Research Article

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The importance of cultural training in the hospitality sector

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Abstract: The human element is the most influential resource and the one that has the greatest responsibility in the organization's effectiveness and efficiency. Therefore, the development of human resources and their training is fundamental to achieve organizational goals. Globalization facilitates the mobility of people around the world, increasing the number and diversity of tourists in hotels, from different cultures, bringing with them different perceptions of the quality of services. This new reality has become a challenge for human resources management practices, and specifically in one of its key areas, which is training. Studies show that training has a positive impact on skills development and worker performance. Given this importance, a cultural training programme is proposed for professionals of the hospitality sector that takes cultural values into account, as well as their impact on the interaction of these professionals with clients.

Keywords: Human resource management; Training; Culture; Cultural training

1 Introduction

The competitive capacity of organizations depends on their human elements, with the literature having widely recognized their importance in the achievement of superb

results in an organization (Gonçalves & Noves, 2012; Nieves, Quintana & Osorio, 2014). Human elements are the resource with greatest impact on and most responsibility in the effectiveness and efficiency of an organization (Milkovich & Boudreau, 2004), and therefore, more than any other resource, are determinant for the success or failure of the organization (Roque, 2017). Added to this is the fact that they do not have credible substitutes, as only they combine the skills, talent and motivation to accomplish the goals of the organization to which they belong (Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart & Wright, 2004).

For this reason, human resources management practices and policies are perceived as strategic elements in the management of organizations (Caetano & Tavares, 2000). Human resources management practices 'represent a standard in terms of use and operation of activities that help the organization to achieve its purposes by a concerted planning of its goals and accomplishment' (Neves & Gonçalves, 2009, p. 66).

While in all sectors, the quality of human resources is a determinant for the success of organizations, in the tourism sector and in the hospitality business, in particular, it is crucial (Murray, Elliot, Simmonds, Madeley & Taller, 2017). Various authors note that both the development and training of human resources are fundamental to achieve organizational goals (Benerjee, 2016; Chand, 2016; Phillips & Phillips, 2016). Indeed, only very recently has the hospitality area received academic attention (Golubovskaya, Robinson & Solnet, 2017).

According to the OECD, tourism is a fairly significant sector, which, on average, accounts for 4.2% of gross domestic product, and represents 6.9% of employment and 21.7% of exports in the member countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2018). In the tourism sector, the hospitality business plays a key role (Kang, Lee & Huh, 2010). Accordingly, reflection around this sector, and specifically concerning issues linked to the training of human resources, has become imperative.

This article presents a brief characterization of the hospitality sector and the impact of culture on the hospitality sector. An analysis will also be made of training

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among professionals of the hospitality sector. Finally, a training proposal will be put forward based on knowledge, understanding and respect for cultural differences, so as to facilitate interaction between guests and professionals of the hospitality business, contributing to customer satisfaction with the service provided.

2 Literature review

2.1 The impact of culture in the hospitality sector

Currently, it is a widely accepted fact that the tourism sector is very important in the world's economy, and could even be considered a fulcrum stimulus to the growth of the entire economic system. Furthermore, tourism establishes interdependences with other spheres, in particular in political, social and environmental fields (Salgado, Costa & Santiago, 2015).

Three areas can be distinguished in the tourism sector: accommodation, transport and entertainment (Petrocchi, 2002). Hotels are one of the types of offer we find in accommodation. Brotherton (1999, p. 168), referring to the hospitality business states that 'for hospitality to exist, something more than hospitable behaviour must be evident. It is this trinity of accommodation, food and drink'. Other authors define the hospitality business as 'a special kind of service industry, where service is vital but where the emphasis on service dimensions can be quite different from other service sectors' (Kandampully, Keating, Kim, Mattila & Solnet, 2014, p. 289). More recently Golubovskaya et al., (2017) considered that, notwithstanding the various definitions of the hospitality business, there are three key aspects in this definition which are the host, the guest and the interpersonal relations that are established between both.

