Collaborative approach to mentoring in the tourism sector: Embracing new partners to enhance an industry programme.

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Abstract

This study considers the impact of a new mentoring scheme within the UK tourism sector. To broaden the portfolio of expertise within this programme, launched by the trade's professional newspaper the Travel Trade Gazette, an academic was selected as a mentor alongside senior travel professionals and business leaders. The key findings show that embracing specialists who work indirectly within the field can add depth and a new focus to mentoring within the tourism business. Therefore, it is hoped when developing future mentoring schemes including practitioners, who are linked to the sector, but not directly involved, can be a valid option to those working in the business.

Keywords

Mentoring, tourism, collaboration, academia, partnerships.

Introduction

Global tourism is worth 10% of international GDP; it accounts for 1 in 11 every job, and it is 7% of the world's exports, (World Tourism Organisation, WTO, 2016) .As a worldwide export category, tourism ranks third after fuels and chemicals and ahead of food and automotive products. In many developing countries, tourism ranks as the first export sector. Forecasts for continued growth state that the number of international tourists will reach 1.8 billion by 2030 (WTO, 2016). In Britain the forecast is that by 2025 the tourism industry will be worth over £257 billion by 2025 (VisitBritian, 2016).

Therefore the importance of this sector to the world's economy cannot be disputed. However, arguments about an agreed definition of tourism are almost varied as the components of the industry. Practitioners and academics have attempted to define this sector, but, due to the nature of this multifaceted business, a clear definition has been difficult to pinpoint. The concept (Page and Connell, 2014: 8) can refer to the broad framework of the movement of people, the journey and the temporary visit to a destination. Therefore, the WTO have provided a widely quoted definition which states 'Tourism comprises the activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes is widely accepted' (1995: 103).

Within both the North American and UK standard industrial classifications the sector has been split into 3 areas. These are travel agencies, tour operators and other reservation services which include guiding and time-shares. This classification and the industry accepted WTO description help provide context to the tourism industry.

Employment within this sector can vary extensively from reservations to logistical planning however, regardless of the position or role, it is accepted within the industry

that staff support and mentoring is important to improve retention and increase morale.

This paper seeks to review mentoring and highlight the extent to which it is undertaken within the sector. The study also attempts to review a new scheme which aims to support under 30-year-old industry professionals using mentors not only from industry but also from academia. It is hoped that the work will show that encompassing tourism professionals external to the sector will improve and enhance industry mentoring schemes.

Mentoring

Mentoring is defined by the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD)'as a development technique based on the use of one-to-one discussions to enhance an individual's skills, knowledge or work performance' (2015:1).

Megginson and Clutterbuck (1995:12) explain mentoring as 'off-line help from one person to another in making significant transitions in knowledge, work or thinking'. They clarify that off-line is valid because it is difficult to be fully open in a relationship where one person has authority over the other. Often managers face conflicts of role and the mentees have held back information.

Gannon and Maher (2012:440) describe mentoring as 'an intervention which supports less-experienced individuals in their development'.

These definitions identify that mentoring is a two-way partnership with the main aim to support the mentee. Mentoring has traditionally utilised mentors who are more senior to the mentee however other forms are being adopted.

Mentoring between peers is becoming more common (Clutterbuck, 2010:102) and focuses upon the experience gap of the people involved. This type of mentoring is becoming more widespread within the sector with new employees being embraced by a team member to help the mentee learn about the new role. For example, new starters within the tour guiding and holiday representative sector are often 'taken under the wing' of the crew who have worked the previous seasons and therefore peer mentor the new employee.

Furthermore, reverse mentoring is becoming more popular as this approach can help with diversity programmes and ensure senior managers do not become out-of-touch in key areas such as technology advances and customer concerns (Clutterbuck, 2010: 104). Within the tourism industry these methods are still underutilised although this process is being considered for inclusion within a potential future programme.

Mentoring within the tourism sector

Highly motivated and dedicated staff are key within the service sector and have long been identified as essential to the tourism industry. Professional staff help to ensure the success of a business and provide the service customers expect. Within the tourism sector there are many dedicated and professional individuals who are keen to progress and deserve to be supported throughout their career. Whether the workforce is part of a large hotel chain or a small independent travel agency, the employees are vital to the success of this service-orientated business.

There are many industry approaches to supporting and advancing staff, whether through training, appraisal or coaching. Mentoring has been identified as a method which can boost morale, increase job satisfaction (Fagenson, 1992: Newby and Heide, 1992) and ultimately affect the bottom line.

However, there are many challenges with mentoring staff in the tourism industry. The tourism sector is very fragmented, hectic and dynamic; workloads can be very high and timelines tight and it can be difficult to invest time for mentoring support. This lack of time is a key challenge to supporting staff in the business.

