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Abstract

The industry is attempting to become more involved with graduates and currently-enrolled students in hospitality education programs. This article re- views the current situation, describes problems which exist, and proposes potential strategies to help resolve the problems.

Keywords

E. Ray Swan, Professional associations, Hospitality industry, Hospitality academics, Orientation

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The industry is attempting to become more involved with graduates and currently-enrolled students in hospitality education programs. This article reviews the current situation, describes problems which exist, and proposes potential strategies to help resolve the problems.

The hospitality industry is, in many ways, benefiting from fast-paced growth in the 1980s. Historically, practitioners within the industry and academics within the educational community have not fully cooperated with each other to achieve mutually beneficial results. Elements of distrust, a failure to communicate, and disagreement about the role of academia in the preparation of graduates for the industry have been among the problems.

The crux of the matter is that there are two conflicting points of view. Hospitality industry practitioners say, "Many of our problems occur because educators don't send us graduates with the proper education, experience, and attitudes." Educators respond with: "The industry doesn't do things correctly; it is our responsibility to teach the students the right way."

Unfortunately, students in post-secondary hospitality education programs have, in large measure, been victims of this debate. Consider the enthusiasm of recent graduates who, in their naivete, believe that their knowledge and ideas will be quickly rewarded with positions of responsibility, challenge, and high income. This enthusiasm is often replaced with doubts about the wisdom of their career decision, anger with both academicians and industry superordinates about a perceived failure to communicate "like it really is," and frustration resulting from a lack of immediate satisfaction in initial work experiences.

This situation is obviously undesirable. Is there a way that the many good qualities of the recent graduate (initiative, enthusiastic attitudes, innovative ideas, etc.) can be channeled into more positive job experiences early in his or her employment?

Cooperation is Increasing

The answer is "yes." The above scenario is changing; the lack of cooperation and understanding among industry, academicians, and the

students themselves is decreasing. For example, educators are working outside of academia and industry personnel are offering their expertise either through instructional assistance as "executives in the classroom" or by providing input as curricula, courses, and other educational vehicles are developed. Professional associations are also becoming more interested in enhancing the relationship between the industry and educational institutions. Educational resource materials which are specifically developed for industry use are becoming increasingly popular in the classroom and, of course, professional associations are pleased that they can help bridge the gap between industry practitioners, academicians, and students.

Those working in the hospitality industry can easily understand the graduates' perspective as they ask or at least ponder the basic question: "Why, with all my education, must I begin at the bottom of the organization as a trainee?" Additional questions include:

- I have studied for a long time; what more must I learn?
- I have worked hard at my education so why isn't the pay better?
- I know a lot so why don't they give me more responsibility?
- Why can't I immediately apply what I learned in school?
- Why are wage/salary levels the same for four-year graduates as they are for new employees with lower educational levels?
- Do I really need a degree to do the work required in many hospitality industry management positions?

While the list of related questions can become extensive, those in the hospitality industry must, first, recognize that the graduates we hire have genuine concerns which must be addressed early in their employment with the organization. Second, strategies and techniques that explain the reasons for current procedures must be designed to motivate, not discourage, the people who enter our industry.

Industry Must Re-Orient Employees

Of course, there are some defensible and rational answers to the questions which recent graduates raise. Frequently, industry personnel must teach, or at least re-teach, basic information which should have been learned in the formal academic program. Likewise, it is a basic business principle in any industry to pay employees what they are worth. Until the general information acquired by students during their education is translated into specific knowledge and skills useful to the organization, it is difficult to cost-justify wages much higher than those currently being offered. A primary objective of the early orientation/training activities in the hospitality operation should be the integration of general knowledge and skills acquired through formal education with the specific needs of the operation.

Graduates of four-year college/university programs often resent the fact that their beginning pay levels are the same as or at least similar to those of graduates of one- and two-year community/junior college programs. While the reason for this has already been explained (hospitality industry employers must pay staff members according to their current worth to the organization), it should also be pointed out that the best trainees, regardless of academic background, are those

who will learn most quickly and perform most effectively. Therefore, these employees will receive pay increases and promotional opportunities accordingly.

