

LEVEL 7 ASSESSMENT SPECIFICATION

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Programme:	DBA		
Module:	Managing in Complex environments: Strategies, Insights and Solutions		
Module code:	HKBM7002	Contribution to Overall Module Assessment (%):	100%
Lecturer:	Dr. Leo Ho	Internal Verifier:	
Assignment Title:	Management Report	Word count (or equivalent):	7500 (+/- 10%)
Submission deadline:	Feb 28, 2022	Return date of provisional marks & written feedback:	
Submission method:	All written assessments, where practical and possible, must be submitted via Turnitin unless otherwise instructed by the Lecturer. (Please DO NOT put this assessment specification into Turnitin or it will match many similarities with other students' submissions.) Alternative submission method (if applicable): Late submission of the assessment will result in a late penalty mark. Penalties for late submission: Up to one week late, maximum mark of 50%. Over one week late, 0%. Only the Extenuating Circumstances Panel may approve a change to submission dates.		
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1. Introduction

The international nature of the hotel industry has intensified competition among major hotel owners and brands, therefore Mergers and Acquisitions (M&As) are by a common phenomenon in business practice especially in the hotel industry in order to gain competitive advantages (Mathews, 2000). On the other hand, given the economic crisis and the pressure for organizations to restructure, mergers and acquisitions have become more common (Tsai et al., 2011).

Unprecedented impacts on branding, internationalization, market share and employees can be noticed in the process of M&As. In the process of M&As, it will involve stakeholders of the acquiring and acquired organizations such as investors, franchisee, suppliers, customers, competitors and employees (Zhang et al., 2020).

The success and failure of M&As not only rely on the financial and high level corporate decisions (Graebner et al., 2017). In the hotel industry, where the tangible products and intangible services provided such as sales & marketing, food & beverage, accommodation and other entertainments very much rely on the attitude, skill and knowledge of the hotel employees (Sharma, 2019); and the M&As may affect the employees in terms of emotions (Sinkovics, et al., 2011). On the other hand, there are more research and evidence about the importance of people side in the process of M&As (Hajro, 2015; Stahl et al., 2013). Such M&As have implications for the stakeholders of hotel groups involved in the M&As process and the support of the main key stakeholders is important and essential.

Therefore, this report aims at studying one of the largest mergers in the hotel industry, between Marriott and Starwood in year 2016 (Picker, 2015) with focus on studying two key people management issues includes culture and communications which have a major impact on the employee, one of the key stakeholders of the hotel; with proposed people management strategies that would remove indecision and create focus and purpose towards determining appropriate actions to be taken.

To further understand the M&As, Mr. Ronald Ho ("Ronald"), the Finance Director of JW Marriott Macau and Ritz Carlton Macau was invited to share his opinion verbally with the author in February 2022.

2. Facts of Marriott International Inc. acquired Starwood Hotels and Resorts Worldwide Inc.

In April 2015, Starwood Hotels and Resorts Worldwide Inc. (“Starwood”) put itself up for sale. At that point of time, Starwood was also one of the leading hotel groups with around 1,300 properties located in 100 countries employing approximately 188,000 employees at its owned and managed properties dated back in year 2015 (<https://marriott.gcs-web.com/>). Starwood is a fully integrated owner, operator and franchisor of hotels, resorts and residences under the renowned brands: St. Regis®, W®, Westin®, Le Méridien®, Sheraton® etc.. Sheraton also managed a customer loyalty programs, Starwood Preferred Guest (SPG®).

Marriott International, Inc.(“Marriott”) is an American company, founded by J. Willard Marriott and his wife Alice Marriott, that operates, franchises, and licenses lodging including hotels and residential with its headquarters located at Bethesda, Maryland USA.

In the fiscal year of 2015, reported revenues of more than \$14 billion in fiscal year 2015, and at the time the hotel group owned more than 4,400 properties located in 87 countries and territories. Marriott operated and franchised hotels and licenses vacation ownership resorts under 19 brands, included The Ritz-Carlton®, Bulgari®, EDITION®, JW Marriott®, Renaissance® Hotels, Marriott Hotels®, etc.. , (<https://marriott.gcs-web.com/>) In the same year, Marriott made an announcement to acquire the entire share capital of Starwood Hotels and Resorts Worldwide Inc. (“Starwood”) (Picker, 2015), and after the successful completion of the acquisition a world’s largest hotel empire was established with more than 5,800 properties and 1.1 million rooms (Hotel News Now, 2016) worldwide.

