



Service quality and the training of employees: The mediating role of organizational commitment



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Study findings revealed strong relationships between training and service quality.
- Commitment was found to be acting as a mediator between training and service quality.
- SME tourist hotels need to be trained to improve their performance.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the attitudes of employees working in Indian hotels catering to tourists. It analyzed their perception of training opportunities and the impact of such training on the service provided to guests. An integrated model was developed highlighting the relationship between perceived accessibility to training, perceived support for training, perceived benefits from training, and the implications of training on service quality mediated through organizational commitment. Using a sample of 494 employees, structural equation modeling was conducted to establish this relationship by analyzing the responses of employees working in small and medium size tourist hotels operating in Uttarakhand, India. The findings of the study reveal a strong relationship between employee training and the quality of services offered by employees in tourist hotels. The study discusses the implications of the presented findings and suggests potential practical applications.

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1. Introduction

In today's world, tourism is widely recognized by various business houses, international funding agencies, as well as various governments as an effective way to raise the development of the economy of a country; so much so that emerging economies like India have begun to consider it an alternative source of economic growth (Oppermann & Chon, 1997; Sindiga, 1999). This is mainly due to the potential benefits seen by governments in terms of generating employment opportunities, infrastructure development, and the financial benefits of foreign exchange (Goswami & Saikia, 2012; Lee & Brahmasrene, 2013; Temiz & Gökmen, 2014).

The Indian hotel industry has shown a steady growth of approximately 14% during the last few years and experts predict a similar growth trend in the coming years (Vardharajan & Rajan, 2013). This has resulted in the development of a large number of

hotels, specifically in India's tourist areas, leading to fierce competition among developers (Gautam, 2012). The present market size of Indian tourism and the hospitality industry is around \$120 billion and is expected to pass \$420 billion by 2025 (IBEF, 2013).

An outcome of this growth can be seen in the measures taken by the management of tourist hotels who not only work to retain old customers but also to attract new ones by adopting different measures (Karatepe & Douri, 2012; Kim, Cha, Singh, & Knutson, 2013). The consistent rise in travel expenditures accompanied by changes in tourist requirements (Kaur, 1985) have encouraged tour and hospitality operators in India to develop a range of package deals for their customers. Small and medium sized hotels, in this regard, have grown at a consistent rate of 6–7% since 2013 (ONICRA, 2013), which has created huge employment opportunities. They have also performed the important role of enhancing the growth and development of the Indian economy by providing 40% of total exports and 45% of industrial output (Goyal, 2013). Hence, the focus of this study is on small and medium sized tourist hotels operating in Uttarakhand, India.

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The state of Uttarakhand, India is considered one of the important centers of pilgrim activities and is visited by millions of national and international pilgrims, due to the presence of four major Hindu shrines – Yamunotri, Gangotri, Badrinath and Kedarnath (Kala, 2004; Kala & Maikhuri, 2011). In order to meet the requirements of a huge influx of pilgrims, a complex network of roadways, hotels, restaurants, lodges, and other related systems has been developed in the last two decades. Apart from religious sites, various wildlife parks, mountain vistas, hill stations, and trekking routes have also become a major source of attraction for national and international tourists and, in 2013, Uttarakhand was voted “the best emerging destination” in South Asia (IBEF, 2013). However, while the tourism industry in general has seen an increase in financial performance, specifics of employee behavior in tourist hotels have been taken for granted. Researchers have indicated that the quality of service offered by employees has a direct impact on a customer's decision to re-visit a hotel. Although studies of tourist hotels have been conducted since the 1980s (Barrington & Olsen, 1987), only in the last decade has service quality gained the attention of practitioners, academicians, and researchers (Lassar, Manolis, & Winsor, 2000). In the absence of appropriate training for hotel employees, meeting the high expectations of customers has remained a challenge for hotels and an area of concern for the industry (Clark, Hartline, & Jones, 2009).

