

Barriers of Knowledge Sharing in Malaysian Hotels

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to identify the important barriers in knowledge sharing in luxury hotels and consider significance of motivational points for managers in using knowledge sharing base on knowledge management strategy for their requirement, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. This qualitative research was selected through 23 persons semi-structured interviews with managers and some senior staff of three (four-five) hotels in Malaysia. The progressive comparative analysis was applied in this article. The result shows that barriers in work environment, personnel attitude, and knowledge transfer within the organization, are the main barriers observed in luxury hotels in Malaysia. Identifying the barriers of sharing knowledge and overcoming them in hotel industry of Malaysia as a tourism country can help the stakeholders in this industry to increase the organizational capability and effectiveness, and gain more intellectual assets in terms of knowledge as their competitive advantages.

Keywords

Knowledge sharing, Hotels, Malaysia

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Hospitality industry is one of the service sectors in most of the countries which has a high level of customer engagement. Generally the customers experience begins with their expectations from the hotels they choose. The success of the hotels highly depends on how the perceptions of product/service meet the expectations of customers (Hendrie, 2004). As a result, providing better service to satisfy current guests can attract the customers again as well as new customers. This strategy has become one of the important issues in long running of business operations and the result can influence the service quality of the hospitality organization and then the profit (Zeithaml, V., Berry, L., Parasuraman, 1996). If employees exchange and

transfer their experience and knowledge from the initial service encounter, it will improve the employees' capability and consequently affects the overall organizational performance. The valuable information should be captured, shared and applied in theory. Accordingly, Gupta & Givindarjan, (2000) and Szalanski, (1996) assert that knowledge sharing plays a momentous role in knowledge management and help companies to retain their competitive advantages (Kearns & Lederers, 2003). Knowledge sharing behaviors should be motivated inside the organization as knowledge typically exists tacitly in employee's head. Several studies show that the knowledge sharing component could be used in hospitality operations more efficiently and effectively (Gupta & Govindarjan, 2000; Davenport et. al., 2001; Ingram et al., 2000, Sveiby, 2000). Yang (2004) reveals that sharing knowledge and information about services between employees can affect the overall organizational performance. Sharing and learning knowledge and experience help employees to acquire more knowledge and skill, creativity, imagination, exploration, and discovery about their job in organization (Mc Grill et al., 1992). Consequently, shareholders would achieve more benefit in term of knowledge that improves business outcome.

In spite of the growing significance of knowledge sharing activities, a number of barriers may happen that make difficulties in knowledge sharing or prevent the achievement of activities. Managers need to realize that in knowledge sharing strategy how the barriers can be created in companies and whether they can be removed.

In this research it has been tried to indicate the factors that may inhibit knowledge sharing practices among the employees and also the factors that encourage employees to share their knowledge and experiences. Finally, the result shows, suggestive strategies such as management support, putting rewards system and using IT technology can provide suitable atmosphere for the employees so that they can share their knowledge and experience more effectively.

2.7 FUNDAMENTAL THEORY

2.8 Knowledge management

In organization managers have to manage and rethink their operation strategy in this global competition. Regarding this fact, Knowledge is an intangible asset and recognized as a crucial strategic asset in knowledge-base-economy. In past few years the companies could be sustained competitive by applying existing knowledge and use this knowledge to generate new knowledge assets to perform according to them (Alavi&leidner, 2001). To use and manage organizational knowledge asset effectively, the organization primarily create a knowledge management program and then apply it to invest for gathering information and communication technologies in knowledge management systems (Davenport& Prusak, 1998). According to Alavi and Leidner (2001), one classification of knowledge in organization includes knowledge about customer, behaviors, products, operational process, competitors, and knowledge about business framework. The term 'knowledge' in this research is related to the aforementioned points which are important in hotel industry.

2.9 Knowledge sharing

In an organization, knowledge sharing will happen when individuals need and ask other employees for knowledge and so they are willing to receive assistance from others to solve their problems. The characteristics of knowledge such as intangible, unique, and inimitable make it a potential source for creating competitive advantage and sharing of knowledge among employees is the only approach for collective knowledge in an organization. Due to this fact Knowledge Sharing is a key process through which an organization can leverage its valuable assets (Wasko & Faraj, 2000; Nahapiet & Goshal, 1998). Yang (2007) researched on knowledge sharing and organizational learning in international hotels in Taiwan. He found that knowledge sharing and organizational learning have an impact on organizational efficacy. The result is also supported by Sveiby (2001). He believes that people can use their competence to create value by interflowing knowledge in an organization they belong to. In an organization, employees who share their knowledge will help themselves to improve their capability and in this way choosing interactive methods will increase the efficiency of knowledge sharing. Quinn et al (1996) also state:

“ As one shares knowledge with other units, not only do those units gain information; they share it with others and feedback questions, amplifications, and modifications that add further value for the original sender, creating exponential total growth” (P: 8)

A number of researches have focused on the effect of knowledge sharing on organizational improvement (Eisenhardt and Santos, 2002; Davenport and Prusak, 1998; Sveiby, 2001; Yang, 2007). For instance in hotel industry Sveiby's research (2001) revealed the significance of applying knowledge sharing from companies to their stakeholders. He showed that customer information database can help stakeholders to leverage their knowledge obtained from their hotels. It can be said that knowledge sharing is a process of diffusing knowledge between individuals, and or groups within an organization through the communication channels. In an organization, knowledge plays an vital role as an intangible asset and involves all sectors of economy and as a key driver for future competitiveness (Laycock, 2005; Knapp, 1998; Nahapiet and Goshal, 1998; Winter, 1987). It facilitates transformation of individual knowledge to organizational knowledge.

