The Paradigm Nature of Today's Office Approaches for Achieving Quality Outcomes in Administrative Office Management

Kadulliah Ghazali
Noorlaila Hj. Yunus
Erne Suzila Kassim

ABSTRACT

In the recent years, there has been an increased in respect and responsibility given to Administrative Office Managers. This paper shall seek to explore the most challenging factors encountered by them, strategies practiced to minimize the challenges, and the benefits gained. The role of Administrative Office Managers has become even more challenging with globalization, human utilization and information technology advance issues, the need for the organizations to sustain the growth, and the need to help employees overcome resistance to the new system. A cross-sectional questionnaire survey was then conducted at several hospitality organizations in the West Malaysia. The findings suggest regardless of hotel ranking or the origin of the organization, they face and adapt similar factors. There is also a significant relationship between challenges and strategies, and the ICT investment. In addition, any deployment processes would also provide a substantial role in nurturing employees in the organizations. The study is imperative to intensify and enrich the current administrative management and hospitality management research.

Keywords: *Administrative office management, globalization, hospitality organizations, ICT advancement, management/human resource*

Introduction

As businesses become more complex, organizations continually face new challenges that form a new paradigm in today's office (Green, 2002). Globalization, information technology, electronic commerce, human resource (Costea, 2005) and the knowledge workers are parts of the challenges. As a mean to remain competitive amidst these challenges, organizations increasingly rely on administrative office managers. Much has been discussed about these challenges, and how they affect the present day workforce in attaining to perform in a competitive environment. However, there has been a lack of research conducted in determining the challenges that administrative office managers have to face, and the strategies practiced by them. Therefore, this research intends to identify and analyze the degree of the above challenges faced by administrative office managers in several hospitality organizations, particularly those who have served in the hotel industry.

Using a numeric trend from a survey, the study was conducted to answer the following research questions:

i.   What are the challenges faced and strategies adopted by the office managers, and what are the benefits gained by practicing those strategies?
ii. Are there any significant differences between hotel ranking, origin of the hotel, the challenges faced, strategies practiced and benefits gained?
iii. Is there any significant relationship between the overall challenges and the overall strategies taken, and between the strategies carried out and benefits gained?

Based on the review of the related literature, the challenges were grouped into three categories: globalization, management/human resource and the information and communication advancement. Similarly, the strategies were also clustered into these three categories: globalization, management/human resource and the information and communication

advancement. Finally, the benefits were classified according to the customers' satisfaction, continuous improvement and people development.

Although the scope of the study was limited to hotels located in West Malaysia, the findings are deemed significant as is it provides more understanding of the current phenomena in the field of administrative management, which has been given little attention in the previous researches.

Literature Review

Odger and Keeling (2000) classified administrative office managers as the middle management who is responsible in planning, organizing, staffing, directing, controlling and managing administrative activities and costs. Activities performed by an administrative office manager are quite broad and complex and in some areas it is becoming similar to the human resource manager such as employees' orientation, discussing job duties with new employees, determining working hours and handling issues such as overtime, sick leave, absences and tardiness.

An administrative office manager has to also perform activities similar with that of an administrator and is responsible in the administrative systems of an office and maybe is expected to carry out a range of administrative tasks (Quible, 2005). Among job titles of administrative office are administrative office manager, administrative manager, office manager, office administrator, manager of office support, and director of administrative services.

Paradigm Shift in the Workplace

As the working environment is changing dramatically, it is important for managers to review the agents affecting changes in the working environment and giving recommendations to meeting the challenges posed by those changes. Where and how people work today is vastly different than it was even 20 years ago and there are more changes expected to come in the near future. Technological changes, changes in financial markets, the emergence of global markets for products and services, international competition, dramatic increases in foreign direct investment, new business strategies, new management practices, new forms of business organization and of the organization of work are among the more significant developments that are transforming the world of work (Certo, 2003). According to Onn (2002), change is not only constant but also inevitable and is a phenomenon most apparent at the workplace.

Quible (2005) stated that administrative officer manager has to be sensitive to the changes at the work place as it affects the employees' productivity in their quest to enhance organizational performance and achieving the goal of the organization. As most dramatic changes at the workplace are still to come, it is time for administrative office managers to think about the bigger changes ahead, so that, they can equip themselves with the necessary tools to cope with changes and help others accept these changes. Organizations must also accept that the key to survive is to shift from a pure operational focus to a combination of strategic focus and operational efficiency (Robertson, 2000).

