Boston Hospitality Review

www.bu.edu/bhr

Published by the Boston University School of Hospitality Administration

Promoting Racial Inclusivity Through Gamified Systems: Perspectives for Hospitality Practitioners and Researchers

By Sean McGinley, Ph.D., and
Ravi S. Ramani, Ph.D.

Leadership - May-June 2023

© Copyright 2023 by Boston University

About the Authors

Dr. Sean McGinley is a graduate of Pennsylvania State University and a current associate professor at the Florida State University's Dedman College of Hospitality. He currently researches topics including career change, turnover, organization recruitment, job applicant attraction, and career development in the hotel industry. His professional work experience includes time as a front office manager at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York, the Crowne Plaza Auckland in New Zealand, and the Fairmont Pittsburgh. LinkedIn.

Ravi S. Ramani, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor at the Earl G. Graves School of Business and Management at Morgan State University. His research interests include career development, progression and outcomes, management education and scholarly impact, and organizational research methods. Previously, Ravi worked in Human Resources for Hilton with roles in organizational learning, executive coaching, talent development, recruitment, labor negotiations, and compensation and benefits. LinkedIn.

Promoting Racial Inclusivity Through Gamified Systems: Perspectives for Hospitality Practitioners and Researchers

https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/young-business-people-discussing-important-documents-340410311

Abstract

The importance of diversity and inclusion in contemporary American society and for the hospitality industry is increasing due to an ever-diversifying labor market and customer base. To best appreciate and leverage the changing demographics of the nation and the industry, hospitality organizations must be prepared to not only hire but also promote people of diverse backgrounds into leadership positions. Furthermore, implementing inclusive promotional practices throughout all levels of the organization can help hospitality firms rebuild workforces affected by Covid-19 by taking advantage of the already diverse human talent in the industry. This paper describes how organizations can improve promotional practices by creating more objective measures to guide decision-making and build more diverse leadership teams at all levels of the organization. Additionally, we provide suggestions for researchers that can help guide the scholarly conversation regarding racial inequality in the hospitality industry.

Introduction

The hospitality sector in the United States, and in particular, the hotel and lodging industry, has long prided itself on its ability to recruit and retain a diverse and inclusive workforce. Focusing on diversity and inclusion makes sense for the hotel and lodging industry not only because of their increasingly global clientele but also because greater diversity and inclusion helps drive better financial performance (Lorenzo & Reeves, 2018).

Worryingly, however, this focus on diversity and inclusion by U.S. hotel and lodging companies is not translating into greater career mobility and progression opportunities for African Americans and, more broadly, people of color. According to studies published by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), rates of promotion for minority groups in the hotel and lodging industry actually declined between 2012 and 2019. In other words, while these minority groups have increasingly found employment within the industry, their earnings, status, and career growth have lagged along racial lines. For organizations, failure to afford the same advancement trajectories available to white employees to people of color means that these employees are more likely to leave the organization and even the industry altogether, thereby jeopardizing the performance and continued financial success of hotel and lodging companies (McGinley & Martinez, 2018). For researchers, a dearth of diversity among industrial managers in the U.S. limits the types of questions that can be asked and theoretical frameworks that can be applied when studying this industry and constrains the inferences that can be drawn from a study's results.

However, progress can be made to create more diversity and inclusion within the industry's managerial ranks. In the following pages, we draw on our research as well as professional experience in operational and human resources roles in the hotel and lodging industry to identify a practice that has contributed to the current situation. We offer an actionable solution to overcome this barrier that has stymied efforts to increase promotion opportunities for people of color in the industry. Finally, we discuss the implications of the current state of affairs for hospitality scholars and offer suggestions for future research.

