

On: 30 September 2014, At: 17:19

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Anatolia: An International Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Research

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rana20>

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Published online: 05 Sep 2013.

To cite this article: Rozila Ahmad & Noel Scott (2014) Managing the front office department: staffing issues in Malaysian hotels, *Anatolia: An International Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 25:1, 24-38, DOI: [10.1080/13032917.2013.822010](https://doi.org/10.1080/13032917.2013.822010)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13032917.2013.822010>

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Managing the front office department: staffing issues in Malaysian hotels

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(Received 3 April 2012; final version received 1 July 2013)

This study examined hotel staffing issues with a focus on the front office department. Although there are numerous studies reporting high employee turnover in the hospitality industry, few have examined issues that contribute to this turnover or broader related staffing issues. To address this gap, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 front office managers from hotels with various levels of service in the northern region of Malaysia. Results identified a number of poorly studied issues that contribute to staff turnover. The findings indicate that hotel staff turnover and the consequences for hotel performance are due to a complex series of causal factors. Results may be used by hotel managers in addressing their staffing issues and in improving performance.

Keywords: hotel turnover; causal factors; front office; human resource management; Malaysia

Introduction

The importance of human resource management for service quality, customer satisfaction and loyalty, competitive advantage, and organizational performance is highlighted in many theories, models, and empirical studies (Dimitrov, 2012; Hayes & Ninemeier, 2008; Kusluvan, Kusluvan, Ilhan, & Buyruk, 2010; Solnet & Kandampully, 2008). Human resource management policies and practices directly influence employee knowledge, skills, abilities, attitude, and behaviour which are crucial for firm-specific advantage (Ahmad, Solnet, & Scott, 2010; Kusluvan et al., 2010). Human resource practices such as training and career development seek to motivate, satisfy, and retain employees (Whitener, 2001) and hence to result in satisfied and loyal customers (Koys, 2001; Kusluvan et al., 2010). Managing employees effectively is one of the biggest challenges faced by hotel managers (Kapoor & Solomon, 2011; Singh, Hu, & Roehl, 2007).

The challenge of managing human resources has been widely discussed in the hospitality management literature (Kusluvan et al., 2010), especially focusing on employee turnover (Cheng & Brown, 1998; Guthrie, 2001; Huselid, 1995; Koys, 2001; Kuria, Alice, & Wanderi, 2012; Pare & Tremblay, 2007; Pizam & Thornburg, 2000) and staff shortages (Baum & Devine, 2005; Davidson, Guilding, & Timo, 2006; Singh et al., 2007). In addition, a variety of other human-related issues may be identified, such as difficulty of attracting and retaining personnel, managing a diverse workforce, low prestige and status of hospitality jobs, aging population and disadvantage of older workers, the need to train employees in new communication and information technologies, HIV/AIDS issues, employment law, minimum wages, and restrictive government policies

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(Kusluvan et al., 2010). This study seeks to examine the importance and influence of these issues on staff turnover and hotel management effectiveness in Malaysia.

Although there is a body of literature pertaining to staffing issues in the hospitality industry in other countries (Alonso & O'Neill, 2009; Davidson et al., 2006; Kuria et al., 2012; Kusluvan et al., 2010; Pizam & Thornburg, 2000; Rok, 2012), studies in Malaysia are limited. Previous Malaysian studies have focused on turnover intention and are quantitative in nature (Chew & Wong, 2008; Hemdi & Nasurdin, 2006, 2008; Hemdi & Rahim, 2011; Khalid et al., 2009; Radzi, Ramley, Salehuddin, Othman, & Jalis, 2009; Ryan, Ghazali, & Mohsin, 2011), and have ignored many hotel staffing issues (Kusluvan et al., 2010). In particular, few studies have focused on the front office department (Patah, Zain, Abdullah, & Radzi, 2009). This study is the first to use an inductive and qualitative approach to examine staffing issues faced by front office managers in Malaysia and the solutions they are adopting. It focuses on front desk employees because irrespective of hotel types and sizes, this department is the main contact point for guests (Baum & Devine, 2005) and provides guests' first impression of a hotel. The success of a hotel largely depends on front office staff service delivery (Slatten & Mehmetoglu, 2011), and it is crucial to ensure that employees are competent in technical, communication, interpersonal, and language skills (Baum & Devine, 2005).