Challenges of Middle Management

New challenges arise as the economic and social environments of businesses change. It is important for managers to recognize some of the challenges that exist at the workplace. In order to sustain office productivity, they need to cope with the challenges.

A boundaryless world introduces new challenges for managers as economy undergoes the free flow of trade among countries. This globalization influences the number and kinds of jobs that are available and requires that organizations balance a complicated set of issues related to managing people in different geographies, cultures, legal environments, and business conditions. Functions such as staffing, training, compensation, and the like have to be adjusted to take into account the differences in the global management. According to Yulk (2002) the trend towards globalization continues to be a challenge for administrative office managers as foreign competition exaggerates and more companies become multinational and participating in cross-

national joint ventures.

The human contacts across the world have dramatically increased due to globalization with ideas and cultures circulating more freely as a result of a diversified workforce. The Hudson Institute's reported on the changes in demographics has listed that immigrants will represent the largest increase of workers in relation to jobs. They will be entering the workforce in the 21st century. These immigrants will bring in with them cultures or customs that are different from the norm (Certo, 2003). According to Ebert and Griffin (2005), experts have projected that even the U.S. workforce will reflect on the diversity where almost half of all workers in the labor force will be women and almost one-third will be American Africans/Africans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, and others.

Managing and valuing diversity is the key component of effective people management, which can improve workplace productivity (Black Enterprise, 2001). It is important for organizations to learn how to manage diversity in the workplace in order to be successful in the future (Flagg, 2002).

The work environment is also changing due to the increase use of information and communications technology products and services, including the Internet. Work has radically changed with the infusion of new technologies that demand for new skills and competencies, including personal skills and information technology competencies. Advanced technology has tended to reduce the number of jobs that require little skill and to increase the number of jobs that require considerable skill. This shift is referred to as moving from touch labor to knowledge work. And as a result, it displaces some employees and requires that others to be retrained (Captus Press, 2005).

Technology has made it possible for organizations to have virtual offices. Virtual organizations with virtual offices involve the usage of technology. This is to reduce the need to have people at a fixed place of employment and at a fixed time, thus opening a whole new challenges in managing employees who are electronically linked to the employers but do not have face-to-face contact. The same type of interaction was once common (Certo, 2003).

Changes itself posed as a challenge to managers as some people like change and are able to go with the flow of such change without a problem while others are resistant to change. According to Macadam (1996), change is frequent in most organizations, and some of it radically affects the day-to-day working environment. Staff may be asked to change departments, learn new skills, rediscover old ones, take over additional responsibilities, work a shorter week or experience a cut in their overtime.

Koonce (2001) concluded that managers must not only able to address to change but must also be willing to change the organization if necessary. Managers should expect change to be slow, while at the same time encouraging change. Robertson (2000) stated that the key to success in a business in the next 20 years will be to be fast, fluid, and flexible and managers must be prepared for constant change. Managing change is the essence of a manager's job and more importantly in the long run than managing resources on a day-to-day basis (Muir, 1995).

As this study is focused on administrative office managers in hotels, it is also important to know some of the challenges in this hospitality industry. There are many challenges in the hospitality industry but the International Society of Hospitality Consultants (as cited by Hospitality Industry, 2005) has identified the top ten global issues. The first challenge is its global uncertainty, followed by human resources issues, branding, and financial viability. Technological advancement, customer issues, operating cost creep, supply issues, distribution channel management and the support from the airlines industry in the 21st century are also among other challenges faced by the hospitality industry.

The International Hotel & Restaurant Association (Jones, 1999) stated that thirty five leading hospitality professionals representing European-based hotels, chains, associations and hotel schools when asked to debate on the organizational and workforce challenges for the 21st century gave responses that reflected the issues on re-shaping the workforce, the workplace and the nature of work, as well as the changes in the hospitality industry that must be made, in order to compete successfully for tomorrow's best and brightest.

