

HUMAN RESOURCE RECRUITING TECHNIQUES IN RURAL TOURISM - CLUJ COUNTY, ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT. The aim of the paper is to explore the specific techniques used to recruit human resource in the rural tourism industry. The main objectives are: to map the current labor market in the rural tourism - Cluj County; to look for innovative practices in HR recruiting and finally to propose new directions capable to overcome the problems associated with labor market shortage in this industry. The research uses a mixed methods approach (quantitative and qualitative), confirms some of the findings of previous articles and proposes new and unique ones.

Key words: *human resources, recruiting, rural tourism, labor market.*

JEL classification: L83, M12, M54, 015, J24

1. Introduction

To recruit or to attract enough quality candidates, in sufficient numbers, with the right qualifications and skills, to encourage them and to motivate them to apply for a job in the rural tourism industry, became a real challenge as the EU labor market, or other exotic tourist destinations drains the Romanian labor market. Hotel industry and tourism are second as demand in EU for labor force, right after medical industry. Urban areas and hotel industries are like a magnet for the remaining educated and qualified workforce, and attract the remaining candidates.

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If we change the perspective in an imaginative way, the labor market in tourism seems to become an overfished sea, where huge trawlers (cruise ships, international hotel chains), with ever skilled fishermen (recruiting agencies, human resource professionals), trash the local biodiversity. The paradox is that in rural tourism the housing capacity increased from 1.6 million places-days in 2000 to 11.3 million places-days in 2011 (only in touristic and agro-touristic boarding houses), the infrastructure developed, but in the same time the human resources necessary for this development decreased, the economically active population in rural area decreasing from 5.9 million persons in 2000 to 4.3 million persons in 2011 (NIS, 2011).

Moreover, analyzing the internal regional tourism resources for North West Region the conclusion was that most of the human resources in tourism have a low level of specialization (Negrușă, Gică 2008:9). What are we doing to solve the situation? What are we doing when the labor market sustainability is in freefall? What are we doing when we want to invest in local rural tourism but we can't find enough people for that? In order to answer to these questions, in the first section of the paper we make a brief literature review, in the second part we present the materials and methods used in our research, while in the third part we discuss the results obtained. The paper ends with conclusions.

2. Literature review

One aspect studied by the paper is the *perception of work and career* in hospitality industry, especially in rural tourism. The starting point for this focus is two articles referring to the organizational identity (Baum, 2007; and Erickson and Gratton, 2007). Jobs in the hospitality industry are seen and signified in various ways: from George Orwell's extreme pessimism about certain jobs in tourism industry - "servile and without art" - (Baum, 2007), to the overoptimistic approaches of now days - "war for talents" - (Erickson and Gratton, 2007). A central part of this perception is built around the skills level and the skills blend the industry standards require. "Tourism and related service work has traditionally and widely been characterized as low skills" (Baum, 2007). These happened because the work was breakdown into simple micro-tasks heaving in mind the need for evaluation, reward and training. The problem with this approach is that in time, the need for "soft skills" grew and the focus of

human resource recruiting should have changed. The employees should know how to *manage their hearts and sell emotions* (Hochschild, 1993). In certain industries, and tourism certainly is the case, we have an increasing amount of “emotional labor”, and emotional interaction with the client that have to be genuine. Flexibility is also needed due to the “eclectic nature of customer expectation which may demand very different things from the same service delivery situation”. The client more often looks for a “total destination experience” (Baum et al, 1997:213). So an interesting mixture of *communication skills* with a *cultural savvy* is important in order to rise to the client expectations. Especially the rural tourism is expected to have a rich inherited cultural background. For example, traditional food and cuisine are powerful elements of local identity (Bessiere, 1998) and in this case not only the meal or the “traditional products” in themselves matters but also the story behind these products, the local history and the folklore of the region (Negrușă, Gică, 2008:13). Employees in tourism have to be not only good executers but also great storytellers.

Seasonality is another great concern for human resources because affects dramatically tourism employment leading to “seasonal employment, underemployment and unemployment” (Jolliffe and Farnsworth, 2003:312). June, July, August and September are the active months in tourism and the critical fluctuations in tourism demand reflects in critical variations in human resources demand. How businesses react to these oscillations depends on two HR strategies. “Evidence suggests that some businesses in this highly seasonal industry develop a business strategy that embraces seasonality, while others develop a strategy that challenges the seasonal nature of their work.” (Jolliffe and Farnsworth, 2003: 312). According to Ribeiro and Marques, (2002) we have a problematic situation generated by seasonality. On one hand business owners constantly complain about how difficult is to recruit local workers properly able to fulfill the requirements of the job, and on the other hand, the same owners are stressing they have insufficient economic scale, hence they lack the capacity to pay higher salaries professional employees deserve and demand.

