Perceptions of employers on the employability of hospitality graduates in Gauteng Province, South Africa

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Abstract

The hospitality industry is a service industry; therefore, the role of personal service by employees is irreplaceable. There are frequent and intense face-to-face interactions or encounters between the service providers and customers. It is therefore important to have the right employees with the necessary skills and competence. The ability of graduates to develop proactively, adapt and repackage their capabilities is an essential aspect of employability. The study on which this article reports, investigated hospitality employers' perspective of the skills, attributes or qualities they deem necessary to make a graduate employable.

Employers of hospitality graduates represent the diverse stakeholders in the industry such as for example private enterprises (hotels, guest houses, lodges, restaurants) and public organisations (hospitals, correctional services, schools and the military). Therefore, a qualitative research design was deployed with semi-structured interviews to get in-depth data about their views on the subject matter. Data analysis was done with the use of a QDA software programme, ATLAS.ti. The interviews were transcribed and coded. Different themes emerged from the coded interviews and the themes were presented in the form of a network diagram. The findings about aspects that are essential are discussed.

Keywords: Attributes, competence, employability, service, skills.

Introduction

The tourism and hospitality industry is an important contributor to the global and local economy and a significant generator of jobs. According to a global economic impact analysis commissioned by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), the industry employed 292 million people and contributed 10.2% of the global gross domestic product (GDP) in 2016 and is forecasted to increase to 245 million jobs by 2027. It was also reported that in 2016, the total gross domestic product (GDP) contribution of the tourism and hospitality industry to the South African economy was R402.2 billion or 9.3% (WTTC, 2017).

The role of personal service by employees is irreplaceable, taking into account that the hospitality industry is at its core a service sector, a people's business (Zehrer & Mossenlechner, 2009). There are frequent and intense face-to-face interactions or encounters between the service providers and

customers. It is therefore important to have the right employees possessing the necessary skills and competences (Wan, Wong & Kong, 2014; Rathore, 2017).

Employability is defined as a set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes that a graduate needs to be more likely to gain employment and be successful in his or her chosen occupation and career, which benefits oneself, the workforce, and also the community and economy (Artess, Mellors-Bourne & Hooley, 2017; Yorke & Knight, 2006). Employability is also about the capacity of a graduate to function in a job and be able to move between jobs and remain employable throughout their working lives (Knight & Yorke, 2004). Employees in South Africa normally retire between the ages of 60 to 65.

Involving employers in the education experience of students could help the learner to learn how to apply theory and knowledge in useful and practical ways in the workplace. According to Knight and Yorke (2003), employers are most likely to target universities where they have successfully recruited in the past because of the skills and attributes relevant to their needs which students from such institutions tend to exhibit in the workplace.

Literature review

The survival of an organisation is of the greatest importance for any employer. Acquiring and maintaining a competitive advantage over others will ensure a company success. Acquiring and maintaining a competitive advantage however, requires the employer to have the ability to obtain an adequate pool of employable individuals who are competent and who possess the right skill sets and motivations (Van Emmerik, Schreurs, De Cuyper, Jawahar & Peeters, 2012). Employees who have positive attitudes toward the industry and their jobs are more likely to provide good service and performance that are of a superior quality resulting in greater satisfaction and needed loyalty from the customers who would be more likely to return. Therefore, hospitality graduates play a key role in the ability of the hospitality organisation to gain a competitive edge and strategic advantage (Jauhari, 2013; Wan, Wong & Kong, 2014).

However, one of the difficulties experienced by hospitality graduates is that employers complain that the educational sphere does not meet the demands of the industry satisfactorily, by delivering hospitality graduates who generally lack the required skills sets (Bok, 2006).

In a study by Pool and Sewell (2007), the generic employable skills provided by the Pedagogy for Employability Group, which employers expect to have been developed in graduates, are listed below:

- imagination and creativity
- adaptability and flexibility
- willingness to learn
- independent working and autonomy
- working in a team
- ability to manage others
- ability to work under pressure
- good oral communication
- communication in writing
- numeracy
- attention to detail
- time management
- assumption of responsibility and for making decisions

- planning, coordinating and organising ability
- ability to use new technologies.

