



# Attracting and retaining quality human resources for Niagara's hospitality industry

Attracting and  
retaining human  
resources

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to identify the best approaches management should embrace to successfully attract and retain high quality human resource talent within the Niagara region's hospitality industry.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A selected cross-section of relevant and recent publications are reviewed. The key findings from a mini survey involving 14 senior hospitality managers in the Niagara region are shared.

**Findings** – This paper suggests that the hospitality managers should: understand the basics related to good human resource management practices; know the "fair market value" for each position; foster relationships with colleges and universities to tap into student labor; encourage mature workers to apply for part-time work; and cultivate a good relationship with seasonal employees and educate them on the rewards of a career within the hospitality industry. Through the industry survey, it was discovered that hospitality managers within the Niagara region are already executing some of these strategies. However, it was concluded that a stronger working relationship with the seasonal employees is required in the region.

**Originality/value** – Two academics with hotel general manager experience in five countries join hands with the president for three four-diamond hotels to write this paper. Given the background of the authors, it is expected that the viewpoints would be welcomed by hospitality managers.

**Keywords** Hospitality management, Human resource management, Consumer behaviour, Employee relations, Canada

**Paper type** Viewpoint

## Introduction

The Niagara region represents the fourth largest hotel market in Canada, with over 12,000 rooms, as identified in Table I. The hotel industry is a significant contributor to the Niagara economic engine as the regional population is approximately 425,000 (2.86 percent rooms to population) in comparison to Canada's largest hotel market, Toronto, with a population encroaching upon 2.5 million (0.986 percent rooms to population).

The accommodation sector of Niagara's hospitality and tourism industry is also complemented by two casinos, eight theatres, 17 marinas, 25 campgrounds, 40 golf



International Journal of  
Contemporary Hospitality  
Management  
Vol. 20 No. 3, 2008  
pp. 293-301

© Emerald Group Publishing Limited  
0959-6119  
DOI 10.1108/09596110810866109

**Table I.**  
Canada's major hotel  
markets

|     | City          | Total room inventory | Total properties |
|-----|---------------|----------------------|------------------|
| 1.  | Toronto       | 24,655               | 107              |
| 2.  | Montreal      | 16,380               | 123              |
| 3.  | Vancouver     | 15,930               | 114              |
| 4.  | Niagara Falls | 12,168               | 152              |
| 5.  | Calgary       | 10,815               | 77               |
| 6.  | Edmonton      | 10,342               | 88               |
| 7.  | Ottawa        | 9,365                | 62               |
| 8.  | Quebec City   | 7,554                | 94               |
| 9.  | Winnipeg      | 7,251                | 97               |
| 10. | Mississauga   | 6,502                | 50               |
| 11. | Victoria      | 6,399                | 76               |

**Source:** Hotels Association of Canada (2007)

courses, 50 parks, 60 wineries, and well over 180 food service establishments (Niagara Economic and Tourism Development, 2007).

One of the biggest challenges that the Niagara region tourism industry is currently confronted with is the operational issues associated with the nature and scope of seasonal businesses. To this end, most tourists will visit and patronize the Niagara region during the summer months, typically June through late September; this time frame represents the peak season. There is also a moderate volume of business during the spring and fall seasons and very little if any business during the winter period. The exception is the Christmas to New Year holiday period, as highlighted in Table II and Figure 1.

As illustrated above, during this relatively brief one-week period of celebration in December business volume picks up once again but not at the same capacity/demand level as experienced during the summer period months of June, July, August, and September. Succinctly, business volume usually increases during this relatively short period of time. However, and for the most part, from the Canadian Thanksgiving