Staffing issues in the hospitality industry

The importance of staffing issues in the hospitality industry is driven by the high dependence of hotel performance on its employees (Kusluvan et al., 2010). Empirical studies indicate a wide variety of approaches to the management of human resources (Ahmad et al., 2010; Lockyer & Scholarios, 2004) influenced by the strategic response to the nature of the internal and external environment (Davidson et al., 2006; Wilton, 2006). Companies may adopt strategies of innovation, quality enhancement, or cost reduction (Schuler & Jackson, 1987). Innovation and quality enhancement are strategies requiring a long-term perspective and involve improving the quality of products and services. A cost reduction strategy involves producing products and services at the lowest cost. Although the long-term perspective requires high investment in human resources, a cost reduction approach to hospitality services reduces investment in human resources and results in various problematic staffing issues (Ahmad et al., 2010; Davidson et al., 2006; Kusluvan et al., 2010).

The human resource literature suggests that hotels seeking to lead their competitors and become known for their quality service should be selective in staffing, provide orientation and training, offer competitive and fair pay and benefits, and involve and empower employees (Guthrie, 2001; Kusluvan et al., 2010; Lepak, Taylor, Tekleab, Marrone, & Cohen, 2007; Pare & Tremblay, 2007). These practices require high investment and may be thwarted by employee turnover and demand seasonality. A career in the hotel industry is often built by moving from one organization to another and this practice is common in large and luxury hotels (Scott & Revis, 2008). Furthermore, demand in the hospitality industry fluctuates, and whereas having too few employees may impair service quality, having too many permanent (full-time) employees is a risk because labour cost is the largest operating expenditure (Knox & Walsh, 2005; Nankervis, 2000). High employee turnover and fluctuating demand has led hotel managers to adopt a cost reduction strategy by practising ad hoc staffing, providing minimal and on-the-job training, no career advancement opportunities, limited employment security, and inferior compensation (Alonso & O'Neill, 2009; Wilton, 2006). This results in a number of staff-related issues for hotel managers to deal with.

Issues and solutions

A review of the hospitality literature indicates that staffing issues can be grouped around issues of high employee turnover, difficulty in attracting and retaining skilled workers, staff shortages, and poor discipline and job commitment. Among these issues, employee turnover appears to be the most challenging (Alonso & O'Neill, 2009). Employee turnover is defined as the voluntary or involuntary permanent withdrawal of a staff member from an organization (Robbins, Millett, Cacioppe, & Marsh, 2001, p. 27). Employee turnover is a major problem in the hotel industry, especially in developed countries such as the UK and Australia (Cheng & Brown, 1998; Wilton, 2006). Excessive turnover involving valuable staff members disrupts and hinders the effectiveness of an organization (Robbins et al., 2001). Reducing turnover is important because it reduces recruitment, selection, and training costs, and improves the quality of service delivered (Cheng & Brown, 1998).

