

Northern German hotel employees' expectations of employer inducements: Development of a context-specific Q-set

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Abstract

The German hotel industry struggles with employee retention due to stressful working conditions and poor management. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the economic impact of a severe skilled labour shortage, making staff retention a top priority. This research explores the psychological contract of German hotel employees by exploring key aspects of the psychological contract; promises and expectations. It analysed job advertisements to uncover explicit and implicit promises perceived by employees, discussed with experienced hospitality professionals, and generated a list of 41 key expectations. The study reveals that employees prioritize the ability to plan their time and organize their personal lives over benefits like gym memberships and travel discounts. Four main themes emerged: reconciling work and personal life, professionalism, trust, and an engaging environment. Reliable scheduling and accommodating personal plans were the most important expectations. By incorporating these findings into managerial and HRD practices, such as appraisal interviews and onboarding as well as managerial training, hotels can better meet employee expectations, leading to more satisfied and productive staff. The findings indicate that HRM/D practitioners in the industry should engage in long-term career planning with their employees. This paper furthermore contributes to methodological literature on online focus groups and creation of Q Sets.

Keywords

Psychological contract • Q Methodology • Hotel Industry

Introduction

The hotel industry worldwide has been plagued by labour shortages for years (Enz, 2009; Hwang et al., 2014; Ma et al., 2021). Working in a hotel is considered to be one of the most stressful careers, primarily due to unfavourable working hours (Salama et al., 2022). Poor management practices add to the factors causing dissatisfaction (Nigg, 2020; Poulston, 2009). Overall, hospitality employees experience a low level of job satisfaction and comparatively very high turnover rates (AlBattat et al., 2014; Kuria, et al., 2012; Nigg, 2020).

In Germany, the number of employees in the hospitality sector has been in steady decline for decades, while the number of apprentices peaked in 2007 and thereafter declined sharply (Maack et al., 2013). Horgan (2021) notes that in industries characterized by low wages and low levels of employee government, organizations find little pressure to automate tasks; this applies to the hospitality sector (Herok et al., 2019). Hence, going into the COVID-19 pandemic, hotel businesses

in Germany were heavily reliant on low-cost, often part-time labour (Maack et al., 2013).

As the country emerged from the pandemic, the resulting problems became evident: it began to suffer economic consequences of qualified labour shortage (Sauer et al., 2022). The accommodation sector felt the pressure more than any other industry (Peichl et al., 2022; Schulten & Specht, 2022). In 2020 alone, the gastronomy and tourism sector lost almost 13% of its employees.

Hospitality employees are especially vulnerable to losing their livelihoods due to external shocks (Manoharan et al., 2021) and consequently move to more stable careers (Jansen & Risius, 2022) while individuals in general have become more reluctant to work in a foreign country (Sahoo et al., 2022), limiting the access to international talents. The drastic shortage of labour has already caused noticeable economic damage in certain regions (Mügglér et al., 2022). Today, staff

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retention is an action priority for practitioners in the industry in Germany (dwif consulting, 2022; Salama et al., 2022). Previous research on the relationship between retention and career development by Dassanayake & Kularathne (2021) led to the recommendation for employers in the hotel industry to align their career development strategies with the employees' plans in order to improve employee retention. Employers appear to be following these recommendations with job adverts promising a wide range of inducements.

We adopt a psychological contract perspective on job satisfaction, a suggested prerequisite for employee loyalty (Noble-Nkrumah et al., 2022). A psychological contract is the promises and expectations, or set of "individual beliefs in a reciprocal obligation between the individual and the organization" (Rousseau, 1989). In this study, we have considered the promises made by employers to the workforce and positioned them as the inducements – benefits, services and circumstances – that employees expect the employers to provide on the basis of these (perceived) promises. Kraak et al. (2024) emphasize that psychological contract research should aim at solving specific problems in a regional, or sector-related context. They urge academia to improve the relationship with local stakeholders and have a meaningful impact on communities suggesting that wider-context approaches incur the risk of organizations implementing solutions which may not be suitable for the local context.

This research responds to calls for psychological contract research to aim to solve context-related problems (Kraak et al., 2024), by identifying the employer inducements which frontline hotel employees in Northern Germany expect and determining which of these inducements are most prevalent. The identification of these inducements offers a Q set to explore the psychological contract of hotel workers in a further in-depth study. Our findings will demonstrate methodologically how future researchers can develop context specific Q Methodology approaches to explore the psychological contract within specific contexts. Meanwhile, the findings themselves can inform HRD and HRM practice.

