

Factors That Contribute Towards the Employability of Hospitality Graduates

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Abstract

The study aims to determine factors contributing to the employability of hospitality graduates. The study adopted a qualitative research approach using semi-structured interviews. A purposive judgement sampling was used to gather hotel line managers' perspectives and knowledge in four- and five-star hotels in Pretoria, South Africa. Six themes were generated from the data. The results suggest that the employability of hospitality management is contingent on (i) the work environment; (ii) hospitality educational institutions; (iii) employability attributes required by hotel managers; (iv) hospitality management graduates; (v) future readiness of hospitality management graduates; and (vi) human resource management (HRM) in the hotel industry. Suggestions can assist education institutions, hotel managers, hospitality management graduates, students and future researchers, particularly in the current environment of global connectedness, the knowledge economy, and the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and technological advancements. This paper contributes to the literature on graduate employability and higher education institutions (HEI) in the hospitality domain. A good understanding of the factors contributing to the employability of hospitality graduates will be a positive factor in retaining graduates in the hospitality sector, advancing the industry, and obtaining more sustained graduate employment in the future. This study can further be utilized as an instrument to recognize graduates' capability to become future managers.

Keywords: Employability; graduates; hospitality; hotels; human resource management; students

Introduction

Globally employers criticise academic hospitality institutions for failing to produce employable graduates. Employers argue that more emphasis is placed on pass rates as a measure of success than on equipping graduates with employability to secure employment (Cheng et al., 2021). However, some education institutions (EI) believe they are not obligated to produce work-ready individuals, but rather a qualification. These dissimilarities contribute to the mismatch between employers, Higher education institutions (HEIs), students and graduates, and graduates who find it challenging to transition from the classroom to the workplace. However, Jonck and Minnaar (2015) and Wessels et al. (2017) claim that the higher academic sector must keep pace Higher education institutions (HEI) need to make, it is important to consider the students' role in securing employment and improving their employability (Artess et al., 2017). This will enable graduates to be competent and have the relevant knowledge to ensure that human capital develops through training.

If hospitality graduates do not possess basic employability attributes – in this case, the knowledge, and skills required in the hotel industry – their employability is at risk since it may negatively affect the overall efficiency and effectiveness of business goals, customer service and the harmony of the working environment. Post Covid-19, the industry needs to recover and

become more efficient. To get back on track a more agile leadership with effective change management skills is essential for employment. Furthermore, hospitality graduates are declining job offers or rejecting work opportunities in hotels and are changing career paths in search of better working conditions in other industries due to their expectations not being met by the industry. The hospitality industry is rather a complex and diverse sector, facing many challenges, relating to high levels of employee turnover, low productivity, poor remuneration, demanding working conditions and limited opportunities for personal development (Marinakou & Giousmpasoglou, 2019), as well as disruptive technology and new applications to sell more (Jiane & Wakelin-Theron, 2023). This study therefore aims to determine which factors contribute to the employability of hospitality graduates.

Literature review

Employability

According to Spowart, et al. (2019) in order to maintain, retain and secure, employment in the tourism industry, graduates ought to possess relevant employability attributes. In short Wakelin-Theron (2023), refers to this as employability capital. These are the skills and abilities that allow you to be employed (Wakelin-Theron, 2017). Ahmed et al. (2017) defines employability as the knowledge, skills and competencies that all job applicants possess to ensure they are effective and proficient in the world of work Yet, Gill (2018: 2) continues to add that employability is "an array of soft skills, assets, achievements, personal characteristics and understandings". Though employability is very difficult to authentically replicate in HEI, it does improve and advance graduates' ability to secure employment and to prosper in the employment field, benefiting themselves, the organisation, the economy and the greater community (Köseoglu et al., 2019, Wakelin-Theron, 2014). Yet, Crane and Kinash (2015) further describe it as the agreement between HEI and employers regarding the knowledge, skills and competencies essential for graduates to be successful in the world of work. Yet, employability is an inexpensive advantage for graduates entering the world of work. It can be considered the multidimensional integration and use of five specific resources namely: i) personal attributes, ii) intelligence, iii) meta-skill, iv) integrated dynamic capabilities and vi) job-specific skills) and dynamic capabilities that are rare, valuable, hard to imitate, and substituted by the market (Finch et al., 2016). Espellita and Maravilla (2019) concur that employability attributes are those that prepare students for the workplace. They cover a variety of competencies in hotel departments, such as conceptual, hospitality operations, and personal and human resource skills. Therefore, the study set out to determine factors that contribute to the employability required by hotel managers in the industry.

