The career paths of general managers in Dubai's luxury hotel sector

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ABSTRACT: This study aims to identify the career paths of general managers (GMs) of five-star hotels in Dubai through 20 face-to-face interviews. GMs see themselves as leaders and role models for their staff. Most participants have spent their careers working in the hospitality industry in operational departments and various locations around the world. The most important competencies to possess include strategic management, revenue management, and effective communication. The biggest challenges faced by GMs were missed opportunities and lack of support. Dubai-specific challenges related to the oversupply of hotel rooms, high expectations of owners and customers, and difficulties in talent acquisition and retention. In the future, GMs are expected to use and employ more technologies to tackle these issues and to stand out in the luxury hotel sector.

KEYWORDS: careers, career development, Dubai, five-star hotels, hospitality industry, UAE

Introduction

The hospitality industry plays a great role in many economies as a source of revenue and opportunities for employment and development (World Travel and Tourism Council [WTTC], 2020). That applies to Dubai, one of the seven emirates of the United Arab Emirates, with its world-class offerings and establishments in all hospitality-related sectors: hotels, restaurants, airlines, travel agencies, theme parks and more (Dubai Corporation of Tourism & Commerce Marketing [DTCM], 2020). As of October 2019, Dubai had welcomed 13.5 million international visitors, with the key source markets being India, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom. The total number of hotels in Dubai increased from 706 in September of 2018 to 716 in September of 2019, accounting for a total of 119 779 hotel rooms (DTCM, 2020). The travel and tourism sector accounted for 11.9% of the total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2019 (WTTC, 2020). The city's nominal GDP stood at AED398.1 billion (US$108.4 billion) in 2018 (Department of Economic Development, 2020). Moreover, the hospitality industry is known to be a fast-paced and every-changing environment with high pressure, long working hours, elements of servitude as well as part-time or seasonal workers (Davidson et al., 2011; Gebbels, 2019; Wang, 2013). The increase in tourism flows and consumer awareness as well as changing lifestyles among younger generations are key factors in fuelling the demand for luxury hotels worldwide (PR Newswire, 2015). Luxury offerings can be defined to be non-essential, high quality and associated with premium prices, providing social value and fulfilment for individuals (Wu & Yang, 2018). And though luxury itself may be more of a mindset than a necessity, it still provides value for individuals and companies alike (Wu & Yang, 2018), thereby further challenging the competence and flexibility of general managers (GMs) of five-star hotels to deliver their promises.

The purpose of this study is to identify the different career paths of GMs of five-star hotels in Dubai to better understand the skills needed to reach the GM level, and to be aware of the challenges they faced during their career development, in addition to determining the future trends in the luxury hotel sector and how hospitality professionals can prepare themselves for these. Therefore, the two research questions posed were "What is career development in the hospitality industry?" and "How are the career paths of GMs of five-star hotels in Dubai different or similar to those elsewhere?". Furthermore, six research objectives were defined: First, to define career development and its stages for hotel GMs; second, to explore the career paths of the GMs of five-star hotels in Dubai; then to determine the factors which impact the career development of GMs of five-star hotels in Dubai. Next was to explore the competencies required for career development of hotel GMs in five-star hotels, and then to analyse the challenges and barriers for hotel GMs of five-star hotels in their career development, and lastly to identify the new trends and challenges impacting the hospitality industry and GMs.

The five-star hotel sector was chosen because Dubai is known for its luxury offerings. The high expectations from customers and owners demand a lot from staff and management to offer customised products and experiential services. No research has yet been done in the Middle East, in Dubai specifically, on this, making it of interest for the researchers to explore.

Literature review

The role of general managers in hotels
The role of GMs as leaders and role models for their employees is crucial (Comfort & Franklin, 2014; Buecker et al., 2016). The specific leadership qualities needed by GMs are interpersonal skills, communication skills, mobility and adaptability, along with

trustworthiness, enthusiasm, and a spiritual foundation (Akrivos et al., 2007; Burwash, 1999; Cassel et al., 2017; Chung-Herrera et al., 2003; Ng & Pine, 2003). Folkman (2014) revealed the major success factors for top management are inspiration and motivation, facilitation of the growth of their employees, display of high integrity and honesty, powerful and effective communication, and development of strategic perspective.