In Malaysia, a number of studies have focused on employee turnover intentions (Chew & Wong, 2008; Hemdi & Nasurdin, 2006, 2008; Hemdi & Rahim, 2011; Khalid et al., 2009; Radzi et al., 2009; Ryan et al., 2011). Malaysian studies have found that respondents with high intention to leave are those who want transient employment, who were influenced by others to seek employment in the industry, and who are more oriented towards peer group friendship rather than the specific work (Ryan et al., 2011). Human resource practices (Chew & Wong, 2008; Hemdi & Nasurdin, 2006), procedural and distributive justice (Hemdi & Nasurdin, 2008; Radzi et al., 2009), organizational citizenship behaviour (Khalid et al., 2009), and a psychological contract (Hemdi & Rahim, 2011) contribute in reducing turnover intention. The negative relationship between helping behaviour and turnover intention is stronger among female employees (Khalid et al., 2009). Hemdi and Rahim (2011) found that job content (challenging, comprehensive, and diverse works) is a significant predictor of hotel managers' turnover intention. They also found that age is a significant variable in explaining reasons for intention to leave the organization. Promotion opportunities and salary are significant predictors of turnover intention for the members in the 18–30 age group who had just started their career whereas work–family balance was important for those in the 31–40 age group, and the older age group (41–50) members are more likely to leave an organization with a policy of performance-related pay.

Other research in Malaysia has examined the attraction and retention of skilled and efficient employees (Chew & Wong, 2008). A low level of human capital among the workforce has been found to be a cause for a shortage of skilled labour in Malaysia (Wong & Baum, 2006). Although the number of hotel schools is increasing, there is a declining interest among hospitality students and graduates in a career in the hotel industry (Zahari, Hanafiah, Othman, Jamaluddin, & Zulkify, 2010). As a result, hotel organizations employ foreign workers or less skilled high school graduates who are willing to take an entry-level position and work for low wages (Ahmad & Zainol, 2011). Such a situation makes managing the staff for superior service delivery a challenging task.

Studies outside Malaysia have identified a number of other issues facing hotel managers, including a lack of commitment, a lack of discipline, and a poor work ethic among employees (Alonso & O'Neill, 2009). The hotel industry is characterized by significant absenteeism (Chew & Wong, 2008), and employees may leave a hotel without notice or without the knowledge of the manager (Alonso & O'Neill, 2009). Absenteeism is predominantly caused by work-related characteristics (Pizam & Thornburg, 2000) and is a serious problem when it is extensive and prolonged (Cole, 2008). Lateness and absenteeism are symptoms of withdrawal behaviour. Lishchinsky and Zohar (2011) define

withdrawal behaviour as a set of attitudes and behaviours used by employees when they decide to be less participative. Work pressures especially during peak periods are another reason for staff turnover (Alonso & O'Neill, 2009).

A number of general guidelines for hospitality human resources managers are available to address these staffing issues (Kusluvan et al., 2010; Nankervis, 2000; Wilton, 2006) and represent "HR best practice" (Cho, Woods, Jang, & Erdem, 2006; Hoque, 2000; Sun, Aryee, & Law, 2007). These include selective staffing (Cho et al., 2006; Kusluvan et al., 2010; Nankervis, 2000), training, fair pay, a humane management style, and empowered staff. *Selective staffing* is crucial to enhance employee commitment and mitigate employee turnover because it exerts a strong influence on an organization's culture (McGunnigle & Jameson, 2000). Selective staffing refers to attracting enough applicants to ensure that qualified candidates are among them (Millmore, 2003). A realistic job preview allows candidates to assess the organization effectively and to decide whether they are suitable for the organization (Millmore, 2003; Raub & Streit, 2006). Selective staffing also involves the use of multiple reliable selection methods and many stakeholders in selection decision-making (Millmore, 2003).

Orientation and training familiarizes new employees with the organization and increases employees' knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform their required tasks (Cheng & Brown, 1998; McGunnigle & Jameson, 2000). Training should involve a training needs analysis, professionally designed training courses, competent trainers, and training evaluation and records keeping (Hayes & Ninemeier, 2008). Offering *competitive and fair pay* to employees is also crucial for employee retention (Davidson et al., 2006; Kline & Yu-Chin, 2007; Kusluvan et al., 2010; Nankervis, 2000). Non-managerial employees in the hospitality industry have low pay compared to other industries, which leads to high employee turnover, staff shortages, and difficulty in attracting and retaining skilled staff (Alonso & O'Neill, 2009; Kuria et al., 2012; Sturman, 2001). To retain experienced and competent employees, hotels must provide attractive compensation with monetary and non-monetary rewards as well as recognition (Nankervis, 2000). Many hospitality firms, however, do not have sufficient funds to offer attractive and competitive compensation (Alonso & O'Neill, 2009; Tudor, 2011). Practicing a friendly and *humane supervision and management* style can help satisfy and retain employees by reducing the stress of the working atmosphere (Alonso & O'Neill, 2009) and creating commitment, trust, and a motivating work environment. A manager with good communication skills and rapport with staff members recognizes, respects, and involves them in decision-making (Ahmad et al., 2010; Kusluvan et al., 2010). Organizations that *empower employees*, consider job redesign, improve the condition of employee accommodation, create a culture conducive to organizational performance, assess organizational performance, and provide a strong leadership and vision (Kusluvan et al., 2010).

