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Abstract

This paper discovers the state of e-learning within hospitality industry. It introduces relevant topics such as definition, employee attitude and other factors of hospitality e-learning. It critically reviews the growth of e-learning in hospitality companies. Moreover, the author identifies the development of e-learning in hospitality industry by addressing recent cases. A literature review is conducted, and the research involves survey questionnaire and semi-structured interview to collect data from users of Hilton e-learning resources and a statistical analysis of that data. Findings of the study indicate positive perceptions of e-learning among hospitality companies. However, the main finding is the identification of several concerns that can potentially prevent the users to utilize the complete advantage of e-learning. The findings should assist policy makers, instructors and e-learning implementers in designing course materials or improving technical matters that would be more effective for e-learning at hospitality environment.

Keywords: E-learning, Hospitality Industry, Staff Training, Hotel Management.

1. Introduction

E-Learning is transforming the training practice. E-learning or electronic learning is a general term covering many different approaches through information and communication technologies. E-learning covers various technical methods to supplement traditional teaching process (Clarke, 2004). More and more organizations are opting for using technology in staff training and development as it provides entry to numerous learning opportunities. E-Learning research has expanded significantly due to the substantive impact of the internet. In hospitality industry a number of organizations are adopting e-learning programme to train their staff because it is fast, colourful, player driven, challenging and fun. However, e-Learning in the hospitality industry is not focusing on replacing live training, as customer facing roles require rigorous exercise.

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1.1. E-learning

Various scholars and organizations approached different way to define e-learning. According to Armstrong (2003) , " E-learning is learning or training that is delivered by electronic technology". Holmes and Gardner (2006) mentioned the definition by European action plan : "The use of new multimedia technologies and the internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services as well as remote exchanges and collaboration". Zine (2000) defined e-learning as "The delivery of individualized, comprehensive, dynamic learning content in real time, aiding the development of communities of knowledge, linking learners and practitioners with experts." and "a phenomenon that delivers accountability, accessibility, and opportunity allowing people and organizations to keep up with the rapid changes that define the Internet world." But the most acceptable definition of e-learning for this study could be the definition by Stockley (2003) – To provide education, training or

learning by electronic technology that combine various electronic equipment including computer or mobile devices.

1.2.   Employee Attitude and Hospitality e-Learning

Deposition towards information technology is on aggregate level. If hospitality employees are embracing electronic learning system as a part of their obligation, hotel management will feel very relaxed even though the employees hold very negative perception about the system (Lam et al., 2005). Initialization of electronic learning system will definitely create an obvious chaos and confusion within existing learning environment and management may find employee resistance. Keeping the change management in mind hospitality authorities needs to develop constant communication and campaigns for employees to create positive thoughts for e-learning (Dev, 2003).

Most of the hospitality companies fall within labour oriented service sector and in most of the cases hospitality directors are ready to increase investment in learning system that aided by technology which in turn will increase employee productivity. As a result hospitality company these days introducing e-learning option as a method of training and blending this with more traditional learning system. Majority of the hospitality and tourism organizations now believe that e-learning have the capacity and capability to increase skills, knowledge and competencies of hospitality workers. Integration of electronic learning system into conventional training strategy is now widely enjoyed by hospitality enterprises worldwide. Even companies that raised doubt about the effectiveness of e-learning initially are now praising this system due to its nature of flexibility, accessibility, cost efficiency and other admissible benefits (Stensgaard, 2004). While the benefit and importance of e-learning is proven to the organization it is important to investigate and analyse the views of system users.

A study by Stensgaard (2004) found various reasons that motivate the employees to adopt e-learning in the hospitality industry. The Hotel group called Razidor, a multinational and multi branded hospitality entity based in Brussels took a pilot test prior to launch a new e-learning program for training employees. 30 employees were selected from all of their brands across all regions to establish feedback on the system and to decide the future of this training program. The study found that the course content was applicable and up to date, exercises were relevant, targeted and user friendly. Hotel authority found the feedback motivational and discovered a continuous and hassle free learning process (Easter, 2006).

1.3.   Growth of e-Learning in Hospitality Industry

In the past hospitality industry is more often branded by poor literacy levels, unfriendly working schedules and the casual nature of training mandate, which leads to high staff turnover. Therefore, the industry officials are using tech-based e-learning solution through their existing architecture in a view to make the tourism and hospitality industry as a prestigious and respectable career and with this process staff turnover is getting reduced and overall operational efficiency improved. As the growth of -learning continues, Skillsoft, one of the major creators of e-learning content in the hospitality industry announced their periodical results which showed 34% increase in revenue and profits nearly multiplying. Third Force, which is another specialize e-learning provider for hospitality and catering industry published a report that claimed 90% surge in their operating profit for the year 2007, while at the same time their income rose by 35% (Hanley, 2008). Food service and hotel are the two major sectors in the hospitality industry where e-learning is widely implemented.

