... For example transportation, taxes, meals are paid for the trainee, they are totally covered by the hotel' [P12]

The differing responses regarding the cost of training abroad would seem to reflect differences in practice, among various chains, in funding such training, either in whole or in part.

Contractual issues were another concern. It was rumoured that there had been cases of managers, having completed their training abroad, resigning from the hotel.

'One manager has been sent abroad to the USA...they have never heard of him again; he has never come back to this country. I am uncertain whether it is true, but that's what I heard' [P02]

It was noted that this could be avoided by using contracts stipulating minimum post-training employment tenure, as some hotels have begun to implement. Managers were ambivalent about such contracts:

'...the manager shall sign a contract with the company agreeing on the cost and the commitment of the trainee to work for a period of time in the hotel. This guarantees the trainee does not resign. Should the manager resign before the restricted period, he would have to pay the cost of the course so

there will be no loss in money nor efforts exerted on the manager...this makes managers think twice before agreeing to take training abroad... and personally I do not like 'fetters'. [P06]

Another significant barrier on the part of potential candidates to OCT is language skills. Middle managers without knowledge of other languages would be less likely to apply for and/or succeed in OCT. At the same time, managers without knowledge of languages are less likely to be selected as candidates. This issue leads us to the next section.

Before undertaking OCT: selection criteria of OCT candidates

Once all barriers had been eliminated and the hotel decides to send some of its middle managers abroad on training, the next issue arises: how do they select the candidates? Who are the most likely candidates to succeed in an OCT? Since there are no official guidelines, it was interesting to explore what middle managers thought these criteria and personal characteristics should look like. In discussions about the ideal candidate for OCT, certain personal traits were perceived to be essential.

Having language skills was among the most frequently-cited:

'I took part in training in Lebanon and I had to make a presentation about it. My colleagues' presentation was presented in much stronger English than mine, which honestly left me rather disappointed in my English, which was not good enough. Therefore, I think language is vital for anyone to be selected for training abroad.' [P14]

Such sentiments were echoed by several others, although the possibility of improving language skills was also cited as a key benefit of OCT:

'I have been working in this position for 3 years, and with absolute honesty my English is poor, and I know managers whose language is 'zero' and they cannot even decode an email... so

why shouldn't the training be in a language centre, in a country where the language is spoken, to learn English with regards to hotel-vocabulary... [P17]

There was debate as to the importance of educational and other qualifications. One manager who had completed OCT noted that:

'Candidates should preferably have a degree.' [P08]

However, another responded:

'I don't think that high education level is an essential prerequisite for choosing a manager... because some of us have not got a university degree' [P07]

Though it was felt that, in general, some criteria should be in place to select the 'right person,' there was no agreement as to a single appropriate standard. This may reflect the participants' own education levels, which varied widely.

The importance of 'open-mindedness' arose with respect to the cultural challenges of training abroad:

'I know some managers who were sent to be trained outside Jordan but they failed to socialise in the new atmosphere since they were not open-minded, but rather introverted.' [P14]

Such comments revealed that a successful OCT experience would entail an important element of sociability and willingness to engage with the host culture.

Another personality trait stressed as highly important was 'strength of personality':

'If the company wants to send one abroad, he must possess a strong personality to deal with the new environment from day one.' [P04]

As with the quality of 'open-mindedness', this points to some of the potential difficulties of

adapting to 'culture shock' and a new way of life in order to fully benefit from OCT.

One participant noted the importance of having career ambition. Since training in general, and OCT in particular, is associated with career advancement, participants' comments acknowledged the importance for the company of investing in candidates likely to progress within the organisation. With regards to age and selection, opinions varied:

'According to my point of view young managers have high potential' [P13]
'I believe age is not that important ... there is no real perfect candidate, anyone is a prime candidate for training abroad regardless of age as long as he is suitable and the conditions and guidelines are set' [P18]

The participants also disagreed about the importance of a manager's length of experience in the selection policy. One of them noted:

'I would go for those with less experience in order to guide him to another level, so that he gets the opportunity to be cognisant with his abilities and competences.' [P17]

Another responded:

'I do not agree with you, I have long experience and I always feel the need for training.' [P03]

As with age and qualification, differing opinions on the ideal candidate may have reflected managers' own backgrounds and career experience.

One participant described the importance of reliability to ensure the successful completion of a candidate's training:

'...picking and choosing the appropriate and the right person is essential...he should be a reliable manager who can be depended on to accomplish the training successfully.' [P01]

Given the rumours about trainees who had either failed to complete their training abroad or simply never returned, the perceived importance of 'dependability' was unsurprising.