This literature review has identified a number of issues or management practises that affect staff turnover in the hotel sector. In this research study, these practices are examined to determine their practicality and use as solutions to staffing issues in hotels of various level of service in Malaysian northern region.

Methodology

A qualitative research methodology and semi-structured interview method was used for this study. Data collection was carried out in November 2011 using convenience sampling. Hotel managers were recruited by phone. Fourteen front office managers from hotels of various levels of services were individually interviewed face-to-face. On average, the

interview on staffing issues took 40 min. Two main questions were asked: “What are the staffing issues faced by front office managers?” and “How do managers solve these issues?” The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using thematic content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004). Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts and allows a researcher to discover what the text reveals. With thematic content analysis, data are analysed by themes that emerge from the data. Each transcript was systematically and thoroughly read through to identify the staffing issues with codes allocated to portions of the text. Codes concerning various staffing issues were grouped on the basis of their similarities into a small number of manageable themes.

The participants were managerial ($n = 11$) or supervisory ($n = 3$) employees of hotels in Malaysian northern region and covered a range of experience, locations, hotel types, and hotel departments. The designation of the eleven managerial employees comprised front office manager, assistant front office manager, room division manager, and operation and sales manager. For confidentiality purposes, a code name was assigned to every manager. The code name reflects the manager’s position, the hotel’s star rating and the location of the hotel. Three of the fourteen managers were from Penang four- and five-star, and luxury boutique hotels. Their experience in the hotel industry ranged between 8 and 12 years. Four managers were from Perlis, managing a three-star and a budget hotel. Their experience in the hotel industry ranged between three and eight years. One manager was from a three-star hotel in Perak. He had 18 years work experience in the hotel industry. The other six participants were from Kedah three-star and budget hotels. Their experience in the hotel industry ranged between 2 and 20 years. Each participant’s profile is summarized in [Table 1](#).

Results

Eight themes were identified by grouping the 20 issues initially identified. The eight themes and related issues were as follows: staff shortage, high employee turnover, poor performance (slow, inefficient, incompetent, and mistakes made at work), low-skilled employees (inability to use the property management system, poor English proficiency, and poor communication skill), unpleasant personality (rude, bad attitude, and rowdiness), lack of commitment (lateness, absenteeism, emergency leave, medical leave, and taking long lunch breaks), excessive socialization (employees who socialize too much amongst themselves, which negatively affects their work), and sexual harassment. Each of these themes is discussed below.

Staff shortage

Of all the staffing issues, staff shortage was mentioned the most. According to the front office managers, staff shortages at the front office are caused by the difficulty in getting and retaining employees due to the low pay and long working hours. A four-star hotel pays as little as Malaysian Ringgit 700 (Australian Dollar 230) per month for front desk staff. FOM4SPG stated:

The hotel is recruiting people but many do not take the job because of the low pay. In the hotel industry the salary is very low. The starting salary for a front desk staff is between RM750 to RM1000. In the second year, then, their salary will increase to RM1000 and above.

Staff shortages make it difficult to deliver excellent customer service. One respondent (FOM4SPG) stated:

Table 1. Respondents' profile.

