

Lifestyle Drives Convention and Exhibition Careers

Lifestyle considerations most often drive careers in Asia's convention and exhibition (C&E) industry note the SHTM's Dr Karin Weber and Professor Adele Ladkin in a recently published research article. The researchers admit that this is a surprising finding, given the "long hours of work, both weekdays and weekends, typically associated with the industry". Yet they also point to the "sizeable number" of professionals who are driven by more than one factor. This, they argue, suggests that industry organisations should recognise the significance of "career anchors" so they can "devise appropriate strategies to motivate and, ultimately, retain staff".

Anchoring a Career

The C&E industry offers a wealth of career opportunities, and organisations within it rely heavily on excellence in customer service for their competitive advantage. Yet, the researchers note, there is little understanding of what motivates C&E employees to pursue their careers, let alone to excel in them. In an attempt to redress this oversight, they focus on underlying career motivations.

When considering what motivates employees, careers can be split into external and internal aspects. An external career is the "progression of positions or jobs" that an employee moves through. This aspect of the career is, at least potentially, available to all employees and serves as a common 'roadmap'. The internal aspect of a career, in contrast, is much more highly personalised.

The internal career, argue the researchers, is comprised of those activities that help individual employees make sense of what they are doing and where they are heading. From this perspective, "beliefs and values, expectations, and aspirations" are just as important as the position an employee currently holds.

In the formation of a stable career identity, then, the individual relies on "career anchors", or a set of forces that serve to "guide, constrain, stabilise and integrate one's career choices". These the researchers identify as technical and functional competence, managerial competence, security, autonomy, entrepreneurial creativity, service, challenge and lifestyle.

"When individuals achieve congruence between their career anchor and their work", argue the researchers, "they are more likely to attain positive career outcomes".

Industry Professionals Surveyed

To gain insights into how career anchors influence C&E professionals in Asia, the researchers conducted an online survey of employees from leading organisations. The respondents represented a cross section of the industry, with slightly more men than women and a majority aged between 36 and 45 years.

A third of the sample were Hong Kong or mainland Chinese, followed by Singaporeans, Thai and Malaysians, with much smaller percentages of other nationals. Just over half of the respondents lived in Hong Kong.

Only a quarter of the respondents had postgraduate degrees, but over half had completed undergraduate education. Most held senior positions, with director and managing director being the most common. Just under a third of the respondents were in middle management positions. The typical industry experience ranged from 5 to 20 years, and the largest group of respondents were exhibition organisers.

Lifestyle Anchor Dominant

The headline finding from the survey is that lifestyle considerations formed the career anchor for the largest

group of respondents, followed by the challenge and autonomy anchors. This predominance of lifestyle might seem peculiar given the working conditions prevalent in the C&E industry, but a closer look reveals a compelling rationale.

According to the researchers, the type of position that an individual is filling could influence whether or not lifestyle is an important consideration. Those positions that offer “opportunities to travel and meet interesting people may be seen as a critical part of the lifestyle of individuals attracted to the industry”. They back this up by noting that middle and lower level managers were more likely to chose the lifestyle anchor than their, apparently more sedentary, higher-level counterparts.

On even firmer footing is the observation that women were more likely than men to choose the lifestyle anchor. Women, explain the researchers, tend to emphasise working conditions, career certainty and working hours in their career choices. This could also encompass the maternity leave and day-care options put forward by their employers, which men find less compelling.

Further Demographic Differences

Shifting down the anchor list, autonomy – and to a lesser extent, entrepreneurial creativity – were more important to men than women. In one sense, note the researchers, this is to be expected, because men are more likely to run their own C&E businesses than women. Yet they also note a trend in which “increasingly more women are setting up their own businesses to leave the confines of organisational structures and constraints”. In the near future, then, C&E employers will need to more seriously consider the importance of autonomy in retaining senior female staff members.

In terms of age, the older respondents, aged 36 and above, rated the challenge anchor more highly than did their younger counterparts. The researchers register their surprise at this counter-intuitive finding, with younger people usually considered more likely to look for challenges. However, they do note that more senior executives than middle and lower level managers chose

this anchor, which implies that position rather than age could be a defining factor in making the choice.

Importance of Multiple Anchors

These findings are obviously significant in themselves, but they come with an important rider – just over a third of the respondents indicated that they had multiple career anchors. The challenge and lifestyle anchors were most often chosen in combination, together or with other anchors. This is very significant, given that any one employee could have a range of combined anchors, with individual anchors being more or less significant depending on career stage or other circumstances.

The researchers suggest that it is important to understand whether these combinations are “complementary or mutually inconsistent”. If they are complementary, employers should be concerned about redefining job roles to best fulfil the career aspirations of their staff members. Overall, the aim should be to understand what motivates employees to attract and retain the highest quality C&E professionals.

Points to Note

- Career anchors guide employees in their career choices and job performance.
- C&E professionals in Asia are most often motivated by the lifestyle career anchor.
- Gender, age and position all help to determine which anchor is most significant.
- Understanding the choice of multiple anchors could enhance talent attraction and retention in the C&E industry.

Weber, Karin and Ladkin, Adele (2009). Career anchors of convention and exhibition industry professionals in Asia. *Journal of Convention and Event Tourism*, Vol. 10, pp. 243-255.