Today, the role of female GMs is ever more prevalent in the hospitality industry. With 44% of its employees and 40% of its directors being female, Accor Hotels value this diversity and recognise its importance for the group's performance (Accor Hotels, 2018). This is higher than what was found in the banking industry, where 35% of the supervisory board at Deutsche Bank and only 18.3% of managing directors are females (Deutsche Bank, 2020). Hilton Worldwide and Marriott International, Inc. also focus on equality and employing minorities of all kind — whether it is people with a handicap, veterans, women and others — through their global inclusion and diversity programmes (Hilton Worldwide, 2020; Marriott International, Inc., 2018). In fact, 50% of the board of directors at Hilton are female (Hilton, 2019).

Career and career development
The concept of a career goes back to the 1950s. A career is "the pattern of work-related experiences that span the course of a person's life" (Greenhaus et al., 2010, p. 18). Wang (2013) defined career development as the accumulated activities and roles during a person's working life. A career usually consists of stages reflecting one's transition from one phase to the next and not as a mere sequence of jobs (SAQA, n.d.). This indicates that a career is a dynamic and subjective experience (Gebbels, 2019). The theories around career development have been categorised into five theories by Gebbels (2019). The theories of content focus on intrinsic influences from one's environment. The theories of process focus on the interactions and decision-making processes of individuals. This includes the developmental theories by Super (1990, as cited in Leung, 2008), who defined four stages consisting of exploration, growth, maintenance, and decline.

The theories of content and process, which are based on social learning theory, consider both one's characteristics and their developmental approaches. There are also theories that emerged based on the lack of theories on minority groups and gender roles, such as women's career development. Finally, there is the constructive route, which contributes to vocational theory and includes the boundaryless career approaches that are considered most prevalent in the 21st century.

Career development of general managers in hotels
Traditionally, GMs in the hospitality industry start by training or going to college, gaining experience in "food and beverage" and "rooms" departments, before becoming a GM (Li et al., 2007). Individuals would usually start at the bottom of the hierarchy and move up the ladder (Harper et al., 2005). Then, employees would remain loyal to the same company throughout their careers, due to promises made to individuals concerning their future (Ladkin & Riley, 1996). In this bureaucratic model, mobility was upward, and promotions were awarded based on competition (Creed & Hood, n.d.). The profile of GMs in the hospitality industry in the US in 1995 was relatively young, college-educated, male, specialised in hospitality or business and willing to stay in the industry (Nebel et al., 1995). Now, individuals focus more on

career self-management or the boundaryless career in which one can enter certain levels of a specific career ladder if they possess the necessary competencies and qualifications, even if they have a different background (Greenhaus et al., 2010; Harper et al., 2005). However, Okumus et al. (2016) showed a similar profile of GMs in Turkey: dominantly male, aged between 30 and 49, 56% held a bachelor's degree, and half of the respondents majored in hospitality and tourism.

The competencies required for career development in hotels
Competencies refer to the attributes of individuals that enable them to perform their job in a proficient manner (Bharwani & Talib, 2017). These often incorporate the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for certain positions or industries (Bharwani & Talib, 2017; Walsh & Koenigsfeld, 2015; Wang, 2013). Bharwani and Talib's (2017) model in Figure 1 relates to four dimensions consisting of cognitive competencies (knowledge), functional competencies (skills), social competencies (attitudes and behaviour) and meta-competencies (motives and traits). Moreover, business acumen is needed to run multinational companies, such as being aware of local business practices, global politics, economic market conditions and knowledge of local customs (Smith et al., n.d.), alongside human relations and linguistic skills (Okumus et al., 2016).

In 2013, Wang devised a competency model for employees of the hospitality industry which examines the relationships among career competencies and career success from a career development point of view. Bharwani and Talib (2017) and Wang (2013) classify meta-competencies as the most influential among other skills.

Furthermore, Chung-Herrera et al. (2003) developed the leadership competency model since no specific competency model existed then for the hospitality industry. This model consists of eight factors (see Figure 2). Nevertheless, Chapman and Lovell (2006) criticised this model for not having a measurable scale for the competence levels. They believe that the hospitality industry is too complex to teach core skills to trainees.

FIGURE 1: A competency framework for hotel general managers (Bharwani & Talib, 2017)

Leadership-competency model for the lodging industry

Factor	Mean	Dimension	Mean
Self management	4.32	Ethics and integrity	4.58[a]
		Time management	4.28
		Flexibility and adaptability	4.22
		Self development	4.12
Strategic positioning	4.17	Awareness of customer needs	4.39
		Commitment to quality	4.26
		Managing stakeholders	4.21
		Concern for community	3.67[b]
Implementation	4.16	Planning	4.23[c]
		Directing others	4.15
		Re-engineering	4.02
Critical thinking	4.15	Strategic orientation	4.24[d]
		Decision making	4.18
		Analysis	4.17
		Risk taking and innovation	4.03
Communication	4.12	Speaking with impact	4.27
		Facilitating open communication	4.14
		Active listening	4.06
		Written communication	4.06
Interpersonal	4.09	Building networks	4.20[e]
		Managing conflict	4.07
		Embracing diversity	4.01
Leadership	4.09	Teamwork orientation	4.25[f]
		Fostering motivation	4.19
		Fortitude	4.14
		Developing others	4.02
		Embracing change	3.98
		Leadership versatility	3.97
Industry knowledge	4.09	Business and industry expertise	4.09

