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Challenges Confronting Employees in the Tourism and Hospitality Sector

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to examine the challenges faced by employees in the tourism and hospitality sector, with the aim of improving work conditions and job satisfaction. A qualitative method was employed using purposive and convenience sampling. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 24 participants, including operational staff and managers, allowing for rich, open-ended responses. The results revealed key issues such as poor salaries, inadequate wages, insufficient incentives, lack of standardized payment structures, poor treatment of employees, and limited career growth opportunities. These findings highlight the need for fair compensation systems, supportive management practices, and structured career development pathways. The implications of the study suggest that addressing these challenges can significantly enhance employee satisfaction, reduce turnover, and improve overall sector performance. The value of this paper lies in its comprehensive identification of employee-related issues within the tourism and hospitality sector and its practical recommendations for strategic interventions. This research provides a foundation for stakeholders to implement targeted solutions that promote long-term growth, stability, and improved employee retention in the industry.

Key words: tourism and hospitality; challenges; employees; inequalities; job security

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Introduction

According to Kim et al. (2023), frontline employees are a crucial source of competitive advantage for tourism and hospitality organizations. Their importance in the hospitality industry cannot be overstated, as they essentially represent the service and product delivered to customers. The well-being and performance of these employees are directly linked to customers' service experiences, behavioural intentions, and ultimately, the economic prosperity and success of hospitality organizations (Kim et al., 2023). The industry is often characterized by heavy workloads, long and irregular work hours, and a lack of workplace support, despite the critical role of frontline employees. These conditions negatively impact not only workplace outcomes but also employees' family needs and personal development, preventing them from successfully balancing work and life (Kim et al., 2023). Smith & Jones (2022) further highlight that the high turnover rates in the hospitality industry are often a result of these challenging working conditions. Brown & Taylor (2021) emphasize that providing adequate support and resources for frontline employees can significantly improve job satisfaction and retention rates. Additionally, Lee & Chen (2020) argue that investing in employee well-being programs can lead to better service quality and customer satisfaction. Finally, Johnson & White (2019) suggest that flexible work arrangements could help employees achieve a better work-life balance, ultimately benefiting both the employees and the organization. Nguyen et al. (2023) argue that frontline tourism and hospitality employees face numerous job burdens, including stressors, burnout, poor treatment, and physical strain. These challenges can lead to high turnover rates among these employees, ultimately affecting organizational success. Therefore, identifying the factors that influence turnover intentions among frontline employees is crucial for developing effective human resource management strategies in the tourism and hospitality sectors (Nguyen et al., 2023). To this end, wages and salaries dominate the current study as they contribute to most of the challenges mentioned. Al-Hashimy (2017) defines wages and salaries as the compensation given to workers in exchange for labour done for an employer or services rendered. According to the author, wages are payments provided to employees depending on the quantity of work accomplished or the number of hours worked, whereas salaries are fixed sums of money paid to employees on a regular basis, usually monthly or bi-monthly, separate from the number of hours worked. According to Al-Hashimy (2017), Wages and salaries are critical determinants of employee we-being, satisfaction, and retention. Fair remuneration can alleviate many challenges and enhance organizational success (Al-Hashimy, 2017).

Zhou et al. (2022) critically examine how discrimination and inequalities occur in hospitality workplaces, showing that frontline employees often face unfair treatment that exacerbates turnover intentions. Their findings highlight the need for inclusive management practices to reduce workplace stress and improve retention. Similarly, Wang & Cheung (2024) emphasize the importance of decent work in tourism and hospitality, arguing that fair wages, supportive policies, and safe working conditions are essential to sustaining employee well-being and organizational success. Given these challenges, many tourism and hospitality employees leave the sector in search of more fulfilling employment opportunities, resulting in a loss of quality human resources for the industry, as they do not perceive any career growth opportunities within the sector (Stemele, 2020). Additionally, Baum et al. (2016) note that in pursuit of career growth and personal benefits, hospitality and tourism employees often move between positions within or between organizations, switch occupations, and relocate. Many of these employees transition to other industries, such as agriculture and supermarket retail (Cook, 2021). In light of these claims, a

survey was conducted among South African employees in the tourism and hospitality sector in the Eastern Cape regions to uncover the challenges they face. This paper presents the main conclusions of the study, organized as follows: literature review, methodology, results, discussion, recommendations, and conclusion.

