Communication Challenges for Foreign Workers within Multicultural Hospitality Working Environment

Anwar Basalamah[1]*, Edvi Gracia Ardani[2], Angeline Fransisca[3]

[1,3] Hotel Business Program, Universitas Agung Podomoro, Jakarta Barat, Indonesia
[2] Entrepreneurship Program, Universitas Agung Podomoro, Jakarta Barat, Indonesia

A R T I C L E I N F O

A B S T R A C T

As tourism grows fast and tourism destinations develops well all around the world, the human capital in the sectors are the most important component of its business which deliver services. The grow affects all aspects of business including hospitality industry. A multicultural working environment in hospitality industry has been practiced since decades due to its international character of business. The condition brought communication challenges to the internal operations more particularly in the front-line departments. This study aims to find out the challenges for foreign workers in the process of communication and how they overcome any communication problems that may occurred in their day-to-day operations in a multicultural hospitality working environment. Different cultures may press the communication problems while the business is about serving people and ensure that all the guest needs are provided well in timely manner. The research is conducted in a three-star-rated hotel in Japan with a multicultural environment and may give insights to the hoteliers who aspire to embrace their future career abroad. The findings are quite interesting since culture is taking the most important part to overcome and handle the situation as it aims to maintain a good working environment.

1. Introduction

The tourism industry has grown very fast over the past years. The number of tourist visits has significantly increased all over the world following great tourism campaigns by tourism destinations. World Tourism Organization formally reported that the increase of the number of tourist arrivals is encouraging for the future of tourism industry (Mucharreira et al., 2019). In 2018, the increase was at 5.3% comparing to the number in 2017 which is from 1,332 million in 2017 to 1,407 million in 2018, while an increase of 3.6% occurred in 2019 with 1,461 million of tourist arrival. The share of the market is led by European tourists with 51% followed by Asia Pacific tourists with 25% within 2018 and 2019 (see Figure 1).
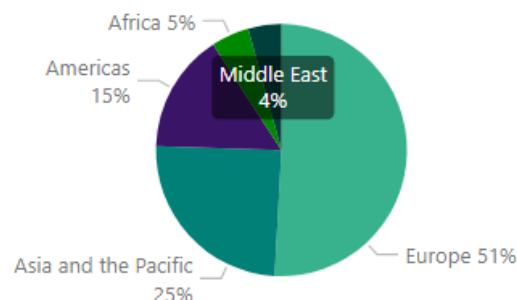

Figure 1. Share of World Tourist Arrivals 2018 and 2019 (UNWTO, 2019)

*Corresponding author.
 E-mail: anwar.basalamah@podomorouniversity.ac.id

In the Asian region, Japan is one of the most visited countries that has seen an increase in tourist visits every year. JTB Tourism Research and Consulting reported that Japan welcomed 28,69 million tourists in 2017 that increased to 31,8 million in 2019 (Mucharreira et al., 2019).

As the number of tourist visits, tourism industry in Japan must keep maintaining their capacity in all tourism aspects of the country including hospitality sector. Hoteliers try to offer attractive and quality products and services. It surely has the impact on the needs of accommodation as well as other resources such as its human capital, as well. It is not only about the skills of the human resources but also their ability to coop with any situation when welcoming guests from different cultural background of many different countries.

The impact of globalization has created a great opportunity for any individuals to having career in the international stage. It does happen nowadays all over the world, and it permits the world citizen to travel across continents to get a broader experience. Cross border opportunity to find jobs is no longer a luxury yet it become an easy access for any job seekers. This issue does influence the presence of cultural diversity within an organization that will also be growing. For some companies, the diversity of the employee origins motivates different perspectives of ideas, knowledge, and skills enrichment, as well as situations that spur productivity. There is nevertheless a need for employees to understand the basis of hotel rules and regulations and be carried along that can led to increased sustainability the staff awareness that will be beneficial for a productive contribution (Oriade et al., 2021). Although some people might think that diversity is nothing but an obstacle, it cannot be denied that multicultural organizations may have to face challenges. Like happening in any organizations, communications may play an important role in its day-to-day operations, but it may also affect the organization's future development more particularly in the services industry such as the tourism. However, Wang et al., (2020) argues that when employees are motivated, they tend to share information when errors occur, analyze and learn from the errors, and help each other in error situations.