Like all other economic sectors, the hospitality business is subject to the ongoing changes. These arise, on the one hand, from change in the needs and motivations of the tourists and, on the other hand, from the growth of competition, which multiplies and diversifies the offer (Costa, 2016).

Effectively, the hospitality business is a sector with numerous particularities. Garcia (2016) points to some of the specificities of the hospitality business as follows: operating 24 hours a day during seven days a week; the offer is always fixed throughout the financial year, but demand is more intense in certain seasons and regions; it implies considerable investment; the management of

expectations is very complex as they are distinct for each client; the product of the service is intangible; a recurrence of flexible working hours and overtime; on average, wages are low and likewise the qualification of the workers, with a predominantly high turnover. Another particularity of the hospitality business is the fact that the product of this activity is consumed at the place where it is produced.

With globalization and internationalization, the hospitality business has grown progressively and substantially, with the consequent existence of a large variety and mixture of cultural profiles both in terms of the clients and workers. Due to these global movements, increasingly more tourists from all over the world travel, staying at hotels outside their countries of origin, which, in our perspective, adds yet another particularity to this sector: cultural diversity. As such, it is important for companies providing hospitality services to understand the extent to which guests of different cultural origins have different expectations regarding accommodation, which are reflected in distinct behaviour in terms of the interpersonal relations that they establish with the hospitality professionals, their appraisal of the services provided and aptitudes when faced with possible critical events (Swanson, Huang & Wang, 2014; Tsang & Ap, 2007).

Culture proves to be a very important topic. Various studies examining the hospitality sector highlight the influence of national culture on various aspects such as: the interpersonal relations that are established both between guests and front-line workers, and between guests and hotel managers (Manzur & Jogaratnam, 2006; Prayag & Ryan, 2012); the role of emotions in interpersonal relations (Prayag & Ryan, 2012); the type of incidents that are reported and the manner of compensating clients (Cheng & Yau, 2007; Ergun & Kitapci, 2018; Ngai, Heung, Wong & Chan, 2007).

Prayag and Ryan (2012) demonstrated that the national culture of the guests not only influences how they interact but also what they consider to be positive and satisfactory interpersonal relations. This study revealed that, generally speaking, the guests expected that the front-line workers and managers should show particular attention to how they (and their children) feel during their stay. However, some differences were found among clients in relation to the role of emotions in interpersonal relations. For example, while the French (coming from a more affective society) easily demonstrated their emotions, the Germans (whose society is more neutral) evinced controlling their emotions.

Another study carried out by Manzur and Jogaratnam (2006), in which American and Asian guests were compared, revealed that the former showed a positive

attitude towards the techniques of integration (used for the purpose of creating a favourable image) and exemplification (used to conjure up the idea of commitment and dedication) employed by hotel workers. The Americans were less satisfied than the Asians when confronted with techniques of intimidation (aimed at developing fear in clients) and supplication (when weakness is used for the purpose of obtaining understanding by the clients).

In the hospitality business, a critical incident could be defined as an encounter, which has a positive or negative impact on the guest's perspective (Swanson et al., 2014). The perception of what could be considered a critical incident is not the same guests with different cultural values (Cheng & Yau, 2007). The study conducted by Swanson et al. (2014) showed that Asian guests (coming from societies with high power distance and strong collectivism) would tend to report incidents based on flaws of social nature, while American guests (a society with low power distance and weak collectivism) would tend to report incidents that might affect their image in terms of their economic status.

Clients coming from more individualistic cultures would be more likely to express their displeasure and try to find solutions than clients from more collectivist cultures (Ergun & Kitapci, 2018). These clients from more collectivist cultures, apart from being less expressive of their dissatisfaction with the service, when they actually do it would be done in a discrete manner and at a distance from the other guests staying at the hotel (Ngai et al., 2007).

Differences were also observed in relation to the form of compensating Asian and American guests. The Asians considered that the forms of compensation should have an underlying social base, while the Americans believe its base should be financial (Swanson et al., 2014). According to these authors, for the Asians, in the event of an incident, the hotel manager should always show a proactive attitude apologising for the failure and remedying it. Both the presentation of the incident and the words of apology given by the manager should be done with the greatest discretion and out of reach of the public in general. For Americans, the incidents should be reported only when involving financial damages. In this situation, financial compensation is the solution they consider appropriate.