**Table II.**  
Niagara Falls market  
hotel occupancy rates

| Period         | 2005 (%) | 2006 (%) | 2007 (%) | Average occupancy (%) |
|----------------|----------|----------|----------|-----------------------|
| January        | 30.50    | 33.40    | 32.30    | 32.07                 |
| February       | 33.98    | 39.30    | 37.10    | 36.79                 |
| March          | 44.45    | 43.70    | 43.20    | 43.78                 |
| April          | 42.38    | 51.60    | 49.30    | 47.76                 |
| May            | 53.00    | 57.90    | 58.10    | 56.33                 |
| June           | 74.00    | 74.10    | 73.30    | 73.80                 |
| July           | 84.60    | 82.80    | 82.20    | 83.20                 |
| August         | 84.80    | 86.80    | 87.30    | 86.30                 |
| September      | 75.40    | 74.60    | 72.30    | 74.10                 |
| October        | 64.10    | 65.10    | 62.93    | 64.04                 |
| November       | 45.00    | 45.20    | N/A      | 45.10                 |
| December       | 37.10    | 40.10    | N/A      | 38.60                 |
| December 24–30 | 63.80    | 58.80    | N/A      | 61.30                 |

**Source:** Smith Travel Research (2007)

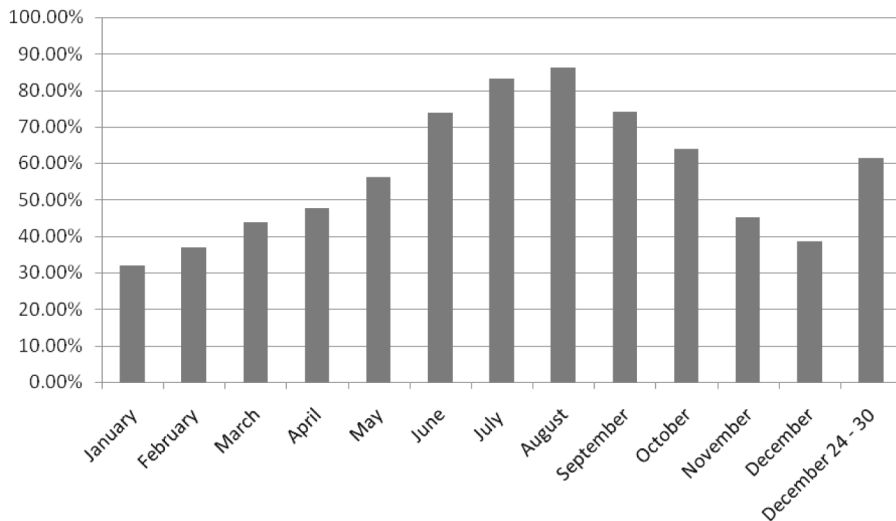


**Figure 1.**  
Niagara Falls market hotel  
occupancy rates

weekend (second weekend in October) until the middle of May the tourist season is in a lull period for the Niagara region.

### Literature review

From the literature it is evident that the human resource challenges found within the Niagara region are not unique from the perspective that there are many other tourist regions around the world that are confronted with this same issue of seasonal employment.

A 2006 research paper published by Martin *et al.* (2006) determined that the job candidates' perception of the following: unfavorable working conditions; the negative image of the tourism industry; and lack of development as well as few promotional opportunities all served as the most significant impediments to attracting and retaining talented supervisory and managerial human resources for and within the Scottish tourism industry (Martin *et al.*, 2006).

Accordingly, these authors advocate that what is most important to job candidates is the belief and perception that professional development and in-house promotional opportunities exist. When these conditions are present, job candidates are much more likely to pursue a career within the hospitality and tourism industry. Also, job candidates are motivated to apply for work at those hotel properties which have done well with respect to projecting a positive and opportunistic career progression image (Martin *et al.*, 2006).

Additionally, research conducted by Heather Earle (2003), indicates and provides evidence that the operating work environment serves as an important recruitment tool for the challenged human resource strategist. From this research, Earle speaks to the significance of the physical work environment and how it has an impact on organizational culture, cooperative learning, teamwork, creativity, and perhaps most importantly successfully recruiting and retaining high quality employees. Therefore, it is important for the hospitality manager to create, maintain and promote an attractive

and healthy work environment. To this end, hospitality operators should ensure that the work environment is safe, provides occupational support, employees have the tools and equipment they require to perform assigned job tasks, and fair, equitable compensation packages are parceled out. This will support the human resource management functions of quality employee recruitment and retention (Earle, 2003).

