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Hourly employee retention in the attraction industry: Research from small and medium-sized facilities in Orlando, Florida

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Abstract

The major objective of this study was to explore the reasons behind hourly employees' turnover in the attraction industry. Data were collected from 172 hourly employees in 13 Orlando small and medium-sized facilities. The results empirically confirmed that hourly employees' retention was predicted by self-fulfilment and working conditions rather than monetary rewards. More specifically, employees who had a sense of fulfilment with their job exhibited low inclination to move to another employer because of different management style, and those that were given clear job responsibilities and had consistent working hours were more likely to remain with their current employer.

Transformation in the US labour market

BACKGROUND

The 20th century was an extraordinary period for US employees as wages rose, fringe benefits grew and working conditions improved. At the beginning of the 1990s, the majority of the new jobs that were created were in categories paying above-median wages, and the expansion in strong labour markets generated an increase in real (inflation-adjusted) wages, especially among low-wage workers.¹

Furthermore, workers' fears of job loss have also declined in recent years. Survey results show that the percentage of workers who believe that job losses were likely in the coming year has declined since the mid-1990s, from 12 per cent in 1993 to 8 per cent in 1998. A different survey of workers employed by large firms indicated that the percentage of workers who were frequently concerned about being laid off rose until 1996 but declined thereafter, from 46 per cent to 33 per cent in 1999.²

In 1999 the US unemployment rate was 4.1 per cent, the lowest it had been in 29 years, and employers were faced with the challenge of recruiting, training and retaining employees.³ However, in October 2001 employment fell sharply, and the unemployment rate jumped to 5.4 per cent.⁴ The job losses were spread across

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Hourly employees are an important component of the US labour market

most industries, with especially large declines in manufacturing and services. Subsequent to the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, the services industry lost 111,000 jobs, mainly in travel-related businesses like hotels (46,000) and auto services (13,000), particularly car rental agencies and parking services.⁵

In spite of the unstable employment situation in the USA, total employment is expected to increase by 20.3 million jobs over the 1998–2008 period, or 14 per cent. While occupations that require more education and training are projected to grow the fastest, there are many occupations, like retail, where unskilled labour will be in high demand.⁶

The US Department of Labor enforces the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), which sets basic minimum wage and overtime pay standards. Workers who are covered by the FLSA are entitled to a minimum wage of US\$5.15 an hour. Overtime pay at a rate of one-and-a-half times their regular rate of pay is required after 40 hours of work in a week. Certain exemptions apply to specific types of businesses or specific types of work.⁷

In the past ten years, average hourly earnings in the services sector have grown faster than in all other industries except finance, insurance and real estate. Service sector hourly earnings exceeded the average for all other private industry sectors.⁸

The tourism and hospitality industry has had a major impact on the US labour market. In 2000, the travel and tourism industry directly generated over 7.8 million jobs with US\$171.5bn in payroll income and US\$99.5bn in tax revenues for federal state and local government.⁹

With prospects for a rebound in the economy, the hospitality industry is faced with the challenge of recruiting and retaining employees. In the hotel industry, for example, the turnover rate is estimated between 60 and 300 per cent annually.¹⁰ Turnover costs are soaring and usually include 'separation costs', 'replacement costs' and 'training costs'. In the hospitality industry, some estimate these costs to be between US\$3,000 and US\$10,000 per hourly employee.¹¹

Most employees in the attraction industry are hourly employees

According to the US Department of Labor, 1,263,710 people were employed in 1999 in the 'Miscellaneous Amusement and Recreation' occupation category, with an average hourly wage of US\$10.22 an hour and a mean annual salary of US\$21,260. However, only 69,560 employees, or 5.5 per cent, were in management positions, earning a mean annual salary of US\$49,590.¹²

Human resource management in the attraction industry is not an easy task, as managers are challenged with unique recruiting, selection, training and development processes, especially for hourly employees. Employee retention, job enrichment, motivation and other on-the-job issues like safety and discipline are additional concerns for employers in many amusement parks and attractions.