Code name	Position	Gender	Industrial experience (years)	Qualification	Employer
FOM4SPG	Front office manager	Female	12	Computer science degree	Four-star hotel in Penang
FOS3SPS	Front office supervisor	Female	4	Certificate	Three-star hotel in Perlis
FOMB1KH	Front office manager	Female	15	Certificate	Budget hotel in Kedah
RDM3SKH	Room division manager	Female	20	Certificate	Three-star hotel in Kedah
FOM3SPK	Front office manager	Male	18	Certificate	Three-star hotel in Perak
MBKH	Manager	Female	8	Certificate	Budget hotel in Kedah
FOS3SKH	Front office supervisor	Female	5	Certificate	Three-star hotel in Kedah
OSMBPS	Operation and sales manager	Female	3	Hospitality degree	Budget hotel in Perlis
AFOM3SPS	Assistant front office manager	Male	10	Certificate	Three-star hotel in Perlis
FOE3SKH	Front office executive	Female	4	Hospitality certificate	Three-star hotel in Kedah
FOM3SPS	Front office manager	Male	8	Certificate	Three-star hotel in Perlis
AFOMLBPG	Assistant front office manager	Male	10	Hospitality diploma	Luxury Boutique hotel in Penang
FOS3SKH2	Front office supervisor	Female	2	Diploma	Three-star hotel in Kedah
AFOM5SPG	Assistant front office manager	Male	8	Certificate	Five-star hotel in Penang

To give good service it is important to have enough staff. When you have enough staff, they have enough time to provide good service to the customer. When you don't have enough people, you tend to finish everything faster. You cannot provide excellent service when you're rushing.

Two methods of solving the problem of staff shortages were discussed. One manager (RDM3SKH) resorts to employing part-timers from a nearby university whereas another (FOM4SPG) solves staff shortage problem by paying overtime. FOM4SPG (a manager) stated that paying overtime is his preferred solution because casual or part-time employment increases the rate of employee turnover and this means that employees do not have work experience. Furthermore, part-timers are not as competent as the permanent staff whereas paying overtime gives the opportunity for the staff to earn more.

High employee turnover

High employee turnover was mentioned as an issue by FOM4SPG and FOS3SKH. According to FOS3SKH: "A number of employees resigned because they were offered better salary by other hotels. They worked for two to three months, and then left". To address this problem, the manager conducted an exit interview to find out why they resigned and to try to persuade good employees not to leave.

Poor performance

Poor performance was mentioned as an issue by eight participants. Incidents that reflect poor performance were giving guests the wrong key, cash shortages, and slow service. FOS3SPS stated: "There are staff that are not efficient but very few. Sometimes these employees give the wrong key to the guest. I guess they lose focus". FOM3SPS also reported cash shortage problem. According to AFOMLBPG, some new staff members are slow and inefficient although they usually improved after training.

Managers solved the issue of poor performance by providing continuous training. AFOM3SPS stated: "We have to send them for training. Retrain them so that they could deliver better service to the guests". According to OSMBPS, employees who have passed a probation period are given a warning letter if their work standard is below an acceptable level. After the third warning letter, the employee can be terminated. Solutions to problems of cash shortages varied from one organization to another. FOM3SPS stated: "In this hotel employees are required to cover the shortage by paying in cash or by salary reduction. Some hotels require employee to give a 'show cause' letter".

Low-skilled employees

Low-skilled employees had poor communication skills, English proficiency, and problem-solving and computer skills. Poor communication skills was mentioned by three participants and concerned phone conversations, poor English language proficiency, and misunderstanding customers. According to AFOM5SPG, some employees misunderstood their duties and failed to follow instructions. FOS3SKH2 mentioned an inability to communicate in English was a problem with some staff. AFOM3SPS mentioned an inability to follow standard operation procedures in answering the phone:

Some staff don't know how to answer the phone properly. In hotels we have a standard way to answer the phone. It's not like at home where we just say 'hello'. We have senior staff members who have worked here for a long time. It is very difficult to change their method of answering the phone but we are still trying.