FIGURE 2: Leadership-competency model for the lodging industry (Chung-Herrera et al., 2003)

While skills are proficiencies developed through training, abilities refer to the innate capacity to perform certain tasks (Werner & DeSimone, 2012). Kay and Moncraz (2004) revealed that employees in different managerial levels should have basic knowledge in human resource management. More technological competencies were seen to be used and needed in the entry level and middle management, while financial competencies were most important for upper management along with formulating plans and delegating tasks (Okumus et al., 2016).

Garavan et al. (2006) assumed that a certain level of education is important for enhancing individuals' career prospects. Ladkin (2002) showed that those with a master's degree got to the GM position almost two years faster than those who had a vocational background. Harper et al. (2005) predicted that in the future, having a master's would be the key differentiator when competing for managerial positions in hospitality firms.

Factors impacting career development in the hospitality industry

GMs' personalities and attitudes were key influencers in their career development (Ng & Pine, 2003). Ladkin (2002) mentioned that people's career ambitions are based on their values and needs and determine their career direction. Others (Akrivos et al., 2007; Garavan et al., 2006; Gebbels, 2019) have stressed the following characteristics: spirituality, self-motivation, tolerance, taking risks, commitment, common sense, strong memory and sentimental stability. Physical stamina, and especially immaculate appearance for female GMs, were considered important by Akrivos et al. (2007), as well as honesty, loyalty, goal orientation and hard work (Okumus et al., 2016). While Gebbels (2019) also mentioned the factor of personal relationships.

When it comes to work-related factors, it is expected that as individuals progress, they will take on more responsibility, gain knowledge and skills (Ladkin & Juwaheer, 2000), learn new languages (Inkson & Myers, 2003) and develop their self-confidence (Inkson & Myers, 2003). Career mobility is often used as a strategy by individuals to progress faster, especially when self-initiated (Benson & Pattie, 2008; Ladkin & Juwaheer, 2000). Mobility can happen internally (within a company) or externally (between companies). However, individuals may be resistant to relocate due to the fear of losing promotional opportunities back home or due to potential burden on their families. Furthermore, international assignments do not always guarantee increased compensation, benefits, or promotion (Benson & Pattie, 2008), and can reduce time for personal development (Buecker et al., 2016). Having connections in the

industry seemed to also have a great effect on managers' careers, especially having a mentor (Garavan et al., 2006; Gebbels, 2019; Okumus et al., 2016). Gebbels (2019) also mentioned that factors like cultural, economic, or political environments can influence the career choices of individuals.

The challenges for hotel general managers in their career development

GMs can also face challenges in their career paths or the environment in which they operate. Brownell (1994) was the first to capture the perceptions of male and female hotel GMs. Women seemed to view the existing networks of their male colleagues as the most challenging aspect in their career development, followed by conflicts between family and work. Ng and Pine (2003) also examined the perceptions of Hong Kong's GMs on career development issues, highlighting that female GMs lacked a support system at work and unfairness in promotions, while male GMs had greater challenges with inadequate job knowledge and lack of support systems at work. Both agreed that sexual harassment at work, being married, and childcare responsibilities were the least of the problems. Challenges resulting in a GM leaving a property, as per Birdir (2002), relate to management's conflict with the property owners and lack of respect from stakeholders.

New trends and challenges impacting the hospitality industry

Only a small number of GMs emerged from sales and marketing, accounting and finance, and human resources (Ladkin, 2002; Ladkin & Juwaheer, 2000; Ladkin & Riley, 1996; Li et al., 2007; Nebel et al., 1995; Okumus et al., 2016). This is predicted to change considering new industry trends regarding better talent acquisition and commitment, optimising efficiency and maintaining a firm's brand image (Davidson et al., 2011).

