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Are hospitality graduates making too many compromises? What they give up may lead to turnover

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Abstract

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Title: Are Hospitality Graduates Making Too Many Compromises? What They Give Up May Lead to Turnover

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Keywords:

career experiences, career importance, hospitality education, turnover

INTRODUCTION

Previous researchers suggested a discrepancy between what employees expect and what they experience as one of the reasons hospitality employees leave the hospitality industry (Blomme, Van Rheede, & Tromp, 2009; Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000). In addition, factors employees find important, but do not experience at a high enough level, may lead the employees to search for a job elsewhere. According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2013), turnover is almost 50% higher in the leisure and hospitality industries (4.8% per month) relative to private companies overall (3.3% per month). In addition, retaining quality staff is becoming increasingly difficult (Walsh & Taylor, 2007). Therefore, it is important to determine where the major gaps exist between importance and experiences of career factors for hospitality graduates. In addition, determining the gap is important so educators and industry professionals can attempt to reduce the gap and reduce turnover intentions.

Significance of study

Although Richardson (2009) examined career factor expectations of hospitality students, researchers have not examined the gap between the career factors hospitality graduates find important and their experiences in the hospitality industry. In addition, this research attempts to predict turnover intentions by examining the gap between what hospitality graduates experience and what they find important. In addition, this research is significant for both hospitality students and hospitality researchers. Future hospitality graduates may use the information to determine if their perceived importance of career factors match the reality of the hospitality industry. Researchers and educators may use the information to continue defining the direction of hospitality management careers by attempting to provide a clearer picture of the industry or putting more emphasis on hospitality internships. In addition, educators may use the information

to ensure current student expectations are realistic with respect to the careers available and the working conditions of the industry.

Purpose of the research and objectives

The purpose of this research was to examine if differences between actual experiences of hospitality graduates and the perceived importance they placed on career factors can lead to turnover intent. The specific research objectives are 1) determine the difference between career factor expectations and important career factors; 2) analyze the difference between career factor expectations and important career factors can predict turnover intention; and 3) confirm a regression model by examining both graduates within the hospitality industry and those who had already left.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers suggest a difference in pre-existing expectations of the hospitality industry and the reality of the industry as a cause of the high turnover in the hospitality industry (Blomme et al., 2009; Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000). Turnover intentions can begin while still in college (Blomme et al., 2009) or develop once a student graduates.

Turnover intentions of hospitality students and graduates

Blomme et al. (2009) found 66% of hospitality students intended to enter the hospitality industry. Lu and Adler (2008) conducted a study in China and found only 68% hospitality students intended to enter the hospitality industry. Similarly, Richardson (2008) found over 50% of hospitality students surveyed were considering careers outside of the hospitality industry. Moreover, 33% of the students claimed they would not be working in the hospitality industry

once they graduated. With these high percentages, it is important to examine why hospitality students may not enter the hospitality industry.

Richardson (2008) examined the propensity of hospitality students to not enter the hospitality industry further, and found 46% of the students with work experience claimed they would not work in the hospitality industry. Of the students who claimed they would not work in the hospitality industry, 96% stated this decision was a result of their work experiences in the hospitality industry. This was similar to Roney and Öztin's (2007) study, which found as Turkish tourism students gained more work experience in college, their perception of the tourism industry become more negative. Roney and Öztin (2007) suggested this might be due to inaccurate expectations of the tourism industry, which Richardson's (2009) findings further supported. Richardson's findings indicate students might not have a clear idea of careers and working conditions in the hospitality industry.

Having no intent to go into the hospitality industry may begin as a student, but the intent may or may not be the same as what actually occurs. In hospitality research, varying percentages of graduates stay in the hospitality industry. Blomme (2006) found 17% of graduates had no intention of entering the hospitality industry. King, McKercher, and Waryszak (2003) found between 48% ($n = 205$) and 53% ($n = 146$) of the hospitality graduates either did not enter the hospitality industry or no longer worked in the hospitality industry. Most alarmingly, Blomme (2006) found after 6 years of graduating from The Hague Hotel School, 70% of graduates were no longer in the hospitality industry.

The hospitality industry has a high turnover rate compared to other industries. However, having students and graduates with no intention to enter the hospitality industry warrants further research into why this may be occurring.