The hospitality industry

The hospitality industry is a people's industry, and the relationships that employees establish with guests make trips more memorable and enhance their experience (Espellita & Maravilla, 2019). Travellers expect indulgence, remarkable service, quality food, supported by the latest technology, which promotes a sustainable recovery and well-trained staff with world-class skills, which satisfies the customer and repeat visits (Rathore, 2017). Digitalisation in the hospitality industry is expected to continue to grow, and higher use of automation, contact-less payment and services, real-time information provision and virtual experiences post-Covid-19 is a skills and staff shortage as some staff were redeployed and or resigned (Ngoepe & Wakelin-Theron, 2023; OECD, 2020). Yet, employees must be qualified and competent as they are critical service providers to ensure that the industry remains competitive and sustainable (Spowart et al., 2019; Wakelin-Theron, 2014, 2015). This is a global industry in which graduates can develop themselves and their careers as it offers a great variety of business

opportunities (Giannotti, 2020) and therefore compete for the best talent among establishments (Finch et al., 2016; Hanks et al., 2016).

Human resource management in the hotel industry

The key function of human resource management in the hotel industry is to ensure that current and future employees are up to date with aspects such as modern innovations and technological advancements. In the past, human resource management has been viewed as an administrative department that stores personal files, processes salaries, and deals with benefits and incentives. However, the hospitality industry economy relies on the HRM department to recruit people with the right set of knowledge, skills and competencies that meet the requirements of management and guests (Basak & Khanna, 2017). The industry relies entirely on customer experiences and products linked to customer service and satisfaction (Connell & Page, 2014). Due to the changing work environment and the developing workstyles of the labour force, HRM in the hospitality industry needs to be mindful of the following elements namely: Work-life balance (Connick, 2014), remuneration, benefits and rewards, education and training, Image of hotels as employment option; Competitiveness and glocalization as well as seasonality. The listed factors contribute to graduates' perceptions and desires to pursue a career in the hospitality industry. The hotel sector has the highest industry turnover rates, and organisations must be serious about retention, staff training, and mentorship programmes (Deloitte, 2020; Wakelin-Theron, 2015). It is indeed important that human resource managers improve policies and procedures to ensure that this industry is appealing to new entrants (Esterhuyse et al., 2022; Wawira, 2016;).

Higher education institution (HEI) role

HEI's role is to develop individuals' creativity and innovation to improve productivity, advance human well-being and ability, and grow the economy by being creative (Ngoepe & Wakelin-Theron, 2023). Relevant tourism and hospitality curricula are vital features that produce skilled and knowledgeable graduates (Chauke et al., 2015). Business management principles and practices have been incorporated into the curriculum for HEI to meet the challenges related to the industry's needs. This suggests that the curriculum should address the needs of employers, students and the community (Chauke et al., 2015). Spowart, et al. (2019) confirm the need to equip students with Entrepreneurship knowledge, as the market is changing students are operating in a volatile, unknown, complex and ambitious (VUCA)- world.

Therefore, HEI must modify their curricula to fulfil its mission and respond to the unpredictable labour market. Higher education institutions can introduce these modifications by providing opportunities for graduates to acquire the general skills and abilities that will prepare them to meet workplace demands (Abas & Imam, 2016). Extra- and co-curricular activities and work-integrated education (WIE) can assist students in the twenty-first century while enrolled in HEI (Wakelin-Theron, 2017). Factors such as work experience (Work-Integrated Learning - WIL) through placements and internships as well as Work-Integrated Education (WIE) improve the employability of graduates as well as their connections in the industry, as well as networking and close collaboration with hospitality establishments support and advance employability (Crane & Kinash, 2015; Ngoepe & Wakelin-Theron, 2023; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Wakelin-Theron, 2017). In addition, HEI needs to produce graduates with excellence and proficient employability for future working environments. One of the essential skills graduates need for future employability is future readiness (Shariff, 2021). Future-ready hospitality management graduates will be more competent and competitive in the labour market as hospitality establishments continue to evolve.