Promotions and Person-organization Fit

Decisions about whom to promote within an organization can be challenging. An incorrect promotion decision can elevate an employee unsuited to the task into a position of authority, leading to poor outcomes for the focal employee, the various stakeholders who interact, work with or report to the employee, and the organization. Furthermore, promotions are a signaling mechanism that communicate what is valued and rewarded in the firm (Jex & Britt, 2014). Put another way, promotion decisions convey to other employees the types of knowledge, skills, abilities, and other attributes

(KSAOs) that are considered desirable and worthy of emulation, which can lead to other employees trying to acquire or demonstrate similar KSAOs in the hopes of gaining a promotion.

An influential theory that has shaped how organizations make these promotion decisions is person-organization fit, which proposes that "the people make the place" (Schneider, 1987). That is, organizations should seek to hire and promote employees whose KSAOs, values, experiences, and preferences "fit" with the organization. Person-organization fit has many benefits for the organization, such as reduced conflict, increased enthusiasm, greater understanding and group cohesion, and decision alignment in pursuit of a narrow array of high-level organizational goals (Schneider, 1987).

At the same time, misunderstandings about what person-organization fit is an over-reliance on fit as *the* criteria for making promotion decisions can have severe negative consequences for the organization. One pernicious effect, which stems from an incorrect understanding of the meaning of person-organization fit, is managers making decisions based on "looking-glass merit," or what Riveria (2016) stated as the "similar to me" effect. That is, promotions are based on likability and shared personal or professional backgrounds among the person(s) making the decision and the employee being considered, instead of the actual fit between the employee and the organization. Consequently, managers make promotion decisions based not on merit and qualifications, but rather by using the "airport test," which stipulates that you promote someone you would enjoy spending time with if you were stuck with them in an airport during a long flight delay (Rivera, 2016). Because this promotion decision-making process relies on interpersonal factors rather than person-organization fit, it disadvantages employees who do not share the same background, social circles or interests as the manager(s) making the decision (Rivera, 2016). And given that management ranks in the U.S. hotel and lodging industry have traditionally been dominated by one group, i.e., white people (NAACP, 2012; 2019), this practice adversely impacts demographic diversity – especially racial diversity – when considering an organization's promotion outcomes. Furthermore, due to the increasingly segregated neighborhoods that make up contemporary American society (Yu et. al, 2021), it is becoming increasingly difficult for people of color to pass an evaluation based on social similarities, such as the airport test.

The second negative impact, which can occur even when person-organization fit is used correctly, is that over-reliance on this measure to make promotion decisions stifles other forms of diversity within an organization's ranks (Schnieder, 1987). This lack of diversity affects the firm's knowledge bases, capabilities, and networks, making the firm less

responsive to internal and external changes and reducing organizational adaptation capability (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Because person-organization fit is predicated on identifying employees who match a manager's existing schemas regarding success, it creates a virtuous cycle where employees who can execute current initiatives and resolve immediate issues are promoted, leaving the organization vulnerable to a changing competitive landscape that may require skill sets not possessed by the incumbent managerial team (Schneider, 1987). And since most organizations only adopt change incrementally (Magee & Galinsky, 2008), this reduces their ability to pivot and adapt to a changing competitive marketplace. Furthermore, even when an organization does engage in the change process, employees often display high levels of resistance that can stall or even doom the change effort (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). As over-reliance on person-organization fit for promotion decisions reduces heterogeneity within the managerial team, this resistance to change increases dramatically, thereby handicapping the organization's ability to adapt.

The positive outcomes of increasing diversity and inclusion for organizations are clear. More diverse organizations are able to capture greater market share, launch more product innovations, and attract more job applicants and guests, leading to better financial performance (Carter, 2020). Greater diversity and inclusion may even help organizations recover from downturns, like the coronavirus pandemic shock, faster because of broader KSAOs present in the organization's human capital. However, for an organization to fully reap these benefits, managerial teams must represent a diverse group of people, thereby giving them a voice in influencing decision-making. One way in which organizations can ensure that diverse perspectives are part of organization decisions is to ensure that a firm has a diverse managerial staff throughout all hierarchical levels, departments, brands, and geographic locations. So, how can the hotel and lodging industry counter the pitfalls of person-organization fit and create resilient workplaces that respond nimbly to environmental changes? We tackle this issue next.