Furthermore, social media and the implementation of new in-room technologies are seen to impact the luxury sector when it comes to branding the property, attracting customers, staffing, and delivering unique services (PR Newswire, 2015). Other trends in the hospitality industry include the introduction of value-added taxes (VAT), the increase of sharing economy options, the emergence of experience seekers, and tech-savvy millennial travellers (Bharwani & Talib, 2017; Gerdeman, 2018; Jauncey & Nadkarni, 2014). The usage of smartphones and social media are expected to increase when making travel decisions (PwC, 2017). Innovative start-ups and new technologies such as blockchain and virtual reality are already being adopted in the hospitality ecosystem in the UAE, with an increase in pace to be expected in the coming years (ITP Digital Media Inc., 2018). Firms venturing into these new technologies are expected to benefit from promoting the destination, safer transactions, automated loyalty programmes and time savings (Divecha, 2017; ITP Digital Media Inc., 2018).

The expected increase in hotel rooms, stimulated by the upcoming developments and events in Dubai, may pose further challenges for current and future GMs to sustain the competitiveness of the properties they manage and retain their customers (Jauncey & Nadkarni, 2014).

The localisation initiative in the UAE, "Emiratisation", requires all industries to employ a certain percentage of Emirati nationals in their businesses. Here, firms need to pay special attention to accurately representing themselves and understanding the perceptions and expectations of the workforce (Pennington, 2017).

Research methodology

Secondary research

The literature review lays the foundation for the article by summarising the existing approaches, concepts, and findings around the topic. The information in each section is presented in a reverse chronological order to explain how the topic has evolved and which major contributions were noticed. Relevant works were found by searching for the key words or phrases through relevant Boolean searches like "career paths" or "career development", "general managers" or "hotel general managers", "five-star hotels" or "luxury hotels", and "general manager" and "competencies" and "hospitality industry", using online databases, in addition to journals, periodicals, and publicly accessible reports from sources like Hotelier Middle East and the World Travel and Tourism Council.

Primary research

Both qualitative and quantitative methods of data gathering were applied in previous research, however, this study utilised only the qualitative approach, because it is less time consuming than mixed methods, but more exhaustive than quantitative research (Cooper & Schindler, 2014; Creswell, 2009).

Population and sampling

The population consists of all the possible subjects that could be studied and analysed for the specific research. Since the entire population cannot always be accessed, a smaller sample, with similar and generalisable characteristics, can be studied (Cooper & Schindler, 2014). The population for this study consisted of all 106 GMs of five-star hotels in Dubai. The focus was on five-star hotels because they were considered to provide a wide range of sophisticated services (Bundhun, 2012). As of March 2018, there were 106 five-star hotels in Dubai according to the hotel directory on the Dubai Corporation of Tourism and Commerce Marketing (DTCM) website.

Non-probability purposive sampling was utilised for this study. Therefore, the 106 five-star hotels were sorted alphabetically, and then we contacted every second hotel to obtain the contact details of their current GMs. In order to reach the desired number of 20 participants, additional hotels were contacted, and interviewees were asked to recommend other GMs of five-star hotels who may be interested in participating. In total, 72 hotels were contacted, of which 14 declined, 23 agreed and 35 either never replied, did not have a GM or were only available after the allocated research period.

Data collection and analysis

Emails were sent out to potential participants introducing the purpose and aims of the study, along with a form to be signed providing consent to be interviewed. Participants were asked for their permission to be recorded in order to transcribe the interviews at a later stage. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and only five interviewees explicitly asked for notes to be taken.

The semi-structured interview consisted of two sections. First, the demographic information, such as gender, age, nationality, marital status, and current position were requested.

Second, insights from the participants relevant to their career development and paths were obtained through clear open-ended questions. For questions 10, 11, 13 and 14, flashcards were presented to the interviewees. These were based on previous findings from studies around the world regarding the subject matter asked in the questions. Though flashcards are known to be used mostly when conducting focus group research, as per Bryman and Bell (2015), they proved to be beneficial in this study as thought triggers for participants.

A pilot study was carried out with a GM in April 2018. The GM was male, 45+ and had 26 years of industry experience. He had been a GM in the hotel for three years, and four years prior to that was an executive assistant manager in the food and beverage section at another property. This means he followed the traditional path when it came to his career development. He is managing an airport hotel of 579 rooms and values interpersonal skills and relations in the hospitality industry over a degree.

After transcribing the pilot study's interview, the findings were critically analysed, with changes made to the instrument before the actual interviews took place. As a result, the pilot interview was not kept as part of the final interview sample. The changes we made included:

- Age of the participants: these were changed to start realistically from 25 onwards. Since it cannot be expected for an 18-year-old to run a multi-million dollar business, given its demands. Moreover, the age groups were ranged to nine years;
- Demographic information: a question about the marital status of the participants was added, as it opens the conversation about the role that their partners and children had in their career choices;
- The word "host" was replaced by "domestic" in question 15 because the pilot study showed how the participants could mistake the question to mean Emirati GMs as opposed to GMs native to a certain location and the potential advantages or disadvantages that they may have over their international counterparts; and
- The time allocated for the interviews was reduced from 45 to 30 minutes, since most of the information was obtained in that time.