Service is the core aspect in this sector, more particularly human interactions that cannot be avoided. In a hotel, there are different departments that have different levels of interactions with the guests, but the first impression is given by the frontline's staff who guests start to meet at front office department. This department is not only meeting guests in the beginning of their stay, but also during their stay. This department is the most crucial department in the operation of a hotel because it has a high intensity of service to hotel guests in their daily activities. Therefore, technology is applied to be effective in integrating guest history data so that front desk employees can communicate with personalize guest service experiences (Shin et al., 2019).

The Front Office Department is the first point of contact for guests and plays a major role as an information and command centre for the entire hotel operation, and as a liaison for guests and other hotel employees (Ismail, 2002). Therefore, good communication is the main keyword in all daily activities in hotel operations. The ability and skills to work multi-tasking are important in carrying out a job as a Front Desk. Working in multitasking is a special art in working in the Front Office department of a hotel, which requires various skills, such as communication skills, computer skills and so on (Walker & Walker, 2017). Front office staff do not only interact with hotel guests, but they also must maintain good communication with all hotel staff whom they work closely with. This is recognized by Bardi (2011), who stated that Front Office staff are required to always interact with all departments in the hotel, including the Sales & Marketing, Housekeeping, Food and Beverage, Security, and so on. Operationally, it is undeniable that the front office department is the operational end of a hotel which acts as a liaison between hotel guests and employees and management in providing guest services. In general, the hotel industry is in a very competitive environment and its managers need accurate and reliable information for proper management of activities (Mucharreira et al., 2019).

In this case, successful communications are the most important aspect to form a working system in this hotel industry. Brett (2018) suggested that people take social interaction into their own hands and they communicate directly to the person they need to convey their message with. This may lead to miscommunication when the shift is changed and the staff in charge is no longer the same ones. The miscommunication may lead to many unfinalized guests' requests because written communication is not available to remind the next shift. Foreign workers will have to adjust to this environment because if they do not do, they tend to end their foreign assignments early because of poor performance (Kaye and Taylor, 1997, Ahmad and Scott, 2021). It is a challenge for the hospitality industry to be well equipped with qualified staff with required languages proficiency to interact with hotel guests from different countries. It is also happening that announcements in hotels be broadcast in multiple languages and multilingual warning signs should be placed in front of the elevator on each floor (Tsai et al., 2020). As stated above, the globalization may also influence the mobility of hospitality workers to enhance their career in a broader environment more specifically within international opportunities.

This present study has the objectives to identify the challenges for foreign workers in the process of communication and how they overcome any communication problems during their working days. The benefits to this research will be to give an idea to hospitality workers on what to be prepared to work abroad, to give clear picture to hospitality students who still must determine the directions of their future career worldwide, and to construct an understanding of what foreign workers are to prepare to start their career in an international environment. The study was performed within 5-month-period in 2019 and limited to a front office department of a three-star hotel in Japan which has been having foreign staff for years. Thus, a multicultural working environment involving employees from various countries that require to communicate with many different languages or accents but using Japanese as the main one.

2. Methods

The research method in this study is qualitative using ethnomethodology with descriptive approach. As stated by Vom Lehn, (2014), ethnomethodology approach of Garfinkel is to use creatively the phenomenological focus on the participant's perspective to create a sociological attitude to analyze the social empirical events. The ethnomethodology approach is being used since the study was about to analyze the process of interactions between foreign workers and all stakeholders related to their responsibilities.