Theoretical background

To achieve their business goals, hotels rely heavily on employees' performance (Hwang et al., 2014; Salama et al., 2022). This performance hinges on hospitality and the entertainment of visitors and delivering an experience to guests (Hemmington, 2007; Sørensen & Jensen, 2015). Services meanwhile also have a social component (Nerdinger, 2007). Service-oriented businesses require a strong work culture which necessitates low turnover rates (Rousseau, 1990). Good job performance of hotel employees is directly influenced by job satisfaction and loyalty, which itself is positively affected

by job satisfaction (Tran & Tran, 2020). Well-performing hospitality employees directly contribute to business success (Karatepe et al., 2020).

The working conditions in hotels have been characterized as particularly stressful (Ma et al., 2021; Salama et al., 2022). Antisocial working hours (Salama et al., 2022) high workload, overall working conditions, and increasing demands to flexibility (Maack et al., 2013) are named in particular; along with role ambiguity (Üngüren & Arslan, 2021) and emotional labour (Lee & Madera, 2019; Ma et al., 2021; Shi et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2020). Considerations of employee health and life phases have been secondary to demands for business performance (Budhiraja et al., 2022) and hospitality employees have been known to leave the industry at the transition to a different life phase, for instance when they found a partner working outside the industry or when becoming parents (Guhleemann & Krüger, 2018). Hotel employees consistently report low job satisfaction which leads to high turnover rates (AlBattat et al., 2014; Kuria et al., 2012; Nigg, 2020).

Hospitality employees are especially vulnerable to losing their livelihoods due to external shocks like the pandemic (Manoharan et al. 2021), the industry being highly susceptible to the effects of a crisis (Hao et al, 2020). Post-pandemic, some researchers consider the time right for re-assessing psychological contracts (Lopez & Fuiks, 2021; Mehta et al., 2022) and for a new approach to managing people in general (Butterick & Charlwood, 2021). Adekoya et al. (2022) demonstrated that expectations in work flexibility had increased generally during the pandemic, when remote working spread widely; a different sense of self-discipline, the role of leadership in the working environment and smart working practices took hold and have shaped expectations of both employees and employers with the consequent desire to review traditional working practice (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020).

Given the difficulties in adopting such practices for the hotel sector it is an appropriate time for further research on the current psychological contract of hotel workers. Retaining talent requires consideration of what prompts hotel employees to leave or stay. Rousseau (1990) argues that an individual's psychological contract hinges on their career aspirations, whether they intend to advance within the organization or use it as a stepping stone requiring employers to offer incentives aligned with individual employees' career plans. Therefore, regularly assessing the different employee needs (Mhlanga, 2018) is crucial. For example, Guhleemann & Best (2021) and Guhleemann & Krüger (2018) note challenges for aging hospitality employees faced with tensions, particularly during family-building or career qualification stages, due to insufficient employer flexibility. With many hotel employees being comparatively young (Guhleemann & Best, 2021), attention may need to be paid to the motivation and needs

of Generation Z entering the workforce. Members of this generation have been motivated to work in hotels. During the pandemic young individuals made themselves available to work in quarantine hotels, motivated by the idea of doing something meaningful, while they otherwise shied away from hospitality work on account of working conditions and the requirement for emotional labour (Goh & Baum, 2021). Lau (2022) and Klaffke (2021) show that members of Gen Z wish for recognition and validation of their work and development. While some research suggests that psychological contracts do not differ significantly across generations, they do appear to be influenced by life stage (Egerová et al., 2021; Magni & Manzoni, 2020), suggesting the requirement to not only design jobs and working conditions to cater to different needs, but also to assess the needs of individual employees regularly and make adjustments to their employment conditions accordingly.

The above literature suggests the answer to the question of what motivates hotel employees is located in job design and working conditions and changes appear to be in order to prevent further loss of employees and enable the attraction of more talent.

The role of the psychological contract in work outcomes has been accepted by many scholars (Bal et al., 2010; Chen et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2014; Restubog et al., 2006; Suazo & Mai, 2005). Mehta et al. (2022) confirmed previous findings that fulfilment of the psychological contract positively affected work performance, but also life satisfaction and well-being. As the quality of the psychological contract improves, the expectations of employee and organization increasingly converge (Raeder, 2007; Tekleab & Taylor, 2003), leading to higher productivity and improving the career advancement of the employee (Dabos & Rousseau, 2004). This process can be sped up by verbalizing the psychological contract and implementing HRM measures to ensure optimal information flow between both parties (Rogozińska-Pawelczyk, 2018). Bandyopadhyay & Srivastava (2022) and Hammouri et al. (2022) confirm that fulfilling the psychological contract is an antecedent to job satisfaction and lower turnover. Failing to fulfil psychological contracts, meanwhile, leads to reduced contributions by employees in the wake of perceived organizational injustice (Estreder et al., 2021). Meanwhile, where HRD is being delegated and fragmented, expectations are being met less and frustration grows; organizations need to clearly understand their employees' expectations (Dainty et al., 2000). In the context of hotel employees, Rousseau's (1990) two types of psychological contracts - transactional and relational contracts - provide a useful lens and contrasting views. Transactional psychological contracts describe those of shorter duration and characterized by quid-pro-quo exchanges and an economic orientation, while relational contracts are socio-emotional and more robust, characterized

by loyalty and security (Rousseau 2000). In the context of hotel workers, the transactional factors directly motivating employees, particularly highly educated employees, to stay are salary and career opportunities (Blomme et al., 2010). However, Bandyopadhyay & Srivastava (2022) claim that managers need to pay more attention to relational than to transactional elements of the psychological contract.