According to AFOM3SPS, problem-solving skills are very important at the front office and a good problem solver is more easily promoted. However, most employees were unable to solve guest problems and he is still seeking the best technique to improve them. He stated:

Problems will just come through that door. People will just appear with problems and I'm afraid if there are situations that they don't know how to handle... I will keep trying to train them until they can solve the problems themselves.

Another skill required but reported lacking by AFOMLBPG and FOS3SKH2 was the ability to use the computer property management system. Most hotels in this study, except for budget hotels with less than 40 rooms use a property management system. This makes it necessary for employees to be computer literate. All participants in this study solved issues of low-skill with training although training senior non-managerial staff appears to be more challenging.

Unpleasant personality

An unpleasant personality was reported as an issue by six participants and was related to rudeness, unfriendliness, and "bad attitude". AFOM3SPS reported having these types of problems with new young employees:

They are very rowdy, and they expect people to accept them the way they are, especially when they live in the area (neighbourhood) where people are used to it. We have to slow down the rowdiness and improve their communication skill. To them it is just being cool... because they are young. But at the Front Office we can't do that. We have to be professional.

Besides training, the unpleasant personality issue was solved by trying to hire suitable employees and by counselling. AFOM5SPG stated:

One of the front office staff refused to let a guest borrow a hand phone charger and was rude to the guest. So we had to train this staff, give her counselling and explain to her why her actions led to guests complaints.

Lack of commitment

Lack of commitment was the most frequently mentioned staffing issue. Absenteeism, lateness, long lunch break, medical leave, and emergency leave were some of the staffing issues that were related to a lack of commitment. Absenteeism and lateness were most frequently mentioned. RDM3SKH was the only manager who mentioned long lunch breaks and perceived it as a minor issue that could be solved by verbally advising the staff. According to FOS3SKH, frequent absenteeism is a serious problem to the front desk department because there are just a few of them to run the operation (staff shortages). The problem is worst if it happens on a busy day when the hotel occupancy is high. AFOM3SPS stated: "Just because one staff was absent on a busy day it took us a very long time to register the guests. That day we received many complaints because they had to wait for so long".

The participants discussed actions to solve the lack of commitment issue. Lateness was handled by taking disciplinary action. According to FOM3SPS, employees who were late were given three verbal warnings. When the problem continues, they were required to give a "show cause" letter. Show cause letter is a letter written by an employee after a show cause notice is issued by the manager. It provides employees the opportunity to justify or explain the cause of their conduct that violates the policy and appointment terms and

conditions. The letter is filed and documented. This affected their performance appraisal and year-end salary increment. If there was no improvement they are given a warning letter. According to AFOMLBPG, employees who received three warning letters were immediately terminated. AFOM5SPG stated: “Usually, when staff are asked to give a show cause letter, he will take note of his mistakes. He realises that he is being monitored and he will be more careful of his actions”. AFOM3SPS sort to avoid this issue by checking an applicant’s medical background prior to employment to avoid frequent medical leave.

Excessive socialization

Excessive socialization was reported as a problem by three participants. According to FOMB1KH, her front desk employees were always chatting and gossiping with each other instead of doing their work. FOS3SPS stated that her employees preferred to share their dissatisfaction towards management with their colleagues instead of using the proper channel for a complaint. She explained that sometimes a manager may unintentionally show favouritism towards a member of staff and this causes dissatisfaction among other staff who gossip about the matter. AFOM3SPS mentioned that in his hotel, employees mistakenly thought that no action was taken about an employee who was late and they were unhappy about it. However, action was taken but due to the confidentiality of the matter others were not informed. AFOM3SPS stated: “Staff talk without even confirming [the problem]. The grapevine [informal transmission of confidential information] has created an inharmonious working atmosphere”. AFOM3SPS tried to address this issue by having daily briefings and weekly meetings. In these meeting, staff members were given the authority to speak and there was “two-way communication”. This was a way to avoid “the grapevine” and excessive socialization.