There was a side story in the process of the mega M&As. The initial agreement price proposed by Marriott was for \$12.2 billion, but this was revised to \$13 billion where shareholders of Starwood would receive \$12 per share in cash and 0.80 shares of Marriott for each share they held of Starwood. This amended agreement came after a Chinese insurance company Anbang partnered with a US company named as J.C. Flowers & Company and Primavera Capital, joined the competition with an aggressive bid. Though, Anbang and its partner withdrew their offer at the price of US\$14 billion for acquiring Starwood on 31 March 2016; but the acquisition cost paid by Marriott was increased. The deal was closed at US\$13.25 billion offered by Marriott (De La Merced and Picker, 2016).

The impact of increasing the acquisition fee is that there shall be a pressure for the management to control the labour cost after the completion of M&A as hotel is regarded as labour incentive industry, with labour cost to revenue “generally around at 30%” (McMahon, 1994).

3. Key Stakeholders of Hotels

Stakeholders can be viewed as ‘any group or individual who can affect, or is affected by, the achievement of a corporation’s purpose (Freeman, 1984: vi). Stakeholders can be further categorized as primary or secondary. According to Clarkson (1995), stakeholders who have a formal, official or contractual relationship with a firm are the firm’s primary stakeholders whereas those who are not engaged in transactions with the firm and not essential for the firm’s survival are secondary stakeholders.

The main stakeholders in the hotel industry normally include hotel owners, investors, employees, corporate executives, customers, suppliers, consultants, legal actors, the local government and the community or society (Benavides-Velasco et al., 2014; Darnall et al., 2008; Gadenne et al., 2009; Lo, 2013; Leung, 2019; Torres et al., 2014). Because of the significant impact of M&As on hotel employees of both parties, it is worth looking into the strategies of managing the hotel employees during the implementation of the merge, or it may result in less benefit from the change (M&As) due to low efficiency and the acceptance at a slow speed in change management (Hiatt and Creasey, 2012). In fact, Gigliotti et al. (2019) concluded in their study that about 70% of a company’s change initiatives fail. Change management is normally focused on people management because the resistance of people to change makes the change challenging (Paper and Ugray, 2008).

Lewin (1947) indicated that managing change can be a very complex process because it encompasses various aspects. For instance, during the M&As, Marriott International needs to deal with leadership influence, interactions of different groups/units and the internal and external environment. The scholar further emphasized that understanding perceptions of individuals, their needs and emotions and the perceptions of others and laws is important for planning and implementing changes.

Therefore, understanding and examining strategies adopted by Marriott International to influence their main stakeholders is important. The following sections will discuss the

challenges facing Marriott International focusing on people management after the M&As and its related people management strategies in detail.

4. Key People Management Issues

4.1 About Culture

The difference in cultural of the merging organizations is one of the key elements in determining the process effectiveness of the integration and the success of M&As (Schraeder and Self, 2003). There are a lot of studies and research related to culture, and it is useful to illustrate the theories and definitions before sharing how the culture can affect the success of M&As.

In social sciences, one of the most classic definitions is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” (Tylor, 1871). Though the definition of Tylor is broad but it reflects the truth that the belief and behaviour of people are very much affected by a number of factors. To be more specific in an organization, according to Buono et al., the organizational culture “tends to be unique to a particular organization, composed of an objective and subjective dimension, and concerned with tradition and the nature of shared beliefs and expectations about organizational life.” (Burono, Bowditch, Lewis 1985). Therefore, the cultural differences after the merging of two hotel giants could be a potential issues. On the other hand, Marriott International needs to manage more hotels used to be managed by Starwood Hotels, which are located in different countries. As a result, Marriott International has expanded very quickly and has become more globalized than before. Originally, Marriott International only operated and managed different hotel properties including different brands such as JW Marriott, The Ritz Carlton, and Westin etc in 120 countries around the globe. After the merge with the Starwood Hotels, Marriott International now needs to manage over 7,000 hotels in 170 countries.

