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Perspectives on Training for the Local Café Industry: How well does the Hospitality Training Provided by Institutional Providers Meet the Expectations of Local Café Stakeholders?

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Abstract

The researcher holds a hypothesis about tacit differences in motivation behind training for the hospitality industry in New Zealand. Trainees have long held that there are differences between the experience of training in a tertiary institute and the realities of the workplace. These perceptions prompted this study of the values placed upon formal institutional training among a sample of owners, managers, and supervisors in the local café sector. The local café sector is known for its vibrancy, informality and unregulated approach to hospitality. The sector is a proliferation of small businesses which operates in a competitive environment. This study explores the relationship between small locally operated cafes and formal training of the kind fostered by polytechnics and similar institutions.

The findings show there is little reliance on formal training or qualifications in the sector. There is a mixed attitude towards the hiring of staff members who have formal training. Some local café management views the qualifications and formal training with indifference. The main factor in employing new workers in the sector is 'experience' and in some cases, intrinsic qualities like 'personality' are important. This sector is largely made up of small business run by independent owner-operators. Competition in the sector is intense, and profit margins are small. Café employees are not generally well rewarded for their qualifications, and there is little in the workplace culture that may distract or inhibit the desire of workers to train formally. There is more evidence of formal institutional training and gaining of qualifications among cooking staff in cafes than front-of-house areas, signifying that cookery is an area of specialised skill and features more as a career choice. While the management of local cafes will sometimes seek to hire qualified staff, they accept the lack of them. Management of local cafes who have themselves in the past been trained in formal institutional programmes are more likely to see benefits in employing people who have undergone similar training.

This study concludes that formal institutional training is not a necessity in the local café sector, and that generally this sector views formal training to be of lesser relevance. As in most small businesses, cafes show that the need to survive commercially over-rides the propensity employers may have to improve the professional standing of their employees. Many employers will train employees on-the-job with the skills immediately necessary for the commercial well-being of their cafe. Local café managers have little energy or time to promote formal training programmes, and are content to accept that many of their employees will not be formally trained. The relationship between the content of traditional institutional training programmes and the skills required in the informal environment of the local café industry is somewhat incompatible.

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"The chargings to and fro in the narrow passages, the collisions, the yells, the struggling with crates and trays and blocks of ice, the heat, the darkness, the furious festering quarrels which there was no time to fight out—they pass description. Anyone coming into the basement [kitchen] for the first time would have thought himself in a den of maniacs."

George Orwell

This project has been reviewed and approved by Massey University Human Ethics Committee, WGTON protocol 04/26

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Preface:

- *'N' is the Head Chef and Kitchen Manager in one of Wellington's busiest pub cafés. He has a share in the business which is the reward for long service marked by being a loyal and hard-working employee. 'N' is a formally trained professional chef and tries to employ trained workers where possible. In his considerable time in this café, he has undertaken one apprenticeship for a trainee.*
- *'C' is the owner/proprietor in a small café in the inner city on the fringe of suburbia. He is the latest in a string of owners of a café that was once a front-runner in the Wellington scene. 'C' does not have a lot of experience in this type of small business, having managed this café for only 2 – 3 months. He believes that 'experience' is an important quality in new employees. He says they do not have time to train staff in his café.*
- *'G' is a Head Chef in a contemporary waterfront café not far from Wellington's central business district. The café he works in alters its character from offering café service during the day to restaurant service at night. The café tries to be different things for different types of people at various times during the day.*
- *'R' is the Kitchen Manager and Chef in a small ethnic¹ café in Wellington's busiest café area. It is difficult to find people specifically trained to work in the style of cookery that is implemented. 'R' relies on informal on-the-job training to induct new employees.*
- *'D' is the owner-proprietor of another contemporary café on the fringe of Wellington's main downtown café area. He finds that there are not many formally trained front-of-house staff members, but says that kitchen staff members usually have some formal training.*

¹ An 'ethnic' restaurant or café engages in the cuisine of the people from one particular nation, region, or religious culture, e.g. Indian, Japanese, Creole, Jewish, or Szechwan.

- *'P' is the owner-proprietor of a busy lunch café in a large downtown pedestrian plaza. He has been working as the front-of-house host for many years and his partner runs the kitchen. Neither of them is formally trained but they run a very successful business.*
- *'L' is a fully trained Head Chef in a popular suburban pub café. He worries about the part-time nature of many employees in his establishment and the stress that this factor places on the senior permanent staff.*

The experiences of these café owners, managers and supervisors are used in this research project to explore the value of formal training in the local café sector. The themes that are gleaned from the interviews of these people, together with a comprehensive review of the literature form the basis for the findings and recommendations of this research.