Promoting Racial Inclusivity: Practical Suggestions

Overcoming the pitfalls of person-organization fit and counteracting decades of ingrained assumptions and behaviors requires that organizations systematically incorporate and bolster diversity and inclusion in the promotion process to create diverse leadership teams that are better equipped to capture new market share, create new products, and understand customer's needs (Carter, 2020). To achieve this goal, organizations in the hotel and lodging industry need to take concrete steps that clearly outline and communicate expectations regarding the KSAOs required for a promotion, and closely monitor the organization's success, or lack thereof, in implementing these initiatives. Ensuring that promotional opportunities are available to a diverse set of

qualified candidates can help these organizations reduce turnover, create cost savings, foster a workplace environment that encourages and welcomes divergent viewpoints, advance change acceptance among employees, and lead to overall more positive organizational outcomes (Jex & Britt, 2014; McGinley & Martinez, 2018).

A useful way of creating objective criteria for promotions that leverages an employee's positive career progression expectations and helps prevent person-organization fit challenges such as the "airport test" (Rivera, 2016) is by utilizing the gamified system proposed by McGinley (2019). In the context of promotions, gamification refers to the creation of a system where employees can score points and "level up" (i.e., get promoted) as they would when playing a video game. Specifically, employees gain points for mastering various KSAOs that are relevant to seeking advancement within the organization. Consider, for example, a newly hired recent hotel school graduate working at the front desk of a large full-service hotel. An illustration of what might be included in a gamified system to gauge progress and readiness for advancement for this employee is shown in Table 1. This system can be introduced to the employee once they have successfully completed their probationary period and certification (as applicable). As Table 1 shows, based on KSAOs identified by the organization, there are a number of different accomplishments that the employee can achieve to gain points, and each accomplishment has a maximum number of points it can contribute. Furthermore, the system explicitly identifies the minimum number of points required to seek either a lateral move within the organization (e.g., from the front office to housekeeping) or a vertical move (e.g., to the front office manager). While the number of accomplishments and points allocated to each will vary depending on factors such as, for example, hotel brand, size, and location, the basic principles underlying the system can be extrapolated to positions within and across the industry.

Table 1. Example of Gamified System for Newly Hired Recent Hotel School Graduate at Front-Desk of a Large Full-Service Hotel.

Accomplishment	Number of Points	Maximum Points Allowed per Accomplishment
° Learn and successfully execute all front desk agent responsibilities on all three shifts	3	9
° Obtain 95% or higher on certification checklist for all three shifts	3	9
° Receive positive guest feedback (e.g., comment card, TripAdvisor mention, loyalty survey)	1	3
° Receive a rating of 8 or higher (out of 10) on annual performance review	2	6

° Receive nomination for departmental award	1	3
° Win a departmental award	2	6
° Receive nomination for hotel-wide award	2	6
° Win hotel-wide award	3	9
° Receive nomination for city-wide/regional/corporate award	2	6
° Win city-wide/regional/corporate award	3	9
° Successfully contact and resolve customer challenges received through Guest Assistance Correspondence system	3	6
° Prepare daily pre-shift briefing document	1	2
° Successfully complete project assigned by Department Head		
° Serve as training mentor for new hire front desk agent	3	6
° Block rooms for VIP, group, special-needs and loyalty preferred customers based on arrivals reports	2	7
° Demonstrate expertise about room types, configurations, and special features	2	4
° Demonstrate broad knowledge of external dining options and city attractions and events	2	6
° Independently identifies and executes operational project or improvement that positively impacts key performance indicators (KPIs)	5	10
° Complete front office supplies inventory audit and obtain refills	2	4
° Exhibit familiarity with bell and door procedures, including guest luggage and package storage and retrieval	2	5
° Display understanding of Housekeeping, Guest Services, and Reservations procedures	2	5

Note:

- 25 points required to apply for a lateral transfer
- 60 points required to apply for a promotion

Adopting a gamified system provides an organization with five key advantages. First, by making explicit the number of points associated with different KSAO-linked accomplishments, and the number of points required to be considered for progression to different levels within the organization, a gamified system provides a roadmap for employees. Accordingly, it can help improve employees' perceptions of future opportunities within the organization, thereby contributing to reducing turnover (McGinley & Martinez, 2018). In addition, the time required to accumulate the depth and breadth of KSAOs through these accomplishments ensures that employees spend a meaningful amount of time in each position before being eligible for a lateral or vertical move, thus giving the organization stability in its operations.

Second, a gamified or point-based system increases transparency, and in turn, equity,

by giving individual managers the tools required to move promotion decisions from relying solely on subjective notions such as person-organization fit, to more objective measures based on observable and measurable KSAOs. Additionally, because there is no arbitrarily decided minimum required tenure in a position, promotion decisions are based primarily on merit, rather than on having served a specific number of months in a given role. Adopting such gamified systems is particularly important as they can help redress, to some extent at least, wide-ranging disparities in promotion decisions received by people of color in the hotel and lodging industry (Carter, 2020; NAACP 2019).

Third, identifying critical KSAOs at each level of the organization can help streamline training and development efforts and ensure resources are allocated appropriately. By creating objective standards for training and development managers can overcome "looking-glass merit," and avoid using Rivera's (2016) airport test to determine who is qualified for promotions. Furthermore, this objective system helps deemphasize the constraining and prejudicing effect that the racially segregated living conditions of the United States (Yu et al., 2021) can have on promotion decisions.

Fourth, these systems can be integrated with an organization's succession planning to help develop "bench strength." That is, because these systems are designed to address different facets of KSAOs required in higher-level positions, they can help an organization develop well-rounded leaders, rather than narrowly-focused professionals. Returning to our previous example, a gamified system can help ensure that an employee seeking promotion does not just focus on building strong guest service or conflict resolution skills but also develops leadership, networking, budgeting, and project management KSAOs. Furthermore, by reducing reliance on tenure as a marker when making promotion decisions, these systems can help organizations retain their "stars," who are more likely to seek opportunities elsewhere if they feel stifled by arbitrary timelines (Aguinis & O'Boyle, 2014).

Finally, these gamified systems can help organizations in the hotel and lodging industry be more responsive to a broader demographic of customers, a concern that is particularly important given that the U.S. population is projected to become increasingly racially diverse over the next 40 years.

Promoting Racial Inclusivity: Research Implications

The lack of diversity and inclusion among the managerial ranks in the U.S. hotel and lodging industry also affects hospitality researchers, consultants, and managers. We see three main deleterious effects. First, reduced diversity and inclusion limit the types of questions that can be asked and theoretical frameworks that can be applied when

studying phenomena or proposing creative solutions in this industry. Within the broader field of management, diversity and inclusion, particularly racial inclusivity, have emerged as a significant area of research in recent years, bringing to the fore numerous new viewpoints and theoretical frameworks that seek to understand and explain employee behavior in the workplace. Many of the questions and issues raised within this literature are as applicable to the hotel and lodging industry as they are to organizations in general. However, a paucity of diversity among the managerial ranks within the hotel and lodging industry means that researchers, consultants, and managers lack access to the samples needed to explore these questions and test these theoretical frameworks. Stated differently, as every doctoral student learns in their introductory statistics class, conducting empirical tests of hypotheses requires variance among the population being studied. The hotel and lodging industry's backsliding on diversity and inclusion (NAACP, 2012; 2019) means that there is a lack of variance among managers in this industry, which precludes researchers from asking particular questions or being able to adequately sample and test related hypotheses, which can range from conceptualizing and testing boundary conditions for different theories to conducting strong inference studies (Aguinis & Edwards, 2014).