The graduate attitudes, work style and career expectations

The labour market comprises three generations: baby boomers, Generation X and Generation Y (also known as millennials). These generations have divergent work views, values and expectations (Kraus, 2017). These differences cause different preferred work methods and interactions (Kraus, 2017; Spowart et al., 2018). According to Miranda (2018), millennials are the biggest and most diverse generation, not only regarding their needs and wants but also their preferences, confidence and behaviour. Miranda (2018:1) states that "millennials do not want to be managed, they like to be led, coached and mentored". Millennials and now centennials continue to challenge the status quo and drive changes across different hospitality sectors (Miranda, 2018). Well-known hotel groups such as Marriot and Hilton have indicated the challenges of understand millennials and centennials and staying up to date with how they think and operate (Miranda, 2018).

Millennials conduct comprehensive research to ensure prospective employers match their values and mission (Miranda, 2018). Miranda (2018) further highlights that millennials look for rapid development, new skills, and a good work-life balance, yet they are self-educated, loyal, creative, and favour financial security. Millennials aim to gain financial independence as early as possible and do not mind working more than one job to achieve that goal. Buying a house is not the first thing on their priority list as most hope to clear their education debts (Miranda, 2018). The literature analysis illustrates that dissimilarities exist between older generations' and millennials' expectations regarding attitudes, work style and career expectations. Although dissimilarities exist, millennials offer fresh ideas and new skills that are attractive to the hotel industry. Hotel employers need to be cognisant of how millennials are changing the work environment and find ways to accommodate them without compromising service standards and guest expectations.

Roles and responsibilities of graduates

Graduates ought to have a clear perspective regarding their self-identity and employment prospects (Shariff, 2021) as well as the roles they need to play in the world of work (Shariff, 2021). Once understood by students this could enrich graduateness (attributes that students acquire during the study) and employability. A key concern is that twenty-first-century students' particular needs and wants are not being met. According to Crane and Kinash (2015), the 21st-century student is more empowered and digitally connected than former student generations. Students call for education that is relevant, flexible, practical and personalised (choices of face-to-face, blended learning and online study, shorter in nature) and that leads to several outcomes such as employment, competence and a competitive edge with some form of work Integrated Learning and Work-integrated Education to progress into the world of work (Crane & Kinash, 2015). Students require access to online learning to participate in activities other than studying while enrolled in HEI. These include participating in extracurricular activities and working part-time jobs (Crane & Kinash, 2015). According to Kottawatta and Tharunya (2014), graduates become motivated and efficient (Brooks & Duty, 2016) when equipped with the necessary skills.

Yet, students can implement the following tips to make themselves employable upon graduation: ask for professional advice; participate in the university's extracurricular activities; keep a record of the skills they have acquired; volunteer in local organizations; be mobile and flexible; network in the industry; conduct research on the graduate job market, and be confident (Brooks & Duty, 2016).

Future readiness in the hotel industry

Skill shortages in the hospitality industry are a major issue (Mavuru et al., 2020, Ngoepe & Wakelin-Theron, 2023). As the world moves into a digital era, graduates must be equipped with the necessary future-ready attributes to confront the challenges they might face in the hotel environment. Future readiness refers to the idea of constantly getting ready. An individual or organization can adapt and evolve into what is required now instead of relying on what has been taught or expected before (Costanza, 2015). The focus is not on the present but on looking to the future and determining the industry's needs (Costanza, 2015). Deloitte (2021) define future-ready employees as freelancers, gig workers and contractors who work with traditional employees. However, the modern workforce may not be only human. Technology is already performing essential business tasks with little to no human intervention (Wakelin-Theron, 2021). Chatbots answer customer questions, robots handle mundane administrative duties, drones conduct safety checks, and cognitive systems analyze and extract insights from vast volumes of data (Wakelin-Theron, 2021).

A future-ready workforce embraces continuous lifelong learning, which is incorporated and integrated into the workflow (Spowart et al., 2018). A highly effective learning environment incorporates learning into activities that are already part of workers' everyday responsibilities and uses technologies with which they are already familiar. It is learning that is immediately applicable and available when and where it is needed – a far cry from the traditional classroom-based learning we have relied on for so long (Deloitte, 2021).

Research design and methodology

A qualitative methodology was used to answer the study's research question: Which factors contribute to the employability of hospitality graduates from HEI? In this study, the researcher used non-probability purposive judgment sampling. Purposive sampling is utilized when it is obligatory to collect data from particular target groups and the sampling is restricted to individuals who can provide the desired data. This study was conducted in Pretoria, South Africa. The rationale for selecting this city was based on several reasons. Pretoria is the administrative capital of South Africa with historical buildings, galleries, museums, numerous entertainment venues, theatres and the well-known Union Buildings (Gauteng Tourism Authority, 2019). Many travellers visit the city for both business and leisure reasons.

