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## Reducing Employee Turnover in the Hospitality Industry Through the Use of Job Design Optimization

by Emily Zirbes

### Teaching Note Summary

Norma Lampe is a new manager at Quad City Golden Hotel (QCG). Sherri Piry, a long-time employee of QCG recently put in her resignation after being promoted to the position of front desk supervisor. In the hospitality industry, when an employee leaves a job, it is easy for management to assume that the reason the employee left was because of lack of fit, salary dissatisfaction, or the various other reasons that have been cited through research on turnover in the hospitality industry.

However, due to the commonly high frequency of turnover, little consideration is ever given to whether the jobs of these employees are designed effectively to prevent turnover in the first place. After seeing that Sherri was in a similar position in a competitor hotel not long after leaving QCG, Norma begins to have suspicions that there may be something wrong with the front desk supervisor job at QCG. This case study uses a job design optimization tool (JDOT) to uncover the balance of job descriptions in the hospitality industry, focusing on the front desk supervisor position in particular and evaluating strategies to balance the job to ultimately prevent employee turnover.

Upon using JDOT and the available job description for the front desk supervisor advertisement for QCG, Norma uncovers that the claims Sherri made regarding the lack of support and overwhelming expectations for the role at QCG were accurate. Norma attempts to use JDOT to uncover ways of balancing the front desk supervisor job so that future candidates will not be compelled to leave the position due to something preventable, such as rotating tasks and providing better support for employees.

### Teaching Objective

It is an unfortunate fact that managers often find themselves thinking more about revenue for the organization than the well-being of their employees. In fact, it has been found that even most hospitality establishments are not fully staffed during peak demand periods due to cost concerns (Law et al., 1995). When conditions like this are the norm for hospitality employees, it seems inevitable that high turnover may also be an issue. This case study attempts to understand how optimizing the design of jobs in the hospitality industry can not only reduce burnout for employees and provide a better source of support and a feeling of organizational ownership but also ultimately reduce turnover.

Employee turnover in the hospitality industry does not, of course, end at being able to address these topical issues for employees but knowing, as a resourceful employer, how to adequately address them in a workspace position as well.

By the end of this case study, students will be able to:

1. Analyze the best approaches to understanding how to combat turnover in the hospitality industry.
2. Evaluate the support and lack thereof that is offered to employees while taking into consideration the various resources necessary to achieve the goal of reducing turnover within a balanced job.
3. Compare and contrast the implications of not having a balanced job for your employees and reflect on experiences of being in both situations.

## Teaching Audience

The case study is most suitable for a graduate-level hospitality course or an upper-level undergraduate with working experience in the hospitality industry. Analysis of reducing turnover, as the topic is more directed to the responsibilities of managerial professionals, is best discussed by graduate-level students in a hospitality or business program.

While a large proportion of this case study is geared toward graduate students, instructors may find it useful to incorporate this case study into an open discussion in an undergraduate classroom. The themes present are applicable to an upper-division undergraduate course of study, particularly those students who have had work experience in the hospitality industry. Better insight into the discussion questions would come from those who have experienced high levels of pressure while working in the hospitality industry, as opposed to those students who may not have had a lot of job experience. Those students who have had experience in the hospitality industry would further be able to give specific insight into the unique pressures and challenges those in the hospitality industry may face as opposed to another industry.

## Teaching Approach

Prior to the lesson, students will be asked to read the case study along with the additional readings on employee burnout and job design optimization strategies.