A number of themes arise. The salient ones are:

- The distinguishing characteristics of the local café sector and how these have an effect on the training culture of this sector.
- The learning principles that could apply in café training, and whether these principles are more aptly applied in the training institutions.
- The part that owners, managers and supervisors play in the training culture.
- Formal training is more likely to occur in some café-based vocations than in others.
- The usefulness of formal institutional training for the needs of this sector.
- The methods of training that are used for workers in the sector.

and

- Employment factors and working culture in the café sector that may affect the training culture.

1.1 Background

The hospitality industry, which includes the local café sector, is one of the most important and widespread industries in New Zealand, although this importance is often understated. In introducing this study it is necessary to emphasise the importance of the hospitality industry to New Zealand and to the Wellington area. Statistics reveal that the hospitality industry employs at least 60,000 people nationally and is the largest service retail sector in New Zealand. The café sector is a very vibrant part of the

hospitality industry in Wellington. As the dining habits of people have changed, the café sector has enjoyed an upsurge in patronage over the last two decades. There are currently about 240 local restaurants and bars, and about a third of these identify themselves as 'cafés'. The food in these cafes is perceived to be relatively inexpensive, yet good value for money. A significant number of these cafes are small businesses. These claims are supported in Chapter 2.2 of this report.

Having an understanding of the significant characteristics of the local café sector is necessary in order to grasp the nuances of this study. In particular, the role of formal training in this sector is of significant importance. Many industries have a code of practice that dictates whether a product or service is being executed to acceptable professional standards. Is the café sector bound by any such quality systems? The café sector seems to be an unregulated labour industry in the sense that workers do not need to be registered on the basis of proficiency in the way that say, electricians do. In fact, the workers are not required to be formally trained or have formal qualifications at all, in order to work in the industry. This study hopes to identify any effects that these industry characteristics have in the local café sector. Is there an incentive to become formally trained when there is no absolute requirement to do so? Is there a responsibility for the employer to facilitate worker training and how much resolve, if any, does the worker have to become a trained operative?

Hospitality is reputedly an industry that attracts workers from varied backgrounds and is regarded as an industry in which it is possible to gain employment easily. How much does the local café sector rely on part-time workers and casual workers? How is the value of formal training and qualifications affected by the presence of part-time workers and casual workers? What kinds of training are these people given, and how does the presence of trained or untrained workers affect the café industry? These are some of the important questions that this research will attempt find answers for. As there are numbers of unqualified workers in this dominant industry, this project also seeks to find what value formal training has within the local café sector.

There is also a perception that a 'café' is different from a 'restaurant'. The research explores the differences and draws conclusions as to how these differences affect formal training regimes. It is hoped that important insights will emerge to indicate any disparity in training values between the two entities. A café, for the purpose of this study, is a small, (30-80 seats) unpretentious commercial hospitality business which serves food and beverages to the public to consume on the premises.

Some of the jobs within the hospitality industry, particularly that of chef², maitre'd³, and sommelier⁴ are regarded by those who engage in them, as being creative jobs in which a high level of skills is exercised by dedicated crafts people. This research will endeavour to discover if this is a context which exists mainly in the 'fine-dining' restaurant scene, or also in cafes. The fine dining scene, where customers expect to pay a premium price for top class food, served with particular attention in a salubrious setting, caters for a minority market. The skills required to function effectively at the fine dining level can be sophisticated and formal and much training is required. Cafés can also have good quality cuisine and service, although perhaps not in such a traditional way. It would be interesting to discover if restaurant attitudes also permeate into the café scene. There is a variety of other types of catering in industrial and institutional settings, which are more utilitarian in nature and have fewer requirements for higher level skills and therefore less emphasis on formal training. Does this variation of standards indicate that different types of training are appropriate for different sectors of the industry? It is expected that a study of the relationship of these different branches of the local hospitality industry will reveal to the researcher the training values of each, and by comparison will give forth reasons for any distinctiveness in the value of training in the local café sector.

What then is the nature of café culture? Many countries have a functional indigenous cuisine that is based on local ingredients, geography, climate and culture. These local cuisine styles contribute greatly to 'street food' or the patchwork of informal eateries at which the local population of that country dines. In many countries, it is part of the social culture to frequent such places regularly. Historically New Zealand had little café culture of this type, but it is developing. Wellington has encouraged a wide variety of cafes featuring food from other countries and allowing diners to experience international cuisine styles. There has also developed a throng of informal eateries which provide good coffee, alcohol and good quality food which experiments with local and imported ingredients. Is one training regime suitable for these different styles of dining establishments? How would a trainee who works in a Turkish restaurant or perhaps a small café serving bistro meals fare in the typical traditional institutional training environment which is more suited to turning out fine-dining chefs?