The research instruments such as observation, open-ended questions, in-depth interviews (audio or video), and field notes were used to collect primary data in their natural setting (Daniel, 2016). The method of qualitative research is systematic and logically rigorous but often in different from statistical analysis, and it emphasize that people think and interact on the basis of meaning as well as with words or numbers (Neuman, 2014).

The research has also adopted interpretive paradigm to construct the indicators for foreign workers' preparation to work in a multicultural working environment. As Neuman (2014) also suggested that qualitative researchers who use interpretative or critical approaches also study documents and reports with statistical information but they consider those documents as cultural objects, or media that communicate social meaning. Thus, in this study, the result would be analysed from the data but influenced by the hospitality knowledge and perspectives from the researchers. The adopted method and instruments allow this study to reveal practices, processes, and underlying mechanisms through unconventional methods.

The data collection is organized through observations and in-depth interviews with a total of 10 key performants as participant working in Hotel X in Japan. The observation phase was performed in two periods of time when the communication situation needed to be improved and a later stage of observation. The key performants consist of 4 Japanese nationality and 6 foreign workers coming from the Philippines, Thailand, Korea, Indonesia, and Taiwan. The observation is performed during the stay of one of the researchers in 2019 as an intern. To ensure the validity of the data, method triangulation is being used that involves multiple methods of data collection that includes interviews, observations, and field notes (Carter et al., 2014).

The result of the observation and interviews are analysed based on the professional experiences. The construction of the key factors of the topic is brought from a comprehension of social context understanding through the meaning of social reality.

3. Results and Discussions

The result of the research has appeared from both the observation and in-depth interview. As the result of the observation, the Hotel X has been welcoming foreign staff for more than 5 years. As this hotel adopts a multicultural environment in its organization, communication challenges have occurred in the interaction between its employees as well as with the guests with many language barriers. The daily communication between staffs verbally is using Japanese language, however, to ease the process of operations, the front office staffs are using both Japanese and English in their day-to-day internal department operations.

Based on the early-stage observation, the problems encountered during the shifts used to be a strong opportunity of miscommunication between hotel staff. The communications were performed verbally and there was an absence of recorded important points during the operations that is required in any service industry, especially when the staff are scheduled to work in shifts. The level of staff fluency Japanese language was also another problem that seemed to be one of the causes. The language barrier has caused an avoidance between the staff who has the tendency of not giving any feedback to others when an issue raised to be solved. Kadam et al., (2020) also found that there is evidence that team

heterogeneity can result in conflicts, discrimination, communication barriers, etc., which in turn can affect team members' performance. Goh & Lee (2018) also consider the discrimination issues that may be encountered in the hospitality industry must be taken seriously, especially in the diverse multicultural hospitality workforce.

On a later period of observation, the leadership in the department implemented a written communication form called Hikitsugi List. The Hikitsugi List (HL) was established online that can be accessed and filled in by any staff in charge that contain the list of information to be aware and acknowledged by all the staff working in all shifts of the day. The HL includes important events during a shift, the list of important guests on arrival, new policies that may arise from a particular event, and other issues to be followed up by staff on the next shifts. In addition to the issues entered, anyone would be able to see the name of the staff who submitted the issue. This identification helped other staff in charge to cross-check the issue when there is a doubt. In regard to the new policies, the leadership opened the opportunities to all staff to give their comments. After the implementation of this HL, the communications between staff were improved and less disputes occurred. Moreover, the HL was effective to prevent misperception commonly found in the daily operations. It was also observed that when the communications in a department is not carried out properly, it affects the smooth running of a broader scope of work which is the hotel operations. Thus, for such busy department of a hotel, written communications help to improve the operations of a service environment that also help to increase staff productivity.

According to Butow & Hoque (2020), communication is something complex, through messages sent via verbal, para-verbal like tone of voice and non-verbal like eye gaze and expressions. To confirm what was stated by Miller (2012), organizations run in a classical style are dominated by written communication because a strong value is placed on permanence. Thus, the receiver's feedback can be valued as very important and written communications in an organization may help the smooth communication between sender and receiver. In this study, a hospitality working environment would require both verbal and written communication to ensure the smooth running of the operations, especially in a multicultural environment.

