AGE ISN'T BUT A NUMBER: TRAINING A MULTI-GENERATIONAL TOURISM WORKFORCE*

Swathi Ravichandran[1]

[1]*Bowling Green State University*
rswathi@bgsu.edu

Abstract

The tourism industry's labor force is made up of multiple generations including Baby Boomers, Generation Xers, Generation Yers or Millennials, and Generation Zers. Individuals belonging to different generations do differ in values, cognitions, and behavior, potentially impacting workplace dynamics including preferred methods of training and development. For example, Generation Yers, born between 1981 and 1999 were raised in high tech, neo-optimistic era and are technologically adept; however, Baby Boomers tend to resist change and are not technologically savvy. This paper goes through the traits of various generations that make up the tourism workforce and effective training and development strategies for these generations. The benefits and outcomes of effective training strategies are also discussed.

Keywords: *tourism, hospitality, Gen X, Gen Y, Gen Z, Boomers, training*

Introduction

Highlights of the fourth industrial revolution, a term coined by Schwab (2017) is characterized by smaller, cheaper, and more powerful sensors, artificial intelligence, machine learning, and more mobile internet. This revolution has been established ex-ante unlike its predecessors, allowing world economies to transition into it at different times and varying pace. In Vietnam, Industry 4.0 gained notoriety in late 2016 when President Tran Dai Quang discussed its impact on the country's socio-economic development (Vu & Anh, 2017). With the digital focus of the fourth industrial revolution, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc added that Vietnam's young population is well-positioned to take advantage of emerging technologies (Vu & Anh, 2017). According to the Central Intelligence Agency (n.d.), approximately 70% of Vietnam's population is in the 15-64 age group; i.e., those considered to be of working age.

Human resources management-related challenges are expected to be at the forefront as Vietnam tackles Industry 4.0. PricewaterhouseCoopers Consulting (Vietnam) Ltd. (2018) conducted a survey in collaboration with the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Vietnam Business Council for Sustainable Development in November 2017, to understand the country's workforce views of the impact of Industry 4.0. Although respondents were optimistic about the impact of implementing Industry 4.0, they

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believe it will need significant upskilling to influence how an organization functions. Survey results also indicated respondents' ambiguity with respect to the specific knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to make digital integration with Industry 4.0 a reality (PricewaterhouseCoopers Consulting (Vietnam) Ltd., 2018).

Industry 4.0 has brought on opportunities for many sectors including Vietnam's travel tech startups ("Vietnamese tourism industry to grow," 2019). Specific examples include the development of apps to manage hospitality properties and market destinations, and the utilization of VR and 3D scanning technology. However, the tourism industry has identified the same challenges as those identified by respondents of the PricewaterhouseCoopers survey discussed above; i.e., lack of employee skills development. Even so, investing in training is often viewed as a dispensable, expensive luxury as opposed to essential business activity by hospitality and travel businesses. This paper makes the case for investing in training. Besides, given the age diversity among the working age population, this paper also details the traits of various generations that make up the workforce and recommends training methods suitable for these generations.

The Case for Investing in Training

Human resources departments in hospitality organizations have often been criticized for being a cost center as it is easy to determine costs while difficult to calculate the results of employees' efforts (Cho et al., 2006). Specifically, training is an essential business activity that results in lowering costs, increasing sales and customer satisfaction, and ultimately improving profits (Lashley, 2018). However, this relationship can only be observed in organizations that track and measure human resources metrics such as employee satisfaction and turnover. Investing in employee training can also make them more adept to constantly evolve business practices and technological innovation reducing the likelihood of resisting change (Lashley, 1997). On the flip side, organizations' reluctance to invest in training results in added costs stemming from reduced employee and customer satisfaction.

Poultson (2008) stated that training could break the cycle of reactive management by reducing the incidence of several costly workplace problems including theft, under-staffing, sexual harassment, and constructive dismissals. Below is a discussion of how training positively impacts organizational performance, employee job performance, and job satisfaction and intent to stay.

Organizational Performance

Lashley (2018) summarized the impact of training on business performance as a two-step process (Figure 1). The impact of training on customer service quality, a measure of work performance, is established in the literature. Shen and Tang (2018) found in a sample involving 230 employees representing a variety of industries, including hotels, that training indirectly influenced customer service quality via the mediating roles of transfer of training and job satisfaction. The authors iterated that training influenced customer service quality via skill development that occurred through the transfer of training (transactional process) and job satisfaction

(motivational process). Similarly, Dhar (2015) found a strong relationship between employee training and quality of service offered by employees in tourist hotels. Data collected from employees in 53 small- and medium-sized tourist hotels led the authors to conclude that employee development practices such as skill acquisition and upgradation help hotels gain a sustainable competitive advantage (Dhar, 2015).

