

ASSESSING TRAINING EFFECTIVENESS IN LARNACA'S HOTELS

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Abstract

This research article presents the findings of research undertaken during 2010, in the hotel industry in Larnaca-Cyprus. The aim of the article is to assess the achievements and effectiveness of training. The investigation addresses the impact of training on improving service quality standards and employees' skills. The evaluation concerns the Content, Input, Reaction and Outcomes (CIRO Model) of training. A survey was used and questionnaires were piloted on HRMs in order to secure the validity and the reliability of the research instrument. A sample size of 352 (n= 352) employees participated in the research. Findings showed that training was effectively implemented and acknowledged by all participants, highlighting the role of front-line supervisors as training facilitators and agents of learning. On-the-job training is an important source of tacit knowledge, promoting novelty ideas and maintaining a defense mechanism to operational drawbacks, such as diversity and low performance. However, training needs' assessment and training evaluation policies do not exist in all hotels. HRMs miss an opportunity to implement the assessment process as a diagnostic tool in evaluating the achievement of training and to decide whether or not training has met the pre-set training goals. As a consequence, hotel organizations risk financial resources invested on training. For this purpose, top management should integrate training and develop a training model in order to assure the compliance of training programs to a specific purpose and organizational goals. This will result in the development of an adaptive workforce that is able to respond to the changing business needs and to create employees capable of contributing to service quality improvements in the hotel industry.

Key Words: Training, CIRO, Cyprus, Cypriot Hotel Industry, Tourism Sector, Training Evaluation, Training Need Assessment.

Introduction

Tourism in Cyprus has created a diversified facet of jobs, requiring high and low specialization skills. Thus, the labor mobility detected since the island's accession in the European Union (EU) resulted in enormous arrivals of employees from overseas, with lower living standards (Karris, 2006). As a consequence, the diversified workforce substituted the homogeneity of the local workforce in the hotel industry (Angellodemou, 2007). The new structure of the hotel industry demographics gave rise to diversity challenges and opportunities, drawbacks and obstacles, as well as workplace communication problems. Also, the rising international competition in relation to the global recession has further increased pressure to improve the competitiveness of hotel organizations (Allen and Snyder, 2009). Indeed, the need to improve organizational competitiveness dictates the necessity to boost performance and productivity.

Productivity in Cyprus' Hospitality Industry

High performance and productivity has been a great challenge since Cyprus was classified among the less productive countries within the EU (Eurostat, 2009). The main criterion was the productivity of work in relation to the production of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) per hour of work (Eurostat, 2009). Based on the latest report of Eurostat, the productivity of work in Cyprus (GDP per employee) for 2008 was found at 87.7% of the EU average. Cyprus was classified in the 15th place amongst the 27 countries of the EU. In 2007, the same indicator

was found at 85.1% of the EU average rate and Cyprus was classified in the 16th place amongst the 27 countries of the EU. The productivity of work (GDP per hour of work) for 2007 was found at 67.3% of the EU average. In 2007, the same indicator was 69.6% of the EU average (Eurostat, 2009).

Beyond productivity and performance issues, service quality and product differentiation are considered critical to the island's diverse group of customers (Kouis, 2008). As a result, local government and tourism stakeholders should see the need to turn to quality tourism as the antidote to the changing nature of the international hospitality market (Presbury et al., 2005). The effectiveness of the island's tourism stakeholders and the local government to collaborate will determine the future of the hotel industry in Cyprus. By establishing a common agenda, "The Cyprus Tourism Organization: Strategic Plan 2003-2010", major weaknesses and problems arising from diversity and workplace communication could be identified. Priority for the common agenda should be the Training and Development (TD) of the human pool. A competent workforce within the hotel industry could be an important parameter in securing the successful development of a homogenous mosaic of employees (Willie et al., 2008). The right academic education, the acquisition of practical experience and the effective implementation of vocational programs could sharpen the industry's competitiveness (Drisoll et al., 1994).

