Exhibitor Perspective on the Relationship Quality in Trade Fairs in China

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ABSTRACT

China’s trade fair industry has enjoyed fast growth in the past two decades and is facing consolidation. Competition among trade fairs for quality participants is increasingly intensive. If and how organizers can build up B2B customer loyalty becomes a key issue for competitive advantages of trade fairs. This paper aims to use relationship marketing theory to examine the adaption of the relationship quality concept in the trade fair sector in China. Altogether 33 semi-structured interviews were conducted in four major international trade fairs staged in Guangzhou and Beijing. Results indicate the perceptions of exhibitors regarding relationship orientation, organizer reliability and service quality, and how communication, service quality, trust and commitment contribute to trade fair relationship quality. By taking a qualitative approach to probe the perceptions of exhibitors, this paper is able to identify in-depth issues and problems. Findings may also have implications to trade fair industries in other countries and regions.

Key words: Trade fairs, relationship quality, trust, commitment, satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

China’s exhibition industry has experienced rapid growth over the past two decades. According to the Global Association of the Exhibition Industry (UFI), China’s indoor exhibition space amounted to 2,516,581 square meters in 2007, accounting for 9% of the World’s and 65% of Asia’s total. It is estimated that by
2010, China’s total indoor exhibition space will increase to 2,961,088 square meters (UFI 2007). More than 4,000 exhibitions of a diversified nature and scale are held per annum in China, delivering revenue of about US$1.3 billion and contributing about 0.08% to China’s GDP. However, the utilization rate of the exhibition centers is only about 15% (Kay 2007). Commentators point out that the current size of 4,000 exhibitions per year do not always follow the rule of market and a process of consolidation is expected, with the market being increasingly mature and selective (Chan 2005; Erwin 2005; Heckmann 2005). How exhibition centers attract quality and scale trade fairs and how trade fairs retain and attract loyalty customers have become crucial questions for the development of the exhibition industry in China.

This research employs a qualitative method to probe into how trade fairs can build up exhibitor loyalty. It applies relationship marketing theory in which relationship quality results in customer loyalty, relationship continuation and future positive behaviour. This is one of the first attempts to determine the role of relationship quality in fair marketing in the context of trade fairs in China. Theoretically this attempt improves understanding of the relationship quality concept and practice in the trade fair context and in a distinctive economic and cultural environment. The qualitative interview method is considered the most appropriate to gain rich insight into the feelings and perceptions of the key players in this context. Despite that trade fairs, exhibitions, trade shows, expositions have slight differences in meaning, these terms were used interchangeably in literature. In this paper, business to business (b2b) trade events were investigated and business to customer (b2c) events excluded.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relationship Quality

Relationship is presented, amid a number of definitions, as “the process of developing mutual understanding and the mutual creation of value with customers over the lifetime of an association” (Kasper, Helsdingen and Gabbott 2006: 148). A relationship is two sided. To develop a positive and enduring relationship, successful exchange contacts and involvement must be properly managed from both parties (Crosy, Evans and Cowles 1990).

Relationship quality is regarded as a basis for contributing to a lasting bond with the supplier (Dorsh, Swanson and Kelley 1998). The determination of relationship quality is an important point when the customer decides about devel-
oping and maintaining a long-term relationship with a given supplier or not (Dorsh et al. 1998; Walter et al. 2003). Crosby and colleagues (Crosby et al. 1990) indicate that “Relationship quality from the customer’s perspective is achieved through the salesperson’s ability to reduce perceived uncertainty (Zeithaml 1981; Roloff and Miller 1987). High relationship quality means that the customer is able to rely on the salesperson’s integrity and has confidence in the salesperson’s future performance because the level of past performance has been consistently satisfactory.” They define relationship quality as having two dimensions: trust and satisfaction.

