

Career Development, Work Environment and Challenges of Hotel Middle Managers

Journal of Tourism, Hospitality & Culinary Arts (JTHCA)
2022, Vol. 14 (2) pp 50-68
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UITM Press
Submit date: 28th February 2022
Accept date: 09th April 2022
Publish date: 30th June 2022

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Proposed citation:

Patah, M.O.R.A., & Zahari, M.S.M. (2022). Career Development, Work Environment and Challenges of Hotel Middle Managers. *Journal of Tourism, Hospitality & Culinary Arts*, 14(2), 50-68

Abstract

Advancing in the hotel industry for employees depends on their willingness to face and overcome several challenges in mostly a difficult work environment. The aim of this paper is to explore and report the career development, work environment and challenges of hotel middle managers in Malaysia. This study uses qualitative research approach and data collection was done through semi-structured interviews and narrative analysis. A total of 14 hotel head of department (middle managers) from hotels in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia were interviewed. Participants were initially approached through their respective Human Resources Managers and through alternative platform such as LinkedIn, a professional social media platform. They were selected based on their tenure as middle managers (five years or more on the post). Atlas.ti™ software was used to transcribe the recorded interviews. The results highlighted new perspective on the participants' career construction and pathways which was actually self-constructed based on the opportunities that they had, changes in their life phases as a hoteliers and other factors such as their family support. This study contributes by bringing on the importance of seeking new managerial knowledge, continuously attending trainings for skill enhancements, variety of work experiences, and pursuing new opportunities.

Keywords:

Career Development; Hotel Middle Managers; Work Environment; Challenges

1 Introduction

The hotel industry is a service driven industry, in which operational employees and middle managers in particular is the central focus at the frontline of hotel services (Cronin, 2018). Operational employees in all departments are the core element in the industry while middle managers like Front office managers, Food and Beverage Managers, Executive Chefs, Housekeeping managers and few others represent the operation structure of the organisation. Middle managers career progression is continuously evolving thus making it a challenge to keep up with the trend in the service context (Harris, 2021; Ivanov et al., 2020). For example, middle managers are expected to be able to attend to the needs of their variety of clientele groups, on different promotional periods or seasons, and different style of services. (Ben Aissa & Goaid, 2016). Therefore, prior vocational knowledge and skills obtained through formal education and years of working experiences are essential for them. The middle managers may come from different batches of recruitment processes and they may have followed different learning cohorts previously, depending on the type of vocational trainings that they attended before starting their career in the hotel (Chang & Busser, 2017). However, the unique nature of the hotel industry allows employees with minimal formal education to build their career based on work experiences (Cronin, 2018).

Despite being part in the present organisation, many hotel middle managers are searching for the right opportunity to advance, be it a different hotel or another service organisation altogether (Nicely, 2017). Evidence has emerged that hotels are experiencing problems retaining the newer generation of middle managers (Chen et al., 2014; Twum, 2015). Middle managers face the varied challenges of being a role model to new employees, while they also think about their career advancement as they often work for an expatriate general manager (Sandstrom & Reynolds, 2020), even though they are qualified to take on this role themselves. Several trends have shown in the direction of career development and career pathways in the hotel industry and in general, including the impact of motivation, career orientation and aspirations (Nicely, 2017; Rasheed et al., 2020).

Whilst there are existing studies on issues of hotel employees' career development and early careers, the career development of middle managers has not been examined thoroughly (Safavi & Bouzari, 2019). What motivates hotel middle managers to decide on their career path is not fully documented (Rasheed et al., 2020; Wang & Tsai, 2012). This is because most career-related studies for hotel middle managers focus on the high job turnover rate of hotel employees and other occupational issues (Chang & Busser, 2020; Perev, 2018), and less focus is given to their motivations and aspirations to grow in their career. In addition, research on career development has largely focused on opportunities for new employees or for hotel managers who are already at the top of the career ladder (Kumara, 2018; Okumus et al., 2016). This study explores the career development, work environment and challenges of Malaysian hotel middle managers.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Career Development in the Hotel Industry

