

The Quiet Battle for Travel and Tourism Talent

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The 'war for talent' is real. The labour pool will soon shrink in many Asia Pacific destinations, even while more than two-thirds of the world's new jobs will be created in the region.

But this does not necessitate slower travel and tourism industry growth rates.

"In populous developing countries the issue is training, while in developed countries the issue is lack of supply," said Outgoing PATA Chairman 2007/2008 Brian Deeson of Accor. "To match the two the answer lies in investing in human resource development (HRD) and new policies that enable labour mobility."

Professor Walter Jamieson of the University of Hawaii said: "Human resource management (HRM) and HRD is becoming central to business operations in some industries."

"In travel and tourism we're good at product and market development," he continued. "But HRD is rarely central to industry growth strategies, and good workforce development strategies are hard to find."

Prof Jamieson moderated the PATA Annual Meeting session "Human Capital Challenge - It's Time to Invest", attended by more than 150 PATA members, local industry stakeholders and media on Monday morning (April 7).

Delegates learned that working-age populations will begin to contract in Korea (ROK) in 2015, China (PRC) in 2016, Singapore in 2017, and Thailand in 2025. In Japan, the number of workers in the population started to decline in 1994.

In the travel and tourism industry, inexperienced staff members are being fast-tracked into positions of responsibility quicker than ever before. Salaries are rising as competition for talent heats up and employees show a willingness to job-hop.

Yet money is not the biggest issue when it comes to retaining the services of "Generation Y", those born later than 1978 and the newest members of the working age population. Some 44% of Gen Y respondents to a TMS Asia-Pacific survey put money last on a list of reasons to stay at a company, or move on.

More important was "career development" (44% of respondents ranked this as the most important reason to stay or go), "recognition" (33%), "work conditions/boss" (21%), and other reasons (2%).

To replace a member of staff costs at least the annual salary of the position, said TMS Asia-Pacific's Andrew Chan, so it is important to understand what motivates your staff. For Gen Y, for example, "fun and work are not mutually exclusive", he said.

In the context of a poor rural area in Sri Lanka, Jetwing Group's PATA Grand Award-winning Youth Development Project is an inspiring example of how to ensure a dedicated, loyal and professional work force by investing in local youth.

Kumar Senaratne of Jetwing said poaching qualified staff for the new Vil Uyana property in Sigiriya, Sri Lanka wouldn't have been difficult due to the company's reputation.

However, in order to optimise benefits for the local people and offer a more authentic experience to guests, Jetwing decided to recruit and train 50% of required staff from local villages.

To ensure corporate cultural continuity and an appropriate mix of experience, the balance of staff would come from other Jetwing properties.

The Project silenced its doubters and exceeded expectations. Those working on the Project quickly realised that "village kids could do it ... hospitality was in their genes". Some of Jetwing Group's best feedback on customer service now comes from Vil Uyana. Furthermore, at less than US\$5000 per graduate investment, the project more than pays for itself in terms of reduced staff turnover and retraining costs.

Kenneth Low, Director of Strategy at IHG and the 2008 PATA Face of the Future, said his company would need to fill 200,000 new hotel jobs over next three years. IHG's approach is give and take: "What do we want our people to do? What do we do for our people?"

To position IHG as an employer of choice, the company's multilingual careers website makes promises to prospective employees: "Room to be yourself", "Room to get involved", "Room to grow".

IHG's openness to individual identities and passions, its partnership-based HRD strategy, as well as its own chain of IHG Academies, have helped the company perform strongly on employee satisfaction surveys.

Pradeepa Dahanayake of SriLankan Airlines described her organisation's HRM and HRD as a "continuous flow" of internal staff development and external training, recruitment agents, management trainee programmes, high performer and key talent identification, and career development.

She emphasised that it was important for HR professionals to understand what is going on in the marketplace and industry, locally and globally.

For example, Ms Dahanayake cited the radical growth in global aviation bringing challenges to airlines in the region, such as the need to compete for a fair share of the more than 42,000 additional pilots needed by 2020.

Meanwhile, in Sri Lanka, emboldened by global and regional conditions, unions are raising members' expectations. As a result, Ms Dahanayake says she has to be in constant communication with the unions.

Ms Dahanayake identified some of the core competencies needed by HR professionals today: management development, change management, and internal communications.

Jetwing Group's Mr Senaratne said: "Think differently and out of the box and I think we can make dreams come true."

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