EFFECT OF EMPOWERMENT:
FRONT-LINE EMPLOYEES IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY

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Abstract
The aims of this study were to examine how empowerment is perceived by the front-line hotel employees and secondly, to identify factors affecting empowerment within the industry. Factors such as communication, coaching, participation, training and reward were examined for any significant relationship with empowerment, along with whether employee's socio-demographic characteristics affected their perceptions of empowerment. The findings from the study indicated that except for gender, socio-demographic factors were not a strong influence on the diffusion of empowerment among employees. In order to ensure that the individual employee's feels empowered, factors such as communication, coaching, participation, training and reward should be given due attention by the management. Based on the findings, implications to companies are discussed and further research is suggested.

Keywords: Empowerment, front-line employees, hotel industry

INTRODUCTION

With the government's emphasis on the tourism industry (such as increased investment in the industry and campaigns like *Cuti-Cuti Malaysia* and Visit Malaysia Year 2007), the hotel industry is gaining prominence at the time of the study and a valuable revenue earner for the Malaysian economy. Sarawak, which projected 3.5 million visitors in 2007, recorded three million visitors in 2006, with the tourism sector growing by about eight percent (Eastern Times, January 24, 2007). Thus, there is presently a pressing need for more trained and suitable employees to serve the hotel industry. Empowerment of front-line employees is important because they are the direct point of contact for visitors and as such need the autonomy to deal effectively with visitors' concerns or problems. Empowerment will enable them to take advantage of sales opportunities, and cross-selling opportunities resulting from the interactive nature of the service delivery process (Grönroos, 1981). In services marketing, empowerment of the front line employees can lead to both attitudinal and behavioral changes. Attitudinal changes resulting from empowerment include increased job satisfaction, reduced role stress, and less role ambiguity (Niehoff et al., 1990; Brown and Peterson, 1993; and Westman, 1992; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1988.) Furthermore, empowerment can boost employees' self-efficacy (Conger and Kanungo, 1988) as it permits them to decide the best way to carry out a given task (Gist and Mitchell, 1992). Empowerment leads to employees becoming more adaptive, as adaptivity is associated with autonomy (Niehoff *et al.*, 1990; Scott and Bruce, 1994), as well as freedom of employee action (Spiro and Weitz, 1990).

A review of the literature within this field has shown that th. focus of study has predominantly been from a management perspective rather than employee percep .n of empowerment. This can lead to only partial understanding of the empowerment proce s i .cause as stated by Nesan and