



Predictors of customer service training in hospitality firms

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ABSTRACT

Small hospitality firms have a reluctance to embrace business improvement activities in general and customer service training in particular. In a survey of 255 hospitality firms, this study investigated a range of predictors for owner-managers to adopt specific customer service training activities, in a series of regression equations. It was found that, in general, those firms that placed more importance on customer service training were willing to take up more training activity. In addition, it was found that predictors for specific customer service training activities, such as benchmarking best practice or mystery shopping, varied between types of activity and with a general intention to consider customer service training.

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1. Introduction

There is a widespread recognition that small service oriented firms, such as those in the hospitality sector, are reluctant to invest in training initiatives (e.g., Lashley and Rowson, 2003; Beeton and Graetz, 2001). Despite calls for better approaches to improving small firm management generally (e.g., Down, 1999), there remains a general lack of understanding of the limited uptake of business improvement activities by owner-managers (Jameson, 2000; Johnson, 2002). This is the case even though, as Massey (2004) suggests, training in the small to medium enterprise sector is a huge investment in training by governments around the world. Thomson and Gray (1999) report that participation rates in government sponsored business initiatives still remains very low. Furthermore, Morrisson and Bergin-Seers (2002) argue that there is, worldwide, a market failure in the inability of small firm owner-managers to be engaged in business improvement initiatives. Consequently, researchers have argued for a more sophisticated understanding of the owner-manager's disposition, means and organisation of learning (Morrisson and Bergin-Seers, 2002).

Determining firm behaviours and attitudes toward business improvement in general, and customer service improvement activities in particular is the first step toward developing more suitable customer service improvement tools for the sector. This

project aimed to provide insights into the attitudes of owner-managers of hospitality firms toward training, business orientation and organisational factors that might lead to greater training activity. In particular, we explore how these three sets of variables relate to customer service training outcomes (see Fig. 1). We first outline, in a brief literature review, some of the previous research into training within small hospitality firms. This discussion is followed by the results of an empirical study that explored the drivers of customer service training/information within small hospitality firms.

2. Literature review

2.1. Attitude toward training

It is apparent that many small tourism and hospitality firms have a degree of scepticism of business improvement activities. Indeed, Johnson (2002) argues that small firms are behaving quite rationally in rejecting a strong focus on training activities. For instance, there is a well established chronic fear of staff mobility resulting in efforts to develop staff to be seen as a largely wasted investment (Patton and Marlow, 2002). Consequently, small firms tend to be reluctant in investing time, finance and other resources in training (Lashley and Rowson, 2003; Beeton and Graetz, 2001). However, Thomson and Gray (1999) have linked growth oriented small firms to a positive attitude toward training activity and, in particular, strong awareness of the importance of management development. In small to medium size firms with between 20 and 200 employees, Vinten (2000) found those firms undertaking higher levels of training also had a positive attitude that training leads to success; tended to integrate training as part of a company

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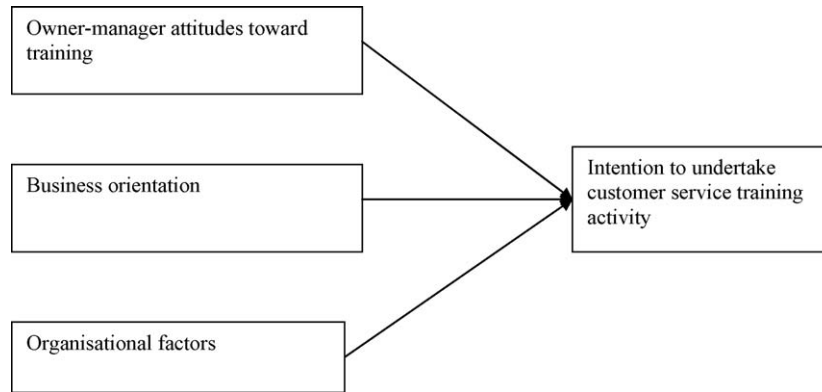


Fig. 1. Model of drivers of customer service training in hospitality firms.

strategy; adopted training that is very practical rather than theoretical; and, acknowledged the importance of a strategic role for training. He argues that where training is made more relevant to small firm needs and delivered onsite in a flexible manner there will be greater receptivity.

