Recruitment, attrition and training at the Hilton Hotels: Beijing and Shanghai

Background

The Hilton Beijing is a 375 room hotel, making it medium sized for the group. It is situated in the ‘new diplomatic’ area of the City and has just completed a major renovation of rooms, restaurants and bars, event facilities and public areas including the hotel lobby. There are just over 600 team members at the hotel. Almost the entire workforce are Chinese nationals. There are currently 13 non-Chinese team members on the payroll and all of them work in senior or middle management positions. Work permits are required for expatriate managers and these are difficult to obtain. Moreover the hotel has a deliberate policy of developing its local workforce.

The Hilton Shanghai is a very large hotel: it has 720 rooms and an extensive conference and banqueting facility. 1,200 staff are employed across eight major departments. All except some 20 of the staff are Chinese nationals – the exceptions are a number of management staff and four management trainees from overseas in an internship.

Recruitment and retention

At Shanghai, Ester Zheng, the Director of Human Resources and Development, regards recruitment as her major problem. Overall turnover rates are 7%, which is less than other hotels in Shanghai. This reflects a positive brand image for Hilton and the company’s commitment to development – this is demonstrated in good results from staff surveys. However, the situation is particularly acute in the food and beverage department where staff need to be able to have a standard of English which allows them to talk to guests and to be well-presented. Hours of work are long and the salary of junior waiters and waitresses does not compare well with other departments in the hotel. There are a number of routes to recruitment, including websites, newspaper advertisements and links with hotel schools. The most important source of recruitment comes from websites and applicants who approach the hotel themselves.

Similarly in Beijing, Emma Ma, the Hotel’s Human Resource Manager, and Marcia Stubbings, the Assistant Human Resources Manager who is in charge of Learning and Development, consider that team member attrition is the major problem that they face. The demand for team members who are able to work in international-standard hotels far exceeds the supply. Such team members not only need English language skills and good standards of personal grooming, but also an awareness of, and ability to meet, the requirements of international clientele. Experienced personnel will move to jobs in other hotels and often their ambitions for advancement exceed their capabilities. As a result attrition rates at the Hilton Beijing can be quite high. This is both expensive in terms of resources and damaging for team members’ morale. It will take some time for labour market to adjust and, with the Beijing Olympics due in 2008, hotels are expanding and demand for suitable workforce is intensifying.
A number of strategies are in place to meet this operational challenge. At Shanghai about 50–60 trainees are recruited into an internship programme at the hotel each year. They can start at various times in the year since initial orientation sessions are held once a month. Most of the trainees come from Shanghai, so have been living in a city which is open to international culture. However, few of these new joiners will have prior work experience in hotels – they could be shop assistants or part time tutors or sales girls/boys etc.

The Beijing Hotel has implemented a scheme which involves the recruitment of up to 70 trainees a year, who then undertake a year of training. The Hotel recruits three-quarters of this trainee population from the Shanxi Labour College located in Xian which is 12 hours away by train from Beijing. Trainees are also recruited from hospitality and catering schools elsewhere in China, including Beijing, but as Emma Ma puts it:

“The rapid growth and resulting shortage of skilled personnel in all industry sectors in the major centres has led to skewed expectations of the young generation. They no longer wish to enter the service industry as a first choice and are very particular about the jobs they will take. Those in rural areas are keen to take the jobs, but lack the educational background and awareness of the international approach required.”

The trainees from rural centres have not had the exposure to the demands of an international hotel. They will not have taken a meal in a western-style restaurant or experienced the accompanying service. In part this raises practical issues in delivering a training programme - the culinary skills taught at rural centres often focus on Chinese rather than western cuisine and service delivery. As Marcia Stubbings puts it:

“Trainees from secondary cities tend to have a less developed awareness of some common etiquette and therefore may be reminded to avoid certain behaviours when in the lobby or guest contact areas.”

As a result the city-based students tend to progress more quickly during their training period.

**Training at the Hotels**

Once the trainees have joined they spend two days in orientation which is mainly focused on giving the trainee an exposure to the Hilton company culture: what is expected of them and the support they receive. They then spend a period of two to four weeks on initial training: in most cases half of this time is spent in the classroom and half in an operational department, closely supervised by a manager or a skills trainer. This is then followed by a period of rotating assignments. During this period they have to complete the Technical and Behavioural Skills (TBS) training. The TBS forms have been translated into Mandarin Chinese and this is the preferred version in some departments, for example housekeeping. At the end of that period successful trainees are offered jobs; some may decide to return to their home town or village.

It can be seen that on-the-job training is critical to trainee progress. Both hotels have similar mechanisms in place to ensure that there is effective delivery of support for learning in the workplace. At Shanghai, for example, each department has one to two departmental trainers and some skills trainers depending on the size and they will all have secured certification following a train the trainer course. There is also a network of 62 skills trainers across the
Hotel. Ideally the HR department would like 10% of total staff to be skills trainers. These staff are certified to deliver the brand standards and departmental skills and knowledge training.

**Training to learning**

The HR and training staff at both hotels regard the Chinese trainees as passive learners compared to other nationalities. In their view Chinese learners like to take notes and are less likely to interact or ask why. They ascribe this to the instructor led pattern of Chinese education. Indeed Rachel Deng, the Shanghai Training Manager describes her mission at the hotel as seeking to:

“Help the learners find their passion.”

She does however detect marked regional differences in approach amongst the trainees and adjusts her style accordingly. Unsurprisingly, trainees from Shanghai are seen as the most sophisticated and confident learners.

At Beijing, both Emma Ma and Marcia Stubbings emphasise that all trainees, but especially those from rural areas, are eager to learn and to seize the opportunity to acquire the relevant skills. Generally they regard Chinese learners as well-motivated but somewhat passive in their approach. They ascribe this to the fact that they are products of an education system which is firmly instructor-led and does not encourage interaction. However they respond rapidly and become receptive to more participative methods. As Marcia Stubbings observed:

“After our initial induction session, one Chinese trainee said to me: ‘It’s amazing – I never knew learning could be like that. I had fun.’”

Unsurprisingly, Marcia Stubbings sees a key demand of her job as adjusting her approach to the learning needs of trainees from different parts of the country.