

Conference Research Paper

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Assessing the Impact of Generational Shifts and Training Deficits Fuelling Staff Shortages in the Hotel and Hospitality Sector

Abstract

This paper investigates the persistent issue of staff shortages within the UK hotel and hospitality sector, with a particular focus on how generational workforce shifts and deficits in training provision contribute to the widening skills gap. Through an analysis of contemporary academic literature, industry data, and case study examples, the study explores the interplay between demographic changes, evolving employee expectations, and the operational realities of the hospitality labour market. A PESTLE framework is employed to critically examine the external political, economic, social, technological, legal, and environmental factors influencing workforce challenges. The findings reveal that generational differences in work values, coupled with fragmented and inconsistent training strategies, have intensified recruitment and retention difficulties. Furthermore, the paper evaluates existing industry responses and proposes evidence-based policy and management recommendations aimed at fostering a resilient, multigenerational workforce. These include flexible working models, regional skills hubs, and prioritisation of workforce wellbeing. The research concludes that addressing labour shortages in hospitality demands coordinated, long-term strategies that align with both demographic realities and sector-specific skills needs, ensuring future sustainability and competitiveness.

1. Introduction

The hotel and hospitality sector are a cornerstone of the UK economy, contributing over £93 billion annually and employing 3.5 million people (UKHospitality, 2023). Yet, the industry is grappling with severe labour shortages, intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit, and broader socio-economic shifts (Giousmpasoglou, 2024: ONS, 2023: WTTC.2022).

The sector now spans Generation-Z (born 1997-2012) to Baby-Boomers (born 1946-1964) delaying retirement due to rising living costs and pension age reforms (Living Wage Foundation, 2024: Department for Work & Pensions, 2023: Cribb, Emmerson and O'Brien, 2022). This diversity brings differing values, motivations, and learning needs, creating new challenges for employers (Seyfi, Tan & Mustafeed, 2024). Simultaneously, fragmented training provision has widened the sector's skills gap, impacting both service standards and organisational resilience (People 1st, 2020). As competition for talent intensifies, understanding how generational shifts and training shortfalls intersect is vital to addressing workforce instability (Grenside, 2025).

2. Literature Review

The skills gap in the hotel industry is longstanding, but its effects have been exacerbated by recent global events (Baum et al., 2020). He argues the COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the vulnerabilities of a labour model heavily dependent on casual contracts, low wages, and minimal investment in staff training and development. This exposure has reignited discussions around workforce sustainability and the role of training in enhancing productivity.

The roots of this discussion can be traced back to the Human Capital Theory, gaining prominence in the 1960s through the work of economists Becker and Schultz (Ross, 2024). They posited education and training are forms of investment that increase individual productivity. In contrast, Richard Freeman (1976) argued that education signals potential rather than directly boosting output. He emphasised on-the-job training, intrinsic motivation, and effective use of equipment as true drivers of productivity (Ross, 2024).

This ongoing debate highlights the multifaceted nature of workforce development in the hotel sector, where productivity is not solely the result of formal education or qualifications, but is also shaped by motivation, workplace context, and the presence of supportive training structures.

2.1 Generational shifts in workforce expectations

A key contemporary theme is the emergence of a truly multigenerational workforce, ranging from digitally fluent Generation-Z entrants (born 1997-2012) to the more experienced Baby-Boomers (born 1946-1964).

Generation-Z brings new expectations to the workplace, prioritising flexibility, work-life balance, and purpose over traditional motivators such as salary or promotion (Deloitte, 2024). Spencer (2022) adds that digital fluency and meaningful engagement with technology are baseline expectations for this cohort, making low-tech, rigid hospitality roles less attractive. Hajal and Losekoot (2024) believe workers viewed hotel careers as offering limited prospects for advancement. These concerns have since deepened, with post-COVID workforce placing greater emphasis on job security, safety, and personal wellbeing (WTTC, 2022).

Cribb, Emmerson, and O'Brien (2022) and Department for Work & Pensions (2023) report Baby-Boomers are delaying retirement due to rising living costs and increasing state pension age. Čiutienė and Railaitė (2014) state older workers are a vital but underutilised segment of the workforce. They argue that it is a misconception that older workers are less productive, noting that performance issues stem from skill obsolescence rather than age. Yet, older workers in hospitality are often excluded from digital upskilling initiatives, limiting their continued participation (European Commission, 2022).