The interviews were conducted over a period of around one month, mid-June to mid-July 2018. An interview schedule was devised according to the number of respondents and their availability. The data collection period took place during summer and the holy month of Ramadan. As a result, some GMs were either on vacation or busy with other projects. All interviews were held in quiet and convenient areas at the respective properties so that the recording and note-taking were done smoothly.

The qualitative data was analysed using the grounded theory approach by deriving abstract meanings and theories from research participants' contributions based on the steps suggested by Creswell (2009). As a result of the data analysis, in total six themes and 18 subthemes were identified.

Findings and discussion

All 20 interviewees were general managers of five-star hotels in Dubai, with some of them even being complex or regional GMs. All GMs were expatriates with none being Emirati. Eight GMs were from Europe, five participants came from other Arabic countries, three were Australian, two Turkish, while one was Indonesian, and one a US citizen. All GMs of this study were middle aged, ranging between 35 and 54 years old, with only two being over 55 years old. Interestingly, only two interviewees were female. Most GMs were married, and some had at least one child, while two were single and one was in a partnership. All GMs had over 18 years of experience in the hospitality industry, with one having worked in hospitality for 40 years. Three GMs had only recently started working in Dubai, while one had been working in Dubai for over 15 years. Many participants had been GMs before their current role, either with their current company or with other firms. For participant 17, it was his first GM position, which he had held then for four years.

Six main themes emerged from counting the frequently mentioned key words and phrases by the interview participants as depicted in Table 1. Any subtheme that was mentioned less than five times was not considered significant enough to be a main subtheme.

Theme 1: Components of a GM's career path

This theme consists of three subthemes: *operational background*, *education*, and *international work experience*. When comparing the profile of GMs of five-star hotels in Dubai with those of previous studies on GM career paths, similarities were seen in the findings of Okumus et al. (2016). These similarities showed male dominance with the majority holding a university degree in the field of hospitality and tourism. The participants of this study, however, were somewhat older than those of Okumus et al. (2016). Furthermore, five out of 20 hold an executive or master's degree, one had a bachelor's in accounting and only one had no formal education beyond middle school. It was evident that all participants spent most of their training and work experience in either or both the food and beverage and rooms departments. Interestingly, seven out of 20 participants spent an extensive time of their career in the sales and marketing department, three of which worked as revenue managers as well. This supports the findings of Greenhaus et al. (2010) and Li et al. (2007), who highlighted that the GM level can be reached so long as one possesses the necessary competencies and qualifications. The traditional path though was more prevalent in this study, which contradicts Gebbels (2019), who believes that there is going to be a shift in the stereotypical paths and roles due to hospitality organisations adjusting their policies and offering more opportunities for their employees. The participants of this study obtained their first GM position between seven and 21 years after they started working in a hotel. Some GMs in our research saw no value in their degrees, e.g. Participant 11, while Participant 14 recognised its value only after starting to work. Participants 2, 11 and 15 agreed that university education can help in terms of understanding the terminology and legal aspects on their careers. And Participant 6 saw education as a way for an individual to be aware of his or her own strengths.

Most interviewees argued how domestic or home-grown GMs may have an advantage over expatriate GMs, who still need to learn about the market they go into, which can take then around six months (Participant 2). Participant 2, 4 and 10 mentioned the benefits of knowing the local language when doing business and obtaining connections, because this enables them to do business in an easier manner, which is in line with what Inkson and Myers (2003) have said. On the contrary, Participant 16 highlighted that owners may prefer expatriate GMs for their experience, yet they

come with higher expectations such as the cost of the overall package and benefits, including for their families. Participant 4 also added that if there were more hospitality institutions in the UAE and other countries, then there would be more GMs working in hotels in those countries.