In support of the above-mentioned skills expected by employers are the top five skills and qualities, which include attitude, subject matter expertise, people skills, communication and professional behaviour (Jacobs, 2015).

Previous research on interactive services in the hospitality and tourism industry has mainly concentrated on the soft skills having been considered more important than the hard technical skills. The soft skills are often focused on the aspects of social and interpersonal skills, meaning that a display of responsiveness and being courteous and understanding with customers are what employers are expecting from employees (Wesley, Jackson & Lee, 2017). The provision of quality service is of utmost importance, especially to employees experience direct and frequent contact with the hospitality customer, However service staff cannot deliver quality service if back of house staff are not able and committed to work to excellent service quality standards. The ability to look good and sound right cannot be ignored (Nickson, Warhurst & Dutton, 2005)..

South Africa employers' perception of employability

Good customer service from the employees is what an employer aims for in order to ensure a competitive advantage and higher profits (Rahimi & Kozak, 2017). Quality customer service is about customising a service that is based on the interaction between the service provider and the customer. Variability and the quality of service are dependent on the service provider matching the available service with the customers' personal needs and desires. In the hospitality industry, the customer is the co-producer as well as the judge of the service. Not only is the final product judged, but the whole process of receiving the service, is also judged from beginning to end (Wongchai, 2003). For employers to ensure quality service, special provider's competencies will be absolutely necessary.

According to the responses to a survey that was conducted in Bloemfontein, South Africa, the ability to deal effectively with customers was the most important skill required by the industry, followed by maintaining standards, a positive attitude, adaptability, flexibility and being service-orientated. The industry is after all extremely people-orientated and labour-intensive (Kort & Strydom, 2014).

From an employer's perspective, graduates are viewed as new entrants with a national diploma or degree, but lacking the required soft skills and experience to work effectively in the workplace. Employers therefore pay less and train the graduates according to what the workplace needs and demands (Oluwajodu, Blaaw, Greyling, Kleynhans, 2015). Another study done by Mashiyi (2015) revealed that the perspective of employers of South African graduates comprises the following:

- Employers value the conceptual foundation, knowledge and intellectual approach to tasks provided by higher education.
- There is a need to address the gaps between higher education outcomes and employer expectations.
- Sustaining the reality of how higher education can be expected to bridge the gap and the role that employers play in providing on-the-job training and development.

Employable graduates

South African learners entering higher education, especially those from public schools, tend to lack fundamental skills, such as reading, writing, numeracy and communication skills. Key priorities in which hospitality education institutions should invest for the future, are state-of-the-art curricula, empowering people and developing relevant competencies (Liu, 2013).

Interns and trainees are essentially the next generation of leaders, and they must therefore be treated as strategic resources.

To build up employable graduates and develop a professional environment, the curriculum has to be refined. Higher education institutions need to develop teaching methods that are highly innovative, and the industry must be involved in mentorship, consistency of codes of conduct between higher education institutions and the industry needs to be maintained, and minimum wage rules and regulations for interns must be put in place (Jauhari, 2013).

Practices in a few areas in the industry, such as empowerment, tailor-made internship experiences, work-based respect, and good compensation by way of time or salaries can and should evolve. On the part of the industry, the key role is that of shaping the talent that they need and really engaging the interns positively.

Building a relationship with academia is vitally important. Factors like a good internship stipend, regulated work hours, being given real-life work projects and good personnel practices could greatly influence the attitude of students towards the hospitality industry. A champion nominated by industry for academic engagement and liaison would be good for the management of the relationship (Jauhari, 2013).

Methodology

The research problem or issue the researcher wished to address, was what the selection of the research approach was based on, which was phenomenology. A phenomenological approach analyses human events, as they are experienced in real-life situations (Yin, 2010). A similar approach was followed in a study by Vasquez to acquire the lived experiences of the participants (Vasquez, 2014).

Qualitative research is a way to study the social interactions of humans in naturally occurring situations. The researcher plays a critical role in the process by gathering data and making sense of or interpreting the phenomena that are observed and revealed (Babbie & Mouton, 2001).

