Discussion paper

Hospitality employees promotional attitude: Findings from graduates of a twelve-month management training program

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Abstract
Mentoring is considered an important human resources training program but is seldom discussed as an internal marketing tool in the hospitality management literature. This study, using a major hotel company’s formal mentoring program, empirically tested mentoring’s influence on employee’s promotional attitude. Employee psychological contract theory provided the theoretical foundation for the study. The proposed research model was tested using Partial Least Squares (PLS) SEM. The results showed that mentor functions (i.e., career development and psychosocial support) were antecedents of employee promotional attitude. In addition, employee’s psychological contract breach and employee’s affective organizational commitment were mediators between mentor functions and promotional attitude, with affective organizational commitment showing a full mediation effect. These results provide both theoretical and managerial implications and offer opportunities for future research.

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1. Introduction

To increase hospitality employees’ career satisfaction, a successful career management program should contain three key elements: (1) appraisal and advice, (2) development, and (3) training (Kong et al., 2011, 2012). Career management programs are particularly important for younger hospitality employees that expect a genuine and meaningful start to their career, providing personal and professional development (Anastasios, 2007). This is easily achieved through well designed and administrated mentor program. Mentoring is a critical element of employee development and training and often considered an organizational socialization tool, especially when a mentor is formally assigned to a new recruit (Chao, 2007). Various mentoring benefits were revealed in the literature both at the organization and individual level, such as increased organization attractiveness (Allen and O’Brien, 2006) and improved job performance (Li et al., 2016). In the hospitality industry, lacking mentor support was a major factor preventing female employees from succeeding in their career (Kattara, 2005). However, there is a lack of research investigating whether mentoring shapes mentees’ attitudes toward the organization as an internal marketing tool. Internal marketing emphasizes communicating organizational values to employees and helping them to set up a clear understanding of what to expect (Rafiq and Ahmed, 2000), thereby increasing employee satisfaction and service quality (Kong et al., 2015). Hospitality employees, especially front-line employees are the most valuable resource for a company because they are the ones who deliver services to customers and are brand ambassadors. An efficient internal marketing process could substantially assist organizations to shape their employees’ attitudes and behaviors.

Over time, hospitality employees develop opinions about their employer and share them with friends, family and coworkers (Trowbridge, 2001). Moreover, these opinions have also been posted on social media (Higginbottom, 2014). With the explosion of social media usage, employees’ shared information has become increasingly important to companies. Externally, employees’ shared opinions toward the company influence their friends and family, who are potential customers or employees of the company (Greene et al., 1994). Internally, since hospitality companies rely on employee–customer interactions to deliver services (To et al., 2015), it is imperative to avoid having negative opinions shared among their employees. Therefore, promoting employees’ positive information sharing has become an urgent concern in the workplace, especially in the hospitality industry. However, the link-
age between mentoring and employee's promotional attitude is missing in the literature.

Adding to the dearth of mentorship study in the hospitality industry, this research investigates a major hospitality company's formal mentoring program with the purpose to understand the role of mentor functions on hospitality mentees' promotional attitude. In addition, this study included psychological contract breach and affective organizational commitment as two mediators between the antecedent of mentor functions and the outcome of promotional attitude (Fig. 1). As an exploratory study to understand mentees' promotional attitude, this case study extends scholars' understanding of promotional attitude and its linkage to mentoring. By introducing two mediators into the relationship, this study potentially provides a new approach to assess mentoring and its theoretical outcomes. Furthermore, it contributes to the literature on psychological contract theory by clarifying mentors' role in psychological contract breach. Practically, this study provides recommendations to hospitality managers regarding the design and implementation of formal mentoring programs. More importantly, it offers managers a potential psychological remedy to improve employee attitudes that are broadly shared through social media.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Mentorship and mentorship functions

Mentorship is “an intense interpersonal exchange between a senior experienced colleague and a less experienced junior colleague in which, the mentor provides support, direction, and feedback regarding career plans and personal development” (Russell & Adams, 1997, p. 2). Different types of mentorship are often discussed in the literature, especially formal and informal approaches (e.g. Allen and O'Brien, 2006; Ragins and Cotton, 1999). Duration and initiation of a mentorship are two key elements to distinguish formal mentoring from informal mentoring (Kram, 1985; Ragins and Cotton, 1999). Formal mentorships are initiated by the organization and are usually shorter in duration compared to informal mentorships. Normally, in a formal mentorship the organization assigns mentors to mentees and determines specific responsibilities for mentors. Conversely informal mentorships start spontaneously with either the mentor or mentee initiating the relationship and usually lasts longer, sometimes over the span of a career. Regardless of the mentorship type, mentoring is considered a beneficial tool in building and maintaining relationships between employees and the organization (Ragins and Kram, 2007).

