The Future of Hospitality: Dubai Workforce Sprint

Managing human capital in the hospitality sector

There's a saying that "people make the place,"

and that's especially relevant to the hospitality sector. But at the same time, talent can be hard to find and retain. Creative talent-management strategies that foster attraction, growth, and loyalty are therefore essential.

At Dubai's recent Future Hospitality Summit (FHS), a group of passionate experts and rising talent gathered to debate the challenges and deliver solutions. This innovation exercise was moderated by Bertrand Audrin, professor and human capital specialist at EHL Hospitality Business School.

Collective Creativity

Collective creativity has few requirements: committed participants willing to challenge the status quo, a positive environment, and a combination of convergent and divergent thinking. Structured collective "sprints" are an effective way to address a specific challenge fast and creatively. Participants collaborate on the relevant aspects, breaking them into parts and discussing potential outcomes with the aim of identifying concrete solutions and actions.

At the recent human capital sprint at the Future Hospitality Summit (FHS) in Dubai, participants considered three fundamentals of human-resource optimization:

How can we attract the most talented individuals to the industry?

How can we further develop those talents?

How can we retain them?

The participants—a mix of seasoned professionals from industry and education, challenged by passionate students—were split into three teams to identify the current state of the industry and whether practices are effective or outdated. They then investigated areas for improvement and growth in the future. The last (and hardest) step consisted of translating the most promising ideas into actionable measures. Challenges were considered at organization and industry level, for both the short and long term.

Talent Attraction

Participants identified four major areas for improvement around talent attraction: trust-based environments; trust in people; clarity; and flexibility. It was also emphasized that there's a need for organizations to provide a clear career path for prospective applicants, and to communicate this with a compelling narrative about their company and what its available roles involve. Priorities—and solutions—include:

Trust-based environments:

Participants identified the need for hospitality companies to create trust-based environments that foster psychological safety, initiative, and personal well-being and growth. Relationships between organizations and their employees can easily become transactional and marked by mistrust and uncertainty. Hospitality companies can show the way, developing privileged relationships based on trust with their employees. This benefits employer branding and talent attraction in the short term, and encourages a sense of belonging and positive performance in the long term.

Trust in people:

It was highlighted that trust-based environments lead to growth opportunities for employees, and that advertising such opportunities can be a source of competitive advantage in the quest to attract talent. Hospitality has traditionally been an industry associated with the need to "win your spurs" over time, while other industries have leaner, faster career tracks. To that end, developing fast tracks, and communicating these clearly, can be an efficient talent-attraction strategy as it gives high-potential candidates a clear vision of their career path and potential for progress in the short term.

Transparency and fairness:

It was emphasized that transparency and fairness regarding both short-term and long-term commitments can significantly increase talent attraction. Veiled promises and delayed gratification won't attract talent to hospitality. Instead, there needs to be transparent communication clarifying "what's in it for them." This is particularly important when it comes to attracting talent from alternative sectors, whose skills are relevant to hospitality.
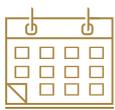
Flexibility:

It was also agreed that "getting a taste of hospitality" can play a big role in attracting talent. To achieve that, organizations could develop part-time roles to raise interest in hospitality and build a talent pipeline.

Developing Talent

Participants made the distinction between industry-level measures and organization-level measures when it comes to talent development, focusing on alignment, skill definition and development, and career paths.

At industry level

Alignment between academia and industry:
Participants highlighted the need for hospitality schools to "stay close to industry," and ensure their graduates are equipped with the relevant lifelong learning skills to thrive and grow. Foundational and advanced education is a fundamental way to develop talent, but there's a need for continuous coordination between what employers value and what academia is teaching.

Core skills identification:
The "heart of hospitality"—and core skills that constitute this—were a topic of debate, with participants agreeing that these skills are still ill-defined. They called for an industry-wide reflection on what constitutes "hospitality skills"—from technical to human skills—and the need to nurture and develop these in talent. As participants noted, such skills are sometimes taken for granted, but continuously developing and honing them is essential for talent and industry alike.

At organization level

Skills-based development:
It was agreed there's a need for organizations to think beyond jobs when developing talent. They need a broad perspective that encompasses future opportunities and (as at industry-level) crafts core hospitality skills. To achieve this, there needs to be greater visibility of roles and the skills they require. As roles are constantly evolving, it can be challenging for organizations to develop complex skills frameworks that map out trajectories and expectations. Nevertheless, those hospitality companies that can craft skills-based trajectories for talent and endorse a more proactive role in development will gain a competitive edge.

Fluid careers:
Participants emphasized how continuous changes require organizations to become more agile and identified this as an opportunity for more fluid career development, by emphasizing and valuing new roles beyond the traditional "road to general manager." Embracing fluidity by recognizing atypical careers and roles can offer new opportunities in terms of talent development. However, participants noted that this recommendation is only possible if the previous consideration on core hospitality skills is implemented as an enabler for mobility.

Retaining Talent

Talent retention is a key challenge for hospitality as people are its most important resource. Participants identified three key areas for improvement:

Personalization:

It was agreed that there's a need to go beyond the "one size fits all" vision of employees' expectations and to provide options—whether in terms of professional growth, work content, or arrangements and scheduling—that align with employees' expectations and interests. This means companies would do well to listen to their employees and purposefully design roles, careers, and environments that match what they want.

Recognition:

Participants highlighted the importance of showing people that they matter, through various forms of recognition. Notions of transparency and fairness have been closely tied to this, reinforcing the impact of employer branding and the importance of non-financial forms of recognition, such as praise and feedback.

Belonging:

Purpose and belonging were considered key levers to retain talent. Participants highlighted the role of managers in fostering this sense of belonging, tying it back to a strengthened organizational culture that thrives throughout the organization. Managers are thus presented as the champions of "belonging," and this mission is presented as a key component of their role.

The finish line

The purpose of this creative exercise is to push debate to create actionable insights for the industry and at company level. Organizations can use the areas identified in the sprint to audit their talent-management practices. This will enable them to determine where they stand in terms of talent attraction, development, and retention, and to identify areas for improvement in the short and long term.