Following from the above, it is easily gleaned that the workers and managers of a hotel should know and identify the cultural profiles of their different guests so as to enable establishing positive interactions and, simultaneously, adapt their practices to the guests' expectations to the extent possible. In market terms, an organization that shows this concern about its clients will clearly score highly in differentiation, increasing its competitive edge in relation to all the other organizations of the sector.

In sum, culture proves to be an important element also in the hospitality sector, with an impact on the interpersonal relations between workers and clients, as well as between the actual professionals of the sector.

2.2 The importance of training in the hospitality business

Training can be defined as 'the set of learning experiences planned by an organization, aimed at fostering changes in skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of the employees in their work' (Cabrera, 2006, p. 168). Training is the result of an effort planned by the organization to facilitate the learning of the skills required by the workers for performance of their duties, involving the knowledge, attitudes and behaviours that are essential to this performance (Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart & Wright, 2010).

As a rule, skills can be defined as the level of performance of an individual in a given task or these individuals' capacity to perform their duties properly (Noe, Hollenbeck & Gerhart, 2015). It is commonplace to distinguish two dimensions: hard skills and soft skills. The former refers to technical competencies and knowledge about the job, while the latter refers to behavioural competencies associated to communication, interpersonal relations, the ability to resolve problems, decision-making, leadership capability and the capacity for teamwork (Leckey & McGuigan, 1997).

For a long time, hard skills were considered essential and soft skills as nice to have (Schuz, 2008). However, over the last decades, the role assigned to soft skills changed considerably. Nowadays, soft skills are perceived as being of such relevance that it is believed that their acquisition by future professionals should preferably date back to their student days (Pizan, 2011). A study conducted in four European countries (England, Austria, Slovenia & Romania) precisely confirms the importance of soft skills being included in the programmes that are taught at higher education establishments (Andrews & Higson, 2008).

In the hospitality sector, these skills are regarded as crucial (Weber, Finley, Crawford & Jr., 2009; Weber, Crawford, Lee & Dennison, 2013). Soft skills are fundamental for applicants to achieve and subsequently hold onto their job (Jaykumar, 2018). According to the author, training programmes that involve soft skills should promote the individual capabilities that the trainees are sometimes unaware that they possess, as much as possible developing these capabilities to attain high performance levels that will result in professional success. Individual success

naturally becomes success at the organizational level, and can make all the difference in relation to other organizations of the same sector and thus achieve a comfortable position in the market.

Although soft skills are crucial skills in this business sector, some authors (e.g., Chung, 2003; Raybould & Wilkins, 2005) believe that the workers of the sector do not yet have sufficient knowledge in terms of these types of skills as there is a certain discrepancy between what is taught at university and what is really necessary in professional practice.

Considering that organizations operate in a global economy, where differentiation based on the skills, knowledge and motivation of the workers proves to be increasingly important, it is fundamental to invest in the training and development of the workers' knowledge and skills (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009). This investment, according to Jacobs and Washington (2003), constitutes an effective method to gain competitive human resources. Training is thus revealed to be an indispensable form of responding to the complexity of the tasks required by our modern society (Barzegar & Farjad, 2011). Human resources contribute to the quality of the offer, to promote customer loyalty, to customer satisfaction and to the organizational performance in general (Baum, 2015).

Regarding training methods in the hospitality sector, we find some diversity, from those involving interaction between the trainer and trainee to a higher or lesser degree, right up to those using new technologies, where this human interaction simply does not exist. Those entailing a high level of interaction include training in a classroom setting, on-the-job training, training ministered through the presence of an instructor and learning by observation or job shadowing (Lee & Bugler, 2017; Powers & Barrows, 2003). On the extreme opposite side of the spectrum we find another type of method, which involves the use of new technologies, more specifically the computer, where trainer/trainee human interaction is non-existent (Lee & Bugler, 2017).

