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Attracting Talent through Sustainability: Leading question - Does Sustainability Help Attract and Retain Talent

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16 ~~_____~~-Attracting Talent through Sustainability

Leading question: Does sustainability help attract and retain talent?

Ralf Burbach, Julia Lenz and Stefan Jooss

Abstract

Facing significant talent shortages, many hospitality organisations struggle to attract, develop, and retain talent, and ultimately are not able to develop sustainable talent pipelines. In this chapter, we consider how organisations in the hospitality industry can introduce sustainable practices to manage talent. The chapter first presents an overview of the meaning of talent and talent management. We then introduce sustainability in the context of talent management and present three aspects that relate to a sustainable approach: (1) diverse and creative talent, (2) employer branding and employee value proposition, and (3) coopetition as an alternative to the competitive narrative in the hospitality industry. We conclude that sustainable approaches to talent management can aid talent attraction and retention. However, they must meet the organisational needs and employee needs alike, and therefore we advocate a differentiated approach ~~which~~that allows for strategic differentiation while equally providing learning, development, and growth for all employees. The hospitality industry needs to become better ~~in~~at addressing foundational issues such as compensation, working conditions, and career paths, while at the same time exploring more innovative approaches to managing talent in the future.

Keywords: Talent, Talent management, Talent attraction and retention, Sustainable talent practices, Diversity, Employer branding and value proposition, Coopetition

Introduction

Sustainability and the attainment of global sustainability is critical not just for the planet but also for the survival of hospitality organisations, whose key stakeholders, ~~—~~ above all, its customers and its employees, ~~—~~ place an increasing value on sustainability. It seems therefore a reasonable assumption that sustainable business practices have a positive effect on talent attraction (Magbool, ~~Amran, Nejadi, & Jayaraman et al.~~, 2016). At the core of sustainability lies the strategic management of scarce resources. The single most important resource for ~~a~~ hospitality organisations is its talents and the knowledge, skills, and abilities they possess (Johnson, ~~Huang, & Doyle et al.~~, 2019). Yet, the hospitality industry worldwide has long suffered a losing streak as far as the global war for talent is concerned, largely due to its poor reputation caused frequently by poor working conditions (Baum, 2019; Johnson et al., 2019). Moreover, as Brannon and Burbach (2021) argue, the dynamic nature of many of the employment relationships, which often encompass temporary contracts, make it difficult to establish sustainable talent pipelines for these organisations. Furthermore, the global ~~Covid~~COVID-19 pandemic once again highlighted the precarious nature of employment in the industry as well as the unsustainable way in which hospitality organisations have approached talent management. Thus, it is evident that hospitality firms must adopt more innovative and sustainable approaches to managing their talent. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to shed light on how organisations ~~s~~ can sustainably develop their talent pipelines. This chapter engages in a critical debate to ascertain if and how sustainable talent management practices can

help to attract and retain talent, which is a similar point made also by Brannon and Burbach (2021), who focus on common talent pools across several collaborating firms in lieu of firms' specific talent pools as a sustainable mechanism to attract and retain talent. Firm-specific talent pools describe a group of employees ~~which-who~~ meet certain characteristics, often in relation to perceived performance and potential (Jooss, Burbach, & Ruël, 2019; Tansley & Tietze, 2013).

The extant literature suggests that a clear talent management strategy creates a path to better talent recruitment, retention, and engagement in the hospitality industry (Christensen Hughes & Rog, 2008). But to what extent are these or can these strategies be sustainable? As part of this debate, we will explore a range of different approaches, which, if adopted, ultimately can assist firms in creating sustainable talent pipelines. This chapter will first introduce the concepts of talent and talent management before providing some insights into sustainable talent management, including a number of innovative and sustainable talent practices. Specifically, we highlight the need for more diverse and creative talent, emphasise the critical role of employer branding and employee value propositions, and offer an alternative to the competition narrative in talent management, introducing cooptation as a strategy to manage talent challenges in the industry. Finally, the chapter will offer some concluding remarks.