In a post-COVID-19 survey of what motivated hotel employees, Choi et al. (2022) found that on top of the list were financial benefits, followed by teamwork, training, career and growth opportunities, and recognition. In order to keep employees engaged and motivated, Mhlanga (2018) suggests interesting job design and job rotation. Similarly, Sheehan et al. (2019) found job design to be a factor in turnover intention.

D'Annunzio-Green & Francis (2005) demonstrated that employees actively monitor company behaviour and evaluate it against the expectations they hold; furthermore, that management behaviour – rather than organizational reasons – has a much stronger effect on psychological contract breaches. This suggests the need for HRD professionals to give attention to the personal situation of team members, develop trusting relationships, and engage with team members on eye level, i.e., respecting them as professionals (Patel and Hamlin, 2012), to enable them to constantly develop strategies and measures to manage the expectations that constitute psychological contracts.

Methods

This paper is the first element of a longer Q Methodology research project. Q Methodology concerns itself with 'the systematic study of subjectivity' by presenting a participant with a set of statements about a given topic, asking them to rank-order them based on their personal view (Brown, 1993). This methodology utilizes the relative sorting of statements regarding a topic by the participant (*Q Sort*). These statements – collectively called the *Q Set* – are synthesized from the *concourse*, which is the complete universe of knowledge and opinions about the topic in question. The *Q Set* thus represents part of the *concourse*, analogous to how a participant sample relates to the whole population (Watts & Stenner, 2012). In this paper, we present the process of this *Q Set* creation for the research project. Q methodology has been used in psychological contract research only infrequently (e.g. Purvis & Cropley, 2003). It is considered a suitable tool for individual psychology (Watts & Stenner, 2012), for grouping people viewing the world similarly (Giles, 2013), and for understanding subjectivity (Stephenson, 1953). Psychological contracts can differ among people employed under identical conditions (Allan, 2010; Rousseau & McLean Parks, 1993; Rousseau

& Schalk, 2000) and their exploration therefore requires a methodological approach tailored to highlighting individual voices, identifying similarities, and explaining differences. A strength of Q in this regard is that it leaves the creation of meaning to the participant, minimizing the forcing of external categories, thus allowing for the influence of the participant's individual context (Adams, 1965; Brown, 1980, 2019; Müller & Kals, 2004; Watts & Stenner, 2012). Q Methodology also lends itself to the work with hotel employees over a larger geographical area due to its practicability: it is considered less time-consuming and more engaging than questionnaires using Likert scales (Gao & Soranzo, 2020) as well as a cost- and time-effective tool for exploratory research (ten Klooster *et al.*, 2008). Purvis & Cropley (2003) conducted a Q Sort as part of psychological contract research on the grounds of its ability to allow for a structured and systematic approach in understanding individuals' unique standpoints on an issue.

Our paper identifies and develops a list of statements detailing expected employer inducements of hotel employees in Northern Germany, which underpin the psychological contract. This represents the creation of a Q Set, consisting of statements about expected employer inducements, which can be used as part of Q Methodology to further research the difference viewpoints in existence (Watts & Stenner, 2012). Q allows researchers to interpret commonalities and differences in opinion based on circumstantial factors – in this case, the participants' workplace location and type as well as basic demographic characteristics like age and education. It allows the participant to let their individual experiences and biography inform their responses; Watson (2002, cited by D'Annunzio-Green & Francis, 2005) considers the employee's biography, identity, values, and feelings to be important things they bring into the employment relationship besides their skills and working capacities. Q Methodology allows these to influence and enrich the research of the psychological contract.

The set of statements to be rank-ordered is called the Q set. It is required to cover the entirety of the relevant ground as thoroughly as possible in order to be broadly representative of the concourse (Watts & Stenner, 2012). Stephenson (1952) argues that there are several ways of creating a Q sample required in the particular experiment at hand, while Brown (1980) likens the process to an art rather than a science. Watts & Stenner (2012) make the case for rigour in developing Q samples in order to avoid criticism.