The extent to which mentoring is undertaken within the sector is difficult to clarify. Anecdotal evidence shows that when employers are asked about mentoring, their comments are generally very positive, however the implementation is often limited. Additionally, staff mentoring is a high-level skill which managers and leaders should be trained to undertake if they are expected to offer this programme of guidance. Therefore, another challenge within the sector to offering effective mentoring is the lack of skill and training to allow managers to become equipped to provide this guidance and help. Unfortunately training is not always readily available and can be costly.

It is acknowledged within the sector that employee turnover is high. The continual change in staff is costly to the industry, not only in terms of recruitment and training, but also in terms of staff morale, satisfaction and commitment to the organisation. If workers are dissatisfied and not committed, their service levels within this highly customer-orientated profession is likely to be low. This poor level of service will affect customer satisfaction and reputation of the business (Sims, 2007:23).

Long unsociable hours and low pay are often quoted for people leaving the sector (Brown et al, 2015: 135) however lack of career advancement is also highlighted as a reason for resigning from the sector (Walmsley, 2004: 276). Mentoring can help to overcome staff feelings of dissatisfaction and signal that the sector values professionalism and personal growth. Hayes and Ninemeier (2016: 273) have noted

that mentoring is able to increase satisfaction levels and enhance commitment, as it demonstrates to employees that they are important team members and the business wants to invest time and effort in them.

Furthermore, a study of hotel employees (Kang at al, 2016: 355) identified that the followership – individual and collective efforts to achieve an organisation's goals – can be improved through mentoring, which suggests that this form of support will encourage performance and the employee's feeling of satisfaction. Additionally mentoring has been found to increase organisation commitment and satisfaction (Kim et al, 2015: 78).

Mentoring can reduce frustration within younger employees who realise that progression is often slower than hoped. Academics have highlighted that a supportive mentor can explain the reasons for the delays and suggest ways round current blockages. In addition, appropriate support can encourage the mentees to make the most of the opportunities and learning experiences within their current positions (Clutterbuck (2014: 27). Indeed, mentoring has been identified as a powerful career management tool (Ayres, 2006: 121), enabling employees to make sound decisions and choices throughout their working life. It is accepted that many large tourism companies and businesses offer internal mentoring, but embracing the experience of others who are not directly involved with the day-to-day business can often provide new insight and a fresh perspective.

The tourism mentoring scheme

The tourism mentoring scheme was launched by the Travel Trade Gazette (TTG) in November 2015. The TTG was founded in 1953 and was the world's first weekly travel trade newspaper. It has global brands which include TTG Czech Republic.

TTG Italia, TTG Russia and TTG Mena. The TTG is published online and hardcopy and TTG Media also provide a range of training events, a news-led website and annual travel awards. The mentoring scheme was launched after feedback from candidates on the newspaper's Tomorrow's Travel Leaders scheme.

The Tomorrow's Travel Leaders scheme has been running since 2012. This scheme selects young professionals, who all must be under 30, and have made a valuable contribution to the sector. For example, one scheme member worked for a law firm and was selected as they had addressed an Association of Independent Tour Operators (AITO) conference and set up an intellectual property initiative; another was an industry manager who had increased sales of major airlines by 12% working for an online search engine; a marketing manager had been nominated after raising the profile of a family holiday brand through successful PR strategies. The scheme attracts applicants from a wide variety of sector related fields. To be considered they submit an online application and then judges from the newspaper's editorial board, various industry body representatives and previous year scheme members help select the successful candidates.

The mentoring scheme was initiated after several cohorts of the leadership programme identified mentoring as highly valuable to their career growth and development. The programme was launched at the annual Leaders of Tomorrow conference in November 2015 and was followed by an editorial, and a link was provided for online applications for both mentors and mentees. The application asked respondents to consider what skills and attributes they had which would enable them to be successful and then explain why they wanted to take part in the programme.

A rigorous assessment of applicants was undertaken by mentoring experts, the mentoring co-ordinator and stakeholders. Over 30 mentors applied and 20 were successfully matched with mentees. The mentors came from all sectors of the industry, including tour and cruise operators, and also attracted managers from leading consultancies, with job roles including cruise managing director, online tour operator chief operating officer , tour operator product manager, travel accountant managing director, service business coaching consultancy director, and a cruise commercial director.

Furthermore, a tourism academic was also accepted to the programme. The academic has worked in the industry for over 15 years and has been teaching the subject for nearly 13 years. The academic has an obvious interest in the business, and therefore, although not directly from the sector, scheme managers felt such an external partnership would be a useful addition.