Hoarding knowledge is in contrast of sharing knowledge and it is happen when employees are not willing to share knowledge or not feeling that their sharing will be returned. Husted and Michailova (2002) said that some behaviors and attitudes could inhibit knowledge sharing. They mentioned some factors which lead to knowledge hoarding , factors such as: 1) deficiency of knowledge power, 2) unwillingness to spending time on sharing knowledge, 3) Fear about misuse of knowledge (sharer worry about the misuse of knowledge that they diffuse), 4) High esteem for hierarchy, 5) Avoidance of revealing (deficient confidence in knowledge).

Lack of desire to share knowledge is referred to as a barriers and it might happen in different departments of organization. It may happen when the employees are not aware of the benefit of sharing knowledge or they cannot manage to integrate such a task into their daily duties, or they do not have enough time to share knowledge and experiences. Also some employees may perceive insufficient support from the top management in organization to apply the new ideas in their work, or some may feel better to gathering information instead of sharing it. The process of knowledge sharing cannot be started when the person is not aware of 'knowledge' value. So, for developing knowledge sharing within an organization, such kinds of attitudes should be removed.

2.10 Promotional Programs

This research is focused on factors that may prevent knowledge sharing in organization and it suggested some factors that help to increase knowledge sharing culture and organizational effectiveness.

2.10.1 Introducing Motivation System

Motivation can be considered as a keyword in an organizational development toward knowledge sharing. In fact, the people are different in many aspects, so such motivation system should be designed and formulated considering different needs and expectations of the people. Reward is one of the factors that help to promote knowledge sharing. Batrol & Srivastava's research (2002) reveals that monetary reward has a positive effect on knowledge sharing. It should be mentioned that reward does not have to be just monetary. Non-monetary rewards such as social recognition can be also a powerful incentive while they are credible and culturally significance.

2.10.2 Effective Social Interactions

Social interaction can provide suitable atmosphere for employees to have a relationship and be facilitated to share their knowledge. In fact, combination of relationships and social networks lead to knowledge sharing. In a good relationship, people can learn and share their knowledge and information as well as they can trust each other more easily (Ramasamy, Goh, Yeung, 2006). According to Marouf (2007) the relationships include two categories: business and social. He revealed that in organization business relationship is more contributed in knowledge sharing.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, data collection is based on semi-structural interview (Yin, 1994), and are collected from 23 senior managers and senior staffs (8 from company A, 7 from company B, and 8 from company C) who involve in managing knowledge and knowledge sharing in three international hotels in Malaysia, last year. Company A provided 296 guestrooms and four food and beverage outlets while company B equipped with 335 rooms and 6 restaurant and bar and company C accommodates 428 rooms and 7 restaurant and bar.

Interviewed respondents from each company were senior managers, middle managers, and supervisors. The respondents are more than five years experienced in hotel industry. The purpose of the interview was to identify and describe the important

barriers in knowledge sharing from the management and senior officers' point of view. The term "sharing knowledge" was explained prior to each interviewee. Through this interview, interviewees could think freely and say their opinion and describe their experience about knowledge sharing barriers in their hotels or hotels industry as a whole.

The questions asked included: "1. what factors have you found that inhibit you to share? 2. Will sharing knowledge take too much of your working time? How do you think about this problem? 3. Is relationship important during knowledge sharing in the work? Why? 4. What reason encourage/discourage you to share your knowledge with others?"

A total of 23 interview transcripts were in English. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes. The collected data included of interview and observation. My observations were through several stays in these hotels.

4.0 FINDINGS

All of the hotels in this research have similar customers like Tour Groups, Holiday Guests and Business Guests. These three hotels are located in Kuala Lumpur and not in suburbs and they are similar in term of providing service and facilities to their customers. The study shows almost all the respondents agreed with the importance and necessity of knowledge sharing in hotel industry and intended to share their knowledge. However they mentioned some points as the barriers that prevent smooth flow of knowledge sharing between the employees in the organization. Analysis of the data shows several barriers in knowledge sharing in hotel industry which are categorized into three groups.

1. Work Environment
2. Personnel (staff attitude and their capabilities)
3. Knowledge Transfer

Work Environment:

In organization some factors can inhibit the effective process of knowledge sharing. In all three companies the majority number of interviewed managers declared that low monetary reward system and insufficient salary are some of the factors lead to create barrier in knowledge sharing. Some managers stated that:

"[...] no money, no talk"

A human resource manager also pointed to the similar factor as:

“Actually I had an experience... insufficient salary can be considered as a factor in inhibiting knowledge sharing between employees,... it is a fact at least in hotel industry.”