Research design

A qualitative research approach was followed for the purpose of this study, since this method is more suitable for finding out 'why' rather than 'how many' or 'how much' (Fylan, 2005). Hospitality employers were used as a sample, comprising 16 employers as managers and supervisors. Data was collected after obtaining the necessary ethical clearance, by means of interviews, since a questionnaire would have been too rigid and limiting to achieve the goals of this study. The researcher was trying to get as much information from the participants as possible, even new information or ideas, which the researcher might not have considered before.

Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain in-depth data from the participants, and data was collected until saturation was reached. For validity and reliability, the researcher used triangulation and member checks. A software program called ATLAS.ti was used to assist the researcher in recording and saving the coding of the transcribed interviews (Petrova, 2014). The codes from the data analyses were interpreted by the researcher and themes of the study were identified.

Measurement Instrument

The instrument used to collect data was an interview schedule where the researcher had a list of 12 questions asked during a face to face with the participant for an interview. The interview is one of the most powerful and popular tools to collect data for qualitative research because the researcher is able to access people's perceptions, meanings and understanding of others' situations (Punch, 2005). The researcher tried to get as much information as possible from the participants without sidetracking or losing focus of the ultimate goal, which was to develop themes and patterns that were used to develop meaningful data. A list of questions was formulated with guidance from the literature study and experts in the field.

Data collection

The researcher began by approaching fellow graduates as well as employers from the participating two, three star, hotel establishments in Gauteng at which she had previously been employed. Being familiar with the researcher made it easier for the participants to agree to become part of the study. At the end of every interview the researcher asked the participant for referrals, and in that way the researcher was able to acquire more contacts for potential participants to be part of the study. The researcher made telephone calls to the participants' places of employment to request interview meetings and set up appointments while others were contacted directly on their mobile phones as they were acquired by referrals.

Trustworthiness

According to Babbie and Mouton (2001:275) the ways towards enhancing validity and reliability which is called trustworthiness in a qualitative study, include inter alia triangulation, peer reviewing, writing extensive note taking, member checking and audit trials. For the purpose of this study the researcher used triangulation and member checks. Triangulation is one of the best methods for enhancing credibility an dependability in qualitative research. It is also known as the use of multiple methods, and it eliminates the biases that stem from the use of a single methodology.

Member checking takes place when the researcher takes the transcribed interviews back to the participants to check whether what is written is what they have truly said. Through this method additional volunteer information can be obtained. Member checks was done by the researcher by way of calling and emailing the participants and requesting that they read through the transcribed interviews.

Data analysis

Data analysis essentially means breaking down the data into meaningful manageable themes, patterns, trends and relationships. This type of analysis is called thematic data analysis. The aim of data analysis is for the researcher to recognise the relationships between the variables, interpret the observations or data, and account for the trends and patterns in the data. The process involves splitting, coding and organising themes and trends, representing the data and interpreting the data.

Splitting encourages careful scrutiny when coding (Creswell, 2009; Mouton, 2001). After the researcher had transcribed the data into written text, a coding scheme and categories were developed from literature and contributions were drawn from the coded text. A computer software program ATLAS.ti was used to support the analysis of the data. This program enables the

researcher to organise text, graphic, audio and visual data files as well as coding memos and findings (Creswell, 2009).

ATLAS.ti is qualitative data analysis (QDA) software developed by scientific software development specialists. It is a useful tool for data analysis in qualitative research. The acronym ATLAS means Archiv für Technik, Lebenswelt und Alltagssprache (Archive for Technology, the Life World and Everyday Language). The 'ti' stands for: text interpretation (Evers & Silver, 2014).

The program is user-friendly and enables the researcher to assign codes to a number of different texts and types of media, including images, videos and audio. Before the increased use of the QDA software, the researcher had to highlight segments of text and write notes in the margins of the pages. The key ideas were then arranged and connections drawn among them. This process was extremely time-consuming. Although ATLAS.ti does not analyse the data for the researcher, it does facilitate the process (Friese, 2014). Out of the 16 interviews from the managers' perspectives 94 codes emerged, which were reduced to 18 core codes (Figure 1).

