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Retention of graduate trainee programmes: a case study of Hilton's Elevator fast-track to general manager graduate programme

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ABSTRACT: Developing a talent pipeline through the design of graduate programmes has become a notable trend in the hospitality industry. This trend aims to address skilled labour shortages and alleviate high staff turnover rates. This study examines the impact of career development challenges on individuals' behaviour concerning their aspiration to become and stay as a hotel general manager. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather primary qualitative data. Data analysis involved grounded theory coding techniques employed for data analysis, offering insights into respondents' perspectives and experiences. The findings highlighted the relationship between career development and the elements of attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control, particularly concerning individuals' commitment to the general manager career path. Various career development obstacles and facilitations were found to influence these attitudes. Moreover, career development emerged as a pivotal organisational factor in participants' decision to stay on the general manager career trajectory. These findings enriched the understanding of career development in graduate trainee programmes in the hospitality industry, offering insights into talent management practices for retaining programme graduates and increasing programme efficiency.

KEYWORDS: career development, talent management, theory of planned behaviour

Introduction

As a leading contributor to the global economy, the hospitality sector is a rapidly developing industry fundamentally connected to meeting and exceeding people's expectations by offering high-quality service. As early as 1991, Leslie anticipated a decrease in young people entering the hospitality workforce as the industry expanded significantly. Years later, Agarwal and Naidu (2021) acknowledge that considering the current business environment and rapid advancements in technology, the need for hard and soft skills training is more significant than ever, mainly due to the "war for talent" phenomenon. Since hotels require a highly skilled workforce to remain successful players in today's competitive and dynamic environment, recent graduates represent an excellent talent pool. Thus, graduate trainee programmes became very popular in attracting young talent. However, some argue that there needs to be more focus on talent management theories in discussing the role of graduate trainee programmes (Timisjarvi, 2009).

Talent management involves the strategic identification and classification of employees based on their performance levels, aligning them with suitable positions that leverage their strengths, and ensuring a smooth workforce transition in the organisation (Lewis & Heckman, 2006). In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, a surge in leisure and travel demand means that numerous businesses are grappling with rehiring furloughed workers or recruiting new staff. Moreover, the industry's sluggish adaptation to change, as highlighted by

Singh (2021), exacerbates the hurdles faced in training and talent management, particularly in global enterprises. These challenges underscore the pressing need for innovative solutions to address workforce requirements in the ever-evolving business landscape.

Hilton Hotels Corporation is a leading name in the hospitality industry, with more than 6 100 properties, including luxury, full-service and focused-service hotels, resorts and vacation ownership (Hilton, 2022). The company's main objective, derived from its vision statement, "to fill the earth with the light and warmth of hospitality", is to make every interaction unforgettable, primarily through its exceptional services. The employees or team members, as the company refers to them, represent key players in achieving this goal. The company identified this critical success factor early in its business journey and managed to keep a good employee retention level through a talent strategy that accentuates the offering of professional learning and leadership development programmes and training for global staff at all levels, as well as offering attractive benefits and incentives and a good working environment.

To minimise the threat of facing shortages in skilled young employees, in 2000, Hilton launched the Elevator programme, a graduate fast-track to general manager programme designed to give participants a clear insight into the operational and managerial procedures and challenges of the complete hotel operation, while building the foundational knowledge required by the industry. The incentive for this research project arose from a programme analysis which suggested its inability to reach the programme's objective, with only 13% of Elevator

programme participants currently in a general manager role, while 57% left the company altogether. Apart from the wasted financial investment, there is also a loss in knowledge and skills, as leavers will still use most of the knowledge gained and skills developed as part of the Elevator programme in their new jobs outside the Hilton group.

The company evaluation reports and meetings with the senior director of talent and leadership suggest that the Elevator graduate programme faced substantial challenges. Previous participants had expressed dissatisfaction in multiple areas, such as leadership exposure, programme structure, resilience, initiative, work relationships, organisational communication, job opportunities and alignment between candidate expectations and company realities. Furthermore, the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to exacerbate the programme's retention due to widespread industry furloughs and dismissals. Despite a noticeable trend of participants leaving the programme, the organisation has not proactively investigated the root causes of this problem, or explored potential solutions. This research aimed to fill this significant gap by investigating how the career development challenges faced by participants in the Elevator programme influence their decisions to pursue a career as a general manager with the company. Additionally, the study sought to identify actionable strategies that the company could employ to positively influence participant behaviour and enhance retention rates in the programme.

