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Abstract

With the downsizing of hotel companies in the 1980s and 1990s, internships became a way of supplementing staff during peak seasons and auditioning students for full-time positions upon graduation. The authors surveyed corporate directors of human resources on specific activities and tasks associated with experiential learning in the guest services areas of hotels.

An Industry View of Experiential Learning

by
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With the downsizing of hotel companies in the 1980s and 1990s, internships became a way of supplementing staff during peak seasons and auditioning students for full-time positions upon graduation. The authors surveyed corporate directors of human resources on specific activities and tasks associated with experiential learning in the guest services areas of hotels.

As hotel companies were forced to lay off many employees or leave positions unfilled in the late 1980s and early 1990s, internships and other forms of experiential learning provided human resource managers with alternative sources of labor. College students were often employed to fill positions previously held by full-time employees during both the school year and summer vacations. In addition, some hotel companies were offering internships with the understanding that this was the way to secure a position upon graduation. By trying out a student for two months or more, a company could tell whether or not that student would be a good job candidate, thus minimizing turnover in the long run.

Students bring a variety of benefits to a hotel while engaged in work experience. They are career-oriented and take their temporary assignments seriously. They also demonstrate enthusiasm and interest in a variety of hotel issues, perhaps doing more than the job description requires. Many students are graded on their work experiences, and this serves as another incentive to do a good job.

Experiential learning has always been an important feature of hospitality education in higher education. The first college program in hotel management included a work requirement for students.¹ A 1976 survey of hospitality programs found that more than 50 percent required an internship.² By 1992 95 percent of all undergraduate programs in hospitality included a work experience requirement.³

Experiential learning programs in higher education may be called internships, externships, cooperative education, practicum, or field experience. Regardless of their name, their objectives are very similar. The integration of practical work experience and classroom study is a primary objective of such programs.⁴ Work experience can enhance theoretical studies that take place in the classroom.⁵

The mastering of technical skills is another goal of experiential learning. Students in the hotel, restaurant, and institutional management practicum at Purdue University did gain specific job skills.⁶ The formation of technical skills is an objective of the internship program in Ohio State University's hospitality curriculum.⁷ Generally, hospitality students can benefit from technical training through experiential learning courses.⁸

Management development is an additional objective of experiential learning. Competency in banquet management was the goal of one program.⁹ Students have acted in the capacity of management consultants as a strategy for development¹⁰ and have acquired management skills through internship programs.¹¹

Is Experiential Learning Worthwhile?

There is no doubt that all of these goals are academically worthwhile. But educators need to know if they are also valid from an industry perspective, especially as the labor market has changed so drastically since the mid-1980s. The purpose of this study was to determine if corporate human resource directors agree with hospitality educators about the learning objectives associated with experiential education, specifically, classroom studies students should apply while working in the front office of a hotel, the types of technical training students should receive while getting hands-on experience, and the types of management development activities students should engage in for academic credit.

The study was designed to measure perceptions of corporate directors of human resources about students who fulfilled their experiential learning requirements by working in guest services areas of hotels. The front office was chosen because of its importance to hotel operations and because in some hotels there are limited experiential learning opportunities for students in other departments.

A questionnaire developed in 1991 to measure hospitality educators' opinions about experiential learning was used in this study. The earlier study identified 14 areas of classroom study that should be reinforced by experiential learning, 13 technical competencies, and 10 types of management development that should be available to students.¹⁴ The survey was sent to 21 corporate directors of human resources of hotel companies in the United States in the fall of 1992. A 60 percent response rate was achieved. Companies responding represented 2,287 hotels and 511,473 hotel rooms.

Table 1 shows the mean scores for the variables associated with the application of classroom studies. Corporate executives rated the

Table 1
Variables Associated with the Application of Classroom Studies

| Variable | Mean Score |
|--------------------------------|-------------------|
| Resolving guest conflict | 4.83 |
| Relationship management | 4.50 |
| Supervision of employees | 4.42 |
| Forecasting | 3.91 |
| Budgeting | 3.83 |
| Yield management | 3.58 |
| Promotions | 3.36 |
| Cost per occupied room | 3.25 |
| Market segmentation | 3.08 |
| Pricing | 2.92 |
| Management information systems | 2.75 |

resolution of guest conflict the most important variable, with a mean score of 4.83. Relationship management was also considered a key element and received a mean score of 4.50. The lowest mean score, 2.75, was found for management information systems.