1.3.1.   Food service sector

As technology is becoming more 'people friendly' catering operators are accepting e-learning more than ever before. With the use of computer devices such as talking avatars, service simulation practices and gaming activities employees can manipulate a mouse and can create a perfect dish (Duffy, 2008). Ohio based chain Damon's grill launched its e-learning centre to train their employees on food safety modules. They introduced three food safety courses which cover time and temperature controls for food, cross-contamination and food safety, thus ensure the same food safety practices for all employees (E-learning Tracks Training, 2005). Another growing chain in Maryland, Greystone grill introduced an online wine training course for their waiters to educate them on the restaurant's extensive wine range. Greystone grill which are known for their stunning wine list have seen significant increases in their wine sales after implementing the e-learning course (Kooser, 2007). Del taco the Mexican style quick service chain which has a system of 260 company owned stores and 166 franchised units, commenced CD-Rom based e-learning course for their employees. Since its launch, it has become a key learning source for food handling procedures, preparing techniques and specific instructions on tracking product expiration information (Peters, 2004). According to Connecticut based sandwich chain 'Subway' there were 45% drop in customer complaints due to it's implementation of e-learning program. In 2005 Subway developed

'University of Subway' e-learning program in a view to create a standard platform for its hourly employees. Today using this e-learning program Subway's 28000 franchise partners are developing their 300,000 employees. With 169 franchise and self-controlled stores Ohio based Marco's pizza enjoyed an tangible return since it's implementation of e-learning courses. Using this animation and game based learning system hourly workers are getting trained on back of the house pizza preparation tasks and improving their customer service skills. Marco's pizza reported to have 2% increase in their sales volume from 2006 to 2007 and lowered staff turnover by 10% to 15%. (Duffy, 2008). A privately-owned pizza chain - Monical's pizza operating in Wisconsin, Illiinois and Indiana noticed that through e-learning system they have achieved one of the greatest retention rates in the industry. By implementing Harvard Manage Mentor e-learning module, Monical's not only be able to control their turnover rate to below 100% but also to keep their management turnover rate to an amazing 7% (Business Editors, 2003).

1.3.2. Hotel sector

International hotel companies have begun to adopt e-learning because of its frequent contribution to the industry. Hilton established e-learning programme through Hilton University, where all the Hilton employees can admit to departmental and non-departmental courses through an online learning portal. Hilton University is organised in seven faculties – Operations, finance, business development, HR, management skills, executive education and the faculty of research. Malmaison and du Vin hotels developed e-learning solution with ThirdForce Plc and placed at all of their properties. Currently the mandatory courses are: Licensing Law for Bar Persons (LLBP), Foundation Health and Safety (HSF), Foundation Food Safety (FSF) and Disability Discrimination Awareness (DDA) (Snell, 2008). Opera Property Management System (PMS) is the e-learning project for International Hotels Group (IHG). This PMS allows IHG personnel to complete their hospitality training who are located different parts of the world. Sixteen units of learning syllabus covers various hospitality tasks including reservations, front office, housekeeping, food & beverage, events & banquets, night audit and many more. (Opera PMS, 2007). One of the world's leading luxury hospitality brands- Fairmont hotels and resorts associated with eCornell in a bid to provide high quality online education to all of it's worldwide leaders. Staff who are at management levels can earn certificates from Cornell University in various hospitality management fields, such as – Catering management, Accommodation management, Financial management, Human resource