Many psychological contract scholars (Kraak *et al.*, 2024) argue that context is underrepresented in research design and that the specific context of the research setting should receive greater attention. Context, according to Johns (2006), includes the location, occupation, and demographics of participants.

To produce context-relevant results, we decided to source the concourse from which the expressions of expectations are formulated directly from the context itself. Hence, a survey was conducted of job advertisements published on the industry-specific employment portal Hotelcareer.de (Hotelcareer, 2023) on 21 September 2023. A total of 141 individual job advertisements from the German states of Schleswig-Holstein, Hamburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Bremen, and the northern part of Lower Saxony were extracted. The survey was conducted using the 'location +20km' filter, with subsequent searches of accordingly spaced locations. No further filters were applied, so that all available job advertisements were displayed. The relevant ones (for frontline roles) were then manually selected and logged on a grid according to location type (island, coastal, rural, city), hotel ownership (family-run, private, corporate), chain affiliation (independent, loose co-operation, local chain, or international chain), hotel type (budget, mid-range, luxury), department (front office, food and beverage, others or multi-role) and level (line staff, supervisor, manager, or apprentice). To further enrich the data, we surveyed the online career portals of large hotel companies and chains active in the region and extracted relevant promises.

The information gathered was analysed and categorized using NVivo version 12 (Lumivero, 2017), where 20 nodes were identified which are displayed in Table 1: "Topics mentioned by job adverts".

Table 1. Topics Mentioned by Job Adverts

Node	Mentions
Corporate culture	248
Personality	243
Job content	189
Career development	163
Monetary benefits	137
Discounts (staff rates)	130
Workplace description	112
Training & development	109
Team spirit	100
Mobility	94
Staff meals	87
Health	78
Discounts (external partners)	74
Salary	73
Team building	67
Staff housing	62
Work-life integration	57
Uniforms	41
Vacation leave	41
Feedback	31

Paige & Morin (2016) provide a step-by-step instruction on developing a Q Set. After population of the concourse (this being the job adverts) and development of the preliminary Q Sample (Q Set), evaluation and piloting of the set is required to refine the items. We presented the 49 statements deduced from employer promises to a focus group of six seasoned hospitality employees. The members of the group were purposefully chosen for their wealth of diverse experience within the industry and their demographic diversity: participant age ranged from 25 to 57 years, participants were living in different family situations (e.g. with young children, single, married without children etc.) and had distinctly different career paths under their belt. Natives of different parts of Germany were as much part of the group as foreign-born participants. The participants were members of a WhatsApp group chat, where they were presented with the statements (sorted by category) and asked to comment on and discuss the validity and relevance of the individual statements.

WhatsApp was the chosen medium as it allows for asynchronous discussion revolving around the participants' availability (Colom, 2022). Group discussions on WhatsApp (and similar messaging applications) have yielded positive results for researchers in the past (Neo et al., 2022; Singer et al., 2020) and shown results on-par with offline discussions, though the richness and quantity of the output lagged behind those of in-person discussions (Chen & Neo, 2019; Richard et al., 2021). Dos Santos Marques et al. (2021) contrast disadvantages of virtual focus groups like smaller group sizes, greater responsibility on the part of the participant, and technological access issues with positive effects such as increased participation and greater flexibility and an expanded, more diverse participant pool due to the asynchronous and geographically flexible setup. In general, they too find the results generated by smaller, virtual focus groups satisfactory.

As research on the viability and quality of focus group discussions conducted via messenger apps is still scarce (and almost exhausted by the sources presented above) this step offered a methodological innovation.

Stahl & King (2020) provide a comprehensive guide to ensuring the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative data based on Lincoln & Guba (1985). Three of their principles have been applied: Firstly, using several sources of information. This has been ensured through the two-step process of extracting information from a wide range of job adverts and subsequently interrogating a focus group of industry experts to validate and amend it. The focus group members also served as informants verifying the researcher's interpretation, after which each statement (save one) was cross-referenced with published academic findings. Secondly, the authors consider a prolonged engagement in the field of study to be desirable. The lead author has spent

over a decade in various functions and locations in the hospitality industry, adding to undergraduate and graduate degrees with a specialization in hospitality management. Lastly, peer debriefing was conducted through discussion between the authors and the presentation of the working paper at an international conference for HRD.

Findings

The topics most frequently covered by the job adverts were: corporate (workplace) culture, aspects of the applicant's personality (i.e. soft skills and matters of motivation), contents of the job, career development, and monetary benefits. The latter included measures such as night or weekend premiums, bonus systems, employer contributions to retirement funds, or Christmas presents, but also profit sharing.

Discounting items which would be formalized explicitly in work or union contracts in Germany, the individual and differently worded promises, descriptions, and employer-side expectations were rephrased in accordance with the expectations that they would induce among the applicants. An initial 97 statements in 20 categories were reduced to 49 statements in 13 categories by combination of similar statements and omission of obsolete or duplicate ones. Each statement was verified by cross-referencing it with previous research findings.