There are some problems which occur when there are differences in perception about the role that graduates should play immediately upon entering the hospitality industry. Obviously, job dissatisfaction can result. At the least, this can lead to attitudinal problems which slow the pace of planned training programs. Accompanying frustration levels further hinder the ability of industry trainers to help recent graduates become productive members of the organization on a timely basis. How many employees who are not effective, contributing members of the management team are reacting to problems which could have been avoided early in their careers?

Resignation from the organization and frequent turnover in the hospitality industry, as well, can often be traced to motivation/morale problems which develop early in an employee's career. Another problem — burnout — can occur when people entering the industry overexert themselves during initial training programs. Sometimes, they also work hard to attain the wrong goals, such as attempting to impress the trainer rather than maximizing the worth of the training experience.

If problems stemming from how to deal effectively with recent graduates are obvious from the perspective of the new employee, their impact upon the operation and the industry is also relatively clear. A failure or lack of willingness on the part of the employee to make an optimal contribution to attaining organizational goals has already been noted. In addition, there are new, fast-growing segments of the hospitality industry that are simply unable to fill positions with qualified staff. They frequently must accept the graduates of in-house training programs, regardless of their potential long-term stability and perceived ability to help the operation.

Cost implications of lower-than-optimal productivity, low motivation/morale levels, employee turnover, wasted intellectual resources, etc. are more reasons why the hospitality industry must be concerned about graduates' initial job attitudes.

Educators Can Develop Quality Programs

Now that we have defined the problem and have focused on some of its implications, let's look at what can be done to at least partially reduce it. When considering the educator's role, several significant strategies can be identified. First, there is the obvious need for academics to develop and implement the highest quality educational programs. This effort should begin at the point where faculty and staff members are recruited and then continue through the development of relevant curricula and meaningful courses. The need to utilize high quality resource materials and to actively involve practicing alumni in ongoing educational activities is also very important.

Of course, it is necessary to tell and to show students what they can expect after graduation when they assume entry-level positions within the hospitality industry. Emphasis on the art and science of the industry (some things can and other things cannot be learned in the

classroom) is a good start. The following learning methods can be helpful:

- project-based instruction models which require students to undertake work projects in hospitality operations as an integral part of their courses;
- external hospitality specialists serving as guest speakers in the classroom or as instructors for entire courses (the concept of "executives in the classroom"); and
- required internship or apprenticeship programs where students gain work experience as an integral part of their academic experiences (exposure to the "real world" can be helpful in reducing the possibility of surprises after full-time employment begins).

As a result of these activities, students should have a better understanding of what to expect when they begin work in the industry. This is a far better situation than the current possibility of many students entering the hospitality industry with images of multi-storied hotel atriums or of dining room tables covered with starched white tablecloths. There is much more to the industry than that.

Educators in four-year institutions must recognize that, by design, many of the concepts noted throughout the educational program will not be relevant to entry-level positions, but will apply more to mid-management activities in the hospitality industry. At this point, they should note that it will be necessary for graduates to learn and practice procedures required by their employer before they begin to utilize advanced concepts discussed in the classroom.

Educators have an additional responsibility to advise students as initial job selection decisions are made. They can point out that factors other than salaries and wages must be considered. Among the most important factors should be the quality of training experiences which will be offered the graduate. Students should also be advised to question recruiters about where they will be in the company in five years and to ask for specific information about the initial trainee position.

The industry itself, probably through professional associations, should carefully develop and then promulgate career track and time frame information. Of course, each operation is different, but it is very difficult for recent graduates to develop career management programs in the absence of some generalizations about how the programs work in the hospitality industry.

Professional Associations Can Assist

Professional associations can help improve the quality of educational programs and services provided to hospitality students. However, representatives could also serve on advisory boards of educational institutions and can help develop and disseminate quality educational resources.