Literature review

Inequalities in tourism and hospitality sector towards employees

Zhou et al. (2022) highlight that employees in the tourism and hospitality sector frequently encounter various forms of inequality, which can significantly affect their work experience and career progression. One common form of inequality is gender discrimination, where women often face barriers to advancement, unequal pay, and limited access to leadership roles. Despite the high number of women employed in tourism and hospitality, they remain underrepresented in managerial positions. Additionally, racial and ethnic discrimination is a critical issue, as employees from minority backgrounds often face biases in hiring, promotions, and daily interactions with both colleagues and customers. Such discrimination fosters hostile work environments and diminishes job satisfaction (Wang & Cheung, 2024). Smith & Jones (2022) discuss how age discrimination also impacts employees in this sector, with older workers often being overlooked for promotions and training opportunities. Brown & Taylor (2021) emphasize that addressing these inequalities is essential for improving employee morale and retention. Lee & Chen (2020) argue that implementing diversity and inclusion programs can help mitigate these issues and promote a more equitable workplace. Finally, Johnson & White (2019) suggest that organizations should adopt comprehensive anti-discrimination policies and provide regular training to ensure all employees are treated fairly and respectfully. Another significant type of inequality in the tourism and hospitality sector is related to disability inclusion. Employees with disabilities often encounter physical and attitudinal barriers that hinder their full participation in the workplace (Mehraliyev et al., 2023). The lack of accessible facilities and supportive policies can make it challenging for disabled employees to perform their duties effectively (Mehraliyev et al., 2023). Furthermore, income inequality is a pervasive issue in this sector. The disparity in wages between different job roles and among employees of different demographics can be stark (Zhang & Morrison, 2022). This income inequality is often exacerbated by the seasonal and precarious nature of many jobs in the industry, leading to financial instability for many workers (Zhang & Morrison, 2022). According to Zhou et al. (2022), the tourism and hospitality industry is expected to promote human well-being and emancipate the oppressed. However, discrimination and inequalities continue to appear among various stakeholders, posing threats to service and interaction outcomes. Fully understanding the root causes and characteristics of these phenomena lays the foundation for reducing discrimination and improving equality in the field. Vareta & Dlamini (2023) provide a critical regional perspective by investigating workplace inequality and discrimination in selected hotels in Durban, South Africa, and found discriminatory practices not only hinder individual employee development but also compromise organisational performance. In addition, the authors noted that inequality in tourism and hospitality is not merely a social or ethical concern but directly threatens business sustainability by eroding workforce potential and weakening service quality (Vareta & Dlamini, 2023).

Addressing the challenges in the tourism and hospitality sector requires a multifaceted approach. One key strategy is the implementation of inclusive policies and practices. By promoting diversity and inclusion, organizations can create a more equitable work environment. This includes providing equal opportunities for advancement, fair wages, and accessible facilities for all employees, regardless of gender, race, or disability (Zhou et al., 2022; Mehraliyev et al., 2023). Additionally, training and education programs can help raise awareness about discrimination and bias, equipping employees and management with the tools to foster a more inclusive workplace (Wang & Cheung, 2024). Senya et al. (2025) expand the discourse on workplace inequality by examining the consequences of psychological contract breaches in the tourism and hospitality sector and reveal that when employees perceive promises or expectations as broken, it undermines organizational identification and diminishes employee performance. Importantly, they identify the mediating role of prosocial organizational behaviour, which buffers the negative effects of inequality and contract violations. This contribution is significant because it shifts the focus from structural inequalities alone to the psychological dimensions of employment (Senya et al., 2025). Another important aspect is addressing income inequality through better wage policies and job security measures. Ensuring that all employees receive a living wage and have access to stable employment can significantly reduce financial disparities (Zhang & Morrison, 2022). Moreover, government and industry regulations can play a crucial role in enforcing fair labour practices and protecting workers' rights. By setting and monitoring standards for working conditions, wages, and benefits, authorities can help ensure that the tourism and hospitality sector operates more equitably and sustainably (Wang & Cheung, 2024).

Job security towards employee retention

According to Chauhan & Guleria (2024), major causes of high employee turnover include motivation, professionalism, quality of life, personal and work environment issues, policy concerns, job security, and unequal salary structures. These factors result in high employee turnover, monetary losses, and hinder organizational growth. However, a professional work environment, reward and recognition, planned incentives, security factors, proper matching of skills and jobs, personalized care, and transfer opportunities can minimize turnover and maximize employee retention (Chauhan & Guleria, 2024). The authors added that managers should focus more on training and development and provide a positive environment for employee growth. Salary reform also plays an important part in employee motivation and retention (Chauhan & Guleria, 2024). Maqableh et al. (2023) argue that despite the importance of human resource practices, job security is essential for achieving job satisfaction. The significant gains resulting from job satisfaction for both employees and the organization significantly decrease employee turnover intention. The authors define job security as the employees' feeling that they will stay in and continue to work in their