Training in a classroom consists of the verbal transmission of information from the trainer to the trainees, usually supported by PowerPoint presentations, videos, manuals or articles. Lee and Bugler (2017) suggest that this training method has the advantage of the learning process taking place in a familiar atmosphere, favouring interactions and fostering the creation of an atmosphere that facilitates questioning and the debate of opinions.

On-the-job training, as indicated by its name, occurs when the workers do not move outside their work environment and this is where the necessary skills or knowledge for the accomplishment of a task are conveyed (Gallup &

Beauchemin, 2000). Workers are given the opportunity to learn through actual professional practice (Khan, Khan & Khan, 2011). In this type of training, the trainee immediately applies the skills acquired to the tasks that must be carried out, implying a very low cost to the organization, as the learning takes place simultaneously with performance of the job (Sims, 1990). Apart from this, on-the-job training is normally accepted in a positive training way by the workers (Elkin & Roberts, 1994).

Training ministered through the presence of an instructor is yet another method used in training and tends to be well received by the trainees (Schmidt, 2007). The trainer's role is to give instructions or feedback relative to the implementation of the task or tasks, always with the preoccupation of adapting these instructions to the needs of the trainees (Lee & Bugler, 2017). According to Farrell (2000), this method is able to contribute to excellent interpersonal relations between the trainer and the trainee. The presence of the trainer on the one hand, enables the trainee to pose any necessary questions, helping the trainee to resolve any doubts that may arise, assisting the trainee in the process of socialization in view of the quality of the relationship established between the trainee and trainer, as noted above (Schmidt, 2007).

Learning by observation or job shadowing consists of placing the trainee in contact with an experienced worker in the work context. This learning involves four stages: 1) explanation of the task; 2) demonstration of how to carry out the task; 3) accomplishment of this task by the trainee; 4) follow-up and supervision of the performance of the task by the more experienced worker (Powers & Barrows, 2003).

Computer based training can be defined as a training that occurs through the use of a computer. This training is interactive in which questions and situations are presented by the computer to the trainee who responds to them, with the responses being subsequently analysed by the computer. This method is not always applied due to the considerable amount of time and expense required in the development of the material (Lee & Bugler, 2017). Although the trainees consider this training to be interesting, when its goal is to change behaviour and attitudes in the trainees, this is probably not the most appropriate and effective technique (Lee & Pershing, 2000).

Methods that involve trainer/trainee interaction appear to be preferred by the trainees, which is easily understood considering the penchant that those working in the hospitality sector tend to have for interacting with other people, and they probably transfer this propensity to the learning context (Lee & Bugler, 2017; Schmidt, 2007). This is consistent with prior findings by Rowden (2002).

The training method that is chosen is a relevant issue as the workers' satisfaction in relation to the type of training they receive will be reflected in their level of commitment to the organization (Bartlett, 2001; Olgobo & Saudah, 2012). Therefore, human resources management should take this aspect into account, as it affects the actual organizational performance (Schmidt, 2007).

To conclude, the benefits of training are extensive, not only and directly to the workers but also to the actual organization. According to McKenna and Beech (2008), training improves the workers' performance in their job, keeps the workers' updated in terms of technical and professional skills, lowers the probability of mistakes and makes the implementation of tasks faster, reduces senior coordination time, contributes to lowering turnover levels, reduces accidents, contributes to the attraction of good candidates to work in the organization and facilitates organizational change.

Along similar lines, a study carried out by Otoo and Mishra (2018), reiterates that the training of workers in the hospitality business positively influences performance as it increases the workers' knowledge, skills and aptitudes. Before them, another study by Appiah (2010) had also confirmed the positive effect of training on the performance of the workers.

And if in most organizations, human resources are essential to achieve maximum efficiency and efficacy, in hospitality, these are enormously important to the excellence and quality of the offer, as this is a sector where interpersonal relations can make all the difference.