Turnover intention causes and retention

Stalcup and Pearson (2001) examined the causes of turnover for hospitality managers. The authors found 86% of hospitality managers who left a hospitality job stayed within the industry. As a follow-up to Stalcup and Pearson's research, Walsh and Taylor (2007) concluded the remaining 14% of the experienced managers left the industry for good. Alonso and O'Neill (2009) found owners and managers agreed that finding labor was a difficult task. In addition, the owners and managers agreed that turnover and other staffing problems were issues at their businesses. Moreover, Davidson, Timo, and Wang (2010) mentioned the turnover rate of operational employees is 51% and the turnover rate of managerial staff is 39%. Reasons experienced managers leave the hospitality industry may be similar to why hospitality students and graduates decide not to enter, or leave, the hospitality industry.

Lu and Adler (2008) found the top reasons hospitality and tourism management students in China listed for not entering the industry to be they were personally not interested, they did not think their personality would fit, the low pay, and the lack of development prospects. A solution to personality fit, development, and interest would be a greater focus on placing hospitality graduates in jobs that align with their needs. Robinson, Barron, and Solnet (2008) suggested improving career path options by integrating career management throughout the entire curriculum. If career management is included through an entire curriculum, this may help with students finding jobs they are interested in and increase the likelihood of finding a job with development prospects.

Cho and Erdem (2006) found managers who were unable to give suggestions for organizational improvement were more likely to leave an organization. Cho and Erdem concluded allowing managers to offer suggestions could not only increase retention, but also lead

to ideas that could improve the organization as a whole. This was congruent with research done by Maxwell, Ogden, and Broadbridge (2010) who found Generation Y hospitality students needed a challenging job to keep engaged. The critical thinking skills required by Cho and Erdem's suggestion may be the challenge needed.

Increased levels of turnover lead to increased costs to an organization. Parsa, Tesone, and Templeton (2009) suggest new employees are significantly cheaper to replace than high performers with a long organizational tenure and strong knowledge base. The most expensive employees to replace were those in complex jobs at large upscale hotels (Tracey & Hinkin, 2008). For example, front-desk jobs within hotels could cost more than $12,000 to replace when considering pre-departure, recruiting, selection, orientation, and training costs as well as productivity loss (Tracey & Hinkin, 2008). In addition, Davidson et al., (2010) indicated the turnover expenses for their 64 sampled hotels could be $7 million a year for managerial staff and $42 million a year for line employees, or approximately $110,000 and $656,000 respectively per hotel.

With the high costs of turnover, finding the reasons people leave is important. Murphy, DiPietro, Rivera, and Muller (2009) demonstrated the top reasons multi-unit managers of casual restaurants left their jobs, 1) lack of necessary managerial knowledge and skills, 2) high performance/profitability standards, and 3) lack of organizational/human resource standards. Similarly, employees who found working conditions unfair or unreliable were more likely to leave (DiPietro & Condly, 2007). Therefore, high levels of self-efficacy, task value, and task importance could increase employee motivation (DiPietro & Condly, 2007) and possibly decrease turnover intentions.

Conclusions

With the percent of hospitality graduates leaving, or not intending to enter, the hospitality industry ranging from 17% to 70% (Blomme, 2006), it is important to examine potential causes of this turnover. Previous research has focused on students' expectations (Blomme et al., 2009; Kusluvan, & Kusluvan, 2000; Richardson, 2009) and how these expectations change after entering the industry. Because expectations change, it is imperative to study the importance of career factors and what hospitality management graduates experience in the hospitality industry. Walsh and Taylor (2007) found individuals who are leaving the industry are the ones who are educated, such as those with a hospitality management degree, therefore, to retain an educated hospitality workforce, a reduction in hospitality graduate turnover is important.

RESEARCH METHODS

The focus of this research study was to examine how gaps between the importance of factors within a career, such as high pay, and the experience within a career of the same factors affects turnover intentions of hospitality graduates. This study utilized two similar questionnaires distributed to hospitality graduates. Participants who were in a hospitality career took a survey about their current career. Participants who were no longer in a hospitality career, but were in the past, took a survey about their previous career in hospitality. Other than present and past tense, the surveys were identical.