Despite inconsistent participation, the focus group shared extensive and valuable personal insights in addition to validating the statements. At the participants' consensual suggestion, some items were rephrased, omitted, or added. The total number remained at 49 statements. The statements "I am provided access to leisure activities" and "I am empowered to make extensive decisions" were omitted as the consensus was that they were irrelevant. At the same time, participants wished to add "I receive support for taking care of my children" to distinguish between enabling care work and overall work-life balance. Equally, a distinction was desired between the general statement on diversity: "I am respected for who I am" and "I can fill my role in a manner that is comfortable and suitable for me" as one participant explained that one does not necessarily display one's entire personality at work and is instead expected to play a role.

At the end of the focus group discussion, a poll was conducted on these statements. The poll question was "Which of these statements constitute expectations you have of your employer?", participants were able to cast a vote for each item they considered part of their set of expectations. In this poll, nine statements received no support, eight of which were consequently eliminated from the final Q Set.

Table 2: "Validated Q Set" lists the statements generated through the process described. They are ranked from most to least supported in the final poll.

Table 2. Inducements Identified

#	Statement of expectation	Votes	Theoretical Foundation
1	I have plannable working times	5	Heimerl et al. (2020); Rohita et al. (2022); Wanger (2017)
2	I receive support for reconciling work and personal life	4	Heimerl et al. (2020); Rohita et al. (2022); Wanger (2017)
3	My reliability is valued	4	Heimerl et al. (2020); Rohita et al. (2022); Wanger (2017)
4	My criticism is received gratefully	4	Heimerl et al. (2020); Rohita et al. (2022); Wanger (2017)
5	My professional expertise is valued	4	Marshall et al. (2015)
6	I am being valued	4	Maroudas et al. (2008); Marshall et al. (2015); Mhlanga (2018); Nohria et al. (2008); Younies & Al-Tawil (2021)
7	My professional advancement is individually supported	4	Dashper (2020); Lee et al. (2015)
8	I work in a professional environment	4	Kirillova et al. (2020); Min & Hong (2021)
9	I am allowed to let my work be guided by empathy	3	Bahadur et al. (2020); Kraak et al. (2024)
10	My passion for my profession is being kept alive	3	Crawford et al. (2022)
11	I am respected for who I am	3	García-Rodríguez et al. (2020); Lee & Madera (2019)
12	I can fill my role in a manner that is comfortable and suitable for me	3	Alagarsamy et al. (2023); Jin et al. (2021); Shi et al. (2022)
13	I am allowed to actively contribute to the business's development	3	Mhlanga (2018)
14	I receive appropriate feedback	3	Lee et al. (2015); Lee & Kim (2021)
15	I can provide feedback any time	3	Kraak et al. (2024); Liu-Lastres et al. (2024)
16	My personal life plan is being taken into account	3	Lee et al. (2015)
17	I am not left hanging	3	Jaworski et al. (2018); Kraak et al. (2024)
18	My good performance is rewarded	3	Jaworski et al. (2018); Lee et al. (2015)
19	I work in a company which consistently evolves	3	
20	I am being managed with a suitable leadership style	3	Lee et al. (2015)
21	I have the opportunity to have a varied career	3	Mhlanga (2018)
22	I have high-quality tools at my disposal	3	Lee et al. (2015)
23	I get to learn through suitable training formats	3	Jaworski et al. (2018)
24	I am being taught all skills necessary for my job	3	Chiang et al. (2005); Kraak et al. (2024); Lee et al. (2015)
25	My financial needs are being taken into account	2	Mhlanga (2018)
26	I receive support for my commute to work	2	von Eisenhart Rothe (2021)
27	My flexibility is valued	2	Colakoglu et al. (2010)
28	Our team work is encouraged and supported	2	Lee et al. (2015); Mhlanga (2018)
29	I receive high-quality meals	2	Song (2022)
30	My loyalty is valued	2	Colakoglu et al. (2010)
31	I am treated like a family member	2	Haugh & Mckee (2003); McIntosh et al. (2011)
32	I can continue my career in different places	2	Hjalager (2003); Kotrotsiou (2018)
33	I have long-term career prospects	2	Chang & Busser (2020); Dashper (2020)
34	I get to work with high-quality products	2	Lee et al. (2015)
35	I can continuously develop myself professionally	2	Budhiraja et al. (2022); Chang & Busser (2020); Chiang et al. (2005); Heimerl et al. (2020); Lee et al. (2015); Tamminga & de Boer (2018)
36	I receive support for taking care of my children	1	Bainbridge & Townsend (2020); Henle et al. (2020)
37	I receive support to be able to have a comfortable place to stay	1	Fink (2020); Neukirch (2023)
38	I am allowed to make the guests' interest a priority in my work	1	Lages & Piercy (2012)
39	I get to participate in the business success	1	Belloc (2022); Chien et al. (2020); Dewi et al. (2020)
40	I work in a sustainable organization	1	Dixon-Fowler et al. (2020); Dögl & Holtbrügge (2014); Kraak et al. (2024); Puncheva-Michelotti et al. (2018)
41	I enjoy creative freedom	0	Alagarsamy et al. (2023); Bousinakis & Halkos (2021); Jaskyte et al. (2020)