Job Embeddedness Theory (Lee et al., 2001) suggests that employees stay when they feel connected to their organisation and community. However, hospitality roles, often casual, seasonal, and lacking structured development, undermine these connections. Vassou, Theocharous, and Zopiatis (2024) challenge that without age-inclusive work models and training pathways, the sector risks high attrition across all demographics.

2.2 Training deficits and skills mismatches

Training provision within hospitality has historically been fragmented, especially among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Baum, 2002). Poulston (2008) highlights that many businesses lack structured development pathways, resulting in

limited opportunities for upskilling and internal progression. The British Hospitality Association (2021) adds that the absence of such frameworks discourages long-term career commitment and exacerbates high turnover rates.

People 1st (2020) revealed that 62% of hospitality employers report significant skills gaps in leadership, customer service, and digital literacy. These deficiencies not only hinder operational efficiency but also compromise guest experience and under-prioritise talent management (Baum et al., 2016; Sábio, 2024).

Herzberg's Theory (1959) further supports this view, suggesting that inadequate training impacts both 'hygiene factors' such as job security and 'motivators' like recognition and development.

2.3 Brexit and labour market disruption

Brexit has further compounded staff shortages, where EU nationals accounted for up to 30% of the hospitality workforce (Tourism Alliance, 2021). Stricter visa policies, rising recruitment costs, and uncertainty contributed to the exodus of experienced and multilingual EU staff (Migration Observatory, 2023). As a result, employers are increasingly reliant on younger domestic workers, many of whom require significant onboarding and support.

2.4 Digital transformation and workforce readiness

The hospitality sector is undergoing a digital revolution, with AI-powered concierge services, automated check-ins, and cloud-based booking platforms becoming standard (Jayawardena et al. 2023). Yet, the European Commission (2022) reports that fewer than half of hospitality workers have received formal digital training. Ciapponi (2024) adds it is especially problematic for older staff and those with limited educational backgrounds

Zhu, Wang, and Cheng (2021) highlight that SMEs are particularly disadvantaged, lacking the capital and infrastructure to implement digital training effectively. Without widespread digital upskilling, technology adoption risks excluding parts of the workforce, while failing to fully realise the productivity gains associated with automation (Iranmanesh et al., 2022).

2.5 The lasting impact of COVID-19 on workforce supply

The long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to destabilise hospitality labour markets (Bates, cited in Price, 2025). Powell, Francis-Devine, and Clark (2022) and Baum (2020) noted the pandemic disproportionately impacted low-wage, front-line workers, many of whom left the sector permanently in search of more stable employment.

Based on the literature review, there is a gap that requires further examination on how generational shift and training requires further exploration within the hotel and hospitality sector. While existing studies acknowledge the presence of a multigenerational workforce and highlight training deficiencies, there is limited empirical research that deeply investigates how these two dynamics interact to influence recruitment, retention, and productivity outcomes. Specifically, more understanding is needed on how generational values shape training engagement, what age-inclusive strategies are most effective, and how digital transformation can be equitably implemented across all age groups. Addressing this gap is critical for informing policy and practice that support long-term workforce resilience in an industry marked by rapid change and high staff turnover.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach, using secondary sources to investigate the underlying factors contributing to staff shortages in the hotel industry sector. The study draws on a diverse range of credible materials including academic texts such as 'The Human Equation' (Pfeffer, 1998) and peer-reviewed journals like the International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management. Industry reports such as UKHospitality's Workforce Strategy (2023) and the People 1st Hospitality and Tourism Skills Survey (2020) provided current insights into training and recruitment trends.

A thematic analysis identified recurring issues and patterns relating to generational workforce dynamics creating skills gaps, and training deficits. For instance, Deloitte's (2024) Generation-Z and Millennial Survey revealed changing employee expectations around flexibility and purpose, while Cribb, Emmerson, and O'Brien (2022) highlighted the economic reasons Baby-Boomers are delaying retirement.

4. PESTLE Impact Analysis

Political

Post-Brexit immigration policy changes have restricted access to international labour, historically essential for both skilled and entry-level hospitality roles (Insight Hospitality, 2023). The points-based system disproportionately impacts small and independent operators (HM Government, 2021).

The Apprenticeship Levy is criticised as inflexible and poorly utilised, with SMEs struggling to access training aligned to operations (HM Revenue & Customs, 2025; Mansfield and Hirst, 2023). Moreover, regional funding disparities undermine efforts to develop a coordinated national strategy for workforce development (Miller, 2022). UKHospitality (2022) proposes sector-led skills academies and regional hubs to better align training provision with localised needs.