Instruments

The web-based questionnaire contained four parts. Part one contained demographic questions developed by the researchers. Parts two and three evaluated the importance and experience of career factors respectively. Parts two and three were a modified version of Richardson's (2009) questionnaire which was based on a questionnaire originally developed by Kyriacou and

Coulthard (2000) to examine job factors based on importance and expectations of their availability within a teaching career. Part four evaluated turnover intentions for respondents who were still in the hospitality industry. The researchers used a multi-question format with influences from other researchers in developing these questions (Boshoff & Allen, 2000; Chau et al., 2009; Hom, Griffeth, & Sellaro, 1984; Karatepe & Karatepe, 2010; Murphy et al., 2009).

The survey began with the informed consent letter and the next page contained demographic questions, including one asking if they were in a career in hospitality. This qualifying question would then determine which of the two questionnaires they would complete. The qualifying question had three options: 1) I currently work in a hospitality related industry; 2) I currently work in and industry unrelated to hospitality; and 3) I currently am unemployed. If a respondent indicated they were presently working in a hospitality related industry, they completed the questionnaire designed for graduates in the hospitality industry. If a respondent indicated they were not working in a hospitality related industry, they completed a questionnaire with similar questions, but with a focus on their previous experiences and perceptions when they were in a hospitality related industry. No respondents chose the "I am currently unemployed" option.

The questionnaire had a section rating importance of career factors and another rating the experience of career factors. Examples of these career factors include a career that is enjoyable, with high earnings, is respected, where a degree would be useful, and with the opportunity to travel abroad. The importance of career factors had a 1 to 8 scale in order to add an item identified as "Critical." Critical meant if the item was not present, the respondent would not remain in the hospitality industry. The experience and turnover scale was a 7-point, Likert-type scale. Hospitality graduates still in the hospitality industry responded to three questions on

turnover intentions to determine an individual's intent to leave a hospitality career in general, within the next year, or within the next 5-10 years.

The researchers hosted the web-based survey on Surveymonkey.com™. The initial page was a letter describing the survey and the confidentiality of the data per Institutional Review Board standards. The respondents agreed to voluntarily participate in the survey by proceeding to the next page. The only required question was whether the respondent was in the hospitality industry. This question was required to move forward because the wording on the career factor experience items was dependent on the respondents' response.

The respondents were able to track their progress through a current page number out of a total number. Recommendations by Dillman (2007) and Park and Khan (2006) indicated the shorter the survey, the more likely an individual is to start and complete it. Based on these recommendations, the survey was limited to three pages. For each statement, respondents choose one item on the respective scales. The researchers did not place restrictions on internet protocol (IP) addresses because individuals attempting to complete the survey multiple times did not seem likely.

Participants and procedures

Participants for this research study were hospitality and tourism graduates from US four-year programs within the last ten years. The researchers identified the four-year programs from *The Guide to College Programs in Hospitality, Tourism, & Culinary Arts* (International Council on Hotel, Restaurant, and Institutional Education, 2012). The researchers identified 121 programs and made an initial contact inquiring about willingness to participate in this research study.

Because some programs are protective of their alumni contact information, the researchers distributed the survey in two ways. First, if the researchers received the emails of the

graduates, then the researchers sent a direct email to each individual participant. However, if the program contact was unable to share the contact information but wanted to participate, the researchers sent the survey information, directions, and a survey link to the program contact who then distributed it to the potential participants.

SPSS v19.0 was used for all statistical analysis. The researchers used SPSS v19.0 to run linear regression with the difference of career factor importance and career factor experience predicting turnover intention. In addition, the researchers compared the difference scores between those still in the hospitality industry and those that have left the hospitality industry.

RESULTS

Department heads from 10 out of 121 hospitality and tourism programs agreed to include their alumni in this research. Common reasons for not participating included university policy, they were conducting their own survey with alumni, and some were not interested with no reason given. Of the ten programs, eight sent the questionnaire directly to their graduates to protect their alumni databases. At least three indicated they could not send the survey directly, but they would forward the survey to their alumni association and they would send the questionnaire to alumni from there. The methods of distribution varied and did not allow for a total population number. However, the average of the two contact lists provided to the researchers was 146 alumni. If the average is used for the remaining 8, this would result in an approximate population of 1460. There were 165 usable responses resulting in an 11.3% estimated response rate.

