EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE JOURNEY MAPPING: A NEW APPROACH TO ATTRACTING TALENT IN THE TOURISM SECTOR IN THE SHADOWS OF COVID-19

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Abstract

Purpose – While customer experience management has become an essential practice for service businesses, employee experience management is a less frequently used tool. This research aims to illustrate how the customer experience mapping approach can be applied as a strategic part of employee experience planning, taking into account tourism-specific HR challenges.

Design – Despite the increasing attention given to employee experience in academia, there is a lack of research extending journey mapping to employees and a clear understanding and implementation of the concept in relation to hospitality employment.

Methodology – The study includes step-by-step instructions for creating an Employee Experience Journey Map. The action research project is based on interviews with the manager of a 5-star hotel (HR) in Budapest. During the joint work with the hotel, the manager gave iterative feedback, so that the Journey Map was continuously improved and completed.

Approach – The application of the Employee Experience Journey Mapping concept includes the identification of touch points and critical 'pain points" and the development of proposed solutions.

Findings – The creation of an employee journey map can help determine the steps necessary to reduce turnover intent and improve the employee experience.

Originality of the research – The results of the study show that it is important to develop an employee journey based on personas. In addition, it is beneficial for the marketing and HR departments to treat employee experience planning as a joint project.

Keywords Employee Experience, Action research, Employee Journey, COVID-19, Tourism & Hospitality Industry

INTRODUCTION

As a result of Covid-19, nearly 100-120 million direct tourism jobs are at risk according to a report by UNWTO (2021). Strategic efforts to retain employees have received more emphasis than ever before, with more or less success. Changing the negative labor market image of the sector is hampered by uncertainty and constantly changing conditions and regulations. For most services' customer satisfaction is greatly influenced by the quality of the service and the behavior of the staff towards them (Kasiri et al., 2017; Xu & Li 2016). For this reason, the competitive advantage of companies depends particularly on employees who interact with customers (Zhou et al., 2009). Based on the idea of value profit chain (Heskett et al., 2010) employees will deliver high-quality service and contribute to customer satisfaction if they are satisfied themselves.

While the recognition of the principle that employees should be treated as customers is not new in the hospitality industry (Mill, 1996the tools that HR departments use to create outstanding employee experience rarely conform to the ones that customer experience experts offer. One of these methods is the Customer Experience Journey mapping method (McKelvey, 2018), which can form the basis of an Employee Experience Journey Map. Similar to the Customer Experience Journey mapping method which is also accepted in the hospitality industry (Lee et al., 2020; Trischler & Zehrer, 2012; Stickdorn & Schwarzenberger, 2016) the concept of the employee experience journey focuses on the process of how employees experience their encounter with the company from the first moment to the end of the relationship. Mapping the employee experience is an essential step in developing employee satisfaction. A participatory action research project with results illustrated in our case with detailed flowcharts helps the organization to assess the real needs and experiences of its employees and to help uncover critical points. The identification of pain points allows the company to improve its HR processes, thus eliminating the problems that typically arise (Claus, 2019), making conflicts manageable, and welcoming future generations as employees.

The topic suggests the vital importance of close collaboration between HR and Marketing departments, especially concerning communication strategy and goals. As a result of having satisfied employees, high turnover rates of tourism enterprises can be reduced while efficiency can be increased, so the quality of the service will be improved. Once the epidemic is over, the first step should be rebuilding the shaken confidence of employees with the help of innovative techniques. Moreover, introducing a sustainable vision for tourism human resources management will encourage all the actors in the industry to come together and cooperate.

Therefore, the specific objectives of the study are as follows:

1. Introduce a new approach and provide a tool that can be applied in real-life situations.
2. Create a journey map in the framework of an action research study, helping the work of HR experts in the tourism and hospitality sector through the presentation of the process with suggestions, recommendations, and the identification of critical points.
3. Illustrate how the mapping approach can be applied to employees as a strategic part of HR processes, taking tourism-specific HR challenges into account.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review discusses the concept of employee journey and journey mapping process, which as a solution can support the HR activities of tourism services.

1.1. Challenges in tourism employment

The hospitality and tourism industry was among the fastest-growing sectors in the pre-2020 era. The WTTC (2019) estimates that tourism accounts for approximately 10.3% of world GDP, while its contribution to the employment rate is also high, with one in ten people working in the sector, representing almost 330 million jobs (World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), 2019).

In the tourism and hospitality sector, the employee experience is greatly influenced by industry-specific negative factors such as long working hours, overtime, weekend and holiday work, (Ghiselli et al., 2001) high degree of stress (Adams & Webster, 2013), and low average wages (DiPietro & Condly, 2007). As a result, those working in the sector must have skills that, in addition to a high degree of endurance and problem-solving ability, enable them to deal professionally with different forms of customer behavior in all cases as a company representative without burning out, which ultimately lead to a negative customer experience (Clark et al., 2017; Yu et al., 2021).