While data on employee turnover in the attraction industry are

Research on hourly employees in amusement parks is limited

unavailable, many facility operators are concerned with the future of employment in the industry. For example, a recent study of general manager members of the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions (IAAPA) revealed that employees were among the top three priorities of managers of entertainment complexes. In the same study, general managers also perceived the prospects for seasonal employees in the attraction industry to be worse in the next five and ten years.¹³

While many attractions provide detailed training for hiring, motivating and retaining employees, most of the information is derived from other sectors of the hospitality industry or other segments of the economy. To date, no major research has been conducted with regard to hourly employee retention strategies and the identification of methods to reduce turnover rate.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON EMPLOYEE TURNOVER AND RETENTION**Most turnover studies were conducted with full-time employees**

Most research on turnover has addressed the causes, effects and implications of turnover. Numerous studies found that turnover rate was associated with employees' demographic and personal characteristics, overall job satisfaction, organisation and work environment, job content and intrinsic motivation, the external labour environment, and employees' perceptions of alternative jobs, absenteeism, lateness and job performance.¹⁴⁻¹⁶

Other studies attempted to find the relationships between intervening variables and retention. For example, research suggested that perceived organisational support strongly influenced job satisfaction and organisational commitment. They also concluded that the intent to quit a job was influenced by both job satisfaction and organisational commitment.¹⁷

Some studies also recommended retention programmes that could reduce turnover and its effects. These included realistic job previews, job enrichment, workspace characteristics and socialisation practices.¹⁸ The trade literature is filled with prescribed studies to tackle turnover and reduce retention.¹⁹⁻²³ It is important to mention, however, that most of the studies addressed management retention or full-time employees, but neglected to address the important resource of hourly employees, especially in the hospitality industry.

In their attempts to find and keep employees, many companies use incentives such as pay, benefits, promotions and training. However, these efforts often miss their goal, as some research indicated that the front-line manager is the key to attracting and retaining employees.²⁴

The major objective of this study was to explore the reasons behind hourly employee turnover in small and medium-sized attractions. The study also attempted to explore key employment-related issues that might be helpful in reducing the hourly employee turnover rate, and to identify employment characteristics that would increase retention.

METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this study, an hourly employee was defined as 'an employee who works in an attraction facility on an hourly basis for a period of at least six months'. Employee turnover was defined as 'the number of persons hired within six months to replace those leaving or dropped from the workforce'. Small and medium-sized attraction facilities were defined as 'gated commercial facilities that offer entertainment for a single admission price with a minimum of five hourly employees and a maximum of 500 hourly employees'.

The research solicited data from hourly employees in 13 small and medium-sized (less than 500 employees) attractions located in the greater Orlando area of Florida. A self-administered questionnaire was developed based on previous studies on retention, and several one-to-one interviews were conducted with operators and human resource managers in the attraction industry.

The questions included items pertaining to the respondents' current job responsibilities, job search process, previous employment experience and evaluation of their current employment experience. Other questions asked the respondents to evaluate their level of importance of employment characteristics (22 items) and their perceived fulfilment by their employers (22 items).

To predict retention, respondents were also asked to indicate the level of satisfaction with their current job, their likelihood to refer someone to their current place of employment and their likelihood of remaining with their current employer. The last set of questions asked respondents to assess employment features that would make them move to another company, and established demographic characteristics.

The questionnaires were distributed through human resource departments of each of the 13 facilities participating in the study. In total, 446 questionnaires were distributed randomly to employees, proportionally to the number of hourly employees in each facility. Questionnaires were filled out on the job in staff rest rooms. The participants returned 172 questionnaires, yielding a response rate of 38.5 per cent.

FINDINGS

Characteristics of amusement park hourly employees

The respondents in the study represented all age groups and had a median age of 36–40 years. The most prevailing age groups in the sample were 19–25 years (25.1 per cent), 41–50 (16.2 per cent), 51–60 (16.8 per cent) and over 61 years (16.2 per cent). A large proportion of the respondents were married (41.4 per cent), and the rest were single (39.1 per cent), divorced/separated (13.6 per cent) and widowed (5.9 per cent). Most of the respondents had a high-school diploma (46.2 per cent), a community college degree (24.3 per cent) or a technical diploma (13 per cent). The gender

The sample represented an array of demographic characteristics

The sample represented a variety of job responsibilities

distribution between males and females was 37.1 per cent and 62.9 per cent, respectively.