Most of the hotels will appoint the Human Resources Department to handle the cultural issues (Watson, D’Annunzio-Green 1996), like the changing in company structure, performance appraisal, performance-related pay, training programmes and counselling are

under the umbrella of human resources management, and all the mentioned functions are related to the alignment of organizational culture and individual performance. Therefore in terms of the culture building and deployment of Marriott's Vision, Mission and Core Values ("VMV"), the ex-Global Chief HR Officer, David Rodriguez expressed the three philosophies for engaging Starwood employees into Marriott's umbrella including " (1) Leaders must espouse and live core values; (2) Core values should be based on fundamental human needs (in order to knit the organization together through common bonds); (3) Leaders must empower employees to express core values in a personal way to animate the culture. (This not only further brings people together across generations and geographies, it creates a continuous cultural-renewal dynamic.)" (Andrew, 2019). On the other hand, the late-President and Chief Executive Officer of Marriott International, Arne Morris Sorenson also appreciated the contribution of David Rodriguez in the M&As process: "[The merger] was the largest influx of associates in company history," Sorenson told the magazine. "David ... stressed the common characteristics of our cultures rather than obsessing about process differences, which could easily become attributable to culture conflicts." (Andrew, 2019). From the message of the ex-Global Chief HR Officer and late-President and Chief Executive Officer, it is conceivable that the corporate culture of Marriott is deep-rooted and strong.

However, with a long operating history, Starwood had its own way to manage their staff too. In terms of number of rooms and locations, Starwood was even perceived as a "bigger" organization than Marriott, especially outside United States before the year 2016. Therefore, the "merger syndrome", that is a phenomenon describes the reactions of the employees after the announcement of M&As could be expected; such as "stressful feeling and rumormongering ferment on both sides; conflicts over who should lead and staff the newly combined departments erupt. Stereotyping and misunderstanding based on differences between the two company cultures reinforce the battle lines." (Marks and Mirvis, 1992). All these behaviours would be leaded to emotions, and affected the mood of employees as well. To a certain extent, the service would somehow be affected as the hotel industry very much relies on the service performance of individuals.

As mentioned, the Marriott International has become more globalized after the merge with the Starwood Hotels. Due to the management of more hotel properties in more different countries, the hotel group needs to implement and change their strategies to ensure consistent organizational structure, brand standards, hotel life and safety standards and

auditing standards, corporate culture and accounting systems etc. due to different product portfolios and strategies. The biggest problem in the M&As is staff, skills, and structure.

In addition, the merge also affects some human resource policies such as recruitment policy, appraisal system and compensation and benefit policy etc. For instance, some employees working in the two different hotel groups have different service skills and mindsets because of the different service standards of the luxury hotels and budget hotels in the groups. For instance, the Ritz-Carlton brand managed by Marriott International is full-service luxury hotel brand providing customers with highly quality personalized services whereas the Sheraton brand managed by the Starwood Hotels before are 4-star positioned hotels providing different level of services following the casual way to their customers.

Therefore, In terms of human resources management, the corporate office of Marriott needs to deal with many different issues such as recruitment, promoting the Marriott's culture and persuading the hotel employees originally from the Starwood Hotels to truly accept the Marriott's culture and standards etc. and change their working behaviour. This implies that Marriott International would encounter different challenges when managing the hotel properties originally managed by the Starwood Hotels. The change of the leadership originally lies in the hands of senior executives of Starwood Hotels has also required the Marriott International to carefully deal with.

