**Concluding Editorial: Is talent management a strategic priority in the hospitality sector?**

As this theme issue demonstrates, hospitality operators concur with the notion that talented people can help differentiate one organisation from another and influence business success. This being the case, the arguments *for* a strategic approach to talent management (TM) are widely understood by the vast majority of respondents to this theme issue, and are convincing. The evidence shows that for TM to be viewed as strategic, it should be integrated into the day-to-day activities of all hospitality practitioners and have clear links to an organisation’s overall mission and strategic direction. Strategic talent management (STM) is also perceived as having an impact on customers and current and future employees, as they all have a stake in being led by, working with or being served (in the case of customers) by talented people. The articles in this issue illustrate a range of challenges associated with a strategic approach, in that the talent itself is elusive, transient and fragile. Managing this talent strategically requires skill, time, professionalism and a long-term perspective. One respondent refers to talent as “sacred” and another as “the soul of the business”. There is clearly a yearning for great talent to be acquired, retained and developed and some feelings of disillusionment and frustration at how hard this is to achieve in practice.

This concluding article provides a short summary of the most significant themes across all the articles, highlighting some of the key actions and implications arising from these.

1. **The role of line managers in attending to employee development and wellbeing as a cornerstone of strategic talent management**

In the opening Editorial, this theme issue defines STM as being concerned with creating an integrated and sustainable approach to developing a flow of talented people throughout the organisation. It highlights the importance of line managers at all levels being fully involved in TM processes and identifies the most common challenges that arise from this professional responsibility. The paper argues the case for hospitality operators to focus on employee wellbeing, in the form of supportive and enabling behaviours by line managers, to help motivate and retain talent. This sentiment is echoed in a number of other articles, in particular in the viewpoint paper by Bratton and Watson *(Talent management, emotional labour and the role of line managers in the Scottish hospitality industry: A round-table discussion)*.

Examining the role of line managers in emotion management and TM, Bratton and Watson highlight line managers’ perceptions on supporting staff to express the required emotions in roles where significant customer contact is the norm. The line manager’s role in TM is explored by testing out a model (Bratton and Gold, 2017: 89) that identifies four sets of line manager (LM) behaviours and processes. While views on the value of TM were positive, with clear intent and focus, the understanding of emotion management was far less well developed. The strategies managers used to support staff in this area were informal and reactive, with no formal training being provided. The paper identifies line managers’ developmental skills as a priority for improving TM processes for customer-facing staff and suggests an increasing awareness of the concepts of emotion management and emotional labour.

**Actions and implications**

The requirement for line managers at all levels to develop a range of soft skills as part of their TM responsibilities has emerged as a strong theme throughout this issue. D’Annunzio-Greens’ overview of the strategic question article (*Cornerstones of talent management as a strategic priority in the hospitality sector)* identifies the importance of concern for employee wellbeing, developing positive relationships and positive work attitudes with employees, being authentic, building trust and sincerity and providing a high level of organisational support for achieving a more sustainable approach to TM.

Bratton and Watson *(Talent management, emotional labour and the role of line managers in the Scottish hospitality industry: A round-table discussion)* argue that the skills required of line managers in TM processes should be clarified and embedded into development and performance management activities to ensure that there is the necessary alignment for achieving a strategic approach to TM. They also draw attention to using incentives and reward as a means of encouraging skills development. Embedding those skills into human resource (HR) processes will facilitate buy-in and commitment and communicate messages to employees about the organisation’s strategic talent priorities.

1. **Strategic talent management as a lever for cultural and behavioural change in hospitality**

The role of TM practices in facilitating culture and behavioural change is a strong theme throughout the papers.

Bratton’s case study *(The role of talent development in environmentally sustainable hospitality: A case study of a Scottish National Health Service training and conference centre)* examines the extent to which TM policies and practices enable and improve the environmental management strategy within a hospitality organisation. It illustrates how TM interventions change and shape the development of the skills and attitudes required to embed a pro-environmental culture in the organisation. The findings resonate with many of the other key themes presented here including: the important role of line managers as carriers of culture; the role of recruitment and selection of new staff who are culturally aligned to the pro-environmental agenda; the development of contextually appropriate development initiatives to help communicate and embed the new values; and the importance of a strategy to engage with and encourage participation of all stakeholders.

