

Sustainable Hotels as Learning Organisations: Innovative Approaches towards Employee Training

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Abstract

Sustainability issues impact nearly all aspects of hotel operations. Sustainability-driven hotel programs and initiatives can provide a significant competitive advantage to the hotel industry and make a high contribution towards the implementation of global sustainable development goals. Therefore, effective and innovative employee training plays a key role in the design, adoption and promotion of hotel sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies and practices. Furthermore, hotels that manage to engage into the process of building a learning organisation develop their high potential and organisational capacity to foster collective learning, develop new competitive ideas and promote both individual and organisational creativity and inventiveness for effective responsiveness to emerging business needs. This exploratory theoretical paper aims to address the key issues related towards building a learning organisation within the hotel industry setting. It outlines key factors and issues underlying employee training and learning possibilities. In addition, this paper contributes to the current scholarly debate about the importance of sustainability-oriented non-formal education within organisational settings.

Keywords: sustainable hotels, sustainability education, sustainability training, learning organisation.

Introduction

The concept of sustainable hospitality is gaining momentum throughout the world in parallel with sustainable development discourse since the hospitality sector has a significant impact on the environment through energy and water consumption, extensive consumption of wide-range products, and large amounts of waste generation. It could be argued that sustainability issues impact nearly all aspects of hotel operations. In turn, adopting sustainable hospitality programs can provide a significant competitive advantage to businesses in the hospitality sector. Furthermore, sustainability implementation is highly complex within hotel industry setting since it requires much technical expertise and specific know-how. Therefore, effective employee training plays a key role in the design, adoption and promotion of hotel sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR) since it includes the following areas of necessary know-how:

- Energy efficiency and management;
- Water management;
- Waste management;

- Air quality management;
- Sustainable purchasing;
- Biodiversity and conservation;
- Sustainable site management.

However, since sustainability-oriented strategies are rather new for hotel industry, employees and customers are largely unaware of sustainable issues, challenges and alternatives, so hotels first need to think of themselves as educators. This approach implies that hotels need to expand their training and educational opportunities and move their employee education and knowledge towards the larger issues of pollution, diminishing biodiversity, climate change, waste and resource management, and other environmental and social problems. According to Sloan et.al (2013), the entire organisation and workforce is partly responsible for the sustainable development within the organisation. When working with sustainability, it is important for the entire organisation to stay well informed and to educate employees, sales personnel and suppliers about hotel's sustainability goals and priorities. Educational approach towards employees helps to foster their interest in the hotels sustainability-inspired efforts. If a hotel follows strategic hotel sustainability efforts, its staff could also become more efficient in different areas of sustainability-inspired practices: waste management and recycling, sustainable purchasing, etc. Furthermore, employees and hotel operational departments must understand how sustainability-driven initiatives and strategic goals affect their organisational functions in order to promote their effective implementation and better assess strategic considerations. Once highly educated on sustainability issues, the hotel staff may become a large contributor towards further organisational sustainable development. For instance, if the catering personnel become more educated and well-trained at waste management, this could improve the entire facility's waste management operations and highly contribute towards sustainability goals.

During the past several years, many scholars have suggested that learning may be the only source of competitive advantage for organisations since the hallmark of effective organisations is their capacity to learn. Currently the notion of the learning organisation has generated tremendous debate and academic discussions. As defined by Senge (1990), a learning organisation is the one where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, and where collective aspiration is set free. This approach refers to an organisation that promotes continual organisational renewal by embedding a set of core processes that support their capacity to learn, adapt and change. The learning organisation is arguably a promising path for building sustainable competitive advantage in view of the easy replication of other sources of value creation and the corollary imperative of capitalizing on new knowledge, inferences and insights (Jamali and Sidani, 2008). According to Garvin (2008), a learning organisation is not cultivated effortlessly. It arises from a series of concrete steps and widely distributed activities. He further states that learning processes involve the generation,

collection, interpretation, and dissemination of information. They include experimentation to develop and test new products and services, intelligence gathering to keep track of competitive, customer, and technological trends, disciplined analysis and interpretation to identify and solve problems, and education and training to develop both new and established employees.

This exploratory theoretical paper aims to address the key sustainability-oriented employee training issues relevant to the hotel industry in the context of a learning organisation theory. It outlines key factors and issues underlying employee involvement into sustainability-driven initiatives and goals, the role and effectiveness of training and learning.

Assessment of training opportunities for hotel industry employees

Sustainability-oriented training provides employees with the additional skills and knowledge to help them to accomplish tasks and carry out procedures or operations related to sustainability. Furthermore, effective employee-oriented educational approach clarifies organisational expectations and creates consistency in employee behaviours and priority-setting. Sustainability-oriented training also ensures that all employees have the right skills and competences to support sustainability strategy implementation, since it helps to raise employee awareness of important issues and also improve necessary skills.