Despite continued efforts, the fight against the labor shortage continues, mainly due to the negative perception of the sector. Labor shortages generate most of the HR issues in the hospitality industry, both in terms of quantity and quality. According to Baum et al. (1997), hospitality organizations face these challenges of attracting talent because of the negative image of the profession, which may have its roots in the fact that many people still associate hospitality work with physical housework and in extreme cases, slavery.

The COVID-19 global epidemic has posed new and more complex challenges to the tourism sector (Mao et al., 2021; Ozdemir, 2020; Sigala, 2020). The crisis exposed the sector's serious vulnerability to external global economic effects that further reinforce the already negative image of the industry. The tourism and hospitality industry has long struggled with labor shortages, not only in terms of quantity but also in terms of quality, so tourism companies are looking for innovative solutions to improve employee motivation and loyalty, while reducing turnover (Gössling et al., 2021).

1.2. Customer Experience

Abbott (1955) proposed that what people want is not the tangible product itself, but rather the desire for satisfying experiences. There is no doubt that tourism and hospitality is specifically an experience and human resource-focused sector (Bharwani & Butt, 2012). Given the simultaneity of production and consumption, the service provided in person is of paramount importance in the process of service delivery, so workforce focus is one of the most important components of ensuring that service users receive a high-quality service (Kusluvan, 2003). Interaction with employees and the quality of service have a positive impact on the customer experience (Verhoef et al., 2009). Gentile et al. (2007) highlight that every customer experience is personal and that the process involves the customer's rational, emotional, sensory, physical, and spiritual reactions. According to another definition, customer experience is the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a supplier of products and/or services. "Direct contact generally occurs in the course of purchase, use, and service and is usually initiated by the customer. Indirect contact most often involves unplanned encounters with representations of a company's products, services, or brands and takes the form of word-of-mouth recommendations or criticisms, advertising, news reports, reviews, and so forth." (Meyer & Schwager, 2007, p. 2)

In addition, the perception of a brand or image of the service at a strategic level and the resulting expectations may develop in the customer before the shopping experience, thus, the brand image has an impact on the final assessment of service quality (Ofir & Simonson, 2007). Moreover, interactions between employees also significantly influence the customer experience (Verhoef et al., 2009). Customer experience, therefore, is the sum of all the aggregated experiences and reactions to either direct or indirect interactions that can be identified in the consumption process. These can result in negative, neutral, or positive emotions in the customer, which creates a perception of the company that determines future customer behavior.

With the help of mapping customer experience, it is possible to create a holistic concept based on unique experiences, which explores all the factors that are decisive in creating a satisfying service experience (Micheaux & Bosio, 2019).

1.3. Customer Journey Mapping

The Customer Journey Map (CJM) is a flowchart, based on a design-thinking method that tracks and describes the reactions, feelings, and experiences of customers when using a particular service (Claus, 2019). CJM contains at least one route, which is a typical route that the customer follows when making a purchase. There are two types of CJM, expected, often referred to as ideal, and the actual journey that was taken. Customer journey mapping is thus a method that allows professionals to better understand the customer service experience by observing the reactions and feelings evoked by the service during the steps of the shopping process, the so-called journey, and also identifying the gaps in interactions (Bernard & Andritsos, 2017).

An important element of customer experience is that it interprets the experience holistically and does not focus on the customer, but on the person, who subjectively perceives the stimuli and will have an overall impression based on them (Gentile et al., 2007). Customer journey mapping helps service providers to understand the behavior of their customers, thus they can provide them with a better service and experience.

The interactions that take place during the process are identified as touchpoints. Touchpoints are interactions between customers and the company's products or services (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) that indicate any verbal (e.g. advertising) or nonverbal (e.g. product use) events that the customer perceives while using the service, thus consciously linking it to a particular company or brand (Homburg et al., 2017; Duncan & Moriarty, 2006). Another approach is to treat every emotional interaction as touchpoints, whether with the organizational structure itself, systems, or people. These emotions can be either positive or negative, which will be then identified as critical or pain points (Claus, 2019).

An important consideration when creating a CJM is that most of the time the customer will not be participating in every existing touchpoint, as customers can interrupt the shopping process at any time, often unexpectedly and without explanation, thus not following the ideal customer path (Bernard & Andritsos, 2017). Nevertheless, the mapping process is obstructed by the increasing number of touchpoints associated with more complex services, mainly due to the media's and the used communication channels' influence (Verhoef et al., 2009).