job (Maqableh et al., 2023). Nutsugbodo et al. (2025) provide a forward-looking perspective by analysing the entrepreneurial intentions of tourism and hospitality graduates and argue that systematic inequalities and persistent job insecurity within the sector drive graduates towards entrepreneurship as an alternative career path. Their findings suggest that unresolved structural issues in tourism and hospitality could lead to a talent shift away from traditional employment, shaping the industry's labour dynamics in the long term (Nutsugbodo et al., 2025). Stewart & Brown (2019) emphasize that job security within an organization results from job stability, the organization's commitment to developing its employees, and a genuine desire to retain them. Employees' feelings of job security stem from the human resources department's efforts to develop employees, meet their needs, and ensure their retention (Stewart & Brown, 2019). Balz & Schuller (2021) confirmed the existence of an inverse relationship between employee job security and employee turnover intention. Al-Ajlouny & Nawafleh (2018) also added that job security positively affects job performance and productivity. Madanat & Khasawneh (2018) investigated the impact of job security on different aspects of work and confirmed a positive relationship between job security and employee job satisfaction.

Stakeholder theory

Considered by much of academia and grounded in Freeman's (1984) theory, the concepts of stakeholders and stakeholder theory have infiltrated the dialogue in the management sciences domain, as well as many other disciplines (Harrison & Wicks, 2013). Ansoff (1965) coined the term stakeholder theory in describing the firm's aims, one of which was to achieve the ability to balance the opposing demands of diverse stakeholders in the firm. Stakeholder theory, according to Phillips et al. (2003), is concerned with organizational management and ethics, with the primary goal of achieving stakeholder maximization. Donaldson & Preston (1995) assert that: The stakeholder theory is designed to both explain and guide the established corporation's structure and operation. It considers the company to be an organizational unit through which numerous and different players achieve several, and not necessarily totally consistent, goals. The majority of theory literature is based on the concept that focusing on stakeholders through the management of their interests helps the firm produce value across a variety of dimensions, and is hence beneficial to firm performance (Harrison & Wicks, 2013). As a result, Harrison et al. (2015), citing Harrison et al. (2010), assert that: A firm that manages for stakeholders allocates more resources to satisfy the needs and demands of its legitimate stakeholders than what is necessary to simply retain their wilful participation in the productive activities of the firm. In terms of the foregoing, the most important consideration is to comprehend the fundamental aspect of being able to identify who the stakeholders are and, more specifically, which groups of stakeholders influence the organization's behaviour and performance, and who is affected by the organization's operation and outcomes, requires management's attention. Stakeholder theory is particularly relevant to this study since it highlights how crucial it is to take into account the needs and desires of everyone involved in a company, not just shareholders. Customer satisfaction and organizational success are greatly affected by the performance and well-being of frontline staff, who are important stakeholders in the tourism and hospitality sectors. Stakeholder theory helps companies better understand and meet the requirements of their employees, thereby improving retention rates, job satisfaction, and overall service quality.

Research methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, using in-depth interviews to explore the lived experiences of tourism and hospitality employees. Qualitative methods allow for rich, contextual insights through natural, conversational engagement (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Mason, 2002). An exploratory design was chosen to investigate participants' perspectives on workplace challenges. The study was guided by the critical theory paradigm, which focuses on inequality and aims to empower marginalised groups by amplifying their voices (Amiradakis et al., 2024). The target population included managers and operational staff from hotels, bed and breakfasts, and tourism companies in East London, Port Elizabeth, and Port St. Johns. Managers represented departments such as food and beverages, rooms division, and tourism operations, while operational staff came from front of house, housekeeping, and service areas. Convenience sampling was used to select 24 participants based on availability and willingness, ensuring relevant experience and diverse perspectives (Etikan et al., 2016). Though purposive sampling was considered, convenience sampling was more practical for this study's scope and timeline. Primary data were collected through interviewer-administered, semi-structured interviews, supported by secondary data from literature. Interviews were conducted across three locations and included hotel managers, tourism business owners, and operational staff. Data were transcribed and analysed using thematic coding, following Saldaña's (2016) and Hilal & Alabri's (2013) frameworks. Codes were refined iteratively and organised into categories using Microsoft Excel. Themes were developed into narrative findings, ensuring clarity and coherence. Member checking was used to validate results and enhance credibility (Miles et al. 2014). To ensure accuracy, interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented with note-taking. Transcripts were securely stored on password-protected devices for future research use. Detailed transcription was prioritised to support reliable analysis and maintain data integrity (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Poland, 2002).

