
DEVELOPING ORGANISATIONAL SOCIAL CAPITAL IN HOTELS: A (FUTURE) RECESSION PROOFING APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

In fighting for economic survival, hotels have diligently reduced as many costs as possible via the extensive use of systems, technology and efficiencies in all areas. While operating margins are thin and hotels have focused on reducing their largest costs item – labour, yet in doing so risk long-term business sustainability as service levels reduce, tacit knowledge leaves the company, and customers notice a less than expected experience.

This article presents research conducted in New Zealand in 2007 – before the 2008/09 global recession, which focused on the management of contingent labour in five-star international hotels. The findings of that research are pertinent to this present recession and its recovery in that it suggests that building organisational social capital, that is, trust, communication, commitment, social relations, and influence (Requena, 2003), has significance general organisational sustainability, productivity and profitability enhancement benefits.

Hotels who have built organisational social-capital in positive economic times will potentially being winners over those who have not when this recession subsides and into the future. This research highlights it will be effective social capital leadership which will bring about the much needed rapid response at the end of this recession and future proof an organisation; leadership not solely invested in that of the General Manager, but in particular by hotel middle managers – those how manage the majority of staffing on a daily basis.

Key Words: Social Capital, Hotels, Recession, Leadership

Introduction

The world has been, and arguably is still in, a financial recession. Share markets have fallen, property values have declined, consumer spending has dropped and tourism numbers have contracted. For hotels reliant on tourist and corporate travellers this has resulted in reduced occupancy, room prices and RevPAR (Revenue Per Available Room), and the need for continual review of costs in every area, in particular staffing. As with many businesses, hotels are in reactive mode. It is indeed a challenging time to be a hotel manager, a hotel company CEO or Director of the Board.

In the past twenty-four months economic conditions has caused aggressive competition in terms of hotel room rates resulting in discounting. However, discounting, even in good times, has been proven to be false economy (Canina & Enz, 2006; Enz, Canina, & Lomanno, 2004), therefore, discounting rates in, or continuing to discount as we lead out of a recession, will have even greater negative economic

impact. The immediate winners are the guests who have time and availability to pay. The long-term losers are the hotels who have now re-adjusted the guest physiological pricing reference for that of what a hotel room actually costs, not necessarily its value, and will take years to return to pre-2008 room rate levels.

In fighting for survival, hotels have diligently reduced as many costs as possible via the extensive use of systems, technology and overall efficiencies. The operating margins are thin with hotels focused on reducing their largest costs item – labour. Yet, reducing labour puts into question long-term business sustainability as service levels reduce, tacit knowledge leaves the company, and customers notice a ‘less than expected’ experience. Potentially hotels may now be overpromising and under-delivering.

This article presents research conducted in New Zealand in 2007 – before the 2008/09 global recession, which focused on the management of contingent labour in five-star international hotels. The findings of that research are pertinent to this present recession, and its recovery, in that it suggests that building organisational social capital, that is, trust, communication, commitment, social relations, and influence (Requena, 2003), can enhance an organisations sustainability, productivity and profitability. Given the pain that many hotels have suffered in the past twenty-four months, understanding organisational social capital may aid business survival and profitability in non-recessionary and recessionary times, and prepare for future economic shocks.

Labour is said to be the most significant ‘cost’ of hotel operations (Morland, 1988; Gustafson, 2000; Mercer, 1998; Lai, 2005), yet Hotels’ who have built organisational social-capital amongst in positive economic times, will potentially be winners over those who have not when this recession subsides. More importantly, this research highlights, it will be effective social capital leadership by hotel middle managers (who manage the majority of a hotel staffing) which will bring about the much needed rapid response at the end of this recession, and future proof an organisation. This article questions what we have not learnt from the past and starts with relooking at Human Resource Management.

Human Resource Management (HRM) in Hotels

The global tourism and hospitality industry has suffered hard times on a number of occasions in the past twenty years; the stock market crash of the mid 80’s, the economic slowdown of the mid 90’s, the Asian financial crisis of the late 90’s, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and SARS in 2003. From such challenging periods it should be assumed that various industries, including hotels, have learnt many lessons. While individual organisations have used different strategies to manage through such times, a common strategy has been to reduce employees, followed by what can be an even larger challenge to then re-attract them, as and when the phase subsides.