The purpose of this qualitative study was twofold. Firstly, it sought to understand and explain the relationships between the students' career development difficulties and their behaviour toward becoming and remaining a hotel general manager. Secondly, it strived to understand how the company can support and encourage participants' behaviour to become a GM. While doing so, the study aimed to gain more in-depth knowledge into how various elements of their career progression — such as programme structure and content, organisational communication, job opportunities, relationship dynamics, resilience, trainee initiative and expectations differences — are perceived and experienced by current trainees in the Elevator programme to identify unique perspectives. Moreover, the study intended to discover which difficulties are experienced by these trainees and which influence their behaviour. Thus, this study interviewed trainees currently on their career progression to GM and those who chose a corporate career to search for similarities and differences in their experiences through qualitative data analysis techniques. To demarcate how career difficulties impact participants' behaviour, the following problem statement and research questions have been formulated: What role do career development difficulties play in participants' behaviour of remaining on the GM career path?

- RQ1: How does an Elevator participant's attitude about becoming a general manager influence their behaviour to retain the position?
- RQ2: How do Elevator participants' subjective norms about becoming a GM influence their behaviour to retain the position?
- RQ3: How do Elevator participants' perceived behavioural-control beliefs about becoming a Hilton GM influence their behaviour to retain the position?
- RQ4: How can the company influence Elevator participants' behaviour to remain a general manager?

Literature review

Talent management
Training and talent management continue to be one of the most significant challenges in many large organisations, representing one of the most crucial and urgent aspects of human resource management worldwide (Singh, 2021). The talent management approach involves identifying and classifying individuals based on their performance, aligning them with roles that leverage their strengths, and ensuring a consistent influx of employees into various positions in the organisation (Lewis & Heckman, 2006). A strategic implementation of talent management practices is vital in nurturing a high-performing talent pool tailored for key roles in an organisation (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). This approach effectively fills key positions and fosters employee commitment to the organisation (McDonnell et al., 2017). Notably, the challenges of not managing high achievers appropriately can lead to high employee turnover if their skills and talents are not fully utilised in their roles.

Voluntary staff turnover
The issue of talent management becomes particularly pressing in the context of the hotel industry, where attracting and retaining talent is challenging due to a labour shortage and the short career lifespans of graduates (Goh & Okumus, 2020). About 29.1% of hospitality workers leave the industry within ten years of graduating (Brown et al., 2014). Causes for this high turnover include limited job satisfaction and external job opportunities. Various studies (Katou, 2015; Anthony et al., 2021; Snyman, 2021) confirm the positive link between job dissatisfaction and individual-level factors like unmet expectations and job stress, as well as organisational-level factors such as low pay, unfavourable policies, poor communication and distributive injustice. On the other hand, organisational commitment, influenced by mentoring and employee characteristics (Meyer et al., 2002), has been shown to reduce turnover intentions and behaviours.

Career commitment and resilience
Continuous change is expected in businesses, including the hospitality industry. Research by Bardoel et al. (2014) suggests that employees play a vital role in managing these changes and need support to develop psychological capital and resilience. Resilience involves the ability to endure or bounce back from hardships and quickly return to normal functioning after a stressful situation (Schwarzer & Warner, 2013). Stressful situations occur when individuals perceive a gap between their desired reality (based on goals, needs, wishes and aspirations) and their current circumstances (Parsons et al., 2016). Building resilience involves how individuals deal with these perceived differences. The study concludes that personal cognitive traits associated with resilience include self-efficacy, cognitive control, flexibility and emotional self-regulation.

High workplace resilience is associated with reduced withdrawal behaviour due to positive emotions in the face of work challenges (Indirasari et al., 2019). Organisations can foster resilience by offering training to enhance individuals' knowledge and skills and promoting favourable policies like a work-life balance and flexible hours (Mishra & McDonald, 2017). Building supportive relationships among co-workers also enhances career resilience. Given the increasing complexity and uncertainty in career contexts, effective self-management has become vital

for employees. Self-directedness is positively linked to career resilience and satisfaction, as individuals in control of their work are more likely to find solutions to improve their situations (Lyons et al., 2015).