management and in other Leadership and Supervisory skills. (Taylor, 2007). Prestigious hospitality group Le Meridien hotels and resorts created e-learning platform with Centra's collaborative learning solution. This initiative brought all the revenue managers in the same network that allows them to optimise revenues, seek subject knowledges and share best practices. As a result of this education project Le Meridien enjoyed immediate positive outcome comparing with their costly, limited and non-productive regional classroom training. (Centra Software, 2004). Whitbread – the renowned providers in hospitality sector purchase digital el-box from ThirdForce which is UK's top e-learning player. This el-box is designed as a tablet pc which is suitable for those properties that are unable to provide access to designated space for learning. The company currently offers the courses same as Malmasion and Hotel du Vin hotels through the el-box. Moreover, Whitbread management established three tailor made courses: Premier Inn housekeeping, bar excellence and the business account. 'Academy Online' is Whitbread's private internal learning platform and is accessible on the Whitbread network only. Subject areas such as team management, guest affairs, cost management and resource planning can be addressed through this online academy. Fundamentally, this online institution focuses on training plan specific to individual needs and job specification. (BCS, 2008). Accor is one of the largest hotel chains across the globe. Accor's dedication to employee training has its heritages through French cultural tradition to employee development. Today, Accor North America is providing e-learning and custom content to all employees, irrespective of their site developed by Element K. Accor Hotels in Ireland and the United Kingdom has also announced that they have made a partnership with ThirdForce that will provide the Accor Hotels chain with e-learning outlets that are related to health and food safety, as well as the discrimination and disability act (Supplier News, 2008).

2. Research Methods

The aim of this paper is to identify issues related to hospitality e-learning and also establish the notion of e-learning as a competent means of staff training to gain hospitality organizational excellence. Following research objectives were set at the start of the project:

- To consider the implications of e-learning and its use for staff training.

- To examine whether there is a relationship between service quality and e-learning.
- To provide recommendations and further study area in relation to e-learning.

The primary research question that the paper investigated is as follows:

"What are the potential issues that can affect the performance of e-learning in the perspective of hospitality staff training?"

This is a both qualitative and quantitative study (Figure 1). The objectives achieved in two different steps. Sources of secondary data were: General business publications, Magazine and newspaper articles, Specialist marketing report i.e. Mintel. Academic publications, Library sources, Publications from professional bodies i.e. Institute of Hospitality and other internet sources. Another part of the data collection is qualitative. The chosen method for this study was in-depth semi- structured interview with the human resource managers. Tape record method was used to collect the data. Permission was sought to tape record before the interview. However, while recorder is used the researcher continued to make notes and listen attentively. Data was transcribed in order to analyze.
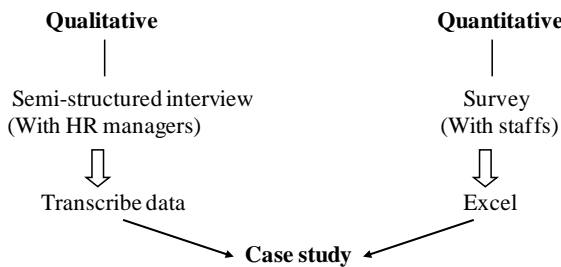
Qualitative　　　　　　　**Quantitative**

Semi-structured interview　　　Survey
(With HR managers)　　　　　(With staffs)

Transcribe data　　　　　　　Excel

Case study

Figure 1: Research steps

3. Results and Discussions

This part is based on both primary and secondary research data, which generalizes the results and findings.

3.1　　Secondary Data Analysis

Literature review part of this research reviewed the various aspects of e-learning both in general and in hospitality industry. According to the previous literature development of e-learning rate in the hospitality industry are not as fast as other industries. Growth of e-learning is demonstrated with various examples of e-learning in hospitality sector. By analyzing these examples, it is recognizable that operational staffs are mostly targeted for e-learning rather than the managerial. The literature have shown that the majority of the employee embraced e-learning just to improve the quality of their role, where number of people said it is mandatory for them. That is why reputable hospitality companies got either full e-learning system or some sort of e-learning activities. The following sections discusses the research findings from 'Hilton' properties.

As the aim of the questionnaire is to understand the implications of e-learning in the general staff training, the participators' background information has been well considered to make sure the reliability of the data. Figure 2 show the educational level of the participants. In addition, almost all the hotel departments have been covered for the purpose of this study.
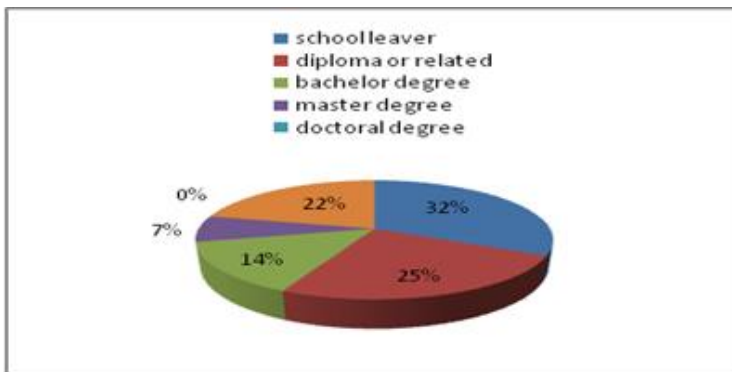