A second negative effect is with regard to the relevance of hospitality research for practitioners. As an applied field, hospitality researchers seek not only to advance knowledge but also to derive actionable insights that can be implemented by practitioners, a practice that is commonly referred to as "evidence-based management." A critical, and often unstated, assumption in evidenced-based management is that inferences drawn from a study's results are based on a sample that mirrors, or is at least reasonably similar to, the population to which it will be applied. Consequently, using samples predominantly consisting of white managers limits the ability to generalize inferences to a broader managerial population. Consider, for example, leadership studies that find particular leader behaviors more effective when motivating hospitality teams. Because of the lack of racial diversity within managerial teams, researchers are unable to know if the behaviors identified as effective work equally as well for African American leaders, or whether other leadership styles may be more effective. Evidence suggests that institutional context is important in predicting the effectiveness of leadership behaviors for men and women (Park 2021), and a similar pattern may also be true for people of different racial backgrounds. Scholars who study cross-cultural phenomena are familiar with this limitation. It is fairly uncontroversial to suggest that inferences from a study that samples U.S. managers may not generalize to China or Brazil; so too one can reason that a study that is unable to access a diverse sample within the U.S. may not apply to a diverse employee population. Similarly, if a theory is derived from the field of psychology that samples and collects data from the general population, which is more diverse than the leadership teams of firms in the hotel

and lodging industry, the ability of such theories to predict outcomes for hotel managers is dubious.

The final negative effect we anticipate is the growing chasm between the cadre of scholars who conduct hospitality research, and the workforce that they study. Many hospitality researchers enter academia after spending an appreciable length of time in the trenches, often in supervisory, managerial, and even executive positions, seeking to answer questions of interest. A lack of racial inclusivity among managerial ranks means that fewer people of color will apply to, and consequently research, hospitality-related issues in the future. This is troubling because diversity is especially valuable when researchers attempt to build new theoretical models that are grounded in data, perhaps through qualitative studies. Indeed, qualitative approaches such as dramatological interviewing techniques are particularly suited in eliciting "awareness for experience which has been forgotten and overlooked" (Barritt, 1986, p. 20). Consequently, having a few, or fewer, researchers who are people of color hinders our ability to understand and tell the stories from diverse viewpoints in the workforce, which in turn limits the ability to develop and apply comprehensive theoretical frameworks.

Conclusion

Every hotelier knows the adage that "what gets measured, gets done, and what gets rewarded, gets repeated." Indeed, the hospitality industry has long used these philosophies when facing operational, technical or financial challenges. Our article proposes that this systematic approach to measurement and reward can also help the hotel and lodging industry tackle the issue of diversity and inclusion, and specifically racial inclusivity, in managerial ranks. Implementing a gamified system that moves promotion decisions from over-reliance on person-organization fit to more objective and transparent standards can help hospitality companies increase promotional opportunities for people of color, which brings attendant benefits for organizations, and indirectly, the researchers, consultants, and managers who study this industry.

We realize that a point-based gamified system is not a panacea. Other challenges besides person-organization fit play a role in stifling diversity and inclusion. For example, Carter (2020) outlines how African American employees are often required to prove their worth by accomplishing menial tasks before being given the opportunity to work on larger projects, while their white colleagues are often evaluated and offered opportunities based on "potential." Tackling diversity and inclusion effectively, therefore, requires a multipronged approach. The gamified system is but one part of this puzzle. It allows management and human resources to identify potential blind spots or areas of concern, as well as provide them with a tool they can use to redress the imbalance. Tracking employees' points and the different accomplishments they achieved to gain

those points provides insight into employee dynamics and preferences, which can then be used to ameliorate unconscious biases that may lead to imbalances in task assignments and performance evaluations. For example, if a subset of employees is not scoring enough points to be considered for promotions, managers can review how they assign work tasks to afford greater opportunities to all team members, while at the same time providing employees the knowledge needed to advocate for better work assignments. As such, while the gamified system does not directly address Carter's (2020) concern about how tasks are assigned, it does track that information, thereby allowing managers to use data to self-correct at the individual level, or through audits that can help correct inequities at the organizational level. This gamified system thus has the potential to provide more data about promotion decisions, thus engendering a greater sense of informational and procedural justice amongst employees and allowing organizations to more fully tap into the potential of their human capital.