For the successful formation of a homogenous mosaic of employees, the deployment and integration of training as an operational process should be perceived as a transitional force for the industry's healthy development and improvement (Kouis, 2008). Through training, Hotel Organizations (HO) might be able to develop a productive team of players and a strong organizational culture (Dessler, 2008). Training as an operational and integrated function might assist in shaping a unique workforce by sculpting employees' skills and developing professional qualities (Collins, 2007). Although training is crucial to all HO, organizations lack appropriate evaluation mechanisms and systematic records of training information (Maguire and Redman, 2006). As a consequence, many organizations are not capable of determining the utility and the actual effectiveness of a Training Program (TP; Goldstein, 1993). The importance of training and the lack of assessment mechanisms to determine the actual outcomes and achievements of training acted as a catalyst in undertaking the current research.

This article presents research undertaken in the hotel industry of Cyprus aiming to assess and determine the effective implementation of training. The major challenge for HRMs is the selection of appropriate evaluation mechanisms and techniques to assess the achievements of a Training Program (TP; Davenport, 2006). Hence, the assessment process of a training program must not be performed in a vacuum, or isolated from other operational functions. The findings from the assessment process of a TP should be reported, stored and used continuously in order to create a pool of knowledge. This pool of knowledge could foster the necessary learning conditions, leading to continuous improvement and maximizing the return on investment (ROI; Mohamed, 2006). Thus, organizations should design a TP that supports the organizational objectives in order to countermove individual, team and organizational weaknesses with efforts to achieve high performance and productivity (Duguay and Korbut, 2002). The crucial-success determinant factor that affects the effectiveness and the success of a TP is the degree to which organizations have merged organizational objectives productively with employees' personal career goals (Duguay and Korbut, 2002).

The productive merge of the organizational objectives and the personal career goals of the employees dictate the need for strategic integration of training as a development function (Mohamed, 2006). Thus, the merger of organizational and individual goals might transform training into a value-added activity (Rossett, 2007). Training could have a positive impact on operational values such as organizational commitment, workplace communication, diversity integration, low level of employee absenteeism and turnover (Holtzhausen, 2002). For HRMs and practitioners the actual value-added activity should be the generation and usage of effective feedback based on the achievement of the TP. The feedback from TP should focus on the outcomes and the impact of the TP on the skills, knowledge and abilities of employees in performing duties more effectively (Willie et al., 2008).

Goldstein (1993) underlined the importance and the usefulness of getting feedback from the assessment of a TP. The feedback has to be in the form of descriptive and judgmental information. Descriptive and judgmental information will help decision-makers to base future decisions on facts and evidence when selecting the content and the type of the TP. Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick (2006) underlined that descriptive and judgmental feedback might be used as a source of consistent knowledge in achieving future improvements in training. Consistent knowledge-feedback might be collected through the evaluation of training (Davenport, 2006). Training evaluation as a basic and simultaneously a complex managerial responsibility might contribute to the development of a flexible and adaptive workforce by avoiding ineffective training and training methods. Training evaluation models can be used as a safety valve for HRMs in determining the effectiveness of a training program (Noe, 2008). In the current study, the CIRO model has been used. The CIRO model is based on the concept of measuring skills of trainees, before and after training. It is divided into four thematic areas investigating the content, input, reaction and outcomes of training (Cooper, 1994).

The CIRO model is used by many organizations in measuring and determining the effectiveness of a training program (Cooper, 1994). Although, the importance of training assessment was underlined in the literature, in Larnaca's hospitality industry the majority of the hotels do not use any model in assessing training outcomes due to the lack of time or inadequate knowledge (Petasis and Anastasiou, 2008). The workload of employees and the intangible nature of the industry act as serious obstacles in integrating training evaluation. Another serious reason for the lack of training evaluation is the policy of hotel organizations to face training as a problem oriented function and not as a strategic issue. The missing training strategy led hotel organizations to the design of training programs that temporarily face a problem. Consequently, many operational issues and drawbacks remain unsolved. Hence, in many cases HRMs cannot communicate tangible and measurable results in order to determine whether training had met the preset objectives (Radnor and McGuire, 2003).

