



The dark side of high performance human resource practices in the visitor economy



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ABSTRACT

Enhancing employee performance and improving staff retention are key objectives within the visitor economy, especially among the subset of tourism and hospitality businesses where there is a strong emphasis on 'people first' practices. A significant threat to achieving these sector goals is the presence of psychosocial risk factors associated with abuse and ill-treatment at work. This study examines the role of workplace bullying in the relationship between two organisational approaches to support workforce performance, high performance work systems and perceived organisational support, and employee engagement and retention. Our findings indicate that bullying weakens or even reverses the impact of these organisational initiatives, with HPWS found to increase perceived exposure to bullying. The paper discusses the implications for the visitor economy, particularly, the need to enhance the perception of concern for employee wellbeing and create healthy work environments in the sector if organisational efforts to enhance engagement and retention are to be effective.

1. Introduction

Human resource issues are among the most important and challenging concerns for hospitality and the visitor economy globally (Baum et al., 2016). Employment in the visitor economy is characterised by high levels of staff turnover, instability in contracts and working hours associated with seasonality (see McCole 2015), low rates of pay and unsociable working practices (Chiang et al., 2010). It is not surprising, therefore, that this economic sector places a great deal of emphasis on 'people first' practices, with the goals of reducing employee turnover rates, increasing productivity (which is often very low per employee, see Joppe and Li 2016), and raising customer service quality and worker satisfaction with their work.

The visitor economy is characterised globally by a high prevalence of violence, bullying and harassment directed towards employees, evidenced in the International Labour Organisation report *Violence at Work in the Hotel, Catering and Tourism Sectors* (Hoel and Einarsen, 2003) and reaffirmed in the case of Canada by Roper and Menten (2017). However, this remains a somewhat hidden issue compared to government strategies in other service-oriented settings such as healthcare (see Hogh et al., 2011), designed to stamp out such problems. The endemic nature of these problems in the visitor economy

means that there is a moral and growing legal case to analyse the extent and causes of such problems (see the excellent synthesis of the subject by Ram 2015) because it often has a power dimension, with low status employees disproportionately affected by these issues which directly contributes towards low productivity, staff turnover, and a poor image as a employing sector of the economy. In Australia, Tourism Australia's Code of Conduct (Tourism Australia 2015) sought to take a leadership role illustrating the importance of addressing bullying and harassment as unacceptable practices in organisations (also see Cowan, 2011; Dehue et al., 2011; Harrington et al., 2013).

This paper contributes to advancing knowledge around people-facing businesses in the sector through examining for the first time the potential for workplace bullying to impact organisational outcomes crucial to workforce retention in the sector, and the impact of bullying on organisational practices designed to enhance such outcomes. The paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach and seeks to extend and apply knowledge developed from human resource management, organisational behaviour (see Mullins, 2007) and organisational psychology fields to understand what are globally significant employment issues.

The paper commences by establishing the theoretical framework that informs the study, drawing upon strategic human resource management, social exchange theory and the workplace bullying literature.

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This is followed by hypotheses development and presentation of our research model for the testing of these hypotheses. Next is a discussion of the methodology deployed and the results of the study along with a discussion of the results and the limitations of the study. The implications for professional practice are then examined together with the overall conclusions of the study.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical perspectives on HRM: HPWS and POS to enhance worker satisfaction and reduce leave intentions

Numerous studies have highlighted the effectiveness of human resource management (HRM) practices in achieving satisfaction and retention that are salient for the visitor economy (e.g. Delery 1998; Huselid 1995; Way 2002), although there are a wide range of issues which impact upon human resource (HR) practices and performance and productivity that remain germane areas for research (Fevre et al., 2012; Guest 2011). One approach to people management, based on strategic HRM and the resource-based view, relates to the macro system of practices organisations use to manage human capital (Murphy et al., 2007). These macro systems of practices are known as high performance work systems (HPWS) (see Garcia-Chas et al., 2016). HPWS include a range of HRM practices that have been associated with positive organisational performance (Huselid 1995; Ramsay et al., 2000). Despite the growing literature on HPWS, there has not been any uniform definition of the specific composition of these high performance HR practices. A meta-analysis of the literature by Jiang et al. (2012) identified a variety of HR practices that could be considered components of HPWS. These practices were categorised into three dimensions of HR systems: skills-enhancing, motivation-enhancing, and opportunity-enhancing. Jiang et al. observed that these practices include comprehensive recruitment, rigorous selection, and extensive training for skills-enhancing HR bundles. Developmental performance management, competitive compensation, incentives and rewards, extensive benefits, promotion and career development, and job security were examples of motivation-enhancing practices. The last bundle, opportunity-enhancing HR practices, include HR practices such as flexible job design, work teams, employee involvement, and information sharing.