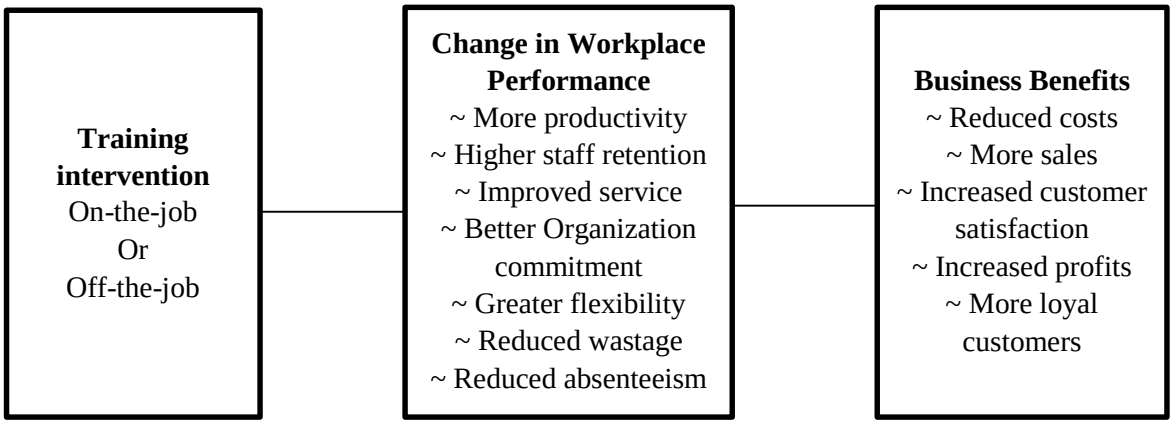

Figure 1. From Training to improve business performance. Reprinted from Innovation in hospitality education: Anticipating the educational needs of a changing profession (p. 202) by J.A. Oskam, D.M. Dekker, and K. Wiegerink (Eds.), 2008, Springer. Copyright 2018 by Springer International Publishing.

Employee Job Performance

Improvement in employee job performance as a result of training can be assessed in several ways including reduction in errors and workplace accidents, and number of customer complaints; higher levels of service quality and resulting guest satisfaction; and service innovation performance among others.

How errors are addressed in the workplace is largely attributed to the training received. Yao et al. (2019) studied the effects of three types of training; errorless, error avoidance, and error management, on employees' service recovery performance. Using data gathered from frontline hospitality employees, the authors concluded that error management training had a stronger impact on service recovery performance compared to the other two methods. Managers need to encourage employees to make mistakes during the training process so they can learn from them and determine what skills need to be further improved or developed. Employees' perceptions of fairness in the workplace were also enhanced as a result of error management training as they felt more at ease knowing they could make mistakes during the learning process (Yao et al., 2019).

Improvement in productivity can also be attributed to a reduction in workplace accidents. It is the legal responsibility of employers to ensure a safe workplace. In addition, workplace injuries result in additional costs to the organization due to employee absence and medical bills. In a

study involving employees of a hotel in Karachi, Pakistan, Afaq et al. (2011) found a positive relationship between time spent on training and overall scores earned in training examinations on many performance outcomes including workplace safety, job preparedness, hotel hygiene, physical maintenance of rooms, guest interaction, and overall customer service.

Training is an example of a high performance work practice (HPWP). Karatepe (2013) tested a research model to determine whether workplace engagement mediated the relationship between HPWPs and hotel employee performance. Utilizing data gathered from frontline hotel employees and their managers, Karatepe (2013) found that employers' investment in training to improve task-related and behavioral skills of employees confirmed their commitment to HPWPs, leading to higher levels of work engagement. When employees were more engaged in the workplace they had higher quality relationships with their employer which ultimately led to them going the extra mile to solve customer problems.

Training has also been found to be a significant predictor of employees' service innovation performance. For example, Chen (2011) found, based on data collected from frontline employees in mid- and upscale hotels in Taiwan, that when employees perceived access to and support for training, they were more likely to engage in service innovation. A better person-job fit reinforced this relationship. When employees engage in innovative behavior a number of benefits result including an increase in revenue and profits, cost reduction, response to changes, and ultimately, competitive advantage (Chang et al., 2011; Ottenbacher & Gnoth, 2005).

Job Satisfaction and Intent to Stay

Lashley and Rowson (2006) demonstrated that firms with high employee turnover rates registered low training activities while organizations with active training programs experienced low employee turnover. Investing in training is justified due to costs associated with replacing employees which could be over $12,000 for positions such as front desk associate or restaurant supervisor and even higher for those in middle and upper-level management and sales positions (Tracey & Hinkin, 2008). Not including the intangible costs associated with lost productivity and diminished service quality, Davidson et al. (2010) estimated that an average hotel in Australia spent $109,909 replacing executive, managerial, and supervisory staff each year. Investing in training also suggests to employees that they are valued members of the organization as it gives them the opportunity to move on to higher-level positions. They may also feel more prepared and confident in the positions, potentially reducing absenteeism, workplace stress reduction, and ultimately turnover (Lashley, 2018).

