

The role of leadership in improving employee wellbeing and building resilience in a changing world: evidence from low skilled employment

Extended Abstract (Practitioner Paper)

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Abstract

Evidence from the tourism and hospitality industries shows growing concerns related to employee wellbeing. The issues with recruitment, retention and chronic worker shortages post pandemic are indicative of this. This research explores the role of leadership and managerial styles in improving employee wellbeing in times of turbulence and rapid changes. The focus is on post-pandemic wellbeing and work practices in the context of low skilled employment. The research involves semi-structured interviews and focus groups with industry stakeholders in the UK, as well as documentary analysis.

This research will make original contribution to a less-researched area and will advance scholarly understanding of Human Resource Management (HRM) practices and employee wellbeing, particularly in situations of high levels of threat and uncertainty. The outputs will have implications for

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Introduction

Evidence from the tourism and hospitality industries shows growing concerns related to employee wellbeing. The issues with recruitment, retention and chronic worker shortages post pandemic are indicative of this. This research explores the role of leadership and managerial styles in improving employee wellbeing in times of turbulence and rapid changes. The focus is on post-pandemic wellbeing and work practices in the context of low skilled employment. The research involves semi-structured interviews and focus groups with industry stakeholders in the UK, as well as documentary analysis.

This Extended Abstract presents only the initial stages of a wider research project which is work in progress and conducted in collaboration with industry stakeholders. It will make original contribution to a less-researched area and will advance scholarly understanding of

Human Resource Management (HRM) practices and employee wellbeing, particularly in situations of high levels of threat and uncertainty. The outputs will have implications for practitioners and recommendations for the industry will be provided.

In addition to its focus on practical issues, this research seeks to respond to the call for theoretical innovations in the tourism and hospitality (T&H) leadership and managerial styles research (Baum, 2016; Kloutsiniotis & Mihail, 2020) and employee wellbeing (Agarwal, 2021). Baum (2016) points out that the T&H literature is dominated by research on marketing, technology, the natural environments, and culture, whilst HRM has been largely ignored. Only 2% of research published in tourism journals over a ten-year period (2005-2014) covers workforce issues. Moreover, the few studies published in the last decades focus directly on the hospitality field rather than on the broader tourism landscape.

The theme of health and wellbeing has become central to building resilience of the workforce, creating people-centred work cultures and achieving the UN SDGs. This research is aligned with two of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals - to improve mental health and wellbeing and to promote decent and meaningful work for all. It also contributes to the studies in the area of workforce wellbeing in the under-researched context of low-skilled employment.

While emerging studies offer evidence from India and sub-Saharan Africa (Agarwal, 2021; Bayighomog & Arasli, 2022) these are limited to the hospitality sector, and wider scholarship is needed to explore the issues and practices in the UK and the industrialised countries in general.

Past studies show that the discourse in the tourism and hospitality literature is dominated by low skills, low entry barriers, poor working conditions and seasonal employment (Baum, 2016). Traditionally, the T&H industry has a reputation for poor human resource practices and managing people in an exploitative way (Kusluvan et al., 2010). It is frequently associated with the unskilled and semi-skilled nature of most jobs, employment of marginal and disadvantaged labour, low pay, poor working conditions, overwork, anti-social working hours and poor social status. According to HOSPA (2022), the hospitality industry in the UK in 2022 is seen as the Cinderella employer, low-skilled employment and a short-term option.

A review of past studies shows that theories adopted in previous studies include the resource-based theory, corporate social responsibility, self-determination theory and social practice theories among others. Scholars have questioned the suitability of applying generic HRM constructs and models to the context of T&H and called for theory building. Moreover, there are growing concerns over the somewhat idealistic assumptions and the notion of excess positivity that characterise the new school of leadership theories, including ethical, servant, spiritual, and transformational leadership (Alvesson & Einola, 2019). Some even suggest that the outcome predictors might be theoretically and methodologically flawed, and, therefore, yield questionable implications. This research aims to extend theory by

building on the elements of the job demands-resources model (Demerouti et al. 2001), wellbeing models and considering the moderating effect of leadership. The tenets from these concepts will be employed to develop a conceptual framework that explains the ways in which different leadership styles impact employee wellbeing.

T&H organisations are increasingly under pressure to evaluate their preparedness to effectively support their teams and, in particular, their senior and middle managers. Therefore, understanding how business leaders can better support individuals' wellbeing is crucial to enable employees to remain and thrive in work. Directly linked to employee wellbeing is the call for a commitment by business organisations to dignity in the workplace and to decent work for all, through a sustainable approach to employment (Baum, 2019).

This research sets up the following objectives:

1. Explore post-pandemic wellbeing and work practices in the context of low-skills employment with particular emphasis on the tourism and hospitality industry.
2. Develop a conceptual framework that explains the ways in which different leadership styles impact employee wellbeing.
3. Identify effective measures to support current and future managers to fulfil their role and make effective decisions.