The respondents had worked in their attractions for an average of three-and-a-half years, with a median of two to four years. They had responsibilities in a variety of areas, mainly guest relations (22.9 per cent), merchandise (12.9 per cent), food services (11.2 per cent) and maintenance (8.8 per cent). Other areas included entertainment shows, ride operations, custodial services, security and characters.

The hourly employees worked an average of 30.4 hours per week and a median of 32 hours per week. Most of the respondents worked between 31 and 40 hours per week (47.6 per cent), while a small proportion of the sample (18.4 per cent) worked fewer than 20 hours per week.

Comfortable working environment, flexible working hours and interaction with people attract hourly employees

The participants in the study were asked what attracted them to their current job. A very large proportion mentioned that employee working environment (46.7 per cent), flexible working hours (45.1 per cent) and interaction with people of different backgrounds (44.0 per cent) were the most important features that attracted them to their current job. Other issues included ease of commuting (27.7 per cent), job tasks (26.1 per cent), reputation of the organisation that they worked for (21.7 per cent), the fact that friends or family members had already worked for the attraction (20.1 per cent), pay level (18.5 per cent), employee benefits (15.2 per cent) and free admissions and discounts (14.7 per cent). Extrinsic features such as pay level, employee benefits and free admissions and discounts were thus not among the top reasons for hourly employees to choose their current place of employment.

Hourly employees' evaluation of their current employment experience

Respondents were asked to evaluate 22 employment characteristics with regard to their perceived importance. They were also asked to assess to what extent each of these characteristics was evident and implemented in their current place of employment. Each variable was evaluated with regard to level of importance on a five-point scale where '1' indicated 'unimportant' and '5' indicated 'very important'. The actual implementation of these variables was also measured on a five-point scale where '1' indicated 'poor experience' and '5' indicated 'excellent experience'.

Nice people to work with, humane approach to employees and introductory training were crucial issues for hourly employees

Respondents indicated that the most important employment characteristics were nice people to work with (mean = 4.58), humane approach to employees (mean = 4.56), introductory training (mean = 4.55), clear information on job tasks (mean = 4.52) and fun and challenging job (mean = 4.47). The least important employment characteristics were perceived to be health benefits for the employee (mean = 3.83), retirement plan (mean = 3.62), health benefits for the employees' family (mean =

Table 1: Comparison between level of importance and actual experience of respondents' employment characteristics

Employment characteristic	Level of importance		Actual experience	
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation
Nice people to work with	4.58	0.79	4.20	1.04
Humane approach to employees	4.56	0.86	3.71	1.28
Introductory training	4.55	0.88	3.73	1.18
Clear information on job tasks	4.52	0.86	3.83	1.14
Fun and challenging job	4.47	0.87	3.94	1.13
Company communication to employees	4.43	0.89	3.22	1.33
Flexible working hours	4.40	0.98	4.03	1.21
Other	4.33	1.14	2.83	1.72
Ongoing training	4.29	1.01	3.54	1.19
Consistent working hours	4.27	1.03	3.58	1.31
Performance reviews	4.27	1.08	3.33	1.42
Pay	4.23	1.06	2.75	1.30
Convenient travel to work	4.23	1.07	3.84	1.22
Paid holiday	4.15	1.28	2.88	1.66
Company policies	4.14	1.06	3.84	1.16
Parking	4.10	1.07	4.12	1.13
Promotion opportunities	4.04	1.22	2.77	1.35
Health benefits (for me)	3.83	1.58	2.71	1.59
Retirement plan	3.62	1.51	2.31	1.49
Health benefits (for my family)	3.51	1.65	2.39	1.54
Employee meals	3.37	1.51	2.51	1.42
Availability of day-care facilities	2.57	1.63	1.62	1.10

3.51), employee meals (mean = 3.37) and availability of day-care facilities (mean = 2.57) (Table 1).