It is worth noting that informal mentoring is more of a personal level relationship than a managerial tool. In the workplace, informal mentoring is preferred and can be encouraged through formal mentor programs. However, the development and success of informal mentoring depends on many personal characteristics including gender and personality (Scandura and Williams, 2001; Turban and Lee, 2007). Personal characteristics are often beyond the organizations’ ability to match mentors and mentees. Therefore, this study focuses only on a formal mentoring program.

Mentoring is beneficial to mentors as well as mentees. Mentoring increases mentors' personal satisfaction (Allen et al., 1997), rewards and recognition among peers (Ragins and Scandura, 1999), and encourages their learning of emerging technologies and skills (Lankau and Scandura, 2002). All of these benefits contribute to mentors' meaning of work, which in turn increases their job engagement and organizational commitment in the hospitality industry (Jung and Yoon, 2016). For mentees, mentorship provides two major functions: career development and psychosocial support (Kram, 1985). Career development includes the opportunity and guidance for mentees to acquire work knowledge and facilitate their advancement in the organization. Research revealed that active knowledge sharing in hospitality organizations had a positive effect on the organization’s learning environment and effectiveness as well as frontline employee job satisfaction (Lee, 2016; Yang, 2009). Psychosocial support addresses the interpersonal aspects of the mentoring relationship and enhances mentees’ sense of competence, identity, and effectiveness in a professional role. While career development focuses on providing the necessary working knowledge, skills and abilities to mentees and assists them to achieve their career goal, psychosocial support centers on the quality of personal relationships between mentors and mentees (Ragins and McFarlin, 1990) and fosters mentees' psychological stability. This function is normally achieved through mentor’s personal support and consultation. Psychosocial support was highly related to hospitality employee job satisfaction, organizational commitment and turnover intention (Kim et al., 2015). In addition to the benefits that mentoring brings to individual mentors and mentees, it also benefits the organization as a whole. Some key organizational benefits from mentoring include increased socialization (Ostroff and Kozlowski, 1993), improved diversity practices (Madera, 2013) and reduced turnover (Smith and Ingersoll, 2004).

Mentoring is a communication process, in which, organizations can systematically deliver the organizations’ culture, values, vision and mission to their employees. This kind of systematic and ongoing communication is ardently advocated by internal marketing (Berry et al., 1976). Researchers suggest that internal marketing is an implementation vehicle for organizational strategies and an organizational change management tool (Rafiq and Ahmed, 2000). Therefore, mentoring, as an effective communication tool, is indispensable to an organization’s internal marketing process.

2.2. Mentoring and psychological contracts

Psychological contract theory has been widely used to explain the relationship between an organization and its employees (Conway and Briner, 2005). A psychological contract is defined as “an individual's belief regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between that focal person and another party” (Rousseau, 1989, p. 123). Unlike written contracts, psychological contracts are dynamic and grounded on implicit perceptions between the organization and employees. Therefore, on the basis of perceived employer promises, employees dynamically change their perceptions of these promises, and evaluate the fulfillment of the psychological contract by comparing their expectations with the organization’s actual inducements. Since employees do not negotiate their contract terms with the organization, psychological contracts are subjective, unilateral and reside only in the eyes of the beholder (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994). In formal mentoring, once a mentor is provided, this person is signaled as the liaison between the mentee and the organization; effectively an agent of the organization. The mentor’s behavior is considered an indication of the organization’s intentions (Levinson, 1965). In this case, mentors develop psychological contracts with their mentees (Rousseau, 1995) and their behaviors influence mentees’ beliefs. When the mentees' beliefs of mentors' promises are higher than actual inducements, a psychological contract breach occurs (Robinson and Morrison, 2000).

Psychological contract breach has a compelling ability to link psychological contracts with outcomes and has emerged as the most empirically examined construct in the literature. Morrison and Robinson (1997) identified two types of psychological contract breach: (a) breach from deliberately reneging and (b) breach from incongruence. The former breach occurs when the organizations’ agents (e.g., mentors) know they are breaching promises, while incongruence occurs when agents’ understanding of promises differ from employees’ understanding. Research suggested that when
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