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MNE Hotels in Australia**

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Human Resources Development, Employment and Globalization of MNE Hotels in Australia

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Abstract

Increasingly researchers are examining the role and impact of multinational enterprises (MNEs) on the development of HRM strategies and practices. This paper presents data from an employee relations survey of MNE hotels operating in the Brisbane-Gold Coast corridor. Demographic characteristics are examined and important features underlined. The survey shows similarities in characteristics between managers and employees such as a young age, high turnover, short job tenure, and low pay. The data suggests that the MNE labour market share many characteristics. Flexibilisation and increases in human capital operate in tandem associated with declining wage pressures suggesting that broader MNE cost minimisation strategies have been effective in segregating the labour market and shielding MNEs from broader wage pressure.

Introduction

According to the ILO, worldwide, employment within the tourism economy is estimated at 192.2 million jobs (one in every 12.4 jobs in the formal sector). By 2010, this should grow to 251.6 million jobs (one in every 11 formal sector jobs). According to the ILO, a key distinguishing feature of the hotel industry is the market domination of global brand names, which compete on price and quality (ILO, 2001: 48). According to the ILO, the international hotel industry remains dominated by a largely casual and seasonal pool of temporary labour on which it can draw in response to demand. Work is largely remunerated at minimum wage levels (excluding skilled trades). The use of tipping as a 'top up' to a low pay base is reported to be widespread (ILO, 2001: 49).

This research reflects a growing interest in examining the impact of globalisation and the role of MNEs within the world economy (Ferner and Quintanilla, 1998:710) especially with identifying and assessing the diffusion of management practices between MNEs and host countries (Bamber, Shadur and Howell, 1992). The role of MNEs has attracted greater interest, particularly with

researchers attempting to explain what happens when MNE strategies and practices 'converge' with domestic labour regulatory regimes (Kerr, Dunlop, Harbison and Myers, 1964) and assessing the strengths and weaknesses of existing domestic institutional arrangements (Dore, 1973). A key theme concerns the role of MNEs in transmitting particular employment relations practices across national borders (Sparrow *et al.* 1994) and the effectiveness of national labour regulatory regimes are in moderating MNE business and employment practices (Lane, 1991) and protecting employee rights (Ramsay, 1997). Since the early 1970's, the rise of global service MNEs has significantly altered our perception of MNEs. Global brands in fast food, retail, etc dominate much of our domestic material culture (Allan, Bamber and Timo, 2000).

Like many premier tourism destination's, the Brisbane - Gold Coast corridor region of Australia is a Mecca for attracting tourists and young people alike. International brand MNE hotels dominate the hotel labour market. Jobs are easily found and life appears to be easy and fun. However, beneath the veneer, this labour

market has a number of disconcerting features that should trouble labour market policy makers in mature service economies. Service work has become synonymous with flexible employment practices (Doeringer and Piore, 1971; Gordon *et al.* 1982; Rubery, 1989). Hotel employment is seen as the archetypal 'flexible' sector of service employment along with retailing and fast food (Gabriel, 1988; Benson and Worland, 1992; Ritzer, 1993; Lucas, 1997; Timo, 1996, 1999).

This paper presents data from a major survey of MNE hotel demographics in this region and underlines important characteristics of the MNE hotel labour market such as organisational tenure, job tenure, gross salary, mode of employment, hours worked, time since last training session and the need for further training. The data suggests that the traditional labour market assumption that connects increasing quality of human capital with rising wage levels is not necessarily applicable to the MNE hotel labour market.

Internationalization of the Australian Hotel Industry

Over the past three decades, tourism has emerged as a significant global industry with Australia having about a 1 per cent share of the total world tourist trade with over 7 per cent of the world's long-haul trade (Timo, 1996). Tourism is big business in Australia accounting 4.5 per cent of gross domestic product. Australian tourism accounts for 89 per cent of demand for hotel accommodation and 30 per cent of food consumed in cafes, restaurants and take away food (ABS, 2000a). The industry directly employs about 513,000 people and has a gross domestic product amounting to over A\$20 billion. It is also a significant employer of young people (*Tourism Forecasting Council*, 2001). Increases in inbound tourism have resulted in a building boom in hotels, resorts, golf courses, retail

facilities and related infrastructure (Timo, 1996). By 1999, Australian hotels had turnover in excess of A\$4 billion (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 1998, Table 1).