There is no shortage of literature suggesting best practice in HRM in the tourism and hospitality industry: recruitment (Ferris, Berkson, & Harris, 2002; Powell

& Wood, 1999), retention (e.g. Brien, 2003, 2004; K. Farrell, 2001; Walsh, 2001; Woods & Macaulay, 1989), training (e.g. Fair & Brooks, 2001; D. Farrell, 2005; Poulston, 2006; Pratten, 2003; Roehl & Swerdlow, 1999), and increasing productivity (e.g. Ball, Johnson, & Slattery, 1986; Brown & Dev, 2000; Deloitte Touche Tomatsu, 2006; Guthrie, 2001; Johnston & Jones, 2004; Reynolds, 2003; Wölfl, 2004). Therefore, potentially we should (1) understand a great deal about managing our employees for the best results and, (2) from a management point of view, entering into any recessionary or seasonal phase could be a managed, albeit slightly stressful, process; yet actions of the industry still appear crisis driven. What have we not learnt?

Part of the answer may lie in what appears to be hotels preference for a rationalistic management paradigm; a management genre developed in the 1900's by Frederick Taylor (Wood, Wallace, & Zeffane, 2001) and the associated Scientific Management movement. This managerial style purported the maximisation of resources and efficiency – potentially a reason for its continued use in many hotels today with one manifestation of this management genre being the use of contingent labour – short term contractual relationships. While a rationalistic approach may secure maximum prosperity for the employer and avoids the complications of long-term – potentially time consuming, employment relationships, when a recession or negative seasonal period occurs, an employer's prosperity reduces, leaving them to rely on ongoing relationships with both the guests and staff. However, with regard to the latter, hotels also hope that the contingent staff, often disengaged during tough economic times will be available for re-engagement when the recession or seasonal period subsides.

Significant, or indeed any, reduction of employees (contingent or full-time) as part of recession survival or general business operations has serious disadvantages, albeit we understand the need for some managed reduction and increased need for flexibility (Bultjens, 200; Riley, 1992; Sheridan, 2000). Kets de Vries and Lalazs (1997) and McDonald and Makin (2000), consider that flippant use of contingent labour, for example in recessionary times or seasonal operations, as being the breaking of the psychological working contract through a 'hire at will and fire at will' approach. Ket de Vries and Balazs also suggest that there is a high social cost in such an approach and that the anticipated gains do not necessarily materialise as (present and future) morale, trust and productivity waver. Thus, it is debatable that reducing significant amounts of labour during a recession will be of significant advantage as any recession bottoms-out and subsides.

Organisational Social Capital

A humanistic management approach (Cunningham, 2002), as opposed to a rationalistic approach, has the ability to build organisational social capital which this research highlights as being the most effective way to manage contingent labour. Such an approach may also build a sustainable organisation, as building social capital in non-recessionary times may be an organisations saviour during difficult times.

The concept of social capital is not new with Jane Jacobs being credited with first using the phrase in 1961 and Coleman (1988) later defining it as being the peoples' ability to associate with one another. Putman (1993, 1995), built on Coleman's definition with Fukuyama (1995) advancing this further to finally Requena (2003), presenting social capital as a 'multidimensional concept' with the variables of trust, social relations, commitment, communication and influence. These variables are no doubt important in any organisation – between employer and employee and between the organisation and its customers. While a hotel seeks these variables at all times, they are even more important in times of recession or seasonal variation, but a challenge to management given lean staffing levels and need for functional flexibility.

Potentially, reducing labour numbers is not something that any manager does lightly, but is potentially easier for the rationalistic manager than the humanistic manager; the former having fewer emotional ties to staff. Yet, it will be the latter that has a greater chance of maintaining standards with remaining staff during any recession, and re-securing displaced staff when the recession subsides.

