

Press Release

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PolyU Study Finds Effective Mentoring Programmes Critical to Hotel Employees

Employees in the hotel sector benefit from mentoring programmes, which also benefit hotels by reducing staff turnover, according to Dr Sam Kim of the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and his co-researchers in a recently published study. The researchers show that mentoring helps less experienced employees to adapt to the organisation and cope with work-related stress. High quality mentoring, note the researchers, may be an “effective human resource strategy” for tackling various job-related issues in the hotel sector.

Working in the hotel sector can present a variety of challenges in addition to those that are “common to all service industry jobs”, the researchers explain. A particular problem is that hotels are often small and offer few opportunities for training, advancement and promotion. To help their employees with these challenges, many hotels implement mentoring programmes that are designed to address the issues of “role stress, job dissatisfaction and turnover intention”.

Mentoring programmes usually involve a superior or senior employee helping less experienced employees to adapt to the organisation’s culture, improve their performance and develop their career trajectories. It does not involve “instructing or telling”, write the researchers, but should involve a “dyadic learning partnership” that helps the mentee to “take charge of their own development, release their potential, and achieve the results that they value”.

The researchers explain that mentoring can be considered as having three functions – career development, psychosocial support and role modelling – each of which can influence the mentee in different ways. The career development function helps mentees to improve their performance and achieve their career goals, while psychosocial support can help them to “stabilise their psychological relation to an organisation”. Role modelling helps a mentee to learn about the mentor’s “thoughts, philosophy, behaviour, skill, know-how, manners and working habits”, which can help to build positive attitudes and values and “develop proper organisational behaviour”.

Although mentoring has been shown to be an effective strategy, the researchers were interested in finding out how each of the three functions of mentoring influence specific job outcomes, including mentees’ role-related stress, attitudes toward their jobs and, ultimately, their turnover intentions.

To achieve their goal, the researchers surveyed staff in 13 super-deluxe hotels in Seoul. The 438 employees in room or food and beverage divisions who responded had experienced mentoring either as mentors or mentees. There were slightly more male than female respondents, and their average age was 31.1 years. The employees had varying lengths of service in the sector, with those having worked in hotels for 1-4 years

representing around a third of the total, and less than a quarter having worked in hotels for over 10 years.

The researchers were interested in whether mentoring is helpful in reducing two types of role-related stress – role conflict and role ambiguity. Role conflict can occur when there is ambiguity or conflicting expectations about an employee's role performance, such as when an employee is given conflicting instructions by two or more people, which can cause anxiety and tension. They found that all three mentoring functions – career development, psychosocial support and role modelling – reduced mentees' feelings of role conflict. Mentoring, the researchers explain, can give employees greater confidence in solving problems and improve their overall performance, which helps them to manage role-related conflicts and thus reduce stress.

Role ambiguity occurs when an employee is unsure about what is expected of him or her, and is most likely to occur when there is a "lack of information about organisational goals, policies, guidelines or duties", note the researchers. According to the employees surveyed, the psychosocial support function of mentoring was the most helpful in reducing role ambiguity. The researchers suggest that working in a hotel environment requires "'team play' and cooperation", and receiving social support and counselling from a mentor can "inspire employees to work for their organisation" and help them to understand and carry out their given tasks.

Although the researchers also expected the career development and role modelling functions to reduce role ambiguity, this did not seem to be the case. They suggest that role ambiguity is most effectively reduced when the mentee provides social support involving counselling or friendship "without invoking seniority in rank or position".

The researchers also found that all three mentoring functions increased mentees' job satisfaction and organisational commitment. As they explain, job satisfaction means that an employee has a "favourable attitude toward the job" and a "positive mental state" about his or her job performance. The support that mentoring provides can enhance such positive attitudes, thus motivating employees to do well and feel a stronger sense of commitment to the organisation.

Nevertheless, the researchers note that even with the positive effects of mentoring, some of the employees who experienced particularly high levels of role-related stress were also less satisfied with their jobs and showed less commitment. They suggest that working in a hotel where "customers require high quality service" is likely to create role stress, and even if mentoring can reduce this, a highly stressful environment will inevitably affect job satisfaction and commitment to the organisation.

The loss of capable employees is harmful to an organisation and can "ruin the quality of service", note the researchers, so hotels should try to minimise employees' dissatisfaction and maintain a stable workforce. Mentoring may be one way of doing so. The researchers found that the career development and psychosocial support functions of mentoring were helpful in directly reducing turnover intention, whereas the role modelling function did not appear to be as important in this respect. It is quite likely that although having a good role model at work is positive in many respects, there are other, perhaps more important, considerations when it comes to deciding whether to leave a job.

Unsurprisingly, those employees who were more satisfied and committed to the organisation were less likely to want to change their jobs. However, it seems that even the benefits of mentoring cannot entirely overcome the negative effects of high levels of role conflict. The researchers note that those who “continued to experience role conflict in a stressful service-providing work environment” were more likely to indicate that they were thinking of leaving the organisation than those who experienced role ambiguity.

Overall, the study provides useful information about what the researchers label the “practical benefits of mentoring” that hotels can make use of in designing more effective mentoring programmes. Although mentoring cannot overcome all of the potentially negative effects of a stressful work environment, it seems that it can go a long way toward alleviating such stress, improving employees’ attitudes about the organisation and reducing the likelihood of them leaving to find other jobs.

Kim, Samuel Seongsop, Im, Jaemoon and Hwang, Jinsoo. (2015). The Effects of Mentoring on Role Stress, Job Attitude, and Turnover Intention in the Hotel Industry. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 48, 68-82.

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