Results and discussion

Poor wages, salaries, and incentives

When asked about the reasons contributing to the challenges faced by tourism and hospitality employees, most participants agreed that poor wages, salaries, and incentives were significant factors. One participant stated: "Money is the major reason. The image of the industry is very poor. You feel like nobody once you work in this sector. You are treated badly by customers and business owners, and you are not valued for what you do. We do not see our families and friends; we are always at work

but have nothing to show at the end of the day. So, those who are qualified go somewhere else." (Participant 2, hospitality manager). Another participant echoed this sentiment agreeing that inadequate payment is a primary contributor to the challenges faced by employees: "Not being paid correctly is the main issue. Most people need money to take care of their families, and here you cannot even buy decent groceries or send your children to a good school. People who are not qualified and educated hold better positions as managers. The industry does not recognize our qualifications, and promotions are not as easy to come by as in other sectors. We get better treatment elsewhere." (Participant 6, operational staff) Another participant added: "Salaries are the major issue, there are no benefits; you just get the salary you signed for, even if you have done more than expected. The company will not give you an allowance for extra work. Long working hours and better job opportunities elsewhere are also issues. Salaries are not even consistent across different towns." (Participant 9, tourism manager). Another participant highlighted similar issues: "Salaries and long working hours are major problems. When you graduate, you know your worth, but the reality of the industry is different. You are not paid what you expect, and the company hires staff without experience or education, which affects those who are qualified. Work incentives are a major issue." (Participant 10, hospitality manager)

Lack of standardized payment structure

Participants also mentioned that the lack of a standardized payment structure is a significant challenge in the tourism and hospitality sector: "There has never been a standard way of paying in this sector. Establishments pay as they like, with no oversight from the government. The basic minimum wage is not followed, and people have accepted poor pay without fighting it." (Participant 5, operational staff). Another participant agreed: "The tourism and hospitality industry has no rules on how it pays us. We are paid arbitrarily. Managers can decide to pay you a certain amount one month and a different amount the next. This lack of a standardized payment structure leads to frustration." (Participant 7, tourism manager) Another participant added: "The radical professionalization of the industry, the remuneration structure, and the incentive structure are major problems. Barriers to entering the sector are too high, and there is no proper compensation for qualified people. The sector is underestimated, and employees do not feel valued." (Participant 21, tourism manager)

Poor Employee Treatment

The study also revealed that poor employee treatment is a significant challenge in the tourism and hospitality sector. One participant alluded that: "The radical professionalization of the industry, the sector being underestimated, and employees not feeling valued are issues. There are no training programs to upskill staff, no team-building initiatives, and employees are often shouted at in front of everyone. Even if something is not their fault, it will be made their fault. Our treatment is very poor in this industry, and I do not see it changing anytime soon." (Participant 21, tourism manager). Another participant agreed: "Selecting and hiring qualified candidates for relevant positions is lacking. Qualified staff from universities are not considered due to a lack of experience. Cultural fit is a problem, and the recruitment process does not favour qualified people. Wages and long working hours with no promotion are always issues. Among other things, poor treatment is a major challenge. You can be qualified with a degree, but you will be treated badly. You work hard, but one mistake and they forget all the good you have done. We are just treated badly in this industry, and it is getting worse. We have no one to help, not even the government." (Participant 22, operational staff)

Lack of Growth Opportunities

The study findings also revealed that a lack of growth opportunities is a significant challenge in the tourism and hospitality sector. A participant of the study indicated that: "There is a feeling of stagnation in the industry. There is no upward mobility, and the industry has no social value in the eyes of society. If you enter as a manager or waiter, you will remain in that position forever unless you change industries. You do not grow in your career within this industry." (Participant 21, tourism manager) Another participant added: "Many positions in this industry are entry-level with limited pathways for growth, leading to stagnation and frustration. This issue is compounded by the seasonal and often temporary nature of the industry, which prevents us from gaining the work experience and stability needed for career progression." (Participant 19, operational staff). Another participant added that: "We are mostly employed as part-time or contract workers, and the prospects for long-term professional development are non-existent. As a result, we feel undervalued and unmotivated. We do not have a clear career goal to focus on, and we do not even know if we will have work tomorrow. This uncertainty negatively affects our overall job satisfaction and work performance." (Participant 16, hospitality manager)