Theme 2: Tasks and responsibilities of GMs
This theme includes the following subthemes: *ensure stakeholder satisfaction*, *financial performance*, *operational performance*, and *leadership management*. Most study participants agreed that there will always be a need for GMs in hotels, regardless of the description or job title. Participant 9 also highlighted the importance of a GM over a hotel manager, who may be able to run the business, but not grow it. The hotel was compared by Participant 8 to Rubik's Cube, with the general manager constantly manging the different sides and colours. On the contrary, Participants 1 and 2 did not view the GM position as an achievement, but more as an inevitable result from the years of input and grit that were invested into the profession, coupled with their performance and capabilities. The GMs role in building relationships, being a motivator, and exercising great leadership supports the findings of Folkman (2014) and Akrivos et al. (2007). All GMs recognise the important role of their colleagues when it comes to implementing the firm's vision and delivering service to guests, stressing the importance of choosing the right people for the team because they must have the same passion to serve the guests. Participant 2 stressed the welfare of her subordinates and the importance of being genuine in order to serve the guests well. Participant 6 also expressed his level of commitment toward his staff, by interviewing each person who wants to work in his property, adding: *...because I share the responsibility and that makes me a partner in your success*, in addition to guiding them in their career progression. The interviewees also agreed with Ng and Pine (2003) on the importance of one's personality and attitude, and they mentioned the need to obtain experience in the sales and marketing and revenue management departments.

Theme 3: Factors impacting the career development of GMs
The following subthemes were derived in this theme: *individual traits* and *work-related factors*. As per the literature, individual traits or personality-related factors that are predominantly fundamental for GMs to possess are very much about emotional intelligence and passion (Ladkin, 2002; Ng & Pine, 2003). Something that was supported by the interviewees of this study, not only because the hospitality industry is viewed as a very tough and demanding industry, hence not suitable for everybody, but also because GMs hold higher levels of responsibility which may lead to some fearing the position. This becomes evident when events such as the health condition of Participant 16's parent also impacted on the decisions he had to make in the process of defining his career. For Participant 7, making certain compromises with the help of his significant other was seen as necessary to ensure their children's stability. Participant 2 had actually been offered the GM position 12 times in her working career before she decided to take on the role, justifying her decision as follows:

> I received my first GM offer when I was in the industry for 14 years. For about six or seven years, I didn't want to be a GM, because I have two kids and a family. And knowing myself, I will spend even more time in hotels if I am GM, so I didn't want to take the position.

However, a couple of participants came to terms with being far away at important times. The role of family was further seen as the reason to join the hospitality industry. For Participants 5, 6 and 12, becoming a GM was their career goal in their teenage years. Particularly, Participant 12 stated: *I watched my uncle who was a GM when I was four years old*. From that moment onward, he knew he wanted to do the same thing. The parents of Participant 8 convinced him to opt for hospitality rather than his field of interest, mathematics. And Participant 1 grew up in a family that owned a lodging establishment. One's passion and self-drive was another important factor. In fact, six participants stressed the importance of continuous learning and development, with Participant 14 saying: *I learn from everyone*. Participant 13 also stressed that throughout the hardship, he never lost his passion because he did something he liked, though training was seen to be offered less over time as they progressed. Nonetheless, the self-initiative to participate in courses or accepting training opportunities was regarded as vital by the interviewees. This is in accordance with Li et al. (2007).

The study participants agreed with Benson and Pattie (2008) on mobility being a work-related factor which either positively or negatively impacted them. The decision for participants to move was almost always coupled with a new promotion or career opportunity. This supports the study by Buecker et al. (2016) on the advantages of going on international assignments and being open and creative. In addition, having a mentor was for some of the current GMs a crucial part of their path, supporting the findings of Gebbels (2019) and Garavan et al. (2006) and contradicting the findings of Okumus et al. (2016). The mentors of the GMs in our study not only gave them professional advice, but were considered more as good friends, even if there was a considerable age difference. Overall, the advantage of having connections in the industry is something that the interviewees advise should be maintained. Economic or political influences were not revealed by the participants, contradictory to Gebbels (2019).

Theme 4: Competencies required by GMs
This theme includes the following subthemes: *cognitive*, *functional*, *social*, and *meta-competencies*. When comparing the competencies required by GMs from the latest framework by Bharwani and Talib (2017), the study participants emphasised the cognitive, functional, and social competencies of strategic thinking, effective communication, adaptability and ethics. Furthermore, the interviewees emphasised the importance of understanding the overall environment in which one operates in terms of the culture, market trends, consumer preferences, politics, and the global market, adding to the complexity of the job. While the GMs in the study of Okumus et al. (2016) considered their main tasks to be formulating plans and delegating tasks, these were things that the participants of our research had been practising at earlier stages in their careers. At the GM level, revenue management skills and industry expertise were vital. Participant 2 valued being proactive by stating that "*...many things can be forecast ahead*".