Perception of work and career, and the seasonal character of the industry, influence largely the recruiting process: recruiting sources, recruiting methods, recruiting area and employment diversity, and this are another topics followed in this paper. If we compare again recruiting with fishing, it is important to:

- *map the recruiting sources*, or the species of fish in the water (social categories of persons that can be easily identified on the labor market and have a series of common characteristics that facilitate their recruiting);
- *to match the recruiting sources with recruiting methods* or luring techniques (special tactics or recipes for accessing, informing and motivating potential candidates to apply for vacancies and for a “professional lifestyle”);
- *to extend your recruiting or fishing area* if the fish is scarce, and finally to ensure employment diversity or a biodiversity.

3. Material and method

In order to define the target group of our study, we used the database of the Romanian classified tourism accommodation structures from the Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism’s Website. We selected the touristic chalets, touristic boarding houses and agro-touristic boarding houses acting in rural areas, the total number being 97 units. From this group we eliminated 20 units which are located on national roads or in cities proximity because these units are not focused on rural tourism activities. Also, in the case of village Sâncraiu, 34 out of 40 accommodation units have an accommodation capacity below 10 places (they are small family businesses) and have no employees. As a result we had a potential target group of 43 units. In the end, 26 accommodation units accepted to take part at our study.

We applied a semi-structured interview, each guest house owner being questioned about: the evolution of employees’ number, the employees’ residence, age and competences. Also, during the discussion, we tried to identify what are the skills of the “perfect employee”, the benefits they provide to their personnel and what are the methods they use to recruit their workers.

4. Results and discussions

The employee profile sketched by employers is not an impressive one. If we were to consider the scale suggested in the literature review: (“servile and without art”, as described in Baum, 2007, versus “war for talents”, as described in Erickson and Gratton, 2007), unfortunately the first part of the continuum seem to approach reality. The majority of traits mentioned by employers can be grouped as character traits (28 mentions in total):

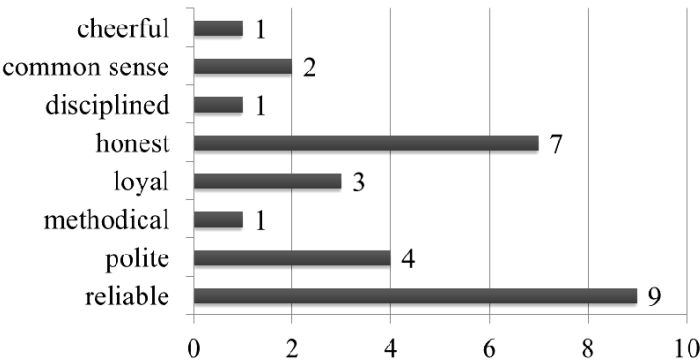


Chart 1. The character traits of employee in rural tourism industry, Cluj County (frequency of preferences)

These traits represent the backbone for a decent employee. Most of the businesses in rural tourism are a family business, employing a reduced number of persons besides the family members. So, in most of the cases, the employers do not expect the employees to be highly qualified persons, but a decent one.

Another category identified is stamina and determination (8 mentions): hard working, perseverant, dynamic. The third category regards communication skills (7 mentions) but these skills regard basic interaction with clients. Employers consider that in rural tourism is mandatory to become a “friend” of their guests, to try to know them, the communication skills being essential in this case.

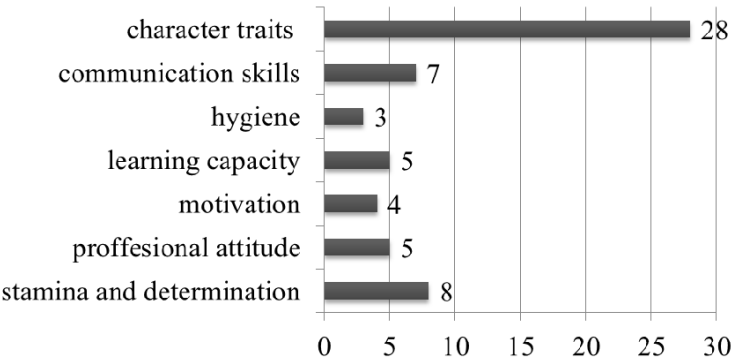


Chart 2. The employee profile in rural tourism industry, Cluj County (frequency of preferences)