Ronald mentioned that in year 2016, there was a greater number of Starwood hotels than Marriott Hotels in China; with a higher acceptance in the market as well. Marriott understood that their management team was lack of the understanding of local knowledge in terms of legal, labour market, customers and culture. If the management of Starwood was "kicked out", Marriott was unable to stabilize the workforce in China which might lead to potential reputational risk as well. For example, if the staff of Starwood opposed and went on strike, it would be a huge problem for Marriott International. Therefore, Marriott had made a decision to appoint "Steven Ho" who was a very senior "Starwood Guy" at that point of time to ensure smooth transition. Ronald also told the insider story that although after the completion of the M&As, the organization was divided into four geographical regions; Steven did not need to report to the Asia-Pacific head, and he was instructed to report to the corporate office directly which was very unusual.

However, after knowing the background of Steven Ho from a research paper (Chu and King, 2019), it is obvious that Marriott was appointing the right person to do the right thing at the right time; though Ho just served Marriott for two years. An in-depth biographical study of Stephen Ho (“Ho”), stating that Ho is a Singaporean, and started his career as a pastry chef in 1981 at a Starwood-operated hotel in Brunei. Ho worked in different departments including food and beverage, fixture and equipment procurement, business development and hotel openings etc.. In 1985 Ho was part of pre-opening team members of the first international chain in China—Sheraton Great Wall Beijing Hotel. Ho assisted Starwood to sign more than 200 new hotels under, and before Starwood was acquired by Marriott, he was the Starwood Asia Pacific President, responsible for nine distinctive brands across 21 countries and territories (Chu and King, 2019).

Commercially, in terms of M&As, there is a need to compromise in many aspects. To reach a win-win situation, either one has to compromise. But in a recent research conducted by Chinese University mentioned that on one hand, the job engagement promoted on-the-job performance and proactive behaviour. However, two sides of a coin, the flip side was that this ownership could be translated to resentment when employees perceive that their job “space” is “being infringed, leading to territorial behaviour and knowledge hiding” (Wang, et al., 2019). To a more extreme case, the very much engaged employee may even be very political in “discrediting others’ performance and purposely excluding others in a work group”. Though I think the study is a bit tricky in the sense that it only measures staff engagement to the “job”, but not to the team or the company. Therefore, a deep-rooted culture or emotion attachment to the existing company shall be well noticed by human resources department as well; as this is one of the key factors of retention.

4.2 About “shaking hands” of Information Technology (IT) Systems

Although Marriott International has become the largest hotel chain on the planet, there are different challenges facing the group such as the change of marketing strategy, standardizing the IT systems and cybersecurity (Okafor, 2021), dealing with the local legislations and related regulations of the countries where the hotel group hasn’t operated and managed any hotel properties there before etc.

According to Ronald, owing to the different standards and levels of service provided, the IT systems of the two hotel groups used for their front of the house operations (e.g., front

office, housekeeping, and food & beverage department) and back of the house operations (e.g., human resources, purchasing, engineering and accounting) are different. For instance, front-line staff working at hotel front desk to check in, check out and provide other sundry services to hotel guests normally use the computerized OPERA PMS system to perform the job tasks. Although both Marriott International and Starwood Hotels have adopted the same OPERA system to provide the customer services, the systems are incompliant because of the different markets, service standards and room categories etc. Therefore, Marriott International has encountered difficulties in aligning the two different systems. In addition, the group also needs to spend a lot of time on the financial reports' alignment. Ronald also mentioned that the "shaking hands of systems are still on-going at this point of time".

5. Propose appropriate people management strategies

With all the issues identified above, the following points are the proposed strategies to remove indecision and create focus and purpose towards determining appropriate action throughout the new organization after M&A

5.1 Building corporate culture

Given the importance of employees of involvement and support, that help guide their daily activities and their working behaviour, the Marriott International will need to start by building up the Marriott's company culture in their workplace because company culture has a significant influence on the success of an organization, which can affect its productivity, performance, recruitment policy and retention efforts etc. (Warrick, 2017). The group can start to educate the employees and build the Marriott culture through the hotel orientation programmes in which every hotel newcomer is required to attend. With such arrangement, the hotel group can cultivate the corporate culture into the new employees on the day one when they join the company.

