


Knowledge Retention in Botswana's Tourism and Hospitality Industry: Challenges and Prospects

Abstract

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This paper presents the findings of a study carried out to identify the challenges and prospects to retaining knowledge in Botswana's tourism and hospitality industry. The study adopted a questionnaire survey approach for data collection. A total of 80 questionnaires were administered to staff members of tourism and hospitality organizations. The criteria used for selection of eligible organizations was that they had to be legally licenced to operate by the Department of Tourism and graded by the Botswana Tourism organization. Organizations were purposively sampled from three industry strata being accommodation, travel agencies and tour operators. The results show that some of the challenges faced by hospitality organizations in retaining knowledge include difficulty in the utilization of retained knowledge because of long requisition procedures, lack of trust and knowledge hoarding. These challenges result in the retention of knowledge in the industry appearing to be optional. The study further reveals, supporting strategic objectives and self-fulfilment as the leading motivators for knowledge sharing. The industry therefore must turn these motivators into opportunities to cultivate a culture of knowledge retention.

Keywords: Knowledge retention, challenges, prospects, tacit knowledge, explicit knowledge.

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Introduction

Tourism development is a leading source of employment in developing countries (Dedu, 2012). Dating back to slightly over two decades, tourism development is a relatively new phenomena in Botswana (Lenao, 2015). The application of knowledge retention in the tourism equally a new phenomenon although the industry is highly knowledge based (Hallin & Marnburg, 2008). Kahle (2002) emphasizes that the tourism industry is a knowledge-based industry as service quality standardization makes the retention of knowledge a vital tool for competitiveness in the tourism industry. Employee turnover, which directly impacts knowledge retention in the tourism and hospitality industry, forms one grave challenge to the industry worldwide meanwhile the retention of highly skilled employees is a fundamental element of business success and sustainability (Abou-Shouk et al., 2023). Motshegwa (2017) notes an increased employment of locals into the Tourism and Hospitality industry of Botswana, even though its mainly at operational levels. Expatriates occupy senior and management positions such as managers, accountants, professional guides and chefs (Mbaiwa, 2002). Mahachi et al. (2015) shared the same sentiments in stating that Botswana mainly relies on expatriate labour for managerial positions. Botswana Tourism Board (BTB) (2009:12) attributes this discrepancy to the apparent shortage of qualified Batswana with the managerial expertise and experience.

Although, expatriates bring managerial talent into the country, their departure can according to Galan (2023) result in a great loss of knowledge or knowledge loss induced by organizational member turnover (KLT) if not well planned for. Motshegwa (2017) opines that such unplanned departures may result in extensive knowledge loss. Tapping into the brains of these managers before their departure will help organizations build a database of knowledge that locals can then use as they take up managerial positions in the industry. Gupta & Govindarajan (2000) assert that unless knowledge is efficiently pumped throughout the corporate network of an organization, the organization will risk becoming prey to competitors as their ideas will be easily and rapidly replicated. Botswana's tourism and hospitality industry needs to safeguard itself from this and sustain its competitive advantage as it operates in a region whose tourism product is similar. Knowledge retention, defined by Kirsch (2008) as a process of focusing on the critical knowledge at risk of being lost, based on potential knowledge gaps and their impact upon overall organisational performance has of recent become an area of great academic and business interest. This paper contributes to the ongoing debates around knowledge retention. The paper was derived from a study aimed at identifying the challenges and prospects to retaining knowledge in Botswana's tourism and hospitality industry in Gaborone, Botswana. The emphasis of the paper is on understanding the challenges and prospects to the retention of knowledge by the tourism and hospitality industry.