MNEs have played a major role in the expansion of Australia's four to five star accommodation. Whilst numerically smaller, MNE hotels account for 45.8 per cent of all hotel workers employed and represent 59.1 per cent of gross wages paid and account for 49.7 per cent of gross hotel income (ABS, 1994, Table 4.2, latest figures; ABS, 1998, Table 1.0). In the early 1980's there were 5 international four and five star hotels, by 1999 there were 40 (RACQ, 2000) including familiar MNE brand names such as Conrad, Hyatt, Accor, Hilton, Sheraton and Marriott establishing a presence encouraged by pro-development State governments. However, with a relatively small domestic market, these global brand hotels have struggled to maintain a competitive edge over domestic and international competitors.

Employment and the Hotel Labour Market

Studies suggest that the hotel labour is relatively unstable with higher levels of turnover than most manufacturing industries (KPMG, 1991 and Timo, 1996). More than half of all hotel employment is on a casual or contingent basis making this type of employment in Australia far higher than the OECD average (Timo, 1999). A survey conducted by Norris *et al.* (1995) found that hotel workers (excluding maintenance engineers and chefs) are generally young and lower paid, earning on average only 73 to 86 per cent below the all industry average. In addition, they found that most hotel jobs had few skill barriers and were attractive to young workers looking for travel and excitement. The Australian Industry Commission (AIC, 1996, now part of the Australian Consumer, Competition Commission, or ACCC) concluded that low pay; labour

intensity and low skill were interconnected. The demand for skills (excluding cooks and chefs) was low with only 11.0 per cent of hotel workers requiring trade qualifications as compared to an all industries average of 16.4 per cent. The AIC went on to find that 70.6 per cent of hotel workers had no post school qualifications as compared to 52.9 per cent for an all industries average (AIC, 1996: 257, Table 13.8). A hotel training needs survey conducted by Tourism Training Australia (TTA) found that future growth in hotel employment was expected to be in semi-skilled occupations particularly in kitchen work (27.1 per cent), food attendants (26.5 per cent), cooks (17.1 per cent), bar attendants (12.2 per cent) and porters and house attendants (4.1 per cent). Skilled and supervisory positions were only expected to increase by 3.6 per cent (TTA, 1997). Norris et al, (1995: 57-58) concluded that the demand for hotel jobs exceeded supply by almost two to one thus reducing pressure on hotels to either increase wages or reduce labour turnover.

Research Method

This paper draws on research from on a survey of four to five star MNE hotels operating in the Brisbane-Gold Coast corridor and surrounding region covering managers and employees. The data was collected during 2000-2001 using both a managerial and employee questionnaire and a reference group (expert panel) of 6 senior hotel executives was established to advise on the formulation of the questionnaire and lobbying hotels to partake in the survey. Following a briefing, each hotel HRM department was responsible for distributing and collecting the instrument. Of the original 17, two hotels withdrew from participation when the full detail of the study was explained citing lack of resources and time. The questionnaires were distributed with the wage slips and only staff rostered on for either of those days received the questionnaires representing a 'snapshot' of

employment for that period. 4034 questionnaires were distributed over a two-day period at each MNE hotel with a response rate of 1778 questionnaires or 44 per cent.

Results

The survey responses were evenly split between gender with females' only four percentage points (or 52 per cent) ahead of males. However the numbers of male managers exceed female managers by 31 per cent. Whilst this gender split may well reflect most industries, particularly manufacturing, it again reinforces the fact that women managers are under represented at the senior levels of four and five star hotels in the sample.

The data on age shows that MNE hotels attract young people with the majority employees in the 15-24 (30.5 per cent) and 25- 34 years of age group (34.8 per cent) with these age groups comprising 65.3 per cent of employees. Most managers are in the 25-34 years of age (40 per cent). The majority or 77.9 per cent of managers are found in the 25-44 years of age group.