However, when these employment characteristics were compared with their actual implementation at the place of employment, the data revealed discrepancies between hourly employees' perceptions of their importance and actual experience in all 22 employment characteristics. In each case the employee perception of importance was higher than the experience of implementation. The most significant gaps were recorded in the employment characteristics of level of pay (means 4.23 and 2.75, respectively), retirement plans (means = 3.62 and 2.31, respectively), paid holiday (means = 4.15 and 2.88, respectively), promotion opportunities (means = 4.04 and 2.77, respectively) and health benefits to the employee's family (means = 3.51 and 2.39, respectively). Although these employment characteristics were not perceived to be the most important, they seem to be more easily quantifiable than all other employment characteristics.

Job retention indicators

To find out respondents' retention inclination, the participants in the study were asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with their current job, their likelihood to refer a friend or a family member to their current place of employment and their likelihood to remain with the current employer in the next 12 months. Each of these three variables was measured on a five-point scale, where '1'

Job satisfaction, referral propensity and likelihood to remain in the job were used as retention predictors

Communication, humane approach, consistent working hours, pay level and performance reviews were tied to hourly employees' satisfaction

Communication, humane approach, pay level, performance reviews, consistent working hours and company policies were tied to hourly employees' referral potential

Consistent working hours, performance reviews, having fun on the job, promotion opportunities and humane approach were tied to hourly employees' likelihood to remain with their companies

indicated a low level of satisfaction or likelihood and '5' indicated a high level of satisfaction or likelihood.

The data indicated that 71.5 per cent of the respondents were either 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with their current job. Over half of the respondents (56.2 per cent) were also 'likely' or 'very likely' to refer friends or family members to their place of employment, and almost two-thirds (63.4 per cent) were 'likely' or 'very likely' to remain with their current employer in the next 12 months.

Analysis of the data indicated that these three predictors were highly correlated. Pearson correlation confirmed that highly satisfied employees were more likely to refer someone they knew to their employer, as well as to remain with their current employer in the next 12 months. Furthermore, employees who were likely to remain with their current employer were also likely to refer someone to their place of employment (Table 2).

Further statistical analysis (Pearson correlation) also revealed that employees who were more satisfied with their job reported better experience in their job with regard to 'having a fun and challenging job' ($r = 0.435$), company communication to employees ($r = 0.418$), humane approach to employees ($r = 0.411$), pay level ($r = 0.405$), performance reviews ($r = 0.395$), consistent working hours ($r = 0.373$) and company policies ($r = 0.371$).

Employees who were more likely to refer a friend or a family member to work at their current employer reported better experience in their job with regard to the company's communication to employees ($r = 0.448$), humane approach to employees ($r = 0.394$), consistent working hours ($r = 0.388$), their perceived pay level ($r = 0.385$), performance reviews ($r = 0.384$) and having a fun and challenging job ($r = 0.375$).

Employees who were more likely to remain with their current employer reported better experience in their job with regard to consistent weekly working hours ($r = 0.477$), the implementation of their performance reviews ($r = 0.450$), having a fun and challenging job ($r = 0.446$), promotion opportunities ($r = 0.445$), humane approach to employees ($r = 0.433$), company communication to employees ($r = 0.427$) and perceived pay level ($r = 0.427$).

Table 2: Correlation between respondents' level of satisfaction with current job, likelihood to refer a friend or a family member to their employer and likelihood to remain with their current employer in the next 12 months

	Level of satisfaction with current job	Likelihood to refer a friend or a family member	Likelihood to remain with current employer
Level of satisfaction with current job	1.000		
Likelihood to refer a friend or a family member	0.540	1.000	
Likelihood to remain with current employer	0.471	0.396	1.000