Subsequent studies have empirically tested the antecedents and outcomes of this higher order construct in various research contexts, using a wide range of mediating variables. Kumar and colleagues (Kumar, Scheer and Steenkamp 1995) added commitment and conflict to their conceptualization of relationship quality. Dorsch et al. (1998) considered opportunism, customer orientation and ethical profile to define relationship quality. Hennig-Thurau and Klee (1997) and Moorman, Zaltman and Deshpande (1992) added perceived quality. Walter and colleagues (Walter et al. 2003) believed that satisfaction should be an indicator to relationship quality, apart from trust and commitment and used four dimensions – trust, satisfaction, commitment and service quality – as determinants of relationship quality in a B2B environment. Thus, relationship quality “is an overall assessment of the strength of a relationship, conceptualized as a composite or multidimensional construct capturing the different but related facets of a relationship” (Palmatier et al. 2006). It is generally viewed as a higher order construct which comprises of, but not refined to, trust, commitment and relationship satisfaction.

Trust is “confidence in an exchange partner’s reliability and integrity” and consists of benevolence and honesty (Morgan and Hunt 1994: 23), trustworthiness and credibility (Palmatier et al. 2006). Trust has been divided into interpersonal level (trust in the employee of the supplier) and organizational level (trust in the supplier itself as a whole) (e.g., Rauyruen and Miller 2007).

Commitment is regarded as a focal construct in relationship marketing (e.g., Morgan and Hunt 1994; Huntley 2006), and is described as “a desire to develop a stable relationship” and “a confidence in the stability of the relationship” (Anderson and Weitz 1992: 19). Commitment is differentiated as having four forms: calculative, affective, behavioral, obligation and normative commitment. Extant empirical studies provide sufficient evidence that commitment leads to customer loyalty (e.g., Stanko, Bonner and Calantone 2007).
Satisfaction describes a customer’s affective or emotional state toward a relationship. Anderson and Narus (1984: 66) defined satisfaction as “a positive affective state resulting from the appraisal of all aspects of a firm’s working relationship with another firm.” Palmatier and colleagues (Palmatier et al. 2006: 139) clarified that “Relationship satisfaction reflects exclusively the customer’s satisfaction with the relationship and differs from the customer’s satisfaction with the overall exchange”. Relationship satisfaction has been regarded as a dimension of relationship quality in RM literature (e.g., Morgan and Hunt 1994). Perceived service quality is a critical measure of organizational performance. High quality service eventually leads to competitive advantage and customer loyalty (Palmer and Cole 1995). Crosby and colleagues (Crosby et al. 1990) state that service quality is relevant to service marketing of both a transactional and relational nature. Service quality can be considered a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for relationship quality (Crosby 1989).

**Relationship Quality in the Trade Fair Context**

In the trade fair segment, the ‘product’ and ‘service’ provided by the trade fair company to their business customers – exhibitors and visitors – is an ‘experience’ in the ‘information exchange’ platform of the trade fair. The delivery of this ‘experience product’ is through multichannel. The success of a trade fair depends on the close co-ordination of organizers, exhibitors and potential visitors (Kresse 2005). A trade fair and its sphere encompass a relationship triad among a trade fair company, exhibitors and visitors (Bruhn and Hadwich 2005). The fact that exhibitors and visitors, as ‘buyers’ of the ‘trade fair product’ that the trade fair company ‘sells’, are themselves the main components of the ‘product’ construct a complicated buying-selling relationship between exhibitors and the trade fair company, and between visitors and the trade fair company. The duty of organizers is to facilitate the relationship-building between the two customers at different stages of the events: pre-event, on-site and post-event. In addition, although organizers are sales representatives of the trade fair event, they are not the exclusive supplier of the product. Other suppliers include venues and related local sectors. This phenomenon is unique in the trade fair industry.

Exhibitors generally expect optimized quality and quantity of visitors, ideal trade fair facilities, minimal organizational effort before and during the trade show, including booth space and technical services, registration, appointment systems, one-stop shopping/billing, etc. (Stoeck and Weiss 2005). If expecta-
tions are poorly met, the relationships between trade fair companies and exhibitors are harmed.