² A chef is a professional cook, trained to a high standard. The term is also used as an abbreviation for the chef de cuisine or head chef.

³ Maitre'd is an abbreviation for Maitre d'hotis. This person is the head waiter.

⁴ Sommelier is the wine waiter

Much of the content and methods of current hospitality training in New Zealand emanates from training systems that were in use in the days when hotels, traditional fine-dining restaurants, polytechnics and the armed services were the prevalent sources of hospitality training. The world of café catering is generally casual in comparison with the constraints and discipline of the traditional hospitality industry. Cafés try to provide simple, nutritious natural products that are usually good value for money. How well do traditional hospitality values fit with this notion?

A turning point in the hospitality industry was reached as a consequence of the stock market crash in October 1987, an event that punctuated the end of an economic boom in this country. Traditional restaurants suffered fall-off in trade and some were forced to close (New Zealand History Online, 2005). In this time of dramatic economic downturn the urban restaurant trade was forced to reflect on its purpose and intent in the commercial marketplace. This gave rise to the development of contemporary cafes; a new genre of eating houses that better suited the changing economic conditions of the time. How well has the training regime adapted to the changing face of local catering? The establishment of this genre as a major contributor to the hospitality industry was further enhanced by the deregulation of the liquor industry by the introduction of the Sale of Liquor Act 1989. The advent of liberated liquor licensing meant that alcoholic beverages could be sold more easily in restaurants, and people were changing their social habits. Hill, L., and Stewart, L (1996) write: "This change was attributed to consumer choice in a more open and competitive market, as well as to the legislative requirement to provide food."

Many restaurants and cafes could now supplement food-related income with that from alcohol sales thus becoming more viable as businesses. In a growing marketplace these factors would assist the continued viability of many cafés and was to entice new operators into the industry.

Social changes have also played their part in the development of the local café sector. New Zealand society has undergone many changes in the last few decades. Changing lifestyles in society have assisted the rise of the café industry. With both adults in the family often working, there is less inclination to cook meals at home than there once was. Increased leisure time and more expendable income has allowed for more time to indulge in the pleasures of life, including dining-out. The effects of increased tourism from abroad, immigration, globalisation, and New Zealanders travelling overseas have brought with them cosmopolitan influences in cuisine styles (New Zealand History

Online, 2005). Among the many new influences is the introduction of superior coffee from freshly-roasted beans which the citizens of Wellington have learned to consume with a passion and is a cornerstone of café culture.

1.2 The Researcher

1.2.1 Professional Background

In this introduction it is relevant for the researcher to share his professional background in order to establish his interests in the area of hospitality training for the local café industry. The views of the researcher are interwoven through the observations and discussions of the research project. He was until recently an educator engaged in the training of catering students at Massey University, Wellington. He held this position for eleven years, firstly in the employment of Wellington Polytechnic and subsequently with Massey University when the two institutes 'merged' in 2001. Prior to this, he has approximately seventeen years experience as a chef, working in industry. He has worked abroad for several years, but much of his industry experience was gained locally in cafés, restaurants and hotels in which he held a variety of positions, many in managerial roles. Currently, the researcher is engaged as Head Teacher of TAFE Hospitality and Tourism Management at the New Zealand International Campus in Upper Hutt, a position he has held for one year. In all, he is well positioned to reasonably debate the aspects of this study. The training and formal learning he undertook to gain qualifications as a professional chef were completed in Wellington in the early 1980s but like many people, he has never stopped learning and studying. He currently maintains associations with significant personnel in the industry and he is actively involved in a couple of professional organisations related to the hospitality industry. An aspect of this research that he relishes is the opportunity to meet and communicate with industry people.

1.2.2 Research Motivation

Another question that propels this work is how well the type of catering training provided by local training providers meets the needs of the local café industry. While professional cookery is a long-held passion for him, the researcher's interest in this instance is principally educational in nature. In his commitment to hospitality training, he has for some time held a perception that there exists a difference in purpose between the technical environment of training institutions and that of the industry that makes use of the 'products' of the training. This hypothesis provides some motivation for engaging in this study. The researcher's opinions in this regard are based on

personal experiences and an assortment of anecdotal evidence which suggests that there are some differences in the intentions of training institutes and the requirements of the café industry. A part of the task is to undertake a study which will assist to justify this hypothesis. In acknowledgement of this perception, it has always been important to him, as an educator, to sustain meaningful connections with industry people in an attempt to diminish any feeling of seclusion of institutional training.