For the existing employees especially those from the Starwood Hotels, a series of training and staff meetings should be arranged to communicate the Marriott's corporate culture with them in order to let them know the company customer service philosophy and standards. The support of Starwood Hotels' employees at all levels is essential when

implementing the change. To facilitate the process, Marriott's international can identify some senior executives originally from Starwood Hotels to be the 'Change Champion' who are committed to achieve the same goal of change, to educate them about the corporate culture so that they can share and exchange the information with their subordinates from the Starwood Hotels. It is easier to persuade individuals with the same company background, promote the new policies and standards, and gain their support. Selecting the Change Champion from Starwood Hotels and their buy-in is important because they control every aspects of the Starwood Hotels directly or indirectly. It is believed that this influencing approach should be more efficient and effective for the Change Champion to influence their subordinates to buy in the new company culture. Glazer et al. (2016) suggested that the leadership's buy in is a significant component of organizational changes. After the buy-in, according to Lewin (1947)'s model, the Change Champion needs (1) to unfreeze by breaking customs and habits (Starwood Hotels' culture) with the attempt to change a group's (Starwood Hotels) psychological views or physiological response, (2) to move and transcend the group from the present to the desired state after the break of their customs and habits, and (3) to freeze in order to solidify the new processes and standards and make them permanent.

Because the large no. of employees after the merge, compulsory online workshops should also be considered for the employees from Starwood Hotels in order to ensure they are familiar with Marriott's culture and standards. Some tests should also be arranged after the workshops of which the employees are required to complete and pass. By doing this, Marriott International's corporate culture and standards could be conveyed to all the employees in the company more efficiently and effectively.

When the Marriott and Starwood Hotels' employees have the same culture, they can work together better because of the common ground they share to provide their hotel customers with the promised customer service standards.

On the other hand, referring to the case of Ho, it is understandable that the employees are highly involved and engaged by Starwood. However, it will also be very common that if the employees are also highly engaged with their to the team/company, he/she would consider for the greater good of the team/company and would put the team's/company's bigger interest ahead of his/her own. This would eliminate the dark sides and create even greater synergies, i.e. the power of $1 + 1 > 2$. That may be a good way for the acquiring

company Marriott to listen to the Starwood manager especially with long tenure to know the motivating and de-motivating factors of individual performances; like building a team of Key Opinion Leaders (KOL) for building new cohesive teams and cultivating loyalty towards Marriott.

5.2 *Recruitment*

In order to maintain the brand standards and quality of the people working in the group, Marriott International has its well-developed recruitment policy, which is different from the Starwood Hotels' one. After the merge, it is important and essential for Marriott International to review the recruitment policy implemented by Starwood Hotels in order to ensure all job applicants can meet the qualification standard set by the Marriott. Both groups also need to renew their current SOPs together to develop a new one acceptable to both parties. The new SOPs will serve as the guidelines of hiring employees with the required attributes and qualifications. Although the process may be lengthy, it is vital to do so to ensure the quality of services promised to the customers by Marriott International.

For the existing Starwood Hotels' employees, Marriott International will need more time to ensure the employees to meet the required standards. To reduce the resistance, Marriott International should organize regular meetings with different levels of employees in order to exchange information and collect feedback. With the feedback, the company can slightly adjust the policy and standards to allow the Starwood Hotels' employees to cope with the Marriott's current practices. For instance, many senior managers including general managers of Starwood Hotels in China do not understand English well, which has consequently influenced the implementation and performance of some strategies or initiatives introduced by Marriott International as a result of communication breakdown. Because of this, Marriott International has made a change to tackle the problem by changing all the company documents from English version to both English and Chinese version.

5.3 *Establishment of taskforce groups*

To ensure the Starwood Hotels' employees to cope with the new policies and standards due to the change, Marriott International should also establish different taskforce groups to facilitate the transformation in order to achieve the same goal of change. The

taskforce groups should include both managers from both hotel groups with the main aim to identify the differences and commonality in terms of the groups' policies and standards in order to formulate the one acceptable for both parties. With establishment of groups, managers from both hotel groups can exchange information with employees to elicit their concern and awareness of different policies and standards and then develop various ideas and present them to the senior management. The members are responsible for initiating, designing, sponsoring and implementing the transformation in order to enable the required change happen. The managers from Marriott International who are responsible for affecting the change must consider different forces affecting the process such as subgroups, the group's standards and value system (Lewin, 1947). In terms of composition of the task force group, more Marriott's employees should be included in a taskforce group (51:49) so that the Marriott group can have the influencing power to push the Starwood Hotels counterparts to meet the Marriott's standards in order to help achieve higher level of service quality standards.