1.4. Employee experience and journey mapping as an innovative HR trend

Despite many factors indicating that the approach of the services marketing mindset can be applied in HR, the development and practical implementation of the concept is not yet fully explored (Heuchert, 2019). However, based on the value profit chain theory, it is clear that employees should be treated as internal customers in the same way as customers are in the traditional sense (Heskett & Sasser, 2010). While examining services and the customer experience, several parallels can be observed concerning human resource management. In the recruitment process, the touchpoints that are essential elements of a journey, such as the step of the first contact, meeting the staff, and the exit from the journey can be identified in the same way. If all of these are considered, the experience mapping method can also work in HR processes (McKelvey, 2018). A successful HR strategy results in satisfaction for the employer, the employee, and ultimately the guest (Claus, 2019). Consequently, this study also provides practical guidance on how to use the mapping method in the HR processes.

With minor adjustments and a review of touchpoints, the Employee Experience Journey (EXJ) can be easily formed, using the Customer Experience Journey method. Unlike general approaches, however, the EXJ does not analyze processes from the perspective of talent management and performance measurement, but from the perspective of the employee (Claus, 2019). Previous research findings suggest that employees do not need tangible benefits, but to feel safe, be satisfied with their work, and actively participate in creating a new and improved employee experience. This suggests that the advantage of design thinking is that it can help make intangible benefits tangible, which can help more in fulfilling the fundamental needs of employees, both psychic and social. (Plaskoff, 2017). As already mentioned, the perception of service quality is highly dependent on the employees, so companies in the tourism and hospitality sector should place special emphasis on the correct strategic management of their workforce.

Developing a map of the Employee Experience Journey requires both qualitative and quantitative data. Quantitative data are usually collected by employers through employee surveys and so-called anonym PULSE questionnaires that focus more on exploring emotions. From a qualitative point of view, employers usually conduct in-depth interviews with employees, categorizing the collected stories according to the different personalities or positions of the employees. As individuals experience touchpoints somewhat differently based on their different needs and characteristics, this data can further help in planning the perfect experience based on each persona (Heuchert, 2019).

In conclusion, by analyzing the labor market issues in tourism, a relatively new approach can be implemented to improve HR processes, the concept of employee experience, and Employee Experience Journey mapping (McKelvey, 2018).

1.5. Journey Maps tailored for personas

Examining the concept of employee experience and journey from a communication perspective, different communication strategies must be applied at different stages of the process. This is supported by a term already known in marketing terminology, namely the creation of personas. There are different ways to motivate, interview, onboard, and involve a fresh graduate, an experienced professional, and someone from another industry (Claus, 2019). Therefore, the Employee Journey Map has to be tailored to these fictitious clusters, with several possible ideal journeys being created, which then will follow the journey of a selected type of customer, or in HR, a chosen talent segment (Heuchert, 2019).

2. METHOD

2.1. Employee Journey map for a 5-star hotel

Following the description of the journey mapping procedure, the goal of this research is to illustrate how the employee experience mapping method can be applied based on the customer experience concept. The objective is not only to present the concept in theory. The methodology is based on an action research project with an operating hotel, by which the intent is to achieve applicable practical knowledge. For this reason, a specific industry, namely the hospitality and tourism sector, and a certain 5-star hotel in Budapest was selected for observation. In the following parts of the study, a precise employee journey will be demonstrated, as a result of a joint project with the hotel's HR manager.

Action research as a method is best described as "*a research committed to social outcomes, typically involving collaboration with a client organization*" (Veal, 2017; p.139). Consequently, the method fits perfectly to achieve the aim of proving the importance of implementing journey mapping in HR processes. During this action research project, our aim was to describe a general journey that presents practices developed by multiple companies. It is also the aim to present a "best practice", and to highlight the steps and advantages of the journey mapping methodology, using the example of a specific hotel with its own good and improvable practices. The selected hotel was found to be a good illustrative example because it has already done numerous studies on its employees and places great emphasis on the appropriate design of the employee experience. Therefore, they have both the commitment and the information to create a journey map and were open to participating in this action research project.