Innovation and creativity were further reasons for the success, along with integrity and hard work, supporting the findings of Wang (2013). Most participants disagreed with Wang (2013), however, valuing hands-on experience more than training and education, without disregarding the importance of education

in general. For most GMs, their industry experience and capabilities were more impactful than education to accelerate their progress. Nonetheless, education did play a role in their career development, especially in the later stages in which some firms asked them to do executive-level degrees to prepare for the GM role. This is in accordance with Herr et al. (2014), who mentioned that the individual would continue developing within the workplace based on the employers' requirements. Four participants took part in management-related courses offered by Cornell University in the United States. For the interviewees of this study, the speed in which they reached the GM level depended on several factors like education, prior experience, time, changes in careers choices, and family. One participant mentioned how working for a branded firm facilitates a faster career path since the structures are standardised worldwide. One interviewee added that if there were more hospitality institutions in the Middle East, more GMs would emerge from these regions. It is evident that a certain type of personality that can withstand pressure and develop others is crucial. Participant 6 expressed the need for a sense of humour and stamina when dealing with different situations, saying: *You need to have some thick skin, because it's not always gonna go your way.*

When it came to social competencies, most participants stressed the importance of interpersonal skills, including effective communication and listening skills. These skills are crucial for translating the owners' and managers' visions through the service delivered to guests by the employees. Participant 13 values his open-door policy for his staff, expressing clearly: *I'm happy to lead the team, but we are together in the challenge... come to me and I will be there to help and support you.* In addition to that, fairness plays an important role, because GMs are being watched as role models. Knowing the local language was not seen as substantial by the participants, as opposed to the findings of Okumus et al. (2016). For those who worked in different destinations around the world, the Middle East included, they spoke mostly English. Although translators were sometimes needed.

Theme 5: Challenges faced by GMs
This theme consists of two subthemes: *lack of career growth* and *Dubai's hospitality environment*. Interestingly, most GMs said they did not recall any specific challenges in their career development. At most, they were self-made challenges, such as being scared or not accepting certain opportunities, according to Participants 2 and 12. In agreement with Ladkin and Juwaheer (2000), challenges were faced when choosing to move, though it did not apply to each participant, especially in relation to the strain it may bring on their families. This supports the findings of Benson and Pattie (2008).

The study participants expressed the value and scarcity of female GMs in hotels yet mentioned how this is changing in real time. The study by Ng and Pine (2003) focused more on the differences in how female and male GMs rated the challenges they faced. It was clear in this study, however, that both genders viewed similar issues as equally difficult, mostly relating to the perceptions and negative opinions of colleagues, management, or the owners. Most GMs agreed with the findings of Birdir (2002) that the conflict of interest between the different stakeholders is challenging to manage. Lack of respect was not an issue in our study, more so the mistrust that some owners or even previous GMs had against the capabilities of the current GMs. According

to Participant 14: *Every country has its reputation.* Some owners seemed to think that this participant GM would not be able to deliver the luxury service because of his country of origin, yet he proved them wrong through his capabilities. Participants 12 and 14 also mentioned that the perceptions of others made the shift from being a specialist in a certain department to a generalist difficult, especially for those with a background in the sales department who had to obtain more knowledge in the operations or specifically food and beverages. Yet, the support and knowledge of their colleagues were also the reason for their success. Moreover, Participant 9 strongly advises young beginners to *stay away from politics... [and] gossip.* Other challenges faced by general managers related to the chances and opportunities they have missed or that were not offered to them. Participant 19 also believes that it is the *company's role to provide opportunities.*

Several challenges for GMs of five-star properties were identified, revolving mainly around the current oversupply of hotel rooms in Dubai's hospitality market. This translates to higher competition that drive down the prices that can be charged on products and services. Participant 17 was optimistic, saying that *business in Dubai is getting more structured, yet more mature...there is business.* Other GMs, however, were more pessimistic, yet they have plans in place to mitigate the challenges such as tapping into new markets and continuing to deliver the service level as promised. More so, it is important to keep updated, remain relevant and authentic. Both Participants 6 and 12 also stressed the need to *think outside the box.* This is crucial for the luxury sector, since the experiences and expectations of customers vary (Harkison et al., 2018).

Theme 6: Future trends in hospitality
This theme includes three subthemes: *growth of the hospitality industry in Dubai, use of technology* and *advice for future hoteliers.* Five out of the 20 participants had a pessimistic outlook about industry changes being too quick. Along with an increase in hotels of different star ratings opening in line with mega events like the World Expo 2020 in Dubai is the pressure from corporate regarding the operational and financial performance of the property. The way business used to be conducted is also expected to change, as hotels need to operate with more limited budgets, according to Participant 16. The impact of the sharing economy, like Airbnb, on the hospitality industry was only considered a threat by one GM. This can be linked to the fact that these types of lodging options do not compete on the same level as five-star and luxury accommodations. Some GMs see a change in tourists' travel patterns and decision-making, especially millennials, due to new technology. They may seek new locations, seeing Dubai as too expensive, especially for luxury experiences. Therefore, it is important to remain focused on a property's competitive advantages and service levels. Participant 8 added how only big chains will survive in the market.