Sustainability training can cover everything from sustainability policies, programmes, goals, and performance related to all aspects of hotel operations, including suppliers, waste and emission management, product design and life cycle (Maon et al., 2009). Employees need to learn about their role in supporting sustainability in a transformative way that helps them acquire a new mind set, competences, skills, and behaviours. Therefore, hotel management should promote and design effective learning opportunities and tools to meet the needs of a hotel. In order to maintain a competitive edge, effective businesses are adopting new approaches to learning. Today there are many innovative opportunities for employee training, which could be applied towards hotel industry settings:

- **Sustainability-driven coaching.** This type of coaching invites consultants, experts or hotel sustainability officers to train, educate and lead employees or their teams on specific tasks. As a result, employees may gain renewed motivation to pursue their goals and enhance their passion for achieving sustainability-inspired goals. Sustainability-driven coaching may lead to higher productivity and fulfilment of goals.
- **Internal or external workshops or seminars.** Organizing sustainability-inspired meetings or workshops for employees by inviting outside speakers to address smart environmental practices could be the first step forward to advance sustainable practices within an organisation. Each meeting is a unique opportunity to raise awareness among employees about the benefits of sustainability-driven services, innovations and products. This approach helps employees to stay up-to-date on sustainability issues and understand

the bigger picture of the whole process. While little research has explored the role of informal education, Molnar and Mulvihill (2003) note that inviting in industry leaders to speak to employees can inspire new sustainability initiatives. Seminars and workshops can be an effective, open environment for sharing ideas, exchanging perspectives and gaining new insights. In addition, seminars and workshops provide employees with intensive exposure to a topic through presentations and discussions led by multiple experts.

- **Internal or external training courses.** This type of training may consist of a single (or multi-day) course or a series of related courses that enhance a range of required skills, knowledge, and attitudes. External courses may include short courses (or workshops) and the longer (usually part-time) courses that often leads to a qualification. Moreover, training opportunities may include distance learning possibilities.
- **Job-swapping opportunities.** Some hotels may provide employees with possibilities to try a job-swap approach to learn sustainable practices. For instance, hotel managers could arrange short-term visits between employees from a “sustainably advanced” hotel to a “beginner” hotel so that “beginners” could see how “sustainably advanced” hotels operate and, in turn, employees from “sustainably advanced” hotels could provide their feedback in “beginner” hotels.

Sustainability-oriented education is a living, evolving phenomenon; therefore, employees should be encouraged to share their new knowledge and know-how among other employees. Once some employees visit sustainability-inspired seminars, they should be encouraged to share new information with other employees and spread the best know-how practices. In turn, hotels could provide employees with information-sharing boards or websites to keep them up-to-date. Indeed, there are numerous opportunities to promote non-formal sustainability education and eco-literacy among employees. Some of the few innovative approaches towards sustainability education are the following:

- **Forming objective-based learning teams.** Since the area of sustainability includes many complex situations and possibilities, learning groups or teams are formed when employees need to focus their own learning on a particular interest area; for instance, a team for waste management, a team for energy efficiency, a team for biodiversity and conservation. This approach reinforces learning through the on-going peer support provided by regular learning team meetings and stimulates the on-going commitment towards reaching planned objectives. According to Goh (1998), a key to strategic building block for a learning organisation is emphasis on teamwork. By working in teams, employees bring their collective skills and knowledge to bear on problems and to develop innovative ideas for the organisation. Teams can leverage information and knowledge, broaden team-member competency and bring a diversity of thinking knowledge and behaviours to bear on understanding and action (Bennet and Bennet, 2004). This approach

may be highly effective when hotels attempt to build sustainability-inspired teams which would act as change agents throughout the hotel.

- **Organizing structured information sharing sessions.** Information sharing sessions (forums, debates, and discussions) are meetings where employees gain and provide information, advice, know-how on particular areas of interest. The key element in this process is that employees are not passive listeners, but providers of information. Furthermore, such sessions may include external experts to share their expertise and know-how; nevertheless, employees are encouraged to provide their feedback and insights on new knowledge and ideas. The advantage of information sharing sessions may be a time-saving opportunity for employees to stay up-to-date and actively participate in the co-creating learning experience. In turn, this approach may serve as an orientation point for future learning needs and best-practice benchmarking opportunities. Clarke and Roome (1999) state that companies engage in knowledge sharing in order to inform, confirm and validate their own internal approaches to sustainability.
- **Self-directed learning.** Self-directed learning is a new approach in the context of organisational learning. It refers to such educational goals that an individual can pursue on their own. This approach implies employees may focus on developing specific areas according to their own needs, priorities and schedules. Furthermore, self-directed learning encompasses any training source and means where the learner has control over the process and resources, for instance, reading relevant books, articles, available online information, professional journals or magazines, taking online courses, attending seminars or workshops. Self-directed learning stimulates employees' knowledge of relevant sustainability-inspired issues, trends, challenges, and solutions. In this context we could mention a possibility to introduce an employee development plan. This plan could be a formal document that identifies specific learning and development goals of an employee. The manager and the employee may jointly develop this plan by including an outline and goals of employee training and competence development in order to achieve organisational sustainability-oriented goals. Such plans introduce an advantage of structured learning experiences linked to organisational needs, goals, and job requirements and, furthermore, they may function as a part of a formal career development program.