Figure 2: Educational level of the participants

Majority of the employee (almost 70%) said e-learning is compulsory for them depending on their job role (Figure 3). Consequently, about the same proportion of employees believes that using e-learning has improved their service quality (Figure 3). So, certainly e-learning meets the necessity for the staff training despite of different backgrounds.
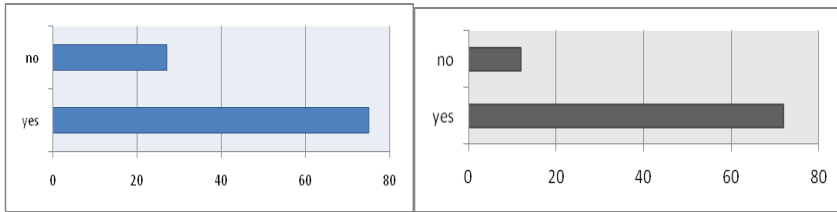
Figure 3: e-learning course and service quality

Although e-learning improved the service quality, general employees also raised some issues regarding to e-learning. About 12% of employees think that some of the e-learning contents are not related to their job role (Figure 4). In addition, some members of staff desire some different language in e-learning (Figure 4). It is also a matter of concern that about 25% said that they faced technical difficulties while performing e-learning.
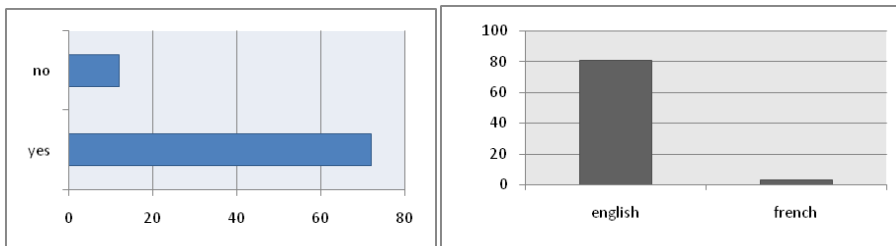

Figure 4: Content and language

Motivation to e-learning is another issue that needs to be considered when implementing e-learning. About 30% of the employees says that they somewhat agree with the statement that their manager explains the development opportunity related with e-learning. More than 5% indicate that they neither agree nor disagree with the statement. On contrary, 50% of the respondents (Figure 5) pointed that they embraced e-learning for their professional development. Hence a large number of employee believe that e-learning will help them to develop their career even though they don't know the systematic way.
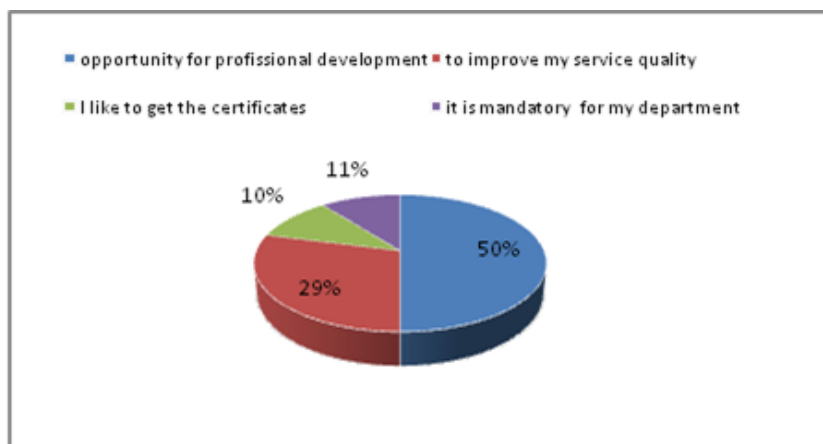
Figure 5: Development opportunity and training

As e-learning is based on electronic online medium, it is important that the users get proper training to explore this educational portal. More than 60% of the respondent agreed that they are satisfied about their knowledge on e-learning.

3.2. Semi-structured Interview

Two different Human resource managers joined in the semi-structured interview session conducted. One of them is the human resource coordinator of Hilton Manchester Airport and another one is regional trainer of Hilton, North of England.

These semi-structured interviews covered wide range of topic area. The first question which is about the importance of e-learning courses, all the answers were positive. According to interviewees, e-learning is not only a great tool of learning but also a unique learning experience. Sometimes hotel industry relies on part time or casual worker. Many of them are school leavers. Therefore, e-learning programme facilitate a platform for them where they can enroll for job related training.

