

Research Horizons

Highlights of Recent Research by the SHTM

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Work-Life Balance Crucial for Hotel Employees

Employees in Hong Kong's hotel industry do not feel that they have achieved work-life balance according to the SHTM's Simon Wong and Annie Ko. In a recently published article the researchers highlight employee dissatisfaction with current staffing practices and suggest an employee-centred, integrative approach to the problem.

Work-Life Balance in Hong Kong

Hong Kong is renowned for its 24-hour business culture and the hotel industry necessarily involves long working hours, shift duties and dealing with difficult customers. This, write the researchers, leads to stress that forces employees into making important decisions about their work-life balance. An immediate consequence is "increased turnover and poor staff retention"

Even with the government's shift towards a five-day working week, Hong Kong has yet to embrace an adequate approach to work-life balance. The prevailing "paternalistic" culture, note the researchers, means that staff members "are afraid to leave the office until their boss does, otherwise they may be thought of as lacking commitment".

At most, companies tend to copy best practices as a "one-size-fits-all" approach that might not be the optimal solution. The major problem underlying this situation is that there is "literally no definition of work-life balance".

With the increased number of women in the workforce, firms around the world have tailored work-life balance

programmes towards "family friendly" practices such as the provision of child-care facilities. These practices, however, do not recognise that "employees who are single with no children may have other commitments within the community", such as care-giving or even purely personal interests. The researchers argue that work-life balance should be defined neutrally in terms of employees having a measure of control over their working hours, and over where and how they work.

The Study

Given this less than positive situation, the researchers wanted to provide human resource managers with "a comprehensive solution". Their rationale was that by understanding employee perspectives on work-life balance issues, "hotel management can derive ways to improve staff productivity".

To determine the extent to which hotel employees in Hong Kong were satisfied with their work-life balance, the researchers first conducted 24 in-depth interviews with human resource managers, hotel employees, industry professionals and representatives of government bodies. Having established 31 statements on "perceptions of work-life balance issues" they then conducted two pilot tests before producing a questionnaire.

With a total of 230 respondents in early 2007, the survey gathered data from High Tariff 'A' hotels, High Tariff 'B' hotels and Medium Tariff hotels. Just over half of the respondents were male, and just under half were aged between 26 and 25 years old. Most were single with no children and a large majority were frontline employees

working in the Food and Beverage Department, Front Desk or Housekeeping.

Work-Life Imbalance

The employees were unhappy about the current lack of discretion they had over their starting and finishing times but understood the situation was unavoidable given the necessity of shift work. A more worrisome finding was that the employees thought “they did not get enough time off work”, particularly if they had received tertiary education.

This concern about sufficient personal time, note the researchers, is key to making “work-life unbalanced in the Hong Kong hotel industry”, as increasingly more degree holders enter the workforce. Employees with degrees have relatively high career expectations, but that can also mitigate some aspects of this work-life imbalance. The employees surveyed, for instance, were neutral on reducing working hours to a part-time level even when combined with job security, because doing so could damage their career prospects. At the same time, they expressed slight agreement with the need to work longer hours to move along the career path.

A More Positive Outlook

Not surprisingly, the employees were very concerned about having “quality family time”, taking into account childcare, other family responsibilities and non-conventional responsibilities. In a slightly different context, this category could be expanded into “life orientation”, which would also include the ability to “pursue personal interests or aspirations” outside of work.

From this perspective, hotels have the opportunity to enhance productivity by instituting employee management systems that include “a well-designed roster system, job re-design and cooperation between departments aiming to facilitate a smooth handover of duties”. The willing participation of line managers in any such changes would be crucial.

The researchers also find that “staff commitment and loyalty towards their work and company exert a strong

bonding force” that maintains a work-life balance. This sort of attitude forms the cornerstone of a hotel’s success.

First Steps toward Change

Given that employee perspectives on work-life balance ranged from worrisomely negative to potentially positive, the researchers suggest that hotel managements first “listen to their employees and appreciate their differences and needs”. Employee consensus on appropriate work practices could be measured with “focus groups, individual interviews, discussion sessions or web-based surveys”.

The next step in an integrated process of change would be to provide support for family matters and then move on to providing employees with more free time in their week and more control over their work schedules. The researchers warn against taking a “scattergun” approach to addressing employee work-life balance concerns, which “can only contain the company’s turnover rate for a while”. The goal should be to transform the workplace proactively, instigating a “cognitive shift” amongst employees that will benefit the hotel industry as a whole.

Points to Note

- Hotel employees in Hong Kong are not satisfied with their work-life balance.
- The biggest concern is not having enough time off work.
- Concern about time for family and personal life could be used initiate change in work practices.
- An integrated rather than scattergun approach to change should be taken.

Wong, Simon Chak-keung and Ko, Annie (2009). Exploratory study of understanding hotel employees’ perception on work-life balance issues. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 28, pp. 195-203.