It is largely agreed that employee training plays a significant role in improving employee performance in terms of offering better quality services and, hence, helping an organization obtain a competitive advantage. According to Buckley and Caple (1995), training can be defined as “a planned and systematic effort to modify or develop knowledge, skill, and attitude through learning experience, to achieve effective performance in an activity or range of activities” (p. 34). In this regard, training in desired skills and knowledge can be considered an investment in the most important resource of the organization, i.e., ‘human resources’. From this perspective, training can also be considered a way to improve employees' satisfaction level concerning their personal and professional development. Further, researchers like Scott and Meyer (1991) have suggested that investment in employee training contributes significantly toward raising the productivity and performance of an organization. In spite of this, there are comparatively few studies available supporting the argument that HRD positively influences organizational performance (Torraco, 1999). Researchers have suggested that consistent efforts need to be made to ensure effective and adequate training is provided to employees so they can achieve organizational goals with a higher degree of confidence. This is possible when employees display a higher level of commitment toward their organization (e.g. see Bulut & Culha, 2010; Ehrhardt, Miller, Freeman, & Hom, 2011).

Although numerous studies have been carried out to establish the relationship between training and its impact on the commitment level of employees in countries like Malaysia (Teck-Hong & Yong-Kean, 2012), Turkey (Bulut & Culha, 2010), Qatar (Al Emadi & Marquardt, 2007), few studies of a similar nature have been done in the Indian context. In some western countries, studies have been conducted providing evidence that training has a positive impact on the commitment level of employees. Internationally, studies carried out by various researchers like Glaveli and Karassavidou (2011) and Shantz and Latham (2012) have highlighted the positive effect of training on various work related outcomes for improving organizational performance. However, until now, studies on training in India have largely focused on the returns of training programs and organizational policies (Chidambaram, Ramachandran, & Thevar, 2013; Subramanian, Sinha, & Gupta, 2012; Yadapadithaya & Stewart, 2003). Very few studies have examined the impact of training on employee commitment levels

and, subsequently, their performance related outcomes, such as service quality.

This study examines employee perception of training related activities carried out by an organization, including perceived accessibility to training, perceived support for training, and perceived benefits of training on their commitment level toward their organizations. The subsequent impact on quality of services they provide to customers of small and medium sized tourist hotels in Uttarakhand, India is also considered. A literature review supporting the model is given below.

2. Theoretical foundation and hypothesis formulation

2.1. Organizational commitment

Organizational commitment is considered one of the most important concepts in the area of organizational behavior and human resource management (Cohen, 2007). In spite of the fact that organizational commitment is considered a single construct, Meyer and Allen (1991) divided it into three different aspects: affective, continuance and normative commitment. According to Meyer and Allen (1991), affective commitment is “an employee's emotional attachment to, identification with and involvement in the organization”; continuance commitment is “commitment based on the costs that employees associate with leaving the organization”; and normative commitment is “an employee's feelings of obligation to remain with the organization” (Meyer & Allen, 1991, p. 67).

Employees who have a strong faith in the values and beliefs of an organization and readily accept its goals and objectives and are ready to exert extra effort for or on behalf of the organization are considered to have a very high level of organizational commitment (Angel & Perry, 1981; Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian, 1974). This suggests that those who are strongly affiliated to an organization with a higher level of commitment can be motivated to achieve organizational goals without looking for an opportunity for personal gain.

Studies conducted in the last 10 years have conceptualized organizational commitment as affective organizational commitment, organizational commitment, or affective commitment (Ariani, 2012; Sani, 2013). Such commitment displayed by employees is largely based on their willingness to accept the organization's values and strategies and their strong desire to work for the betterment of the organization and remain with the organization (Porter et al., 1974).

A large number of studies has examined the commitment level of employees toward their organization and its relationship with various employee work related outcomes, such as turnover, performance, and organizational citizenship behavior. Along similar lines, a number of studies has been conducted in India that have revealed that organizational commitment has a direct relationship with trust (Nambudiri, 2012), cultural values (Singh & Mohanty, 2011), participation satisfaction (Kanwar, Singh, & Kodwani, 2012) and a mediating relationship between HR practices and turnover intentions (see Guchait & Cho, 2010). However, no research has been conducted in India to examine the effect of training on the commitment level of employees and its subsequent impact on employee quality of service. Hence, this study examines the mediating role of commitment between training and customer service quality in the context of small and medium sized tourist hotels.

2.1.1. Perceived access to training and organizational commitment

Perceived access to training refers to employees' perception of the opportunities they are given to attend training programs regardless of eligibility, including support from their managers, fair criteria for being selected for a program or, following a formal process, selection for training. The probability of gaining access to a

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