During the first steps of the action research project, we identified the problem of attracting young employees to the hospitality industry (Veal, 2017). During the pre-observation interview, it was stated that the HR department of the hotel has been focusing more on employee experience and employer branding for several years. The interviewed HR manager has been working at the hotel for more than 10 years, which means that she is well acquainted with the processes and has been involved in many changes, and is aware of the weaknesses. The competition for a good workforce and the next generation of employees has grown so much in recent years that they realized the importance of having an employer brand to stay competitive in the market. To create an employee-data-based strategy, a special employer branding project was implemented in 2018, in cooperation with a Hungarian start-up company specializing in employer branding solutions. The goal was to see the processes with the help of an external actor as an extended hand of the HR department. The aim was to have a partner who asks the employees as an outsider about how they feel and what values make the company a good employer and that can help retain employees. The 3-month project with the name "Employer Branding Sprint" began when the hotel industry was still booming with tourism and great revenue. During the research period, the employees of all three properties of the company located in Budapest were involved. Workshops were organized in a gamified way for employees and management as well. While participating in games at several stations, employees could express what they liked or what they would change. Workers were also asked to indicate what values they could identify with as employees of the hotel. The results were determined based on this feedback. The first and foremost value was the safety and stability of a long-standing hotel. The second value was the family and supportive atmosphere, and the third was the opportunity for progress. The involvement of an external partner, and thus anonymity increased the participation rate leading to approx. 60-70% of employees taking part in the project.

The hotel also has a global and anonymous engagement (Pulse) survey every year, which provides indicators such as the "Commitment index" (how long-term employees plan with the company in the future) or the action planning index (how satisfied employees are with the actions taken after previous questionnaires where the goal was to improve engagement). During our research we did not have access to the results of the Pulse survey, however, the main results were summarized briefly by the manager. Based on the employees' anonym feedback, indicators such as leadership excellence, quality of work, quality of life, engagement, pay, etc. can also be assessed. The results are analyzed by the HR with the managers, who then implement the conclusion in a dedicated action plan.

All these research data at the company made it possible to build the journey map based on realistic and sufficiently broad information. As presented previous research has included data on internal employee satisfaction, research on the hotel's employer brand, and employee value proposition, the results of which were the basis for the development of the present map.

In accordance with the literature, their research confirmed that there is little collaboration between the marketing and HR departments regarding activities related to employee experience. Therefore, the HR department has taken on this task singlehandedly. As one kind of solution, they have created an "Employer Branding Champion" position within the HR department, as experience has shown that this position requires a full-time person with a marketing approach but under the guidance of an HR manager.

After gathering information about the HR department's previous results for exploring employee experience within the organization, the next step was to create the employee experience journey map based on these results. Thus, the design of the map was a joint effort with the hotel's HR manager in line with their goal of creating a better employee journey and experience. After an in-depth interview with the HR manager and learning from existing research, the researchers created a journey map, that was evaluated and commented on by the HR manager. In the next phase, the map was corrected and evaluated again by the manager. Thus, during the joint work, the HR manager continuously gave iterative feedback, so the journey map was continuously improved and supplemented, which will eventually be used by the hotel's HR department to transform the employee experience strategy.

Another important feature of the developed journey map is that it illustrates only the path of one type of an employee persona, however, it is important that this work has to be done separately for each persona group. In this case, too, it is important to emphasize that the researchers did not consider these different persona groups as "average", but selected fresh graduates and presented the individual steps concerning this type of employee group. Although the hotel had sufficient information about its current employees, to increase the validity of the findings and the created journey map, interviews were conducted with graduate students with tourism specialized studies to acquire information about their expectations and to check if the resulting map is meaningful for them.

2.2. Recruitment challenges of the hotel

Before moving on to the specific employee journey, it is necessary to present the recruitment challenges of the selected hotel as the HR manager formulated it before the joint work has begun. Regarding the traditional challenges, the negative perception of being employed in the hospitality sector has a great effect on job application rates. The hotel struggled with labor shortages until early 2020, with very few applications for open positions, and qualified people kept disappearing from the labor market. The HR expert put it this way:

"It is well known that the hotel industry is not very well-paying, but in return, there is a lot of work and high expectations. That's why it's important to find out why it's good for an employee to work for us."

Another tourism-specific HR challenge is that the benefits differ for each hotel employee, depending on whether they have a front-line position or work in the back offices. While those working in the guest areas can be encouraged with commissions and tips, flexible working hours will be an attractive factor for those working in the back office. The balance is important in terms of incentives, otherwise, internal conflict may arise. Another factor is that background workers e.g. employees in Sales, HR, Marketing, Finance, and IT departments can easily go to work in other sectors, which is why compensation packages need to be competitive. In this case, the hotel is in competition not only with other hotels but also with completely different enterprises.

"Due to the fact, that wages are notoriously low in the hospitality sector, we have to compensate for this with something else to keep our employees."

The COVID-19 epidemic has significantly increased the workload of the HR department, they had to deal with exits, they had to work on retention, maintain company culture, and work on mental health, not to mention maintaining credibility. The HR staff had to be extremely flexible, creating a different wage strategy every month. The good outcomes however were the highly efficient online meetings, the introduction of remote working, and the success of online interviews and training. These improvements, which are now supported by the management, increase the satisfaction of the existing workforce and make workplaces more attractive to potential employees. However, the biggest challenge is to rebuild the most important employer value of the hotel chain, which is trust. Providing a safe and stable workplace, therefore, needs to be the key message that is communicated in the next period.