The trade fair product that a trade fair company delivers to its customers is of a primarily intangible character, relying on customer participation and depending largely upon minimizing the expectation-perception gap from the customers’ perspectives. With the core product being ‘interaction between exhibitors and visitors”, it is difficult to assess the quality of this product. Bruhn and Hadwich (2005) indicate that the trade fair product is, by its very nature, of ‘credence qualities’ (Zeithaml 1991: 40) which presents “a situation in which the attributes of services cannot be assessed even after purchase and consumption”. From the perspective of exhibitors, it is difficult to develop and apply quantified methods to assess if potential customers are generated from a particular trade fair, even though techniques and skills on follow-ups after trade fair proliferate. It depends on trust in the trade fair organizer that the future events may live up to their expectations. Thus, future attending decisions are based on credence in the organizers, not simply the one-off on-site experience. Trade fair is of typical relational exchange nature. It is crucial for a trade fair company to build strong relationship with their business customers to sustain subsequent trade fairs.

**METHODOLOGY**

This explorative study employs a qualitative method to investigate relationship quality between trade fair organizers and exhibitors in the context of China’s trade fair industry. Qualitative studies are especially appropriate in understanding the cognition, affect, intentions and the alike from the participants’ perspectives (Maxwell 2005: 22). They explore how participants make sense of events and how these affect their behaviour. In addition, a qualitative method has an inherent openness and flexibility that allows a researcher to modify the design and focus during the research to understand new discoveries and relationships (Maxwell 2005). “A qualitative approach satisfied the need to collect rich data and offer voice to the researched” (Tribe 2010: 8).

A series of semi-structured face to face interviews were conducted at four major trade fairs staged in Beijing and Guangzhou, China, from April to July 2009. As per interview, a single exhibiting firm was treated as a unit of analysis. For most of the times, a senior manager or business owner/partner was approached; for rare occasions, several employees helped answer with the questions. Prior to the commencement of each interview, the objective of the study was explained and anonymity was assured. Questions and categories were de-
veloped according to the dimensions commonly discussed in relationship quality literature, such as trust, commitment, satisfaction of the relationship, as well as some of antecedents to relationship quality such as corporate reputation, communication, service quality. This interview guide was used flexibly during the interviews.

Interviews were conducted at 105th Canton Fair, China Ceramics 2009, Guangzhou Lighting Fair 2009, and Wind Power Asia 2009; the first three were staged in Guangzhou and the last was in Beijing. These interviewed events were organized by different types of exhibition companies: quasi-governmental divisions; Sino-foreign joint venture companies – a merge between a private Chinese exhibition company and a famous international trade fair company; joint cooperation between quasi-government divisions, industrial associations and foreign companies; joint cooperation between quasi-government divisions, industrial associations and Chinese private exhibition company. This diversity of fair operation paradigm may have varying impacts on fair quality and management. Also the four trade fairs have different orientations in terms of focus. Some shows are mainly import-oriented and some are export-oriented. The purpose of conducting interviews in these different trade fairs in different locations is to achieve triangulation in sampling.

Altogether 33 semi-structured interviews were conducted in either English or Chinese. Interviews lasting between 10 to 50 minutes were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data is then analyzed using content analysis method. The method of analysis was data immersion with repetitive reading and re-reading of data and cluster data around key analytic categories. In quoting their comments each is given an anonymous number as well as their profile characteristics.