Besides the observations and the field notes that enrich the observations, in-depth interview was held in a later period. A list of questions was prepared about the communication challenges that key informants might encounter during their working schedules. The results of interviews supported with the field notes are summarized as part of the team, all informants considered that the interaction and communication between employees are acceptable despite the deficiencies of foreign staff to communicate in Japanese. Most of the foreign staff are fluent in Japanese but there are still those who need to improve their Japanese, as the majority of informants are originally from other countries which are Philippines, Thailand, Korea, Indonesia, and Taiwan where Japanese is not their mother tongue. This condition did not influence the day-to-day operations and communications with the guests. However, there were some events of miscommunications in the operations. To reduce the problems caused by cultural diversity in the workplace, employees must be open to interacting with colleagues who come from various cultures, and they must have the ability to build interconnections with people who are different from them (Afsar et al., 2020). Thus, it may answer the problem encountered in this study. Understanding each other's differences would help to build a healthy environment.

The multicultural environment brought challenges to all key informants more particularly the understanding of formal Japanese language as part of the Japanese culture that were required to be solved. Formal form of Japanese is required more importantly in the written communication. In previous research, Reddy & van Dam (2020) argue that the use of language in multiculturalism is present both at the informal as it used in the daily life and formal level as people need to remember what has been said. This argument supports the next issue as well about written and verbal communications that are found in the next point.

The informants considered that verbal and written communications should be implemented to support each other. It is recognized that verbal communication is more understandable than written in Japanese, because of its writing, but written form in English as International language helps the communication process. Japanese language itself is not easy to learn because of the knowledge of its culture is not well assimilated thus the true meaning of a terminology or a message cannot be understood. Fortunately, as Hotel X welcomes international guests, the staff are required to speak English. As Srinivas Rao, (2019) highlights, English has become the main language in various countries and is also the main language used in business, commerce and cultural environments. It has become an essential tool for those who wish to work in a foreign country or in any multi-national company.

The result of the interviews confirmed the findings in the observation that verbal communications in a multicultural working environment would be ideal if supported by written one. The

written communications should be certainly in a language that is understandable by all stakeholders in the hotel. Understanding cultural differences must be recognized as an important factor by all the staff. It will help the smooth communications between them. As Miller (2012) suggested, in an organizational context, the role and expected behaviours of each team members should be well-understood by all parties. Reddy & van Dam (2020) suggested that in multicultural societies, culture is often recreated and reconstructed as it interacts with different social elements it is exposed to. Thus, the result in this study has revealed that the working environment has been recreated by the key informants in order to be understood by others.

As foreign workers, the key informants expressed how the immersion process within the organization which characteristic is multicultural. There are few issues mentioned by the key informants that occurred during their employment in the Hotel X. The result of the in-depth interviews is found that they need to appreciate each other despite their cultural differences, be ready to adapt rapidly because the work is waiting to be finalized, imperatively having face-to-face interactions, open conversations with other staff to ensure that no information is missed, share culture experiences and differences, and accommodate culture similarities and differences to overcome communication barriers.

After coding and analysing the issues, it can be constructed that foreign workers must be able to cope with the following situation: (a) A multicultural environment leads them to promote appreciation of strong cultural differences; (b) Immersion to the team requires rapid adaptation. There are similarities in the different cultural background that help the adaptation going smoother; (c) Language barriers affect communication process; thus, they are challenged to be pro-active by asking questions and ensuring themselves to get and understand all information in daily working condition. (d) Differences cannot be avoided and being sensitive to potential cultural differences during interactions with others is needed. Sharing cultural issues helps the mutual understanding between foreign and local workers.