Literature review

Knowledge retention

Knowledge has become an asset, yet its retention is a challenge for organisations in retention is becoming challenge in many countries (Levy, 2011). According to Gupta & Govindarajan (2000) organisations lose a sizeable amount of knowledge through employee departure while Ghani et al. (2022) identify employee retention as one of the biggest challenges for the tourism and hospitality industry in the 21st century. Vinson (2003) suggests that the brains of employees who are retiring, moving on to new jobs or otherwise leaving the company, in this case expatriates should be tapped to retain knowledge. This was further emphasised by Adeyefa et al. (2023) who further that when an employee leaves from their position, the company loses not only a team member but also the loyal clients associated with that employee, their business expertise, ongoing projects, competitive



edge, and a part of the company's history. It is therefore imperative to identify knowledge loss risks and issues that affect knowledge retention. "Retention" involves a deliberate and systematic effort aimed at cultivating and enhancing an organizational environment conducive to sustained employee engagement, while concurrently positioning policies and practices tailored to accommodate their complex requirements (Ghani et al., 2022). Knowledge retention is defined as a process of focusing on the critical knowledge at risk of being lost, based on potential knowledge gaps and their impact upon overall organizational performance (Kirsch, 2008). Once this is done, strategies must be developed to aid the retention of such knowledge to grow the institutional memory of the organization. The existence of this database will serve as a point of reference to avoid reinventing the wheel. Organizations that identify knowledge as an asset tend to be more successful than their counterparts (Bessick & Naiker, 2013). As the industry is challenged with high turn rates the retention of knowledge acts as a key strategy in ensuring service continuity and standards.

Knowledge sharing

Knowledge sharing is, according to Lin (2007), defined as a social interaction culture, involving the exchange of employee knowledge, experiences, and skills through the whole department or organisation. Bartol & Srivastava (2002) argue that knowledge sharing is critical to knowledge creation, organisational learning and performance achievement. A supportive organisational culture as opined by DeLong & Fehey (2000) is a key prerequisite for knowledge sharing. Knowledge flows easily where employees view it as an organizational good public to all rather than as a personal asset (McLure & Faraj, 2000). Factors such as inadequate organisational structures, sharing-unfriendly organizational cultures and denominational segregation have been identified as impediments for knowledge sharing (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Hendriks, 1999). Wang (2010) explains that knowledge sharing among employees creates an environment for cooperation while Galan (2022) emphasises that developing knowledge sharing presents better learning opportunities for the remaining and replacing employees. This translates the value of interpersonal relationships between employees in knowledge sharing. Knowledge sharing is fundamental to generating new ideas and developing new business opportunities through socialisation and the learning process of knowledge workers (Lin, 2007).

The willingness of an individual to share their knowledge cannot be overlooked. However as much as knowledge sharing is of great benefit to the organisation, Reyhav & Weisberg (2010) suggest that organisation must acknowledge knowledge as valuable intangible asset for sustainable competitive advantage even for the knowledge individual. Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995) argued that the creation of organisational knowledge cannot happen without individual employees who are willing to share knowledge with others, the knowledge is likely to have limited impact on organisational effectiveness if not shared. It is now being acknowledged that even under the best of circumstances, knowledge sharing within organisations is a multifaceted, complex process (Ipe, 2003; Hendriks, 1999; Lessard & Zaheer, 1996). Hendriks (1999) opines that knowledge sharing is a significant barrier to knowledge retention and/ or management. The success of an organisation in the highly competitive tourism and hospitality industry is highly dependent on the organization's ability to empower and encourage employees to generate, use and share both new and old knowledge.