Sexual harassment

The issue of sexual harassment was mentioned by only one participant. According to FOS3SKH, sexual harassment rarely happens but it is a serious problem when it occurs, especially for female employees. FOS3SKH stated:

For sexual harassment, the front office manager will take a quick action. She will investigate if the report is true or it is just a joke. If the report is true, the manager will punish the harasser by taking disciplinary action and reassess his performance on the job.

The staffing issues faced by front office managers in this study are summarized in [Table 2](#).

Discussion

Among the issues mentioned, staff shortages, poor performance, and lack of commitment were the staffing issues considered as most important by managers, which are discussed below. Less frequently mentioned issues were as follows: low-skilled employees, unpleasant personality, excessive socialization, high employee turnover, and sexual harassment.

The issue of staff shortages in the hotel industry has been discussed and documented in the literature (Kusluvan et al., 2010). Staff shortages are especially important when the hotel is running at a high occupancy. Usually hotels do not employ the number of staff required to cater for occupancy because room occupancy fluctuates and seldom reaches its maximum (Malaysian Association of Hotels, 2012). In this study, concern for service

quality has led a four-star hotel manager in Penang State to choose to pay her experienced and efficient employee overtime instead of taking on part-timers. Penang is the State with the most competition for employees and the highest cost of living. The implication is that in this vicinity, managers may need to pay overtime, otherwise they may not be able to obtain suitable employees.

Poor performance was also frequently mentioned by hotel managers from various levels of service and locations in this study. The managers' solution to poor performance was training and retraining. Although high employee turnover means training effort may be a waste of time and money, it is necessary to provide training because it can also lead to employee and customer retention (Omar, 2010). In this study, employees who have completed their probation period were terminated if they failed to improve their performance after going through various extensive training programmes. The identification of the cause of poor performance is necessary for corrective action. This is best done through a close observation of employees' performance and a two-way discussion with them (Ahmad et al., 2010). Failure of training programmes to improve employee performance is either because the employee is not fit to work in the industry or because training programmes used are not effective. Therefore, hotel managers need to assess the effectiveness of training (Hayes & Ninemeier, 2008), and to provide a cost-benefit analysis of the training programme in order to obtain approval from owners who are reluctant to spend on training (Alonso & O'Neill, 2009). This study has discussed action taken due to discovery of cash shortage varies among hotels. Hotels usually require cash replacement and "show cause letter" in this case.

Another issue that was frequently mentioned by the managers in this study was lack of staff commitment. Poor performance due to lack of training or resources is perceived as less serious compared to when it is caused by laziness or a poor attitude to work (Cole, 2008). Although providing training and resources is a manager's responsibility, commitment to work is an employees' obligation to the employer (Shah, Farooq, Munir, Mahmood, & Saeed, 2011). This may explain why, regardless of the types of industry, prolonged absenteeism and poor performance are among the most common reason for disciplinary actions (Cole, 2008). Consistent with Cole (2008), this study discovered that the issue of poor performance and lack of commitment could be addressed by taking disciplinary actions.

An interesting finding of this study is the problem of unpleasant personality. This may reflect workforce generational differences, as the manager reported having problems with new staff members who are younger and appear to reflect Generation Y characteristics (those born between 1979 and 1994) (Solnet, Kralj, & Kandampully, 2012). This generation is considered as more confident and expressive, and are sometimes perceived to have poor communication and problem-solving skills (Kapoor & Solomon, 2011). The managers in this study addressed the issue by practising selective staffing, training, and counselling so these employees could find out about the consequences of their actions, consistent with the suggestions in the literature concerning Generation Y (Kapoor & Solomon, 2011; Solnet et al., 2012). A thorough explanation of the task is necessary because members of Generation Y are reluctant to perform simple tasks that lack depth or meaning for them (Kapoor & Solomon, 2011). The increasing number of Generation Y in today's workforce requires employee management that is tailored to satisfy their needs (Solnet et al., 2012). Front office department staff require communication, problem-solving, and computer skills. Poor communication results in misunderstandings and poor problem-solving skill, and an inability to use the property management system lead to service delays. Managers in this study address these issues with training because these generic skills are important for service delivery efficiency (Baum & Devine, 2005).