Executives were also asked to include any theories or concepts studied in the classroom that were not listed on the form. Quality management was listed once and rated somewhat important. Familiarization with labor laws and selling skills were each listed once and rated somewhat important. Training skills were mentioned once and rated most important.

Reservations and Registration Are Important

Table 2 presents mean scores for activities and tasks associated with technical training. Guest registration was deemed the most important of these variables, with a rating of 4.08. Reservations was the next most important, with a mean of 4.00. Operation of the switchboard and use of other office machines were both rated 2.42, the lowest score of any variable in this area.

Of the 10 activities that the human resource directors added to the list of variables, seven were associated with food and beverage operations. Since the survey asked specifically about experiential learning programs in guest services in the front office, it is difficult to determine if respondents neglected the delimitation or felt guest services experiences must be extended to the food and beverage area. Only one respondent felt that maintenance should be included in the experiential program. Accounting and human resources each were listed once as being somewhat important.

Table 2
Variables Associated with Technical Training

| Variable | Mean Score |
|------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Guest registration | 4.08 |
| Reservations | 4.00 |
| Emergency procedures | 3.92 |
| Room cleaning | 3.50 |
| Completing the housekeeping report | 3.33 |
| Room rack interpretation | 3.33 |
| Updating room status | 3.08 |
| Cashiering | 2.92 |
| Credit card validation | 2.83 |
| Operation of laundry equipment | 2.50 |
| Switchboard | 2.42 |
| Use of office machines | 2.42 |

Structured Development Programs Rank High

Table 3 presents data for variables associated with management development. Supervisory development programs were rated the most important of all management development activities and had a mean score of 4.00, while junior boards and attendance at executive committee meetings received the lowest mean scores, 2.64 and 2.75, respectively.

Two human resource directors added quality assurance programs as either somewhat important or most important to the list. Interaction management and OSHA were each mentioned once as most important. Company philosophy, interviewing, and listening skills were mentioned once as somewhat important and sexual harassment was written in by one respondent as important.

It is obvious that industry executives believe that several objectives of experiential learning are important; the most important activities are all related to human resource and interpersonal skills.

The importance that human resource directors place on relationship management, supervision, and the resolution of guest conflict should serve as an indication to experiential learning coordinators that these issues should be discussed while the students are fulfilling their work requirements. Other courses, such as front office management, should also include components on conflict resolution and relationship management.

The emergence of quality management, as both a theory that should be taught in the classroom and a management development strategy, was interesting. None of the hospitality educators had

Table 3
Variables Associated with Management Development

| Variable | Mean Score |
|--|-------------------|
| Supervisory development program | 4.00 |
| Job rotation | 3.83 |
| Special projects | 3.83 |
| Coaching/understudying | 3.75 |
| Mentoring | 3.75 |
| Structured company program | 3.75 |
| Attending department head meetings | 3.67 |
| Role playing | 2.92 |
| Attending executive committee meetings | 2.75 |
| Junior boards | 2.64 |

identified quality management in the earlier survey. Educators should be teaching quality theories, concepts, and tools.

Industry professionals agree with educators about the importance of teaching emergency procedures. This is probably due to the heightened awareness of a hotel's liability and the increased standards of reasonable care that govern operations. In addition, human resource executives mentioned other topics that have legal implications, such as OSHA and sexual harassment. Both law and operations classes can emphasize how essential an understanding of law is to the success of a hotel.

Overall, technical skills are not rated as important as the development of management ability. An interesting departure from educators' opinions of management development, however, is that special projects are a good method for teaching management skills. Hotels could certainly use individuals or groups of students to address special problems and tasks that the regular staff no longer has the time to handle.

The executives who responded to this survey have identified the basic ingredients of an ideal work experience in the front office of a hotel. An internship should provide opportunities in guest registration and reservations. Students should have a chance to learn about emergency procedures as well. Management development activities should include job rotation, structured supervisory training, and special projects.

Although this study was limited in its scope, the results revealed some issues that deserve further investigation. What input do corporate executives have at the property level so far as experiential learning programs are involved? How important is quality management

throughout the industry? Has the increased awareness of liability and legal responsibility affected curricula and hotel operational policies?

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