Motivation is fourth one (4 mentions) and regards attachment of this kind of job and a sense of ownership. What is interesting is that motivation is seen as a responsibility of the employees, as a kind of self-motivation, not as a responsibility of the employer. This somehow doesn't sound right. Learning is the fifth category (5 mentions): to want to learn and to practice, to have relevant studies and to learn how to deliver quality. Relevant study for the majority of the employers means high school degree, not college degree. Basically they need certain diplomas because of the legal/formal requirements; other than that everything can be learned on the job. Professional attitude is the sixth category (5 mentions): professional approach to work, tries to understand the client and task oriented. Finally, hygiene is the seventh category (3 mentions).

There were no foreign language mentioned (even though the majority of the business owners want foreign clients), no cultural savvy (even though they want to promote the local culture) and no emotional intelligence (even though one of the employer owners said that "in this business we sell emotions"). Obviously, tourism is not an "industry" anymore, and the technical side (making reservations, cleaning, coking and the buildings evermore rooms) doesn't suffice. Only educated employees have what it takes to manage international, "culturally hungry" tourists.

The advantages or the incentives offered for the employees are scarce. A lot of owners (9) had no comment on this topic. For them the existence of the job was enough and the question was redundant. Some of them sustain the employees would be happier with a higher wage or with the safety of their job outside the season and they do not want other benefits. They never thought about differentiation, they never had to due to economic challenges in the rural area: high unemployment, low wages, reduced mobility and high poverty rates. Those owners that gave a thought about what they offer were not very creative. Five of them mentioned the wages (stating the obvious), twelve of them mentioned the free meals they offer for the employees (even the coffee was mentioned as a advantage), four of them offer accommodation for employees that come from distance, two of them were confident enough that their business offers pleasant working conditions, another two mentioned as an advantage the fact that they don't have to commute (being locals), one mentioned the flexible working hours, one mentioned the transport, and finally one mentioned the stability of the working place.

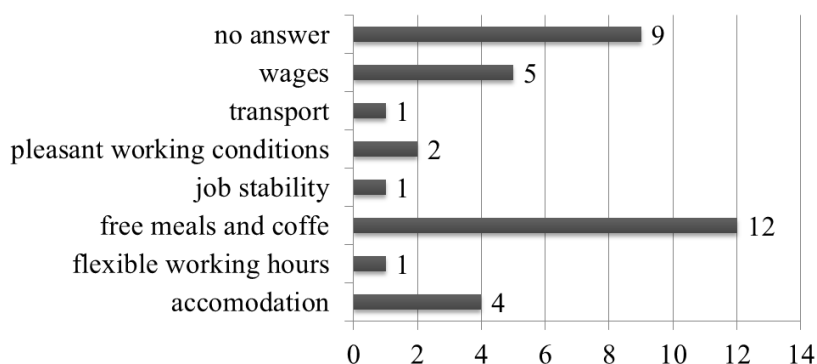


Chart 3. The incentives offered to employees in rural tourism, Cluj County (frequency of preferences)

So, no career plans, no incentives, just the basic package, no much of a bait for the candidates. To paraphrase Erickson and Gratton (2007), “What it means to work here?”. The employers complained about the poor quality of the employees, but when the recurring pool is so small you have to differentiate yourself from other businesses or other industries, if not in financial terms, then in creative terms. How can you attract, motivate or expect loyalty if you don’t have a “signature experience” for your employees?

Seasonality is perceived as a problem, more than in any other industry - 21 business owners said that summer (starting in June and ending in September, but mainly July and August) is the main season for business and occasionally in the winter, especially for holidays. Unfortunately this translates also in seasonal labour force, and as a consequence, professional workers in tourism choose to work in other countries where the salaries allow them to make provisions for the winter. Their strategy is not to challenge the seasonal nature of the business, but to embrace seasonality. When, in summer, the number of tourists exceeds business capacity, some of the owners, collaborate with other business owners in order to keep the tourists in the area and avoid employing new people or increasing their housing capacity. A usual practice, especially in the case of small accommodation units, is to arrange the meals with another touristic boarding house, usually a boarding house with a higher accommodation capacity or a restaurant. It is a kind of outsourcing to other “neighbor businesses”. In the small accommodation units, some of the family members are dealing only with housekeeping, receiving clients and, in a

few cases, with leisure activities. Because they do not have a high number of tourist is not efficient to cook for their guest, so they prefer to allow them to cook them self or to go to other units to eat. Also, in the case of leisure activities, the accommodation units tend to rent/buy some recreation services from other boarding houses or form other businesses. That is definitely something new for the rural tourism units from Cluj County, an action that improves the services they provide to their clients (Negrușă, Cosma, Gică, 2008:80), thus we consider this collaboration as being a sign of innovation, going beyond the simple and rigid concept of competition.