The ~~m~~Meaning of ~~t~~Talent and ~~t~~Talent ~~m~~Management

In order to unravel whether sustainable talent practices can lead to better attraction and retention of talent, we must first understand the meaning of talent. That in itself is a major undertaking, and various research has highlighted the issues associated with conceptualising talent, especially in large hospitality firms (see ~~for example e.g.~~ Jooss, McDonnell, & Burbach, 2019; Jooss, McDonnell, Burbach, & Vaiman, 2019). Kravariti, ~~Voutsina, Tasoulis, Dibia and Johnston et al.~~ (2022), in their systematic literature review of talent management pertaining to the tourism and hospitality industry, found a lack of conceptual clarity surrounding both the meaning of talent and talent management. Nevertheless, several authors have highlighted the unique nature of talent and its critical importance in the hospitality industry for providing memorable guest experiences (Baum, 2008; Bharwani & Butt, 2012; Bharwani & Jauhari, 2013; D'Annunzio-Green, 2018; Horner, 2017; Ramdhony & D'Annunzio-Green, 2018). ~~Yet, However,~~ there appears to exist a dichotomy between the evident centrality of talent to service excellence (Kusluvan, ~~Kusluvan, Ilhan, & Buyruk et al.~~, 2010) and the manner in which talent is treated frequently in the industry (Baum, 2019; Curran, 2021; Sheehan, ~~Grant, & Garavan et al.~~, 2018), which has resulted in the often-reported poor perception of the industry. This situation was compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic (Baum, ~~Mooney, Robinson, & Solnet et al.~~, 2020).

Nevertheless, it is commonly accepted that talent refers to those individuals in an organisation ~~which-who~~ display high performance and/or potential (McDonnell, ~~et al. Collings, Mellahi, & Schuler,~~ 2017) and which, as a result, can be conducive to improving organisational performance (Cappelli & Keller, 2017), which itself is a product of service quality in the hospitality industry. Thus, it seems obvious that sustainable (i.e., viable) talent practices will result in lower staff turnover, higher staff satisfaction, and increased business performance. Notably, the manner in which talent is viewed in an organisation often hinges on the type of approach an organisation takes.

Gallardo-Gallardo, ~~Dries, and Gonzalez-Cruz et al.~~ (2013) distinguish between the object approach, which refers to certain desirable characteristics of employees (e.g., innate abilities, mastery of developed skills, fit, commitment), ~~or-and~~ the subject approach which equates talent to

people, taking an inclusive (i.e., all employees) or exclusive (i.e., a subset of the employee population) approach. Considering the significant talent shortages in the industry, combined with its poor perception, it is evident that a highly exclusive approach is not sustainable within the context of a very finite and dwindling resource. In contrast, adopting a more inclusive perspective offers many advantages, including increased employee engagement and motivation (Buckingham & Vosburgh, 2001). However, by fostering and developing all employees, the inclusive approach may also add significant costs to a business and lack strategic focus on pivotal positions (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). From a strategic point of view, this renders the inclusive approach less attractive to hospitality firms where labour costs already represent one of the main operating costs.

In the hospitality context, talent management is described as the attraction, development, and retention of talent as it enters and passes through an organisation (Hughes & Rog, 2008; Kravariti et al., 2022). Talent management is frequently described as a mindset that must be embedded within the strategy of an organisation (Baum, 2008; D'Annunzio-Green, 2018; Garavan, Matthews-Smith, Gill, & O'Brien et al., 2021). However, as Garavan et al. (2021) argue, a universal approach to strategic talent management, i.e., that is, the focus on human capital, valuable resources, and competitive advantage, does not exist and is contingent on a broad range of contextual factors (e.g., type of organisation, region, sector, size, etc.). Additionally, talent management and its sustainability in the sector is also affected by the changing nature of employment (Brannon & Burbach, 2021), diversity and inclusion initiatives, as well as generational factors which that may affect the level of commitment of employees (Festing & Schräfer, 2014; Lub, Nij, Björk, Mathis, Bal Blomme, & Schak et al., 2012; Shuja & Bussa, 2019) among others. The latter point is a critical one if we consider that most organisations adopt a one-size-fits-all approach (i.e., a unitarist perspective) to talent management, while Generation Z employees are by nature far more individualistic (Self, Gordon, & Jolly et al., 2019). Therefore, talent management in the hospitality industry must be far more pluralistic in pursuance of sustainable talent development (Devins & Gold, 2014).

Many organisations set up internal talent pools, which are replenished through an organisation's talent pipeline, to streamline the flow of talent through an organisation (Jooss et al., 2019). These talent pools are made of those employees whom the organisation identifies as talent (Mäkelä et al., Björkman, & Ehmrooth, 2010). One organisation can establish several talent pools for different roles, levels, or locations. These talent pools are dynamic since their setup can be impacted upon affected by changing business needs (Jooss et al., 2019). Talent pools can be inclusive (when all employees are considered talent) or exclusive (when only certain employees with certain characteristics are deemed to belong to a talent pool). Ultimately, we argue that a differentiated approach, which takes into consideration the strategic needs of the organisation with a focus on pivotal positions and high performers and high potentials, as well as the need for development and growth opportunities for all employees, is required for sustainable talent pipelines in the hospitality industry.