Johnson (2002) asserts that business improvement, and especially training, is often seen as an act of faith. A number of authors have identified a range of factors leading to a loss of faith, including such elements as training not seen as relevant to needs, no credible person teaching the activity, or the delivery of training is too formal (e.g., Westhead and Storey, 1996). This lack of confidence is compounded by the inflexibility of hours and place of delivery (Beeton and Graetz, 2001) with off-the job training activities more likely to reduce output (Curran et al., 1997). Morrisson and Bergin-Seers (2002, p. 396) argue that small firm owners tend to distrust training providers who they see as supply focused rather than meeting the needs of the small firm and would be more likely to “impose prescriptive views of what they believe small businesses should [do], rather than what, they actually need” (word in parenthesis added). Thus, we believe that a positive attitude toward training is essential before small hospitality firms are likely to engage in high levels of training activity. Accordingly, we state the following proposition:

P1: Owner–managers of small hospitality firms who hold a positive disposition toward customer service training are likely to be more interested in training activity

2.2. Business orientation

A number of authors have indicated that the personal orientation of owner–managers will play a major role in determining the nature and level of business improvement activity generally. In particular, it is the growth ambitions of the firm that is a logical indicator of interest in business development and, thus, business improvement initiatives. For instance, Morrisson and Teixeira (2004) acknowledge that a host of ‘human’ factors including personal motives, lifestyle activities and profit motives will influence performance outcomes due to the idiosyncratic outlook of small firm owner–managers. More generally, Gray (2002) found that those firms most content with the way the firm was performing were least interested in change, especially growth. In support, Johnston and Loader (2003) assert that more training is conducted by small firms as they grow. More specifically, Kinsella (1993) noted that high growth small to medium sized firms appear to conduct more management oriented training and, similarly, Matlay (2004) suggested that smaller firms provide less formal training than larger firms. Nevertheless, in direct contrast,

Morrisson and Bergin-Seers (2002) investigated growth oriented small firms and generally found a negative attitude toward formalised training and providers. One reason for such a finding is advocated by Gray (2002) who suggested that micro-firms (less than 10 employees) are more interested in survival rather than growth. He notes the paradox where the perceived flexibility of small firms is seen as a strength to adapt to changing conditions, yet these firms also suffer from ingrained habits of the owner–manager that can stifle growth. Thus, personal ambitions or orientation toward profit goals, growth and customer service are more likely to lead to a variation in interest in training, in general, and customer service training in particular. Given the mixed research findings on this issue we state the following tentative proposition:

P2: Owner–managers of small hospitality firms with a greater emphasis on profit, growth or service orientation are likely to be more interested in training activity

2.3. Organisational factors

Several organisational factors have been suggested to account for variation in training activity (e.g., length of business experience, prior training experience, number of employees, business planning). One of the more widely cited factors related to training activity or business improvement more generally is firm size. For instance, Massey (2004) argues that there is a consensus that firm size is positively related to the decision to invest in training and consequently found that the smallest firms spent the least on training. In general, the issue of staffing resources for business improvement was nicely stated by Barry and Milner (2002) who noted the lack of time to allocate to staff training for new technology innovations. They found that the small size of the firm meant that it was a luxury, rather than normal practice, to spare a staff member to attend a training course. While some authors have noted that training within small firms is less visible and internal, it was pointed out by Loan-Clarke et al. (1999) that one of the more consistent findings among small firm researchers is the relationship between firm size and the level of external training. For instance, Kotey and Folker (2007) found that the amount of formal training increased as firm size increased. In support, Curran et al. (1996) argue that firms with less than 10 employees do the least training and many scholars have acknowledged that more training is conducted as firm size increases (e.g., Marshall et al., 1995). In addition to the observation by Barry and Milner (2002) that small firms lack staff capacity for training, Gray (2002) suggests that owner–managers are also likely to be heavily involved in operational matters and this can reinforce the resistance to learn

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