It is rather ironic that students are frequently attracted to the industry by scholarships, educational materials, and recruiting efforts sponsored and/or developed by professional associations, but are then subsequently forgotten after initial employment in the industry. Professional associations can provide additional benefits to these recent

graduates. What about scholarships for training (internship activities), special-interest sessions at professional meetings, membership promotion, and related services and materials for this special target group?

The industry operators themselves, of course, must also become involved in concerted efforts to resolve these problems. For example, while most recruiters understand the mutual need for honesty as the recruitment/selection process evolves, they should understand that some graduates are naive about the process by which employment decisions are made. Presentations which focus on the company and on exactly what the student can expect will help avoid surprises.

Some operations use creative strategies to mitigate the students' concerns. Fast-track training programs which reduce training times for selected employees are an example. Individualized training programs which focus on the specific needs of trainees can also be used to successfully address early job-related problems. Clearly, formalized training programs rather than informal, spontaneous training activities are required. It is critical for operators to select qualified trainers who have a genuine desire to train and who are relieved of other job duties so they can provide the time and energy necessary for an effective program.

Finally, operations should develop systematic feedback systems. In this way, new recruits will be able to interact effectively with management officials about initial job experiences, the operation, and their professional future.

Some Concepts Are Ignored

Intertwined with the above ideas, which are potentially useful in addressing the concerns of recent graduates, are some concepts which make sense, but which unfortunately seem to be ignored in current industry practice. First, educators should study and research the subjects with which they are comfortable. New ideas and information are generated all the time and are reported in almost every issue of trade journals. Course presentations should mirror the latest concepts. Educators should be aware of industry problems and prepare their students for them, considering how they might best be resolved.

Involvement in the industry through attendance at seminars, writing, research, field trips, friendships with industry practitioners, etc. is important. Industry guidance for the development of academic programs must be actively solicited. Faculty should join and become active in industry associations and be sure that their program teaches relevant information which graduates must know (while this seems obvious, it is frequently not done). In-depth treatment of basic business principles, ethics, and strategies for human relations are frequently overlooked. The two most important skills that many industry recruiters claim are necessary for success are effective communication and the ability to develop strong interpersonal relationships. However, the teaching of these skills is frequently overlooked in many hospitality programs.

Hospitality industry management, on the other hand, should become involved with the hospitality education community, and provide

the necessary input to help programs become more relevant. Service on institutional advisory boards is a good start. Also, training and educational opportunities can be offered for students, both as part of ongoing courses and through part-time, temporary, and other job arrangements. In the process, of course, management and students can consider the possibility of a future relationship upon graduation.

Employee performances should be quantified: What is expected from a recent graduate upon completion of the training program? Do recent graduates understand these expectations before they are hired and as they begin the training program? Employees should develop and utilize creative transitional-period experiences such as detailed observation and discussion, methods for graduates to interact with experienced staff members, etc. Training programs should emphasize exactly how information that is learned will benefit the new employee and, if possible, show how specific information fits into the entire training package developed by the operation. Those hired should have the entry-level skills and knowledge judged necessary for successful performance on the job. The apprenticeship focus should be avoided through a recognition that specialist tracks in the hospitality industry are likely to become more prevalent. The long-range needs of both the operation and the new employee should be considered as training and initial job placement decisions are made. Of course, this is an obvious strategy, but it is frequently overlooked as managers cope with vacancies which must be filled.

Progress Has Been Made

Great strides have been made in efforts to improve the communication and cooperation levels between the hospitality industry and the educational community. This is good for the industry, academia, and the students as well. A clear emphasis on the students (who are often overlooked in the decision-making process) will help you develop strategies for recruiting them, retaining them, and obtaining maximum benefits from their relationship with the operation.

The phrase "we're all in it together" expresses the need for a meaningful relationship between the hospitality industry and hospitality educators. This goal is not just a simplistic and altruistic ideal. It is as necessary today as it is vital to the successful expansion of the hospitality industry in the future.