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Engaging Hotel Staff In Anti-Human Trafficking Initiative

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ENGAGING HOTEL STAFF IN ANTI-HUMAN TRAFFICKING INITIATIVE

Human trafficking is a serious global issue, within which the hospitality industry is a point of focus for sex trafficking. Despite increases in government- and corporate-mandated anti-human trafficking training, the level of hotel employee engagement with anti-human trafficking initiatives remains poorly researched. In a collaborative effort, researchers at UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management, Associate Professor Tingting (Christina) Zhang and Associate Professor Diego Bufquin, have set about identifying the factors that influence employee engagement with anti-human trafficking initiatives in the hotel industry in order to establish a practical framework for implementing more effective measures.

More than 40 million people worldwide are victims of human trafficking, a form of modern slavery that involves the forced or coerced exploitation of individuals for labor and/or sexual purposes. To date, the main destination countries have done little to address the issue. Among the worst offenders, the U.S. is thought to include the most victims and survivors of human trafficking, with 22,326 identified in 2019 alone, followed by the Philippines, China, Mexico, and India.

The hospitality industry is a major contributor to human trafficking cases, particularly those related to prostitution and sexual exploitation. More than 10% of all sexual exploitation cases and 72% of all human trafficking for sexual exploitation occur in the hospitality industry. In recent years, the industry has taken steps towards addressing the issue. Leading the vanguard, in 2017, Marriot instigated mandatory training on human trafficking awareness for all its employees. To date, 700,000 employees have been through the training program, which is offered in 17 languages. Subsequently, a number of other companies in the hotel, travel, and hospitality industry have followed suit. For example, in addition to staff training, Delta Airlines asks its frequent flyers to donate miles for the repatriation of trafficking survivors.

Despite this progress, academic research into the role of the hospitality industry in combating human trafficking is lacking. Most academic research in this field has focused on legal/political frameworks and perspectives; relatively few studies have explored empirical evidence. A number of studies have focused on the design, implementation, and assessment of

The study identified key factors that influence employee engagement with anti human trafficking initiatives in the hotel industry.

The findings highlighted the potential of technology for improving employee engagement in anti trafficking initiatives in the hospitality industry.

THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY IS A MAJOR CONTRIBUTOR TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING CASES, PARTICULARLY THOSE RELATED TO PROSTITUTION AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION.

anti-trafficking initiatives. However, some doubt has been cast over the impartiality of such research, for which the methods are not always clear, and which is often funded by the industry itself. Moreover, there is little research on the practical steps that need to be taken by managers in hospitality venues to identify and prevent human trafficking, or on employee engagement with the issue. Even with mandatory training, which attempts to imbue staff with theoretical and technical knowledge of human trafficking, the level of actual engagement with the issue may remain low, and acting on that training is not guaranteed, giving license to traffickers to continue in their work.

To address this issue, UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management researchers Associate Professor Tingting (Christina) Zhang and Associate Professor Diego Bufquin, along

with their colleagues, set about identifying the factors that influence employee engagement with anti-human trafficking initiatives in the hotel industry. Based on their research, the team has established a practical framework for promoting employee engagement and implementing effective anti-human trafficking initiatives in the hospitality industry.

A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR ANTI-TRAFFICKING ENGAGEMENT
Zhang, Bufquin, and colleagues focused their efforts on hotel employees in the United States, where they invited current hotel staff to participate in semi-structured interviews via telephone and/or face-to-face. Of 40 invitations issues, 70% (28 hotel staff) agreed to participate. The interviewees represented a broad cross-section of the industry, including those employed to work in the front desk (43%), housekeeping (28%), food & beverage (15%), and recreation (14%) departments. Some held management positions. The respondents represented both international chains and independent establishments. All participants reported having participated in anti-human trafficking training of some kind, which is now mandated in a number of U.S. states, including Florida, where many of the participants were based.

Based on the data collected during the interviews, the researchers identified five main themes (training, technology, peer support, organizational systems, and leadership), containing a total of 21 factors that control the level of engagement of hotel employees in anti-human-trafficking initiatives. Together, these themes and factors provide a practical framework for improving employee engagement in the hospitality industry.

Training: Among the participants, 80% highlighted training as a critical factor in promoting hotel employee engagement. Within this theme, four critical factors emerged: (1) identifying suspicious behavior by customers; (2) the frequency of training, with more regular training (1–2 times per year) seen as important in maintaining knowledge and engagement; (3) a variety of training methods (e.g., online, in person) and perspectives (law enforcement, legal, human resources, etc.);

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and (4) reducing the 'flexibility' of training enrolment, as training currently may or may not be given depending on departmental or management whims.