Method

The research adopts backcasting as an overarching methodology. Backcasting offers the flexibility to use a number of different approaches, both quantitative and qualitative. Baum (2019) points out that backcasting, has not been employed with respect to the hospitality industry and finds that it is useful in facilitating out-of-box thinking especially regarding highly complex issues such as sustainable employment. Backcasting is an alternative futures methodology and diametrically opposite to forecasting. It is similar in nature to scenario building and considers alternative pathways in identifying desirable future outcomes and appropriate paths or options to achieve a more positive future for the T&H employees. This approach will allow this research to place employee wellbeing and business resilience within the wider context of an economy characterised by the values and ethical practices of dignity in employment and decent work.

Due to the exploratory nature of the enquiry, this research adopts a qualitative approach and social constructivism, which is effective in developing new knowledge based on the subjective views of participants and the multiple meanings shaped by their personal experiences. Furthermore, the majority of past workforce research studies are quantitative, and qualitative work is scarce (Baum, 2016). Thus, this will be a methodological contribution to the leadership studies in the T&H literature. The research will involve semi-structured interviews, focus groups and document analysis. The industry links and networks of the author of this research proposal will help with the participant recruitment. Purposive

sampling strategy will be used in combination with snowballing sampling strategy to identify and recruit study participants who meet the set eligibility criteria. It is anticipated between 50 and 70 in-depth interviews with industry employers will be conducted.

The semi-structured interviews will identify best practices and explore the issues and challenges that employers in low-skilled employment experience in supporting the wellbeing of their employees. The interviews will be followed by focus groups with employees that will shed light on the perceptions and experiences of those who are in low-skilled employment positions. The aim of the focus groups will be to gain an understanding of what is being done in the workplace to support employee wellbeing. The interviews and focus group data will be digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and data will be analysed using reflective thematic analysis.

Results

The initial results from pilot interviews with industry leaders show that the engagement and commitment of managers is fundamental for the effective implementation of HR practices toward achieving individual objectives and organisational goals. Positive leadership has the potential to contribute to a greater staff satisfaction, and enhance engagement and productivity, resulting in improved business performance. It can, therefore, create a much-needed competitive advantage for the organisations (Stoyanova-Bozhkova, 2020). This is consistent with the view that positive, people-centered leadership styles can boost the influence of HRM on employees' wellbeing (Schaufeli, 2015). The burning question that remains is how leadership styles can help improve positive attitudes and wellbeing.

A discussion on the issues of health and wellbeing in the workplace is much needed and timely. In 2022, the number of COVID-19 cases have continued to rise in many countries and social distancing and quarantine measures have had a significant impact on the global economy. The pandemic is having a direct impact on individuals and their families, but also an indirect effect on financial security, unemployment and social isolation. According to Statista (2022), the pandemic has led to an increase in emotional and psychological challenges worldwide, with specific populations being disproportionately affected. Many managers feel that while support measures are being gradually introduced, organisations need to take a holistic approach and develop a support culture.

In the business context, employee wellbeing has a positive correlation with productivity, customer loyalty and profitability, and a negative link with staff turnover (Krekel et al., 2019). Current studies in the UK show that poor mental health places a massive financial burden on businesses and costs employers between £33bn and £42bn a year in sick pay and lost productivity (IOSH, 2022). The impact is felt particularly strongly across the low-skilled sectors, especially in the T&H industry.

According to People 1st's latest insights (2020), 74.5% of employers in hospitality, retail, travel and aviation across the UK raise concerns that the mental and physical wellbeing of

staff has been affected, and staff are feeling anxious and stressed. Moreover, 83% of respondents believe that the ability of leaders and managers to improve employee motivation, morale and productivity will be critical to manage the uncertainty of the rapidly changing economic landscape.

T&H leaders have repeatedly voiced their concerns about the state of recruitment and retention. Staff shortages are leading T&H leaders to reconsider their HRM strategies. Nearly four in five (77%) say they have offered better pay to try to retain staff; high numbers are meanwhile stepping up levels of communication with staff (85%), creating more learning opportunities (82%) and focusing on staff wellbeing and mental health (72%) (HOSPA, 2022). This research aims to address these issues.

Conclusion and Relevance to Industry

The proposed research seeks to generate new knowledge in an under-developed area and make a contribution to both theory and practice. It aims to support interdisciplinary and impactful research and knowledge exchange that address the UN SDGs and inform education, policy, and business practice. It will inform the development of a conceptual framework that explains the mechanisms through which different leadership styles impact employee wellbeing. The research will help identify appropriate measures to support business leaders to make effective decisions by equipping them with the knowledge and skills to promote positive mental wellbeing. The research will also have practical implications, and knowledge exchange will be achieved through business and academic dissemination events which will be organised as part of the research programme.

While an increasing number of businesses in the UK are focusing on employee wellbeing as a crucial element of the overall package of measures, academic contributions are scarce. Further research is needed to advance the subject area and set the foundations for stronger, applied research which generates theoretical innovations and reflects the changes in different contexts.

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