Difference and turnover

The gap between what employees want, or need, and what they experience has been hypothesized and shown to be a cause of turnover or turnover intent (Blomme et al., 2009; Kusluvan, & Kusluvan, 2000; Richardson, 2009). In order to numerically represent the gap, the

researchers calculated a career factor difference score for each respondent by subtracting their

experience score from their importance score. While this score does not have a scale, a large

positive number would mean the career factor importance score was greater than the career

factor experience score, while a negative number would indicate a respondent's overall

experience score exceeded their importance score of the collective career factors. These

difference scores are in Table 1. Those in the hospitality industry had a mean difference score of

0.89 (*SD* = 1.06) and those that had left the industry had a mean difference score of 1.72 (*SD* =

1.11). A higher positive number indicates a larger gap between what a hospitality graduate finds

important and what they are experiencing, or experienced, in their career.

Table 1. Average difference mean scores of career factor responses for hospitality graduates in a hospitality related industry (*n = 117*) and not in a hospitality related industry (*n = 48*)

Career factor A career…	Hospitality Industry		Not in Hospitality Industry	
	Mean	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*
that I find enjoyable.	1.38	1.41	2.41	1.72
with colleagues that I can get along with.	0.54	1.35	1.35	1.51
with a pleasant working environment.	0.99	1.36	2.14	1.60
that is secure.	1.10	1.75	2.19	1.78
that provides intellectual challenge.	0.97	1.79	2.42	2.04
that has good promotion prospects.	1.65	2.00	1.93	2.44
which gives me responsibility.	0.42	1.28	1.30	1.42
with high earnings over length of the career.	1.49	1.73	2.49	1.84
where I contribute to society.	1.34	1.75	2.26	1.87
where I can use my degree.	-0.60	2.23	-0.79	2.62
where I gain transferable skills.	0.50	1.65	1.00	1.75
that is respected.	0.87	1.72	1.56	1.87
that has a reasonable workload.	1.60	2.03	2.42	2.15
with high quality resources and equipment.	1.02	1.73	1.77	2.32
with the opportunity to travel abroad.	0.32	2.27	0.72	2.58
with career mobility easy to get a career anywhere.	0.52	1.84	1.19	2.54
that can easily be combined with parenthood.	1.16	2.48	2.37	2.80
that has a good starting salary.	1.19	1.90	2.79	2.38
where I can care for others.	0.37	1.68	0.93	2.57
that offers opportunities for further training.	1.02	1.72	1.52	2.03

Note: Difference score was calculated as the difference between importance and

experience

The respondents still in the hospitality industry responded to statements to determine their intent to leave the hospitality industry. These questions included "I often think of choosing a new career," "I intend to change my career in the next year," and "I intend to change my career in the next 5-10 years." The scale was a 7-point Likert-type scale with 1 representing not at all, 4 as neutral, and 7 as definitely. The average of these three items resulted in a turnover score, which for purposes of this research represents the respondents' intention to leave the hospitality industry. The mean turnover score for those still in the industry was 3.49 ($SD = 1.81$). The mean score is slightly below neutral, indicating on average those still in the industry are leaning towards not leaving the industry.

The researchers ran linear regression to determine if the mean difference score could predict turnover. The mean difference score was found to be a significant predictor of turnover ($t = 4.65$, $p = .000$). The resulting regression equation is: T = 2.88 + 0.68D, where T = turnover and D = difference between the career factor importance score and the career factor experience score. The regression equation indicates with each single average unit increase in the difference between the career factor importance and experience scores, the turnover intention of the respondent increases by 0.68. This would indicate a respondent would need an overall mean difference score of a 1.65 to get to neutral on the turnover scale, once the mean difference goes above 1.65, the respondent will likely be on the half of the turnover scale between neutral and definitely.

The mean difference score for those in the hospitality industry was 0.89 and for those that left the industry was 1.72. When using the regression equation, a D-value of 1.72 results in a turnover score of 4.05. For those that had left the industry, the score exceeds the 1.65 that would be required to move the turnover scale from leaning towards staying to leaning towards leaving.