Technology: Under technology, participants highlighted six factors that are important in robust anti-trafficking initiatives in hotels. Participants reported the importance of mobile technologies that facilitate communication among employees, including: (1) messaging apps, email, and walkie talkies, which were noted as particularly important in emergency situations; and (2) collaboration applications such as video conferencing and group chat applications. (3) Security cameras were also seen as an existing resource that could be better utilized, perhaps by integrating them with emergency alert

THE FRAMEWORK ESTABLISHED BY THE RESEARCH TEAM OFFERS A NEW, PRACTICAL RESOURCE FOR HOTELIERS TO IMPROVE EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT WITH ANTI-HUMAN TRAFFICKING INITIATIVES.

systems. Thirdly, participants highlighted the potential of, as yet underused, technologies to improve anti-trafficking success, including: (4) artificial intelligence and facial recognition; and (5) property management systems that allow staff to record critical information about customers. (6) Social media was highlighted as a means to track possible human

trafficking, as social media platforms are often used by trafficking organizations to recruit new victims, in particular by targeting those whose social media outputs suggest low self-esteem or other vulnerabilities.

Peer support: In terms of support, the respondents highlighted the importance of both (1) practical support (e.g., equipment, security staff) and (2) emotional support (e.g., open and clear communication) in ensuring staff engagement with anti-trafficking measures. In a positive finding, most respondents felt that both types of support were offered by the management in their workplace.

Organizational system: The organizational system includes those procedures in places to address potential trafficking situations as they arise, including: (1) special signals and secret language (e.g., including certain drinks on the menu, which when ordered trigger a red flag); (2) responsiveness, primarily being given the ability to act quickly (e.g., strong chains of communication, access to relevant phone numbers); (3) increasing the time

allowed for employees to engage with each customer (rather than simply encouraging speed and efficiency), which would increase amount of time available to properly assess situations; and (4) clear procedures and chains of communication, such that employees are in no doubt as to what they must do if they suspect human trafficking.

Leadership: The final theme to emerge from the interview process was the importance of strong leadership, with particular factors including the need for management to: (1) promote constant awareness, for example by arranging regular, interactive training; (2) provide clear instructions and directions to employees; (3) be a presence that can offer guidance and feedback; and (4) empower subordinates to act appropriately when they suspect human trafficking, especially in critical or emergency situations, by facilitating an environment of open communication among staff at all levels.

THE WAY FORWARD
This study by Zhang, Bufquin, and colleagues offers significant contributions to the hospitality human trafficking literature. Future research will help to refine the framework and provide robust mechanisms for evaluating its effectiveness, for example, by assessing its generalizability to other areas of the hospitality industry (such as spas, restaurants). It will also be important to assess the applicability of the framework in other geographic regions, outside of the U.S. While the focus of this study was on sex trafficking, trafficking for labor exploitation is also a problem that must be addressed. Finally, approaches for the quantitative and/or mixed-method (qualitative and quantitative) assessment of anti-human-trafficking initiatives would add valuable additional insights.

The hospitality industry is extremely vulnerable to human trafficking crimes, and hotels are an ideal environment for traffickers. This study offers significant contributions to hoteliers and hospitality industry practitioners concerned with this issue. By taking a deeper dive into this issue, Zhang, Bufquin, and colleagues have identified the factors that motivate hotel employees to engage in anti-human-trafficking initiatives. Importantly, their study offers a new, practical resource for hoteliers to improve employee engagement with anti-human trafficking initiatives.

RESEARCHERS
IN FOCUS

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study identified key factors that influence employee engagement with anti-human trafficking initiatives in the hotel industry.

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PERSONAL RESPONSE

The data in this study were collected in February 2020, immediately prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. What impacts, if any, did the pandemic have (and continues to have) on human trafficking in the hotel industry?

COVID-19 has significantly affected human trafficking within the hotel industry. The surge in online activity during lockdowns led to a rise in online exploitation and recruitment. Traffickers took advantage of digital platforms to target and exploit individuals, with some ending up in trafficking situations in hotels. Additionally, the pandemic disrupted law enforcement and NGO initiatives focused on combating trafficking. With resources diverted to tackle the health crisis, efforts to monitor and intervene in trafficking cases in hotels might have been reduced.

You offer a practical framework to promote employee engagement and effective anti-human trafficking initiatives in the hospitality industry. To tackle this issue, what do you think are the next steps for implementing this framework?

From our qualitative research, it's evident that technologies, particularly mobile technologies, play a pivotal role in combating human trafficking. They also aid in mobilizing various stakeholders to collaborate in these efforts. Building on this framework, the focus should shift towards leveraging technology to innovate prevention strategies against human trafficking within the hotel industry. Ultimately, this study aims to outline an optimized co-created value network that enhances hotel employees' engagement in counter-human trafficking initiatives, facilitated by diverse mobile technology solutions.

Dr. Tingting Zhang

Dr. Zhang's research addresses human trafficking within hospitality. Her work has resulted in influential publications and significant grant funding. Her notable research impact boasts an i10-index of 45, h-index of 30, and over 5,000 citations.

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Dr. Diego Bufquin

Dr. Bufquin has a multicultural background that has led him to live in six countries and work at several hotels and restaurants in France, Spain, and Brazil. His research agenda focuses on hotel and restaurant management, specifically in the areas of consumer and organizational behavior.

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