Methodology

To examine the effectiveness of training, this article aims at investigating the opinion of employees working in different hotels in Larnaca. Academic and industrial inputs were used. The literature review provided a strong background acting as a useful source for the design of questionnaires for collecting the primary data. The survey method was employed in gathering the needed information. The survey method allows the collection of large amounts of data obtained by questionnaires (Thompson, 2001; Leach 1996). The current research is based on face-to-face interviewer administered questionnaires. Questionnaires are considered by Driscoll et al., (1994) as the most common application of quantitative research methods. The questionnaires were divided into five sections. The first section covered demographic

information and the other four thematic areas consisted of statements-questions relevant to the Content, Inputs, Reactions and Outcomes (CIRO) of training. A pilot study was deployed in order to maintain the validity and the reliability of the investigation. The questionnaire was piloted on HRMs. Due to specialization, educational background and professional experience and involvement with the assessment process, HRMs could assist in confirming the appropriateness of the questions, thematic statements included. The sample population consisted of employees who are currently working in the hotel industry. Sampling is a critical component of the research process since any researcher who intends to gather primary data should identify a specific group of people (population) that share common characteristics (Hair et al., 2005).

Sampling can be seen as “the process of selecting a sufficient number of elements from the population” (Sekaran, 2003). To satisfy the research objective, the stratified sampling approach was considered appropriate and the study involved relatively homogenous sub-groups that were distinct and non-overlapping (Hair et al., 2005). For the purpose of this study, three hundred fifty two participants were contacted (Employees, n=352). Several rating and ranking techniques such as a likert scale, itemized-rating, comparative and ordinal scales were used in order to gather reliable, valid and consistent data.

In successfully fulfilling the requirements of the research, ethical standards were a priority for the researcher to secure the quality of the findings. Since the efforts of the researcher were to investigate different hotel organizations-competitors, in the same regions and considering that Cyprus has a close knit-society and culture, gaining access to a company and questioning the employees was not an easy task. Hotel organizations have a different status quo and organizational culture, and as a result top management might not be willing to release them to a third party. The truthful intentions of the researcher to investigate different organizations and the immaturity of the industry to deal with academic research led to certain cases where the author was faced suspiciously by participants. As a consequence, the researcher tried very hard to clarify and to reassure all participants of the purpose of the research and that the outcomes of the research were going to be used for academic purposes only.

Results of the Research

In order to assist the researcher to determine the effective implementation of the training all those who participated in the research had to rate the content, input, reaction and output of the training. The mid-point on the five-point scale was used as a main criterion in order to determine the effective implementation of training. Responses to the statements that were rated below the mid-point were considered less effective and those rated above more effective. The total response will determine the effectiveness of the training.

For the content of training, 54% (n=190) of the employees responded positively and only 11% (n=39) were not satisfied with their training content during 2008. For the training input, 57% (n=200) of the participants responded positively and a relatively high percentage of 25% (n=88) responded negatively. In contrast with the findings from the first two sections of the CIRO model, (Content, Input), only 43% (n=151) had positive reactions towards training during 2008. The majority of the participants, 47% (n=165), responded negatively to the statements-questions of this section. For the last section, outcomes achieved by training, 55% (n=194) of participants had a positive response to the statements and only 26% (n=92) had a negative view of the training outcomes (Figure 1). The final findings show that hotels have effectively implemented training during 2008, as 52% (n=183) of the participants responded

positively and only 29% (n=102) gave a negative response. 19% (n=67) of the participants responded neutrally to the statement included in the survey questionnaires (Figure 1).

