

Internal marketing as an integration tool of trainees

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Objectives | Second year students of the Undergraduate degree in Hotel Management, of the School of Tourism and Hospitality (ESHT), Polytechnic Institute of Porto (P.Porto) must complete an 800-hour work placement programme in the private sector during the fourth semester of their study cycle, for which they will be granted 30 ECTS. The work placement is arranged by ESHT, with the signature of a "Student Placement Programme Agreement" by the three parties involved (the student, ESHT's representative, host entity representative), with a member of the teaching staff of ESHT and a hotel supervisor directly in charge of assessing the written report produced at the end of the programme and the trainee's performance, respectively.

The purpose of this research is to examine the effect of Internal Marketing in the behavior of the hospitality trainees and its repercussion in the quality perceived by the customer. It intends to understand if the adoption of some specific elements of Internal Marketing mix in the Hospitality Industry really contributes to strategic advantages bearing in mind the trainees' satisfaction and motivation and its reflection in customer service excellence. We aim to introduce a new perspective of IM in Hospitality Services and provide information and tools to for hospitality management dealing with trainees. To this end, our research examines how the IM can achieve trainees' fulfillment and empowerment in *servuction*, and how IM can influence trainees' satisfaction and motivation. We truly believe that key implications for hospitality managers will be highlighted and managers will reflect about the value of their trainees/prospective working force.

Methodology | The methodology proposed puts a particular emphasis on the investigation of Internal Marketing for trainees in Hospitality Services. We collected primary data from a survey with the objective of seeking insights from individuals working as trainees (as part of their degree programme) about their own experience in IM.

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The target population of this exploratory study were 94 Hospitality trainees of both genders and aged between 18 and 22 years, from the School of Tourism and Hospitality (ESHT), Polytechnic Institute of Porto (P.Porto). These trainees carried out their work placement programmes in several hotels (national and international), in various departments, with very distinct functions and responsibilities. Bearing in mind the classification and quality of the hotels hosting our trainees, we considered that the application of IM was a current and normal feature of the hotels' management style, thus also a part of the Human Resources policy towards trainees.

Main Results and Contributions | As referred, our data was collected directly, and, through an inductive approach, its main purpose was to determine how well trainees were integrated/ how much they felt as staff members.

The Programme Agreement signed by the parties determines that the students will work the legal 40 hours per week/ 8 hour per day. The majority of the host hotels will include accommodation in the package offered to trainees (due to the distance from their place of residence), meals for the duration of the work day and some even pay an allowance (in most cases, it is half the Portuguese national minimum wage).

If one analyses in detail the average number of hours trainees work in a week, it is clear that only a small percentage (11.7%) was 40 hours or less at their post. Almost half of those surveyed (48.9%) put in 45 hours each week, and there were even trainees (27.66%) who worked an average of 50 hours per week, 4,26% were 55 hours at their posts and 7,45% were there for 60 or more hours. The survey shows a clear tendency for trainees working excessive hours, which is a common working condition for staff in the hotel industry.

When queried about what they thought about their personal experience during the work placement, 58.51% of students stated that they were satisfied with the programme and that the experience had been exactly what they had expected. As far as in-house training and being given a welcome manual were concerned, 74.47% thought they were duly accompanied by those in charge, despite the fact that only 45.74% were given a welcome document. 86.17% of trainees felt they were supported by line managers, but when questioned about the support they got from the General Manager only 51.06% answered positively.

78.72% of those queried thought they were given a lot of autonomy and responsibility and 67.02% felt as members of the hotel's staff. 63.83% of the trainees felt totally integrated and informed about all activities carried out in the hotel. When asked if they would recommend the hotel they did their work placement in to other students, 65.96% said yes. However, when the question was if they would like to work in that same hotel in the future, only 45.74% responded positively, which shows some dissatisfaction.

In terms of the working environment and how the other members of staff felt, 48.94% of trainees said they were motivated and completely integrated in the company, but 63.83% considered that there was no internal mechanism to assess their performance. When asked about rewards and incentives, only 31.92% said that every member of staff was rewarded in some way. A mere 21.28% considered that staff had access to career advancement.

Limitations | This research would benefit greatly if the number of trainees surveyed was increased and if it included students from other Schools with similar programmes (the structure of the course must

include a mandatory period of work placement). The next step would be to determine the best format to reach students from Higher Education Institutions: would a document in electronic form (Google Docs, Microsoft Forms, or other) be more appealing and result in a faster process of data gathering? The structure of the survey itself could benefit from an improved rewriting, with the objective of making it more specific, integrating narrower questions such as type of departments where the work placement was done, age bracketing of respondents, their degree of responsibility in the position they occupied or number of worked hours per week.

Conclusions | Implementing IM is essential to achieve service quality and customer satisfaction and, consequently, to accomplish any company's goals. It should also be self-evident that the relationship between customer and employee is fundamental for successful service. Companies that implement internal programs are more likely to achieve higher levels of employee loyalty than those that do not, because employees feel they matter to the organization. Motivated and loyal employees have more positive attitudes towards their firms and the management and this leads to increased sales and profit. A positive revenue should be considered a consequence and not the main issue as is defended by Ford and Heaton (2001):

"Most organizations have a tendency to look at the world from their side of the cash register. Decisions on capital investments, facilities design, system design, and managerial policies and procedures are too often made from the organization's point of view and convenience rather than the customer's."

If trainees are treated as full-fledged members of staff (as seems evident from the fact that they work the same amount of hours and are asked to perform the same type of task the other employees are), one should expect their successful integration into the working teams would be a concern of management looking to use IM to its most uppermost efficiency.

References |

Ford, R. & Heaton, C. (2001). Lessons from hospitality that can serve anyone. *Organizational Dynamics*, 30, (30-47).