The employers' perceptions network diagram (Figure 1) was developed by the researcher to demonstrate the themes that emerged.
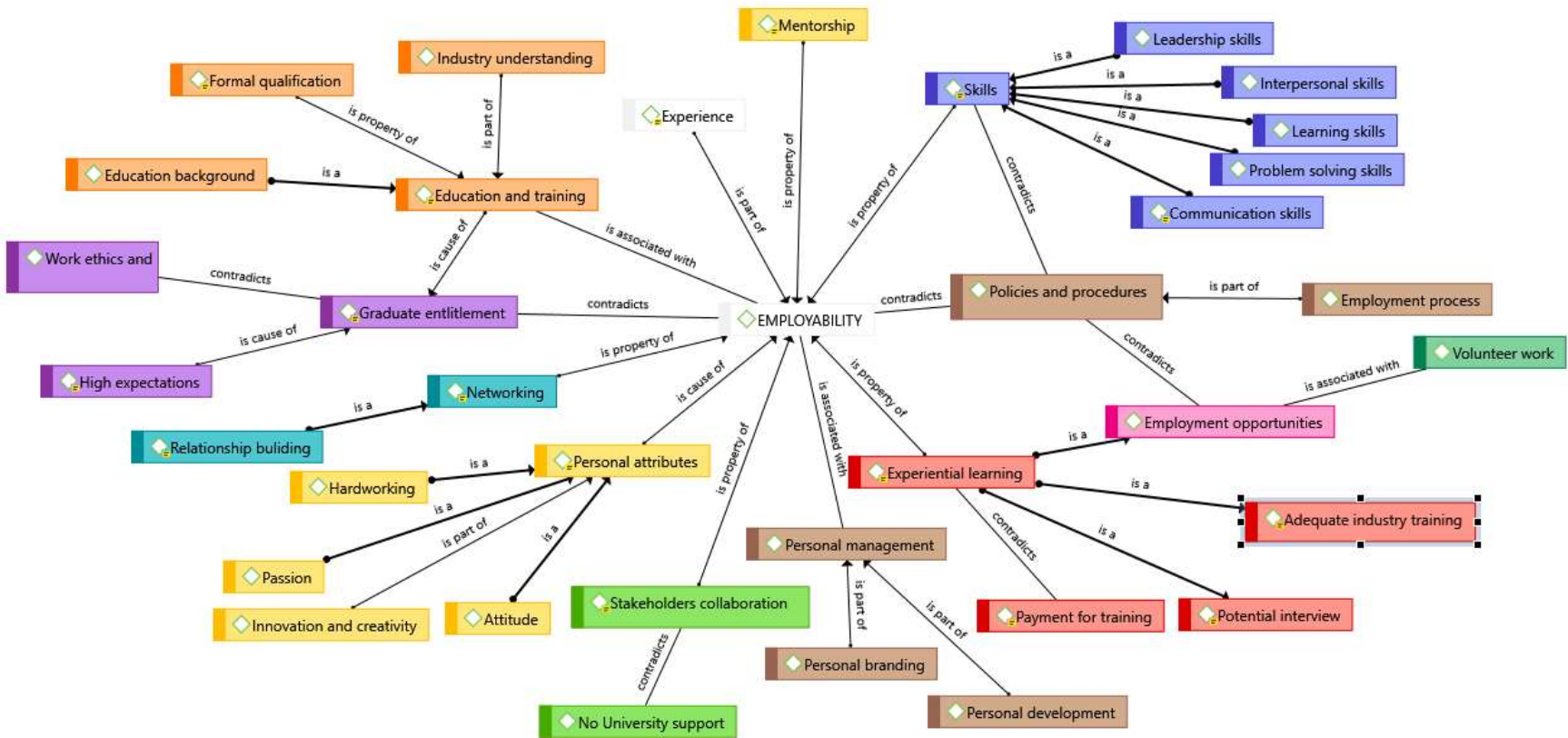
Figure 1. Employers' perceptions network diagram   Source: Author's own

Hospitality employees' perceptions

Experience commonly came up as a very important factor for someone who is looking for employment in the hospitality industry. Some of the participants with qualifications in the industry also mentioned that they had difficulty finding employment after graduating. Of the eleven that had qualifications, six gained employment immediately, while five first started working without payment in order to get employment. The remaining five stated that they had never studied hospitality management and only relied on past experience in the industry. From the participants with qualifications, two were unemployed for a period of a year after graduation and they eventually managed to get employment because they were initially willing to work without payment.