The study on the connection between a future time perspective and career commitment by Park and Jung (2015) underscores the crucial role of long-term goals, skills acquisition, self-efficacy and dedication to one's career and organisation. Individuals with a future-oriented perspective exhibit higher career commitment, reducing the likelihood of considering job changes. This positive relationship between a future time perspective and career commitment highlights the importance of individuals' perceptions and expectations in shaping their career choices and commitments.

Expectation differences
It becomes evident that these expectations and perceptions vary significantly across individuals, particularly in the context of the hospitality industry. As noted by Anthony et al. (2021), differences in perception can stem from factors such as academic level, status and industry exposure. These variations in perception align with the findings from Kusluvan and Kusluvan's earlier work (2000), indicating that students entering hospitality programmes often lack comprehensive knowledge about industry occupations and working conditions. Furthermore, the study suggests that unmet expectations, especially after gaining industry experience, reinforce negative perceptions about the industry. The negative perceptions are consistent with Richardson's (2009) study, where 46% of hospitality students with work experience did not intend to pursue a career in the industry after graduation. This disparity between perception and reality not only affects individual career choices, but also reflects broader challenges in the hospitality sector.

The importance of aligning employees' expectations with their actual experiences in the hotel industry is well-documented in various studies. Brown et al. (2014) emphasised the negative consequences of unmet expectations, which often led to high staff turnover rates, especially in the early stages of employment. This aligns with Solnet and Hood's (2008) emphasis on meeting new employees' expectations to ensure job satisfaction. Moreover, Han (2022) highlighted how unmet expectations, particularly rewards-related ones, can significantly influence employees' turnover intentions. As careers progress, Brown et al. (2014) found that salary becomes a critical factor driving job satisfaction among employees in the industry.

Trainee initiative and mentoring relationships
The significance of mentoring relationships and initiative in the context of career development becomes evident. Mentoring serves as a crucial support system, providing psychological support, career guidance and knowledge acquisition, thereby facilitating professional growth, as noted by Ayres (2006) and Zopiatis (2007). However, the complexity of mentoring relationships is revealed in the study by Chang and Busser (2017), where mentees prioritise either psychological support or long-term relationship building over immediate career development, highlighting the distinction between coaching and mentoring approaches.

Active knowledge sharing positively impacts the learning environment, the effectiveness of hospitality firms and frontline employees' job satisfaction. Additionally, supervisor

career mentoring connects employees' intention to stay and promotability, leading to greater job satisfaction (Van Vianen et al., 2018). The emphasis on mentoring initiatives in the industry suggests that these programmes are practical tools for shifting from organisation-managed to individually driven careers (Ayres, 2006). Keating's study (2012) highlights that the impact of a mentor depends on their knowledge, expertise, dedication and availability. The level of mentor involvement and student commitment also influences the effectiveness of the mentoring relationship, with mutual commitment being a key factor. Ineffective mentorship is often attributed to time constraints and student interest or initiative (Barnes, 2013).

Effective mentoring relationships require active participation from both mentors and mentees. Scerri et al. (2020) highlighted the mentors' perspective that task-oriented mentoring is most effective when mentees demonstrate commitment and take the initiative in leading the relationship. Barrett et al. (2017) further emphasised the importance of practical mentee attributes, such as motivation and openness to the mentoring process, as perceived by mentors. According to their study, mentees recognising the significance of their role and actively seeking a mentor is crucial. The success of the mentoring process hinges on the mutual commitment of both parties. However, the mentee's willingness and dedication are pivotal in ensuring the relationship's effectiveness and positive outcomes.

Organisational communication
Organisational communication emerges as a vital factor influencing employee turnover intentions. Milman's (2003) study illuminated the positive impact of effective communication on job satisfaction and reduced turnover intentions, especially among dedicated, long-term employees. Timely feedback provided by supervisors, as highlighted by Mustamil et al. (2014), can significantly reduce stress and turnover intentions related to role ambiguity. Restructuring organisational communication processes is essential, as suggested by Chmieleck (2015). Internal communication not only ensures information dissemination, but also fosters a flexible work environment, promoting adaptability, knowledge sharing, idea generation and engagement in achieving strategic goals.

Inadequate internal communication in organisations can be attributed to various challenges, including one-sided communication methods, information suppression, errors and inappropriate language usage. Additionally, communication hurdles are amplified by geographic and cultural differences, as well as obstacles in cross-functional collaboration, as noted by Neill and Jiang (2017). When evaluating internal communication in large organisations, especially those with a global presence, it becomes imperative to acknowledge these complexities. Addressing these challenges effectively requires a comprehensive understanding of the intricate communication dynamics at play.

