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Securing graduate commitment: an exploration of the comparative expectations of placement students, graduate recruits and human resource managers within the hospitality, leisure and tourism industries

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Abstract

This research begins the process of mapping out human resource (HR) strategies appropriate to the needs of actual and potential graduate employees. The perceptions and attitudes of placement students, recent graduates working in the sector and managers with responsibility for graduate development were surveyed, looking at the elements that make up the initial psychological contract of students on first encounter with the sector; the types of organisational HR practice that are seen as meeting the needs of employees; the role that universities can play in constructing expectations and bridging gaps between the graduate and the employer. It was found that the nature of the contract shifts from relational to transactional between placement and employment. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

This paper explores the issue of graduate commitment through an examination of the state of the psychological contract in the hospitality, tourism and leisure (HTL) sectors. Given that the sector is characterised by relatively high levels of labour

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turnover and reports (Jenkins, 2001) of a poor image in the eyes of hospitality students, it may face greater challenges than other sectors in attracting, recruiting and retaining high calibre staff. Recent research on this issue presents a mixed picture. A recent report (Doherty et al., 2001) finds evidence of a healthy sector, which invests in graduate recruitment, training and development while qualitative research by other academics, (Jenkins, 2001; Jameson and Holden, 2000), identifies a number of problem areas.

The particular focus of this research is on the nature of the psychological contract as seen through the eyes of three key groups: students on HTL sector placements, graduate employees in their first six months in post, and managers with responsibility for graduate development.

Attention is given to current commentary and research on the nature of the psychological contract with particular reference to UK graduates in the HTL sector. An empirical study was undertaken to establish a more detailed understanding of the meaning and nature of the psychological contract in the sector from the perspective of the three groups identified above. Findings are discussed in terms of implications for employers in this sector, higher education institutions offering programmes in this sector and researchers.

The general research question is as follows: to what extent are organisational HR practices in the HTL sector congruent with the expectations of actual and potential graduate employees?

2. Literature review

2.1. The development of the “psychological contract”

The concept of a “psychological contract” has, since the phrase was first used by Mumford (1972), attracted considerable interest by writers and researchers in the human resource management field. This interest has now extended to HR practitioners (the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development has commissioned surveys on this topic: Guest et al., 1996; Guest and Conway, 1998).

The psychological contract is a series of mutual expectations and needs arising from an organisation–individual relationship. The contract is nearly always implicit and usually covers a range of expectations of rights, duties, obligations and privileges, which have an important influence on employee behaviour. Evidence is emerging (Morishima, 1996) that the contract varies with time, culture and organisation; that it can be a powerful influence on employee satisfaction, productivity and organisational commitment (Shore and Tetrick, 1994). At present much of the research, both academic and applied, is focused on understanding the impact of organisational changes (such as downsizing, contracting out and delayering) on the contract. Limited research has been focussed on the relationship between management learning (through, for example, induction, development and educational programmes) or professional development (through, for example, internships, traineeships and accreditation processes) and the development of the

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