The Ukraine-Russia war has diverted political focus and exacerbated global instability. The knock-on effects, rising energy costs, inflation, and disrupted supply chains, have placed further strain on hospitality operations (Unifocus, 2025), limiting capacity for staff training and development initiatives. Street (2021) maintains the skills gap in hospitality requires a multi-layered approach.

Economic

The industry continues to battle the effects of inflation, and increased operational costs (Unifocus, 2025). While the Office for National Statistics (2023) reports a rise in average pay offers for chefs and front-of-house staff, such financial incentives are unsustainable without investment in training and working conditions (Baum et al., 2020).

While delayed retirements among older workers offer some retention benefits, they can also hinder skill transfer if reskilling programmes are lacking. Current economic pressures constrain employers' capacity for long-term workforce development, exacerbating generational skills gaps. Addressing this requires multi-layered strategies that align economic incentives with talent development (Street, 2021). Furthermore, the sector's limited use of workforce analytics (Deloitte, 2020) restricts

its ability to forecast skills needs effectively, highlighting the necessity of adopting real-time data to optimise training investments and staffing decisions.

Social

Evolving workforce values have introduced complex challenges. Younger employees value ethics, flexibility, and wellbeing, while older staff prioritise stability and routine (Deloitte, 2023). This intergenerational mix requires sensitive management to maintain engagement and avoid recruitment issues (Vassou, Theocharous, & Zopiatis, 2024; Sakdiyakorn and Wattanacharoensil, 2017).

Marriott International's 'The Next Gen Marriott Business Council,' fosters intergenerational collaboration and knowledge exchange among employees (Hogan, 2024). Similarly, the Institute of Hospitality's mentoring programme supports entry-level talent through structured guidance, enhancing career development and long-term workforce sustainability (IoH, 2023). These initiatives demonstrate how targeted mentorship can bridge generational gaps and address training deficits. However, success depends on organisational commitment, adequate resources, and cultural openness to knowledge sharing, which can be challenging for SMEs with limited capacity.

Technological

Increasing adoption of automation, contactless services, and AI-driven customer engagement tools presents solutions to labour shortages (European Commission, 2022) but demand investments in digital literacy. While leading hotel groups have embraced digital transformation, SMEs often lack the capital or infrastructure to implement such changes (Jayawardena et al. 2023). Furthermore, digital exclusion among older staff or those with limited educational backgrounds presents a barrier to widespread adoption (Tomczyk et al., 2023).

Legal

Employment legislation, particularly around health and safety, minimum wage compliance, and flexible working rights, continues to evolve and shape operational decisions. Post-pandemic protocols have further influenced staffing structures, with increased legal emphasis on employee wellbeing and safe working environments (Krikonis et al., 2025; Bal and Brookes, 2022). While these protections are essential, many employers, particularly SMEs, struggle to implement them consistently without adequate training infrastructure. This gap disproportionately affects newer and younger staff, who often enter the sector without sufficient onboarding (Baum et al. 2020).

Environmental

Sustainability is increasingly influential among consumers and staff, especially younger workers who may trade salary for climate-conscious employers (Gritzka, 2023). The sector faces growing pressure to cut emissions, manage waste, and localise sourcing (WTTC, 2022). However, training in 'green skills' such as energy management, carbon auditing, and sustainable procurement is lacking (UKHospitality, 2023). This training deficit not only narrows the talent pool but also weakens staff engagement and retention, as purpose-driven employees seek careers aligned with their environmental ethics. Embedding environmental literacy into staff development programmes is now critical to attracting and retaining purpose-driven employees (Gritzka, 2023).

Case Studies

Accor's 'Work Your Way' (Accor, 2025)

Accor's 'Work Your Way' programme offers employees autonomy to select shifts and engage in hybrid roles across departments, an approach that appeals to a diverse workforce, including Generation-Z employees seeking purpose, working parents needing flexibility, and older staff transitioning into phased retirement. CIPD (2024) note embedding a culture of trust and inclusion, flexible working can reduce turnover by up to 20%, making it a strategic asset in a competitive labour market.

Accor fosters a more inclusive and engaged workforce by adopting Pfeffer's (1998) Best Practice model and the Harvard Framework (Beer et al., 1984), which emphasise flexibility, wellbeing, and mutual benefit as pillars of employee satisfaction and organisational resilience.