METHODOLOGY

The research base related to this article was three 5-star internationally branded hotels in Auckland, New Zealand, and as such the methodological approach was Case Study (Yin, 1994). Within this overarching approach, Grounded Theory (Glaser, 1978) was used to develop a theoretical conclusion.

Identify those who managed the majority of a hotels contingent labour and challenges these managers might face, Theoretical Sampling (Glaser, 1978, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used seeing three hotel General and Human Resource and Managers interviewed. Analysis of their views suggested it was middle managers in the Food and Beverage and Rooms Division areas who manage on a daily basis most of the hotels employees, including significant amounts of contingent labour.

During the interviews with General and Human Resource Managers, they were also asked what they saw as challenges with managing contingent labour; factors which later become opening discussion areas with middle managers. As a result of this initial enquiry and as it typical when using grounded theory, a review of the literature associated with 'middle managers' was undertaken.

'Middle managers' were identified as supervisors or divisional managers within each of the hotel's Food and Beverage and Rooms areas. Invitations to participate in interviews were made to managers and supervisors of each hotel resulting in each manager being interviewed, along with three Rooms Division supervisors from two hotels and two from the third hotel, and two food and beverage supervisors from each hotel. Twenty interviews in all were completed.

Interviews lasted about one hour, were semi-structured around identified (by GM's and HRM's) areas of: managerial style, budgets, influential ability and service standards, operational success in terms of achieving organisational objectives and management of cultural aspects. In addition to these areas participants did con-

tributed their thoughts on areas relevant to the research. This inductive approach generated participant created concepts which later aided developing a theory of management.

Interviews were analysed via NVivo providing participants' individual constructs (codes) that also allowed analysis across all participants. Carney's (1990) Ladder of Analytical Abstraction was used to lift personal and collective constructs to themes in relation to the contingent workforce. The themes were: contingent labours is a dynamic workforce, contingent labour is standard in most hotels; systems and standards are extensively used, the negative image of hotel employment and its role in turnover; different managers approach the job in different ways; and managerial 'choice'.

The above themes were taken back to the participants in a second round of interviews to drill them deeper and confirm, or not, these findings to develop an overall theory. In summary of the latter interviews, humanism as a managerial genre was favoured over rationalism, and within the former, social capital development is a key component. That said, hotels are driven by rationalism and systems present managers with a conflict in choosing a preferred managerial style. Nevertheless, the main thread underlying participants' constructs is successful managers of contingent labour are those who develop organisational social capital resulting in what can be termed a 'respected' manager.

Findings and Discussion

The overarching research developed several themes about the management of contingent labour in hotels; however, this article focuses on the one theme considered most pertinent to managing hotel labour as the industry leads into, during, and out of recessionary times, that is, the development of organisational social capital. While this theme may not seem new and is indeed common-sense; common-sense is not common at the best of times, and potentially even less so in times of crisis! The following subsections and research participants' vignettes lead to the organisational social capital building theory.

Hotels need contingent labour but managing them is getting harder!

Contingent labour is a fact of life for any hotel as is reported in the literature, for example, Larson and Ong (1995), Morland and Wilson (1988), Choi et al (2000), Milner and Pinker (2001), Allan et al (2001), Nayar and Willinger (2001), Buultjens (2001), Cardon (2003), etc. It is also supported by participants in this research. The matter of functional and numeric flexibility that such a workforce allows for (as described by Kelliher, 2002) is not in question in this research. However, when linked to today's dynamic workforce in terms of gender, age, cultural, and attitude (Gen Y, Z), participants find managing the workforce, and in particular contingent labour, extremely challenging. For many participants, it is so challenging that it leads to 'burn-out' and often resignation, similar to previously reported job-related burnout by Cordes (1993) Vallen (1993), and Ledgerwood et al (1998). Without a doubt, a recession increases stress on all parties; contingent staff wanting to keep

jobs and middle managers who try to manage the situation themselves not wishing to be dis-engaged or resign as a result of the stress, but will do eventually do as the stress level increase. Resignations of such managers and supervisors is not good news for any hotel as they rely heavily on such managers and when they leave there is significant disruption to the social relations of those left behind, and thus organisational productivity and profitability.