Sustainable hotels as learning organisations: application of the learning organisation theory

The learning organisation concept has been defined in various ways reflecting the divergent perspectives adopted by different researchers. In his book *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge (1990, 1992) defined a learning organisation as “a place where people continually expand their capacity to create results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective

aspiration is set free and where people are continually learning how to learn". Garvin (1993) defines a learning organisation as an organisation skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights. It refers to such areas as systematic problem solving, experimentation with new approaches, learning from experience and history, learning from experience and best practices of others and transferring knowledge efficiently throughout the organisation. According to Goh (1998), an important if not essential part of a learning organisation is its ability to create new knowledge and to use it to capitalize on new opportunities open to the organisation. He further states that this requires questioning the current status quo and how things are done, which allows employees to bring new ideas into the organisation. From this review, it is argued that learning organisations have the following core strategic building blocks, which the authors of this paper apply to the hotel industry setting:

- **Mission and Vision** refers to clarity and employee support of the mission, strategy, and values of the organisation. This approach implies that hotel employees should have a clear understanding of sustainability-driven agenda in a hotel and its strategic pathway.
- **Leadership** refers to the leadership that is perceived as empowering employees, encouraging an experimenting culture, and showing strong commitment to the organisation. This approach implies that hotel employees need a strong visionary approach of a leader which could guide them.
- **Experimentation** refers to a strong culture of experimentation that is rewarded and supported at all levels in the organisation. This approach implies that hotel employees should be encouraged to share their sustainability-inspired ideas and create new initiatives.
- **Transfer of knowledge** refers to the ability of an organisation to transfer knowledge within and from outside the organisation and to learn from it. This approach implies that hotel employees should be encouraged to seek new knowledge and know-how on sustainability issues and get involved in benchmarking best practices.
- **Teamwork and Cooperation** refers to the importance of teamwork and group problem solving as the mode of operation for developing innovative ideas. This approach implies that hotel employees should have an open and collaborative environment for developing new ideas and initiatives.

Managers should also be willing to encourage individuals and teams to continuously improve work operations and try new ideas. This can be achieved by fostering a supportive learning environment which, according to Garvin (2008), has four distinguishing characteristics:

- **Psychological safety.** In order to learn, employees should not fear to disagree with colleagues or managers. Instead, they must be comfortable expressing their thoughts and showing their initiative and creative ideas.

- **Appreciation of differences.** Learning occurs when people become aware of opposing ideas and appreciate different feedbacks. Recognizing the value of competing functional outlooks, viewpoints and alternative worldviews increases energy and motivation, sparks fresh thinking and inspiration, and prevents conflict.
- **Openness to new ideas.** Learning is not only about correcting mistakes and solving problems, but also about adopting novel approaches and creative solutions. Employees should be encouraged to take initiative for promising creative possibilities.
- **Time for reflection.** When employees are too overstressed by work overload, their ability to think analytically and creatively is compromised. Supportive learning environments allow time for a pause and encourage thoughtful and mindful review of possible organisational progress and ideas.

The process of building a learning organisation is a complex and multi-layered; however, once implemented, it provides employees with opportunities to unleash individual creativity and foster collective learning which are crucial for encouraging and developing innovation and rapid responsiveness to global competition (Millett, 1998). The learning organisation is continually getting 'smarter', because learning is planned, systematic and in alignment with the organisation's strategic goals. Therefore, such organisations will always be improving in its techniques, methods and technology. In fact, the learning organisation theory recognizes that organisations, including hotels, must discover their own solutions rather than borrow them. Redding (1997) argues that learning organisations manage to transform the abstract, fuzzy notion of the learning organisation into concrete, specific initiatives and measuring the results of these initiatives over time.

Conclusions

Sustainable organisations are learning organisations. Effective employee training plays a key role in implementing sustainability initiatives and strategies within organisations. Since hotel industry involves complex and multi-faceted sustainability issues that require much expertise and management know-how, employee involvement and engagement requires a far more structured educational approach, which could facilitate effective implementation of sustainability-driven objectives. The application of the learning organisation theory is a promising approach to promote effective and continuous hotel transformation towards sustainability goals. Hotels that manage to engage into the process of building a learning organisation develop their high potential and organisational capacity to foster collective learning, develop new competitive ideas and promote both individual and organisational creativity and inventiveness for effective responsiveness to emerging business needs.

This paper covered the main aspects of non-formal employee training possibilities within emerging sustainable hotel industry. This first section of this article analysed different employee training and competence building possibilities

and formats by emphasizing some innovative training practices within organisational settings that could be successfully applied to hotel sector needs. The second section of this article introduced the role of the learning organisation theory as a key approach towards successful implementation of sustainability-oriented programs and initiatives.

Implementation of sustainability initiatives in a hotel industry requires extensive expertise and know-how; therefore, there will be a growing demand for employees to stay up-to-date and qualified in order to take advantage of current sustainability trends and opportunities in the hospitality industry. In turn, hotel management will have to re-adapt and design innovative employee training programs to develop necessary competences in-house or externally in order to ensure timely training and effective communication, which are necessary for attaining strategic sustainability-oriented priorities.

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