Furthermore, key positive attribute of e-learning is professional development. E-learning assist an employee who want to develop either his own department or switch to different department. If a food and beverage assistant is interested

to join front office, he/she must do e-learning training course to understand the basic technique of front office computer program.

There are some technical concerns of e-learning such as the specification and condition of the computer or the availability of internet. However, the participants of these interviews are satisfied due to the volume of positive feedback. In terms of the question about employee encouragement for e-learning, interviewees mentioned that, when it is a matter of own department all the employees have to do the basic departmental course. However, it is always up to the employees which additional courses they wish to go for. Therefore, the motivation entirely depends on the employees.

In response to the query of future improvement of e-learning programme, Karoline revealed that, recently Hilton University which contain e-learning courses established its new look. Users can access different sections where they can find new job opening information, corporate information and many more.

3.3.   Summary of Findings

Though e-learning is a form of electronic training certainly it is unable to train the hospitality staff according to their brand standard. Hospitality industry always concerned about the service quality. As service quality can ensure customers' return. Therefore, it is proved that, e-learning can assist new employees to improve their service quality. At the same time few issues are involved with e-learning which are found from the employee survey-

- Contents: Contents are not always relevant to the departments, which de-motivate the users because of wasting their time and effort.
- Language: Hospitality industry is the most diverse industry and e-learning is delivered only in one or two different language mediums which certainly doesn't meet the language requirements of various races.
- Technical Support: Technical problem encountered by the employees are log in related, session time-out and computer slowness.

Generally, employees embrace e-learning as it is mandatory for the department. Though, a large number of employees think that e-learning is an opportunity for professional development, the employers do not provide any motivational support to take further e-learning training apart from department specific training.

As e-learning is electronic, it is obvious that the users will need initial support to explore e-learning effectively. Despite of this fact the employers do not hold any formal training sessions. Consequently, the employees are more interested to attend a formal training session rather than irregular appointments.

Employees would like to see few more courses which are in general subjects and also related to hospitality. Additional courses that employees are interested to undertake are – Mathematics, English Literacy , Advance Computer, Hospitality Laws, Stock Taking (departmental), Cocktail Training and Food Loss related.

4. Recommendation and Limitation of this Research

The study suggests the following recommendations:

- Content selection: Production of effective e-learning content in well-organized manner is extremely crucial to ensure maximum influence on job performance and on overall productivity. Firstly, the employer needs to review the departmental contents of e-learning. Content developers should discuss with different regional trainer about different content option.
- Option for multi-language: As it is mentioned earlier, hospitality industry consists a diverse range of ethnic group. Therefore, only one or two language is not able to fulfil the demands. Web based teaching materials needs to be developed on the following major languages: English, Arabic, Chinese, French, Spanish, Polish, Hindi, German, Turkish and Filipino.
- Trouble free access: Majority of the employees want simple excess to e-learning platform. To make it easy, accessible e-learning should have one icon in the desktop that can directly take to the main page. Currently if faced with any problem, users need to chase human resource people every time. Therefore, the menu button should have self-learning troubleshooting instructions for technical assistance.
- Engaging learners: Hospitality organizations must understand the element of 'soft' stuff. To ensure achievement with e-learning they must involve learners, inspire managers and invigorate their organization. Managers need to discuss careers paths and interests with employees, so that they can identify the right opportunities through e-learning.

- Affix of new topics: Any hospitality e-learning program should cover various aspects of hospitality business including job skills and skills for life. Few essential courses that needs to be considered are – licensing law, disability discrimination awareness, food allergy and intolerance, ICT solutions, literacy skills and new numeracy skills.

There are certain issues that limits the generalizability of this research's findings. First, the sample size is not representative of all the hotel property of 'Hilton' UK and Ireland region. Lack of time and lack of budget was the main issues that prevented the author to travel to different regions. In addition, access to one of the hotel properties was partly restricted because of high volume of business.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, an effort has been made to study the meaning of e-learning, to evaluate the e-learning literature with the intention of bringing appropriate aspects to light and to recommend a set of considerable success stories for implementing e-learning in hospitality training environment. Therefore, from the findings it is obvious that the challenge is to comprehend the full potential of e-learning. The strategy of e-learning must be an integral part of training operations to maximise productivity, performance and profit. However, it is crucial to carry out a research at a large scale to explore any hidden issue linked with hospitality e-learning.

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