To emphasise the perception of differences between the two environments, industry practice outside the training institute is sometimes called the 'real world' by trainers and trainees alike. The use of the phrase 'real world' in this context, whether irreverent or not, implicitly suggests that the modus operandi of the two environments are different from each other, with the inference that the industrial environment is the valid example of the use of skills imparted. The researcher has some sympathy with this notion of validity as it is the industry that receives and utilises the products of the training, and so industry forces are the best placed to judge the value of the training. It seems natural that the proper context for the practice of the skills is in the industry. The café industry is a highly competitive industry that must respond to the realities of the marketplace for commercial survival and surely this is the best environment to discover the relevance of formal institutional training. Training requirements for the café industry are surely forged by the commercial expediencies that form an integral part of the industry. Cafés are typically small business operations which appear to operate in an ad hoc fashion, as needs dictate. The commercial forces that cause an industry to develop should also cause the training requirements for that industry to evolve. If there is a methodological disparity between the way skills are learned while training in institutes and the way skills are practised in the café industry, then how prepared is the trainee for the reality of the workplace and how valid is the institutional training? Is the training institute the best scenario for vocational skills training? If there is doubt about this, are there any improvements required that would make institution-based training a more viable proposition for the trainee and ultimately for the industry that will utilise the skills? What should these improvements be?

The researcher's interest in undertaking this study has been spurred by a variety of factors. He believes the traditional nature of much institutional training is, in part, an impediment to the development of contemporary relevant training for the café sector. The researcher also has a belief that many training institutes have an ethos more interested in filling training programmes with students rather than educational integrity. He wonders how much the offering of international standards of skills at high levels is

warranted given that the trainee has aspirations to work in the less formal local café environment. In a recent study (Lutter, F.W., 2001, p43) the researcher interviewed several ex-students of Massey University regarding their industry experiences. The responses he received varied in their point of view but one common sentiment that prevailed was a disparity of the experience between the training institutes and the reality of the café industry. This important revelation has further fuelled the researcher's interest for researching this topic.

1.3 Research Questions

The aim of this research project is to find out:

- 1 Whether café sector staff is formally trained.
- 2 What form does training take in the sector?
- 3 What is the value placed upon training in the café sector?
- 4 How does formal institutional training serve the sector?
- 5 How does working culture influence the training?
- 6 What skills do people gain in the café sector?

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is organised into the following chapters:

Chapter 1: The Introduction

Chapter 2: The Literature Review

This is made up of two parts,

1. The first part is an extensive search of hard and soft literature sources. 'Hard' and 'soft' are the terms adopted by the researcher for refereed and non-refereed data sources respectively. The key themes that are explored were those listed on page 2 of this chapter. Each theme provides a section in the chapter. The main questions (1-6, previously in this chapter) emanated from the literature research. In conducting the literature review the researcher had fears that it would not be singled out for study very often, given that the café sector is distinguished by its informality and improvisation. It was resolved to delve into unanticipated sources to extract information, and some of it will come from unexpected sources.

2. The second part of the literature review was a survey of thesis material that had been previously done by others on similar themes. It turns out that very little was discovered, especially local studies of training in the café sector.

Chapter 3: The Methodology

The methodology begins with a discussion on the nature of qualitative analysis and its value in the case of this research. The use of interpretive and constructivist epistemology is described in relation to current educational theory and its relevance in the context of this research is shown. The method of sampling is described and the reasons for selecting this method are discussed. Interview techniques that will be used with the industry based participants are discussed and described. The important issues of ethics, privacy and anonymity regarding the rights of the participants and the safety of the research material are emphasised and the role of Massey University in these processes is described. The rationale for the method of data analysis is described and finally, any perceived shortcomings in the methodology choices are extrapolated upon.

Chapter 4: Findings and Results

This chapter is developed using excerpts from the transcribed interviews with the local café sector managers, owners and supervisors. The findings are structured in the main themes developed and supported by the literature review.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Interpretation.

The key ideas which were expressed by the participants are discussed and important understandings formed on the relationship between formal training and the local café sector.

Chapter 6: Summary

The concluding section discusses the possible implications that the research may have on the local café sector and may also speculate how the tertiary educational institutes may gain some use from the outcomes. The limitations of this research are discussed. Ideas for future research projects emanating from this study are suggested.