Sustainability in the Context of Talent Management

What does sustainability actually mean in the context of talent management? It may not come as a surprise that existing research on sustainable talent management is limited. Most organisations have been so busy trying to engage in the war for talent that the question of developing a sustainable approach has, perhaps, for most organisations, simply not yet arisen yet. Therefore, we must, at this point, take a brief detour and delve into the extant sustainable human resource management (HRM) literature, although an in-depth review of the same would be far beyond the scope of this

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chapter. Calls for more sustainable HRM practices and systems largely originate in the drive for corporate sustainability. However, the sustainable HRM literature espouses a large number of models and typologies, each with its own merits and drawbacks (see [for example e.g.](#) De Prins, [Van Beirendonck, De Vos, & Segers et al.](#), 2014; De Stefano [et al.](#), [Bagdadli, & Camuffo](#), 2018; Dyllick & Muff, 2016; Järlström, [Saru, & Vanhala et al.](#), 2018; Macke & Genari, 2019; Podgorodnichenko, [Edgar, & McAndrew et al.](#), 2020; Stankeviciute & Savaneviciene, 2018). ~~Yet, some o~~Others feel that current perspectives are too narrow and argue for a multidimensional and multi-stakeholder viewpoint (Stahl, [Brewster, Collings, & Hajro et al.](#), 2020).

Given the multiplicity of perspectives Aust, [Matthews and Muller-Camen et al.](#) (2020) argue that different types of sustainable HRM literature can be evaluated alongside four dimensions in terms of the context and components of sustainability. These are: an organisational perspective, sustainable HRM inputs, sustainable HRM processes and sustainable HRM outputs. They ([Aust et al. 2020](#)) categorise sustainable HRM activities as one of four types. The first type refers to socially responsible HRM and is often aligned with the corporate social responsibility strategy of an organisation. The second type, green HRM, focuses on attaining environmental sustainability designed to engender the ecological awareness of employees, which in turn would make the organisation 'greener' (Renwick, [Redman, & Maguire et al.](#), 2013 in Aust et al., 2020). Triple bottom line HRM, the third type, centres on the concurrent goals of economic, environmental, and social purposes of HRM. However, critics highlight that some organisations may pay lip service to sustainable HRM in the interest of corporate social responsibility (CSR) reporting and shareholder value (Ehnert, [Parsa, Roper, Wagner, & Muller-Camen et al.](#), 2016) or indeed to improve their organisational reputation to attract talent (Jain & Bhatt, 2015). Finally, common good HRM goes beyond CSR to focus also on the broad impact of these HR practices in terms of fairness, equity, trust, employment security, workplace representation and the psychological contract (Aust et al. 2020).

The ~~b~~Building ~~b~~Blocks of ~~s~~Sustainable ~~t~~Talent ~~m~~Management

An investigation of these categories of sustainable HRM reveals that none of those actually captures the essence of managing talent in a sustainable manner – that is, to ensure a continuous flow of talent into and throughout the firm to fill pivotal roles in the future (Mohapatra & Sahu, 2018). Anlesinya and Amponsah-Tawiah (2020) argue that the key tenets of a responsible and sustainable talent management model should comprise inclusivity, CSR, fairness, and equal employment opportunities. The sustainable talent management development model conceived by Devins and Gold (2014), which is both inclusive and pluralist in nature, offers a number of suggestions. ~~They (Devins & and Gold, (2014)~~ purport that hospitality firms must balance their interest in attaining economic benefits from their talent with the need to foster ~~the~~ social capital in the organisation. Like Thunnissen, [Boselie and Fruytier et al.](#) (2013), Devins and Gold (2014) assert that a broader multilevel multi-value approach to talent management will lead to greater added talent value. Moreover, hospitality firms ought to be more inclusive to place a greater emphasis on their low-skilled employees (Johnson et al., 2019), ~~which-who~~ make up a large proportion of their workforce, by, for example, optimising return on investment in training to reduce cost or offering better career opportunities. Furthermore, hospitality organisations must learn to appreciate the link between learning, training and development and service delivery in this industry (Devins & Gold, 2014). Finally, Devins and Gold (2014) propound that hospitality firms must collaborate with others to participate in 'skills ecosystems' and realise what the impact of their talent practices are on society at large. This is ~~a-similar~~ [to a](#) point made by Brannon and

Burbach (2021) who posit that the actions of some industry players can spoil the overall talent pool available to an organisation by further diminishing the reputation of the industry. Sustainable talent management, therefore, must have a clear focus on the needs of the employee (while also meeting the needs of the organisation). This is echoed by King (2017), who advocates that sustainable talent management is contingent on a strong talent system and strategic climate for talent whereby climate refers to the 'individual-level psychological climate', while the success (measured in terms of their sustainability) of talent initiatives hinges on the perceptions of employees of strategic talent management (King, 2016). However, King (2017) fails to clarify what the term 'sustainable' stands for.