There is a limited application of HPWS to service businesses in the visitor economy (e.g. Tsai et al., 2009; Dhar 2015; Karatepe 2013a, 2013b; Way 2002) and knowledge is limited on the relationship between strategic HR efforts and desirable organisational outcomes. Notable examples include Dhar's (2015) analysis of the impact of HPWS practices among a sample of Indian hotel workers, indicating that HPWS promoted commitment and service innovation behaviour. Karatepe's (2013a) analysis of full-time frontline hotel employees and their managers concluded that work engagement was a full mediator of the effects of HPWS on employee outcomes such as job performance and extra-role customer service. A further study by Karatepe (2013b) examined the effect of HPWS on Iranian frontline employees, where HPWS had a negative impact on these employees' intentions to leave (also see Karatepe and Vatankhah, 2014 and the airline industry). While these studies suggest the potential benefits of HPWS, the overall significance of such practices for achieving sector goals has not been matched by a body of knowledge to illustrate the wider significance of HPWS in the visitor economy.

Social exchanges between a worker and their organisation (see Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005 for a review of social exchange theory) have been conceptualised as having a relationship with perceived organisational support (POS) (Wayne et al., 1997). The generic management and HRM literature commonly links the construct of POS to organisational goals and outcomes. According to Eisenberger et al. (1986, p. 501), POS refers to employees' beliefs concerning the extent to which the organisation values their contribution and cares about their well-being. While research on the impact of POS on desirable organisational

outcomes is mixed, meta-analytical evidence suggests POS to have a strong positive effect on desirable organisational outcomes (Riggle et al., 2009). There is a limited literature on the role of POS in service-related businesses dealing with consumers in the sector.

This study examines the impact of HPWS and POS within a selection of employees in the visitor economy, drawn principally from Australian tourism and hospitality sector staff in relation to job satisfaction and employee leave intentions. This paper argues that the effectiveness of organisational efforts such as HPWS to enhance organisational goals of promoting staff satisfaction with their work and retaining staff will only be realised where workers feel supported by the organisation and perceive that their wellbeing is being supported through a positive work environment, free of negative behaviours and excessive pressures. Hence, the mediating role of a highly prevalent form of psychosocial hazard known to heavily impact worker wellbeing and retention, workplace bullying, in the relationship between organisational support and HPWS and hospitality employee outcomes is also considered in our analysis.

2.2. Workplace bullying as a product of the work environment

Workplace bullying is one of a number of terms used to capture the darker side of organisational behaviour, and is a grave concern across many occupational sectors with an estimated global prevalence affecting between 11 and 20% of employees (Nielsen et al., 2010). Roper and Menten (2017) found that the hospitality sector was the sector according to Workplace BC in Canada data with the greatest number of accepted claims for bullying and harassment. Workplace bullying is defined by Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy and Alberts (2007, p. 847) as 'a situation where one or several individuals perceive themselves to be on the receiving end of negative actions from one or more persons persistently over a period of time, in a situation where the targets have difficulty defending themselves against these actions. We do not refer to a one-off incident as bullying'. Key to this definition is the repeated and persistent nature of bullying – that negative acts are not considered bullying unless the victim has been repeatedly targeted over a period of time. It is important to distinguish bullying from other forms of ill-treatment, notably harassment, which can be a single event. Related constructs include abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000), emotional abuse (Keashly and Harvey, 2005), incivility (Pearson and Porath, 2000), mobbing (Leymann, 1996) and organisationally-motivated aggression, (O'Leary-Kelly et al., 1996). These phenomena have in common unwelcome negative behaviours repeatedly targeted at one or more individuals.

Bullying is often associated with a structural imbalance of power (Ram, 2015), and may have specific facets in customer interactions in tourism where a group of customers may 'mob' an employee with complaints (Hoel and Einarsen, 2011). While workplace bullying research most commonly deals with bullying among organisational members, we note that it is generally recognised in the literature that bullying may occur from multiple sources (Bentley et al., 2012; Einarsen et al., 2011a, 2011b), including managers, co-workers, clients, customers, students and patients. In the visitor economy context, we note that persistent negative acts from customers (such as hotel guests, casino guests, customers in bars and restaurants) may also be characterised and understood as bullying – even where those persistent acts come from different individuals towards the same worker or workers.

A large body of empirical evidence has associated workplace bullying with a range of negative outcomes for individuals and their organisations, including poor physical health, depression and various psychosomatic symptoms (Mikkelsen and Einarsen, 2001), stress (Agervold and Mikkelsen, 2004; Murray-Gibbons and Gibbons, 2007), anxiety and low levels of emotional well-being (Nielsen and Einarsen, 2010; Einarsen et al., 2011a, 2011b). Ram (2015) summarises the major studies of violence, bullying and sexual harassment in the tourism and hospitality sector and concludes that there are three

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