People's careers are always 'in the process of becoming' as identities change over time and, as such, can never be fully understood, especially as societal expectations of career also develop and change. Although the industry is multifaceted, diverse and labour-intensive, retaining talented, skilled and experienced employees is inevitably challenging. For example, small-scale hotels offer limited advancement and career development opportunities for their employees and hence employees are likely to move on (Kim et al., 2015). Employing new staff is often an endless task for managers because of the difficulties in retention (Duncan et al., 2013). This has contributed to turnover for both operational employees and managers (Perev, 2018) and a corresponding shortage of skilled employees (Ahmad & Zainol, 2011) in the past.

Researchers have explored related employment issues such as the effect of workplace stereotyping and how this might have a significant impact on employees' prospects for promotion to managerial positions (Kumara, 2018). Stereotyping might be linked to gender (e.g., more progression opportunities provided to male employees) (Carvalho, 2017) and the gender pay gap whereby women earn less (Ferreira Freire Guimarães & Silva, 2016), to age or work experience (Nicely, 2017), ethnic background (Mooney et al., 2017), and work-family conflict (Zhao et al., 2011). Furthermore, hotel corporate image, policy and practice that relies on foreign expertise to manage hotels (Matić et al., 2016), as well as an immigrant workforce, make it more difficult for local employees to advance, although the primary purpose of such practice is to reduce the shortage of skilled employees (Ahmad & Zainol, 2011).

2.2 Career Development Trends

The responsibility for career development in the hotel industry has shifted from employer to employee (Safavi & Bouzari, 2019) as several studies highlighted how hotel employees are taking control of their own career to seek career satisfaction (Bedemariam & Ramos, 2021), pursuing career ambitions by adapting to changes in career needs (Rasheed et al., 2020). Previous research has redefined 'turnover' as beneficial for career development because of the transitory nature of the work involved in the hotel industry (Bhagwandeem, 2021; Rasheed et al., 2020), and many of today's hotel employees are now actively managing their own career by setting up relevant strategies and controlling their career development route (Wang et al., 2019). Okumus et al. (2016) also mentioned that managers move in between hospitality companies to develop their careers and to have growth opportunities either in the career, job, company and/or the industry as a whole. However, recent trends have seen structures

becoming increasingly flat in nature, and have seen organisations becoming more global.

In order to plan for their own career, hotel employees and managers have to upgrade their knowledge and skill sets in pursuing senior or middle managerial positions in the hotel labour market, because appointments at the senior managerial level are mostly based on reputations, skills and experiences (Brennen, 2017; Nicely, 2017). Hotels have been providing avenues for employees and middle managers to explore new knowledge and skills training on a part-time basis to enhance their human capital (Wilson-Wünsch et al., 2014). Another career development trend in the hotel industry is increased mentoring and networking. This was recognised as being very helpful in motivating employees in adapting to a new career or thinking of switching to a new working environment (Horng et al., 2016). Professional networks, especially in social media, help in spreading available opportunities across hotels and the broader industry. The use of social media such as LinkedIn as a networking tool facilitate the career development of employees and managers as they can identify potential progression routes (Gibbs et al., 2015). The use of online networking also builds career progression patterns for female employees (Ollington et al., 2013).

2.3 Career Development Challenges

In the process of developing a career in the hotel industry, several challenges are faced by both the employees and the employers themselves. There are challenges pertaining to issues of change in the work, need for continuous education and training, gender issues, quality graduates entering the industry, need for skilled labour, and employee mobility. They include the interrelations between educational institutions and the hotel industry in terms of the quality of graduates, soft skills training and internship training. On average, 'graduates left their first job after 13.4 months and their second job after 10.5 months' (McKercher et al., 1995; 543). In order to reduce the high industry dropout rate, educational institutions have been collaborating with the industry to reduce the gap and understand the need to enhance their human capital (Alamu, 2016; Brien et al., 2015).

