

Press Release

15 June 2015

PolyU Study Finds Hotel Employees' Efforts Key to Successful Implementation of Green Practices

Hotels in Hong Kong that are looking to implement environmentally friendly policies should consider the knowledge, awareness, attitudes and behaviour of their employees, according to the Drs Eric Chan, Alice Hon, Wilco Chan of the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and a co-researcher. Attempting to implement new policies with employees who are unwilling to change their behaviour could increase staff turnover and reduce the success of the programme. Selecting the right employees and providing in-depth training on environmental issues are thus important strategies for ecologically conscious hotels.

As concerns about the effects of human behaviour on the environment continue to rise, laws are being introduced in an attempt to increase awareness of environmental issues and change people's behaviour. The researchers point out that hotels are consequently becoming more concerned about balancing "environmental performance, limited resources, public legitimacy, burdensome litigation and profitability". Although most hotel chains already have policies designed to reduce their environmental impact, it is hotel staff who must implement those policies. The attitudes and behaviour of hotel employees thus ultimately determine whether green policies are implemented effectively.

As the researchers suggest, although some employees appreciate and derive greater job satisfaction from working for environmentally aware companies, there is concern among hotel managers that the introduction of environmental policies can "result in resistance from employees" who are unwilling to change their routines. They emphasise that this resistance to change is normal, as most people prefer to stick to what they call "habitual behaviour".

One of the key elements in resistance to environmental policies is the increased workload their implementation brings. The researchers note that office staff may be "asked to use double-sided printing or photocopying" and chefs may be told to "turn on cooking equipment only as needed". Furthermore, some employees may feel threatened not only by change, but also by "their own lack of environmental knowledge".

According to the researchers, the introduction of unpopular policies is a particular concern in the hotel industry, which has always been associated with high staff turnover rates. To ensure the success of environmental programmes and minimise the negative effects on employees, hotel managers need to gain the support of their staff. To do so, they need to understand what influences employees' attitudes towards environmental issues, and how these attitudes affect their "intentions to implement green hotel practices".

The researchers set out to provide hotel managers with a better understanding of how employees' attitudes and behaviour influence their intentions to implement green practices, and to suggest management strategies that could enhance those intentions. They distinguished between environmental knowledge, awareness and concern, and how these related to the employees' actual behaviour and intention to implement green practices in the hotels they worked in.

Environmental knowledge is likely to affect behaviour, note the researchers, because people tend to avoid situations where they do not have "enough knowledge to guide their behaviour". Conversely, having more knowledge about environmental issues motivates people to engage in environmentally responsible behaviour. Greater awareness of the effects of human behaviour on the environment should also motivate people to buy products with eco-labels and participate in recycling programmes.

Environmental concern refers to the beliefs and attitudes that people have towards environmental issues. Although it might be assumed that people who express greater concern will behave accordingly, the researchers point out that the attitudes that people hold do not always predict how they will actually behave.

The researchers thus sought to determine whether hotel employees' knowledge, awareness and concern was associated with their actual ecological behaviour, such as how often they reused shopping bags, recycled paper and tried to save energy. The aim was to discover whether the extent to which individuals practised such ecological behaviour would influence their intentions to implement green practices in the hotels.

The researchers conducted a survey at ten Hong Kong hotels, eight of which were 4 or 5 star and two of which were 3 star hotels. Half of the respondents were female, and the majority were aged between 20 and 49. Fewer than half had a Bachelor's degree or higher level of education, and just over half had worked for their current employer for more than 5 years.

Encouragingly, the employees who took part in the survey generally had positive views on environmental green practices. Those who indicated greater knowledge, awareness and concern about environmental issues were also more likely to indicate positive intentions to implement green practices in their hotels. Yet, the strength of those intentions was influenced by the extent to which the employees already engaged in environmentally friendly behaviour. In other words, even those who were highly knowledgeable and aware, and expressed concern about environmental issues, were unlikely to implement a hotel's green policy if they did not make a habit of practising ecological behaviour in their daily lives.

Based on their findings, the researchers suggest several strategies for hotels looking to make their businesses more environmentally friendly. For instance, when hiring staff, human resource managers could find out more about applicants' "eco-friendly practices and environmental experiences" to ensure they hire people with good green credentials.

Likewise, managers should "share their company's green culture with potential employees", because many applicants would prefer to work for environmentally friendly companies. To ensure they attract the right applicants, hotels could publicise their green initiatives on the company website and in job descriptions.

To enhance ecological behaviour among their current employees, the researchers suggest that hotels should consider providing environmental training to “upgrade employees’ skills and environmental knowledge”. Such training would help to change attitudes and overcome some of the barriers associated with organisational change by equipping employees with “necessary environmental knowledge so that they know how their duties and decisions will affect the environment”.

Once the training is underway, the researchers emphasise that evaluation of its effectiveness is also essential to ensure it is well received. Effective in-depth training will not only build staff commitment to the environmental programme, but will also “improve the employability and marketability” of the hotel employees.

As hotels come under increasing pressure to demonstrate their environmental credentials, managers need to do all they can to ensure that their employees are willing to implement new green policies. As attitudes are notoriously difficult to change, selecting people who already have “good environmental knowledge, awareness, concerns and behaviour” may be the best policy, as the researchers put it.

Employees who personally follow ecological environmentally friendly practices are more likely to be committed to acting similarly in the workplace and more committed to their jobs because they prefer to work for environmentally friendly companies. By adopting the researchers’ strategy suggestions, hotels in Hong Kong and elsewhere stand to not only increase the adoption of green practices among employees but also to reduce the risk of staff turnover associated with the introduction of new policies.

Chan, Eric S.W., Hon, Alice H.Y., Chan, Wilco and Okumus, Fevzi (2014). What Drives Employees’ Intentions to Implement Green Practices in Hotels? The Role of Knowledge, Awareness, Concern and Ecological Behaviour. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 40, 20-28.

Press contact : Ms Pauline Ngan, Senior Marketing Manager
School of Hotel and Tourism Management

Telephone : (852) 3400 2634

E-mail : pauline.ngan@polyu.edu.hk

Website : www.polyu.edu.hk/htm