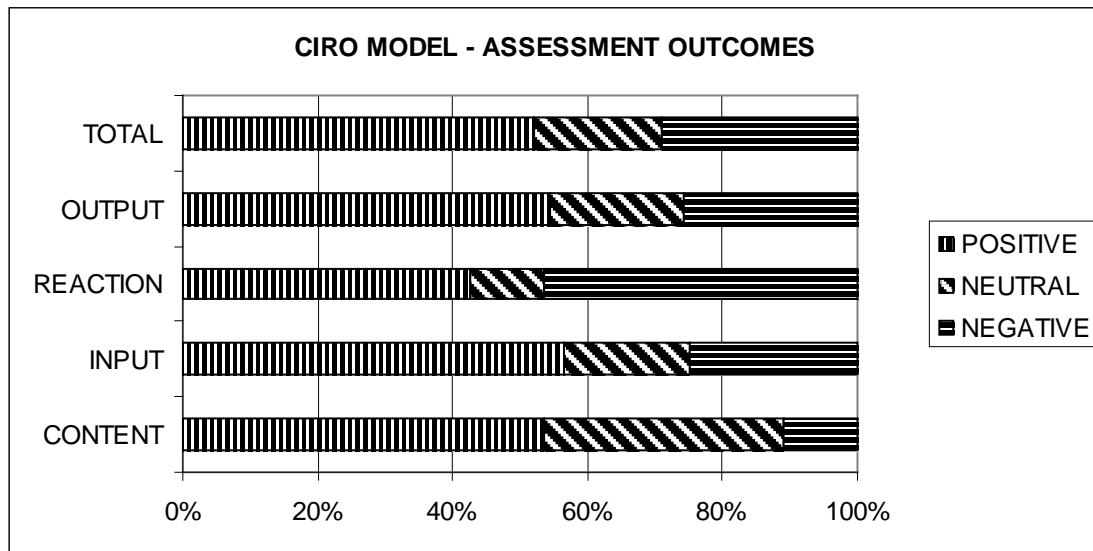


Figure 1 CIRO Model – Assessment Outcomes

Discussion of Important Findings

Demographics

There was an observable over representation of the age group 18-25 (48%, n=169). That is a 16% difference, in comparison to the percentage given by the National Statistical Services (NSS, 2007). Employees having up to three years employment presented the biggest percentage of 40% (n= 141). The main reason employment status was developed in such a way is the recent decline of the industry recently. In order to face competition and survive, many hotel organizations changed ownership, fired higher rewarded employees with long running service or unavoidably entered franchising agreements. The findings indicated that most of the participants came from a low income group (48%, n= 169). The biggest age group (18-25), the lowest income group (48%) and those with the shortest service in hotels seem to be the outcome of the island's accession into the EU as intense labor mobility was observed mainly from EU member countries with lower living standards. Larnaca's hospitality industry underwent a period of intense decline and therefore hiring low income employees was an effective solution for all hotels in order to decrease their operational costs (labor costs).

Content of training

Although HRMs, organizations and governmental authorities emphasize the necessity of training in the ever changing business environment (Petasis and Anastasiou, 2008), 28% (n=99) of participants - almost one-third of the sample indicated that they received no training during 2008. 52% (n=183) of the employees stated a high level of awareness concerning the training process in their workplaces. Only a small percentage (6%, n=21) of the participants expressed the opinion that training did not help them to perform daily duties more effectively. This group of employees could be identified as people with long service, who are resisting change and consequently having a negative attitude towards new ideas (Pardo del Val and Fuentes, 2003).

Training input

The vital role of Front Line Supervisors (FLS; 69%, n=243) is highly stressed. The findings of the research indicated that FLS have a major contribution in assessing training needs and

selecting a TP. FLS not only have to perform supervisory and operational duties but they also need to act as formal and informal training agents and knowledge transferors. 81% (n= 285) of the participants supported that they have participated in tailored TP, designed to satisfy actual training needs. 46% (n= 162) of the employees supported that training helped them to acquire new skills and knowledge. Thus, the benefits deriving from on-the-job training have an immediate impact on employees' performance and productivity (74%, n= 260). In delivering training programs, external trainers had the biggest contribution, since 58% (n= 204) of participants indicated that they have received training from external trainers.