The construct above confirms what has been suggested by Afsar et al. (2020) that cross-cultural interactions and communication with people from other cultures helps to assimilate and disseminate knowledge, thereby, increasing the knowledge sharing, and due to accumulation of knowledge, better and more frequent creation of ideas occur. Moreover, as Brett (2018) suggested, cultural groups distinguish themselves because the values, norms, and beliefs that characterize them and the behaviours that their members typically engage in to solve problems of social interaction are not all the same. Morrow & Yamanouchi (2020) summarized that a study they performed reflects a common perception that Japanese apologize more than English speakers, thus it confirms the fact that cultural differences are very sensitive and needed to be shared the causes. This is reconfirmed by Yilmaz et al. (2020) that the success of intercultural communication lies in individuals who have a certain amount of cultural sensitivity. Besides the sensitivity, cognitive instrument and the process of social influence significantly affect acceptance of the employee on new things more particularly their cultural values (Sun et al., 2020).

Based on the discussion above, it can be formulated that foreign workers might join a multicultural environment with preparation beforehand under the following conditions (1) having strong adaptability in a multicultural environment, (2) being sensitive about and promote appreciation of cultural differences, (3) having assertive personality that includes interactions and good cooperation within the team, and (4) being knowledgeable on the similarity and differences of cultural issues. These findings can be summarized in the following diagram that may illustrate the traits of a Foreign Worker to enter a Multicultural Hospitality Working Environment (Figure 2).
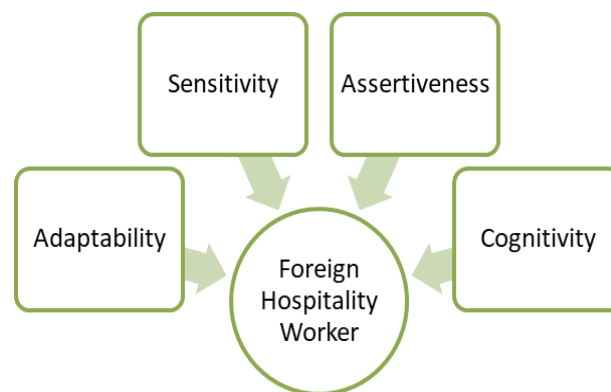

Figure 2. Required Traits for Foreign Workers to enter a Multicultural Hospitality Working Environment

Those traits are very important to guide the foreign workers in understanding the working environment and the situation of the department where they would work. Communication problems may be avoided with such traits in a foreign personality within a multicultural organization.

4. Conclusion

This study has provided insight into how communication occurs in multicultural organizations at Hotel X in Japan. Based on the analysis described in the previous section, it can be concluded that the communication that occurs in the multicultural working environment requires both verbal and non-verbal more particularly written to ensure the smooth understanding between hotel staff. The challenge of culture differences is an important point that needs to be considered for future foreign workers who plan to enhance their career in a hospitality multicultural working environment. Although mastering the local language is mandatory for foreign workers, English proficiency as an international language is still considered very important in helping the communication process. This fact helps unquestionably foreign workers and local workers to obtain uniform perceptions to understand and achieve organization objectives. The required traits established above, can also be used as criterion to recruit foreign workers in the future. Finally, it is encouraged to perform future research focusing on a larger sampling and conduct it in different countries. Research using quantitative studies with performance results may assist in validating this research. It is hoped that the findings from such a study will increase understanding of the role of employees in the multicultural environment in the hospitality industry.

References

Afsar, B., Al-Ghazali, B. M., Cheema, S., & Javed, F. (2020). Cultural intelligence and innovative work behavior: the role of work engagement and interpersonal trust. *European Journal of Innovation Management*. https://doi.org/10.1108/EJIM-01-2020-0008.

Brett, J. (2018). Intercultural challenges in managing workplace conflict - A call for research. *Cross Cultural and Strategic Management*, *25*(1), 32–52. https://doi.org/10.1108/CCSM-11-2016-0190.