However, meaningful flexibility remains challenging in operationally rigid roles such as housekeeping or kitchens, where fixed task structures can lead to perceptions of inequality. Additionally, the system's reliance on digital scheduling tools adds administrative pressure and limits scalability for small businesses lacking such infrastructure.

MGM Cotai's Integrated Wellbeing and Community Engagement Strategy (MGM Resorts, 2025)

MGM Cotai in Macau exemplifies a holistic approach to employee wellbeing by integrating physical, emotional, and social support through its purpose-built staff town. This on-site environment includes facilities such as a doctor's surgery, bank, post office, and multiple restaurants, along with professionally laundered uniforms accessible via a scan card system. Employees also receive two free meals daily, easing financial pressures and supporting physical health.

These provisions directly address Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), namely physiological and safety, while communal amenities and emotional support meet belongingness and esteem needs, reinforcing loyalty and reducing burnout. This model also aligns with Greenleaf's Theory (2025), where leadership prioritises staff welfare and fosters a supportive culture by placing the needs of employees first.

While such a comprehensive model may be challenging for smaller operators to replicate due to high infrastructure costs, it offers a compelling blueprint. Adaptable elements, such as subsidised meals, wellness check-ins, or local community partnerships, can be effectively implemented in other settings, especially in remote or high-cost regions. However, for these benefits to be transformational rather than transactional, they should be paired with transparent progression pathways and inclusive organisational practices.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the complex and interconnected causes of staff shortages within the UK hotel and hospitality sector, focusing on the influence of generational workforce shifts and persistent training deficits. The emergence of a multigenerational workforce has challenged traditional employment models, highlighting the need for more inclusive, flexible, and values-driven approaches to recruitment, retention, and development.

Through application of Human Capital Theory and Job Embeddedness Theory, the research underscores workforce sustainability is not merely a function of labour supply but also of meaningful organisational engagement, skills development, and alignment with evolving employee expectations. Training deficiencies, particularly in digital competencies and age-inclusive delivery, continue to widen the skills gap and compromise productivity and service standards.

Case study evidence and PESTLE analysis confirm that while some large-scale employers are implementing innovative strategies, sector-wide progress remains uneven. Addressing these challenges demands integrated, long-term approaches that embed flexibility, wellbeing, and cross-generational collaboration at the heart of workforce development.

Ultimately, hospitality's resilience depends on its ability to bridge generational divides, modernise training systems, and create environments where all employees, regardless of age, feel valued, supported, and invested in the future of the industry.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following strategic actions are proposed to improve generational workforce sustainability and operational effectiveness:

6.1: Implement Flexible and Inclusive Working Practices

To address evolving workforce expectations and enhance employee retention across age groups, the hospitality sector must prioritise flexible and inclusive working practices. Employers should adopt models such as job sharing, phased retirement, and self-rostering systems, allowing staff greater autonomy in managing their work-life balance. Hybrid roles that blend customer-facing and administrative duties can offer variety and accessibility, particularly benefiting older workers or those with caring responsibilities. By embedding flexibility into scheduling and role design, businesses can better accommodate the diverse needs of a multigenerational workforce, reduce absenteeism, and create a more attractive employment offer in a competitive labour market.

6.2: Develop Regional Skills Hubs and Age-Inclusive Training Pathways

A national network of regional hospitality skills hubs should be established through partnerships between local authorities, further education providers, and industry leaders. These centres would deliver tailored, modular training in high-demand areas and must be designed to be accessible to all age groups, with blended delivery formats combining in-person workshops, online modules, and hands-on placements. This approach addresses current skills mismatches while ensuring that both entry-level and older workers are equipped to adapt to technological and operational changes. Investing in localised, inclusive training provision will also support economic regeneration and workforce stability.

6.3: Embed Structured Intergenerational Mentorship and Wellbeing Initiatives

To foster collaboration and knowledge exchange across age groups, hoteliers should implement structured, two-way intergenerational mentorship programmes. These initiatives should enable younger staff to assist older colleagues in building digital confidence, while more experienced employees' mentor younger peers in customer

service, leadership, and workplace resilience. When formalised and supported with training for mentors, such programmes can improve team cohesion, reduce skill silos, and enhance employee engagement. In parallel, organisations must prioritise holistic wellbeing by offering access to mental health support, subsidised meals, affordable staff accommodation, and opportunities for personal development. Together, these strategies create a supportive culture of learning, inclusion, and care.

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