The way in which TM processes enable a customer service culture is addressed by at least half of the papers. Reilly’s viewpoint paper *(Building customer centricity in the hospitality sector: The role of talent management)* analyses the strategic role of TM as a vehicle for cultural change, specifically related to building customer centricity in the hospitality sector. It illustrates how companies are changing their policies and processes as they respond to internal and external pressures to emphasise a “build” rather than “buy” approach to talent identification and development. The paper makes a strong case for the role of TM in changing culture and presents the views and experiences of hospitality experts who collectively emphasise the importance of using TM practices to encourage behavioural and attitudinal change and also to underpin a values-driven approach to people development practices.

In their conceptual paper *(A dialogic reframing of talent management as a lever for hospitableness),* Ramdhony and D’Annunzio-Green draw attention to the importance of service and the guest experience as a key value differentiator in hospitality. The paper considers how the unique talent of hospitableness can be leveraged by the TM process and emphasises the strategic importance of hospitableness to higher levels of customer satisfaction by providing authentic and genuine care and attention to guests. It advocates consideration of a softer and more human-centred approach to TM, and more dialogic (communicative and participative) approaches to the employment relationship.

**Actions and implications**

Most of the papers discuss the importance of developing line managers as champions of the new culture and developing appropriate line manager behaviours.

Bratton suggests a redesign of recruitment and selection processes to ensure sustainability of STM through the integration and measurement of values-specific criteria, as well as the adoption of a blended e-learning approach to new training initiatives, allowing for continuous delivery with lower resource and time commitment than more traditional methods.

Reilly makes recommendations for the development of a strong, realistic and compelling employer brand, and highlights the importance of ongoing evaluation of the TM approach against the organisation’s aims or strategy, allowing accurate and bespoke responses to talent problems at local levels.

Ramdhony and D’Annunzio-Green *(A dialogic reframing of talent management as a lever for hospitableness)* present a softer conceptualisation of TM, applying this specifically to the pursuit of hospitableness. They argue that this involves setting up communicative structures, such as mentoring circles, shadowing and online forums, to discuss examples and responses relating to hospitableness. The culture of service that promotes the ethos of hospitableness needs to be embedded in organisations’ discursive practices (such as in strategy documents, mission statements, policies and other cultural artefacts). Practitioners are encouraged to institutionalise hospitableness as being integral to their brand strategy and cultural value system, as well as to give consideration to the role of discourse and dialogic acts in reinforcing or changing the way that accepted practices are viewed, thus helping to change stakeholders’ perspectives.

Bratton and Watson *(Talent management, emotional labour and the role of line managers in the Scottish hospitality industry: A round-table discussion)* suggest including some element of emotional labour training in organisational development strategies, given the ever-increasing focus on customer service within the sector and the current paucity of this training.

1. **The importance of customised and contextualised approaches to strategic talent management in the hospitality sector**

Almost all the papers in this issue discuss and confirm the importance of context when it comes to developing successful STM policies and practices in the hospitality sector. The academic viewpoint paper by Sheehan, Grant and Garavan *(Strategic talent management: A macro and micro analysis of current issues in hospitality and tourism)* specifically focuses on this and discusses a range of contemporary macro and micro factors that impact on TM in the hospitality sector. The complexity and influence of macro- and micro-level factors, such as talent shortages and skills gaps, lead the authors to suggest a strategic and customised approach where TM processes are flexed and designed according to nuances across the sector in, for example, large multinational corporations compared to micro small and medium-sized enterprises. The authors acknowledge the significant economic and employment contributions of the sector, but highlight the need for improvement and development for the sector to reach its full STM potential.