With respect to gender, participants indicated that men are prime candidates for OCT. As the one female manager present reported:

'Women are not accustomed to travelling, as there is rejection on behalf of the family of training abroad...' [P05]

Indeed, discussion participants invariably referred to employees as 'he,' probably reflecting the dominance of male managers in OCT programs, and in IHCs in general.

One of the most recurrent topics in the discussion of selection criteria was the issue of *Wasta* and *Mahsoubiah*, Arabic terms denoting 'nepotism' or 'favouritism'. According to focus group participants, it is rampant in the recruitment and promotion process, and in training programmes, particularly those conducted abroad. Several managers said:

'...some trainees are chosen because they have friends and relatives in the right place although they are not worthy of the training.' [P18]

'...when it comes to the selection process in a training programmes, relatives of managers are a priority to the detriment of deserving ones...qualified and talented people are being deprived of opportunities to undertake training abroad... this ailment is widely spread amongst local managers whereas this happens to be non-existent amongst foreign managers, particularly non-Arab foreign managers, since they are committed to applying fair rules to employees.' [P11]

Nepotism exists in developed and less-developed countries (Hagen and Amin, 1994; Abdalla, Maghrabi and Raggad, 1998). In a study based on the analysis and comparison of human resources managers' perceptions toward nepotism from organisations in one developed and one developing country, the USA and Jordan, Abdalla, Maghrabi and

Raggad (1998) found that nepotism is still practised in both countries and indicated that the main causes underlying nepotism in Arab countries were social-cultural, economic, educational and political structures. The authors also pointed out that organisations practising nepotism would encounter problems in terms of their human resources, citing employee dissatisfaction, disloyalty, and lack of commitment, inasmuch as there would be an increase in absenteeism and staff turnover rate. In the long run, policies and functions of human resource management will be affected because of unfair policies and activities.

During out-of-country training: Nature of training

One of the topics of discussion was where, for how long, and in what form OCTs should take place. Some participants noted that training should not only be conducted in hotels, but must encompass out-of-hotel activities such as seminars, conferences, etc. There was debate as to whether managers would benefit more from a broader training, exploring the management and practices of other hotel departments besides their own, or from job- or department-specific training:

'...along with training within one's own work-sphere, there should also be diversity in training and there should be comprehensive training as far as hotel management and hotel services are concerned.' [P09]

Other participants agreed with this, adding that it might be also useful to train in a different IHC than where one works:

'...managers can experience a number of departments beyond their own department, in order to gain a package of different management experiences and to see how other hotels in the same chain work other than the hotel where the manager works...' [P13]

After: benefits and usefulness of OCT to managers and their hotels

Benefits and usefulness for the individual

One benefit frequently mentioned was improving language skills:

'Do you know, two of the highlights of my training in the USA, for me, were ones in which I felt my language improve upon completion...' [P04]

The majority of managers argued that crucial new skills were likely to be acquired through OCT, enabling them to advance in their careers. Many also felt that OCT would enable them to learn more about technology, something especially pertinent in a developing country:

'...when being trained outside the country, and I mean not in the Arab countries, the trainee will learn new technologies in order to become proficient in their job' [P02]

One manager noted an improvement in his managerial skills, while others described expanding their knowledge of the hotel business:

'...I will acquire new information and methods about the job I am doing from a different country, mentality and perspective. I will also make the acquaintance of many people and benefit from their experience... there is much knowledge to be gained through these training programmes' [P12]

This view reflected a perception that methods, techniques and technologies from more developed countries could be acquired and effectively transferred to local employees by a trainee. Managers felt that OCT would help enhance training policy and standards in the hotel, something especially relevant to middle managers, who occupy a key role in training and development of subordinates (Peacock, 1995).