The positives and challenges of the scheme

The programme ran for 1-year and many of the partnerships have been positive for both the mentor and mentee. However, some key issues have been highlighted. At the start it was hoped the mentees/mentors would meet face-to-face with the scheme leader at an informal session to help successful matching but many participants were unable to attend. Therefore they were asked to complete a detailed questionnaire which was carefully assessed to help with the matching process. The

pairing of mentors and mentees was undertaken by evaluating the needs of the mentee with the skills and experience of the mentors. Consideration was also given to the location of both mentors and mentees and their gender. Unfortunately this process was only successful for some partnerships.

Other challenges included lack of time, relationships 'fizzling out' and in some cases expectations were unrealistic. These problems are often associated with mentoring and were addressed. When relationships were experiencing lack of time, utilising technology to allow virtual communication was a successful solution. Some relationships did not develop and although both the mentor and mentee attempted to meet and engage, the partnerships were unsuccessful. To overcome these situations both participants were offered support to identify why the relationship had ended; it was concluded that they didn't really want to do the scheme, but 'thought it was a good idea at the time'. In these circumstances the remaining partner was offered another mentor/mentee to work with if they wished to continue. In some cases the mentee had unrealistic expectations; this was overcome by the mentor re-clarifying the boundaries of the partnership.

Within the academic/industry mentoring partnership, it was relatively easy to organise appointments as the academic was able to work around her teaching and research commitments. In addition, as academics are regularly trained in tutorship and supervision there was an understanding of how the relationship would work. However, two issues were highlighted during the academic/industry mentoring relationship. The first was a lack of in-depth knowledge of the company in which the mentee worked; this was quickly overcome by the mentor using focused questioning, contacting business professionals and online industry research. Secondly, the mentee did have concerns that the academic may not fully understand the

commercial side of the business; this was not an issue, due to the industry expertise of the academic. In addition, the mentor thought working with someone 'from the outside' has allowed a more holistic approach to be introduced within the discussions. Finally, the mentee stated that, as the academic is not currently employed in the sector, they could be more open as they felt there were less conflicts of interest.

Overall, the process was a success with mentors and mentees reporting that even though there may have been some challenges they both felt they had benefited from the programme. The mentors commented that they had learnt from the younger executives, they felt that they had made a difference, and assisted their mentees negotiate some difficult issues. The mentees highlighted the importance of reaching out for help, particularly in the early stages of their careers and that it was good to be able to turn to someone who was able to listen to their concerns and help them build their confidence.

Programme benefits to the industry

As highlighted in the paper the tourism industry has, for many reasons, been unable to embrace mentoring as fully as other businesses. However, due to the high turnover and low retention it is accepted that this supportive approach would benefit the sector. This small mentoring scheme has emphasised that, with careful guidance, staff support can be offered, but finding managers with sufficient skills and time may restrict roll-out of such schemes. The benefits have shown that positive

relationships can enhance the motivation and commitment of both members and could therefore longer-term improve retention and loyalty.

The benefits of utilising industry experts, who are not directly linked to the sector could assist with introducing mentoring schemes as these specialists would not be focussed on the day-to-day workload issues, can draw on wider knowledge and expertise, and may offer more novel insights and suggestions. Scheme management has highlighted that there have been many benefits with the combination of academia and industry expertise in the programme, including lessened business focus, innovative approach and cross disciplinary insight within the mentoring process.

Conclusion and recommendations

This paper has considered a new mentoring scheme within the tourism sector which incorporated an external partner; a tourism academic. The other participants within the scheme were all employed within the sector.

It was the first time the mentoring programme had been undertaken and partnerships have been developed between senior managers from a wide-range of sectors and the participants of the TTG's Tomorrow's Travel Leaders Scheme. It has been

highlighted that during this year-long initiative there have been some issues but these have been overcome utilising a variety of strategies. Within the academic mentor and industry mentee partnership the relationship has been successful as alternative approaches helped provide more diverse solutions to issues raised.

Within the sector it has been highlighted that there are challenges incorporating mentoring programmes within businesses. The key issues have been identified as the demanding nature of the business, lack of time and expertise. Therefore, incorporating indirect experts who have industry knowledge but are not directly linked to the sector could offer a valid solution to help develop mentoring within the tourism industry. In addition, the academic was able to gain insight into current business thinking, demonstrating industry engagement which will benefit current students and future university-course development.

The scheme will run again and some key recommendations for the next programme have been made. These include the wider promotion of the scheme to increase the expertise and number of mentors. As this paper has shown, this will help reduce the industry-wide issue of lack of time and offer a more diverse approach and broaden the opportunities of the participants. It is anticipated that the list of mentors would be available on the TTG website and then mentees would be asked to select their own mentor to help overcome the matching issues which have impacted the scheme this year.

It is vital that the industry supports its passionate and dedicated work-force and, although time-poor and sometimes insufficiently trained, this cannot be an excuse for not mentoring and supporting deserving staff. This mentoring scheme has

highlighted a novel approach which overcomes the reasons for not providing such

guidance for employees.

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