Reaction to training

Participants accept and trust the system since they believe that all employees have equal opportunities to participate in a training program (62%, n=218). Hence, the findings identified several barriers in implementing new materials learned during training. A high percentage of 92% (n=324) of employees, which was unexpected, indicated that time is the most serious barrier in implementing training ideas at the workplace. 74% (n=260) of participants mentioned that training assessment did not take place upon the completion of a training program. As a result, training stakeholders were not able to evaluate the achievements of training. A high percentage of the employees, (89%, n=313) supported that no evaluation took place within their departments to assess any improvements in employee performance due to training.

Outcome of training

45% (n=158) of the participants saw training as a major force that affects workplace performance. Training could be seen as a means to improve performance and productivity. However, 31.5% (n=111) of participants underlined that training should not be faced as the only variable in the hypothesis of how performance could be increased. Other factors such as motivation and reward could cause a positive impact on employee performance. Furthermore, 67.7% (n=238) of the employees believe that training has a catalytic impact on human resource development. Therefore, training could be a source of new ideas and knowledge, fostering the principles of a learning organization (Dessler, 2008). 68% (n=240) of the participants stated that training assisted them in implementing new ideas as well as getting involved in an on-going learning process for further professional development and career advancement.

Conclusions

HO in Larnaca have effectively integrated the training process in their operations as training is said to have a positive impact on the workforce and on human capital (Mann and Robertson, 1996). Consequently, the need for training, as a corrective action or as a pro-active activity was highly acknowledged by all employees. Hence, the investigation led to several conclusions. The development and shape of an adaptive workforce is a major goal for HO, despite the fact that 28% of the employees indicated that no TP was available to them during 2009. This case requires more investigation as employees expressed the belief that training is of vital importance. Training might be a success or a failure determinant factor within the hotel industry due to excessive reliance on the human resources (Barrows and Powers, 2008).

Supervisors play an important role as training facilitators and learning agents. As a consequence, top management of HO should elevate priority to identify supervisors as key-players in an integrated training process. Supervisors can initiate change and act as an agent of change, affecting the success level and the effectiveness of training (Wilson, 1996). The

research indicated that the availability of an on-the-job training opportunity, might torch the initiative of supervisors to undertake the duty of guiding, mentoring and training employees (Simmonds, 2003). Through training, supervisors might become an important source of explicit or tacit knowledge, introducing new ideas and countermining serious operational drawbacks such as diversity, performance and productivity issues (Oltra, 2005).

Surprisingly, training assessment does not exist in all HO participating in the study. Top management of hotels need to establish a formal approach in identifying employee training needs. Training Needs Assessment (TNA) can influence the deployment of Effective Training Programs (ETP; Bee, 2008). TNA should be seen as the outcome of a careful assessment of an employee's training needs at all organizational levels through a systematic study (Simmonds, 2003). Furthermore, TNA can be used as an excellent tool to identify employees' actual training needs in order to make knowledge and solutions available for existing problems as well as to perform the assigned duties and responsibilities more effectively. By establishing a formal Training Needs Assessment Process (TNAP), the top management might secure that the observed training needs are the actual and real training needs (Bee and Bee, 2008). Thus, HRMs might be able to prioritize the training needs and develop the appropriate TP. As a result, hotel organizations might maximize the ROI through budget savings as well. For a successful TNA, three important factors should be considered for comparison: (a) pre-set measurable goals, (b) specific criteria depending on daily duties, and (c) a pre-determined performance level. Consequently, a common goal platform should be created giving the opportunity to set common goals and performance standards, for supervisors and employees allowing a clear comparison towards departmental and organizational objectives. The comparison and the evaluation of the achievements might be used to enhance the TNAP (Perdue et al., 2002).