**FINDINGS**

The interviewer has paid attention to the attributes of informants so that they represent a range of locations and ethnicity. Table 1 reports the basic characteristics of the samples and demonstrates balance over location, ethnicity and company ownership. The interviewer purposefully approached informants with higher positions as they were more likely involved in the decision-making activities in trade fair participation, management and site-selection, and males just outnumbered females in these senior positions. Informants who came from so-called underdeveloped countries came from Turkey, India, Brazil, Morocco, Russia, and Pakistan. Interviewees who came from developed countries & regions came from Hong Kong, Canada, Italy, UK, Germany, and Austria. Younger informants are usually in their 30s.
Table 1. Profiles of Informants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Exhibitors (ER)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Region of Origin</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainland China (MC)</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developed Countries &amp; regions (DC)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under Developed Countries (UC)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male (M)</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (F)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older &gt;40 (O)</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Younger &lt;40 (O)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Job Titles</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Positions (S)</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle /Junior Positions (J)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average interview time</strong></td>
<td>15 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number</strong></td>
<td>33</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Trade fairs are usually organized by a trade fair company with the support of several entities and are commonly distributed via a number of intermediaries (channels). Those who exhibit onsite might not have direct contacts with the trade fair company in the decision-making and booth-construction process. Many exhibitors gain knowledge of the trade fair company by their own research, word-of-mouth, fair performance and organizer service. Some informants lack specific knowledge of the fair organizer. The word ‘relationship’ also causes confusion among some of the informants. Some exhibitors reject a b2b ‘relationship’ between their companies and the fair organizer. Knowledge of the organizer and awareness of the relationship are included in Table 2. Other categories shown in Table 2 to capture the perceptions of informants are adapted from Rauyruen’s (2007) four dimensions, i.e. trust, commitment, satisfaction and service quality.

Table 2. Relationship Quality Perceived by Exhibitors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Perceptions of Exhibitors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge about organizers</td>
<td>No knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Some knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Specific knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship awareness</td>
<td>No relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Different types of relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Host-guest</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parenting (being taken care of)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Guidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Administrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you know which exhibition company is operating this trade fair?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you describe the relationship btw exhibitors and organizers?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Knowledge about the Organizer

Some informants have knowledge of the organizers who operate the trade fair whilst others do not, and they reason differently if there is an obligation to know. Many exhibitors pay diminutive attention to brand name, reputation and financial strength of the organizer, for example:

#1UC/M/Y/S/ER: We don’t know exactly the organizers. For domestic ones, of course we know better the organizers. For international fairs we don’t really know.

#17 MC/M/O/S/ER: Is there a need [to learn the exhibition company]? I only need to look at the effect [of the trade fair] and the word-of-mouth [of the trade fair].

#1UC/M/Y/S/ER: We don’t have sources to learn the reputation of the organizer... we never think about the financial strength of the organizer.

#3 UC/M/O/S/ER: I don’t have any idea of the reputation of the [Chinese] organizer.

Few informants expressed the need to learn about the organizer:

#22 MC/M/O/S/ER: We certainly have specific knowledge of the organizers; otherwise how can we work with them?
Relationship Awareness

Alludes to this relationship, some conceptualized the relationship between the exhibition company and the exhibiting company as a commercial one:

#6 MC/M/O/S/ER: I think it is a commercial co-operation. We exhibit because there are quality buyers from different markets in their trade fair and they [the organizers] give us booth because we pay for it.

Many exhibitors expressed contrary views that such a commercial co-operation does not count for a business to business relationship, and thus the relationship is non-exist:

#7 MC/F/O/S/ER: We should be their customers. But it is a seller's market; the organizer decided everything. It is not our decision on related arrangements, so the relationship does not exist. All popular trade airs are like this. At less popular fairs, there is such a customer relationship.

#13 MC/M/Y/S/ER: We do not think that there is any business to business relationship [between the exhibition company and our company]. As long as the price is acceptable, and we can achieve our exhibiting objectives, we will come.

#21 DC/M/Y/S/ER: There is no relationship. We pay money and they give us this space. That's natural.

#17 MC/M/O/S/ER: The relationship with the exhibition company is very simple. You give money, you will be admitted. That’s all.

#33 MC/M/Y/S/ER: We feel that all the organizers do is simply giving us a space in a venue. They contacted us frequently, about one phone call every two days, when we were about to decide to exhibit, and gave promises, but no communication afterwards. It seems that there is nothing else they do after we decided to exhibit.