Some interviewees see the possibility for utilising artificial intelligence and robots in the future as already being implemented by some in the UAE and around the world, as mentioned by ITP Digital Media Inc. (2018). These aspects may come in handy when wanting to appeal to tech-savvy millennials and experience seekers, as mentioned by Gerdeman (2018) and Bharwani and Talib (2017). Since the organisational hierarchy seems to get flatter, the job of GM may also be comprised or fused with that of an operations manager. In general, Participant

16 sees that GMs nowadays need to be more independent and do without a secretary and/or an executive assistant manager because the work of a GM is facilitated by easier processes, structures and technological devices, such as using WhatsApp group chats for quick coordination among staff. Participant 11 agreed: *GMs need to be hands-on*.

With regard to the difficulties of attracting and retaining the right labour, most GMs saw that issue as very prominent, supporting Gebbels (2019). Participant 6, however, confidently stated: *I personally have never found it hard to attract talent… If you become the leader others want to follow, you'll never have it difficult to attract people who want to work with you.* Millennials are and will be the future GMs and staff members working in the hospitality industry. They are also the customers that will be catered to. There still seems to be some confusion or irritation regarding their different mindset compared to that of the current generation of GMs, yet many current GMs recognise the importance of trying to understand and adapt to them. Participant 2 was the only one who expected more tasks to be outsourced to subcontractors in the future.

In a closing remark, the GMs shared some of their advice — based on their years of work experience in the hospitality industry — with young professionals who would like to become GMs in the future:

> *put* [have]… *reachable goals* — Participant 2
> *be yourself* — Participant 10
> *ask a lot of questions…never fear to be judged* — Participant 19
> *it's a lifestyle…not a job* — Participant 11
> *It's not for everyone* — Participant 7
> *take your time* — Participant 13
> *Do not fight for it…attract it* — Participant 14
> Participants 3, 4 and 6 valued staying *humble*.
> *It's a fantastic industry…that can bring* [take] *you all over the world* — Participant 8

Conclusion

This article gives a perspective of the paths and experiences faced by GMs of luxury properties in Dubai and their important roles for the success and continuous performance of the business. GMs have been recognised as father figures to their subordinates, in addition to being leaders who can encourage their staff and satisfy the main stakeholders (Buecker et al., 2016; Folkman, 2014). These qualities are substantial to the hospitality industry since it is a very demanding environment (Davidson et al., 2011; Wang, 2013). Therefore, GMs must ensure that all aspects of the business are properly planned, executed, and monitored. Over the years, each GM has been through several steps to reach their current esteemed positions, including their education, work experience, refining their competencies, and facing opportunities and challenges (Wang, 2013). Since no previous research examined GMs of five-star hotels in Dubai specifically, this study aimed at closing this gap in the literature.

In this study, 20 out of the then 106 GMs of five-star hotels in Dubai were interviewed between mid-June and mid-July 2018. Most participants had a European background and only two of them were female. Their ages ranged between 35 and 54. Most of them were in committed relationships, and three had children. Most GMs followed the traditional career path, spending a significant amount of time in both the front office and food and beverage departments. This is something that previous researchers have predicted to be different, like Greenhaus et al. (2010). Most participants held a business or hospitality degree, while one held a degree in accounting. The GMs reinforced the importance of skills like strategic management, revenue management, effective communication, adaptability, willingness to learn, creativity, and ethics, along with understanding the market, culture, and laws under which they must operate. The study further encompassed the challenges faced by GMs, which mostly related to the perceptions of others, not taking every opportunity and the differences in the speed of reaching their positions. Most participants predicted a faster progression for the next generation of GMs through the compressed educational programmes and new internal structures of hotels. Dubai-specific challenges were the then current oversupply of hotel rooms, continuous high expectations of owners and customers, and effective talent acquisition and retention. In the future, GMs are expected to employ new technologies to face increased competition and changing consumer demands such as ways to better market their properties and ease processes. All participants expressed their overall joy working in the hospitality industry. Dubai, being a luxury destination, demands that GMs possess the right competencies and mental abilities essential for running luxury properties. Knowing about the nature of the hospitality industry, the context of Dubai and the important characteristics needed in the business, individuals can plan their careers more competently in order to reach their goals and stand out.

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