Note: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

Table 3: Employment traits that would make employee move to another company

Valued characteristic	Mean	Standard deviation
Better pay	4.42	1.09
Better health benefits	3.98	1.32
More humane approach	3.94	1.19
Improved chance of promotion	3.94	1.36
Improved employee communications	3.78	1.29
Flexible working hours	3.77	1.33
Improved working hours consistency	3.77	1.27
Better company policies	3.69	1.31
Better retirement plan	3.68	1.44
Nicer people to work with	3.57	1.43
Different management style	3.49	1.41
Larger organisation with more resources	3.41	1.48
Easier travel to work	3.33	1.49

Reasons for inclination to leave for another job

Respondents were asked to assess 13 employment features that would make them move to another company. Each trait was assessed on a five-point scale where '1' indicated 'no value' and '5' indicated 'very high value'. While the analysis of the data revealed that all employment traits were potentially significant motivators to move to another company, the most valuable employment features were perceived to be better pay (mean = 4.42), better health benefits (mean = 3.98), more humane approach to employees (mean = 3.94), improved chance of promotion (mean = 3.94) and improved employee communications (mean = 3.78) (Table 3).

Prediction of hourly employee retention

Three statistical procedures (step-wise multiple regressions) were conducted to identify what factors might predict employment retention in the attraction industry. The dependent variables were the three employment retention indicators of 'level of satisfaction with their current job', 'likelihood to refer a friend or a family member to their current place of employment', and 'likelihood to remain with the current employer in the next 12 months'.

In the first regression, the dependent variable was 'level of satisfaction with their current job'. The independent variables consisted of 75 variables: respondent's current job characteristics (two variables), respondent's previous employment experience (one variable), respondent's evaluation of current employment experience (ten variables), level of importance of employment characteristics (22 variables), actual experience regarding employment characteristics (22 variables), employment traits that would make employee move to another company (13 variables) and demographic characteristics (five variables).

The results indicated that five variables significantly impacted on respondents' level of satisfaction with their current employer, and the variance explained by the regression was 43 per cent (Table 4). More specifically, respondents were more likely to be satisfied with

Sense of fulfilment, working for a single employer and clear job responsibilities were top predictors of job satisfaction

Table 4: Multiple regression of level of satisfaction with current employer on a variety of employment and demographic characteristics

Variable	Standardised regression coefficient	T	Significance	Cumulative adjusted R ²
I have a sense of fulfilment with my job	0.286	4.269	0.000	0.263
Do you currently have an additional job?	-0.148	-2.476	0.014	0.324
My job responsibilities are very clear to me	0.254	3.969	0.000	0.368
Will move for a different management style	-0.214	-3.464	0.001	0.407
Experience of consistent working hours	0.181	2.942	0.004	0.434

Note: R² = 0.43

their current employer if they:

- had a better sense of fulfilment with regard to their current job
- did not have an additional job
- indicated that their job responsibilities were clear to them
- would not move to another company because of a different management style
- had a better experience with their current employer with regard to consistent working hours.

Consistent working hours, sense of fulfilment and performance reviews were top predictors of likelihood to remain with the current employer

In the second regression, the dependent variable was 'likelihood to remain with the current employer in the next 12 months'. The independent variables consisted of the same 75 variables used in the previous regression model.

The results indicated that five variables significantly affected respondents' likelihood to remain with their current employer, and the variance explained by the regression was 35 per cent (Table 5). More specifically, respondents were more likely to remain with their current employer if they:

- had a better experience with their current employer with regard to consistent working hours
- had a better sense of fulfilment with regard to their current job
- had a better experience with their current employer with regard to performance reviews

Table 5: Multiple regression of likelihood to remain with current employer on a variety of employment and demographic characteristics

Variable	Standardised regression coefficient	T	Significance	Cumulative adjusted R ²
Job experience of consistent working hours	0.287	4.241	0.000	0.193
Sense of fulfilment with the job	0.234	3.463	0.001	0.278
Job experience of performance reviews	0.185	2.612	0.010	0.311
Age of the respondent	0.151	2.422	0.017	0.333
Will move to another company because of improved employee communications	-0.141	-2.250	0.026	0.349

Note: R² = 0.35

- were older
- would not move to another company because of improved employee communications.