Excessive socialization at work may create conflicts with colleagues and management, reduce employees' productivity, and annoy guests (Tudor, 2011). According to Tudor (2011), socializing on the job helps employees form positive connections with their colleagues and creates work enjoyment, which is beneficial for employee and customer retention. Socialization with guests is one of the strategies used by leading hotels such as Club Med to retain its customers (Solnet & Kandampully, 2008). Socialization or open communication between management and employees leads to employee's job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and retention (Ahmad et al., 2010; Hoque, 2000). However, when socialization among employees is excessive, it is perceived as social loafing and is detrimental for organizational effectiveness. This issue was addressed by the managers in this study through a two-way communication during daily briefing and weekly meeting.

Despite the importance of employee turnover issue in the hotel management literature, this issue was mentioned by only two managers. This is consistent with Nankervis (2000) who stated that employee turnover is not as serious in Malaysia, where hotels are often successful in recruiting employees who aim to stay with the same firm for a long time. Managers addressed this issue by conducting exit interviews and trying to persuade the good employees to stay. A friendly working environment to nurture and provide self-fulfilment to employees is also effective in reducing employee turnover (Alonso & O'Neill, 2009). Sexual harassment was mentioned by only one manager who stated that it rarely happens. Reports of sexual harassment were investigated and addressed with disciplinary action. Human resource managers have the authority to conduct harassment investigations and administer discipline (Tyner & Clinton, 2010). In the USA, some employers ban workplace romance to avoid sexual harassment claims arising from such relationships (Boyd, 2010). However, Boyd (2010) argued that such policy is an intrusion of employees' rights. Furthermore, there are other sexual harassment policies that are effective for sexual harassment prevention such as continuous training on sexual harassment for the managers (Tyner & Clinton, 2010) and employees (Eaton, 2004).

Conclusion and implications

This study contributes to the hotel management literature by providing empirical evidence of staffing issues in the Malaysian hotel industry. Although some of the issues identified have been previously studied within the Malaysian context, others such as absenteeism and lateness have not received attention (Khalid et al., 2009). This study has also identified issues of excessive socialization, poor performance, low-skilled employees, staff shortage, high employee turnover, unpleasant personality, and sexual harassment.

This study contributes to better performance of the industry by providing suggestions to solve the staffing issues identified. Although the context of study is Malaysia, the results may benefit managers in other countries with similar staffing issues (Alonso & O'Neill, 2009; Pizam & Thornburg, 2000). Substantial evidence supports the effectiveness of human resource management in improving staffing issues such as those identified in this study (Connolly & McGing, 2007; Lepak et al., 2007; Pare & Tremblay, 2007; Sun et al., 2007). The importance of human resource techniques such as training (repeatedly discussed in this study), selective staffing, career development opportunity, employment security, competitive compensation, empowerment, and effective communication have been identified. However, this is an exploratory qualitative study and further research is needed to allow generalization of its findings or of particular aspects such as withdrawal behaviour (Khalid et al., 2009).

There has been a rapid growth of tourism industry in Malaysia since 1970 (Goldsmith & Zahari, 1994). To enhance Malaysian tourism industry's positive image, the facilities and services provided by tourism-related operators should meet customers' expectations. However, meeting customers' expectation is always a challenge, especially in the hotel industry due to the industry's labour intensiveness. This investigation of staffing issues in hotels of various sizes and location using qualitative study has led to the discovery of various challenges in the Malaysian hotel industry and means to address them. It has highlighted issues that are rarely mentioned in the literature and has suggested solutions to current staffing issues faced by hotel managers.

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