In Pretoria, four- and five-star hotels were chosen because they attract travellers and individuals who are often more financially successful than those who stay in economy hotels (Patel, 2016). Similarly, Kumar and Patel (2017) highlight that service comes when a guest requests it in a four-star hotel. While, guests' needs are anticipated in advance in five-star hotels (i.e., the concierge of a five-star hotel will handle the luggage from the guest's arrival outside and ensure prompt delivery to the hotel room, and there are 24-hour reception and full 24-hour room service available). Thus, four-and five-star hotels require more staff. Front office, food and beverage, banqueting and housekeeping line managers in these hotels were interviewed as these managers know which employability attributes are required from employees. This study selected participants from four- and five-star hotels in Pretoria. Four key departments were chosen to obtain the data required for this study.

The study sample included seven hotel managers from four- and five-star hotels. Participants included the front office, food and beverage, banqueting, and housekeeping line managers. These four departments were selected because they generate revenue. Furthermore, students are placed in these departments during their practical training.

The research instrument used was semi-structured interviews. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with hotel line managers. This method assisted the researcher in obtaining a detailed description of the participants' opinions, knowledge and

insight regarding the employability attributes required by hotel managers, the factors that contribute towards the employability of hospitality graduates, and whether hotel managers are satisfied with the future readiness of graduates from HEIs.

The semi-structured nature of the instrument further allowed the researcher to formulate questions in advance and probe for more insight from the participants by asking questions focused on the study's objectives or various questions closely related to the subject matter (Farooq, 2015). Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to disclose their thoughts and ideas on their own terms. Thus, semi-structured interviews offered reliable and comparable information (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008).

Thematic analysis is a method for analysing qualitative data. It is often used for text data, such as interview transcripts (Caulfield, 2020). This form of data analysis allowed the researcher to examine the data to identify common ideas, topics, and patterns that came up repeatedly (Caulfield, 2020). According to Caulfield (2020), a thematic approach is an excellent approach for research when a study attempts to understand people's ideas, beliefs, knowledge, experiences, or values from a set of qualitative data, such as interview transcripts, social media profiles or survey responses (Caulfield, 2020). This study followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic framework. The first step is to familiarise yourself with the data; 2) generate initial codes; 3) search for themes; 4) review the themes; 5) define and name themes; and lastly 6) produce the report (Delahunt and Maguire, 2017). In addition, latent and semantic themes were identified. Themes were identified at a semantic or explicit level or a latent or interpretive one. A thematic analysis typically focuses solely or mostly on either a semantic or a latent level. Themes are identified using a semantic method when the analyst is looking at the surface meanings of the data. The analyst is not looking for anything other than what a participant has said or written (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analytic process should ideally progress from description, where the data has simply been organised to show patterns in semantic content and summarised, to interpretation, where the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications are attempted to theorise, often concerning previous literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

A thematic analysis at the latent level, on the other hand, goes beyond the data's semantic content and begins to discover or explore the underlying concepts, assumptions, conceptualisations, and ideologies that are conceptualised as moulding or guiding the data's semantic content. In this study, data was analysed at a latent level. To learn and examine underlying assumptions, concepts, conceptualisations, and beliefs that were theorised as affecting or informing the semantic content of the data, look beyond what a participant had said (Delahunt & Maguire, 2017, Kiger, & Varpio, 2020). Thematic analysis was utilised to analyse data in this study.

Results and discussion

The employability of hospitality graduates is not just the responsibility of educational institutions. Six themes were generated from the data. The themes generated from the results are transferable and aligned closely with findings from previous research across the HE sector. The results of this study present that the employability of hospitality management is contingent on factors that include: (i) the work environment within the hotel industry (ii) Higher education institutions (HEIs) (iii) the employability attributes required by hotel managers; (iv) hospitality management graduates; (v) the future readiness of hospitality management graduates; and (vi) human resource management (HRM) in the hotel industry.