**Students will be asked to come to the classroom prepared with a general understanding of the concepts as well as be prepared to discuss in the classroom:**

1. Employee turnover indicators in the hospitality industry
2. The importance of a balanced job description for employees
3. The usefulness of providing support and resources for your employees to prevent employee burnout and turnover
4. Strategies to reduce employee turnover in the hospitality industry

**To stimulate class discussion, instructors can utilize an open discussion format to ask questions to engage students.**

For example:

- Did the initial range selection that Norma input for the Front Desk Supervisor seem accurate, given the presented job description for Sherri? Why or why not?
- Do you think that when a candidate for a job position sees a job description that is unbalanced, they can recognize that without this range gauge presented? Why?
- Do you think that the suggested balance by Norma for the Front Desk Supervisor seemed appropriate? Why?
- What would you further add to the suggested changes by Norma? Why?
- Do you think it is a fair expectation for employers to ensure that jobs are balanced for employees? Why?
- Do you think that those in the hospitality industry should expect an unbalanced job description? Why?
- Do you think any variable of the four would be regularly higher than others for those that work in the hospitality industry? Why?
- What kind of level of resources do hospitality workers normally have access to in their workplace? Why?
- Do you think JDOT gives a fair visualization of work demands for hospitality employees? Why?
- How do you think we can continue to balance job descriptions for hospitality workers?
- Considering the various spans of control, accountability, influence, and support, what more could further be considered to enhance a balanced job for an employee?

For more advanced-level students, the following questions are meant to be perceived from a managerial standpoint as a means of reflection. For students without managerial experience, these questions can be considered pre-emptive opportunities to reflect on their management styles.

**Questions to be considered include:**

- Do my employees feel their job descriptions and roles have been adequately identified?
- Have I identified the perceived physical or managerial constraints to performing the job tasks correctly?
- Do my employees know who they can turn to for help re-identifying their evolving roles in the organization?
- How can I ensure my employees are continuously feeling confident in performing their jobs?
- Are my employees being supervised enough to ensure the jobs are being done adequately and safely?
- Do my employees feel they have enough training to do the work that is being asked of them?
- Do my employees feel they have adequate safety and cleaning supplies to do the job that is being asked of them?
- How can I provide my employees with more development programs?
- Do my employees feel they are receiving enough constructive feedback for their job performance?
- Are my employees being given enough resources to take care of their own mental health and wellness?

This case study is designed so that it can be taught in a variety of ways. For example, class sessions could be broken down to dedicate individual sessions to topics such as employee turnover, job design optimization, employee burnout and employee support. These class sessions can be devoted to discussing these topics at length with the students in an open discussion format. Assignments can include breaking the students into groups and having them discuss areas where they feel employee turnover is more of an issue in the hospitality industry. Groups can alternate topics of discussion with the instructor serving as a guide to encourage the students to think of solutions to these challenges in the industry.

Alternatively, class sessions can be devoted to better understanding the job design optimization tool (JDOT). Students are encouraged to explore the free JDOT tool found at: <https://hbsp.harvard.edu/product/JDOT-HTM-ENG/>.

JDOT allows an individual to:

- Assess the demands of a job and the resources available to fulfill that job
- Determine when a job is well-designed and likely to be effective
- Determine when a job is poorly designed and likely to fail
- Recommend design changes to improve the functioning of the job

The instructor can break lessons into both group and individual activities. Each activity is designed to take roughly an hour to fully explore. Instructors are welcome to either reduce or expand this time frame, given their own objectives for their classroom.

**Group activity:** For the group activity, the instructor can divide students into groups of no more than 4. S/he can then distribute to each student a currently posted advertisement description of a job specific to the course. The students will then use the JDOT to evaluate the job description to understand whether the job appears to be balanced or not. The students are then encouraged to share the job description they used for their JDOT with a partner and have the other student complete a JDOT for the same job description. Both students will then be asked to share their evaluations with one another and compare their results. A discussion should be led by the instructor as to why some of these results may appear different and how the perception of a potential employee when looking at a job description may be deterred by an unbalanced job posting.

**Individual activity:** Have each student reflect on a past or current employment experience while using the JDOT to evaluate the span of control, accountability, influence, and support for themselves in that position. Students should keep in mind that even job designs that create an X can be improved to be more effective. Afterward, have the student reflect on whether they perceive the job to be balanced or not and then go in to make it better, keeping in mind that even a balanced job can always be improved upon! Students should provide specific recommendations for the job so that it supports the selected organization's overall strategy. Students should also consider the challenges that management may have with the proposed changes and be prepared to justify them. The instructor is encouraged to engage with the students to reflect on how less or more in the spans of control, accountability, influence, and support in each area affected their performance as an employee as well as what could have been done to make their job more efficient.

