

# Variable Impact of Environmental Management Systems on Hotel Employees

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Contrary to the widely held belief that environmental management systems (EMSs) uniformly enhance staff satisfaction and morale, the SHTM's Eric Chan and a co-author report in a recent research article that hotel employees experience both positive and negative impacts. The researchers use the case study of a flagship hotel in Hong Kong to show that staff reactions to the implementation of an EMS can depend on the extent to which lower-level employees are involved in the process. Their findings, they note, will "help the industry to better understand the impact of EMS implementation on internal stakeholders".

## Environmental Management Systems Explained

An EMS, write the researchers, is "one of the most effective tools to achieve sustainable development". They point to two major standards – the International Organization for Standardization's ISO 14001 and the Council of European Communities' Eco-Management and Auditing Scheme (EMAS). Meeting the requirements of these standards show that a firm complies with relevant environmental legislation, has a structure in place to implement environmental programmes, continuously improves its environmental performance and improves the environmental awareness and efficiency of its employees.

Employee engagement, then, should be an integral part of implementing an EMS. Against the presumption that EMSs inevitably improve employee morale, which certainly can be the case, there is also the "additional workload, training, documentation and auditing related to a formal EMS or EMS certification" that have "significant impacts on individual staff members". This is particularly relevant to hotels, in which it can be difficult for employees to balance the provision of high-quality service with the required environmental performance.

## An EMS in a Leading Hotel

To judge the sorts of impacts that employees face in the implementation of an EMS the researchers studied a five-star hotel in Hong Kong. With a main target of business travellers, the hotel has 770 employees. It has adopted the ISO 14001 standard for over 10 years, and "its leadership in environmental protection is recognised in the local hotel industry".

The researchers interviewed five executive, seven supervisory and 15 general level staff to obtain their views of the implementation and operation of the hotel's EMS. The interviews generated background and career information on the interviewees, their views on environmental protection and environmental management in the hotel industry, the rationale behind the hotel's EMS and how it had been implemented. The researchers also specifically asked how the EMS had affected the interviewees' jobs.

## Implementation and Outcomes

At the highest level in the hotel, there was real concern for the environment, and for the market demand that the environment be protected. Yet the researchers found that the supervisory level employees were more likely to think that the EMS was designed to attract more green travellers, and the general employees pointed to cost and resource saving and the desire for a better reputation. The company's motivation for implementing the EMS "was not clearly communicated to its employees", according to the researchers.

This lack of alignment could, perhaps, be seen as a result of the top-down approach taken to planning the EMS. The green committee in charge of planning was composed entirely of senior executives and department heads. The researchers note that the executives "benefited a great deal from the process" in terms of their own job

satisfaction and could share “the EMS experience of their hotel with other companies”, which “afforded them status and privilege and induced a sense of prestige.”

The researchers suggest that this sort of situation should be avoided, with green committees involving employees of all levels. Yet they also make a very important point – Chinese employees expect to be shown the lead by senior management. Although the top-down communication was not always clear in this case, there was certainly an improvement in what the researchers call “employee-employer” cohesiveness following the implementation. One duty engineer commented that “about 70% of his colleagues had developed a stronger team spirit because of their intensive involvement with their superiors and each other in implementing the EMS”.

Nevertheless, the general-level employees were not always clear about EMS details, and the researchers suggest that more in-depth training is needed in such situations. Perhaps low levels of training were why more than half of the interviewees claimed that the hotel had failed to establish a consistent environmental policy, citing such examples as televisions being left on in unoccupied guestrooms and the provision of large bottles of distilled water. These inconsistencies, write the researchers, “led some employees to question the real motives of behind EMS adaption”.

### **Impact on Employees**

Despite these concerns, most of the interviewees supported the hotel. Over half “were proud of their company’s achievement”, and around a third said that the workplace was now “cleaner and more comfortable”. Around two thirds stated that they had heavier workloads but did not mind, which is a good indication that the complexities of an EMS can be managed effectively on the frontline.

Indeed, all employees had freedom to carry out environmental practices. For instance, the researchers note that “the fryer in the Chinese restaurant, the tailor and a room attendant all indicated that they could make decisions at their own level”. With enhanced

environmental awareness, “some of the informants believed that the learnt knowledge and experience would benefit their future careers”. This is certainly something of which the industry should be aware, because Hong Kong employees rank career development as their most important motivation.

### **Meaningful Goals Key to Employee Acceptance**

Given both positive and negative perceptions elicited from the interviewees, the researchers suggest that clearly implemented environmental policies are crucial for employee acceptance. Indeed, they warn that in this case, employee commitment “was negatively affected if the adoption of the system by the company was perceived to be a means to save costs, improve the company image and attract green customers”. Hence, they conclude, “meaningful organisational goals result in a more harmonious working environment in EMS implementation”.

#### **Points to Note**

- EMSs do not uniformly enhance hotel staff satisfaction and morale.
- In contrast to executives, supervisory and general employees face mixed impacts from EMS implementation.
- Nevertheless, most employees are positive about EMS implementation.
- Clear organisational goals are needed for employee acceptance.

Chan, Eric S. W. and Hawkins, Rebecca (2010). “Attitude towards EMSs in an International Hotel: An Exploratory Case Study”. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 29, pp. 641-651.