While not statistically proven, this is evidence supporting a larger gap between importance and experience of career factors could result in higher turnover.

Of the 117 respondents still in the hospitality industry, 21 had a difference score of 1.65 or higher. The findings of this research indicate these individuals are leaning towards leaving the hospitality industry at some point. The researchers used an independent samples t-test to determine if the turnover mean was significantly different between those with a difference score of 1.65 or greater versus those with a score less than 1.65. The Levene's Test for equality of variance resulted in an *F*-value of 0.046 ($p = .830$) which is insignificant and indicates both samples have equal variances, confirming the assumption of equal variances required for the independent sample t-test. The *t*-value when comparing the two groups was 4.17 ($p = .000$), which indicates the two groups are significantly different. The mean for those with a difference score equal to or greater than 1.65 was 4.83 ($SD = 1.67$) and for those less than 1.65 was 3.15 ($SD = 1.66$). Because the neutral number on the turnover scale was 4, this adds additional evidence to the claim that individuals with difference scores above 1.65 have a higher turnover intention than those with a score below 1.65.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The researchers found a lower percent of hospitality graduates who no longer worked in the industry than previous researchers. Previous researchers found ranges between 48% (King et al., 2003) and 70% (Blomme, 2006), but of the current sample, 29.1% had already left the hospitality industry (48 were no longer in the hospitality industry of the 165 total respondents). However, this is similar to the 32% of hospitality graduates who did not intend to go into the hospitality industry (Lu & Adler, 2008). A number of reasons could have led to the lower percentage, such as time since graduating or some unknown economic factors.

Through internship opportunities, students are able to confirm their career expectations. The results of this study indicate if the career factors that are important to graduates are also experienced, then they are more likely to remain in the hospitality industry. Ko (2007) suggested individuals who have successful internships become more committed to their future careers in the same industry. In addition, Kim, McCleary, and Kaufman (2010) found students based more of the career decisions on firsthand information, such as internships and real world experiences, as opposed to what faculty teach in class. If an internship does not meet a hospitality graduates expectations, it could allow graduates to decide a certain company or part of the hospitality industry is not a good fit for them and then try other parts of the hospitality industry until they do find a good fit. Strong internship partnerships between academia and the industry do, and could continue to, help ensure students are receiving a variety of internship opportunities. Ayres (2006) found over half of managers believed their education had little to no influence on their career path, but it was more influenced by the experiences they had. This further emphasizes the importance of having highly experienced graduates.

Internship opportunities will only go so far in helping students develop an accurate picture of what the hospitality industry is like. The important career factors for hospitality graduates who stayed compared to those that left the hospitality industry were a career with a pleasant working environment, with a good starting salary, that provides an intellectual challenge, and is enjoyable. Those that left the industry may have done so because of the working conditions and long hours. However, those that stayed also experienced these same factors, but experienced some of the more important items such as enjoying what they do, being challenged, and having new experiences. In order to retain educated hospitality graduates, industry practitioners need to remember to challenge their employees, offer new experiences and

development opportunities, and remember the hospitality graduates earned a degree in hospitality for a reason, and to take advantage of that by offering them responsibilities and challenges that use their degree.

The only factor where the experience rating exceeded the importance rating was a career where the hospitality graduates could use their degree. This was the case for both those who were still in the hospitality industry (-0.60) and those that had left the industry (-0.79). This number was the lowest because both groups indicated they experienced using their degree, but the importance was average. This is a good indication for those hiring the hospitality graduates. Keeping the experience high will keep this factor from becoming a problem. If the graduates do not feel they are using their degree, it is likely this factor could become more important.

For the hospitality graduates who had left the hospitality industry, the largest difference between career factor experienced and perceived as important was a career with a good starting salary. Brown, Arendt, and Bosselman (2014) indicated hiring managers believe the starting salaries they offer meet the expectations of those they are hiring. For those still in the hospitality industry (mean=1.19), this was not as big of an issue as those who had left the hospitality industry (mean=2.79). This indicates hiring managers may not have an accurate perception of this issue.

