



Managers' perceptions of older workers in the hotel and restaurant industry

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Abstract. The purpose of the study was to investigate how managers direct issues of an aging workforce, and whether this has implications for the hospitality industry. Further, managers' experiences with managing age-mixed workforces are outlined. Implications of an aging workforce for the hospitality industry are also discussed. Qualitative data were gathered from 20 hospitality managers in Norwegian hotels and restaurants through employing interviews. A three-step analysis indicates that in organizations employing an age-mixed workforce, managers have more positive than negative experiences with balancing the workforce with younger and older workers. No age barriers were found in recruitment, but few managers plan to actively recruit older workers. Training programmes are not designed specially for older workers. Flexible working practices are difficult to organize in hospitality jobs. There are positive outcomes of creating age-balanced workforces in the hospitality industry, because younger and older workers complement each other. No overt negative attitudes towards seniors were expressed, and older managers seemed to be more positive towards older workers. © 2005 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Changing demographics constitutes challenges to the hospitality industry regarding access to qualified workforce [1]. This industry will be more exposed because of their higher dependency on younger workforce compared to any other industries [2]. Their workforce exit early through turnover to another business [3] or through disability pension

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[2]; hence, younger workers outnumber older workers [2]. Population ageing will imply more senior guests to the hospitality businesses, changing qualitative aspects of service demands. Senior workers may be more able to respond to various guests' demands due to higher level of experience. Personal attributes of younger and older workers may complement each other [4]. More emphasis should be put on retaining older workers in the hospitality organisation [5], calling for strategies to build age-balanced hospitality workforces. The assumption is that hospitality organizations that have a heterogeneous workforce will have higher and more stable service-quality levels than organizations only employing younger workers. This is based on the assumption that older and more experienced workers will be more able to respond to customer expectations, thus, "firms that fail to hire older workers may forego potential advantages arising from a large pool of operative and managerial talent" ([5], p. 339).

The research objective was to identify age-management practices that exist in Norwegian hospitality organizations and to discover possibilities for creating age-balanced work teams to take advantage of positive aspects of both younger and older employees, and how positive outcomes could be generated through adapting the work environment to fit both younger and older workers. The main research questions elaborated, based on Walker and Taylor's research [6], were (a) How well do job recruitment comprise all age groups? (b) To which extent do all employees have equal training, development, and promotion opportunities? (c) How does the organization offer flexible working practices for its employees? (d) How can jobs be designed to fit the individual worker capacities (ergonomically aspects)? and (e) How does the organization deal with relationships between younger and older workers, including striving to cultivate positive attitudes towards ageing workers within organizations?

2. Method

Data were collected from 20 hotel and restaurant managers in Norway. A qualitative approach applying interviews was chosen in order to attain a more detailed and reflected information. Informants were selected by 'snowballing' [7] managers with relevant experiences. New informants were added up to saturation [8]. The sample represents 11 well-established hotels, age span from 18 to 66; two well-established hotels, age span from 18 to 35 years; two newly established hotels; a hotel chain headquarter, which has specifically dealt with managing age-mixed workforces; and four restaurant concepts, with staff ranging from 18 to 60 years. In all businesses with age span 18 to 60+ years, more than 20% of all employees were over 35 years of age. The sample was non-random, chosen for reasons argued above, accordingly giving access to informants possessing relevant information.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed on the basis of Walker and Taylor's studies [6]. Walker and Taylor's fifth theme, the organization's attitudes towards older employees, is in this study supplemented by questioning the relationship between older and younger workers. Interviews were conducted in the managers' business setting, and recorded and transcribed verbatim. The time spent for interviewing averaged 45 min. More detailed results are reported in a research article [9]. Validity in terms of 'competent insider performance' [10] is taken care of through the interviewer's extensive industry experience,

thus knowing how to infer information from talking to these managers. The data gained were judged as giving a fair, honest, and balanced account of the research field, thus meeting the criterion for authenticity. As for reliability, internal consistency is judged high in the sense that the information fits together in a coherent picture. Misinformation, evasions, and obvious lies [10] were not detected.