The data also suggests that the MNE hotel workforce is increasingly educated with 64.9 per cent of employees have qualifications at the post-secondary level and above. This is at odds with the finding of the AIC (1996) that reported only 29.4 per cent had post school qualifications suggesting that life style choice may be a significant factor. Managers are increasingly educated with 25.2 per cent having associate diploma level qualifications with this figure being closely followed by degree qualifications at 23.1 per cent. 79.8 per cent of managers had some form of post secondary educational attainment:

Table 1: Organisational Tenure for Employees and Managers

Employees	Frequency	Percentage*
0 – 2 years	1017	56.5
3 – 5	403	23.2
6 – 8	186	10.7
9 – 11	95	5.5
12 – 14	27	1.6
15 – 17	11	0.6
Total	1792	100.0
Managers		
0 – 2	70	48.3
3 – 5	36	24.8
6 – 8	26	17.9
9 – 11	9	6.2
12 – 14	4	2.8
Total	145	100.0

*3.0 per cent of employees

**0.0% of managers

There may be a number of reasons for limited organizational tenure. First, in the case of employees, hotel work is often closely connected to life style. ‘Play and work’ may attract those employees who see work in the industry as opportunities to travel etc. Second, low skill barriers to entry, seasonality, low pay, and the persistence of non-standard forms of employment create conditions for job instability, turnover, and multiple job-hopping (ACIRRT, 1996; Timo, 1996, 1999). Finally, for both managers and employees, hotel departmentalisation generally inhibits career pathing by placing barriers on upward mobility and encouraging a culture of mobility as career progression becomes linked to careers in industry rather than within an organization. It is often company policy in many of the

major national and international hotel chains to ‘compel managers to rotate quite frequently between properties, often every three years’ (HRM Director, large MNE hotel, *personal communication*, 8th April 1999).

Managerial and employee turnover may have some perceived benefits. For managers, it enables an infusion of fresh ideas and approaches, for employees, managing turnover allows greater control over staff performance, and accessing skills already in the labour market (e.g. multiple job hopping or poaching) without incurring the costs of in-house human capital development. Despite the apparent advantages, there must be a considerable cost to hotels, with loss of quality and efficiency in operations and continuity where hotels must continually divert resources on re-training and organizational renewal this is especially pertinent where up to 56.5 per cent of staff and 48.3 per cent of managers had two or less year’s of employment with the organization.

Table 2 provides data on job tenure being the length of time employees and managers have held their present jobs. The data for the employees when compared with the results for organisational tenure in Table 1 shows how fragile the labour market is with a majority of employees having only held their jobs for two years or less (65.7 per cent). The percentage of those in the 3–5 year category was 20.7 per cent giving a cumulative percentage for these two-year bands of 86.4 per cent, almost 5 per cent up on the equivalent organisational tenure figure:

Table 2: Job Tenure for Employees and Managers

Employees	Frequency	Percentage*
0 – 2 years	1134	65.7
3 – 5	358	20.7
6 – 8	122	7.1
9 – 11	79	4.6
12 – 14	19	1.1
15 – 17	14	0.8
Total	1792	100.0
Managers		
0 – 2 years	94	64.8
3 – 5	32	22.1
6 – 8	12	8.3
9 – 11	2	1.4
12 – 14	5	3.4
Total	145	100.0

*3.7 per cent of employees

**0.0% of managers

The data in Table 2 also confirms the shortness in time that employees are spending in their jobs. There has been a considerable operational change in the four and five hotel industry towards job simplification keeping a lid career progression. This is particularly apparent in the food and beverage area where the increasing usage of pre-prepared and partially prepared foods and the change to more self-service styles of food and plate presentation has reduced the need for skilled chefs and cooks. In addition, departmental resistance to multiskilling as a means of protecting exiting skill/labour domains ensures that job ladders remain undeveloped contributing to shorter job tenure as employees exit the organization to pursue careers in industry (Timo, 1999).

When examining the managerial data shown in Table 2, an equally dramatic picture emerges with 64.8 per cent of managers having been in their jobs for 2 years or less. To some extent this may be seen as positive because it opens up career path opportunities for ambitious managerial staff but the quality and depth of their understanding and experience in dealing with customers and employees may be limited due to their narrow experience. In an industry based upon quality service this presents problems in consistency of the service offered.

The survey data also reveals that the MNE hotel industry is a low paying employer with 85.8 per cent of employees earning less than A\$30,000 p.a., or just less than one per cent above average ordinary weekly time earnings of A\$33,000 as set by the ABS (*Average Weekly Earnings – States and Australia*, Cat. No. 6302.0, August, 2002: 2) reflecting broader trends (ILO, 2001). Hotel employee earnings should be read in conjunction the mode of employment (Table 3) and hours worked data (Table 4) to assess how many employees are full-time and how many are part-time or casual. Notwithstanding the other data it is very notable that a very small percentage of staff earn in excess of A\$36,000 (5.5 per cent). Other than award mandated penalty rates, over award payments are rare. This data contradicts the traditional economic labour market view that increasing skills and qualifications are associated with stronger wages bargaining power. In the survey, 64.9 per cent of employees and 79.8 per cent of managers held post secondary education qualifications, yet, wages remain relatively low. The majority of employees (65.4 per cent) were found to earn A\$25,000 p.a. or less with the majority of managers (60.0 per cent) earning A\$49,000 p.a. or less. ABS data (2000b) suggests that Australia's industrial award safety net will continue to dominate pay