In the hotel industry, the gender imbalance in terms of advancement opportunities has also been studied by researchers (Al-Ismail et al., 2019; Carvalho, 2017; Kumara, 2018). Women often face many obstacles in advancing their career in the hotel industry. The stereotyping of the male dominated industry (Al-Ismail et al., 2019; Kensbock et al., 2013) for example in the kitchen department, often has a negative effect on women who end up in staying in the same job, even though they had the necessary experience and skills to progress. A study by Nicely (2017) revealed that managers are prone to change job at certain times during their career as their decisions are also influenced by the external labour market. In a related study in Malaysia, Ahmad and Zainol (2011) found that work experience and English language proficiency are the criteria that are

most needed to be a hotel manager. Moreover, their study concluded that several other traits are also required for managerial posts in Malaysian five-star hotels, including leadership skills, technical knowledge, education, communication skills, interpersonal skills and interest in the job itself.

3 Methodology

3.1 Sample and Population

A qualitative approach through a narrative interview method was applied for information gathering. The study population and unit analysis are among the hotel middle managers comprised of human resources training, sales and marketing, food and beverage, kitchen, housekeeping and front office departments at five star-rated hotels in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Purposive sampling or criterion-based sampling was selected based on the characteristics of the respondents mentioned in the previous paragraph. Participants' vast networks and work-related groups within different hotel chains, job trade associations and different informal networks were useful for this process. Snowball sampling was used after the earlier selected purposive sample. Working from the recommendation of existing participants, new potential participants were identified and contacted.

3.2 Data Collection Method

The potential participants are identified via LinkedIn. However, the researcher made all efforts to ensure that any particular bias in selecting the sample was avoided, although the use of LinkedIn limits the participation of some managers (assuming that not all managers use the social media app). Invitational messages and emails were sent to all those on the LinkedIn shortlist of 200, 40 of whom agreed to participate. Follow-up calls and confirmation of interview details were made two weeks before the fieldwork commenced. In the end, 14 participants were available to be interviewed. The remaining participants were unable to be interviewed because of work commitments and last-minute changes. It is worth mentioning that, before the interview session the participants are explained that their participation is voluntary, and all the information provided is strictly confidential and that their names will not be revealed. All interview sessions were tape recorded and on average each interview lasting between one to two hours.

Semi-structured interview questions were utilized with the intention to obtain in-depth and detail information. These open-ended questions were used to avoid any potentially biased responses and with the idea to discover rather than prescribed. Questions ranging from informants' demographic profiles, initial career formation to work environment and its challenges were asked. English version of the semi structured questions was used in the interview.

Table 1: Primary Questions Asked

No.	Area of questions
1.	Initial career formation
2.	The impact of hospitality education on career
3.	Patterns of work experience
4.	Types of organization
5.	Career Transitions
6.	Work environment and its challenges

3.3 Data Analysis

The data analysis was done by translating interview transcripts, transcribed, read and coded. Atlas.ti™ qualitative data analysis software was employed to facilitate the process of establishing and organizing the themes. Due to its flexibility in understanding how people are representing themselves, expressing and sharing their experiences, a narrative analysis is used in the interpretation of the interviewed information. Each name of the middle managers is not disclosed to preserve the confidentiality, thus throughout the analysis they are known through their position.

4 Findings

4.1 Initial Hotel Middle Managers Career Formation

Through the description, four themes of the initial hotel career formation identified. They are diverse experiences and career encounters, cultural diversity, ambitious and courageous and family influence. These were among the issues and points mentioned by the participants based on their own story or experiences.

4.1.1 Diverse experiences and career encounters

Developing a career in the hotel industry may not always be reliant upon specific hotel skills and knowledge. As previous studies indicated, most hotel employees started their career with different qualifications and experiences (e.g. Kong et al., 2012). Employees were initially hired into low-skilled jobs and gradually obtained their career advancement and better pay grades after gaining sufficient experience and work skills (Nicely, 2017). As for the findings in this study, the middle managers reported diverse experiences and career encounters prior to their first hotel job. Although, they could still utilise their knowledge and skills from their early education into their work in the hotel, but eventually chose a different direction and department.