According to the value profit chain idea, creating an employee experience has to be based on the same methodology as creating a guest experience. For this reason, it is necessary to find the touchpoints where the potential employee meets the hotel and experiences emotional interactions, like applying to a job advertisement, talking to the HR personnel, or meeting another hotel employee, perhaps a future colleague.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Step 1: Phases of the journey of a graduate

The steps and critical points are different for each industry, position, and even demographics. In each case, it is advisable to create a journey map based on different personas, also known as target groups. To be able to design the map, thorough research is needed to create valid and usable personas. As the goal of this study is the presentation of the journey map, during this step only the indication of the importance of developing proper personas will appear. An important target group of hospitality recruitment is the group of young professionals, who are just on the verge of starting their careers. Considering the relevance of the issue of the attraction of the next generations, their journey will be presented in the following section. With minor modifications the journey map can be transformed, so that it may be applied to any other target group, considering their needs, characteristics, and tenure in the industry. After choosing a persona, like a university graduate, the next step is to outline the phases of the employee journey that would occur in the examined 5-star hotel (Figure 1).

Figure 1: **The journey of a graduate as an employee in a hotel**
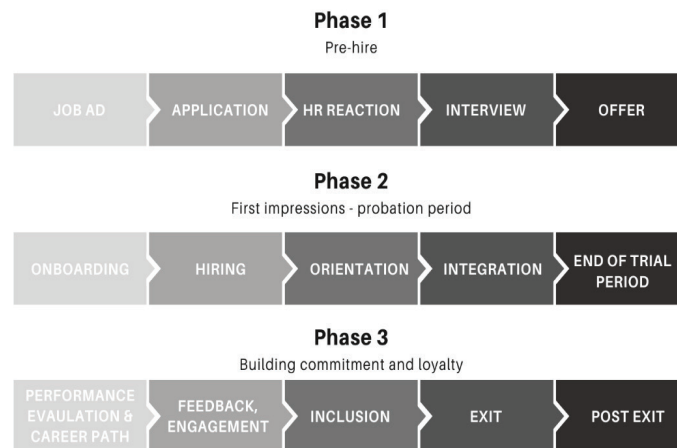
Source: own edit

3.1.1. Phase 1: Pre-Hire

Phase 1 consists of 5 stages, starting with the applicant seeing the job advertisement, followed by applying for the position, then receiving feedback and an invitation to an interview, which usually leads to being presented with an offer. The goal is to attract the best talent and keep them interested during the process so that they would not exit the journey.

3.1.2. Phase 2: First impressions

In the second phase, the newly hired employee joins the company by participating in the onboarding process, finalizing the hiring with signing all the needed documents. Subsequent to this stage the new hire takes part in the necessary orientation training. Phase 2 completes with the end of the probation period, which is usually 3 months. The challenge during this phase is to provide all the necessary information to the new employee and to fulfill all that was promised beforehand.

3.1.3. Phase 3: Building commitment and loyalty

Phase 3 focuses on building commitment, and more importantly loyalty. The stages include performance evaluation, increasing engagement, and inclusion in HR and employer branding activities, ultimately introducing loyal employees as brand ambassadors. It is important to acknowledge that this phase does not terminate when an employee decides to exit the company. Instead, there is a post-exit period, where ex-employees are considered as sort of an alumni community.

3.2. Step 2: The identification of touchpoints and critical points

The employee journey was examined at a hotel consisting of seven aspects based on the literature analysis. As the process itself is an emotional journey, the first aspect is the initial impulse or thought of the protagonist, i.e. graduate, followed by the definition of the touchpoints, then the actors involved in the process, and finally the purpose and message conveyed by the company involved. Next, critical points are identified, as the most important element of improving the journey.

3.2.1. Phase 1: Pre-Hire – application

Figure 2 below illustrates the journey of a university graduate, filled with the concluded data that was gathered during the first research phase. In the figure, the aim is to summarize all the important topics and details of the journey map. In the following, one step in each phase will be explained in detail, as an example of the process.