Unsurprising problem solving was the skill mentioned most often, followed by communication skills, time management or planning skills, leadership skills and learning skills.

Interviewed employers were of the perception that attitude is an important quality. Employers were willing to employ someone with a positive attitude over one with skills. Passion, integrity, hard work, confidence, being self-driven, innovative and open-minded are also important qualities for a successful career in the industry.

A lack of experience also came up for which in this case, employers felt that graduates could start by volunteering and impress the employers. Others mentioned the importance of self-management, the ability to market oneself which is something that graduates lack, because of the belief that their qualifications speak for them; therefore they are not prepared to start at the bottom. Graduates also lack the understanding of the importance of Work-integrated Learning (WIL) and how it can be a big determinant of whether or not they get employment at the end of their period of training.

There is a need for tertiary institutions (universities and universities of technology) to be stricter than what they currently are with the entry requirements for the various hotel and hospitality management courses, encouraging students to do volunteer work and sketching a realistic picture of what students can expect in the industry.

While qualifications may count as an advantage for a graduate, attitude or emotional intelligence is a great determinant of whether or not the employer extends the employee's contract at the end of his or her WIL programme. Employers also consider factors like whether or not a graduate was willing to work extra hours, go the extra mile during his or her period of training and whether or not the graduate have the passion to grow and build a career in the industry.

Findings

University industry collaboration

In this theme, managers and graduates agreed that industry and universities need to work together and build relationships. There is a need for thorough and effective communication between all stakeholders. Universities need to have someone committed to the students while they are out in the industry, someone with whom the students and employers could raise their concerns or to whom they could give feedback. Managers felt that, at the time of this research, there was not enough contact and support from the university side.

> Sit down with me and find out how the trainee is doing and after that sit down with the trainee and go through what they have learned and what they have covered (restaurant manager – male).

Personal attributes

Managers felt that most students have low self-confidence, they avoid responsibility, and they avoid speaking to guests. The low self-confidence is most likely a result of a lack of experience in the industry. Attitude, hardworking and passion are some of the attributes that were mentioned often by both groups as key attributes for a graduate to possess for successful careers in the industry. A positive attitude is most important for employers because of the quality of service that comes with it.

> No life […] no they have to be driven, self-motivated, self-discipline is very important […] it takes a special type of person to work and stay in the hospitality industry, hard workers definitely, and out of the box thinkers (restaurant manager – female).

Employment

Two factors that make finding employment difficult were that there are more graduates than the industry can absorb, and the graduates' lack the needed experience.

Experience

Employers are looking for experienced people to employ. An interesting point that was raised by a few managers was that students need to begin doing volunteer work while they are still studying during recess at university or even during school holidays while still at school. This is one of the ways to gain experience and impress a potential employer. Furthermore, in the case where graduates have to look for employment after completion of their training, they may go to a hotel, and ask to volunteer so that the employer can see their determination and hard work. Eventually they might be offered a job. Volunteering also makes a résumé look good as it gives the employer a sense of the kind of person with whom they will be working in future, should they employ the person.

> It's quite tough in the hospitality industry because it requires a lot of experience (restaurant manager – male)

Work-integrated learning

Managers feel that the students are not mentally prepared for the industry. They do not take their industry training seriously enough and end up being kicked out and not completing their experiential learning. The most common infringements work-integrated students commit, are being late for work or staying away from work without informing the manager. The six months of experiential learning is a 'practical interview', which, according to the managers, is a platform for students to impress the employers so that the students may be offered employment opportunities.

Education and training

An interesting point that was raised by one of the managers was that hospitality management admission point scores are too low and therefore not usually the students' first choice when choosing a course. Some students only get into hospitality when they fail to get into their preferred course. This is one of the factors contributing to the lack of passion that they see in graduates.

> The entry, they need to toughen the entry requirements. Don't make the hotel industry to be the garbage where if somebody is not taken for engineering, they are there (restaurant manager – male).

Although not all employers are in possession of a hospitality qualification, all of them are of the perception that having qualifications is to some extent advantageous for graduates, but they still have to start at entry-level positions and build their way towards managerial positions.