According to the International Hotel & Restaurant Association (Jones 1999), issues and challenges that are expected to arise in the 21st century are as follows:

i. Mirroring society in which the future's workforce will be increasingly diverse in terms of age, gender and ethnicity and they will feature prominently in tomorrow's labor pool and the expectations they will bring to the workplace.

ii. Women will favor jobs with built-in flexibility to accommodate parenting and domestic obligations which emphasize gender equality.

iii. Ethnic minorities which traditionally have filled many entry-level hospitality positions will increasingly expect companies to show a commitment to tolerance, awareness, sensitivity, and respect for diversity and different value systems.

iv. Generation X (20-30 year olds) being the core of tomorrow's workforce will put a premium on life quality. The 70-hour week or the job-for-life career is not for them.

v. Scruples about who employees work for, seeking out companies with a social and environmental conscience and a reputation for providing learning opportunities, particularly Internet-based training, and other means for personal development.

The 21st century will also see a rise of post-retirement professionals seeking to return to the workplace but on different terms. Part-time work, personal contact and vocational satisfaction will be among their priorities and a work environment that takes account of physical and health limitations.

Methodology

The study used the cross-sectional one time survey in order to get responses from the field. The population of the study was the Office Managers or employees holding the responsibilities of managing the administrative work, who served in hospitality organizations in West Malaysia. Specifically, the respondents are those who have worked in 4-star and 5-star hotels in the Federal Territory (Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya), Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Malacca. The sample was derived from the list of Malaysian Association of Hotels (2005).

In most of the questions, 5-point likert scale measures were used to represent responses of the subjects. The instrument was designed in order to get inputs in accordance to the challenges faced, strategies practiced and benefits gained. Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement to each items asked. The items were derived based on the review of the literature. Besides the above items, demographic factors of hotel star ranking, hotel location, hotel type and nationality of the organization were also measured. A validity and reliability test was conducted to measure the validity and reliability of the instrument. Based on the validity test, few amendments were made to the item statement in order to provide a better clarity to the respondents. Table 1 shows the results of the reliability test for the constructs. The results show all items are reliable; therefore no deletion of any constructs is necessary.

Table 1 : Construct and Reliability Test

Construct	Items in scale	Cron-bach's α
Challenges	14	.739
Strategies	17	.897
Benefits	13	.889

Results and Discussions

To answer the first question, the challenges were grouped according to three components; globalization, management/human resource and information technology advances. The results of

the descriptive test on the challenges show percentage differences in each item. The highest percentage (96.7%) of the respondents agreed that the most challenging globalization issue encountered was new management functions (planning, organizing, leading, staffing and controlling) with mean 4.17 (SD = 0.59). Similarly, from the perspective of the management/ human resource, 100% of the respondents agreed that it was very crucial to invest in human capital training and training (M = 4.60, SD = 0.49). Additionally, 96.7% of the respondents believed that the information technology advances require all employees to have new skills and competencies, which was becoming a challenge to them (M = 4.50, SD = 0.57). Looking at the overall challenges the analysis found that the most challenging factor faced by the respondents was the ICT advancement. The finding was in lieu with the most significant issues as measured by the International Society of Hospitality Consultants (as cited by Hospitality Industry for 2005).

To answer the question of the strategies adopted by administrative office professionals in order to encounter the challenges, the strategies were grouped according to three components; globalization, management/human resource and information technology advances. The results of running a descriptive test on the strategies also showed varying percentages. It was found the most practiced strategy by the respondents in meeting the globalization challenges were complying with the modern policy, legislative and institutional framework which ensures an effective industrial relations system, adopted by 90% of the respondents (M = 4.10, SD = 0.54). On the other hand, the most practiced management/human resource strategy with 96.6% of the respondents was encouraging the individuals to listen to each other and find a mutually agreeable solution (M = 4.30, SD = 0.53). However, the assessment of the information technology strategies adopted did not give sparkling results as the mean scores for all strategies were below 4.00. The most information technology strategy adopted was allocating funds for information technology investment, with 97.3% of the respondents agreed they practiced it (M = 3.87, SD = 0.62). Comparing the different approach of the strategies, it was found that the strategy of managing and human resource was the most taken approach. This showed that the organizations place and value the labor capital as the most important subject of investment, and are also willing to make imperative changes for organizational survival.