Recruiting sources lack variety. As we expected, family, relatives (14 cases) and friends (13 cases) were at the top of the usual recruiting sources, leaving far behind other sources (Chart 4). There seem to be a relational demography activated in order to advantage during the recruiting process those they know. In fact some of the employers stated very clear that they employ only people they know or they have sound guaranties from them from relatives or friends. This is not the case in urban areas, where this degree of control is virtually impossible. When asked to consider special recruiting sources (those usually disadvantaged on the labor market), the majority of employers choose high school graduates (17 cases), students (13 cases), and unemployed people (11 cases), leaving far behind ethical groups, pensioners and persons with disabilities. These findings were consistent with the age profile we will present further.

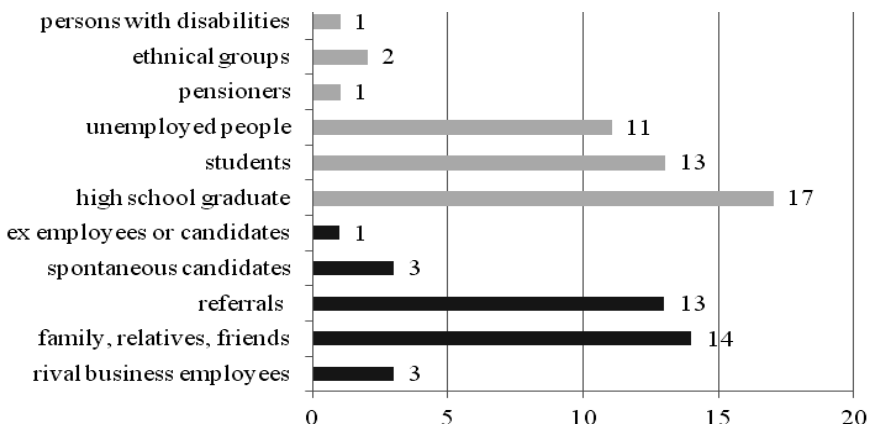


Chart 4. Recruiting sources preferred by the employers in rural tourism industry, Cluj County (frequency of preferences)

Where: special recruiting sources, and usual recruiting sources

Recruiting methods don't project a lot of imagination. The majority of business owners (20 of them or 77%) stated that the main recruiting method for them was their social network (family and friends), and usually by the word of mouth, and for 17 of them this was the unique method of recruiting (Chart 5). Few of them tried to use other methods: 3 of them used the County Employment Office (AJOFM), 2 of them used advertising in community events, 2 of them used internships, one used newspaper advertising, one used job fairs and one used poster advertising. We don't have diverse and creative recruiting methods. There were only two business owners with a broader perspective over the recruiting methods, both promoting their jobs through community events, internship and in a job fair. They also attended numerous projects on tourism and collaborate intensively with other business owners. Also, those with a university degree seem to have a more complex view over the recruiting process.

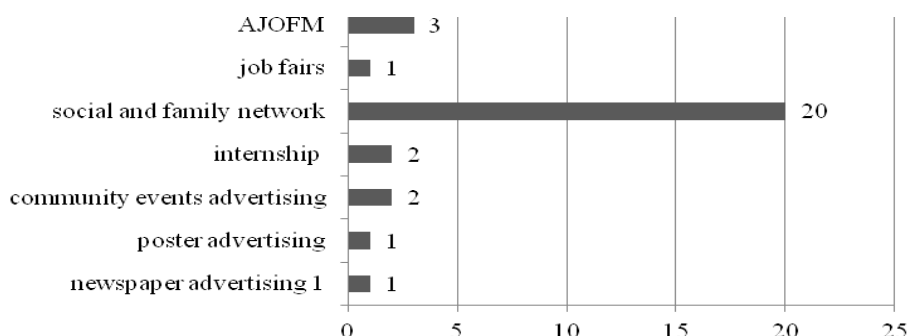


Chart 5. Recruiting methods preferred by the employers in rural tourism industry, Cluj County (frequency of preferences)

