

Do managers actually walk the talk?

Gender equality in hotel careers in Aotearoa New Zealand

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This article offers insights into factors that affect hotel employees' decisions to pursue a career in hotels. These factors are important as there are differences between men's and women's career expectations. Globally, career progression in the hotel industry tends to be linear, from entry-level to senior management positions [1]. Employees' career expectations and values drive individual choices and influence outcomes [2]. Factors such as personal interests, family background, educational level, and gender/race/ethnicity [3] all shape individual career hopes, and industry and geographical context change career progress and paths. Previous research in Korea and China have examined women's career expectations. However, no study has examined men and women's career expectations in hotels in Aotearoa New Zealand, where the workforce is migrant and female dominated [4]. The original contribution of this article is to show that lived experiences change career expectations in distinct and measurable ways for men and women, even with a small sample size. Therefore, any employer's commitment to gender equity principles and practice is only recognised as authentic when senior management highlight and champion their equal opportunity policies and initiatives.

The study on which this article is based adopted a quantitative descriptive research approach to explore the career expectations of employees working in the New Zealand hotel sector. An online survey collected data from hotel employees with over three years of experience in the hospitality industry. Respondents were initially recruited through posts on professional Facebook and LinkedIn sites, and completed the survey via a link to the REDCap platform hosted by New Zealand universities. Based on Kim et al.'s [5] and Kong et al.'s [2] measures of career expectations, 49 questions were developed. A total of 64 valid responses were analysed, of which 54.7% respondents were women and 45.3% were men. In terms of

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their work experience, more than half the sample had worked from three to five years in hospitality, and almost a quarter had between

six and 10 years of experience. The majority were of Asian ethnicity (56.3%), followed by those who identified as New Zealand European (25.0%). Most worked in 5-star hotels (89.1%), with 42% in Food & Beverage. Regarding job positions, 53.1% were entry-level attendants, 12.5% were supervisors and 15.6% were operations managers. Most had permanent contracts (74.6%), with 60.3% paid by the hour; 17.7% were temporary workers.

Three common barriers to progression in the hotel industry emerged for employees: job satisfaction, career support, and gender equality. First, more than half of the respondents were unhappy with their wages/salary and benefits—a similar result to other surveys that have looked at working conditions in the New Zealand hospitality industry [4, 6], and the mental health of chefs in Australia and New Zealand [7], which revealed that low pay and low-quality jobs characterise the New Zealand hospitality industry.

Second, nearly half of the employees expressed negative views about the career support provided by their hotels. They had the perception that their achievements or contributions were not recognised, and doubted if their personal career plans were valued or considered. This result is problematic, as managerial recognition of an employee's efforts increases motivation and is strongly linked to superior performance and increased effort work effort [8].

Lastly, the results revealed that gender equality matters! Despite diversity and inclusion initiatives, the majority of respondents lacked confidence in the existence and efficiency of gender-specific policies, or initiatives that promoted gender equality. Alarming, nearly half of the respondents disagreed that their employers demonstrated any commitment to gender equality, either in practice or outcomes.

The study's findings have practical implications for hotel managers. Globally, the hospitality industry is experiencing acute labour shortages [9], addressing frequently voiced issues—such as unfair remuneration and lack of recognition—while implementing personalised career development plans and effective gender equality policies, can enhance employee retention.

There are limitations to the generalisability of these results due to the limited sample size and composition. Future studies could replicate the study design to attract a more representative sample. Not all employees seek a career rather than a job. They do, however, seek appreciation and fairness, and will leave workplaces where

these basic needs are not met. 'Walking the talk' is more visible and powerful than managers realise, as is its absence.

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