Table 3. Omitted Statements

I have better access to leisure travel
I receive security for my future
My determination is valued
My physical limits are being taken into account
I have access to athletic activities outside of my working hours
I can attend health-promoting activities at my workplace
We celebrate together
I receive support for swift career advancement

Note: "Omitted Statements" lists the statements which were included in the original set but omitted following the poll taken of the focus group members. The discussion showed that these were disregarded by the participants for different reasons. The verdict on "creative freedom" was inconclusive; while the statement received no votes in the poll, several participants had acknowledged its importance during the discussion, while noting that they saw generally little space for creative activities in operational roles. The inducement was thus retained in the Q Set.

Discussion

The results of the focus group discussion showed that transactional inducements appear of lesser importance to hotel employees than expected; the popular enabling of leisure travel through staff rates and discount programmes was not considered an important expectation by a single participant. The inducement of providing support for one's future, the expression of which was mostly developed from employers offering tax-advantaged corporate retirement schemes (Conrad, 2022), was heavily discussed in the group but unanimously rejected since short tenures in companies completely diminish the benefit, leading to negligible payout sums. Offering additional retirement support was also not considered a motivator for staying with an employer longer. Similarly, other transactional inducements like support for one's residence (through corporate housing or support in searching for a home to rent at the location), sharing into the company's (primarily financial) success, and support for commuting by way of discounted tickets or allowances, rank low in the poll. Employees in the focus group are prepared to handle these matters of finance and personal life themselves and rather expect their employer to provide for the necessary circumstances, primarily by sufficient pay, reliable planning, and availability of leisure time, to do so. Contrary to indications from previous research (Marshall et al., 2015), health-promotion and access to sports – a very popular inducement offered is a tax-advantaged subsidy to gym club memberships (Hausen, n.d.) – are not expected either. This finding supports those of the survey by Balogh and Bába (2020).

On the other hand, group members consented that a plannable and reliable working schedule was the most important inducement, which is a prerequisite for the

expectation in statement #2. Further expectations in the top ten surround being valued and professionally respected (#3–#6), individually tailored support for career-building (#7), overall professionalism in the workplace (#8) and the freedom to be guided by empathy and passion (#9–#10).

The most prevalent expectations can thus be grouped in four themes:

1. Reconciling work and personal life. Employers achieve this primarily by providing equitable, reliable schedules and posting them ahead of time. Considering the individual's needs in scheduling and career development was considered an important management activity.
2. Professionalism. This not only includes the appreciation of the employee's expertise, but also extends to the conduct of management and the working environment including tools and materials provided.
3. Trust. Allowing front-line employees to be guided by their best judgement and empathy, filling their role in a manner they feel comfortable in rather than prescribing rules of conduct. An open two-way exchange of feedback is important to the participants. It also extends to the employer being trustworthy, exemplified e.g. in statement #17.
4. Engaging Environment. Employees expect their workplaces and superiors to provide them with a stimulating environment and opportunities for upskilling and participation in organizational development.

Implications for theory

COVID-19 showed that the hotel industry needs to build better strategic resilience (Hao et al., 2020). For the German hotel industry, COVID-19 was immediately followed by a human resource crisis. In contributing to the understanding of contemporary, local, and industry-specific psychological contracts, this paper provides knowledge on which a new framework of Human Resource strategies can be built. A previous study by Hassanein & Özgüt (2022) has identified areas of improvement in both managerial and strategic scopes in the Middle Eastern context.

This study furthermore contributes to methodological knowledge in psychological contract research. Firstly, Q Methodology has seldom been used by psychological contract researchers (e.g. Purvis & Cropley, 2003). This paper demonstrates how a Q Set can be developed for research conducted under the theoretical framework of the psychological contract. Especially as the field has turned its attention to the importance of considering context (Kraak et al., 2024), we demonstrate how elements of the

psychological contract can be extracted from context-specific sources and verified with the help of experts in the context at hand. Utilizing a group chat in a messaging application (WhatsApp) is a relatively novel approach that researchers have been evaluating in the previous years during and following the COVID-19 pandemic (Colom, 2022; Neo *et al.*, 2022; Singer *et al.*, 2020). This paper presents results of and evaluates the use of a WhatsApp group for focus group discussions and thus contributes to the young and small set of knowledge regarding this medium.