Skills

Managers were not greatly concerned about the hard skills. They were of the opinion that graduates lack various requirements such as the ability to solve problems, communication skills, attitude, time management, leadership skills, people skills and communication skills. Graduates need more work on their emotional intelligence.

> Work on the 80/20 rule. 80% is the attitude, 20% is the aptitude. So, you can be sitting with the degrees as long as your arm, but if you don't have the attitude, you will probably get stuck at entry-level position and remain there because you do need the correct attitude (general manager – male).

Entitlement

Graduates felt that having qualifications should come with added benefits for them. They felt that with the qualifications they possessed they should have managerial or supervisory positions as soon as they graduate. They did not want to have entry-level jobs. Managers expressed that graduates have expectations which are too high that need to be managed at university level.

> A lot of GMs [general managers] or directors … they can tell you now, that they all started in scullery, washing dishes. Some of them had degrees, some had diplomas at the time, but then they had to start somewhere and that's where they had to build (assistant general manager – male).

Personal branding and development

According to managers, graduates should always find out what is happening around them and what the latest trends are, and they should constantly be investing in themselves. Volunteering is a way of acquiring work experience, self-development and branding.

University commitment

This theme is about universities making sure that students receive support, training and education of a high quality. One of the managers expressed his dissatisfaction with the level of commitment from a university. There should be follow-up on student progress from the side of the universities. These themes were supported in similar studies (Sadik, 2017;Moolman,2017:39).

Conclusion

Employers deem soft skills as being most important because hard skills can always be acquired by training, but soft skills mostly come naturally. Soft skills are necessary, because the hospitality industry is to a large degree people and service-orientated. To be successful in this field, one needs to have the right qualities and abilities that will result in customer satisfaction and loyalty as this is what makes for a sustainable business.

It is the graduates' lack of experience, lack of passion, negative attitudes, lack of self-management, lack of learning skills and the inability to market them as a brand that makes them less employable than they would like to be. Another contributing factor to the lack of graduate employment is the problem of students holding attitudes, beliefs and expectations that they deserve success without earning it. Employers are looking for individuals with the desire to develop themselves and grow within the company. That kind of individual is an asset to any employer.

Limitations

In this study, findings were based on the perceptions of employers in Gauteng and therefore cannot be generalised to other parts of the country. Findings can also not be generalised because they are based on a small groups of participants' personal experiences and thus highly subjective.

Recommendations

Employers need to make their expectations from graduates as new work entrants from tertiary institutions, clear from the outset. This information can be used to further investigate what is important for hospitality students, graduates and employers in order to improve employability and the workforce.

Educating students regarding realistic expectations for employment, especially at the entry level, and providing them with job previews, may be a way that might help bridge the career expectations and entitlement beliefs gap. This can be done by way of clear communication of what employer and employee obligations are, realistic salaries, accurate job descriptions, including duties and responsibilities. The best providers of this information would be employers or alumni who return to the universities to share knowledge about their experiences.

Building a high tolerance level is an important trait to instil in oneself because of the fast-paced hostile environment, which graduates might encounter in the industry in their efforts to satisfy guests' demands. For example in the hospitality industry graduates might face unexpected staff shortages due to strikes by taxi or catering related unions.

Hospitality graduates need to enter the industry with an accurate understanding of the industry. More time needs to be allocated for work-integrated learning so that students can get an adequate understanding of the different departments expectations and duties. Building relationships and collaboration between tertiary institutions and employers, and assigning mentors both from industry and tertiary institutions is critical. Students need to be met with realistic expectations at the tertiary level so that they can have a clear understanding of the industry and the future prospects. It is important that Entrepreneurship be added as a subject or module in hospitality curricula so that students are empowered to be future employers as opposed to being dependent on employers for jobs. Very important is the ability to mask one's emotions by wearing a smile, as the service face, regardless of what upsets one or which unpleasant emotions one may truly be feeling. Ultimately organisational success and sustainability depends on the continual support from customers. Customers select hospitality establishments based on their expectations or experiences of quality. If a customer's expectations are met he/she experience quality service and will probably re-patronise the establishment. Well trained employees will contribute towards meeting quality expectations and ensuring quality experiences.

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