Specifically in the hospitality industry, employee commitment is vital due to the high levels of customer-employee interface. These relationships impact customer retention and serve as a competitive advantage (Hitt et al., 2001). Chiang et al. (2005) encouraged hotel managers to give training a higher priority because their study found that training quality is a direct

antecedent of training satisfaction and job satisfaction. Job satisfaction, in turn, was found to be a significant predictor of intent to stay. Costen and Salazar (2011) found similar results in their study involving employees from four full-service, upscale and luxury hotels and resorts in the southeastern U.S. Their study confirmed that when employees had the opportunity to develop new skills and advance, they were more satisfied in their jobs, ultimately leading to loyalty.

The training that hospitality managers receive could also impact employee turnover intentions. Malek et al. (2018) found that as manager training increased, employee turnover intentions decreased, justifying hospitality organizations' need to invest in management training. When managers receive more training, employees view them more favorably, feel closer to them, and have less of a desire to leave the organization.

Generational Traits

Manheim (1972) defined a generation as a group of people who experienced similar events in a similar social situation. The value sets they form during the formative phase of their life as a result of sharing time in history also influences their workplace values and expectations (Ng et al., 2010).

The cohort model used to group generations based on birth year cutoffs is not without criticism. For example, it has been argued that education level, race, gender, sexual orientation, and geographic location may better explain complex generational issues (e.g., Campbell & Twenge, 2014). National cultures, industry context, and various organizational variables may be other factors especially when considering generational traits in the workplace (e.g., Lyons & Kuron, 2014).

Sakdiyakorn and Wattanacharoensil (2018) completed a systematic review of research on generational diversity in the hospitality industry published between 2000 and 2016 and found that while nearly half of the studies originated in North America, the rest came from Europe, Asia, and Oceania. However, the U.S. definitions and categories of generations were adapted in all the studies. This paper acknowledges inconsistencies with respect to the start and end dates of each generational cohort, overlaps, and those generational traits may vary by national setting. However, due to the lack of alternate definitions and the consensus among academics regarding existing definitions of generational cohorts (Lub et al., 2012), the traits below are described for generations that currently predominantly make up the global workforce. The cohort of Generation Z described in this paper were born between 1995 and 2009 (Goh & Lee, 2018). While the Baby Boomer generation is exiting the workplace, Generation X is moving into middle and senior leadership positions, Generation Y is occupying entry-level leadership positions, and Generation Z is entering the industry into front-line positions.

Baby Boomers (Born 1945-1964)

Boomers value job security and a stable work environment (Eisner, 2005; Kupperschmidt, 2000). They are been described as being sensitive to status and hierarchy, results-driven, ambitious, and loyal (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Wong et al., 2008). Baby boomers also value consensus

building and mentoring. They live to work; work defines their self-worth and reflects their evaluation of others (Sherman, 2005).

Generation X (Born 1965-1980)

Traits describing this generation include pessimistic, cynical, individualistic, entrepreneurial, and independent (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Yu & Miller, 2005). Generation X employees are more likely to leave an employer for higher pay and a more challenging environment and they also have less respect for authority and hierarchy (Howe & Strauss, 2007). This generation also struggles with finding a work-life balance (Eisner, 2005). Employees in this generation are also tech-savvy, informal, and embrace diversity (Burke, 2004).

Generation Y (Born 1981-1999)

Also called Millennials, this generation shares some traits with their predecessor in that they enjoy challenging work, are comfortable with change and are less committed to their organization (Eisner, 2005; Twenge et al., 2010). This generation currently makes up the highest percentage of the total workforce of the hospitality industry (McCrindle Research, 2010). They value leisure and vacation, which they expect their job to fund but also have high expectations of promotion and pay raises in a faster timeline due to lower patience levels (Hill, 2002; Sheahan, 2005).

Generation Y employees also are highly technologically adept, prefer a less rigid workplace, desire workmates, prefer mobility and teamwork, and do not value seniority (Sinnithithavor, 2010; Tice, 2008). They prefer their managers to be creative and like a performance-based incentive system (Eisner, 2005); they also want an inclusive management style and desire immediate feedback on their performance (Francis-Smith, 2004). Many employees in this generation value education; because they have acquired work experience while a student, they are more likely to have clear workplace expectations and career goals (Wong et al., 2017).