The conventional hierarchical communication model, where information cascades downward from top management, has been identified as problematic, as highlighted by Zulhamri and Claina (2012). This model often results in information loss, delayed delivery and misplacement of data due to the necessity for swift feedback between the sender and recipient. Consequently, this hierarchical approach compromises the quality of information flow in the organisation. To enhance internal communication, especially in global organisations, it

is essential to move beyond this traditional model and adopt strategies that promote transparency, efficient feedback loops and streamlined communication channels, considering the unique challenges of diverse cultures and geographical locations.

Networking and relationship dynamics

Efficient internal communication, incorporating strategies emphasising transparency and streamlined communication channels, not only addresses the challenges posed by hierarchical communication models, but also facilitates positive networking and relationship dynamics. The significance of networking and relationship dynamics in the workplace becomes evident. Studies (e.g. Han, 2022) have consistently demonstrated the link between the quality of relationships among co-workers and supervisors and turnover intentions. An American study further revealed that while a majority of hospitality workers appreciate their managers, there is a notable lack of respect and trust in their managerial skills, with employees expressing frustration due to micromanagement, overbearing management and demanding overtime expectations (Hight et al., 2019). Leadership style plays a pivotal role in employees' decisions to stay or leave an organisation, with research (e.g. Kwan & Hee, 2016) highlighting the influential impact of leadership on talent retention. Recognising the critical role of interpersonal relationships and effective leadership becomes fundamental in addressing turnover intentions and ensuring a positive work environment conducive to employee retention and satisfaction.

A positive relationship exists between leader-member-exchange (LMX) and turnover intentions at various organisational levels (Kim et al., 2015). High-quality leader-member interactions are based on mutual respect and trust, while contract-based, supervisor-led obligations characterise low-quality relationships. Members perceiving poorer quality LMX relationships with their leaders are more likely to consider leaving (Bauer et al., 2006). Kim and Beehr (2020) were among the first to assert that employees with poor relations with their managers are more likely to want to leave voluntarily. Regardless of organisational level, employees who perceive poor relationships with their superiors are more likely to leave (Kim et al., 2010). In contrast, several studies highlight that solid connections in a company positively impact managers' careers, particularly when they have a mentor (Garavan et al., 2006; Gebbels, 2019).

Job opportunities

Various factors influence voluntary turnover behaviour, with outside job opportunities and low job satisfaction being key contributors (Han, 2022). Previous studies have shown that a lack of promotion opportunities can lead to employee turnover (Chan & Kuok, 2011). Organisational commitment often acts as a mediator between promotional prospects and turnover intentions. Career-committed employees tend to be more mobile than organisationally committed ones, often seeking new opportunities for career advancement (Jones et al., 2006). Additionally, the demand for traditional linear career progression in the hospitality industry exceeds the supply, leading to increased interest in non-traditional career paths, known as boundaryless careers.

Boundaryless careers challenge traditional assumptions about organisational careers, representing career paths independent of specific organisations and structures. Studies have explored the relationship between boundaryless career preferences and turnover intentions, with individuals valuing different factors in their decision to stay or leave an employer based on their boundaryless career orientation (Arthur & Rousseau, 2001). Factors like self-efficacy in career decision-making, social support and attitudes toward boundaryless careers play a role in influencing intentions and actions related to voluntary turnover.

This literature review sheds light on the complex relationships between career development aspects and voluntary turnover behaviour. Career commitment, resilience, mentoring, organisational communication, expectation differences, relationship dynamics and job opportunities are positively associated with turnover and job satisfaction. However, there needs to be more research on voluntary turnover behaviours in hospitality graduate programmes, where external factors and contexts play significant roles. Consequently, the study aims to contribute to the existing literature by investigating Hilton's Elevator graduate fast-track to general manager programme and its influence on career development and voluntary turnover.

Method

This research adopted a relativistic ontology, recognising that individuals' experiences and unique contexts shape their truth and reality (Creswell, 2009). The study embraced a constructivist/interpretivist research view due to the epistemological nature of the central research questions, requiring the researchers to immerse themselves in participants' worlds to understand their perspectives and meanings.

