Human resources in tourism: Still waiting for change? – A 2015 reprise

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Global review of trends and developments in HRM/employment in tourism.
- Adopts a macro-environmental analytical approach.
- Identifies newly emerging issues and themes.
- Takes a futures perspective on tourism employment.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Seemingly intransigent human resource issues remain at the forefront of global tourism's challenges. Some of the key issues were identified in Baum's (2007) reflections on this topic. In light of the significant change that has impacted on tourism and employment in the intervening years, this conceptual paper provides an assessment of the current status of the issues that Baum identified in 2007 and identifies a range of emerging concerns that continue to shape the tourism workplace and workforce. The status of tourism work can be seen in terms of both continuity and change and the impact of these contrary forces is considered in reaching conclusions that highlight both the ongoing challenges for tourism and the evident progress that can be identified.

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1. Introduction

In 2007, *Tourism Management* published a detailed assessment of the state of play with respect to human resources in tourism (Baum, 2007), with the somewhat pessimistic sub-title of "Still waiting for change", which focused on the notion that, in a world of increasing social, economic, political and technological churn, not least within tourism, some dimensions of people management and the role of human resources appeared to be frozen in time. The reputation of tourism as an employer remained, in this assessment, very mixed with excellent practice in some organisations located alongside widespread perceptions of poor pay, challenging working conditions and limited opportunities for growth and development, particularly for women and minorities. Baum's (2007) paper is by no means the only analyses of human resource themes pertaining

to tourism that have been aired in recent years (see, for example, Davidson, McPhail, & Barry, 2011; Kusluvan, Kusluvan, Ilhan, & Buyruk, 2010; Lucas & Deery, 2004; Singh, Hu, & Roehl, 2007; Tracey, 2014). The focus of most of these discussions is substantially organisational and managerialist. As a consequence, many of what might be seen as the substantive or structural issues relating to tourism employment are only considered in a fairly superficial manner, with limited attempt to really understand their causes and how they relate to wider social, cultural, economic or political considerations. Ladkin (2011:1152), in her own critique of the workplace environment within tourism, notes correctly that "It is no surprise that the management and economic perspectives dominate much of the research, but the complex societal and cultural factors cannot be ignored and the contribution that studying tourism labour can have on wider societal debates is significant". Of all the assessments of human resource issues in tourism that have been undertaken in recent years, Baum's (2007) iteration of this discourse is perhaps the most directly supportive of Ladkin in aiming to place tourism work and the management of the sector's

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employees in as wide a contextual environment as is possible and pertinent. Tourism and its workplaces have been subjected to the impact of sustained turbulence and change in macro social, economic, political and technological environmental terms since 2007. It is the aim of this paper, therefore, to provide an assessment that accommodates these changes and also takes a fresh but critical look at human resources in tourism through a 2015 lens.

The starting point from which Baum assessed the nature of change in tourism HRM in 2007, perhaps unfairly, was George Orwell's (1933) bleak questioning of the social significance of the tourism worker's life (in the proxy form of the plongeur) and Baum sought to demonstrate that aspects of work in tourism had, indeed, shifted little in the intervening seventy years. It is the contention of this paper that this comparator is somewhat limiting because the same analysis was also able to point to major enhancements in the tourism workplace and dramatic shifts within the way that organisations went about their people management business, driven by external change and guided by shifting values within society. In revisiting this theme some eight years later, therefore, it is important to acknowledge that implicit in Baum's 2007 assessment was the assumption that there could be some notion of real progress towards a state of maturity, fairness and mutual respect within people management in tourism. This assumption encapsulates, on the one hand, a broad commitment to the ILO's principles of decent work for the majority alongside boardroom recognition that the quality of the people in the workplace can make a real and positive difference to business outcomes. In picking up Baum's narrative on this topic after a number of years' reflection, the aim of this paper is to question whether aspirations of real progress towards this ideal were overly naive.