In their viewpoint paper *(Talent management practices in small and medium-sized enterprises in the hospitality sector: An entrepreneurial owner-manager perspective)*, Chung and D’Annunzio-Greenfocus specifically on the SME context and evidence a preference towards inclusive approaches to TM, which are felt to be more appropriate in smaller organisations where every employee’s contribution counts. There is also evidence of personalised approaches to employee retention for *key* employees, i.e. those seen as essential to business success and who would be hard to replace. The SME context was likened to a “family” by many respondents and they voiced the challenge of being able to strike an appropriate balance between the formalisation necessary to achieve business objectives and the appeal of a more informal culture that allows more individualistic and bespoke TM decisions to be made.

**Actions and implications**

Sheehan, Grant and Garavan *(Strategic talent management: A macro and micro analysis of current issues in hospitality and tourism)* outline the importance of a shared responsibility for TM, with senior-level commitment, line manager expertise and a pivotal role for governments in shaping national hospitality and tourism strategy. They urge practitioners to adopt a multi-stakeholder approach to enhance TM. Within organisations, they stress the need for improved employee voice mechanisms and coherent TM practices, such as competitive reward and training opportunities, to strengthen the employer brand. For TM to be sustainable, they argue for a shift towards the improvement of working conditions and ongoing efforts to reduce work intensification and mitigate against continuing labour market challenges.

In the viewpoint paper by Chung and D’Annunzio-Green*,(Talent management practices in small and medium-sized enterprises in the hospitality sector: An entrepreneurial owner-manager perspective),* a strong message emerged from the SME respondents about the importance of an inclusive approach and the emergence of talent over time. This more individualised approach, emphasising employee growth and potential, should be built into marketing and brand messages to attract talented employees with an interest in entrepreneurial activities whose career development preferences could be aligned with those of the organisation.

1. **Strategic talent management requires new and innovative ways of working and advanced skills in collaboration, resilience, communication and adaptability**

The papers highlight a number of exciting new ways of working and challenge practitioners to consider these in addressing the need to improve STM. The case study by Francis and Baum *(HR Transformation within the hotel industry: Building capacity for change)* examines the role of TM strategies in organisational restructuring and repositioning in a medium-sized hotel company. It presents the complexities facing HR professionals as they engage in a strategic restructuring intervention, in an attempt to move towards a more efficient and effective HR function that allows them to better support the organisation’s talent strategy. This example shows the challenges and tensions experienced by the HR function as it strives to assume new roles and responsibilities in building line manager TM capabilities and to work in partnership with other leaders to develop more effective resourcing and development initiatives. Francis and Baum recommend the adoption of dialogic approaches to challenge current practice, recognising the role of language and conversations in changing ways of working.

The dialogic approach, which emphasises the role of conversation and communication, is an area highlighted within a number of papers. In their paper *(A dialogic reframing of talent management as a lever for hospitableness),* Ramdhony and DAnnunzio-Green acknowledge the challenges of transposing the notion of hospitableness to commercial settings, and present a conceptual framework which reframes TM as a non-managerialist dialogic process, encouraging a free exchange of views and ideas between key stakeholders and creating a better balance between employee and employer needs and interests, and a healthy psychological contract.

Bratton’s case study *(The role of talent development in environmentally sustainable hospitality: A case study of a Scottish National Health Service training and conference centre)* suggests a dialogic approach to employee participation which will enable conversations around the new values and increase shared knowledge and understanding of the new pro-environmental culture.

**Actions and implications**

Francis and Baum *(HR transformation within the hotel industry: Building capacity for change)* recommend training and development interventions that encourage managers to embrace inconsistencies and deal with tension and paradox as well as dialogic approaches to challenge current practice, recognising the role of language and conversations in changing ways of working.

Sheehan, Grant and Garavan *(Strategic talent management: A macro and micro analysis of current issues in hospitality and tourism)* discuss the requirement for dialogue and discussion within organisations and across organisational sectors regarding useful ways of developing TM strategies. The implications for TM practice need to be examined from a multi-stakeholder perspective, taking into account the unique strategy and context of the organisation and the individual responsibilities of managers, employees, governmental agencies and educators.