Figure 2: **The journey of a graduate as an employee in a hotel – Phase 1**

I. Application phase

STAGE	JOB AD	APPLICATION	REACTION	INTERVIEW	JOB OFFER
THOUGHT OF THE GRADUATE	*I need a job*	*I'm interested in the job/company*	*This job at this company interests me*	*Are conditions appropriate, interviewers sympathetic?*	*Do I want to work for this company, in this role?*
TOUCH POINTS	• Career site • Job portals • Career day • WOM	• Career site • Job portals • Email • LinkedIn	• Email • Phone	• Phone • Offline • Online	• Phone • Online
PARTICIPANTS	1. Applicant 2. current/alumni employees	1. Applicant	1. Applicant 2. HR	1. Applicant 2. HR 3. Managers	1. Applicant 2. HR
GOAL OF THE COMPANY	Raise interest	Attract talent	Acquire talent	Find the best candidate for the position	Attractive offer and benefits
MESSAGE OF THE COMPANY	*Are you talented? Come and join us!*	*Interested? Send your CV!*	*Liked your CV, want to meet you.*	*You are a fit for the job, you are considered.*	*We have an attracting offer, worth accepting it!*
CRITICAL POINTS	• Boring ads • Complicated landing page	• Complicated application process • Language barrier	• Subjective selection • Slow reactions	• Too many participants • HR excluded • Technical difficulties	• No response • Automated decline only
POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS	• Ads designed to different personas • Eye-cathing layout • Testimonials	• Simple application • Automated CV screening solution	• Quick automated reply • Gamified application	• Digitalized process	• Response to all applicants

Source: own edit

3.2.2. Phase 2: First impressions – end of the trial period

To better illustrate the second step of the journey method, one of the most important stages of phase 2, the end of the trial period will be explored.

Figure 3: **The journey of a graduate as an employee in a hotel – Phase 2**

II. Hire phase

STAGE	ONBOARDING	HIRING	ORIENTATION	INTEGRATION	END OF TRIAL PERIOD
THOUGHT OF THE GRADUATE	*Did I receive all important info?*	*Can't wait to start my job!*	*I want to learn everything*	*Will I be accepted by the team?*	***Did I get what was promised?***
TOUCH POINTS	• Email	• Personal encounters • Physical environment	• Training • Company culture	• On the job training • Meeting the colleagues and the team	• Feedback to/from Supervisor, Manager, HR
PARTICIPANTS	1. New hire 2. HR	1. New hire 2. HR	1. New hire 2. HR 3. Managers 4. Colleagues	1. New hire 2. Managers 3. Colleagues	1. New hire 2. HR
GOAL OF THE COMPANY	Giving information, signing contract	Creating a welcoming environment	Service, culture, core values training	Building relationships	Select high performers to keep
MESSAGE OF THE COMPANY	*Sign all paperwork*	*Glad to have you here!*	*We will teach you the basic your position requires*	*You are now part of the team*	*You do a good job, stay!/ Not performing? Time to say goodbye.*
CRITICAL POINTS	• Boring materials	• Physical environment • Missing out on welcoming feeling	• Leadership not visible • Only English trainings	• Process not in focus	• Pre-selection mistakes • Different duties • Integration challanges
POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS	• Video materials	• Professional mentorship program	• Interactive videos, games	• Buddy program	• Survey: What would you change on our onboarding process?

Source: own edit

3.2.3. Phase 3: Building commitment and loyalty – exit or inclusion

In phase 3 engaging employees is the priority. In the best-case scenario, the thought of the employee is that he/she loves working for the company and wants to share this feeling with others. Involvement in building an internal brand is considered here as a touchpoint, with the presence of the employee, colleagues, managers, and of course the HR department. The goal here is to build loyalty and to encourage committed employees to share their positive experiences, aligning with the goals of an external employer brand strategy. Lack of engagement, passivity, or negative experiences were identified as critical points at this stage. Creating a motivational system, introducing a mentor family concept, and increasing the number of offered perks could be seen as a solution.

Figure 4: **The journey of a graduate as an employee in a hotel – Phase 3**

III. Integration to exit phase

STAGE	PERFORMANCE, CAREER PATH	FEEDBACK, SATISFACTION	ENGAGEMENT	EXIT	ALUMNI
THOUGHT OF THE GRADUATE	*Are they happy with my work?*	*Am I happy with my work?*	*I love working here and I want others to know it*	*I don't like working here, I want change*	*What do I think of the company after I left?*
TOUCH POINTS	• Feedback from supervisors	• Engagement survey • Feedback to HR & Manager	• Involving programs, events	• Notifying Manager & HR	• Staying in contact with HR
PARTICIPANTS	1. Employee 2. Managers	1. Employee 2. HR 3. Managers 4. Colleagues	1. Employee 2. HR 3. Managers 4. Colleagues	1. Employee 2. HR 3. Managers	1. Ex-employee 2. HR 3. Colleagues 4. Graduates
GOAL OF THE COMPANY	Increase performance, recognition, promotion	Increase engagement, motivation	Build loyalty	Peaceful farewell	Maintain relationship
MESSAGE OF THE COMPANY	*Offering development opportunities*	*How can we make you happier here?*	*You enjoy working here? Show it!*	*We regret that you are leaving*	*Come back to us. / Spread the good word about us.*
CRITICAL POINTS	• Lack of career advancement • Physical overload	• Salary • Internal conflicts • No change even if requested	• Lack of activities and engagement	• Flagging problems too late • More attractive offers from other companies	• Negative feeling • Leaving the industry
POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS	• Career path for each persona type	• Mood check application	• Motivation system • Mentor family • Perks	• Opportunity to give feedback whenever needed	• Alumni program • "We care" mindset