Establishing taskforce groups can be a good feedback mechanism of which different sections/units in a hotel are integrated to create accountability and transparency. It helps bridge the gap between Marriott's employees and Starwood's employees while the interactions among members determines the success or failure of the group (Tasheva and Hillman, 2018). The taskforce groups could be established for different hotel departments and operations. Incentive or award can be given to recognize the performance of the groups in order motivate them to continue their good work to formulate the possible mutually-agreed policies and standards. The mutual understanding between the employees of Marriott International and Starwood Hotels and the exchange of information can help facilitate and streamline the implementation during the merge.

5.4 Dealing with two different IT systems

Owing to the two different IT systems that Marriott International and Starwood Hotels are using for their own hotel operations, the challenges facing the Marriott International during implementing the change are substantial due to the disparity between legacy IT culture within the two hotel groups. The resistance increases and morale of users can decrease if not well managed. To tackle the problem, providing different levels of training to enrich employee understanding of the specification currently used after the M&A is vital. In addition, employees from Starwood Hotels should be given sufficient time to practise the system

before the actual operation with coaching by Marriott staff in order to meet the fundamental requirements of Marriott International. The hotel group should also regularly communicate with the users of the IT system to identify the reasons of initial resistance (e.g., extra work) so that remedial actions can be taken. It is also important for the management to arise employees' interests for the change. This is emphasized by Iveroth (2011) creating common interest to align interests among different stakeholders is the central concern.

5.5 Ongoing communication throughout the process

During the change process, ongoing communication between different levels of employees from senior executives to rank & file staff throughout the process is vital. Through the communication, senior executive can receive feedback from the middle management and general staff within the Marriott and Starwood's groups. It is important for the senior leaders to listen to their subordinates effectively or they may lose the trust and ability to implement the required change and make the change a sustainable one. On the other hand, having chances to reflect their feedback, employees feel being more involved in the process by giving their experiences and knowledge. The effective communication can increase the chances of successful change process as found that mutual trust is fostered through effective communication while Pollack and Matous (2019) indicated that effective communication can positively affect change.

5.6 Empowering senior managers of Starwood Hotels

Due to the large number of Starwood Hotels' hotel properties and employees after M&A, Marriott International should empower some Starwood Hotels' senior executive to direct the change. When empowered, the executive with full/partial authority and ownership of the change will be more dedicated to implement the change process.

6. Conclusion

During the M&A process, a company needs to influence the firm's main stakeholders to achieve the established company's objectives and performance. The study mainly focuses

on the impact of the merge between Marriott International and Starwood Hotels on their employees and discusses its related people management strategies.

Although resistance from employees of Starwood Hotels is inevitable during the merge, Marriott International can use some strategies to influence the employees who are the main stakeholders of the hotel company.

When implementing the changes as a result of the merge, it is important for Marriott International to manage the staff issue due to the different Starwood Hotels' company culture and service standards.

It seems that Starwood Hotels' employees can be affected more effectively by gaining their understanding about the change of policies and standards due to the merge, allowing them to exchange information, providing them with workshops covering the Marriott's culture and different policies and standards, compulsory on-line training with test, and promising to award good performance. Identifying Change Champions who should be from Starwood Hotels to lead the change and establishing different taskforce groups consisting of both Marriott and Starwood's employees to exchange views in order to formulate mutually-accepted policies and standards can help facilitate the change process.

In the nutshell, senior executives need to develop and nurture a good relationship between management and employees and focus on employee engagement because they are the most important component of any process. This is especially important for the hotel industry, a people industry.

Acknowledgement

I gratefully acknowledge the support and comments provided by Mr. Ronald Ho who has served Marriott Hotel group for close to 30 years in finance function, and his existing title is the Finance Director of JW Marriott Macau and Ritz Carlton Macau.

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