Work environment within the hotel industry

A good understanding of the hospitality industry and the role hospitality managers play in contributing towards the employability of hospitality management graduates is crucial. According to Espellita and Maravilla (2019), the hospitality industry requires highly skilled and competent employees who possess employability attributes that contribute to the prosperity of the business since the hospitality industry is not just about the attractions and facilities accessible to travellers. Every hotel industry employee needs to have the knowledge, skills and competencies to offer the standard of products and services expected by a hotel guest. Acquiring knowledge about the hotel industry, product offerings, target market, and employees' roles and responsibilities is an important starting point for a successful career in the industry (Espellita and Maravilla, 2019).

HM 1 highlighted...” *the hotel industry has many attributes, hospitality deals with customers across a spectrum. Each property looks at its particular market and its market expectations and delivers it. So the specific attributes are critical. You will notice my focus is on soft skills and leading skills because if you go into the industry you go into a particular property and each property has its unique selling position.*”

The academic environment needs to go beyond just teaching, but needs to continue to expose students to the industry, technology, entrepreneurial opportunities, and employability attributes the industry requires. The study participants strongly encouraged hotel managers to play an active role in the employability of hospitality students as they conduct work-integrated learning programmes at their respective hotels. The study participants urged hotel managers and staff members to mentor students and graduates to pass down their knowledge and train them with the required skills. The participants of the study compelled hotel managers not to be apathetic but to be enthusiastic and realize that they can make a meaningful contribution to the lives of new entrants.

Forming great relationships and partnerships with educational institutions that know and understand the hotel business is essential. These institutions offer a great source of talent through in-service training, traineeships or graduate programmes and mentorship (Deloitte, 2020, Fraser, 2020). Partnerships are an advantage to human resource professionals in hotels, education providers and individual participants. They improve the overall perceptions of employment in the hotel industry, offer first-hand exposure to the hotel work environment, and enable organizations to train new entrants with relevant hospitality skills (Deloitte, 2020).

The role and responsibility of hospitality education institutions

Hospitality education institutions are responsible for educating, training, preparing and equipping students with work-ready and future-ready employability attributes. The participants of this study emphasized that they rely heavily on institutions to prepare graduates adequately for the world of work. Therefore, hotel managers in this study expressed severe dissatisfaction regarding the curriculum and suggested that it needs to be reviewed and refined to include foundational, modern and future-ready employability attributes as well as lecturers with practical industry exposure.

HM 2 “suggested that “*students have to have the responsibility to ensure that they have the correct employability attributes. Hospitality education institutions need to focus on more practical ways to instil knowledge, and skills into hospitality management graduates. Hospitality academic institutions ask a lot of money for the qualifications, and have extremely limited practicals or no practicals in various functional areas of a hotel.*”

HM 1 highlighted “*it is important that the people teaching the course themselves are aware of the industry requirements. You can't expect to develop a product when you, yourself are not well equipped in the requirements.*”

In consensus, Rowe and Zegwaard (2017) highlight a need to consider redesigning the curriculum with employability as the foundation where students can identify and link their education to a desirable graduate competency. Furthermore, Spowart et al. (2019) elaborate on the employability skills embedded in the curriculum and marks awarded for employability. In addition, academics exhibiting teacher's qualifications as well as practical industry experience are also essential, not just an academic qualification in the field (Kleynhans et al., 2014; Wakelin-Theron, 2014, Ngoepe & Wakelin-Theron, 2023).

While, Chauke et al. (2015) point out that tourism and hospitality institutions are money-driven. This leads to the intake of people who are not 'fit' for the industry since students are selected according to their grades and ability to pay fees, which refutes their appropriateness for the hotel industry through passion. Although these graduates are qualified, the job is performed in a way that exhibits a lack of passion. This could contribute to graduates not possessing the correct employability; they could be apathetic and uninterested as they are not passionate about this subject or the field of study and only want a job. However, some educational institutions believe that it is not their obligation to produce work-ready individuals (Moolman & Wilkinson, 2014). These dissimilarities contribute to the mismatch between employers, academia, students and graduates, where graduates find it difficult to transition from the classroom to the workplace. Nonetheless, the inability or reluctance of education institutions to produce employable graduates will result in hospitality management graduates who do not possess the knowledge, skills, and competencies that enable them to secure employment and be prosperous in the hospitality industry (Botha et al., 2012; Moolman & Wilkinson, 2014). Therefore, the industry will not absorb them (Spowart et al., 2019). The discussion will now progress to the employability attributes required by hotel managers.