Types of knowledge to be retained

Polanyi, (1974), Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995), Sletli & Singhal (2017) distinguish between two types of knowledge being explicit and tacit knowledge. Explicit knowledge can be expressed as a language and may be conveyed among individuals (Bhardwaj & Monin 2006). Hallin & Marnburg (2008) opine that explicit knowledge is open knowledge in the form of and can be codified and documented, tacit knowledge refers to intellectual capital and skills that one cannot fully articulate, represent or codify. Wyatt (2001) affirms this in defining tacit knowledge as intuition, defying recording, since it underlies personal skills. Kane et al. (2006) define tacit knowledge as personal knowledge and explicit knowledge as public knowledge. Alwis & Hartmann (2008) argue that tacit knowledge is an unusual form of knowledge that is acquired through observation and sharing experiences. Tacit knowledge is defined as one's personal, internal knowledge (Irick, 2007) and is rooted in individual experiences, ideas, values and emotions (Gourlay, 2002), and is highly personal and hard to communicate or share with others (Koskinen et al., 2003). Tacit knowledge is further categorised into two, being, tacit know-how (very difficult to verbalize) and deep tacit knowledge which is mostly problematic to access and transfer except unconsciously through set and unique organisational practices (DeLong, 2005). It is worth noting that tacit knowledge requires that the principal person and the person aiming to retain knowledge be present for its retention to effectively take place. It is however imperative that both knowledge types be retained.

Methods for the retention of knowledge

Bessick & Naiker (2013) view tacit knowledge as knowledge that cannot be captured and is difficult to articulate explicitly. Tacit knowledge can be shared during socialisation, face-to-face meetings and electronic interactive platform such as Facebook, blogs and twitter (Jain, 2009.) It is through discussions, experience sharing and observation, that such knowledge is amplified at the group and organizational levels (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Tacit knowledge therefore requires that it be retained over a period to allow for observations and interactions between the parties involved in the process of its retention and transfer. McAdam et al. (2007), Bessick & Naiker, 2013 argue that effective sharing of knowledge dictates that there be in-person interaction and trust. Explicit knowledge is captured in official documents or routine records, databases, webs, emails and charts (Tiwana, 2002), it can be documented and shared, and is easily communicable (Jain, 2009). Explicit knowledge can be expressed in words and numerous other physical methods which make it easier to retain and use unlike tacit knowledge which



is more personal. Explicit knowledge must be codified, documented and transmitted to make it easily and cheaply available to large numbers of people at little or no marginal cost (Roberts, 2000; Jasimuddin et al., 2005). The knowledge that can be expressed explicitly is only a small part of the whole body of knowledge; Polanyi (1966: 4). proposes that “we know more than we can tell”. It is vital that possible challenges and impediments be known to effectively retain knowledge.

Methodology

Descriptive research design is viewed to answer questions about the current situation as well as describe the thoughts, feelings, and behaviour of individuals (Stangor, 2011:14). It is for this reasons that this study employed a descriptive survey research design. A self-assessment questionnaire instrument was the key data collection tool alongside an interview guide that was used to solicit information specifically from human resources departments of the organizations that were studied. The questionnaire was segmented into two parts with close ended questions with the first section capturing demographics of respondents and the second section addressing elements of knowledge acquisition and sharing. The interview guide focused mainly on knowledge management practices such as knowledge storage and accessibility policies as the questions were developed using insight gained as literature was reviewed. A population of fifty (50) tourism and hospitality organizations licenced by Department of Tourism (DOT) and graded by Botswana Tourism Organization (BTO) was identified. Using simple random sampling, twenty (20) organizations were sampled with nine (9) establishments purposively selected from the accommodation strata, five from the travel agency strata and six from the tours strata which resulted in 20 survey establishment. Eighty (80) questionnaires were administered to supervisors and section managers while 20 interviews were conducted with human resource officers. Sixty (60) questionnaires were retrieved, of which forty-five (45) were usable after data screening and cleaning analysis.

Table 1: Number of licensed facilities in Gaborone, 2011

Accommodation facilities	Travel agencies	Tour operators
27	10	13

Source: DOT, 2014

It is worth noting that some of these facilities (accommodation) reflected on the above table had not been graded by BTO as required. Most of the organizations had limited knowledge banks as they had been in operation for less than 5 years. It is for this reason that a purposive form of sampling was selected. Organisations viewed to be information-rich were purposively selected and the qualifying criterion was that an organization had to have been in operation for at least three years. This was believed to be an adequate amount of time to have developed enough knowledge to manage. Responses were retrieved from employees who were on duty that day during their lunch and/or tea break. Self-administration of the questionnaire was preferred as it sources un-prejudiced data. The researcher was in most cases available on premises when the respondents completed the questionnaire; this presence reduced the limitations of this approach. This arrangement improved the response rate as respondents could not forget to complete and return the questionnaire. It further allowed for respondents to seek clarity where they did not understand and as a result reducing the possibilities of incomplete questionnaires. The interview was scheduled for a maximum of thirty (30) minutes per organization and appointments were made with the relevant personnel prior. This was important as almost all human resources personnel indicated that they had a busy schedule.