Recruiting area usually is narrow. The majority of business owners recruit their employees from the local workforce. Only 7 of them had non-local employees and only 2 of them had an active recruiting policy aimed beyond local community. The greatest distance for an employee relocation was 389 km, (Huedin - Timișoara) followed by 119 (Bălcești - Aiud) and 59 (Mărișel - Aiud). The other four examples were closer than 5 km. "Fishing" on a poor labour market leaves you with two alternatives. The first alternative is to persist in recruiting local, but then the recruiting strategy must be elevated to another level (became the employer of choice, "grow" your own human resources, recruit from atypical recruiting sources). The

second alternative, extend your recruiting focus to other areas and involves more effort (travel, relocation costs, etc.) and networking (tourism associations, academic institutions). Whatever the chosen strategy, creative or innovative recruiting is a must in order to be prosperous. On the other side, recruiting locally has specific benefits. Being a native add value to the authenticity and keeps the flavor of the place. Natives really know the area; they can give directions and counsel tourists about their options. Unfortunately, being local, without the communication skills, is a frequent obstacle. Tourists, especially foreigners, look for unique personalities and insights in to the local culture, and the body language cannot compensate.

Employment diversity in rural tourism is a little bit lax, because the sense of community, the local history and habits are very powerful. The concept of diversity is either ambiguous, either unimportant for the majority of the employers. However we tried to probe some of the topics connected with diversity: marital status of the employee, age profile, gender and ethnicity. Regarding the *marital status*, the business owners showed no preference for married or single candidates. This kind of discrimination present in urban environment was absent here. The situation differs when we are talking about the *age profile*. The majority of employers preferred young candidates (17 cases), and only in 4 cases they regarded older candidates as prospective employees (Chart 6). These findings are consistent with other researches regarding age discrimination in tourism industry (Riach and Rich, 2006, 2007). When we analyze *gender*, we encounter a “reverse” discrimination, a lot of business owners considering that jobs in this industry are mainly for females. If we look at the gender of the current employee we see that more than 74%, or 50 employees were females and only 26%, or 18 employees, were males. Unfortunately we didn’t gather data to verify another hypothesis about gender discrimination, the wage difference between women and men as suggested by Moore and Wen (2008).

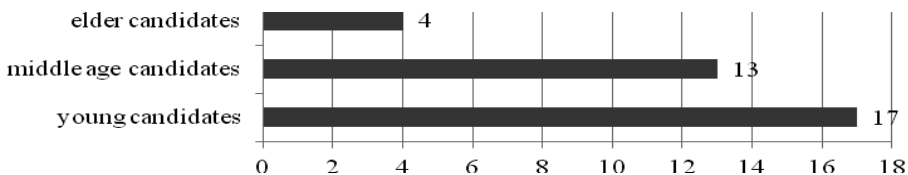


Chart 6. Age profile preferred by the employers in rural tourism industry, Cluj County (frequency of preferences)

5. Conclusions

The majority of the businesses acting in rural tourism in Cluj County are family owned businesses. Usually they hire a few locals, especially women, and they are using their social network and family to recruit them. As a result of the economic crisis and reduced mobility, the incentives for employees are scarce: meals, coffee and accommodation in a few cases. The owners of the units consider that they are helping the local community because their employees do not have other option. In conclusion, from the recruitment process perspective we cannot affirm that the accommodation units acting in rural tourism are employing innovative methods and techniques.

The employers' expectations regarding the skills of their workers are not impressive. In most of the cases, their requests represent the backbone of a decent employee. Unfortunately, even if their services are dedicated to foreign tourists also, they don't ask foreign languages, cultural savvy or emotional intelligence from their workers. As a result, they don't use sophisticated recruiting techniques, the family, the relatives and the friends being the most trusted source for employment. From another perspective, in most of the cases, the favorite candidates are young and middle age people, preferable females. In conclusion, we consider there is a low innovation activity in the recruiting process in Cluj County rural tourism.

In spite of that, analyzing the units' reaction to seasonality, we identified an innovative aspect in the HR activity. Most of the units do not afford to have permanent employees, the family members taking care about all the activities in the off season. During the peak season, they use two strategies: some of them would like to hire high school graduates or students, while others develop collaborations with other units in order to externalize some of the services, especially the meals and leisure activities. This collaboration is beneficial for both, increasing the efficiency of the units with a higher accommodation capacity and eliminating the need of more employees in the case of the small units.

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