Source: own edit

Based on the whole journey map it is possible to define the most critical points of the different phases. For the hotel in the centre, one of the most critical points during the pre-hire phase is that the application process on the company's career site is too complicated. Often, in the case of global companies, the career site and application interface are only available in English, causing language barriers. In addition, the recruitment process is usually very slow, having weeks between application and reaction times, so many applications are no longer relevant when managers accept a candidate. During the first impression phase, i.e. the onboarding process, the most critical elements are the location of the site itself, meaning the physical environment, and the condition of the back offices.

The lack of activity in the commitment and loyalty-building phase raises the question of how ambassador programs can activate satisfied employees to be the faces of the company brand, encouraging others to join the hotel. There is a lot of competition for talent in the labour market, especially for managerial positions, regrettably, low pay always appears as a negative aspect in the hospitality industry. As for the effects of Covid-19, exit interviews and alumni programs can help in uncovering if employees are leaving due to the unstable situation and whether they plan to return after tourism restarts.

3.3. Step 3: Concluding and formulating recommendations

Based on the secondary and primary research, 15 touch points and numerous critical points were identified in the presented Employee Journey Map project. The third and last step in journey mapping is the process where suggestions are formulated for improving the process of the employee journey.

As the last phase of our action research project, several recommendations are given to help improve the employee journey in the selected hotel. For example, to avoid boring job postings, it's important to indicate circumstances that appeal to the desired target audience. Such benefits include a good location, free meals, and a playful atmosphere. Concerning the problem of responding to applicants slowly, a solution could be to hire a professional or use an online system that would pre-screen incoming resumes based on objective parameters. This eliminates subjective evaluation factors. Third-party actors can help make the onboarding process more interactive and modern by producing videos and playful content specifically to showcase the company. However, these solutions might raise concerns regarding bias and discrimination against various minorities (Dastin, 2018). In addition, buddy programs would help with integration by involving and motivating existing employees. Retention strategies in the sector have so far not proved effective, and many fresh graduates have become unemployed as a result of the epidemic. In order to attract talent, it is worthwhile, similar to the hotel, to create alumni groups that motivate dedicated employees to return.

To deal with the negative perception of working in the sector and the amplifying effect of the COVID-19 pandemic practitioners have to turn to innovative and complex solutions (Baum et al., 2020) If it can be identified what processes need to be improved, the HR and marketing departments could work together in addressing them. In the long run, creating an employer brand that is based on authentic and constant external-internal communication (Erkmen, 2018) as well as on the satisfaction of employee needs (Maheshwari et al., 2017) can lead to a positive outcome.

4. DISCUSSION

In this section we aim to formulate suggestions for the journey mapping process. The employee experience journey mapping process should start with a need assessment, involving employees in the creative process, where HR first acts as an external observer and then as a kind of coordinator in implementing the employees' suggestions. The hotel in question had already implemented a successful employer branding project, where the involvement of an external partner and the gamified sessions of employee interviews were fruitful, while anonymity has increased the participation rate. The results also confirm another recommendation that has already appeared in the literature, which is that organizations need to perceive the process of the employee experience as a cycle where there is no starting point or endpoint (Cattermole, 2019).