Cultural training or learning can be especially beneficial for everyone working in the tourism sector and who, on a daily basis, deal with clients coming from a diversity of cultures, in particular, when geared towards the development of the so-called soft skills. As noted above, knowledge of the cultural profile of the clients represents a particular asset for organizations in competitive terms. For this reason, cultural training should be a training goal in the hospitality sector, as it facilitates performance of the job when working in a scenario of coexistence of people coming from diverse cultures (Changuk & Chon, 2000).

This type of training could also represent an extra advantage in the relationships of the employees inside the organization itself and with the surrounding context. As is common knowledge, nowadays, large numbers of people leave their countries of origin to work in scenarios with cultures that are extremely different from those of their home country, in particular, in the tourism sector. For these people, cultural training or learning would make sense, from the outset, due to helping them to adjust to their new context (Black, Mendenhall & Oddou, 1991).

2.3 A cultural training proposal

Individuals of different cultures have distinct cultural values and their perceptions and expectations on accommodation and the manner in which their needs should be met by the hospitality sector do not emerge isolated from their cultural profile.

The objective of the cultural training programme is to impart knowledge on the key cultural differences and similarities between the various regions of the world. These will be considered in the light of the regional division of the United Nations Statistics Division (2019). After having acquired this knowledge, it should be applied in terms of the interpersonal relations that are established with clients, taking into account their region of origin.

Based on the cultural training programs developed by Brislin (1979), Tung (1981) and Roque and Ramos (2019), we propose a cultural training program covering three components: cognitive, affective and behavioural. Let us consider each component in greater detail.

The cognitive component involves the acquisition of knowledge about the main cultural characteristics of the different regions of the world. This acquisition will be based on the GLOBE project (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman & Gupta, 2004). This project involved 62 countries that were characterized according to nine cultural dimensions: (1) Power Distance: degree to which individuals consider it legitimate that access to resources should be hierarchically stratified; (2) Gender Egalitarianism: degree to which organizations or societies minimize gender role differences and sexual discrimination; (3) Assertiveness: degree to which individuals in societies and organizations are assertive, aggressive and competitive in their relationships with others; (4) Institutional Collectivism: degree to which organizational and social institutional practices encourage and reward the collective distribution of resources and collective action; (5) In-Group Collectivism: degree to which individuals express pride, loyalty and cohesiveness in small groups, like their family or circle of friends; (6) Uncertainty Avoidance: extent to which society relies on social norms, rules and procedures to alleviate the unpredictability of future events; (7) Humane Orientation: degree to which organizations and societies encourage and reward individuals for being fair, altruistic, generous, caring and kind to others; (8) Future Orientation: extent to which individuals in organizations and societies engage in future-oriented behaviour such as planning, investment in the future; and (9) Performance Orientation: degree to which a society or organization encourages and rewards individuals for performance improvement and excellence.

As noted above, knowledge of the principal cultural characteristics can be helpful in the interpersonal relations that are established between workers of the hospitality sector and clients of the different regions. By the end of this module, it is assumed that whoever attended it should know, for example, that societies with greater propensity towards distance from power will tend to give higher value to egalitarianism and the participation of people in decision-making (House et al., 2004). Accordingly, when interacting with people coming from these types of societies, two-way communication should be favoured where the other person's opinion should always be contemplated in decision-making. Considering another example, whoever attended the module is also supposed to know that in societies with greater leaning towards assertiveness, individuals tend to be more confrontational in interpersonal relations (House et al., 2004). Here, therefore, it is advisable to adopt a more direct and explicit form of communication allowing space for the other person's initiative capability.

Once the participants in this cultural training programme know the key cultural features of the different regions, they will be able to foresee the impact that the cultural profile could have at a social level.

The affective component involves the simulation of situations that might involve possible cultural incidents. Based on the information acquired in the cognitive component, the participants should express the most appropriate solution for the situation in question.

Finally, the behavioural dimension concerns the capability of adapting to the communication style of the client's country of origin aimed at fostering the establishment of positive interpersonal relations.