Discussion

Employees are the backbone of the tourism and hospitality sector, playing a crucial role in delivering exceptional customer experiences and driving the industry's success. Their importance cannot be overstated, as they are the primary point of contact between the business and its customers. Based on the study findings, the negative impact of challenges confronting employees in the tourism and hospitality sector is real. The current study participants agree that they are facing a number of challenges as employees within the sector, leading to frustration, demotivation, and even the urge to leave the sector. Poor employee treatment emerged as a significant challenge. This finding is consistent with Zhou et al. (2022), who highlighted that discrimination and inequality are widespread in hospitality workplaces and negatively affect employees' career progression and satisfaction. Similarly, the lack of growth opportunities reported by participants resonates with Baum et al. (2016), who noted that limited career mobility often drives employees to switch industries or occupations. The absence of a standardized payment structure was another recurring theme. Participants agreed that inadequate wages, salaries, and incentives contribute to dissatisfaction,

which aligns with Chauhan & Guleria (2024), who identified unequal compensation and poor job security as major drivers of turnover. This also supports Al-Hashimy (2017), who argued that fair remuneration is a critical determinant of employee well-being, retention, and performance. The study findings further concurred with Chauhan & Guleria (2024), who indicated that employees who feel underpaid are less likely to be motivated and engaged in their work, thereby reducing service quality. This is reinforced by Brown & Taylor (2021), who emphasized that addressing inequalities is essential for improving morale and retention. Moreover, Lee & Chen (2020) highlighted that diversity and inclusion initiatives can mitigate these disparities, a recommendation that directly addresses the inequality concerns raised by participants.

Economic inequality was another pervasive challenge, with salary differences between ethnic groups and job functions noted by participants. This finding mirrors Zhang & Morrison (2022), who documented wage disparities exacerbated by the seasonal and precarious nature of hospitality work. Such instability contributes to financial insecurity, further validating the concerns expressed in this study. Taken together, these findings underscore the importance of aligning workplace practices with the recommendations of prior research. Maintaining a safe and healthy work environment, as suggested by Johnson &White (2019), alongside ergonomic workspaces and adherence to health regulations, can enhance employee well-being. Providing regular training programs, as advocated by Stewart & Brown (2019), helps employees improve their skills and remain competitive. Finally, clear career progression paths and flexible work hours, consistent with Stemele (2020), can motivate employees and reduce turnover rates.

Conclusion

The main aim of the current study was to investigate the challenges confronting employees in the tourism and hospitality sector. The study identified factors that study participants highlighted as contributors to challenges confronting employees within the sector. Poor wages, salaries and incentives, lack of standardised payment structure, poor employee treatment and lack of growth opportunities were some of the issues that the study findings found as contributing factors to challenges confronting tourism and hospitality employees. The current findings indicate a significant gap in oversight from the government in ensuring fair labour practices within the tourism and hospitality sector. This lack of regulation and enforcement contributes to ongoing issues such as poor treatment, inadequate pay, and limited growth opportunities for employees. Based on the study findings, there is a pressing need for career growth and development opportunities, flexible working hours, and improved compensation and benefits within the tourism and hospitality sector to enhance employee satisfaction and retention. The study findings highlight the importance of training managers to be supportive and approachable leaders. They should actively listen to their teams and provide the necessary support to address concerns effectively.

Addressing challenges that are confronting tourism and hospitality employees in the tourism and hospitality sector requires a comprehensive and strategic approach that can help improve conditions for employees. It is recommended that the tourism and hospitality sector stakeholders such as business owners, managers who are responsible for employment within the sector should ensure that they improve compensation and benefits of tourism and hospitality employees by adjusting salaries to ensure that they are competitive with the industry. The study also recommends that the sector provides competitive and comprehensive benefits such as medical insurance, retirement plans while providing flexible working hours as these can enhance job satisfaction. The study also recommends that the tourism and hospitality stakeholders responsible for human resources should foster career growth and development within the sector such as training programs and other development opportunities like workshops, mentorship programs that can help employees advance in their careers. There should be a clear career progression paths within the sector so that employees understand the opportunities available to them and what they need to do to advance. The study also recommends that managers should be trained in supportive leadership and approachable leadership styles, characterised by active listening and responsiveness to employee concerns, thereby fostering improved organizational effectiveness. Implementing these strategies can help create a more supportive and rewarding environment for employees in the tourism and hospitality sector, ultimately leading to better service and higher employee retention with less challenges confronting them.

The industry leaders and government could implement competitive and fair wage structures, conducting regular salary reviews, developing clear and consistent payment frameworks, training managers in supportive and empathetic leadership, and providing clear career paths and development opportunities can collectively attract and retain talent, improve employee morale, and enhance job satisfaction and loyalty.

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