Indeed, the evaluation in the training process has become a basic tool-kit in determining the effectiveness of a TP (Mann and Robertson, 1996). The evaluation of training in the hotel industry of Larnaca, as it takes place now, has the form of a simple questionnaire which basically examines the level of satisfaction that employees are getting from existing TP. The inappropriate evaluation practices in the participating hotels, does not give HRMs the opportunity to implement the assessment process as a diagnostic tool in evaluating the achievements of training, and to decide whether or not training has met the pre-set goals (Tennant et al. 2002). Furthermore, the management of hotel organizations risk the ROI with tremendous impact on budget spending, loss of motivation to drive progress, and waste of efforts and time (Mann and Robertson, 1996). The study indicated the necessity to introduce a specific measurement tool to determine the achievements of training, raising the need simultaneously for the extra hiring of specialists with additional costs. However, the management will ensure that the usefulness and the achievements of training and additional costs will be balanced by training budget savings.

Recommendations

In order to ensure the successful deployment of a long-term-integrated training process, the top management of HO has to develop a specific training assessment model. The integrated training assessment model will assist in controlling and assuring the compliance of a TP to a specific purpose, and organizational goals (Bee and Bee, 2008). Through, an Effective Training Process (ETP) the management of HO will be able to foster innovation. Innovation and differentiation are vital ingredient for the recovery of the industry and training can assist employees within HO to develop skills and capabilities, leading to an increase in productivity as well as to improvements in quality standards (Kouis, 2009). Indeed, service quality

standards of hotel organizations are facing serious market and environmental challenges due to competition, as well as demographic changes emerging from the island's accession into the EU. Training allows top management to develop a capable workforce to face all these challenges and, with training evaluation, organizational development will be ensured. Simultaneously, the correct organizational development will have a positive impact on serious issues concerning organizational performance and productivity, profitability and competitiveness.

However, in achieving the organizational development and the expected training outcomes, top management should proceed with continuous assessment of the training evaluation process, due to the fast changing business environment. Hence, the continuous training assessment will allow top management the ability to decide the degree to which a TP succeeded or failed. The success or the failure of a TP could be determined with regards to the content, input, reaction and outcomes of training. The CIRO model as a training evaluation model is not standardized, allowing the adaptation of the training evaluation process. As a consequence, various and multiple factors could be considered every time based on training needs, the purpose of training and the TP deployed. In addition, beyond the continuous adjustment, improvement and development of the assessment process, the CIRO model promotes the ability to link the assessment process to pre-set objectives. The pre-set objectives will act as the pathway in achieving the expected results.

The implementation of CIRO model will create an action agenda and a map with prioritized activities, enabling HRM to proceed with corrective actions and adjustments in order to secure the expected results. The utility of a TP in the workplace will reveal the actual value of training (McLaughlin and Jordan, 1999). However, in maximizing the value of training, top management should design and implement a consistent assessment model, tailor made for the size, the departmental structure and the organizational and individual training needs. Hence, the training assessment process would not take place in isolation and the organizational and individual training needs should not only be a one-way observation (Russ-Eft and Preskill, 2005). Russ-Eft and Preskill (2005) pointed out that various training stakeholders could be involved as every individual has a different knowledge and experience background and interprets the training assessment process and outcomes from a different perspective.

The involvement of various training stakeholders such as top management, supervisors, employees, and training consultants will maximize the effectiveness of training. The involvement of various training stakeholders could promote open communication channels, enhancing the countermining of threats emerging from changes in training and TP. Thus, training stakeholders will contribute to the planning of future training. Therefore, top management needs to face the changes of a TP as the outcome and the product of the training evaluation process (Russ-Eft and Preskill, 2005). The training evaluation process must reflect the level to which a weakness has been improved and training needs have been satisfied in a way that employees have been assisted in improving performance and productivity. The success of the training process and the implementation of a tailor-made training assessment model are constructive managerial tools that will not only contribute to homogeneity and strong organizational culture but also to high performance and productivity at individual and organizational level.

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