I started with a bachelor's degree in engineering. [...] I moved to Talent Instrument as technician [...] After that my wife was offered again to do her PhD... in England. Two weeks after we arrived there, I saw an advertisement at the university [...] a hotel needs a Night Auditor. I applied and got the job...

first I worked as the Night Auditor... then to Reception... Night Audit Team Leader... and my last post was as the Duty Manager. I spent 5 years there.”
[Male, human resource manager]

4.1.2 Family Influence

Making decisions about a career or a career change occurs in between job, learning and other life events and the right decision impacts on an individual’s economic and social change (Nachmias & Walmsley, 2015). Persons with high levels of self-awareness and personal agency are in a better position to respond proactively to external circumstances and exert more control over long-term effects. Family influence and interventions have frequently emerged in previous studies relating to employees or managers across all types of employment (Cheng et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2011). Some noted that the role of family in influencing career decision-making is important although these varied across cultures and regions (Fan et al., 2014; Hassan et al., 2014). In the formation of early careers, influences from immediate family members were also common in providing first impressions to the participants in this study.

“I started... actually my sister was a hotelier... so looking at her, I want to work in the hotel. So since high school, I already set my target to work in the hotel.”
[Female, Training manager]

4.2 The Impact of Hospitality Education on Career

From the interpretation of the interview information, three themes that can be revealed; Specialised/Formal education, In-house Training Development and Association Training Centre which was viewed as important contribution to their career.

4.2.1 Specialised/Formal education

Education plays a significant role in preparing for a career. Hospitality education in Malaysia is designed to train skilled employees and new managers, began in the 1960s and is still flourishing (Lashley, 2015). Hospitality education is a combination of theoretical understanding of the job, artisan skills and a professional approach to consumer experience that were developed to meet the demands of the industry (Brennen, 2017; Kamari, 2003). The U.K. and U.S.A, Switzerland and France were said to be the early pioneers of hospitality study which starts from the tertiary level (Kamari, 2003) and management education was first developed from the actual work training and experiential learning of hotel employees and managers (Medlik & Airey, 1972). Previous research has shown that both theoretical and practical knowledge obtained through the years in colleges and vocational schools are important in assisting new employees when they start their career (Stierand & Zizka, 2015). This was supported from findings in the study reported here:

"I started by doing diploma in 1999 [...] Then I continue with my Bachelor's degree in 2002 and graduated in 2004. After that I was unemployed for 6 months before my first job... then only I managed to get a job in the hotel industry."

[Female, human resource manager]

4.2.2 In House Training & Development

Studies have explored the impact of relevant hospitality educational background on the initial career formation of hotel employees and found that the knowledge and competencies they possessed were beneficial in their career-building (Tavitiyaman et al., 2014; Teng, 2013). It is undeniable that knowledge and experience plays an important role in the career development of the hotel middle managers. Based on the findings, specialised and formal education in hotel management is not the only 'ingredient' in the initial career stage of the hotel middle managers.

Evidence also indicated that the importance attributed to the knowledge and skills possessed by middle managers may differ based on the type of responsibility they carry. The middle managers' pattern of work experiences from various types and classifications of hotels provided them with added advantages because they had the required knowledge and skills by the new employer. Female conference sales Manager used her early career experience in a five-star rated hotel and through in house training she was appointed as Assistant Sales Manager. She believed that the brand of the first hotel had a huge influence in getting the middle manager position in another hotel. Therefore, it is important for them to be constantly learning and enriching their work knowledge and skills through the house training for their future needs.

"...I like to challenge myself in acquiring new knowledge and obtaining knowledge through in house training really contribute to my work. The challenge right now is to maintain it. I am always questioning my ability."

[Female, Conference Sales Manager]

4.3 Patterns of Work Experiences

The middle managers in this study acknowledged the significant contribution of previous work experience in building their career in the hotel industry and highlighting career pathways within and across the service industries. Some argued that education is not the major factor in the career development of a hotel employee. Instead, it is experience that has taught them to be knowledgeable and able to solve work-related problems and challenges. Initial formal hotel education was just a foundation to the skill development and knowledge prior to entering the industry as an employee.