Furthermore, academics Lockyer and Scholarios discovered from their 2004 research that a best practices approach to human resource recruitment and selection might not always work in an optimal fashion within the hotel sector. In their paper they discuss how standard human resource procedures for the recruitment and selection processes are not always adequate when dealing with seasonal staffing challenges (Lockyer and Scholarios, 2004). Consequently, the authors suggest that human resource managers must take into consideration the complexity of the operating environment, size and scope of the hotel, the hotel's station within the competitive set, organizational culture, ownership/management style, and in particular to pay close attention to the economic and labor market conditions. Along these lines the authors propose that human resource professionals require a more "holistic" approach. In that a custom-tailored strategic approach that fits with the specific needs of the hospitality enterprise is undertaken in the recruitment and selection process for securing talented human resources. This is the advocated fundamental deviation from the normal course of human resource management, for those hotel properties that are challenged by the issue of seasonality (Lockyer and Scholarios, 2004).

In scholarly research work performed by Emma Martin (2004), the constructs of employees' perceptions and attitudes towards work and the work environment is unraveled as she illustrates how it has a significant impact on whether or not those employees will remain with the hospitality enterprise and the effect of these variables on their job performance. Martin identifies that understanding the prospective employee's personal priorities, work environment, social factors and structural constraints can all contribute to increased work satisfaction. Accordingly, employers need to probe deeper into the personal psyche of the prospective employee to gain a comprehensive portrait of what is important and significant to that individual. Further, the employer must examine the prospective employee's social skill sets as much as his/her job skill sets. These proactive and affirmative actions by the human resource manager are of course considerably important as they will ultimately lead to lower staff turnover and the successful retention of valuable employees (Martin, 2004).

In both Alberta and British Columbia current unemployment rates are at a 33-year low (less than 4 percent). As such, both provinces have been challenged with finding and keeping talented individuals to work within their hospitality sector. Some members of said hospitality industry have responded to the need by recruiting foreign workers on a short-term (one-year permits) work visa basis. However, what has proven frustrating to date has been the long queue with respect to getting the required documentation pushed through the bureaucratic pipeline, sometimes up to six months in duration (Klie, 2007). This delay in securing the labor at a time when it is critically needed has had severe negative consequences within the hospitality industry. To the extent that some hospitality enterprises have had to operate on a reduced weekly schedule, minimum operating hours, or in some cases hospitality operations have been forced to close some locations because they simply did not have enough staff members available to support the operation.

Given this scenario, researchers Lai and Baum propose the feasibility of developing and supporting a Just in Time (JIT) labor pool to meet the needs of the hotel industry when operators are subjected to the challenge of seasonality, demand periods of both peaks and lulls. Under this proposed scheme, hospitality operators would work closely with third party human resource agencies to provide the required people power as requested by the client (Lai and Baum, 2005).

In the cruise ship industry, the successful recruitment and retention of high quality human resources is a critical driver to the sustainability of the cruise line. Researchers Raub and Streit (2006) propose that, based upon their findings, recruiters need to be open, honest, and “realistic” in their recruitment efforts. By providing job candidates with accurate, experienced-based information about what it is really like to work on a cruise ship, working conditions, staff guest relations, sleeping quarters, staff meals, at liberty shore excursions, and compensation packages. Succinctly, to share all possible information to the prospective job candidate, the good, the bad, and the ugly, herein the successful job candidates will have less shock value to stressful working conditions and are better prepared to deal with long working hours, little privacy, and constant interaction with cruise guests (Raub and Streit, 2006). Therefore, the hospitality manager can improve the likelihood that new employees will experience job satisfaction and ultimately reduce the chance of employee attrition by providing open and honest communication about the nature and scope of the job position during the recruitment process.

To borrow a page out of the McDonald’s playbook, scholar Hesham Magd (2003) identifies that hospitality industry managers need to give serious consideration to employing older workers. Older workers represent a mature, pragmatic, and capable labor pool. They can project a positive image, are strong communicators, have good time flexibility; tend to be more employer loyal and are more likely to show up for work as required (Magd, 2003). Using a more established, mature workforce may also assist in dealing with the challenges of a seasonal hospitality enterprise.