We present a ranked set of expected employer inducements, showing that certain themes are more prevalent than others among the hotel and hospitality workforce in Germany. The results suggest that work-life balance is most important to the workforce, followed by professional and engaging work environments and mutual trust. Surprisingly, members of the focus group generally did not give much weight to inducements of financial or material nature. It is these inducements that are often supported through tax breaks. HRD researchers and policymakers may take this into consideration as it may indicate that it is necessary to develop new support schemes more closely aligned with changed expectations.

Implications for practitioners

While the findings presented in this paper serve the primary purpose of being the basis for further research, practitioners can draw on the statements as verbalizations of common expectations their existing and prospective employees have. The statements can be utilized in the development of appraisal interview structures, onboarding processes or job interviews to learn about an individual's psychological contract, and design more satisfactory employment relationships as well as cost-efficient benefit structures. Uraon (2018) demonstrated that it is beneficial for employers to formulate clear, targeted HRD strategies and measure their effectiveness. Practitioners should actively seek understanding for the individual needs and priorities of their employees in order to deliver on theme #1: Reconciling work with personal life. On the strategic HRM level, this means gaining and constantly updating one's understanding of the individual employee's immediate needs and long-term personal plans, in order for employees to smoothly transition into new roles or functions better suited to changed circumstances, and to find replacements. Personal Development Plans (PDP) can help foster successful long-term relationships and reduce turnover (Beckert & Walsh, 1991), and outlining a new employee's learning and career journey should be part of onboarding practice. Strategic and trusting co-operation on long-term development may also include the abandonment of insular thinking, expecting individuals to remain in one's organization for extended periods even if this

may not suit their personal life plan. Communicating openly about an employee's strategic exit from the organization and developing replacements must be part of a sustainable HR strategy. This open communication requires trust (theme #3: Trust), as employees must not fear repercussions for being open about eventually planning to leave.

This deep understanding of individual needs and the proposed individualization of the exchange relationship indicates that employers in the hotel industry should shift from a model of attempting to create the same experience for everyone to I-Deals: conditions of employment which are negotiated between the individual and the employer (Rousseau, 2005). I-Deals allow for terms and conditions of employment to be tailored to the needs of the individual and have been shown to be helpful in career development and managing job insecurity (Davis & van der Heijden, 2018).

The results show that learning and career development are important expectations which employers need to effectively respond to. Engaging in transformational leadership eventually fosters an HRD-oriented organizational culture with positive effects on job satisfaction (Akdere & Egan, 2020). Another important function of HRD is the creation of a performance management system, which has been found to help align employee and employer expectations, reducing turnover intention (Sharma *et al.*, 2022). On a day-to-day managerial basis, reliable scheduling is a crucial expectation. The nature of the industry dictates that unforeseen circumstances may warrant schedule changes from time to time, yet employees would like to feel appreciated for being flexible (statement #27). Schedule adjustments must be reduced to a minimum, however, which requires robust planning on the part of immediate supervisors. Hotel employees do not mind shift work, but they expect to be able to make personal plans and arrangements ahead of time and to trust that the schedule posted is reliable. Communication, planning ahead, and simple tools like a shift request procedure can significantly improve planning security for individuals.

Several statements concern feedback channels. Organizations promise open feedback culture in many different ways, and the focus group discussion showed that employees expect this to be put into practice. Experienced employees expect to be able to share feedback and suggestions, thus participating in the organization's improvement. Having the required resources to perform well is another element of theme #2: Professionalism; it is therefore vital to be aware of the resource needs of frontline staff. Organizations should hold regular feedback sessions in the form of formal and informal individual performance reviews as well as department or townhall meetings. Individual review meetings should not be a performance evaluation but foremost an opportunity to learn about the employee's goals, plans, and needs through open-ended questions.

The results of the focus group discussion show that popular inducements offered, usually where they are supported by tax incentives, rank low or are completely rejected by the employees surveyed. HRD and HRM practitioners are instead cautioned to enable work-life balance not through parties or subsidizing gym memberships, but by reliable scheduling enabling their employees to reconcile work with their personal lives, taking into account individual needs. Meeting expectations of respect and validation should be high on the agenda as well.

The findings of our research should also inform future management development and training, as they identify important managerial skills of robust planning (i.e. predictable duty rosters), open communication and trust-building; they underscore the importance of developing transformational leaders. For the planning and implementation of career development, the findings highlight the benefits of I-Deals and personal development plans as well as regular feedback sessions with employees.