“Experience... because when you come in with a degree, if you are not an experienced hotelier, you will still rely on those who are in the industry longer than you. [...] because in a hotel, you will not always encounter a routine work situation... it's usually a new challenge every single day... they don't teach you that in college... you have to earn the experience to know the right way of handling it. You can also develop your skills and new knowledge through experience... by experiencing the moment.”

[Female, training manager]

In this paper, six middle managers had 16 to 20 years of working experience. Another six of had 6 to 10 years of working experience and the remaining two had 11 to 15 years of working experience.

Table 2: Participants' work experience (years in range)

Years of Work Experiences	No. of Middle managers
6 – 10 years	6
11 – 15 years	2
16 – 20 years	6
20 years & above	0

Female, training manager highlighted that her senior management team had learned through their work experience and hard work. As the older generation who started their career during the period in which industry-related educational qualifications were not available in Malaysia, they started their hotel careers with minimal or even without any formal hospitality education and worked their way up through work and experiential learning.

“Senior management I can say none [with formal education background] ... they all start from zero... learning from experience... not to say that they are not great people, they are very knowledgeable... even though they don't have diplomas, but their experiences taught them a very good lesson throughout their career... that is why they are at the top now.”

[female, training manager]

4.4 Types of Organization

Most of the managers who participated in this study had worked in several hotels and organisations within the service industry before. Their struggle and ability to cope with the transition from one company to another with different concepts, standards, market segments, and responsibilities were reported. Some of them had also worked in a different capacity before. For example, male, human resource manager was trying his best to deliver in his current position as he was facing multiple and expanding responsibilities as compared to his previous appointment.

“The difference was... first Vimalan hotel was a 4-star hotel and Passion is a 5-star. In Vimalan I started from zero... built up the hotel, documentations, SOPs, hotel logo [...] the experience is totally different. In Vimalan the workforce was about 100 staff and here there are about 500 staff that I have to take care of.”

[male, human resource manager]

Table 3: Types of hotel worked

Types of hotel	No. of Middle managers
Same hotel chain	4
Different hotel chains	10

In this study, a total of 10 middle managers had worked in different hotel chains before while the remaining four remained loyal to the same hotel chains. Some middle managers had been relocated to different departments from their previous post. It proved to be difficult to some of these managers to adapt, including female, conference & sales manager, although eventually she managed to overcome this difficulty and become more confident in her new role.

“Can you imagine that I went in with zero knowledge... knowing nothing about sales and just sitting there in my office for weeks. Some of my colleagues helped me by explaining and teaching me how to do the quotations, meeting clients who wanted to have their functions there, and in those days, I was a bit reserved. [...] It's quite a struggle for me... but later on I managed to change myself and built my confidence level. [...] the important part is that we need to adapt and learn from others.”

[female, conference & sales manager]

4.5 Career Transition Patterns

A smooth transition into a new role suggests that participants were capable and competent enough to hold responsibility. Previous studies have shown interest in the movement of career or transition from various different perspectives, including the new generation of employees, by gender (Maxwell & Broadbridge, 2014), choice (McQuarrie & Jackson, 2002), and work status (Sheridan, 2008). In this paper, male, food & beverage manager was able to advance in his career by taking the risk of accepting a bigger role and responsibility, although he was relatively new in the organisation and the salary was not attractive. This manager reported that the offer was more of a recognition of his skills set and ability to deliver. He had high hopes of becoming a middle manager and that transition helped him achieve his goal. Most importantly, upgrading or advancing on the career ladder needs a new set of skills, including management skills in managing

various departments and employees if they want to become a senior manager, maturity, and the ability to adapt to the transition (Brown & Bimrose, 2014).

"I was the youngest assistant manager being promoted in Corra hotel. I was 23 years old then. My friends said it was not the right decision to accept the post... being an assistant manager with the salary of RM1,600 only. I said to them, I don't go for the pay, I go for the post."