Findings and discussion

Challenges to knowledge retention

The study revealed that, lack of trust and lack of rewards are the leading barriers to knowledge retention as reported by fifteen (33%) and thirteen (28%) of the respondents respectively as presented in Table 2 below. The respondents stated that they do not trust their younger less knowledgeable recipients’ loyalty to the industry as they are more money driven, they also stated that the lack of rewards, both monetary and non-monetary, as a barrier to sharing of knowledge that they acquired through willingness to learn and hard work, a quality that the younger generation does not possess. The lack of trust arises from the realization that once they have shared knowledge with locals, there is a higher chance of their contracts not being renewed as locals will be knowledgeable enough to be promoted to and take up their responsibilities. “The young and educated employees who come into the industry without experience are quick to leave for better paying jobs. We have spent more time training them only for them to leave” (Interviewee 5 and 13, females). “I spent five years as a Food and Beverage manager at one establishment. When a local who had previously been my junior came back from school, I was asked to mentor them for 6 months after which my contract was not renewed. With my current employer, I am protecting my job,” (Interviewee 10, male). Miller (2002) opines that knowledge sharing erodes the individual power and value to the organization for the knowledge worker. These findings also affirm Jacobs and Rooft (2007)’s argument that reward, incentive systems and recognition provide a vital support system for knowledge retention. The study revealed that the previously mentioned reasons further led to unwillingness to share as reported by eight (17%) of the respondents. Disclosing what one knows may create job insecurity (Ramirez, 2010) which explains the unwillingness to share or partial sharing of knowledge. “In my years in this industry, I have trained and shared what I know with young people who were later promoted to be my supervisors while I remained in the same position with no recognition.” (Interviewee 8, male).



Table 2: Barriers to knowledge sharing

		Which of the following are barriers to knowledge sharing in your org?					Total
		lack of participation	not willing to share knowledge	lack of trust	lack of rewards	lack of training	
Nationality	Motswana	0	1	2	1	1	5
	Zimbabwean	1	0	2	3	1	7
	Indian	0	0	1	0	0	1
	Sotho	0	0	0	1	0	1
	Zambian	0	2	1	0	0	3
	South African	0	0	0	0	1	1
Total		1	3	6	5	3	18

Information utilisation

Utilisation of knowledge in the industry is mostly difficult or very difficult as reported by 44.4% (20) and 33.3% (15) of the respondents which make up about 77.7% of the respondents. The respondents felt that whatever knowledge is retained and stored in the organization is very difficult to utilize because it is either outdated or not easy to interpret. Knowledge retention depends on the efficient use of a wide range of people management techniques and organisational storage media, both electronic and otherwise (April & Izad, 2004). It is therefore vital to have good people management and storage media that can support the utilization of retained knowledge. One other reason that was given for the difficulty in utilising information was the tedious procedure followed to access the information as the information generally stored in files that are kept in either departmental offices or the human resources manager’s office. Thilmany (2008) and Dewah (2012) recommends that organisations need to establish ways to retain employees’ know-how and best practices so that the knowledge can be passed on to future workers and replacements who should regain the on-the-job knowledge the ex-employees spent years accumulating. It is thus pointless to retain knowledge from employees and stack it where it is inaccessible and not serving any purpose to the organisation.