Other informants saw the relationship in different perspectives and identified distinctive characteristics of the relationship based on their personal perception and experience, for example:

#4 UC/M/O/S/ER: The organizer is the host and we are the guests.

#8 MC/M/O/S/ER: The organizer is more like a management party [in this relationship]. As in a supplier-customer relationship, it would give you however much you want and cater to your needs, but here the organizer will not give you what you want. It is regulated.
#28 MC/M/O/S/ER: I feel the relationship with the organizer is partnership. Because it is based on cooperation and mutual interdependence.

Trust

Some exhibitors pointed out that they trust the trade fair and this is expressed by one informant as

#10 DC/M/Y/S/ER: … I think it’s not what the organizers do but the exhibition.

Most exhibitors confirmed that trade fair history; reputation, size & scale of the show, number and quality of the buyers, past participation, past visitation, word-of-mouth, and peer exhibitor influence are the sources for trust on the show, for example:

#1UC/M/Y/S/ER: I think this show should meet my expectation as it is the largest of its kind in this region.

#2UC/M/Y/S/ER: This show has a long history and exhibitors and visitors are from all over the world and we are confident of that.

#3 UC/M/O/S/ER: I had participated in the past and I know the potential of the fair.

#4 UC/M/O/S/ER: We know that the fair has a reputation among the buyers; this made us exhibit our products here.

#14 DC/M/O/S/ER: This is the biggest exhibition in this sector in Asia. It represents probably the top three in the world….I would be very happy to walk away from any exhibition with that one inquiry [I had yesterday].

#13 MC/M/Y/S/ER: Although we hadn’t exhibited in the past, we visited for several times. We see that other companies can achieve good exhibiting effect and we decided to come.

Some interviewees pointed out qualities, characteristics, or services of the organizer that resulted in trust:

#1UC/M/Y/S/ER: of course I expect every promises given must be realized.

:#2UC/M/Y/S/ER: We trust the [Chinese] government.
#2UC/M/Y/S/ER: We checked the records of various companies who are organizing and related to this exhibition.

#4 UC/M/O/S/ER: The reliability depends on how much I get back against how much I am putting in.

#5 UC/M/Y/S/ER: I don’t believe exhibitors just fill in a form, apply for a booth and they are just here. I think it is more like a bit trust in the supplier here… our contact is very friendly and helpful.

#14 DC/M/O/S/ER: they can market the show better.

#15 DC/M/O/S/ER: When we contact our customers, they are all very well informed about this fair, and we consider the organization positively for this one.

#18 DC/M/O/S/ER: The fair should be good as the organizer is the world’s largest exhibition company.

**Commitment**

The respondents confirmed different dimensions of commitment, such as calculative, behavioral and normative commitment:

#1UC/M/Y/S/ER: The first few sessions (of exhibiting attendance) are like gambling. Afterwards, we develop commitment.

#2UC/M/Y/S/ER: If we don’t exhibit, business is the same. But if we exhibit, the chances are that we may be better…we are committed to this fair.

#5 UC/M/Y/S/ER: We are committed to this fair. [if we do not come] it may affect our business, but not we’re going to die with...

#7 MC/F/O/S/ER: We who are in this sector have to come to this trade fair. If we do not come, there is no current economic loss, but there will be in the future. Future sales will be affected.

#11 MC/M/S/ER: We are committed. Chinese Farmers have a saying: We must plant annually even if there is no harvest.

#19 MC/M/O/S/ER: Anyway, this annual event is just like a routine.

#20 MC/M/Y/J/ER: It's hard to define commitment. Now competition for exporting companies is more intense, and I think exhibiting is a way out among no way-outs. There is no other alternatives.
#7 MC/F/O/S/ER: Every year we go to Germany to exhibit, because we must queue in [for space], and if we do not, we would be re-labeled. If we do not go, we should seriously consider that, and then we would not go for a period of time. It is not that we could go whenever we want to go or otherwise.