For researchers, we see the gamified system as an opportunity to generate new knowledge and demonstrate value. Academic institutions in the U.S., and in particular, business and hospitality schools, are increasingly under scrutiny due to the perceived lack of relevance of their research for practice. Researchers can partner with hotel and lodging companies to develop customized gamified systems that will benefit the organization. At the same time, this collaboration allows researchers access to unique datasets which can help ensure that the full array of employee stories and perspectives are represented in the scholarly conversation.

Ultimately, the task of making diversity and inclusion truly resonant within the hotel and lodging industry will require a lot of hard work. It will require support, direction, and most crucially, executive-and-managerial-level buy-in. It will require researchers to leave their "ivory tower," broaden their conceptualizations of impact (Ramani, Aguinis, & Coyle-Shapiro, 2022), and become active participants in tackling this grand challenge. The proposals outlined in this article are but a first step in this journey. We hope that they will spur future practitioner and research efforts that make advancement opportunities available to the best and brightest, and help create a more robust, diverse, and inclusive workforce and Academy.

References

Aguinis, H., & Edwards, J. R. (2014). Methodological wishes for the next decade and how to make wishes come true. *Journal of Management Studies*, *51*(1), 143-174.

Aguinis, H., & O'Boyle Jr, E. (2014). Star performers in twenty-first century organizations. *Personnel Psychology*, *67*(2), 313-350.

Barritt, L. (1986). Human sciences and the human image. *Phenomenology and Pedagogy,* 4(3), 14 – 22.

Carter, E. R. (2020, June 22) *Restructuring your organization to actually advance racial justice*. Harvard Business Review. https://hbr.org/2020/06/restructure-your-organization-to-actually-advance-racial-justice

Jex, S. M., & Britt, T. W. (2014). *Organizational psychology: A scientist-practitioner approach*. John Wiley & Sons.

Lorenzo, R., & Reeves, M. (2018, January 30). *How and where diversity drives financial performance*. Harvard Business Review. https://hbr.org/2018/01/how-and-where-diversity-drives-financial-performance

Magee, J. C., & Galinsky, A. D. (2008). 8 social hierarchy: The self-reinforcing nature of power and status. *Academy of Management annals*, *2*(1), 351-398.

McGinley, S. P. (2019). Why hoteliers stay and go: Future oriented thinking. *Boston Hospitality Review, 8*(1), 1-8.

McGinley, S. P., & Martinez, L. (2018). The moderating role of career progression on job mobility: A study of work–life conflict. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research*, *42*(7), 1106-1129.

NAACP (2019). *NAACP Opportunity & Diversity Report Card: Hotel & Lodging Industry.* National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Baltimore, MD.

NAACP (2012). *NAACP Opportunity & Diversity Report Card: Hotel & Lodging Industry.* National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Baltimore, MD.

Park, S. (2021). Gendered leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic: how democracy and representation moderate leadership effectiveness. *Public Management Review*, 1-22.

Ramani, R. S., Aguinis, H., & Coyle-Shapiro, J. A. (2022). Defining, measuring, and rewarding scholarly impact: Mind the level of analysis. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, *21*(3), 470-486.

Rivera, L. A. (2016). *Pedigree: How elite students get elite jobs*. Princeton University Press.

Schneider, B. (1987). The people make the place. *Personnel psychology*, *40*(3), 437-453.

Yu, Q., Salvador, C. E., Melani, I., Berg, M. K., Neblett, E. W., & Kitayama, S. (2021). Racial residential segregation and economic disparity jointly exacerbate COVID‐19 fatality in large American cities. *Annals of the New York Academy of*

Sciences, *40*, 1-14.