The genesis of this paper, following relatively hard on the heels of the 2007 discussion, is recognition of the fast pace of change over the intervening period and the desire to assess whether there has been evidence of discernable progress with respect to conditions in the tourism workplace in the intervening period. This focus on change relates to all dimensions of the external environment, insofar as they impact upon tourism, its workforce and the ways in which organisations marshal their human resources (Solnet, Kralj, & Baum, 2013). Macro-environmental change has been clearly evident across a broad spectrum of economic, political, socio-cultural and technological dimensions during the timeframe in question, a selection of which might include the gradual acceptance by most in the world community of climate change and the potential future scarcity of traditional energy resources; failure to halt the increasing gaps between the 'haves' and 'have nots' both within developed nations and between these countries and their poorer neighbours; gradual but patchy recovery from the global (read European/North American) financial crisis; a rebalancing of global economies in favour of emerging economic powers, in part a response to crisis but reflecting more fundamental, underlying shifts; an escalation of political turbulence at a regional level in key flashpoints around the world; generational and technological change in consumer behaviour and the way in which we execute our choices; the power of social media and its impact on how we communicate with each other, with our brands, with our customers and within the workplace; and the rising power of lifestyle over more overt material career choices in developed economies. Each of these has direct consequences for tourism as a global industry, for work and the workplace and also for the management of people working within the myriad of businesses that go to make up the tourism sector.

Tourism's relationship to these and other developments can be characterized as a combination of both continuity and change. This, of course, is no original observation (see, for example, Richter, 2001) but, nonetheless, is a fair reflection of a tourism environment that has seen both turbulence and stability within a relatively short timeframe. On the one hand, it is clear that there has been continuity with respect to a number of key trends, including a drive towards greater sustainability in the use of finite and potentially harmful resources within travel and tourism; continued growth in both emerging outbound markets and new destinations; the impact of changing technologies on tourism distribution and consumer choice; and travel over greater distances and, paradoxically, for shorter periods of time, as outcomes of consumer choice and behaviour. Complementary to these more stable 'continuity' characteristics within tourism have been the impact of major world events on tourist choice and behaviour, whether natural disasters, the consequences of conflict or volatility in the economic and financial environment.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to provide an up-dated assessment of the key 'broad-brush' themes addressed by Baum in 2007, to establish whether conclusions drawn then remain valid today and to consider whether and in what respects the world of tourism HRM has changed in the intervening period. Baum (2007:1384) explained the purpose of his work in the following terms:

This paper seeks to make a partial assessment of the impact of external change on the human resource environment within tourism over the past 20 years, with particular focus on work and employment themes within the sector. In addressing a topic as broad as this, there is a real danger of uncritical generalisation within a highly heterogeneous sector such as tourism.

This paper aspires to build on Baum's work but it is also the aim of this discussion to progress the debate into a number of new and emerging areas, highlighting themes that have become more significant from both theoretical and applied perspectives. The caveat which was applicable to Baum's earlier work and has equal validity in this analysis today is that, inevitability, discussion in this paper is framed by selectivity and the dangers of generalizing about a business context which is so diverse. Potential themes for inclusion, then in 2007 and likewise, today, exceed in number those that can be addressed in any depth here. Therefore, there are inevitable gaps in the scope and depth of this analysis.

2. A changing world, 2007–2014

To claim that the world within which tourism employment is located has changed and continues to change at rapid pace is to state the obvious. Having said that, in many developed countries aspects of work in all sectors of the economy, not just tourism, exhibit major differences in 2014/15 from the way they were in 2006/07. The impact of such change, however, has been rather more muted in some of the world's poorest nations and for employees working in routine and marginalized occupations. In tourism, a wide range of influencers and drivers of workplace change can be identified and the most frequently cited in the literature (Edgell, 2014) are taken to include, *inter alia*, the factors that are summarised in Table 1.

These changes in Table 1 contribute significantly to subtle shifts in the skills and service demands placed on the workforce in tourism and, in turn, have implications for formative and in-service education and training programmes and providers and well as for the more general management of tourism workers.

The corollary of change within tourism that impacts upon employment is that the world of work, in turn, has constantly evolved in response to economic, political, socio-cultural and technological factors and key trends among these shifts likewise shape tourism and its capacity to offer various products and services. Key employment changes, which relate to the world of work, are summarised in Table 2.