While managing the general workforce is considered challenging, participants had no qualms with hard work, noted “A constant challenge in the hotel industry is being thrown more and more” , followed by “but I love my job”. However, managers were also concerned with the growing complexities of their job noted by one participant, “ ... you have no option but to keep a fairly large component of your staff on the casual side otherwise you would neve be able to equate between revenue and costs from a payroll perspective”. These points accepted, managing a challenging workforce can become too much to bear as demonstrated by the fact that within six months from the conclusion of this research one third of participants had resigned from the hotel industry. While these managers resigned within the recessionary period, it is questionable that these talented managers will re-join the hotel industry as factors leading to their resignation were not solely recession created.

Industry’s acknowledgment of a negative industry perception

Research participants acknowledge that being part of contingent labour, and often the hotel industry in general, is seen negative by the prospective workforce. Such a perception by the existing workforce has an immediate negative impact on the organisational social capital – trust, commitment, communication, social relations and influence. However, such comments are not new when we consider past literature, for example, by Ellis (1981), Dept of Education (1989), Barron & Maxwell (1993), Brien (2004).

Participants commented: “I think people are sick of shift work”, “It’s not the lifestyle that I (they) want long term”, link to Kets de Vries and Lalazs (1997) and McDonald’s and Makin’s (2000) view that the perceived ‘hire at will and fire at will’ nature of contingent labour breaks the psychological contract and damages social relations. As the hotel industry has such a transient workforce it is difficult for any manager to build a high organisational social working environment. Again, these linked concepts are not new, but as an industry, hotels have failed to find a way forward from this position, yet, emphasising the development of social capital may be one area that now needs serious consideration.

Naturally, using contingent labour works well in times of high unemployment. However, in times of low unemployment hotels struggle to find flexible staff. Therefore, as the recession subsides, potentially displaced staff may not remain loyal to the industry and seek careers elsewhere. While this may be true for any industry, hotels will struggle harder than other industries by the perceived approach to workforce recruitment, retention and the image that the industry has built for itself.

Perhaps history has taught hotels to be prepared for this in that they actively

use systems to aid the continual employee turnover; however, this in its-self may work negatively in terms of building organisational social capital.

‘Systems’ often get in the way of building social capital

Participants agreed that systems are needed to maintain standards, but often found that system inflexibility reduced their ability to build social capital. Systems were purely designed for achieving the hotels primary objective, maximisation of profit, with the least impact on resources, and not necessarily the more intangible aspects of employee social capital which can also engender profit but from a different approach.

Rationalistic managers like systems as it allows them to manage economically, that is, they follow the systems and query little – potentially holding the view that the systems are (always) right. Humanistic managers understand and use systems, but set out to add value to the operation by engaging human-relations. This latter approach, however, may not ‘fit’ into the hotels systems as exemplified by one participant who said: “If I feel strongly enough about it (a pay rise), I’ll fight for that person; I fight for that person if they have warranted it”. Was a fight really necessary and what did it do for overall human relations in the hotel? Humanistic managers often question systems – for the benefit of all, yet for this approach as often seen by Human Resource Managers as high maintenance compared to rationalistic managers.

Established systems are usually visible, measurable, operational processes. The variables of social capital, that is, trust, social relations, commitment, communication and influence, in general cannot be systemised or necessarily statistically measured; they take time to develop and can be messy. Social capital development is, therefore, left to those managers who want to engage it and its associated challenges, which takes additional time and energy. However, as we know, contingent employees are generally not long-term employees, thus there is little time to develop social capital, and so the challenge goes on. Social capital is, however, visible in the form of collegiality which can lead to increased productivity, enhanced organisational goals and profitability. Engaging in humanistic practices is stressful and can be one more reason for a manager to resign.