To continue the discussion, the instructor can pose guided questions based on the additional readings. The instructor can ask the students to write a brief summary of their own opinions and perspectives on the spans of control, accountability, influence, and support and whether they feel that more factors could be considered in developing a balanced job for employees. The students will be asked whether their own views and perspectives changed regarding employee burnout as a part of a more extensive group discussion to engage them to think of the learning objectives beyond the text.

For a final assessment, the students will be given an assignment where they will be asked to write an essay on one of the main discussion points, employee turnover, job design optimization, employee burnout, or employee support, and defend their own perceptions of the choices managers can make and how it can affect employees and ultimately an organization. No answers are wrong, but all answers should be well-defended with academic literature. The students should use this opportunity to explore the challenges of being an employee in the hospitality industry as well as understand how a manager can reduce turnover by being aware of variables that affect their employees. Instructors can prepare students for writing this essay by briefing the students before assigning the task on samples of hotels and other businesses locally that have faced similar challenges while exploring with the students in an open-forum way that they have observed these organizations and companies face those challenges. The short essay consists of roughly four pages, not including references. Students must include three to five references other than those provided by the instructor.

## Analysis of Teaching Objectives

The predominant objective of this case study is to examine how to make good use of the JDOT tool in job designing. When a job is not correctly balanced employees are not being given the most effective tools to complete their jobs. This can lead to turnover, among other problems, such as general business and employee productivity. Additionally, burnout can occur as a result of an imbalanced job design, with expectations of employees outweighing the support they may have to do their jobs effectively.

Organizations can redesign jobs to improve productivity and service quality while responding to an employee's needs for increased responsibility and a sense of achievement. Employee burnout is defined as the emotional exhaustion of an employee due to prolonged periods of feeling overwhelmed and stressed (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Due to the expected high levels of customer interaction, studies have shown that there is a high level of stress and employee burnout found in the service industry, as opposed to other industries (Hsieh & Eggers, 2010; Hsieh & Yen, 2005; Koc, 2009). To combat these stresses, an alternative to job redesign can be job rotation, for instance. By implementing a rotational work schedule, employees can not only get a sense of job enrichment, feelings of teamwork, and organizational ownership but also permit the employees to have more control over the design and schedule of their jobs.

The discussions raised in this case study should also probe students to think beyond the benefits of redesigning job descriptions for employees and consider alternative ways that managers can reduce employee burnout by creating a balance in employee job responsibilities in a preemptive effort to reduce turnover in the organization. Through an exploration of job design in this case study, students are able to begin thinking instead as managers. They can provide a significant strategic advantage to an organization by not only understanding potential triggers for employee burnout and turnover but also tools that they can use to combat these common industry transferable issues. Managers are able to give structure to a hotel and lodging through job specialization, organization, and establishment of patterns of authority and span of control (Shipper, 1992). Although adding to a workload can, in turn, bring about more revenue for a business if performed well, when employees become overwhelmed with an unbalanced workload, the opposite is more likely to occur. As managers, we want to encourage the idea that employees can be a part of the design process of their jobs. This can increase their self-reliance as well as strengthen and highlight their talents to move up by being promoted or generally being leaders in the organization.

## Theoretical Concepts

It is essential for managers to recognize employee burnout. Understanding how stress and burnout of employees correlate with turnover has been well documented throughout research (Lee & Ok, 2014; Liang, 2012; Pizam & Thornburg, 2000). When managers react to turnover indicators in employees by taking proactive steps to reduce triggers like burnout, The level of employee satisfaction, happiness, and well-being of employees can significantly influence customer satisfaction (Chi and Gursoy, 2009). As the level of employee-guest interaction is much higher in the hospitality industry, it is essential to recognize the increasingly important influence that employees have on the guest's experience.