Employability attributes required by hotel managers

The participants of this study indicated that they were satisfied with the following employability attributes displayed by hospitality management graduates: personal attributes, entrepreneurship; teamwork; technological ability; appearance, and attitude. The findings reveal that hospitality education institutions deliver well-equipped graduates with these employability attributes. However, the participants of the study highlighted that they were dissatisfied with the following employability attributes and characteristics displayed by hospitality management graduates: lack of confidence; basic housekeeping skills; work readiness; instant gratification; people skills; communication; self-esteem; attitude; computer literacy; professionalism CV writing skills; learning; product knowledge; apathy; etiquette; operational vocabulary; corporate language, communication: writing skills, customer experience, value and contribution; and people skills.

HM 1 indicated, "The basic knowledge of the job itself, there is a lack of or general lack of understanding of the job practically if you take students who are coming on their first work-related learning exercise...they don't have a complete understanding of the actual tourism industry they don't have an understanding of the link between Tourism and Hospitality once you get into the property they have a limited understanding of how the hotel operates and how that links to the general hospitality picture."

Hospitality management graduates should focus on these areas to enhance their employability. Hotel managers expressed that most attributes would worsen due to online learning as hospitality graduates have not interacted with guests and other people. However, this list will assist hospitality education institutions to identify the employability attributes required by hotel managers in four- and five-star hotels.

The role and responsibility of hospitality management graduates

The study participants indicated that hospitality management students and graduates play a critical role in their own employability. Students and graduates are responsible for conducting research and fully immersing themselves in what they are studying. They should be fully attentive in class and while carrying out their work-integrated learning programmes. It is important for individuals who aim to secure and retain employment in the hotel industry to know the scope and objectives of the tourism and hospitality industry before they enrol in any hospitality programme.

Hotel managers strongly discouraged rote learning behaviour where students sit in class and cram for tests and exams and forget what they have learned soon after. The participants of the study expressed that they were unhappy with the entitlement displayed by graduates. Graduates need to show their value through meaningful contributions that will increase revenue, guest satisfaction and competitive edge (Abas & Imam, 2016). Hospitality graduates will continue to find themselves in challenging situations as many graduates are in the employment market. Graduates must find ways to stay competent and competitive and enhance their employability to secure and retain employment (Esterhuysen et al., 2023; Spowart et al., 2019). This is particularly important in South Africa since high youth unemployment rates exist (Graham & Mlatsheni, 2015; Cunnien, 2017).

HM 2 highlighted that it is important for managers to continuously upskill themselves and stay relevant to keep up with the current trend and contribute toward organisational goals. Managers must encourage and harness every entrepreneurial skill they have to survive.

HM 2 further mentioned that *“We must acknowledge that the stumbling blocks are going to be there but it doesn’t help if you just put a plaster on it the whole time. There needs to be some kind of solution. It needs confrontation and sometimes confrontation is necessary and that’s going to be to the benefit of everybody, the staff. It’s going to benefit the business, it’s justifiable.”*

In consensus, Connell and Page (2014) highlight that graduates should have a clear perspective regarding their self-identity and employment prospects. It is crucial to know how to create their own understanding of employability and the roles they need to play in the labour market (Connell & Page, 2014). Brooks and Duty (2016) believe that hospitality students should implement the following tips to make themselves employable upon graduation: asking for professional advice; participating in extracurricular activities at university; keeping a record of the skills acquired in a possible portfolio format (Wakelin-Theron, 2014); volunteering at local organizations; being mobile and flexible; gaining networking skills; conducting research on the graduate job market; and being confident. The discussion will now progress to the future readiness of hospitality management graduates. As employers of hospitality management graduates, hotel managers ought to understand millennials' attitudes, work styles and career expectations. The current work environment is digitalized – it consists of a more globalized workforce and there is an increase in millennials in the workplace. These changes have created a growing focus on unionization (the process of grouping employees into a labour union), which will be the arbitrator between the employees and company management (Business Dictionary, 2020); safety, gig work (revenue-producing activities that do not include traditional long-term employment); and human resource technology (Gig Economy Data Hub, 2020).

Future readiness of hospitality management graduates

The participants of this study indicated that future-ready graduates should possess the following attributes: old-school hospitality value systems; grit; practicality; entrepreneurship; basic knowledge; soft skills; open-mindedness; attention to detail; courage; empathy; a



learning spirit; departmental knowledge; knowledge; customer service; and communication skills.