Participants were informed of the study's purpose and data collection process via email, and they provided voluntary consent for participation, with the assurance that refusal or withdrawal would have no adverse consequences. Qualitative data collection methods were employed to access participants' unique experiences directly. The study included alumni from the Elevator fast track to GM programme, using a non-probability sampling technique, specifically convenience sampling, resulting in 11 interviews. Although the sample size in qualitative research is a highly debated topic, with studies suggesting a sample range between 9 to 50 participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022), in case studies, the size of the sample depends on several factors relevant to the study's purpose (Sharan, 2009). Nonetheless, it is predicted that data saturation can be reached after approximately ten interviews when there is a high likelihood that new data will be redundant (Saunders, et al., 2018). Semi-structured open interview questions based on the primary research questions and sub-questions were used for data collection. Each interview was recorded and transcribed in English for precision and dependability. Manual content analysis and ATLAS ti 23 were used to refine the data systematically.

Findings

The study quality was ensured through descriptions (Sharan, 2009) by the use of detailed narratives to capture the personal experiences, emotions and perspectives of the participants. These narratives offered a deep understanding of the participants' lived experiences. To capture this outcome, the results are presented using quotes and verbatim responses, including direct quotes from participants' responses, to help the readers grasp the participants' exact language, expressions

and emotions that informed their experiences in the graduate programme to allow readers into the candidates' realities.

Career development difficulties
The data analysis reveals significant challenges in the career development of Elevator participants in the programme, particularly in their journey to becoming general managers.

Programme awareness
One of the fundamental challenges identified is more programme awareness among participants. Elevator participants must understand the Elevator programme's role in the more extensive talent management and HR priorities. This lack of understanding can lead to confusion about how the participants should be treated and supported during their placements.

Many participants reported that they observed their peers engaging in menial tasks during their placements, *"sometimes in hotels I just see them working as a casual cleaning glasses"* (P8), which did not align with their expectations. This discrepancy between expectations and the actual hands-on nature of placements, particularly in operations, can negatively affect Elevator participants' perceived behavioural control and self-efficacy in becoming a GM. Participants with strong academic backgrounds and high achievements tend to have even higher expectations, *"I've done a Bachelor's, I've done a Master's, and I'm sitting here in a managerial position, pondering someone's dirty laundry, like this is not what I signed up for"* (P3). These high expectations lead to disappointment and demotivation.

Placement property distribution
Participants recognise the importance of property (venue) placements in shaping their experiences with the programme and their attitudes towards becoming GMs. While the programme is well-structured in theory, it must be implemented consistently at the property level. *"I go to my property. I'm like, hey, I have this handbook to fill out, and the property goes no, no one cares about the handbook"* (P3). Elevators may receive tasks that contribute little to their development, resulting in disappointment. Some properties may need more resources or support, further impacting Elevator participants' experiences.

Elevator network
Participants highlight the importance of emotional support from co-elevators, but there needs to be more encouragement and support for networking between programme participants from different classes. *"I feel like we were so detached class by class...you didn't really interlink with people that came before you"* (P10). This limited interaction between Elevator participants from different courses can hinder the development of a robust professional network, which is crucial for career progression.

Talent management support
The study suggests that networking alone may not be sufficient for career progression. The availability of vacancies at the right time is critical. However, Elevator participants report that knowing about job opportunities often depends on luck and personalised support. *"You don't know what your opportunities are. You need someone to tell you for this one I would actually consider an Elevator"* (P10). The lack of explicit support and customised career advice after placements is a concern, as

this is a crucial period during which many Elevator participants abandon the GM path.

Programme structure
One significant issue is the unrealistic timeline proposed by the programme, which suggests that Elevator participants can become GMs within five to eight years. Participants who realise their career progression is slower than expected can feel left out and less motivated: *"I felt left out"* (P1). Some participants suggest that this timeline should not be emphasised, as it can lead to burnout and insufficient experience and knowledge to be successful GMs.

Vacancy availability
The most prominent difficulty participants face is the availability of GM vacancies. Many encounter challenges in finding suitable roles after their placements. They may be offered positions below their capabilities or rejected due to a lack of experience stemming from a lack of understanding of the Elevator programme: *"More could have been done to place people, considering the fast-track aim of the programme. You cannot force vacancies"* (P8). The absence of published vacancies and the influence of personal connections on job opportunities further exacerbate this problem: *"all positions were supposed to be for everybody to apply and such, but the better the network — it's helpful to know what's coming"* (P1) .

