

Research Horizons

Volume 12 | Issue 1
February 2018

Create a Green Culture, Hotels Urged

With the ever-increasing concern about worldwide environmental problems, the findings of a recent study by the SHTM's Dr Eric Chan, Dr Alice Hon, Dr Wilco Chan and a co-researcher provide much-needed practical suggestions that should help hotels aiming to implement environmental management programmes. The researchers highlight that gaining employees' support for new environmental initiatives is key to ensuring success. Equipping employees with sufficient environmental knowledge is important to raising their awareness and concern, and should encourage them to participate in the necessary ecological practices.

Knowledge, Awareness and Concern

The successful implementation of an environmental management system in a hotel depends on the "support and involvement" of its employees, the researchers explain. Although there is some evidence that staff morale may be improved by the implementation of an environmental programme, employees may be resistant to changes in their "routine and habitual operations", especially if such changes mean they are also required to undertake additional tasks. Hotels thus need to ensure that staff members are willing to support the introduction of such programmes, yet little is known about how this can best be achieved.

Environmental behaviour, according to the researchers, relies on having knowledge about environmental issues. They suggest, for instance, that someone is more likely to "buy an eco-washer after acknowledging the meaning of its green label and benefits". Providing employees with information about the effects of green practices that as recycling, saving water and turning off lights should thus promote more positive attitudes towards that behaviour, and this in turn should motivate them to participate in more "ecologically or environmentally responsible behaviour".

Environmental knowledge also promotes environmental awareness, which the researchers define as "an individual's attention to and sensitivity to environmental problems". A person with greater environmental awareness is more conscious of how problems such as global warming affect them and understands that "he or she may eventually suffer from the consequences". Consequently, those who are more ecologically aware are more likely to "purchase products with eco labels, consume organic foods, and participate in recycling programmes".

Another important factor is environmental concern, which refers to people's beliefs and feelings about ecological issues. Someone with environmental concern about the greenhouse effect, for instance, is likely to believe that "some

attention or immediate action is required to tackle the problem". Such concern may lead to more ecological behaviour, although the researchers point out that it is still unclear whether that behaviour is directly related to environmental knowledge.

Employees' Environmental Behaviour

Although various studies have examined how people's environmental knowledge, awareness and concern influence their ecological behaviour, these factors have not been investigated together with the aim of examining how they relate to each other. Although each factor may "eventually drive ecological behaviour", as the researchers suggest, there is evidence, for instance, that knowledge alone is insufficient to change behaviour.

To bridge this gap, the researchers wanted to determine the extent to which the ideas generated by environmental programmes could be integrated with hospitality employees' environmental knowledge, awareness, concern, and ecological behaviour. They hypothesised that environmental knowledge is positively related to environmental awareness, that environmental awareness is positively related to environmental concern, and that environmental

concern is ultimately positively related to ecological behaviour.

With this mental model in hand, the researchers conducted a survey at ten international tourist hotels in Hong Kong, eight of which were 4 or 5-star hotels and two of which were 3-star hotels. Hotel employees at various levels were asked about their environmental knowledge, awareness and concern, ecological behaviour and demographic characteristics.

Among the respondents, 58% were female, 41% were aged 20-29, 36% were aged 30-49 and the rest were aged over 49. Less than half had a Bachelor's degree or higher-level education and worked in a managerial or supervisory-level position. Almost half of the respondents had worked in their current company for 5 years or more.

The survey results revealed that employees with higher levels of environmental knowledge also showed greater environmental awareness and concern, and were more likely to implement green practices. For instance, such employees tended to agree with statements like "As the last person to leave a room in the hotel, I switch off the lights". Although environmental knowledge directly influenced ecological behaviour, it had the greatest effect among those who also showed high environmental awareness and concern, thus confirming that knowledge alone may not always be sufficient to change people's habits.

Raising Awareness and Concern

The researchers' findings have many practical implications that can help hotels to successfully implement new environmental initiatives, in particular by focusing on raising awareness and concern. The

researchers highlight the important role of management in transmitting "environmental knowledge, understanding and information" to lower-level employees. When employees receive messages from top management about the importance of environmental protection, their awareness is raised and they become more concerned about the effects of green practices and protecting the environment.

Hotels should thus start by training managers and ensuring they communicate regularly with employees, such as by providing "daily briefings" and staff meetings to exchange the latest environmental information.

The researchers also explain that rather than just focusing on knowledge, it is important that training should raise employees' awareness and concern about environmental issues, particularly those that are relevant to the hospitality and tourism industry like the "carbon footprint of travellers" and the problems caused by food waste in hotels. They advise that training should be regular and provided to "all levels of hotel employees" to motivate senior executives to introduce new environmental strategies and marketing campaigns, motivate supervisors to monitor daily environmental practices and motivate rank and file employees to implement these practices, even if they add to their workload.

Eventually, employees should be encouraged to come up with new ideas about how to reduce the effects of environmental problems by organising discussion sessions and providing a "suggestion box only for possible green practices", the researchers suggest. Finally, incentives could be offered to "employees or teams who implement green practices that result in noticeable cost savings".

Helping Green Hotels

The main contribution of the study, according to the researchers, is their mental model, which should be useful for assessing how environmental practices affect employees' "ecological behavioural outcomes". Hotels are increasingly expected to have effective environmental programmes to build and maintain a good reputation and ensure their profitability. By following the researchers' suggestions, hotels should find it easier to provide the right training to ensure employees at all levels are informed and aware of how ecological behaviour can help their hotel, the environment and themselves, and provide appropriate incentives to motivate them to participate.

POINTS TO NOTE

- Hotels need to implement environmental programmes to remain competitive
- Effective implementation depends on the cooperation and involvement of all staff
- Increasing employees' ecological knowledge, awareness and concern is crucial
- Training at all levels is needed to disseminate information from top management

Chan, Eric S. W., Hon, Alice H.Y., Okums, Fevzi and Chan, Wilco. (2017). "An Empirical Study of Environmental Practices and Employee Ecological Behavior in the Hotel Industry". *Journal of Hotel and Tourism Research*, Vol. 41, No. 5, pp. 585-608.