Develop, support and keep ‘respected’ middle managers

The culmination of management of contingent staff, the extensive use of systems, and negative industry image appears to force a manager to choose between two managerial styles - rationalistic or humanistic. To a point, rationalistic management is cleaner, simpler, well-defined – described by one participant as “I do my job, my eight hours and then I’m out the door”, or as one hotel Human Resource manager noted: “Rationalist managers are low maintenance in terms of needing support” and as a self-confessed rationalistic manager noted: “As a rationalistic manager you get noted and therefore promoted”. Humanistic management is perceived at the other end of the continuum and seen as messy and time consuming – something to be avoided when other (economic) challenges are pressing.

This research exposed an alternative management style, that of ‘the respected manager’. These managers are able to find a balance between rationalistic (systems focused) and humanistic management (developing social capital) modes, something similar to what Collins and Porras (1994) describes as the ‘Genius or the AND’ rather than the ‘Tyranny of the OR’, that is, it is not one way ‘or’ another, but a blend managerial approach. Such managers may well be able to bring together staff in challenging times such as a recession and maintain positive organisational social capital.

Such (respected) managers want the organisation to achieve its objectives, for example: “We want the hotel to succeed and it won’t succeed without us” and “Managers’ are very conscious of their payroll”, and were passionate about their jobs: “I’m proud of where I work”, “I’m hooked on the industry”. Respected managers actively develop organisational social capital as per: “My staff are very personal to me”, and “I don’t get out of bed in the morning to please the GM, I get out of bed to please the guests and staff”. Such actions are admirable and common sense, but why then do so many middle managers find this so challenging that they leave the hotel industry?

‘Respected’ managers are builders of trust, social relations, commitment, communication and influence that enables loyalty to be developed which may lead to increased productivity and profitability. Such managers are key to organisational success, yet are often ‘burnt-out’ with a continually changing workforce (perhaps due to the negative image becoming a reality on the job) and leave the hotel due the stress that this blended managerial paradigm places on them. Should a hotel loose this key employee they loose in several ways, that is, substantial tacit knowledge, reduced (remaining) employee productivity as their leader has changed, and an enhanced negative image of the industry. All this places the hotel in a difficult position in retaining and re-attracting staff contingent and full-time staff as the recession subsides.

Practical implications for the hotel and tourism industry

Any economic recession or seasonally active operation will potentially bring about the following: (1) Place middle managers under extreme pressure, potentially to the point of resigning as soon as the recession, or season subsides, and (2) cements in the minds of the prospective workforce that the hotel industry is highly subjective to any economic impact in which hotels react in a rationalistic fashion via a ‘hire and will and fire at will’ approach.

This article questions what hotels have learnt from past research and ‘hard-times’ as they work their way through the 2008/2009/2010 world recession, and into the future. Acknowledging the complexities that the area of human resource management brings to any organisation, this research and its imbedded literature suggests that hotel middle managers who are ‘respected’ managers, are key to surviving difficult economic times.

As the hotel and tourism industry move through this (and any future) economic recession, reducing the workforce will be necessary. However, serious consideration must be given to:

- (a) Learning from the lessons of the past.
- (b) Finding the balance between maintaining profitability now and ensuring sustainable profitability after a recession subsides. This is in terms of re-attracting suitably qualified/competent staff who will deliver productively; short-term pain for longer-term gain.
- (c) Supporting the engagement of a raft and blend of managerial styles to retain and re-gain employees (in particular the contingent workforce) so being in the best position as the recession subsides, and
- (d) Consider if the rationalistic approach, so strongly enforced in recessionary and non-recessionary times, is the most appropriate managerial style to use.

The decisions made by managers now will determine if the industry has a ready and willing workforce at hand as the recession subsides – one that is available due to the social capital that the organisation developed in previous and present times.

Research limitation and implications

This research was conducted in one country (New Zealand) and is therefore bias; however, this research is relevant to the hotel industry in any country or indeed any tourism organisation where contingent labour is used.

The research group consisted of three large international hotels who were part of chains and whose ownership was American and Singaporean. These hotels are based in New Zealand engaging an internationally diverse staff. Further research around the topic of middle managers managing contingent labour and social capital impacts in the service industry is needed in different countries, including developing countries, with different cultural bases and in independent hotels.

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