Another point of consideration exists with those individuals who are currently studying to become hospitality managers. In research work performed by Raybould and Wilkens (2005) the authors make several discoveries with respect to how graduates of hospitality programs see themselves in comparison to their industry specific manager counterparts. Accordingly, hospitality managers value those students or graduates that have good problem-solving skill sets and can function effectively on their own with little or no supervision. However, hospitality managers also believe that hospitality students or graduates do not have strong analytical and conceptual skill sets at this early station in their careers (Raybould and Wilkens, 2005). However, this expression of perception towards students or graduates of hospitality programs is not necessarily all negative as it presents an opportunity for both parties. Whereby, hospitality students could work closely with hospitality managers throughout their academic career. This advocated mentor-style partnership would help future hospitality managers to develop the desired skill sets and to gain invaluable “hands on” experience and exposure to those situations in which analytical and conceptual skill sets are required. Furthermore, the managers who participate in such a project would increase the likelihood that the graduate has the required skill sets and has already been groomed for a junior management position.

Based on the research work that was performed by Jolliffe and Farnsworth (2003), hospitality managers should consider the possibility of running to and embracing the characteristics of seasonality by working with its dimensions as opposed to fighting its natural elements. To this end, the hospitality manager should focus on the use of students as a temporary labor pool. Also, the authors advocate that hospitality operators need to provide an adequate orientation program, place more emphasis on specific job related training, and ensure that temporary employees are receiving competitive wages as well as a loyalty bonus at the end of the season (Jolliffe and Farnsworth, 2003).

### Discussion

From the literature as identified above, some common themes and possible solutions emerge. Accordingly, the following five points of consideration are highly recommended to the hospitality manager who is confronted with the labor challenge issues of securing valuable employees as a result of a seasonal operation:

- (1) *Understanding the basics.* First, it becomes apparent that the hospitality manager must have a complete understanding of the existing job vacancies, job and social skill sets that are required, and current conditions of the working environment for said positions. Once this information has been ascertained both the manager and the human resource specialist need to work together in making sure that the human resource management documentation is current and relevant. Job descriptions, job specifications, and job performance prediction tests should be utilized whenever it is feasible to do so. Also, a concerted effort must be made to ensure that the work environment is attractive, healthy, and safe.
- (2) *Fair compensation packages.* Second, knowledge of the compensation packages that are being parceled out within the competitive set will also be of importance. Accordingly, the hospitality manager must know the current “fair market value” for each hourly paid position and what benefits if any are also being provided by competing businesses. The hospitality manager must make sure that the wages and benefits being offered for existing job vacancies are attractive. A reminder, employee recruitment, orientation, training, development, and turnover can become very expensive. Therefore, competitive wages and benefits might just be a good dose of preventative medicine for the seasonal hospitality operation. Also, serious consideration should be given to providing loyalty bonuses to those employees who have successfully provided their services to the hospitality enterprise for the entire season. The hospitality manager should broadcast any type of loyalty scheme during the recruitment campaign and remind current employees of the existence of any such loyalty rewards.
- (3) *College and university students.* Third, it will be advantageous in both the short and long run to foster strong and mutually beneficial working relationships with local colleges and universities to tap into the available student labor pool. Ideally, these academic institutions offer hospitality-related programming and are within close proximity to the host work site and are supported by reliable public transit. In Niagara, hospitality operators should work closely with

Niagara College and Brock University. Niagara College has its own school of Hospitality and Tourism Management with around 1,000 full time students. Brock University has a Tourism and Environment undergraduate degree complemented with graduate study opportunities in tourism.