A number of the papers within this issue advocate a partnership approach to TM, highlighting skills in collaboration, resilience and adaptability. Internally, this might encourage all levels of staff across the organisation to work together on the talent retention agenda, emphasising the fact that internal talent is fluid, and managers need to enable this and not create barriers to it. Externally, this might mean: working closely with an employment agency or labour market expert to better understand the external environment in the area of recruitment; collaborating with other hospitality operators to pool resources or expertise in order to reduce retention problems and offer employees additional development opportunities; or partnering with educational providers to offer suitable experiences to students as a way of networking with and developing new talent.

1. **Strategic talent management is constrained by economic pressures and day-to-day operational demands**

The findings provide evidence that day-to-day operational demands restrict the time and resources available to think, reflect, plan and develop a strategic approach to TM. This final theme is particularly relevant to the SME sector, although the sentiment was raised in almost every contribution, albeit in different contexts in that operational issues are distracting managers from strategic TM. Chung and D’Annunzio-Green *(Talent management practices in small and medium-sized enterprises in the hospitality sector: An entrepreneurial owner-manager perspective)* present an owner-manager perspective of TM practices in SMEs. They examine a range of pressures driving TM strategies and practices, particularly ongoing operational demands driven by pressures to survive in challenging external and economic environments. The overwhelming challenge for TM in SMEs is to see beyond potential current short-term business challenges and pressures and invest in longer-term business growth.

In their contribution, *(Strategic talent management: A macro and micro analysis of current issues in hospitality and tourism)*, Sheehan, Grant and Garavandiscuss the resource poverty in SMEs and the negative effect this has on STM due to financial and operational pressures and the lack of necessary expertise, driving a more informal TM approach. They discuss the challenging position of owner-managers who have to juggle the operational and strategic parts of their role on a day-to-day basis. While this is not ideal, it does enable them to develop a well-grounded understanding of the TM supply and demand within their organisation.

**Action and implications**

In their paper *(Talent management practices in small and medium-sized enterprises in the hospitality sector: An entrepreneurial owner-manager perspective)*, Chung and D’Annunzio-Green note the emotional ties that owner-managers make with current employees and alumni. This helps with understanding particular employees’ career aspirations and development requirements. The positive relationships that are forged often last well after the employee has left, resulting in good alumni networks being formed from which future talent may be re-employed or which may lead to useful employee word-of-mouth referrals.

Sheehan, Grant and Garavan *(Strategic talent management: A macro and micro analysis of current issues in hospitality and tourism),* suggest tailored and individualised approaches to staff communication and a differentiated and culturally aligned employer branding strategy, allowing SMEs to showcase examples of good practice. Chung and D’Annunzio-Green find evidence of employees taking responsibility for their own development and working together with owner-managers to identify appropriate development activities to accommodate personal interests. This should be viewed as good practice in SME’s to increase feelings of employee autonomy and involvement and encourage staff loyalty.

**Concluding remarks**

This collection of papers highlights some of the academic perspectives, benefits and challenges that exist around the area of STM and how hospitality operators are responding. Each paper stands alone and illustrates a particular viewpoint or case study example. The contributions show evidence of a high priority being given to TM processes and a real belief in the importance of STM to sustainability and success. The papers also illustrate the challenges that operators are facing. There is some common ground across all the papers in terms of STM priorities, and this concluding article has drawn together five recurring themes identified as being particularly relevant to hospitality organisations when considering a strategic approach to TM.

These themes are: the role of line managers in employee development and wellbeing; the value of TM as a lever for culture change; the importance of contextualising approaches to TM; the need for new and innovative ways of working to achieve a strategic approach to TM; and barriers to the development of a strategic approach caused by economic pressures and day-to-day operational demands.

I hope the contributions within this issue will stimulate further debate and discussion on how hospitality operators can move closer to a strategic approach to TM. New and innovative approaches to (in many cases) long-standing problems are needed along with a willingness to change and think differently in the context of the current external and internal environment.