#7 MC/F/O/S/ER: China’s trade fairs are still organized by guanxi (interpersonal relationship) in the former planned economy style. The larger the business, the more complicated the guanxi is. We need to keep this guanxi after we get in, so that we can have this good location in this venue. It is not that you can have this location by paying more money; you must have guanxi for it. We are able to have our booth located here after keeping the guanxi for several years.

#17 MC/M/O/S/ER: [we are committed] as long as the organizer can guarantee that there will be as many visitors in future trade fairs.

#18 DC/M/O/S/ER: I think the service itself is nothing special, but it is a very big fair in Asia in our sector… we have to come.

#26 /MC/F/Y/J/ER: We cannot be called loyal customers. We will buy this fair as long as we are satisfied. If one day the fair quality or the service quality decline we may consider other trade fairs. We also need to consider the effect, services and other aspects.

**Relationship Satisfaction**

Relationship satisfaction with the fair and the organizer can be based on employee integrity and service, for example:

#5 UC/M/Y/S/ER: I think our relationship with the organizer is great, because one of the contacts from the organization is a wonderful person, helpful and makes us happy as I know I can trust the organization’s personnel.

Since many exhibitors do not acknowledge a commercial relationship with the organizer, when they were asked if they were satisfied with the relationship, they expressed dissatisfaction of the services provided by the organizing company, for example:

#3 UC/M/O/S/ER I have some problems with the organization of the fair…we had informed all our customers that we would be in hall 5, [but our booth was replaced without informing us], and then some customers
cannot find us. It takes some visitors a whole day to find us here because it is a huge exhibition hall.

#18 DC/M/O/S/ER: All the organizer wants is just to make money. This organizer does not have quality service; it is not upgraded to consider service quality.

#20 MC/M/Y/J/ER: The organizer should consider how they can enable effective communication between enterprises as this is the ultimate goal of a trade fair. But look at this trade fair, many of the details are not paid attention to. Securities here don’t prohibit photo-taking. It turns the trade fair to money-making for the organizer.

However, these service failures do not seem to affect their future participation intention as their primary purpose of being there is to interact with visitors and find business opportunities and learn market information. The below informant is typical among the exhibitors:

#7 MC/F/O/S/ER: [relationship with the organizer] will not affect our trade show attendance. It is totally dependent upon if the trade fair can bring us economic benefits.

**CONCLUSION**

This study examined the relationship between the work of locus controls, job satisfaction and task performance of the restaurant service employees. While Spector’s (1988) original work locus of control scale occurs in a structure of two factors, in this study it forms a structure of 3 factors. External locus of control articles did not show ant dissociation but it was seen that internal locus of control occurred in two separate dimensions. Dimensions were attributed as internal locus of control-1 and internal locus of control-2. In the study made by Oliver, Jose and Brough (2006), it was found that internal locus of control separated into two different factors and that the work locus of control showed harmony in three-factor model. In this direction, it is suggested that the work locus of control scale of Spector (1988) should be applied within a wider sample and the factor structures should be supported with the confirmative factor analysis. It was found that there was a relation between the work locus of controls, task performances and job satisfactions of the restaurant service employees. It is seen a positive significant relation between internal locus of control-1 dimension and job satisfaction ($r=154$) and task performance ($r=335$).
Moreover, it was detected that there was a positive relation between internal locus of control-2 dimension and task performance (r=270). According to these results, it is seen that there is a relation between that service employees have a tendency to internal locus of control and task performances and job satisfactions. We can say that individuals with internal locus of control show more task performance and have higher job satisfaction. We can say that internal locus of controls has a role over task performance in determining the role of locus of controls over task performance. In determining the role of locus of controls over job satisfaction, we can say there is the role of 2 dimensions of internal locus of control. According to the above results, the study we made shows that there is a relation between locus of controls and task performance and job satisfaction. Findings of the study are also supported by the literature. It is considered that the study sheds light on other academicians working in areas concerning organizational behavior in tourism and human resources and on sector managers. We predict that locus of controls have one dimensional will help us to deeply understand employees and their attitudes towards work.

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