structures in hotels with 65.2 per cent of employees relying on awards for pay setting as compared to an all industries average of 24.1 per cent. Only 28 per cent of employees in hotels have pay set by individual (non registered) agreements and only 6.8 per cent that have wages set by collective agreements (ABS, 2000b, Table 10).

So why are wages low? We argue that these findings reflect three issues. First, the hotel labour market is highly causalised, mobile and relatively compliant. Second, union density is low as compared to other industries. Third, hotels have generally avoided the perceived rigidities of a centralised award system by adopting a labour utilisation strategy that favours flexible and casual employment. Lack of wages pressures impacts in other ways. In a system based on informal and discretionary management control where individual work effort is difficult to measure, individual rewards and favours (e.g. access to days off etc.) are often difficult to quantify.

Table 3 shows the data on mode of employment for the hotel employees, with 60.6 per cent being in full time employment. A relatively low percentage of 10.6 per cent are part time with casual employment being at 28.8 per cent overall:

Table 3: Mode of Employment for employees

Employees	Frequency	Percentage*
Full time	1041	60.6
Part time	183	10.6
Casual	495	28.8
Total	1792	100.0

*4.1 per cent

Table 4 shows the hours worked by employees. 44.3 per cent of the sample worked 36 – 40 hours per week full time employment. On a cumulative basis, just over a third, or 34.4 per cent of employees worked 35 hours per week underlining the

importance of part time and casual working time arrangements. Just over one fifth or 21.4 per cent worked in excess of 40 hours per week:

Table 4: Hours Worked by Employees

Employees	Frequency	Percentage*
0 – 5 hours	8	0.5
6 – 10	33	1.9
11 – 15	38	2.2
16 – 20	98	5.7
21 – 25	115	6.7
26 – 30	166	9.6
31 – 35	134	7.8
36 – 40	765	44.3
41 – 45	200	11.6
46 – 50	88	5.1
50 +	82	4.7
Total	1792	100.0

*3.6 per cent

Combined with the wages data, the survey reinforces the link between numerical flexibility, hours of work and persistent low pay. Table 5 gives information on training frequency (expressed as time since completion of last training session) for both employees and managers. The data suggests that 72.1 per cent of employees have attended a training session within a 12-month period suggesting a proactive training regime being implemented by the hotels where over the last 3 years 92.4 per cent have attended training. Accredited training is conducted under the auspices of Tourism Training Australia, which is a government appointed ITAB (Industry Training Advisory Board) and a body known as the Australian Hospitality Review Panel (AHRP) is responsible for accrediting workplace training. Similarly, 74.5 per cent of managers had attended a training session within a 12-month period, or 93.7 per cent of managers have attended a training session in the past 3 years:

Table 5: Time Since Last Training Session for Employees and Managers

Employees	Frequency	Percentage*
0 – 1 years	1199	72.1
1 – 2	238	14.3
2 – 3	99	6.0
3 – 4	40	2.4
4 – 5	29	1.7
5 – 6	11	0.7
6 – 7	47	2.8
Total	1792	100.0
Managers		
0 – 1 years	105	74.5
1 – 2	21	14.9
2 – 3	6	4.3
3 – 4	2	1.4
4 – 5	1	0.7
5 – 6	2	1.4
6 – 7	4	2.8
Total	145	100.0

*7.2 per cent of employees

**2.8 per cent of managers

These training frequency figures, however, must be set in the context of employee turnover and job tenure figures which both indicated the high turnover levels of employees. The high proportion of training may be a necessity to adequately compensate for the ongoing loss of human capital due to the sheer volume turnover of staff numbers. Obviously such a high level of training also indicates that considerable resources are being expended not for improvement in existing human capital levels, but as a ‘stop gap’ mechanism in to remain competitive in service levels in a high turnover organization. The data also sought responses to the question of whether more training is needed for both employees and managers.