3. Results

Recruitment does not comprise all age groups in this study. Norwegian youngsters lack interest in getting part-time or contract employment; hence, resort businesses primarily employ youngsters from neighbouring countries to fill the need in the main season. None of the businesses have age limits when recruiting employees except those regulated by law. Although personality seems to be more important than age, most of the informants prefer more ‘mature’ individuals when recruiting unit managers. For some jobs, work experience is important, and for other jobs, social competence and good health are the most important qualifications, the latter being particularly important for chamber maids, which is a job with high physical pressure. Even though age seems to be of less importance for the majority of informants, job demands will play a role in the process. The right competence is the most important criterion and is often related to age.

‘The ideal age’ in restaurants seems to be when waiters’ age reflects customers’ age, as this ensures better communication between employees and guests. Even though there are no upper age limits, there is an inclination that managers prefer to hire workers below the age of 55, and few applicants aged above 30 are seen. Concerning the future workforce, most of the employers think that the employee mix will be constant; whilst some businesses with several employees aged 60+ think that the average employee age will drop because those aged 62 will choose early retirement. A candidate’s attitude and social competence are regarded the most important factors.

None of the organizations offer training programs adapted to fit older workers’ training needs. Most of the informants actually feel that there is no need for diverse training as all employees are doing the same job. Many informants note that age is not at all decisive for which training is needed or offered and say that other factors may be stronger indicators. The difference is that many feel that youngsters in the age group 18–19 need more basic training than older workers, and two informants say that it is hard for older workers to learn computer skills; however, none of them have tried alternative training approaches.

With reference to career planning, there seem to be two main directions. One, some organizations ask employees about their future plans to see if it is possible to develop their competence within the organization. Some hotel managers have supervised employees to take up on formal education if they want to climb within the industry. On the other hand, some organizations avoid the topic because they think they are too small to offer internal careers for their employees.

Flexible working practices seem to be difficult to organize in Norwegian hospitality businesses. Physical impacts in the job, e.g., extensively heavy lifting, have lead to repetitive strain injury and following long-term sick leave, or disability pension. Reducing working hours often is the only practicable solution because there are no other positions available with less physical impacts, except for a few administrative positions. Because

Norwegian hotels have relatively flat organizational structures, there is little or no room for giving older workers new job tasks to retain them within the organization. Moreover, older workers may not want to change job tasks, even if they do not handle their current job to the full. This challenge is dealt with in two ways. One, some businesses retain elderly workers till retirement age because they have respect for the effort they have made for the organization over the years, even though it may reduce the effectiveness of the business. On the other hand, some organizations claim that they respect the competence that older workers have and accordingly want to retain them as long as they can keep up with the work pace of their younger peers. Many informants noted that the hotel and restaurant industry might not be suitable for seniors. Only a few managers have experiences with employee retirement. Regarding job rotation, employees in smaller hotels (less than 100 rooms) have tendency to work across units, not as a part of a job-rotation system, but rather because this is a part of the organizational culture. Job rotation seems to be a common occurrence among chefs, but not among waiters. It makes work more interesting and it brings new knowledge into the organization when the employee returns. Just a few businesses stick out by using job rotation extensively; in addition to being dependent on flexible workers they also perceive this as a part of workforce retention management. Flexible working practice also includes self-regulation of pace, and demotion with or without change in wage level. These topics were also mentioned in the current study; however, they are of less relevance in the hospitality industry for the reasons mentioned.

No managers reported efforts to develop positive attitudes towards seniors. Regarding effectiveness, the majority of the informants experience no differences between younger and older workers. Employees' personality, individual work preferences, and attitude seem to be stronger indicators of pace of work and efficiency than age. One informant notes that the motivation to work is stronger among older workers; accordingly, they are more effective than their younger peers. Concerning variation in workload during working hours and during the year, a majority feel that younger employees can handle this better because of physical advantages; however, older workers often compensate by having more experience, endurance, and motivation. Here too, personality plays an important role in determining how each individual responds to stress and shifting workloads. Many informants say that older experienced workers are more efficient because they have a different way of approaching problem solving; additionally, they have professionalism related to the job routine that the younger workers do not have. However, some seniors are perceived to be less open for changes, constituting a barrier for younger employees to bring in new ideas and solutions. Some businesses with a majority of older employees mentioned that the main challenge in organizational-change scenarios is to start earlier with informing and motivating the workforce.