Besides contributing to skills and knowledge, enhanced innovation and creativity were other possible benefits identified by managers, since OCT offers contact with new environments, hotels, managers, departments and staff:

'During my experience during training in England we were given the opportunity to think and create new ideas, and

whatever ideas the trainee suggested, they were taken into consideration' [P16]
'...training outside Jordan helps generate a lot of new thoughts that could be applicable in our workplace' [P18]

Overall, middle managers' responses indicated that training abroad would contribute to increased self-confidence by developing skills and expanding knowledge, while completing OCT may also offer employees a personal sense of achievement. In light of the many personal and professional benefits associated with OCT, managers felt that such training would increase their promotion opportunities and earning potential. A training programme abroad to upgrade job skills was seen as providing additional advantages. One manager claimed that:

'Managers with the credit of training programmes abroad have more opportunities to be promoted to higher positions' [P17]

'I personally think, as a department head, it would help on my way to have a better future, I mean promotion and thus a good salary after ...' [P03]

Benefits and usefulness for the company

Managers noted that training abroad would translate to improvements in customer service. As one explained:

'...when undertaking training abroad, we will attempt to imitate and implement what has been acquired, observed and seen to further improve service quality to customers in the hotel where we work, and it is absolutely one aim of any training programmes.' [P04]

Hotel training policy and standards could also improve as a result of OCT, according to the groups:

'...on my return to Jordan, I shall be able to transfer methods of training gained to my work as well as train my subordinates in the acquired new skills.' [P06]

'The purpose of this training can be to gain knowledge and experience on training in other chain hotels in an attempt improve standards of training here in Jordan' [P09]

Managers' comments also reflected the conventional wisdom that motivation is one of the most powerful driving forces in the workplace. According to responses, their motivation and job performance would be enhanced following training, as one member who had completed OCT reported:

'...after the training, I felt myself being raised to another level. I came back to Amman motivated and agog to work as hard as I could to further develop my department ...' [P15]

Another maintenance manager indicated that OCT would help him to learn about technology, so that he could master more modern equipment, dramatically increasing his work efficiency.

Given all of the perceived advantages for trainees, based on focus group responses, it was found that OCT could also benefit the company by reducing managers' turnover or quit rates:

'...in return, I would stick with the company which gave me the opportunity to have a fantastic experience abroad: it would be such a shame and loss to quit.' [P10]

In light of the investment in an employee represented by OCT, an increase in company loyalty and correspondingly greater employee retention was expected. Despite fears concerning employee desertion, security of employment was likely to be perceived as a benefit of OCT. Managers also argued that training abroad reduces the risk of job losses through the use of mutually binding contracts:

'...given the funding injected for such training, hotels cannot easily give up on their managers.' [P13]
'...this contract creates commitment as far as the managers and hotels are concerned.' [P07]

Despite the real or perceived risk of employee desertion, managers apparently felt that training abroad would strengthen employee retention, commitment and loyalty, contributing to the success of the company. As one manager argued:

'Our company does a good job to train its managers either here or abroad, and this surely will ultimately reflect on managers to perform at the level needed to make our hotel successful in the market' [P12]

Participants believed that OCT would enable them to share good practices with other hotels from the same chain, with departmental colleagues and/or within their hotel, maximising colleagues' opportunities for development. Training abroad also familiarizes managers with others' ways of life, aiding in their professional and personal development and helping them better meet the needs of a culturally diverse clientele:

'...plus the fact that dealing with these societies helps us know their traditions and customs. This advantage could be rather personal but could be transferred conveniently to our work.' [P06]
'I will also gain insight into dealing with people on both a professional and personal level... for example, should there be a training course in England, when an English person comes in, I can figure out how to deal with him.' [P10]

Managers expected that profitability for the company would improve as a result of OCT:

'We have been talking about the benefits of training abroad. Who is the prime beneficiary of all this? It is of course the hotel: briefly, we run the show in the hotels and the more the hotels give us fantastic opportunities to be trained abroad, especially in leading countries in the hotel industry, the more improvements in the quality of the service; then we will see increasing customers, more sales growth, and more money in its pocket.' [P05]

Finally, improved safety was seen as a possible benefit of OCT, given the increased demands of high-tech security protocols and their implications for training. In 2005, terrorists attacked three American chain hotels in Jordan's capital, Amman, killing 60 people and injuring 115. Following these attacks, hotels had implemented specialised equipment, training, and security budgets, which typically involved overseas training.

Discussion

Given that employee training has been noted as the number one factor for improving quality of service, enhancing productivity, and reducing the rate of turnover in hotels (Davies, Taylor and Savery, 2001), it is no surprise that focus group participants were enthusiastic about the possibilities for superior out-of-country training. As in other studies (e.g., Smith, 2002), it was found that managers recognised the need for training and viewed it as an indispensable investment. As the literature establishes, the 'human factor' is key to hotels delivering high quality service, which results in increased customer satisfaction and loyalty (Alwahidi, 1990) and enables a company to maintain a competitive edge (Baum *et al.*, 1997; Garavan, 1997; Garavan *et al.*, 1999; Huang, 2001; Peters and Buhalis, 2004; Ramos *et al.*, 2004; Timo and Davidson, 2005). In an increasingly competitive global market (Baum *et al.*, 1997), training is an essential, if too-often undervalued, investment in the company's success, and a key component of human resources 'best practice' (González, 2004; Hope, 2004). Correspondingly, managers saw OCT as contributing to the company's success and profitability. Regardless of cost, as one focus group participant put it, the 'prime beneficiary' of OCT would ultimately be the hotel.