- (4) *Mature workers.* Fourth, the prospect of hiring mature workers should also be factored into the recruitment and retention model. Mature workers should be encouraged to apply for those positions that offer part-time work and flexible working hours. Mature workers are typically non-transient and therefore can be used on a more long-term consistent basis. An investment in mature workers may pay dividends for a long time to the hospitality operation. Additionally, mature workers should also be encouraged and supported to provide mentoring, training and development, and leadership venues with the youth who are currently working within the hospitality industry or are considering a career within the industry.
- (5) *Seasonal employees.* Finally, the authors of this paper advocate hospitality operations cultivating a strong working relationship with the seasonal employees. Hospitality managers should embrace the challenge of changing the perception of the industry many temporary workers hold – which is that their current position is only a stepping-stone or a once-in-a-lifetime job out of economic necessity and does not represent a valuable learning experience with respect to career progression. Further, many transient workers believe that one can never earn a decent salary within the hospitality industry. Therefore, hospitality managers need to make a more determined effort to demystify or dispel the half-truths or inaccurate information that is in circulation or what is currently being held as reality by temporary workers. All hospitality professionals are responsible for educating seasonal employees on the advantages, benefits, and rewards of a career within the hospitality industry.

### **Best practices in the Niagara region**

In relationship to the points discussed above, a survey of 14 senior hospitality managers from the Niagara region was conducted recently for the purposes of this paper and the following findings are provided:

- 64 percent state that the general manager is made aware all the time when a job vacancy exists and 36 percent state that this event occurs at least sometimes;
- 71 percent state that the general manager does have knowledge of the specific job and social skill sets that are required of the successful candidate for the job vacancy;
- 86 percent state that job descriptions, and 71 percent state that job specifications, are readily available for all positions at their establishments;
- only 14 percent are making use of job performance prediction tests all the time whereas 21 percent will do so at least sometime;
- 79 percent say that they have knowledge of the compensation packages that their competition is offering to prospective employees for entry-level positions; and
- 86 percent state that they currently employ college and/or university students throughout the calendar year as well as on a seasonal basis.

Accordingly, from these findings one may make the following assumptions:

- For the most part the compensation packages being parceled out within the Niagara region for entry-level employees are competitive and fair.
- There is a good level of understanding in place by general managers as to what is required of the individual in terms of skill sets for a particular job position.
- It is not practical for all hospitality operations to make use of job performance prediction tests.
- At present the college and university student pool is being utilized by most hospitality managers.
- What is currently lacking is the relationship element between the establishment and the seasonal employee. To this end, there might be a real opportunity for an establishment to gain a competitive advantage in securing talented human resources by doing a better job at relationship building than their colleagues within the relevant competitive set.
- Finally and conceivably, a concerted effort should be coordinated by all hospitality managers to connect with high school students in the Niagara region. This can be accomplished via a variety of strategic venues and communication mediums to broadcast a positive message that working within the hospitality industry can be fun, financially rewarding, stimulating, and provide opportunities as well as benefits that careers in other professions may not necessarily provide.

### **Conclusions**

As a result of seasonality, many hospitality businesses are challenged with successfully recruiting and retaining high quality employees to occupy entry level and junior management positions. This paper introduced and discussed a five-point framework to increase the likelihood that a hospitality manager would be able to attract, employ and retain suitable individuals to meet the needs of the operation's seasonal requirements.

To this end, the authors of this paper advocate the following five points of consideration for the hospitality manager:

- (1) Understand the nature and scope of existing job vacancies, job and social skill sets that are required and current conditions of the working environment for said positions.
- (2) Know the current "fair market value" for each hourly paid position and what benefits are being provided by competing businesses.
- (3) Foster strong and mutually beneficial working relationships with local colleges and universities to tap into the available student labor pool.
- (4) Mature workers should be encouraged to apply for those positions that offer part-time work and flexible working hours.
- (5) Cultivate a strong working relationship with the seasonal employees and educate them on the exciting rewards and benefits of a career within the hospitality industry.

However, from the recent research that was undertaken for this paper, it has become evident that hospitality managers within the Niagara region are already executing some of these strategies. Nevertheless, what appears to be void at this time is a relationship-building strategy. Such an approach undertaken with urgency and serious intent by the prudent hospitality manager just might represent an opportunity to be leveraged resulting in competitive advantage over the other members of the competitive set. To this end, further research is required in this regard.

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