Limitations

The initial statements were developed from information provided by employers to prospective new hires; to utilize them in the study of existing employees as intended, the perspective was changed from the employer to the employee view on a particular topic. This leaves room for interpretation: to verify that the statements represent possible employee views, a focus group discussion was conducted with a diverse group of experienced hospitality professionals.

The job advertisements used were randomly sampled at one point in time. Balancing between types of hotel, location, or job advertised was not a priority. Rather, it was important to gather as many different job adverts as possible. Furthermore, companies not currently looking for employees at the time, or doing so through different channels, are not represented. A comprehensive overview of promised inducements may be subject to a separate study.

The focus group discussion revealed a pattern among participants to – despite being cautioned not to – relate the hypothesized expectations to their personal experience. Hotel employees tend to experience many different workplaces through their career (Guhleemann & Best, 2021; Guhleemann & Krüger, 2018) and may adjust their expectations in accordance with these experiences: ten Brink (2004) argues that the psychological contract is consistently influenced by prior experiences. This indicates that certain expectations may have been removed from the list by participants because they had not been fulfilled in the past, and that their omission from the psychological contract does not necessarily translate to them being unimportant to employees.

It is consensus that any research on the psychological contract is not generalizable globally and calls for further research in other contexts and locations are common (Abdalla et al., 2021; Jung et al., 2021; Kang et al., 2021; Saleem et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2021). Sia (2013) even doubts the applicability of measures developed for previous studies in other contexts, and Kraak et al. (2024) heavily emphasize the importance of conducting psychological contract research with respect to local context. Thus, while this paper presents a Q Set for exploration of the psychological contract of hotel employees, to our knowledge the first of its kind, it is important to verify the statements' applicability to other contexts and adapt them to the local one if they are used in Q Sorts. Independent from the methodological perusal, this list of employee expectations must be reevaluated in different contexts and at different points in time.

Further research

The survey of promised inducements and subsequent deduction of verbalized expectations provides the basis for further research into the psychological contract of hotel employees, specifically the investigation of the prevalence as well as relevant and absolute importance of the individual inducements in the psychological contracts. The list of expectations presented in the paper will be used in a subsequent Q methodological study to identify possible different types of psychological contracts among Northern German hotel employees. The subsequent study will examine which of the statements presented are of higher or lower importance when ranked relative to each other.

The statements presented were intentionally phrased to represent subjective feelings and opinions. In accordance with the philosophy of Q methodology, the attachment of meaning to them is left to each individual participant (Watts & Stenner, 2012). We believe that these statements can be utilized as a blueprint for similar research projects in other geographic regions, allowing researchers to establish an understanding of hotel employees' psychological contracts in a range of environments and the development of effective practices in each. Q Sorts conducted in different areas are expected to lead to dissimilar results based on the sample region's economic and legal circumstances, potentially providing for a basis of comparison across sample areas and subsequent interpretation. Likewise, a similar approach can be adopted to develop context-specific, relevant Q Sets.

HRD researchers may take the results of this study and investigate whether inducement expectations have changed dramatically across industries and whether attention needs to be redirected from the support measures, benefits and tax benefits currently popular and towards suitable measures that

align with workforce expectations. The results of this small and very specific sample suggest that contemporary policies may be misdirected and inefficient.

It is crucial to note that the communication of promises towards new entrants into the exchange relationship – as is the case with job adverts, which were our primary source of material for this study – entails a high level of expectations for these promises to be delivered on. D'Annunzio-Green and Francis (2005) demonstrated well how employees look out for signals regarding the inducements made. Future research may investigate whether the relatively short tenures in the hotel professions may be related to psychological contract breach during the 'wait and see period' (D'Annunzio-Green & Francis, 2005).

Conclusion

In accordance with recent calls for more research into psychological contracts of different backgrounds (Jung et al., 2021; Kraak et al., 2024; Lopez & Fuiks, 2021), we present a list of formulated expectations held by hotel employees in Northern Germany. This forms a solid basis for different avenues of further research and can be adopted into specific human resource procedures by practitioners. The methodology presented here can be adopted to synthesize context-specific sets of employee expectations to further the understanding of psychological contracts in different industries, regions, and at different times. It also demonstrates a procedure to create a relevant Q Set for psychological contract research.

Hotel managers and HR professionals in the industry may adopt the findings of this research project into their daily work and strategies: the findings show that reliable shift scheduling, accounting for individual needs in the short and long term, and upholding professionalism in the workplace can help fulfil expectations and potentially improve employee loyalty. These changes can be implemented quickly and at low cost by line and middle managers. The findings can furthermore help inform HRD strategy as they demonstrate the need for long-term co-operative career planning centred on the employee's needs and personal plans. Researchers may build on these findings to determine whether HR policies across the economy require a re-alignment to changed attitudes and needs.

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