As an example, before this action research project, the hotel's manager did not consider the trial period phase to be of great importance, which proved to be a specific challenge for the chosen career starters segment. The research provided solutions for each touchpoint, and the results were presented at a regional HR meeting as best practices for improving employee journeys. However, after returning to the hotel in question a year for the last phase of our action research project, it was clear that the implementation of the project results was facing challenges. According to the manager, transforming the whole employee journey process is rather slow at a multinational chain company. Their first attempt was to hire a full-time colleague responsible for employer branding, but there was no resource for that, therefore they altered their strategy (Bakanauskiene et al., 2016). First, they started changing small things, one of which is restructure their orientation process. Orientation now starts within 2 weeks instead of 1 month and includes a meeting with the managers and even the general manager, a program they call GM Café. Second, they aimed to give positive impulses more frequently to employees. As a new approach, they introduced a 'Celebrating 1 year with us' initiative, where employees receive a gift and a certificate for their one-year loyalty. Their story is also shared on the hotel's social media platforms as a testimony (Ampofo, 2020). Third, the HR department launched a new Pulse survey called the 'Workspace of my dream' for managers and supervisors (Hoff et al., 2022). Fourth, the emphasis grew on exit interviews where results indicate employees are looking for remote and hybrid, or work-from-home solutions. From the graduates' point of view, the hotel continued collaborations with various organizations such as local student organizations and the hospitality-themed protégé mentorship program offering them open day programs and free services (Eissner & Gannon, 2018). While these collaborations strengthen the connection with potential future employees they also improve the image of the sector still suffering from the negative effect of the pandemic (Jung et al., 2021). Results of the full action research study advocate that the journey mapping process helped the HR department in focusing on critical areas which were not identified before. HR and talent management strategies should move away from the "one program fits all" mentality and consider building a talent management program that allows the customization of programs based on individual personalities (Zhou et al, 2021). Another rather interesting result of the study confirms that there was no collaboration between marketing and HR departments on employer branding activities before our project, although marketing communications based on employees' needs have a value-adding role in improving the employee experience. Also, findings suggest that creating a journey map for employees can help decrease job turnover intention by identifying the necessary steps to improve employee satisfaction.

5. IMPLICATIONS

To see the whole picture, it is necessary that the target group, for example, fresh graduates, are also taking part in the conversation. The tourism sector has particularly complex labour market characteristics, as there are diverse types of jobs, leading to a lot of individuals who are employees with different needs. These differences can be identified by analysing the characteristics of each personality group by creating personas. Therefore, it is essential to develop a persona-based HR strategy, for which it is particularly beneficial for the Marketing and HR departments to treat employee experience planning as a joint project. In this way, in addition to keeping human resources and talent management aspects in the focus, those with a marketing approach will also be involved in improving the journey mapping process.

The biggest challenge of a participatory action research project is that it is a rather costly, time-consuming, and multi-stakeholder method. The method usually includes reflexive oral journals and interviews, focus groups, survey evaluations, and narratives (Jennings et al., 2010). Our research was limited by only being based on interviews with the hotel's HR manager. However, the results proved the importance of implementing employee journey mapping as a "best practice", therefore in the long run it is certainly worth the investment, especially in a sector with significant labour shortages like hospitality. Also, longitudinal qualitative follow-up studies of employees could be conducted to see if the improvements introduced by the HR department after the project helped improve employee experience or not (Gayle et al., 2010).

Despite the increasing attention to the employee experience in the academic world, more emphasis should be made on applying the journey mapping method for employees, with a clear understanding, differentiation, and implementation of the concept itself in terms of tourism employment. In addition to integrating the customer experience concept in HR tasks, the results of this study aim to help interpret the journey mapping method. The outcome, which was based on an example from the hospitality industry, confirms that employee experience journey planning contributes to the improvement of HR processes. The application of the Employee Experience Journey Mapping concept is rather novel, therefore the paper provides a framework for the HR profession that can be applied in practice, by identifying touch points and critical points and proposing solutions, similar to the hotel in this study.

CONCLUSION

The lack of adequate compensation and flexible, family-friendly work schedules not only increase the turnover rate but also reduce the attractiveness of the tourism and hospitality sector in the eyes of the next generations. To resolve these challenges, the focus should be on initiatives addressing the negative perception of hospitality employment that has developed over the years. To be successful in attracting talent requires building a strong employer brand and providing a stimulating, exciting, and enjoyable work environment while promoting a healthy work-life balance.

Reaching out to fresh graduates is key to solving labour shortages. More and more companies are involved in the training of future young professionals, be it cooperation projects with the best universities or collaborations with student organizations. If leaders are open to new ideas and support the implementation of innovative projects like the employee journey map, involving future generations in the planning, they can contribute to building the future of the tourism and hospitality industry (Lin et al., 2018).

Recognizing that employer branding is a multidisciplinary topic is essential to change the bad reputation of the industry. For creating an attractive employer brand, communication should be consistent with potential employees involving marketing and HR departments (Jolly et al., 2020). Learning from the past also should make the industry realize that tourism organizations need to be prepared for the times when the "war for talent" will resume in all areas of the economy (Michaels et al., 2001).

Future research could focus on each employee segment including the creation of a "worst journey map" based on employee complaints and Pulse survey records. This could help to better understand and prevent unfavourable experiences. Moreover, the impact of the Covid-19 epidemic on tourism and the HR challenges resulting from the crisis will also raise new and thought-provoking questions. Furthermore, this action research study could be amended by several following up participatory action research phases, where former and current employees would be involved in the research process.

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