



Practice Papers

The role of social experience in undergraduates' career perceptions through internships



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to identify the impact that undergraduate students' internships have on their perceptions of careers in the hospitality and tourism industry, focusing on the moderating role of informal social experiences with co-workers and supervisors that may occur during the internship period. Data for pre-internship expectations and post-internship perceptions were gathered from undergraduate students majoring in hospitality and tourism management in two-year courses in the Seoul metropolitan area, Korea. The results imply that desirable social experiences during students' internship periods can ultimately lead to a change in students' perceptions, thereby decreasing negative perceptions regarding various factors relating to a career in the hospitality and tourism industry.

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1. Introduction

Changing customer needs and an increasing reliance on human resources to provide high quality service make it imperative for competing service industries to manage the talents and capabilities of their employees effectively. Suitable and sustainable programs for talent management support an organization's business goals, which essentially amount to making money (Cappelli, 2008). The increased emphasis on effective use of human resources has brought more attention to students' work experiences (Leslie, 1994).

Service industries, and especially the hospitality and tourism industry, are largely founded on human performance, and service quality and service providers cannot be considered separately. In other words, employees are part of the product in the service industry, since their performances affect overall corporate performance (Greene, Walls, & Schrest, 1994). Therefore, there is little doubt that selecting and retaining the right employee is one of the greatest challenges faced by most hospitality and tourism organizations (Leslie, 1994). One way to address this challenge is to consider talent management a critical part of human resource management. This can be initiated through an internship program that provides undergraduate students with a gateway into the industry (Collins, 2002).

Typically, internship programs in the hospitality and tourism industry help undergraduate students understand the industry and obtain exposure to practical work environments, as is only marginally possible in classroom settings (Zopiatis & Constanti, 2007). Students who participate in internship programs can obtain a good sense of what it would be like to work for corporations in the industry by acquiring practical skills through hands-on experience and by making connections in the workplace.

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Students can have either a positive or a negative perception of their internships, depending on their experiences and performance during the program. Although they may consider the relationships they create with industry personnel to be helpful professionally, they may occasionally see a lack of communication among employees, a supervisor's negative attitude, or a frantic work environment, all of which can decrease their motivation to remain in the industry (Collins, 2002). Under the pressure of limited time and working opportunities, students may pursue additional opportunities during an internship in order to obtain more information, acquire actual working skills, practice interpersonal communication skills with co-workers and supervisors, and create social networks with employees.

Recent studies have given considerable attention to the impact of internship programs on career choice and job satisfaction, as well as on the development of long-term strategies for attracting and retaining talented employees in the hospitality and tourism industry (Lam & Ching, 2007; Richardson, 2008, 2009). Devising methods to attract and retain a critical group of talented people is one of the greatest challenges the industry faces. High turnover rates of employees and a lack of consistent praise and feedback result in fewer students choosing careers in these industries (Barron, 2008).

Undergraduates' perceptions of career paths in the hospitality and tourism industry can be heavily influenced by first impressions formed during their internships, which can either enhance or damage the industry's reputation. Therefore, it would be useful for human resource managers in the hospitality and tourism industry to recognize how a student's internship experience can affect his or her future perceptions of and choices with regard to the industry. In addition, it would be useful for managers to appreciate the importance during internship periods of attracting and socializing interns as entry-level job candidates.

In spite of a considerable amount of literature accumulated on the subject of internships and some interesting research questions raised regarding students' career perceptions, little empirical research has explored the possible factors that may affect students' career perceptions arising from internships. Furthermore, significant on-going challenges associated with selecting and retaining talent, faced by most hospitality and tourism companies, call for industry practitioners and college educators and administrators who deal with internships to give greater attention to undergraduates' career perceptions and to possible factors affecting them throughout their internships.

The purpose of this study is to examine how undergraduate students' internships affect their perceptions of careers in the hospitality and tourism industry, with special attention to the moderating role of informal social experiences with co-workers and supervisors that may occur during the internship. This study presumes that social experiences during internship periods can affect the inclination of undergraduate students toward a career in the hospitality and tourism industry. Adopting such a perspective assumes that determining these opportunities for social experiences through internships can enhance students' perceptions of the desirability of a career in the hospitality and tourism industry and demonstrate their commitment to the industry. This study contributes to uncovering useful managerial strategies for developing more effective and successful internship programs as a long-term strategy to attract and retain talented employees in the hospitality and tourism industry.

2. Literature review

2.1. Education and industry experience

Undergraduate students tend not to believe that hospitality professionals respect their college internship programs, nor do they believe that a balance exists between academic education and actual industry experience (Zopiatis & Constanti, 2007). Any industry should provide job seekers with a vision of suitable career factors, such as job enjoyment, job security, opportunities for advancement, high earnings, reasonable workload, and good starting salary. Many of the undergraduate tourism and hospitality students, however, seem not to believe that the industry actually provides them with such desirable factors, which are perceived as important (Richardson, 2009). Besides, lack of priority given to family life, unfair promotions, unsatisfactory pay and benefits, and occasionally inappropriate behavior of co-workers can contribute to the unfavorable reactions of college students to the industry (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000). Discrepancies between the pre-work perceptions and the actual experience of work can surely influence students to avoid a career in tourism (Leslie & Richardson, 2000).

Many hospitality recruiters may argue that students do not have realistic expectations regarding work or they are not prepared physically or mentally well enough for proper employment in the industry (Downey & DeVeau, 1988). When students become aware of the issues and problems existing in the industry, they recognize some discrepancies between what they have learned in the classroom and what they experience on the job (Zopiatis & Constanti, 2007). Previous research on undergraduate students enrolled in the hospitality and tourism courses found that they tended to evaluate careers in the industry negatively, citing stress, exhaustion, and job insecurity due to seasonality, even though they did also perceive the jobs as interesting and worthwhile (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000). Prior to working, students majoring in hospitality and tourism expressed relatively high expectations of reasonable work hours, responsibilities, and interaction with supervisors, but their actual satisfaction at their first jobs fell short of expectations (Dickerson, 2009).

On the other hand, few hospitality professionals believe that educational institutions adequately prepare students to adapt well to an actual work environment (Zopiatis & Constanti, 2007). When students are confronted with operational issues and practices that differ from what they were taught in the classroom, they may become suspicious of their education and have negative perceptions that can leave them frustrated and disappointed with regard to careers in the

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