HM 4 indicated *“I do not agree with it so much because you never going to be ready. I mean you are shaped and created in an environment that you have been brought in.*

“In a way, you can be ready if you get to know what the industry is about and if have the passion and the attitude but you can never be ready because establishment has its challenges and you have to mould yourself to fit in.”

HM 6 stated *“uh well I guess these young ones are the future so I mean and it is what you make it for yourself.”*

HM 7 mentioned, *“future-readiness, when I hire someone, they know the basics they know they what to do, they know the procedures, they know the hygiene standard of the specific star grading of the hotel or restaurant.”*

Great emphasis should be placed on entrepreneurship, which will assist in curbing the high unemployment rates in South Africa, help drive innovation and creativity, and further enhance the employability of hospitality management graduates. The top ten skills that will be required will by the WEF (2020) have been identified below.

Table 1: Top skills identified required in the Fourth Industrial Revolution

The World Economic Forum (2020) as well as Chidera (2022) acknowledged that by the year 2025, the skills necessary to perform most occupations would change substantially.	The ten skills identified by the World Economic Forum (2020) for the year 2025 include
1) analytical thinking; (2) active learning strategies; (3) creativity, originality and initiative; (4) technology design and programming; (5) critical thinking and analysis; (6) complex problem-solving; (7) leadership and social influence; (8) emotional intelligence; (9) reasoning, problem-solving and ideation; and (10) Systems analysis and evaluation (World Economic Forum, 2020a).	(1) analytical thinking and innovation; (2) active learning and learning strategies; (3) complex problem-solving; (4) critical thinking and analysis; (5) creativity, originality and initiative; (6) leadership and social influence; (7) technology use, monitoring and control; (8) technology design and programming; (9) resilience, stress tolerance and flexibility; and (10) Reasoning, problem-solving and ideation.

Source: WEF (2016; 2020) and Chidera (2022)

In addition, the top three skills deemed necessary for the year 2030 are: (1) higher cognitive skills, (2) technological skills, and (3) social and emotional skills (World Economic Forum, 2016; Jezard, 2018). Higher cognitive skills comprise complex information processing, advanced literacy, writing, critical thinking, and quantitative and statistical skills (World Economic Forum, 2016). Graduates who possess self-learning, problem identification and critical thinking skills have the high-level talents that the industry requires. These traits are commonly described as higher cognitive abilities (Gao, 2019). However, according to Gao (2019), exceptional test scores and expertise are increasingly important in entry-level positions. While, Deloitte (2021) indicates that some of these long-term attributes that can be developed through learning, experience and practice include imagination, teaming, empathy, social intelligence, curiosity, sense-making, resilience, critical thinking, creativity, and emotional intelligence, and adaptive thinking.

Both hospitality HEIs and hospitality management graduates need to take note of these employability attributes in order for graduates to be successful in the hotel industry. There is a long way to go for both of these stakeholders since most attributes mentioned in the literature did not match the attributes identified by the hotel managers. The discussion will now progress to the role of human resource management in the hotel industry.

Human resource management (HRM) in the hotel industry

The study participants highlighted that human resource managers could contribute significantly to the employability of graduates by being more attentive and hands-on when students are carrying out their work-integrated learning programmes.

HM 2 stated “*It is the human element and you can take away the human element as much as you want but you will still have to come back to one thing, hospitality is nothing without us, it cannot be a computer. I don’t want to be a computer, we need to make sure that the students don’t lose the old value systems, this is a fight that we have to keep on fighting.*”

Hotel managers indicated that not only do hospitality education institutions, hotel managers and students have a role to play regarding the employability of graduates but so do human resource professionals. Human resource managers are able to assist new entrants in their transition from tertiary education to the workplace by facilitating induction programmes, mentorship and providing training development, which will ensure that graduates are up to date with the requirements of the hotel industry. This may result in positive employee retention, empowered employees and increased workplace engagement (GetSmarter, 2021). This is something new because although Spowart et al. (2019) addressed all the previous matters, they did not incorporate human resource management in the South African environment. According to Chauke et al. (2015), training in the tourism and hospitality industry equips people to meet the labour needs of employers as a means of stimulating local growth. The hotel industry must take the training of hospitality students and graduates seriously. It is a great contributor to the performance of the graduates, which has an impact on guest satisfaction and thus affects the profitability of the hotel.