Hierarchical structure of the hotels gives the authority to the personnel to make decision considering their positions; however such authority may be considered as another barrier in knowledge sharing. Some respondents declared that some higher in hierarchy rank don't take attention to lower in rank and they may ignore the other's ideas and make the decisions on their own ways. Among the respondents one middle manager with more than 15 years experience in hotel industry reported that:

“I encourage sharing of knowledge but we need to see the environment we are in whether our superior practice autocratic or democratic management.”

'Hoarding knowledge' is also another barrier which is observed in company A and B. Regarding this point a middle manager from company A stated that:

“... they [my colleagues] never ask me anything.”

Personnel:

In the past few years, hotel business growing showed upward trend. Accordingly, the managers and staff of the hotels realized that the key of their success lied into the quality of service and products provided by them to their customers. As a matter of fact, managers reported the problem of finding and recruiting skilled and competent staff that are professionally able to absorb and attract customers and finally serve and satisfy them in the best way. A typical comment was:

“People have different attitude and expect different treat. Still it is observing that some employees in some situations have problem in their interactions with the customers...”

A human resource manager reported:

“Often we have fresh personnel who are not having enough experience..., we trained them but still they are not efficient in sharing their knowledge.”

In addition “sensitiveness” as a character of staff and personnel in company B and C is found as barrier. For instance a middle manager stated:

“[...] I like to share my knowledge with them [other colleagues], but sometimes they annoy me. They think they know better or nothing attractive to ask.”

Therefore the attitude of employees and the way they behave is very important in exchanging the knowledge. Some personnel characteristics such as talking and intonation, gesture and even the way to look people are the factors affecting knowledge sharing.

Knowledge Transfer:

It is observed that “loss of knowledge” is another factor which plays a vital role in knowledge sharing process. In any company old personnel can be considered as the precious source of knowledge since they are being involved in their field for a long time. In this regard a middle manager from company C stated that:

“...we often miss good employees; they leave without transferring their knowledge... for example one of colleague moved to another department and his new representative has not enough knowledge yet.”

5.0 DISCUSSION

One critical issue that suggested from managers is arranging social interaction for the purpose of knowledge sharing. About half of the interviewees from these three companies would talk about social interaction. They said that social interaction is very important as a every individual needs and help to buildup the relationship and trust between employees. Moreover, it causes to have a goods bonding so as to be able to accept constructive criticism. This is also supported by (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998; Yang, 2004). They revealed that social activity such as social networking, events, and face-to-face interactions help members to interact and communicate with each other and consequently cause the smooth knowledge sharing process. a number of managers also state that, training program is also increasing efficacy. It will teach employees how to share their knowledge in an organization. Training also teaches the employee how to search for information and how to access the special information (Cabrera& Cabrera, 2002).

Reward is another point that is mentioned as a motivation factor in sharing process. According to Stevens (2000), generally rewards are not considered as an essential tool however they often act as a catalyst to improve knowledge. Although, There is a discussion by experts on the presence of reward system in organization. Yet, a number of researchers advise that reward system is critical and it is necessary for the creation of intellectual capital (Goh & Hooper, 2009; Kharabsheh, 2007; Gross,

2001; Lanney, 2002). It is also important for the success of knowledge sharing in organization and encourages the quality of knowledge sharing rather than quantity (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2002). Most interviewees were of the opinion that rewards is one important factor in their organization for improving knowledge sharing.

Yang (2004), found that limited time can be considered as a barrier for employees in organization. Despite of this point, the findings show, that time is not a barrier for sharing knowledge in hotels. Most of interviewed agreed that sharing knowledge is part of the working process for all levels (junior & senior), and is being done daily and it is not limited in term of time. They mentioned some IT technology can facilitate knowledge sharing process and eliminate time and space barriers to some extent. Javenpaa and Staples (2000) also claim that people who feel comfortable with technology are more likely to use electronic information exchange. Use of some tools and technologies such as yellow pages, intranet, use of some virtual places for discussion forum (chat room), e-learning tools (using electronic system for learning), E-mail, video conferencing can provide facility to improve and support knowledge sharing.

Moreover they mentioned about leaving experienced employees from companies. When employees leave the company, the organization would suffer from loss of knowledge from these staff.

6.0 LIMITATION

This study presented the qualitative data from only three (Four-Five star) hotels in Kuala Lumpur. The limitations of this research initially can be related to the scope of the research. The scope of this study is limited only to Kuala Lumpur hotels with Malaysia condition and may differ with from the situation in other places. On the other hand, also the discussion was limited to only the managers and some senior staff from the selected hotels.

7.0 CONCLUSION

Obviously, all the employees who interviewed said about the importance of sharing knowledge in hotel industry in Malaysia and they also mentioned some factors that inhibit share knowledge program such as work environment, personnel and knowledge transfer which are already discussed previously. It is concluded that in order to eliminate the barriers in knowledge management, the managers of the hotels in Kuala Lumpur should be aware of the significance of sharing knowledge and should take it into consideration during all the managerial functions. This will help them as an effective tool to

improve service quality and product and progress the experience level of employees (juniors and seniors).

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