In answering the next question which is the advantages to the practiced strategies: the benefits were grouped into these clusters: customers' satisfaction, continual improvement and people development. The interval measures also provided different results of the descriptive test. It was found that most customers' satisfaction benefit achieved was in terms of profitability as 73.4% of the respondents corresponded, but if compared to the industry average, they are more profitable (M = 3.90, SD = 0.66). On the other hand, 80% of the respondents agreed that the most achieved continual improvement benefit was over the past 12 months, this proved that the organization has met its performance objectives (M= 3.86, SD = 0.50). The most beneficial people development advantage was in terms of the ability of the organization to respond proactively to the competition and maintain market niche, in which 90% of the respondents agreed (M = 4.00, SD = 0.64). Based on a further analysis between the components, it was found both customers' satisfaction and continual improvement were the most benefits gained, although the level of agreement was not high. The following table provides the mean score for the constructs of the above discussion.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics: Challenges, Strategies and Benefits

Construct	Mean	SD
Challenges: globalization	4.17	0.59
Challenges: management and human resource	4.60	0.49
Challenges: ICT advancement	4.50	0.57
Strategies: globalization	4.10	0.54
Strategies: management and human resource	4.30	0.53
Strategies: ICT advancement	3.87	0.62
Benefits : customer satisfaction	3.90	0.66
Benefits : continual improvement	3.86	0.50
Benefits : people development	4.00	0.64

The study was also conducted to determine if there are any significant differences between the challenges, strategies practiced and benefits between the 4-star and 5-star hotel ranking. In order to retrieve viable results an independent sample t-test was carried out because the different number of sample size among two types of hotels. They showed no statistically significant mean differences existed in challenges [$-t$ $(28) = 0.960$, $p > 0.05$] between 4-star hotels ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.35$) and 5-star hotels ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.33$). The results of running an independent sample t-test also showed that no statistically significant mean differences existed in strategies [$-t$ $(28) = 1.023$, $p > 0.05$] between 4-star hotels ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.33$) and 5-star hotels ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 0.52$). The results of running an independent sample t-test also showed that no statistically significant mean differences existed in benefits [t $(28) = 0.180$, $p > .05$] between 4-star hotels ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.50$) and 5-star hotels ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.54$). The findings suggested both hotel rankings face similar challenges, take similar strategies and gain similar benefits. Besides, they also suggested that due to the approximate closeness of the hotel ranking, no significant differences were found.

The data was also tested for mean differences between the challenges, strategies practiced and benefits between Malaysian based and non-local based organizations. All results showed there are no significant differences in any of the measures between the two types of organization nationality; challenges [$-t$ $(28) = 1.459$, $p > 0.05$] between Malaysian based ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.29$) and non-local based ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.41$), strategies [$-t$ $(28) = 0.446$, $p > 0.05$] between Malaysian based ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.37$) and non-local based ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.56$) and benefits [t $(28) = 0.180$, $p > 0.05$] between Malaysian based ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 0.49$) and non-local based ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 0.57$). The findings further explained, regardless of the nationality of the organization, each of them finds similar characteristics. These perhaps imply that it was the nature of business acts as the determinant factor, not the origin of the organization.

A correlation test was also run to determine if there was any significant relationship between strategies adopted and challenges encountered. The result of running a Pearson test showed there was a significant relationship between strategies practiced and challenges faced, $r = 0.520$, $p < 0.05$. However, running a correlation test between the overall strategies and the overall benefits achieved did not show any significant relationship between the variables, $r = 0.275$, $p > 0.05$. Yet, a correlation test between the overall strategy and benefits in term of customer service improvement did provide a significant result, $r = 0.315$, $p < 0.05$.

A further linear regression test was run between different strategies components and various benefits. The results indicated that there was only one significant relationship existed, which was between the strategy adoption of the ICT investment and deployment, and the development of the people, $F(3, 26) = 3.682$, $p < 0.05$. The result suggested that the ICT played a substantial role in ensuring the organizational success by nurturing and improving the employees' performance.

Conclusion

In summary, our findings suggested that the most encountered challenges faced by the office managers in the hospitality organizations were from the information and communication technology advancement. However, although the technology was the main issue, the most practiced strategies were not from the category of the ICT advancement. The office managers put a greater emphasize to managing change to better manage the human resources. This showed that they place a greater value to the labor capital than to technologies. In addition, the ICT played an imperative role to the success of the organizations in terms of people development.

However, the findings may be used in caution as there were limited number of respondents (only 30 respondents) and limited scope of the territorial study. Therefore, we plan to extend the research into a wider area in order to get a higher number of respondents.

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KADULLIAH GHAZALI, NOORLAILA HJ. YUNUS & ERNE SUZILA KASSIM, Faculty of Office Management and Technology, Universiti Teknologi MARA Shah Alam. kadul827@salam.uitm.edu.my, nlaila814@salam.uitm.edu.my, ernesu02@salam.uitm.edu.my