Job stress is estimated to cost businesses about \$200 billion annually in the United States (Qureshi et al., 2013). When an employee experiences burnout in response to numerous workplace stressors and does not have the needed support, turnover will happen. A manager should invest time into ensuring that the demands of an employee's position do not exceed that of an employee's coping ability. Instances where managers do not consider how overwhelming their employees to simply save a few dollars on staffing can, in fact, cost the organization more money in the long run. In cases where employees feel overwhelmed, they are more likely to be less productive and receptive to customer needs. Resulting in dissatisfied customers, this can, in turn, cost the organization a significant amount of money. This does not even consider the potential costs of employee turnover, which includes recruiting and training new staff.

Depending on an organization's goals, job descriptions can serve several different essential functions for an organization, including maintaining a productive workforce (Hawkes and Weathington, 2014). Employees need to have clear expectations in order to perform their jobs. Effectively written job descriptions are important because they give a clear understanding to candidates of what their duties and responsibilities for a particular position would be and help guide an employee throughout their career. Having a powerfully written job description also helps employees to create goals for job advancement. The first impression of an organization can be found in its job descriptions (Pató, 2017). Therefore, it is to the benefit of an organization to invest time in developing and maintaining job descriptions for their employees' well-being and the security of their organization.

The importance of having a well-defined job description for your employees is essential to the career development of one's employees. Job descriptions are important because they are the foundation for every action we take as both employees and managers in human resources. An effectively written job description can be utilized not only in recruiting but later referenced for compensation, evaluation, training, employee development, health, safety, and succession planning (Rohr, 2016). Career development and training of staff are significant to incorporate into a job description. Still, if those elements are not aligned with the job's requirements and expectations, the training that an organization may offer to employees to offset a bad job description would be meaningless for both the employee and the organization. It's a wrong misconception that a job description can only be used during the hiring process. Managers can effectively utilize a job description throughout an employee's tenure, making it more critical for an employee than some quarterly training here and there. The job description is like the brain for the body controlling both the employee and manager's essential movements within the organization. Technological innovations, such as the JDOT, are excellent strategies that can, if effectively utilized, help any organization's employees work through their continuous development and consequently enhance guest experiences. (Zirbes, 2021).

Instructors can also explore how human resource management functions fit with an organization's mission, vision, and values and how the structure of a position in the organization should reflect the organization's priorities. When a worker struggles to meet the demands of a particular position, the problem may not be with the employee – maybe it's the job design that is wrong. In many cases, employees are being held accountable for measures (e.g., revenue growth, profitability) that are wider than the resources and support they are given. The JDOT offers an opportunity to see how managers can test whether a position provides the employee with the right mix of responsibility and support. This, of course, is not the only way of evaluating an organization's internal responsibility balance, but it provides an initial insight that, in most cases, can be helpful. The JDOT allowed students to evaluate a job by considering the following four questions: What is the employee's span of control? What is the employee's span of accountability? What is the employee's span of influence? and What is the employee's span of support for their occupation (Simons, 2016)?

There is so much that goes into a job description that makes it an integral part of having a productive workforce. Without an effectively written job description or clear delineation of job duties, an organization's employees' functionality trends downwards (Homisak, 2010). Employees can feel not valued for the work and training that they put into a company if it is not a part of their central job duties found in their job description (Lorinkova and Perry, 2019). Written job descriptions need to be reviewed regularly so that if staff decide to take on new tasks to enrich their experience in a position, they are properly acknowledged and credited for it. An alternative to investing in continuous career development for employees would be job simplification within the job description in the first place. Managers can tailor job descriptions to low-skilled employees requiring little training and making their employees transferable from one job to another. Designing a job that fits the potential employee and the organization is an essential factor that helps drive a productive workforce (Manson and Carr, 2011). These newly simplified jobs can be efficiently monitored for their productivity. When you put the time into making a job description the right fit for your organization's goals, a productive workforce comes naturally.

## Suggested Readings

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