Once in possession of knowledge about cultural differences, the trainees are supposed to understand that, just as their own culture influences, behaviour and attitudes, the same is true for clients coming from other cultures (Sue, Arredondo & McDavis, 1992). This process contributes to the trainees feeling more comfortable with the existing cultural differences between them and their clients, facilitating an adjustment of their own behaviour and attitudes. Thus, if the trainees believe that they have sufficient resources, appropriate knowledge to accomplish their strongest action, the stronger will be their intention to conduct this behaviour (Madden, Ellen & Ajzen, 1992).

In view of the various methods presented above, our proposal considers that training ministered through the presence of an instructor is this type of training that favours interaction between the trainer and trainees, as well as among the actual trainees as there is space for sharing experiences, which could prove to be particularly interesting if the team is composed of people from diverse

cultural backgrounds. The presence of an instructor facilitates assistance and offers the trainees the necessary support and means for their assimilation of knowledge and, at the same time, enables developing their ability to progress to a more advanced level of knowledge but this time on their own, unaided (Vygotsky, 1978). For the author, learning is considered a social process in which social interaction is not merely defined as the communication between the instructor and the trainees, but by the actual atmosphere in which the trainees are immersed, the form of interacting with problems and the strategies that are used.

3 Methodology

3.1 Participants

The target group of this programme involves all the workers of the hospitality sector who work in what is referred to as front office. The term front office refers to all the activities that are developed around the hotel reception, encompassing the receiving of guests, provision of diverse information, bookings, check-in and check-out (Baum & Devine, 2007). The programme can also be applied in any country where it is presumed that it is important to take into account and iron out cultural differences between workers and clients, as well as due to the actual heterogeneity existing between the members of work teams.

3.2 Procedure

The cultural training programme is divided into three modules. The first module is related to the cognitive component, the second to the affective component and the third to the behavioural component. The programme will have a total duration of six hours, with two hours dedicated to each module. The programme should be ministered by someone with competencies in the area of multiculturalism and teaching skills.

Gertsen (1990) considered two types of techniques in training programmes. Conventional training in which knowledge is conveyed in a unilateral form and experimental training in which the trainees are able to participate actively, sharing experiences and doing simulations of real situations in order to try to find the most suitable solution or solutions. In relation to the proposed cultural training programme, we consider that the first session of the cognitive component module would tend to have a

conventional type of training but all the remaining sessions should follow an experimental type of training.

4 Conclusions

Hotels constitute an important area of the tourism sector, subject to the ongoing change and enclosed within a fiercely competitive context.

One of the consequences of globalization is cultural diversity. Increasingly, more people travel worldwide as tourists. It is, therefore, indispensable that companies providing services and, in particular, hotels should take into account the different cultural origins of their guests, which is reflected in different expectations regarding accommodation. Cultural origins are likewise reflected in the type of interpersonal relations that the guests consider appropriate, in their appraisal of the services provided, and even in the assessment of compensation for any problems occurred (Swanson, Huang & Wang, 2014; Tsang & Ap, 2007).

Culture thus emerges as a crucial element that cannot be ignored by hospitality organizations. As human resources are a key determinant for excellence in these units, it is fundamental to boost the acquisition of necessary skills so that the human resources and, especially the front-line workers and managers, can suitably meet the needs of their different clients. Soft skills prove to be essential competencies in this context, being crucial for the professional performance of each worker and for boosting organizational success.

With the intent of contributing to the development of the soft skills of front-line workers in the hospitality sector and in the light of our increasingly multicultural context, a cultural training programme was proposed herein. The programme aims to foster change and simultaneously an adjustment of the workers' attitudes according to the cultural origin of the clients. As noted above, knowing and understanding the cultural origin can help to promote positive interpersonal relations, by facilitating the type of communication that is established, the management of incidents and corresponding compensation of the clients.

Naturally, one of the limitations of our study is the fact that a cultural training programme has never been implemented. It is important that this should take place so that an assessment can be done to understand the extent to which the programme effectively contributed to a change of attitudes by the front office workers, in view of the diversity of clients and the actual heterogeneity existing among the employees of the organizations concerned.

It is important for the programme to be implemented in diverse cultural contexts. Indeed, it could be the case that the acceptance and even the efficacy of this programme among the workers might not be the same in all contexts.

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