[male, food & beverage manager]

Working in the hotel industry usually involves several job changes and high mobility, which is often regarded as part of a typical career pattern. As indicated in other research, at a certain stage of their careers, middle managers may seek to find a balance between their age, experience, and favourable career match (Kovalenko & Mortelmans, 2014). Managers in this research may have hopes for further career development and middle manager was advancing while learning, and this ongoing process prepared him to lead the department. While waiting for the required position to be vacant, managers could use the opportunity to explore new work-related skills such as communication skills and management skills and also to upgrade their work performances.

"Start from zero... in this industry, it is more on experience. I started as busboy, wiping cutleries for six months... then increased as a waiter... I learned... step-by-step. Then I aim to achieve the next position... as the captain... when I'm ready I will try for that... still learning. I observe how the captain does his job... from there I prepare myself for the position. Asking my seniors... take notes."

[male, food & beverage manager]

4.6 Work Environment and Its Challenges

In response to the above matters, through the description, three themes dealing with work environment and challenges identified. They are gender issues, workforce diversity and workplace conflict.

4.6.1 Gender Issues

One of the continuing occupational challenges for middle managers is stereotyping within the industry. Hotel jobs were said to be 'gendered-specific' because of the number of either men or women dominating particular posts and the specific responsibilities that they carry (Campos-Soria et al., 2011). These researchers found that female hotel employees were given less responsible types of work, when compared with male employees. In most hotels, the type of work stereotypically suited to women would be in human resources, sales and marketing, the corporate office, and pastry kitchen. This is due to the working hours of these jobs, allowing them to work like any other office worker, and to women's so-called craft-related skills in certain types of jobs.

Although most of the male middle managers claimed that stereotyping in the hotel industry was no longer an issue in Malaysia, despite the overwhelming evidence from

previous studies (Kara et al., 2012; Lagasi & Buba, 2016), responses from female middle managers in this study suggest the opposite. Despite managed to succeed in their career, they still believed that gender discrimination and inequality exists within the industry. They claimed that female managers were still subjected to discriminatory treatment by their colleagues and employers, primarily because of traditional views in the industry that women's roles will change as they marry and that family commitments will limit their mobility. As a result, certain hotels not offer women a full range of jobs. Research in various countries also illustrated similar findings (Blayney & Blotnicky, 2010; Fischer, 2013). In some countries, especially Muslim countries, the segregation of women into 'office hour' jobs is due to 'cultural constraints and religious constraints' (Sobaih, 2015; 236).

"Some hotel group have an aim to increase women in leadership... because there's only few women senior level. In South East Asia at the moment, only a few women GM... the rest are all male. The gender discrimination and inequality still exist within the industry. Marry and family commitments will limit women manager's mobility"

[female, human resource director]

4.6.2 Workforce Diversity

Employees and managers from different countries and with varied backgrounds are indicative of the hotel industry's multicultural nature and a diverse workforce helps managers to cater for different segments of hotel customers. It also justifies why frontline employees, especially in the Front Office department, come from various ethnic backgrounds and have different language proficiencies. Elkhwesky et al. (2019) argued that cultural diversity is a necessity in the current hotel business due to the frequent mobility of hotel employees across borders and brands. As for this research, in particular areas or departments of Malaysian hotels, certain ethnic groups predominate. A female revenue manager described how she managed to work in a group of predominantly Chinese colleagues and was still able to progress without having to face discrimination and favouritism issues.

"...because I'm the only Malay manager there and the rest are Chinese... the treatment is different [...] The thing about working with Chinese colleagues is all about trust. It's hard to get their trust... they rely more on their own people... but once you have gained their trust, you will be fine."