No differences were reported in dependability, while business loyalty naturally is higher among adults and older workers due to tenure. Younger generations do not bound to the employer though being loyal to the business. Several informants accordingly focus on team loyalty between the colleges as a means to retaining employees. Changing management style has been a necessary and interesting part of organizational development. People being loyal to one employer their entire working career is a 'dying race.' As loyalty of one way or the other is important in order to get committed employees, leaders have decided to move focus on loyalty from the employer to the colleague team.

In the relationship between service employees and regular customers, recognition is essential. To a certain degree, this can be related to age through employees' length of service; however, a stable workforce is more important. There are of course some exceptions where both employees and customers have been with the same business for 20–30 years where age plays a role because of the relations established over time. Many informants intend that this might be more related to attitudes and sense of dependability than actual sickness. Among senior workers, sick leave is generally related to physical strain and physical impacts, and therefore, often of a long-term character. Several informants noted that sick leave among younger employees is a great management challenge. Even though managers think that high rates of absence among younger workers more often is due to negative work attitudes than to illness, labour legislation states that employers are not allowed to confront an employee with this presumption directly. On the question 'Who is better in managing senior employees?', the answers point in the direction that a unit manager will derive benefits from being well on in years. In addition to experience, leadership abilities are very dependent on personal qualities. Hence, the most important qualities seem to be empathy, formal knowledge, and good communication skills. Even though age is not a key criterion, several employers mentioned that they would not employ a 20-year-old unit manager. Interestingly, the informants said that their attitudes to older workers have changed over the years, and that they now appreciate older workers' competence more than they did earlier. Therefore, own age seems to be a strong indicator of attitudes towards elderly workers. With reference to cooperation between younger and older workers at the workplace, none of the informants feel that there are generation gaps. Even though there are differences, this does not lead to negative clash of interests or conflicts. Teambuilding is important in order to avoid cliques, a majority mean that the two generations complement each other.

4. Discussion

Only one of four dimensions of good-practice age management, job rotation, is partly met in this study. Few other attempts were made to meet employees' needs of flexibility, except from reducing working hours. Hotel and restaurant jobs have a high degree of physical strain [11]. The organizational structure is flat with few management layers, typically small and medium-sized enterprises, with few alternative positions available for workers that cannot continue in their current position. Even though managers feel that the possibilities of reducing physical strains are limited, projects show that this has been possible in the health-care sector through an approach called 'age-proofing jobs' [12]. Although customer demands regulate pace of work, older workers seem to solve job tasks as efficient as younger colleagues due to extensive experience, because physical disadvantages due to ageing are found to be counteracted. Most managers would benefit from building an age-balanced workforce because younger and older employees complement each other. These findings go along with Magd's [5] and Warr's [4] suggestions that mixed workforces can lead to higher productivity including higher employee moral and company loyalty. On training issues, no indications of age-related discrimination were found. However, by offering the same training to all employees regardless of age, age-related training needs, e.g., computer training, may be overlooked.

This lack of tailored training may confirm existing stereotypes (e.g., [13]). Previous Norwegian hospitality research indicate that age stereotypes exist and that these might be a reason why very few employees stay in the industry till retirement age [2]. Even organizations with age-balanced workforces do not necessarily have age-related human-resource actions in place. Nevertheless, organizations that employ older workers seem to have more positive attitudes towards employing older workers than those who have a young workforce [5]. Developing age-balanced workforce through better staff retention practices might be a way to reduce possible stereotyping of and negative attitudes towards senior workforce as found in previous research on this industry [2]. Alternatively, recruitment efforts could be targeted more on senior workforce, but the industry does not compete well on the senior labour market, so this may be a more cumbersome way to increase the proportion of senior workforce compared to better retention of existing co-workers. Most managers relate their own age to their attitude towards older workers [14], they value older workers' competence more now than they did earlier. The main conclusion to be drawn is that the hospitality industry may successfully employ senior workforce, although our initial findings do not support that this segment constitute a competitive advantage.

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