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21 October 2020

A Glass Ceiling to Shatter

Efforts to shatter the “glass ceiling” and promote women’s equality in the hospitality and tourism workplace must start in universities, according to Professor Basak Denizci Guillet, Ph.D. graduate Dr Anna Pavesi, Professor Cathy Hsu and Dr Karin Weber of the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The researchers note that statistics paint a bleak picture of women’s involvement at the upper levels of the hospitality and tourism industry, both in Hong Kong and worldwide. Although progress is being made in closing the gender gap, social and institutional barriers continue to prevent talented female hospitality and tourism professionals from making a meaningful contribution to management and decision-making. Capturing the real-life experiences of high-flying female executives, this pioneering study explores what can be done by universities to better prepare women to assume leadership positions in hospitality and tourism.

Hospitality and tourism are at the heart of Hong Kong’s economy, but this otherwise trail-blazing industry lags behind in one key respect: women are concerningly underrepresented in leadership roles. Although statistics on undergraduate enrolment in Hong Kong suggest that more women than men begin their careers in hospitality and tourism, the opposite is true for the upper echelons of the industry.

Hong Kong is not unique in this regard, write the researchers: “global evidence has been obtained that women represent a relatively small percentage of top hospitality executives”. Gender-based stereotyping and “old-boy” networks are particularly strong social forces limiting women’s advancement in the industry. Balancing work and family responsibilities may also prove challenging, especially in Hong Kong, where “female managers tend to regard marriage and family decisions as personal matters of no concern to their companies”.

Admittedly, there is some room for optimism. In 2010, women held 34% of the executive positions in Hong Kong’s service sector, compared with just 16% in 1993. Yet progress is slow. It seems that universities may not be doing enough to ensure that female graduates enter the workforce ready to succeed and well-equipped to overcome the barriers they encounter on their career paths. To help close the gender gap and empower a new generation of female graduates, the researchers vowed to find “ways in which hospitality and tourism educators can better prepare women to assume leadership positions in the hospitality industry”.

The researchers’ first task was to conduct a thorough review of the literature to identify the qualities needed to rise through the ranks of the industry. A crucial distinction emerged. Clearly, hospitality and tourism leaders must have diverse forms of knowledge and skills at their fingertips. However, it is not always clear whether “hard” or “soft” skills are more conducive to success in this challenging industry.

Press Release

新聞稿

Hard skills are the specific technical competencies required to perform a job. They are typically bestowed through training and education, and can be measured. In contrast, soft skills are linked with attitudes, emotions, communication and teamwork. They can be understood as “a combination of interpersonal (people) skills and personal (career) skills”, explain the researchers.

Interestingly, the researchers observe that there seems to have been a shift in focus “from hard skills to soft skills in training and development in the hospitality industry”. According to some studies, leadership is the most important soft skill a hospitality professional can possess. Others have highlighted qualities such as effective listening, negotiation skills and a professional image. But which are most beneficial for women who aspire to become industry leaders, and why? Recognising the significance of “developing women for leadership positions and the role of education in reducing career advancement barriers for women”, the researchers set out to answer these questions.

How better to achieve this goal than by collecting the real-life perspectives and experiences of female hospitality executives working in Hong Kong? The researchers recruited 24 women with senior positions in hospitality and tourism firms. Most worked in the hotel industry, and their areas of expertise ranged from human resources to public relations, financial management and sales and marketing. The majority were aged between 40 and 59.

During in-depth interviews, the researchers invited the executives to describe their own backgrounds and careers, and asked them which skills should be taught by universities to set female graduates on the path to leadership in the industry. They also asked the respondents which skills they wished they had been taught when studying hospitality. Educated in institutions across the world, from Scotland to Singapore, the executives were able to offer diverse and thought-provoking insights into what universities can do to empower their female students and ultimately narrow the gender gap at the highest levels of hospitality and tourism.

Careful analysis of the interview transcripts yielded some important findings. First, and perhaps most strikingly, all of the executives emphasised soft skills. “Social and professional communication skills were the most frequently cited”, report the researchers, “followed by nonverbal communication, building confidence, and leadership.” Excellent communication is critical to a people-based hospitality industry. Pointing to the weaknesses of many fresh employees in this area, the executives “suggested offering courses to help students to learn, develop, and refine various social and communication skills”, especially debate and negotiation. Although essential in a multitude of circumstances, these skills are always learned too slowly on the job. It would benefit students to gain some practice in debate and negotiation before entering the workforce.

Nonverbal communication was also highlighted. “Grooming is especially important in the hospitality industry”, explain the researchers, “as employees are expected to regularly deal with guests”. The participants also suggested that social and business etiquette be taught at university, “not only to protect young professionals from embarrassing themselves but also to enable them to

Press Release

新聞稿

focus on conversations without worrying about looking out of place”. This in turn would build the confidence of young hospitality employees – another key quality stressed by the participants.

Finally, the executives urged universities to nurture graduates with leadership potential capable of thriving in the competitive and sometimes cutthroat hospitality industry. This might involve holding “reflection sessions on the definition of success”, for example, or inviting female industry leaders to deliver motivational talks on their own eclectic career paths. “It’s the survival of the fittest”, warned one of the respondents. “If you can’t adapt, you will be out of the game.”

The executives considered these skills and competencies to be vital for all young people entering the industry, not just female graduates. However, they did identify some important gender-based differences. Some argued that emotional intelligence and communication skills are particularly helpful to women in the hospitality industry, who are more likely than male employees to become targets of inappropriate behaviour. “The implications of grooming for career success also differ between women and men”, note the researchers.

This is the first study conducted in Asia to explore how best to prepare female students for leadership positions in the hospitality industry. The female executives surveyed were perfectly positioned to identify room for improvement in the skillsets of young hospitality professionals today. They offered universities practical guidance on tailoring their programmes to help female graduates develop the soft skills needed to overcome institutional and social barriers in the workplace. Ultimately, the findings are expected to help the hospitality and tourism industry in Hong Kong and beyond to catch up with other industries by cultivating a truly diverse workforce of talented professionals.

Basak Denizci Guillet, Anna Pavesi, Cathy Hsu and Karin Weber (2019). What Can Educators Do to Better Prepare Women for Leadership Positions in the Hospitality Industry? The Perspectives of Women Executives in Hong Kong. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Education*, Vol. 31, Issue 4, pp. 197-209.

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