Generation Z (Born 1995-2009)

This generation has not lived without technology and the internet. They have received more formal education than previous generations, experienced more cultural diversity, are globally focused, and emerged from a global financial crisis (Glum, 2015; Singh, 2014). Individuals in this generation exhibit self-confidence, prefer team-work, choose independence over formal authority, and desire happiness in the workplace (Ozkan & Solmaz, 2015). They also want more flexibility; interestingly, they will choose face-to-face communication as opposed to technology (Schawbel, 2016). Like their predecessor, they seek constant performance feedback and want to move up in their career at a fast pace (Ceniza-Levine, 2019).

Training across Generations

Because there are disagreements with respect to defining generations based on cohorts of birth years, there are two schools of thought concerning training across generations. One is that generational differences should not matter when it comes to training. Moscardo and Benckendorff (2010) stated that generational researchers have the responsibility to show that younger groups are different from older groups now but also that they are different from their previous generations when they were

young. Changes in work values, behaviors, and attitudes could be explained by factors beyond just generational cohorts (Hernaus & Vokic, 2014; Saba, 2013). George Elfond, the CEO of Rallyware, a technology company that reinvents corporate training listed several learning preferences that could span across generations including:

- Providing trainees with bite-sized training materials;
- Providing employees with projects or tasks that would require them to acquire new skills, as opposed to forcing learning on them;
- Assigning project to multigenerational teams;
- Allowing employees to make mistakes;
- Offering flexible learning methods;
- Providing on-demand feedback using a variety of communication means (Elfond, 2018)

Deal (2007) found that concerning hard skills, there was consensus in the top five preferred ways of learning across Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y. These include: live classroom instruction, on-the-job, workbooks and manuals, books and reading, and one-on-one coaching/ computer-based training.

The second school of thought is that generational upbringing does play a role in individual learning preferences. For example, because Generation Y has had constant access to technology, they may prefer images and graphics in their learning materials as opposed to just text (Cekada, 2012). Another consensus is that older generations are sensitive to receiving feedback while younger generations desire assessment and feedback as a way to learn soft skills (Deal, 2007). Below is a discussion of training approaches for various generations that currently make up the global workforce:

Baby Boomers

Discussions, simulations, case studies, and problem-solving exercises are recommended for boomers as they can help this generation tap into their past experiences (Quinney et al., 2010). It is also important to point out the value in what they are learning to boomers; i.e., explain how what they are learning will make a difference to the organization.

Generation X

This generation prefers a casual and comfortable learning environment that is more engaging (Prensky, 2005) making small group discussions utilizing a round-table style and teamwork appropriate for this group. Edwards (2005) recommended using questions as a learning tool so trainees can generate answers and learn from each other.

Generation Y

This generation is considered visual learners who also prefer to learn by doing rather than by being told (Cekada, 2012). Simulations and role-playing could be effective methods. It is also recommended that information be presented in short snippets while providing breaks or utilizing a different activity or format every 10 – 15 minutes for this cohort (Hart, 2008). This group also likes to get immediate with a focus on understanding how what they learned can be applied immediately. Cairncross and Buultjens (2007) suggested digital training systems such as podcasts, social media, mobile videos and blogs; onsite leadership academies, or structured

courses through external education providers; and formal mentoring programs or networking sessions.

Generation Z

According to a survey of learning and human resources professionals of small, medium, and large U.S. companies conducted by LinkedIn, Generation Z prefers micro-learning to fill skill and knowledge gaps (Poague, 2018). They also prefer a more self-directed and independent approach to learning (Poague, 2018). Employees in this generation desire multiple check-ins with their supervisor during the week. Any feedback they receive needs to be prompt, swift and tracked (Jenkins, 2019). Wingard (2018) stated that YouTube is a preferred way of learning for Generation Z. The author did however state that this generation does not isolate themselves through technology but rather uses it as an engagement tool. While virtual learning is effective with Generation Z, they do also value face-to-face interaction and group learning, making blended education models ideal (Wingard, 2018).

Even though learning preferences may differ across generations, facilitating mentoring between employees of different ages should be encouraged ("How to manage different generations," n.d.). Younger employees can benefit from older employees' wisdom and experiences and the more senior employees can be exposed to fresh perspectives from their younger colleagues. Older workers can train and mentor the younger employees on core and critical skills and job knowledge while younger workers can mentor their older colleagues on technology and computer skills (Roberts, 2005).

Conclusion

Although training is essential due to numerous benefits including lowering the number of errors and customer complaints, increasing sales revenue and profits via enhanced customer satisfaction, and increasing employee job satisfaction and commitment, tourism and hospitality companies are reluctant to invest in training because it is seen as a cost center. With the labor force being increasingly diverse and made up of multiple generations including Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, and Generation Z, training and development activities must match the learning preferences of each of these generations.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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