Practical implications

This paper contributes to the literature on graduate employability and hospitality education institutions in the hospitality domain to address and review both the industry and the workplace to make it more attractive and rewarding to young graduates. The findings and suggestions are made to assist hospitality education institutions, hotel managers, hospitality management graduates, students and future researchers, particularly now in this time of technological advances in a knowledge economy and globalization. The paper furthermore assists to enhance the educational model that still dominates hospitality management programmes in preparing graduates for careers. In terms of value, the study suggest that a good understanding of the factors that contribute towards the employability of hospitality graduates will be a positive step towards retaining graduates in the hospitality sector, advancing the industry, and obtaining more sustained graduate employment in the future. This study will further assist hospitality education institutions to improve their hospitality curricula and precisely address the attributes relevant to and necessary in the hospitality industry. This study can further be utilized as an instrument to recognize the capability of graduates to become future managers.

Recommendations

The relationship between education institutions and hotel managers together with human resource managers is important. Ongoing conversations and engagement between these stakeholders will benefit the tourism and hospitality industry as a whole. According to Mgaiwa (2021), these partnerships will assist educational institutions with refining and improving their curricula by ensuring that they include up-to-date and future-ready knowledge, skills and competencies. If academic institutions design their curricula without engaging the industry, the programmes offered may fall short of societal needs and increase unemployment among graduates. Therefore, education institutions need to redesign and realign hospitality qualifications that are future-ready to equip students for the industry. The issues of partnerships

and collaborations between education institutions and the hotel industry have been suggested by several researchers (Lie et al., 2008; Kleynhans et al., 2019; Spowart et al., 2019; Mgaiwa, 2021). The lack of these partnerships may result in higher unemployment rates, graduates leaving the hotel industry and pursuing careers in other industries, and a greater mismatch between the employability of hospitality management graduates and the requirements of hotel managers. Graduates and students are encouraged to pay close attention to the nature of the hotel industry and its demands. They are further encouraged to invest in lifelong learning and upskill themselves to remain competent and competitive since employability in the hospitality industry is not a one-sided approach.

Conclusion

The study presented factors that contribute towards the employability of hospitality graduates. The findings of the study highlighted that forming great relationships and partnerships with educational institutions that know and understand the hotel business is essential. These institutions can offer a great source of talent through in-service training (WIL and WIE), traineeships or graduate programmes (Deloitte, 2020). Hospitality education institutions, hotel managers, hospitality graduates and human resource personnel have a great responsibility to ensure that graduates are competent, competitive, and valuable and can make meaningful contributions to the hotel industry.

These partnerships are an advantage to human resource professionals in hotels, education providers and individual participants since they improve the overall perceptions of employment in the hotel industry, offer first-hand exposure to the hotel work environment, and enable organizations to train new entrants with relevant hospitality skills (Deloitte, 2020). This research contributes significantly to education and curriculum design for improving employability among hospitality management graduates. As a result, the study contributes on an empirical data basis for the many employability approaches that exist. Institutions and governments are placing a greater emphasis on employability as the main expected outcome. Therefore, it is critical to demonstrate the impact of the various attributes and factors related to employability from several angles and groups to support graduates and students in different academic disciplines. In conclusion, this study highlights that both hotel managers and graduates need to understand the employability attributes required by graduates better. The better the understanding, the better graduates' chances are of securing, retaining and sustaining satisfactory employment.

Limitations of the study and future directions

The main drawback to this study is the sampling size, which influences the generalisability of the findings. Since data was only gathered from hotel line managers from four- and five-star hotels in Pretoria, the findings cannot be generalized to all hotels in South Africa. The low level of response from the managers suggests that the results may not be generalizable to all graduates from hospitality education institutions and all managers in the hotel industry in Pretoria. Moreover, the limitation in the number of responses gathered in this study is similar to the limitation that Kleynhans et al. (2019) recorded. They conducted a study in the City of Tshwane that targeted front office, housekeeping, and food and beverage managers. Although the targeted sample size was not reached, this is common for hotel managers. Fraser (2017) mentions that due to the demanding nature of their work, hotel managers are well-known for generating small sample sizes. Although this is a contributing factor in this study, the researcher identified other reasons for the participant sizes, namely: (1) COVID-19 restrictions; (2) low staff morale; and (3) hesitation in participating in any form of research. The researchers acknowledge that some attributes used in this study may be interrelated and overlap with one

another. Some attributes may be categorized differently by other researchers depending on the nature of the research.

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