Incentives for knowledge retention

The industry generally does not offer any incentives to encourage knowledge sharing and retention as reported by forty (89%) of the respondents. The human resources departments also affirmed this and further asserted that they have not identified a need to reward employees for knowledge sharing as these employees would be on the job and on the company payroll. This is contrary to a recommendation by Jacobs & Roodt (2007) that rewards, incentive systems and recognition are vital in supporting knowledge retention. This is a rather disturbing view that may result in the continued dominance by expatriates in managerial positions as they remain knowledge sources throughout the industry. Martins & Martins (2012) opine that organizational support and encouragement have a direct fundamental relationship with knowledge retention strategy implementation.

Exit interviews

Experts that leave organisation in the industry were not interviewed to retain knowledge as reported by eighteen (39%), while thirteen (28%) reported that section managers were interviewed on exit although these are the highly mobile experts in the industry. Ten (22%) of the respondents revealed that travel consultants were interviewed upon leaving their organisations. The human resource managers stated that most of the people leaving refuse to be interviewed stating that they are busy preparing for their departure from the organisation. On the other hand, the respondents stated that there is rarely any interest shown by the human resource department to interview those leaving the organisations. The implication of this lack of interest in interviewing those leaving the organisation is loss of vital knowledge that could otherwise be documented for use in training of personnel. This was contrary to Young (2006)’s findings that the only effective way to elicit knowledge from deep within someone’s head is not through them writing it down, but through asking them questions. The exit interview process is thus vital as it helps the knowledge source uncover the key bits of knowledge that they may have not even realised they knew.

Motivation for sharing knowledge

Although there are no incentives, respondents are to some extent motivated to support knowledge retention by sharing the knowledge they have. Supporting strategic objectives and self-fulfilment were identified as the leading motivators for knowledge sharing as jointly reported by 61% of the respondents. Mentoring of junior colleagues was another common motivator as reported by ten (22%) of the respondents. Career enhancement and recognition were the least common motivators as reported by three (6%) and five (11%) respondents respectively. The above findings contrast with Ramirez’s (2007) observation that employees may feel insecure at work if they disclose what they know to colleagues. These findings further affirm Martins & Martins (2012)’s conclusion that knowledge attitudes have an extremely strong effect on knowledge behaviour. The behavior of the knowledge sources in the industry to share knowledge regardless of lack of support in terms of incentives is a strong reflection of their attitudes to find motivation in self-fulfilment.

Conclusion

The study was carried out to investigate the challenges and prospects faced by Botswana’s Tourism and Hospitality industry in retaining knowledge. The findings suggest that the industry faces some challenges in implementing knowledge retention activities. These challenges include difficulty in information utilization. This was attributed to the fact that information retained by businesses tends to be inaccessible because of tedious procedures and protocols leading to its acquisition. Another challenge identified was a perceived or real lack of trust towards the junior staff members by knowledge holders. These knowledge



holders who are almost always older and long serving members of staff were also said to be often unwilling to share knowledge with anyone else. Participants of the study attributed this unwillingness to share knowledge to lack of rewards. The human resources departments were found to not carry out exit interviews to elicit knowledge from exiting employees. This was attested to lack of interest from the exiting employees. Considering the challenges, prospects were identified. The study reveals supporting strategic objectives and self-fulfilment as the leading motivators for knowledge sharing. Career enhancement and recognition as well as mentoring of junior colleagues were also mentioned as motivators. This reflects that knowledge sources in the industry have the right knowledge behaviour. The industry must therefore utilize this attitude as an opportunity to cultivate a culture of knowledge retention. In the final analysis, this paper sheds light on a very critical element in the development of the tourism and hospitality industry of Botswana. Knowledge management and retention are at the heart of sustainability and competitiveness in the tourism and hospitality business where standardisation of service is vital. To this end, it is imperative that knowledge intensive industries like this one utilize this phenomenon to set themselves apart from their competitors. The challenges need to be turned into opportunities lest they diminish the prospects. This is even more so in the case of Botswana, where the industry is still at the early stages of development. There is a need to ensure that the information being laid down is not lost along the way as expatriates continue to leave for greener pastures.

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