For the hospitality graduates still in the hospitality industry, the largest difference score was for a career with good promotion prospects. Promotions can be used to reduce turnover (Ebbin, 1999) and typically employers use merit or performance based criteria for determining promotions (Cho, Woods, Jang, & Erdem, 2006). Hospitality organizations may not have the positions available to promote all employees who feel they deserve a promotion, which could be an even bigger issue for employees who have a hospitality education. Employers could be

creative when proposing new responsibilities to their employees, if the employees perceive it as a promotion, it could have the same turnover reduction impact as an actual promotion.

The regression equation tying the difference between career factor importance and experience scores to turnover intentions was statistically significant. While not generalizable, it is clear hospitality graduates who did not experience what they find important are more likely to leave the hospitality industry. In order to reduce the gap, hospitality graduates need to find jobs in the hospitality industry that align with their expectations. This may require experimenting with several jobs prior to deciding on a specific career path. Another alternative would be employers being flexible, if possible, to adjust a job in a way that it is a better fit individual employees. For example, an employer could find an employee who rates a job where they contribute to society as high. For this employee, they could be the hotel's representative at convention and visitor bureau meetings, or given other opportunities to get involved with the community. Hinkin and Tracey (2010) suggested moving from a mentality that turnover is high and to accept it, to a mentality that people are assets and need to be managed effectively to ensure they stay.

Implications

The regression equation developed in this research indicates the larger the collective gap between experiences and importance of several factors used in deciding on a career can lead to turnover. For industry practitioners, this highlights the importance of having an understanding of what your current and future employees want. Some items in the list, such as a challenging job or offering further training, can have little to no cost to an employer, but could reduce the gap between what an employer is offering and what an employee wants. Some items, such as starting salary or having the opportunity to travel, may not be easily changed within a job and therefore

need to be communicated with potential hires to ensure there is a match for both the employer and employee.

Industry practitioners would benefit from understanding why employees leave. Managers traditionally use exit interviews to understand these issues, but they are not always accurate or the information is not always used (Garretson, & Teel, 1981). If hospitality professionals could get a better understanding of what their employees perceive as important, they could use their resources to address these issues. The 20-item survey used in this study would be a good start for employees to take so managers could get a better understanding of what their employees want. If an employer is able to understand what their employees perceive as important, and could address even one issue, they could decrease turnover intent and save the company money in replacement costs.

In addition, future hospitality graduates, or hospitality employees in general, may be able to use the survey in order to determine if what they feel is important matches what is available in the segment of the hospitality industry they are considering. Researchers and educators can add this as a resource to use when trying to provide a clear picture of the industry. Lastly, the results reaffirm the need for internships. The more segments a hospitality student can experience, the better idea of how the segments differ and which can meet the important career factor expectations they have. Some students may use their current jobs, or easy to get jobs, for their work experiences and internships. Perhaps a better relationship with local business could lead to a more diverse work experience or internship that would expose students to more career possibilities.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

As with any research, these findings come with certain limitations. Because the population sampled came from a small number of institutions, the findings may not extend to all hospitality or tourism graduates. If more schools were able to participate, the sample would have been larger and more generalizable which would have yielded better results for both academics and industry.

An issue of note is that 100 of the respondents (60.6%) were female. Even though the role of a woman staying at home to take care of the family is outdated, it may have had an influence for some respondents and could have skewed responses to career factors about work life balance or a career that fits well with starting a family. Lastly, some hospitality graduates may never have entered the hospitality industry, but this was not an option on the qualifying question. As a result, it is possible that respondents who never entered the hospitality industry after graduating were with those who had left the hospitality industry. However, this would have led to a difficulty in answering questions and may have been the cause of a few incomplete questionnaires.

Future researchers should take the information from this study to further the knowledge base around what causes hospitality graduates to choose other career paths. In addition, future researchers could introduce similar findings into the classroom and track the influence these findings have on hospitality student and graduate perceptions. This research focused on the importance and experiences of hospitality and tourism graduates as a whole, without discriminating against which type of hospitality business. Future researchers may be able to determine differing perceptions based on career paths of hospitality graduates. Lastly, there are likely commonalities among jobs within each part of the hospitality industry. Recruiters or career planners could use the survey as a job placement tool for hospitality students by having them fill out the survey and matching their important career factors with jobs that tend to offer those

factors within the hospitality industry. In order to do this, a much larger sample would be needed

that could be fragmented into the numerous jobs within the hospitality industry.

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