The results also bear out the findings of two related studies on OCT. The first found that companies cited financial costs as the most significant barrier to overseas training (Study highlights benefits of foreign placements for young trainees, 2003). The second, conducted by the Antigua and Barbuda Bureau of Standards (2008), notes the fear among hotel management that staff sent abroad may simply remain abroad. Both of these concerns were

cited by focus group participants, consistent with the uncertainty factor on the part of the company as a major reason against sending people for international training.

Managers cited learning about new technology as an important benefit of OCT, and felt that this would increase their overall knowledge and work efficiency. In Jordan, as a developing country, access to the latest technology and equipment can be a significant challenge. Meanwhile, with the fast pace of technological innovation, the need for ongoing training is arguably higher than ever, while hotels in a competitive global market need to stay up-to-date with technological innovations (Hughey and Mussnug, 1997; Harris, 1995; Baines, 1998; Agut *et al.*, 2003). Correspondingly, focus group participants felt that OCT would provide better access to new equipment and technology than that available in Jordan.

It was felt that OCT may help increase managers' motivation and job satisfaction, something that could translate directly into improvements in customer service quality. A trip abroad was perceived as an exciting opportunity that would increase managers' company loyalty and commitment, work motivation, and self-confidence, and sense of personal achievement. As other studies on OCT have suggested, the experience can serve an incentivising function for trainees (Tsang 1994; Analoui, 1999) leading to increased effectiveness. OCT was also felt to increase job security. While not all participants were enthusiastic about contracts stipulating a minimum work term upon completion (as one said, 'I don't like fetters'), many noted the increased employment security implied by the company's investment in training. A related factor is the notoriously high rate of staff turnover in hotels, especially among middle managers. Better training practices have often been suggested as part of the solution (Birdir, 2002; Aiming at excellence at the Forte Hotel Group, 2002; McGunnigle and Jameson, 2000; Taylor and Davies, 2004), positively impacting employee retention (Tsang, 1994, Barrows, 2000). Since training leads to greater staff development, which is in turn strongly linked with customer satisfaction and loyalty (McColl-Kennedy and White, 1997; Aiming at

excellence at the Forte Hotel Group, 2002), the overall personal benefits of OCT identified by managers in the present study can be understood as leading to significant long-term returns for the company.

A further benefit to both employees and customers is related to cultural exchange that OCT would enable. As Terterov (2004: 130) argues, 'provincialism' and insularity can best be defeated by exposure to and immersion in a foreign host culture, with clear benefits to staff and patrons. Littrell (2002) has also noted the importance of cultural factors in providing high quality service. The factor of cultural exchange may help explain why working abroad is considered so important to the success in the hotel industry (Ladkin and Juwaheer, 2000), something reflected in part in participants' view that OCT was strongly linked to career advancement. As suggested by Rowley and Purcell (2001), managers felt training abroad would improve their earning potential and promotion opportunities by improving knowledge and skills.

One implication of this might be the possibility of replacing costly expatriate staff who tend to occupy many of the top positions of IHCs in some countries (Kaye and Taylor, 1997; Suutari and Brewster, 2001), where they command 3-4 times the earnings of their indigenous counterparts (Webb and Wright, 1996). Given that this practice raises difficulties of communication and conflicting cultural norms and values (Littrell, 2002; Huyton and Ingold, 1999; Barber and Pittaway, 2000; O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2002), it bears considering the possibilities OCT might offer for using more foreign-trained indigenous labour at the top of the organisational hierarchy - skilled in foreign methods and technologies, but with a greater ability to relate to local subordinates.

Conclusion

The results of the focus groups confirmed middle managers' overwhelming support for out-of-country training and revealed some perceived barriers, including lack of company and upper management support. Nevertheless, participants felt that OCT represented a solid investment in organisational success, increasing managers' commitment and

productivity and allowing them to learn more about their customers' cultures. The possibility of replacing expatriate managers and supervisors with more cost-efficient indigenous workers was especially intriguing. Ultimately, participants' responses supported the need for - and benefits of - middle management training programmes.

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