Hierarchy culture
The hierarchical culture in the Elevator programme is seen as a significant hindrance to participants' career progression. The process of assigning directors and GMs, especially in luxury and large hotels, can be time-consuming due to the company's hierarchical structure. *"This company is a huge global organisation, so of course there are limitations on what you can do"* (P11). This rigidity in the career development path discourages risk-taking in hiring Elevator participants and can slow their advancement: *"you need to shine and only then you become GM. I think we need to become more flexible — looking at the pipeline of hotels that we are opening"* (P5). Elevator participants also need more flexibility in changing career paths in the company, contributing to career satisfaction.

Unmet expectations
Elevator participants often have unmet expectations, leading to frustration, disappointment, and demotivation: *"I don't want to say that failure in delivering on the job made me consider other options, but that nearly threw me off"* (P9). These unmet expectations can result from a lack of communication between different levels of management, causing participants to question whether their expectations will ever be met. Miscommunication can lead to them believing they are on the wrong career path, or that the company needs to live up to its promises.

Mobility
Elevator participants' willingness to move between properties, countries and continents is a significant challenge: *"a job is a job, and you committed to being mobile"* (P8). While mobility can open up more job opportunities, it conflicts with personal life, particularly when Elevator participants want to settle down, or start a family. Balancing personal and professional life is critical to their career decisions.

Career development facilitators

Professional relationship dynamics

Building and nurturing professional relationships are crucial for Elevator participants' career progression. Having a robust network in the company can significantly impact job opportunities: *"having the access to people that can support you and can write an email to the one who's hiring, giving a reference, is very valuable"* (P1). The more extensive the network, the higher the chances of finding a suitable job opportunity: *"if they don't invest their energy too strongly in it, at the end of the programme, they're struggling to actually have formed the connections and the networks to then get a decent job"* (P6). However, creating and maintaining these connections lies with the participants themselves.

Career mentoring

Career mentoring and advice are vital for Elevator participants. While they have mentors, the GMs in their placement properties often have a more significant influence. Adding a sponsor is also seen as beneficial, but the absence of such support can lead to frustration and a lack of career guidance. *"I don't think I ever received a call in the last 10 to 11 months — How is it going? Where are you going next? What do you want to do? That never happened for me"* (P9).

Learning opportunities

Access to learning opportunities is crucial for Elevator participants' career development. Opportunities for on-the-job learning and access to the company's learning resources are essential for both practical knowledge and theoretical skills: *"it was the opportunities I had in my properties…like my previous chairman, he really believed in me and he gave me a lot of opportunities to grow and learn"* (P5). However, participants report a greater focus on soft skills rather than hard skills: *"there is higher focus placed on soft rather than hard skills, which gets missed"* (P7), which may lead some to explore non-GM career paths.

Organisational commitment

Elevator participants expressed varying levels of organisational commitment. The company's work culture and environment play a significant role in determining the participants' commitment. A positive work culture that values innovation and invests in employee learning and development can foster commitment.

Career commitment, self-management and resilience

Elevator participants' career commitment is influenced by their ability to balance personal needs and professional aspirations: *"we committed to become a GM then…take it, whatever location they give you"* (P8). Some participants prioritise their careers, while others prioritise stability and family life: *"Do I continue my career or do I choose my partner and build a life in one location?"* (P5). Those who are highly committed often demonstrate self-management and resilience in navigating their career paths: *"I've always been the one actively driving my own career, so I don't feel like I was given a lot of support in making career moves"* (P9).

Answering the research questions

- RQ1: How does an Elevator participant's attitude about becoming a general manager influence their behaviour to retain the position?

The study investigated participants' career development difficulties and their impact on the relationship between their attitude towards becoming a GM and intention to perform this behaviour. However, the findings reveal that participants formed their intention to become a GM before they applied for the Elevator programme, resulting in no identified influence of career development difficulties on the relationship between attitude, perceived subjective norms or perceived behavioural control about becoming a GM and forming an intention. Nonetheless, the study discovered that career development mediates the relationship between the intention to become a GM and the behaviour to retain the position. Therefore, it was determined that career development experiences influence participants' attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control about remaining on the GM career path.

- RQ2: How do Elevator participants' subjective norms about becoming a GM influence their behaviour to retain the position?