[female, revenue manager]

4.6.3 Workplace Conflict

Reflecting on the challenges of working in what is often a stressful environment also highlighted problems with relationships and conflict at work. Positive or negative work relationships can sometimes affect the work environment in the hotel. Working in a stressful environment has previously been demonstrated to lead to excessive turnover

(Cronin, 2018) and reduced organisational commitment (Bae, 2021). Shin et al. (2021) highlighted abusive supervision as a form of conflict at the workplace, involving the negative behaviours of superiors, including “withholding information, humiliating, scapegoating and giving them the silent treatment” (Lyu et al., 2016; 69). In this study, male sous chef explained how his relationship with his superior turned sour because of a misunderstanding with his team members which resulted in them losing trust in him and decided to resign.

“At first there was no intention to leave. [...] had a conflict with the Pastry Chef. I handed over my resignation letter to the Executive Chef... he didn't talk much. He was expecting it actually because my relationship with the other kitchen teams was getting worse. They even met my team members behind my back... I didn't feel comfortable with it to be honest. You have to leave when there is no trust anymore.”

[male, sous chef]

Apart from conflict and disagreement at work, broken promises could also be a push factor for middle managers to be mobile in their career. Female revenue manager was promised a promotion if she achieved a certain level of sales, but this proved to be an empty promise which clearly affected her performance and trust towards the employer.

“...during the interview, they told me that if I perform well, I will be promoted as Revenue Manager. So, I worked so hard to prove myself... achieved highest revenue never achieved before... [...] in terms of revenue wise, I gave them 150% additional from what they have achieved last year... that means I performed well... but they still didn't honour their promise. So, I was a bit frustrated... then I tendered my resignation and joined Peach.”

[female, revenue manager]

5 Conclusion

This paper presented descriptions of the initial career formation of middle managers in the Malaysian hotel industry. Their decisions to a career in the industry were primarily based on their desire to start a career in the field which they had been trained for, although some of them had adapted to working in the hotel industry from different backgrounds. Their different preparations and early career encounters were dealt with differently based on their own individual understanding, motivations and interest to work in the hotel industry. In addition, family support and a secure career path were important in their early career decisions. It also highlights the extent to which formal hospitality education can have a major impact on the career paths of middle managers. Evidence and narratives from the middle managers allowed to understand the struggles and often difficult processes that they had to go through in pursuing their hospitality education. The findings demonstrated that formal hospitality education and

training is crucial, and that initial career formation was shaped by the structured hotel education system available in Malaysia although a few managed to succeed without it. However, realizing the value of education engagement with continuous learning opportunities throughout their career, including via in-house training and development and association training center served as an additional platform for the managers' learning and development. All those mechanisms had prepared participants to advance into higher positions with greater responsibilities, enhancing their self-confidence, self-identity, and giving them a stronger sense of their vocational personality.

Extensive working experience is also an important indication of knowledge and skills in the hotel industry. Years of work experience had provided the knowledge and skills to solve work-related problems and issues. Different working environments and management styles provides new insights into how large international hotels are managed and are often used to gain as much knowledge as possible, including learning a new language. Overseas work experience gained in the past was useful in this respect. Therefore, the sought-after opportunity to work abroad was a rewarding experience for many managers in this study which helped them in their current work role. Middle managers in Malaysia were able to redirect their career paths by extending the skills they gained abroad to provide every possible opportunity to grow within the local hotel industry.

Challenges that the middle managers had to face within the work environment and workplace relationships between the managers and employees showed that the hotel industry is multicultural, diverse and transient in nature. Middle managers believed that the knowledge and skills that they possessed provided a competitive advantage among co-workers and even when compared to their managers. A few of the middle managers reported that workplace conflict, especially with supervisors, could disrupt their career progress. They also reported that the high turnover and career transitions of other staff could present them with challenges in their own roles. How they perceived these setbacks and responded to them accordingly showed the maturity in their decision-making. The conflicts and changes of career certainly affected their career progression as in one case, the middle manager was still unable to progress and faced with difficulties after a conflict which resulted in resignation. Overall, it can be concluded that the middle managers' career aspirations were individually constructed, contextualised by the opportunities available to them, continuous learning experiences, skills development, changes in their life stages, support that they received and the extent to which they were successful in adapting the challenges involved in their career transitions.

6 About the authors

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