Sense of fulfilment, management style and clear job responsibilities were top predictors of likelihood to refer someone to their employer

In the third regression, the dependent variable was 'likelihood to refer a friend or a family member to their current place of employment'. The independent variables consisted of the same 75 variables used in the previous two regression models. The results indicated that 11 variables significantly affected respondents' likelihood to refer a friend or a family member to their current place of employment, and the variance explained by the regression was 52 per cent (Table 6). More specifically, respondents were more likely to refer a friend or a family member to their current place of employment if they:

- had a better sense of fulfilment with their current job
- would not move to another company because of a different management style
- indicated that their job responsibilities were clear to them
- were younger
- had a better experience with their current employer with regard to consistent working hours
- worked more hours per week
- indicated that company communication to employees was important to them
- had a better experience with their current employer with regard to retirement plans
- indicated that availability of day-care facilities was important to them
- indicated that convenient travel to work was important to them
- would not move to another company because of better company policies.

Table 6: Multiple regression of likelihood to refer someone to work with current employer on a variety of employment and demographic characteristics

Variable	Standardised regression coefficient	T	Significance	Cumulative adjusted R ²
I have a sense of fulfilment with my job	0.172	2.658	0.009	0.186
Will move for a different management style	-0.211	-2.948	0.004	0.275
My job responsibilities are very clear to me	0.246	4.020	0.000	0.340
Age group	-0.277	-4.879	0.000	0.383
Experience of consistent working hours	0.227	3.711	0.000	0.433
Number of hours working per week	0.147	2.597	0.010	0.450
Importance of company communication to employees	-0.119	-1.964	0.051	0.464
Experience of retirement plan	0.170	2.832	0.005	0.478
Importance of availability of day-care facilities	-0.186	-2.984	0.003	0.494
Importance of convenient travel to work	0.144	2.390	0.018	0.511
Will move for better company policies	-0.139	-2.047	0.042	0.523

Note: R² = 0.52

Sense of fulfilment with their current job, management style, clear job responsibilities and consistent working hours seem to be the major predictors of job retention

CONCLUSIONS

Looking at the three regression models, it appears that the most powerful indicators to predict retention were the sense of fulfilment with the hourly employees' current job, low inclination to move to another employer because of a different management style, clear job responsibilities and consistent working hours. Other predictors were associated with the respondents' on-the-job experience like performance reviews and retirement plans, as well as the perceived importance attached by hourly employees to company communication, availability of day-care facilities and convenient travel arrangements to work.

It is also evident from the findings that the most significant retention predictors were associated with intrinsic fulfilment and working conditions that were not necessarily associated with monetary rewards. With the exception of retirement plans, which were a predictor in one of the regression models, none of the retention predictors was associated with fiscal issues like pay level, paid holiday, health benefits (for both employees and their families) or free employee meals.

These findings were consistent with Buckingham and Coffman's study, which concluded that while talented employees may join a company because of its charismatic leaders, generous benefits and world-class training programmes, their productivity and retention are determined by the relationship with their immediate supervisor. The findings of this study also suggest that supervisors and managers should help employees to fulfil their potential and treat each person differently by catering to their specific needs.²⁵

Employers, especially in the service industries, continue to face the challenge of retaining employees. To tackle turnover, many practitioners and human resource managers, especially in the USA, started offering substantial benefits packages even to part-time and seasonal employees, with medical and dental coverage, retirement plans, tuition assistance, bonuses at frequent intervals, paid holidays, health club memberships, life and disability insurance and even aid in adopting a child.²⁶ Such developments suggest a new standard in retention, but this relatively new standard should be evaluated with cautions, especially when some empirical studies, like the present one, suggest that the most significant retention predictors are associated with intrinsic fulfilment and working conditions rather than monetary rewards.

The study was conducted in the greater Orlando area, one of the world's largest concentrations of attractions. The area offers an extensive array of job opportunities, and the variety and divergence of job offerings may provide an insight into employees' preferences and overall perceptions of various employment opportunities. While the findings may not be applicable to all geographical locations, some implications may be adopted by using the Orlando example.

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