The study found no direct relationship between attitude towards becoming a general manager and intention. However, it revealed a significant connection between Elevator participants' career development challenges and their attitude about pursuing a GM career and retaining the position. These difficulties encompass programme management, job availability, hierarchy culture, unmet expectations and mobility issues, all of which negatively impact their attitudes and perceived behavioural control regarding GM career continuation (McDonnell et al., 2017). Programme management was the most frequently mentioned career development challenge, affecting participants' ability to stay on the GM track. Aspects of programme management include programme awareness, placement property distribution, Elevator network, talent management support and programme structure. Lack of job opportunities arises from inadequate programme understanding and negatively affects participants' perceived control and self-efficacy, leading to a search for opportunities elsewhere. The study also discovered that not all vacancies are advertised internally, reducing the chances of advancement (Garavan et al., 2006; Gebbels, 2019). A hierarchical culture in the company was found to make participants view the GM career and the company as too conservative, hindering their progression. Geographic and cultural barriers compounded the challenges, making it frustrating to search for vacancies. The company's complex organisational structure hampers internal communication when planning promotions or moves, leading to a slow process that impacts perceived control over career progression (Zulhamri & Claina, 2012). Unmet expectations were another crucial factor influencing participants' attitudes about retaining the GM role, particularly for those with high academic achievements and limited industry exposure (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000; Anthony et al., 2021). The study also revealed that career-committed participants tend to be more mobile, prioritising career growth over personal life (Jones et al., 2006). However, those who choose to settle down and start a family experience a shift in attitude about retaining the GM role, as frequent relocation negatively impacts family life.

- RQ3: How do Elevator participants' perceived behavioural-control beliefs about becoming a Hilton GM influence their behaviour to retain the position?

The research findings indicate that actual control, primarily influenced by the company, plays a significant role in shaping the relationship between participants' intention to become a general manager and their behaviour to retain the role. Career development facilitators, such as professional relationship dynamics, career mentoring, learning opportunities, organisational commitment and career commitment, positively impact participants' attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control in staying on the GM career path. Conversely, challenges related to programme management, vacancies availability, hierarchy culture, unmet expectations and mobility hinder their career development and negatively influence their decision to remain in the GM role. The company can enhance participants' perceived behavioural control by increasing learning opportunities, facilitating networking, providing career mentoring, promoting organisational commitment, and supporting career commitment. To further support participants in their career progression, the company should focus on improving programme management, raising awareness about the programme, expanding the Elevator network, offering more talent management support, and refining aspects of career mentoring. Additionally, addressing vacancy availability, hierarchical culture, managing expectations and mobility can contribute to participants' career success and organisational satisfaction.

Limitations, further research and recommendations
The research has limitations, including a focus on current Elevator programme alumni and therefore neglecting those who have left, which could be explored in future studies. Comparing participants at different career stages may introduce bias due to reliance on memory recollection, indicating a potential need for longitudinal studies. The qualitative analysis method may also introduce bias due to the interviewers' limited experience and the semi-structured questions.

The findings emphasise the importance of raising awareness of the Elevator programme at Hilton Europe, Middle East & Africa properties, as some are unaware of its details and how to support participants in their journey to become general managers. Efforts should be directed towards educating and convincing properties about the programme's objectives and the value Elevator participants bring to the business. Additionally, defining criteria for quality placement experiences and managing expectations regarding the timeline for reaching the GM role is crucial. Finally, establishing a structured talent management support system for the Elevator programme, including regular check-ins, can help monitor participants' career paths and provide necessary coaching and support.

Conclusion

The study offered valuable insights into the attitudes, challenges, and intentions of Elevator programme participants aspiring to become general managers in the hospitality industry. By primarily focusing on the perspectives of these participants, the research provided an understanding of their experiences and struggles. The findings underscore the significance of effectively addressing career development difficulties and organisational

challenges to support the programme participants' career aspirations.

While the study sought to understand the participants' viewpoints, further research is imperative to better grasp the dynamics at play. Future studies should aim to explore the organisational side of the equation. This will include investigating the hospitality organisations' goals, expectations and experiences in offering Elevator programmes. Understanding the organisational perspective is crucial in aligning individual aspirations with broader corporate objectives, fostering a symbiotic relationship between programme participants and their employing organisations.

Additionally, exploring the alignment between Elevator programme participants' career aspirations and the strategic goals of hospitality organisations would provide valuable insights. Research in this direction could shed light on how organisations can tailor their programmes and support structures to meet individual aspirations and align them with the company's overarching objectives. By bridging the gap between individual ambitions and organisational strategies, hospitality businesses can create an environment conducive to talent development, employee satisfaction and long-term success.

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