Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management 32 (2017) 45–53

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management

journal homepage: http://www.journals.elsevier.com/journal-of-hospitality-and-tourism-management

Career desires and expectations of event management students

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 3 November 2016
Received in revised form
20 April 2017
Accepted 21 April 2017

ABSTRACT

This study measured the factors that undergraduate event management (EM) students perceive to be important in choosing a career, determine the expectations of an event career by EM students, and compare importance and expectation factors. Drawing on Social Cognitive Career Theory, this study surveyed 525 students from five U.S. universities. The most important attributes for choosing a career in EM were: an enjoyable job, pleasant working environment, and an exciting job. For expectations of a career in EM, students felt an EM career most highly offered: interaction with others, an enjoyable job, responsibility, excitement, and transferable skills. In general, students reported desired importance factors which exceeded expectation levels. However, findings indicate students are aware of weaknesses of EM careers. Implications for students, educators, universities, and industry are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Many hospitality programs have realized that a majority of students enrolled in their programs are claiming to want a career in Event Management (EM); yet little is known about what these students want out of such a career. To accommodate this career interest, Iowa State University introduced EM as an undergraduate degree program, and it increased from 24 to 217 students in the first year (Roppe, 2012) to 380 students in 2016. In another example, the hospitality program at Purdue recently added an a minor in EM since half of the 600 students were interested in event and meeting planners, a dramatic shift from when they were interested primarily in careers in hotels and foodservice.

Despite the growth in EM careers, EM associations, and university courses and programs (Cecil, Reed, & Reed, 2011; Harris & Jago, 1999; Mair, 2009; Silvers, Bowdin, O'toole, & Nelson, 2006), attempts to study the educational experience, centered on student's perceptions of the relevance of their coursework (Barron & Whitford, 2004; Williamson, 2005) and student and employer perspectives of the EM field and the skills and attributes to succeed (Junek, Lockstone, & Mair, 2009), are limited. Although these studies have clarified the growth in EM careers, the value of their educational experience, and both student and employer perspectives of successful career skills, no studies have specifically identified student perceptions of their desires and expectations in seeking an EM career.

When choosing a career, students must balance what is important to them with what they expect from a career. Students may weigh career information in relation to their views of themselves (Lent, Ezeofor, Morrison, Penn, & Ireland, 2015). Wang and Huang (2014) argued that it is important to understand students' perceptions and attitudes towards tourism and hospitality careers. An understanding of students' career perceptions may help academics to provide accurate information about careers (Hurst & Good, 2009) and may also have a positive impact on the industry.

While researchers have investigated perceptions of hospitality and tourism careers, the evolution of EM as an area of study creates the need for a parallel investigation. It is important to understand what EM students seek from careers, what their perceptions are of EM careers, why EM students have pursued this area of study, and how they compare these careers to other options. This paper addresses the first two areas.

It has been proposed that it is important for a career to meet

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2017.04.005
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expectations. Richardson (2010b) contended that hospitality graduates are entering the industry without an accurate understanding of the industry. Additionally, researchers have claimed that the image of a particular industry will have a major effect on potential recruits' perceptions of the industry, which will impact the quality and quantity of future staff (Brown, Arendt, & Bosselman, 2014; Riley, Ladkin, & Szivas, 2002). Understanding student perceptions of industry careers is a crucial step. By determining student perceptions, it can be determined where gaps exist between perceived and actual EM career attributes.

Richardson (2009) and Richardson and Thomas (2012) are critical studies that frame the purpose of this study. They surveyed hospitality students, asking them which factors were most important to them in a career and compared them to how much they expected a hospitality career to meet those expectations. This paper extends this research to begin to paint a picture of student perceptions of EM careers, a subset of the hospitality industry. Therefore, the aims of this paper are to:

1. Measure the factors that event management (EM) students perceive to be important in choosing a career;
2. Determine expectations of an event career from the perspective of EM students; and
3. Compare importance factors with expectations from the perspective of EM students.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Theoretical framework

Holland's (1985) Social Cognitive Career Theory posits that people tend to select career options that match their primary career interests or that combine their primary and ancillary interest themes. It contains a multitude of factors such as self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals and their interactions with environment and life experience (Chuang, Goh, Stout, & Dellmann-Jenkins, 2007). According to this theory, personal characteristics, contextual factors, and learning experiences play important roles in influencing one's career exploration and career development process (Lent & Hackett, 1994; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). This theory has been used in the study of students' career perceptions in service industries, including retail (Hurst & Good, 2009) and hospitality (Chuang et al., 2007).

Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) has been used in the psychology and education fields to explain that people's judgements and subsequent actions are predicated on what they are able to do, and this is supported by their beliefs of probable actions and their effects. In other words, when a person sees a specific behavior being performed, the person is apt to use the information while observing that behavior in order to replicate the behavior. It is likely that people form enduring interests in activities in which they view themselves to be efficacious and in which they anticipate positive outcomes (Bandura, 1986; Lent, Larkin, & Brown, 1989). In the context of career and academic choice, SCT examines how students' career and academic interests change and mature, and how these choices are turned into behavioral action (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). Three linked variables—self-efficacy beliefs (derived from our sources of information); outcome expectations (effort and persistence), and goals (a person's intention to perform a behavior) are rooted in SCT in aspects of career development. We posit that a students' personal interests and abilities can be compared to expected job characteristics.

Career perceptions, and ultimate success in a career, are due to a number of factors. Lent and Hackett (1994) contended that concepts such as career plans, decisions, aspirations, and expressed choices are all essentially goal mechanisms. They stated that once interests crystallize, it may take very compelling experiences to provoke a fundamental reappraisal of career self-efficacy and outcome beliefs and, hence, a change in basic interest patterns. Thus, it appears that understanding early impressions of career attributes are important.

2.2. Perceptions of careers in hospitality and tourism

Student perceptions of careers in hospitality and tourism have been well documented, but less is known about individual career fields, such as event management, within the hospitality field. Kusluvan and Kusluvan (2000) suggested that finding out hospitality students' perceptions and attitudes towards hospitality jobs may help predict the likelihood of students seeking employment in the same industry after graduation. According to Richardson (2009) "an employee's commitment to any industry will be determined by their perceptions and attitudes towards working in the industry as well the types of jobs available in the industry" (p. 383). He surveyed undergraduate tourism and hospitality students in Australia. Given a list of career attributes, students were asked how important each factor was in career choice and to what extent a hospitality/tourism career would offer each characteristic. In comparing the importance and expectation factors, he concluded that the students did not believe that the industry would offer them the important attributes in choosing a career. However, it should be noted that the two variables had different endpoints and no clear midpoint.

In a similar study of American hospitality and tourism students, Richardson and Thomas (2012) again found that expectations of a hospitality career were not perceived to match up with what students desired. However, the students were "generally happy with most dimensions of work" (p. 7) in the hospitality and tourism industry. This is in contrast to the 2009 study that concluded Australian students were not as a happy or committed to entering the hospitality and tourism industry. Richardson (2010b) also considered the difference in the opinions of domestic and international students studying in Australia, finding that international students believed a career in the industry to be more attractive than Australian students. Thus it appears that there may be strong international differences in career desires and perceptions. A related study by Richardson (2010a) investigated Generation Y students' perceptions of tourism and hospitality employment, the influence of work experience on perceptions, and students' commitment to careers in the industry. He posited that an employee's commitment to any industry will be determined by their perceptions and attitudes towards working in the industry as well as the types of jobs available in the industry.

Other studies have also considered career perceptions among hospitality or tourism students. Wang and Huang (2014) studied how student characteristics (e.g. gender, work experience, and year in school) affect career perceptions and attitudes of hospitality students. They found that psychological attributes (intrinsic) rather than physical attributes (extrinsic) should be the focus in understanding tourism and hospitality students' career perceptions. Kusluvan and Kusluvan (2000) surveyed Turkish students and found that respondents found the work interesting and worthwhile. However, they had many negative perceptions of tourism careers, including stress, long hours, and managerial shortcomings. In a pilot study, Sibson (2011) asked students to rate many career factors and found that enjoyable work, interesting work, and good career opportunities were important to students. Chuang and Dellman-Jenkins (2010) found that the primary reason for choosing a hospitality career was people interaction. Overall, hospitality and tourism students' positive views of related careers

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