Sustainable talent management must entail development opportunities and career paths for employees (Murillo & King, 2019). Training and development have been identified as key components of talent management processes in general (Garavan, Carbery, & Rock et al., 2012) and the hospitality and tourism in particular (Johnson et al., 2019). An excellent way to provide opportunities for learning, training and development ~~are~~ is mentoring initiatives ~~which that~~ foster both human and social capital within the organisation and will lead to better talent retention (Gannon, Clayton, & Klenert et al., 2021; Self et al., 2019). Mentoring initiatives are also proven to promote gender equality in the hospitality sector (Dashper, 2020).

Research has found that ~~more~~ innovative talent practices are not only more sustainable, but ~~they~~ will also improve the overall outcomes of the individual talent initiatives such as recruitment, training and development and retention, while also displaying a greater cognisance of generational preferences (Chang & Werther, 2021). Chang and Werther's (2021) research analysed the key attributes of the winners of the Hospitality HR Awards in Germany. In general, the winners of the awards were not the large chains, which highlights the fact that organisations do not necessarily have to be large or well-resourced or have a HR-/talent function, which is frequently cited as a main barrier to implementing talent management strategies (D'Annunzio-Green, 2008). Sustainable and innovative talent practices do not have to be expensive or resource intensive. Simple measures such as speeding up and simplifying the hiring processes, integration of asylum seekers, recruitment movies, casting shows, train-the-trainer programmes, or paid leave for learning activities can have a huge impact on the attraction and retention of employees. ~~Their~~ (Chang & Werther's (2021) research also provides examples of collaboration with colleges and with other hotels to attract talent. This is a key point, which we will return to later. These innovative practices also provide mechanisms and platforms to ameliorate ~~the~~ organisations' brand image and employer brand, and can lead to greater diversity in the workforce. In addition to this set of practices linked to more sustainable practices, we now elaborate on three aspects: diverse and creative talent, employer branding and value proposition, and cooptation.

Diverse and ~~c~~Creative ~~t~~Talent

Achieving greater equality and diversity is an absolute must in the hospitality industry, which by its very nature should embrace these concepts. ~~and~~ In essence, a more diverse workforce attracts a more diverse customer base, improves the organisation's image, fosters cross-cultural understanding and collaboration and idea generation (Yap, 2017), which will lead to improved ~~firm~~ organisation performance (Singal, 2014). Yet, a number of studies report ongoing issues in this regard (Gehrels & Suleri, 2016). Greater equality and diversity can only be achieved if hospitality firms adopt an approach that considers the development of their entire workforce, considering individuals' unique talents. We already alluded to the critical importance of service quality in

customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry. Ironically, few, if any, hospitality firms have focused on their talent as ‘individual creative talent’ (Kulichyova, ~~Moffett, Woods, & McCracken et al.~~, 2021). The creativity of employees is a key requirement for hospitality employees if we take chefs as an example. This approach is very much aligned with the individual pluralistic approach we alluded to above. Key to fostering this individual creative talent is the establishment of the physical and social environment, bottom-up decision-making processes (something that the hospitality industry is not known for) and a culture that enables creative skills to develop (Kulichyova et al., 2021).

Employer ~~b~~Branding and ~~v~~Value ~~p~~Proposition

There is a clear link between a hospitality organisation’s ability to attract and retain high-quality talent and its employer brand (Christensen Hughes & Rog, 2008; Iles, ~~Chuai, & Preece et al.~~, 2010; Ilyas, ~~Adeel, Alshuaibi, & Shaari et al.~~, 2019). Key to developing the employer brand is to create a firm’s employer value proposition (Chang & Werther, 2021; Davern, 2021). However, this is easier said than done. Minchington’s (2017) employer branding ecosystem illustrates just how complex it is to establish a sustainable employer brand. The employer brand ecosystem consists of a range of, often dynamic, factors. These include trends in the political, social, environmental, technological, economical and legal environment; the sector and influencers within that sector (which wield significant influence on social media, particularly in the tourism and hospitality sector); the employer brand attributes, which consist of operational and strategic aspects; the talent life cycle; the assets which make up the employer value proposition; as well as the various physical and virtual representations of employer brand equity.