The result in Table 5 show an interesting contrast with data on whether employees

believed that more training was necessary, with the majority or 61.6 per cent saying ‘no’ to further training, whereas managers had an almost overwhelming response the other way, with 72.5 per cent saying ‘yes’ to more training. Employees appear to show ‘training fatigue’. The above figures put in the context of high job and organisational turnover can only be interpreted as the employees seeing little point in training because they expect to move on quickly. With 64.8 per cent (Table 2) of managers holding their position for two years or less, on-going training may be necessary for coping rapid change and new responsibilities.

Discussion

Overall, the data show a hotel labour force that is relatively young with the majority (65.3 per cent) of employees being 34 years of age or less. This youthful pattern was also reflected in management where 40.0 per cent of managers were aged 25-34 years. Despite the youthfulness of the demographic profile, women remain under represented in management ranks. The workforce was found to be well qualified with over 64.9 per cent of staff to have qualifications at the post-secondary level and above. This is at odds with the AIC report (1996) that reported lower training levels. The data showed a high frequency of job training with 72.1 per cent (Table 5) of employees having attended a training session within the past 12 months. Despite employees demonstrating relatively high levels of education and training, there appears to be little upward pressure on wage levels. This was true, even when the mode of employment of many employees was accounted for. Only 5.5 per cent of employees received in excess of A\$36,000 p.a. despite the fact that 60.6 per cent (Table 3) of employees are in full-time employment and 65.7 per cent (Table 4) of employees worked 36 hours or more per week. Low pay needs to be seen in context. The data supports the picture of a labour market dominated by high turnover with

56.5 per cent (Table 5) of employees having been with their organisation for less than 2 years and 65.7 per cent (Table 2) of employees in their current job for less than 2 years.

The data presents a number of issues. First, the levels of high turnover suggest continuing labour market instability. As suggested above, low organizational tenure and job tenure sees the external labour market acting as a significant mechanism for allocating skill. The overall pattern of skill acquisition and job mobility in the hotels studied is consistent with the concept of acquiring skills and competencies through a series of changes in employment as opposed to remaining with one or few hotel employers during an employee's working life. Second, labour market instability creates a conundrum for hotels. On the one hand, turnover is a negative factor contributing to labour instability and poor service quality requiring considerable resources in order to fill the 'human capital gap'. Yet on the other hand, a degree of turnover may be beneficial in some service organizations adding to 'fresh happy faces', better attitudes and removing 'dead wood'.

A number of studies Gabriel (1988), Guerrier and Lockwood (1989), Price (1994) and Lucas (1995) of the hotel labour market in the UK, suggests that two decades of labour market deregulation and public policy debates about increasing training and educational levels is not having the effect expected on the hotel labour market. What is disturbing is the failure of increased training and educational attainment to disconnect low pay, gendered jobs, and non-standard forms of employment from hotel work. The reasons appear clear: there is an absence of the type of labour market 'push-pull' factors such as labour scarcity, increased education and more effective organized labour, etc that would normally push wages upwards especially in labour

scarce economies (Debrah, 1994). The hotels in the survey have in the short term at least, found flexible and numerical labour more beneficial than the pursuit of new HRM practices. According to the ILO, the employment prospects of workers in the international hotel industry will be improved where additional efforts are made to make working conditions more attractive as a 'prestigious lifetime engagement' through greater training and multiskilling, creating flatter organizational hierarchies and subcontracting out of ancillary tasks. In addition, hotels would benefit from improvements in managerial education and training especially in the area of manpower planning (ILO, 2001: 122). At public policy level, labour market deregulation has been seen as a panacea for tackling youth unemployment. However, there is a down side: the creation of a lower tier of service work that despite being increasingly educated, remains numerically flexible, mobile, and lower paid.

Conclusion

Using data from selected hotels, the paper shows that the MNE hotel labour market is characteristic of gendered, flexible and low paid characteristic of many low paid industries, yet better educated than most. A heavy emphasis on entry-level training is used to offset high turnover and job instability and variations in service quality. In relation to future HRM planning, the research suggests that there are two choices facing hotel managers. Management can either continue to accept a labour utilisation approach that sees the way forward in terms of increasingly flexible and segmented labour market that affords hotels a competitive edge based on price. Alternatively, hotel management can attempt to move towards a model of employment relations and competitive advantage driven by a more stable, better skilled and motivated workforce. This latter approach requires more effective labour force planning.

Notes

Percentages of missing or invalid data for each Table as follows:

- * Percentage of missing data for employees
- ** Percentage of missing data for managers

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