Butow, P., & Hoque, E. (2020). Using artificial intelligence to analyse and teach communication in healthcare. *Breast*, *50*, 49–55. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.breast.2020.01.008.

Carter, N., Bryant-Lukosius, D., Dicenso, A., Blythe, J., & Neville, A. J. (2014). The use of triangulation in qualitative research. *Oncology Nursing Forum*, *41*(5), 545–547. https://doi.org/10.1188/14.ONF.545-547.

Daniel, E. (2016). The Usefulness of Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches and Methods in Researching Problem-Solving Ability in Science Education Curriculum. *Journal of Education and Practice*, *7*(15), 91–100. https://doi.org/2222-288X.

Goh, E., & Lee, C. (2018). A workforce to be reckoned with: The emerging pivotal Generation Z hospitality workforce. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, *73*(January), 20–28. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2018.01.016.

Kadam, R., Rao, S. A., Kareem Abdul, W., & Jabeen, S. S. (2020). Diversity climate perceptions and its impact on multicultural team innovation and performance. *Measuring Business Excellence*, *24*(3), 301–318. https://doi.org/10.1108/MBE-04-2019-0037.

Miller, K. (2012). *Organizational Communication, Approaches and Processes* (Sixth). Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.

Morrow, P. R., & Yamanouchi, K. (2020). Online apologies to hotel guests in English and Japanese. *Discourse, Context and Media*, *34*, 100379. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2020.100379.

Mucharreira, P. R., Antunes, M. G., Abranja, N., Justino, M. R. T., & Quirós, J. T. (2019). The relevance of tourism in financial sustainability of hotels. *European Research on Management and Business Economics*, *25*(3), 165–174. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iedeen.2019.07.002.

Neuman, W. L. (2014). Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches. In *Pearson Education Limited* (Pearson Ne). Pearson.

Oriade, A., Osinaike, A., Aduhene, K., & Wang, Y. (2021). Sustainability awareness, management practices and organisational culture in hotels: Evidence from developing countries. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, *92*(September 2020), 102699.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2020.102699.

Reddy, G., & van Dam, R. M. (2020). Food, culture, and identity in multicultural societies: Insights from Singapore. *Appetite*, *149*(February), 104633. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2020.104633.

Shin, H., Perdue, R. R., & Kang, J. (2019). Front desk technology innovation in hotels: A managerial perspective. *Tourism Management*, *74*(April), 310–318. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2019.04.004.

Srinivas Rao, P. (2019). The Role of English as a Global Language. *Reserach Journal of English (RJOE)*, *4*(January), 65–79.

Sun, S., Lee, P. C., Law, R., & Zhong, L. (2020). The impact of cultural values on the acceptance of hotel technology adoption from the perspective of hotel employees. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, *44*(September 2019), 61–69. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2020.04.012.

Tsai, C. H., Linliu, S. C., Chang, R. C. Y., & Mak, A. H. N. (2020). Disaster prevention management in the hotel industry: Hotel disaster prevention literacy. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, *45*(September), 444–455. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2020.09.008..

Vom Lehn, D. (2014). *Harold Garfinkel : the creation and development of ethnomethodology*. Routledge New York.

Walker, J. R., & Walker, J. T. (2017). *Introduction to Hospitality Management* (4th ed.). Pearson Education Limited.

Wang, X., Guchait, P., & Pasamehmetoglu, A. (2020). Anxiety and gratitude toward the organization: Relationships with error management culture and service recovery performance. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, *89*(April), 102592. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2020.102592.

Yilmaz, M., Yildirim Sari, H., & Daghan, Ş. (2020). An exploratory study of intercultural effectiveness scale in nursing students. *Heliyon*, *6*(2). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2019.e02769.

Zhao, H., & Zhou, Q. (2020). Socially responsible human resource management and hotel employee organizational citizenship behavior for the environment: A social cognitive perspective. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, *xxxx*, 102749. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2020.102749.