In many ways, sustainable employer branding must be developed in the same manner as the resource-based view of the firm suggests (Barney, ~~Wright, & Ketchen Jr et al.~~, 2001). Therefore, the employer value proposition (EVP) must be valuable, rare, inimitable (and developed over a long period of time) and receive high-level organisational support. That is what will make an organisation’s EVP unique. ~~However, first and foremost, however,~~ organisations need to get the basics right (Davern, 2021, ~~–~~) – that is, they must focus on their pay levels, training and development, promotion, recruitment practices, fairness and trust, work-life balance etc.; in other words, all of the sustainable talent practices we alluded to above. Sustainable talent management initiatives should include measures to support the work-life balance of employees (Chang & Werther, 2021; Deery, 2008). The poor rostering and long working hours in the hospitality industry have been identified as potential health issues (McNamara, ~~Bohle, & Quinlan et al.~~, 2011) and must be addressed to improve talent retention. In general, better working conditions including pay and rewards will improve organisational performance and the employer branding of the organisation (Sheehan et al., 2018). However, the evidence suggests that many organisations fail to get even the basics right (Baum et al., 2020; Curran, 2021).

Coopetition

Many small hospitality operations lack the knowledge, resources and skills to focus on their talent, and many ~~of the~~ talent-related activities occur on an ad hoc need-driven basis (Chung & D’Annunzio-Green, 2018; Krishnan & Scullion, 2017). Therefore, and because existing approaches to managing hospitality appear to have been largely unsuccessful, some authors have suggested that competing hospitality firms should resort to coopeting with one another to establish what may be referred to as interorganisational talent pools (Lenz, ~~Burbach, & Eckstaller et al.~~,

2021) or ~~as~~ common talent pool resources (Brannon & Burbach, 2021). Coopetition describes the concurrent activities of cooperation and competition between firms with a view to ~~overcome~~ overcoming potential resource shortages and ~~to capitalise~~ capitalising on the combined knowledge and expertise of coopeting firms (Bengtsson & Raza-Ullah, 2016). Coopetition has been practised for many years in other industries, but it is a novel concept in talent management, particularly in the hospitality industry. Naturally, the dynamic process of managing the alignment of competing firms for a common purpose (Bengtsson & Johansson, 2012), which consists of multifaceted relationships, may give rise to ambiguity, role conflicts, and potential tensions, contradicting interests, or mistrust among the coopetition partners (Tidström, 2014). Despite the complexities involved, coopetition enables firms 'to cooperate with competitors in a mutually beneficial arrangement that results in higher potential benefits for both companies' (Mercer, 2015, p. 2).

Conclusion

The discussion above has presented various ideas and evidence to suggest that sustainable talent management practices can pave the way for more sustainable talent pipelines and thus the improved attraction and retention of talent into hospitality firms. Specifically, we presented three directions for sustainable talent practices in the hospitality industry:— (1) creative and diverse talent, (2) employer branding and value proposition, and (3) coopetition. In the first instance, hospitality firms ought to identify clearly what they consider to be talent and ensure that there is a shared view of what that is across the entire organisation as a lack of clarity will derail any efforts to establish a meaningful talent management process (Jooss et al., 2019). This includes key decisions around the type of talent pools, the type of approaches to managing talent (subject or object approach) and the focus of talent activities (pluralist or unitarist) the organisation wishes to employ. Our discussion demonstrates that to be sustainable, talent management should be pluralistic in nature, considering a diverse set of talent. Second, hospitality firms ought to assess their own capabilities and needs and select and develop their own set of unique talent practices (or indeed clusters of unique practices among coopetition partners), which are based on a solid employer value proposition. For an effective employer brand and value proposition, we re-emphasise the importance of getting the basics right (~~that is, i.e.~~ the basic terms and conditions) before developing more innovative and sustainable talent practices. Sustainability in managing talent requires opportunities for individuals to grow and a mindset shift from a temporary job to a career among employees. Finally, where organisations struggle to attract, develop, and retain talent, coopetition can potentially be an alternative that allows for more sustainable pipelines in the industry, which then also benefit the individual participating firms. As the literature on sustainable talent management is rather limited, we define it here as the composite of long-term-oriented talent practices which will secure an organisation's talent pipeline and will result in sustained improvements in attracting, developing, and retaining ~~of~~ talent. There are many examples of excellent and very sustainable talent practices in the hospitality industry, which do not have to be resource intensive (see ~~for example e.g.~~ Chang & Werther, 2021). Therefore, it is incumbent upon the hospitality industry and its representative organisations to promote sustainable talent management, which, in turn, will improve the reputation of the industry. Otherwise, the hospitality industry will continue to struggle to attract and retain pivotal talent.

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