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# A Field Study of New Employee Training Programs: Industry Practices and Strategic Insights

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## **Abstract**

Given the importance of well-designed and well-executed training programs, it is important to learn more about the content and design of effective training programs for new employees, particularly those that have been implemented in the hospitality industry. Through a field study assessment of pre-opening training programs that have been implemented by fifteen hotel firms and sixteen restaurant companies, we found that hotels and restaurants spend approximately the same time on pre-opening training for new staff, with the exception of restaurant managers, who receive significantly more days of training than do their hotel counterparts. In addition, there were substantive differences in the amount of pre-opening training based on firm size and whether the company was publicly traded or privately held. We also found that the majority of pre-opening training is designed and delivered by corporate staff, and a balance of active and passive training methods are used for facilitation. Finally, although our survey methodology did not allow us to determine the costs associated with pre-opening training (and therefore the return on these efforts), we noted that the firms used guest satisfaction measures and measured the employees' content mastery, among other metrics.

## **Keywords**

pre-opening training; new employees; flexibility

## **Disciplines**

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## **Comments**

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## Abstract

Given the importance of well-designed and well-executed training programs, it is important to learn more about the content and design of effective training programs for new employees, particularly those that have been implemented in the hospitality industry. Through a field study assessment of pre-opening training programs that have been implemented by fifteen hotel firms and sixteen restaurant companies, we found that hotels and restaurants spend approximately the same time on pre-opening training for new staff, with the exception of restaurant managers, who receive significantly more days of training than do their hotel counterparts. In addition, there were substantive differences in the amount of pre-opening training based on firm size and whether the company was publicly traded or privately held. We also found that the majority of pre-opening training is designed and delivered by corporate staff, and a balance of active and passive training methods are used for facilitation. Finally, although our survey methodology did not allow us to determine the costs associated with pre-opening training (and therefore the return on these efforts), we noted that the firms used guest satisfaction measures and measured the employees' content mastery, among other metrics.

## Keywords

pre-opening training; new employees; flexibility

For the first time in three-plus years, we are seeing predictions for strong increases in revenue growth and new development in the hospitality industry. Moreover, notable companies such as Marriott, Four Seasons, and Starbucks have been showing strong sales performance since 2010, and the trajectory of new property development and store growth around the globe has been increasingly positive and steep.<sup>1</sup>

One of the primary reasons why the companies noted above (and others) have performed comparatively well during the recent financial decline is because they have implemented an integrated set of highly effective human resources (HR) policies, practices, and systems that are designed to create and sustain high levels of employee engagement and performance. This contention is supported by a burgeoning body of evidence that supports the link between HR (as a system, as well as the specific functional activities therein) and various indicators of individual and organizational performance. For example, the HR best practices research by Hinkin and Tracey (2010) found that the “most-admired” companies in their study placed a strong emphasis on learning and development, particularly for new staff. For example, the new employee programs established by the top hospitality and service-related companies address not only

job-specific requirements, but also cover strategic knowledge (e.g., the firm's core values) and interpersonal skills (e.g., behaviors that support cross-functional coordination and teamwork) that are required for sustaining high levels of service quality and efficiency. These companies also offer ongoing learning opportunities that address the various professional development needs of all employees at all levels of the organization. Perhaps the most distinguishing factor is that all of the most-admired companies shared a strong culture of continuous improvement in which training and development is an integral part of everyday work life.

However, while we know a great deal about training programs in general (cf. Noe 2013), little is known about the content and design of pre-opening training programs for new employees, especially in hospitality firms. Even less is known about the adaptive nature of training. Some insights regarding this can be gleaned from research on socialization, which has focused on the processes by

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which individuals acquire requisite attitudes, behavior, and knowledge during the initial stages of employment (Van Maanen and Schein 1979). However, the empirical findings are again quite limited (cf. Cable and Parsons 2001) and do not provide much insight regarding content- or design-related features that can or should be included in new employee training programs.

Similarly, while a few studies have examined socialization and new employee training in hospitality contexts (e.g., Yang 2009; Young and Lundberg 1996), the focus has been primarily on employee perceptions regarding their initial training experiences. In that regard, similar to research on socialization, these findings do not provide any substantive prescription—conceptually or practically—regarding program content and design. Moreover, an exhaustive search of the hospitality research literature failed to reveal any details regarding the content or design of new employee programs. Finally, we could not identify any studies that have examined the ways in which new employee training programs may account for or adapt to the dynamic nature of internal and external environmental conditions. This is a particularly salient gap, especially in light of the hospitality industry's change-oriented and competitive nature (cf. Enz 2010).

Therefore, the objectives of this exploratory study are twofold: (1) to identify the key content, design, and implementation features associated with arguably one of the most important types of hospitality training—pre-opening training for new employees, and (2) to enhance our understanding about the ways in which such training programs may be adaptive to account for the dynamic nature of internal and external work settings. We will begin by presenting a brief overview of the characteristics that are associated with effective training programs. We will then present an analysis of the recent research on HR flexibility, which provides some insights about the adaptive nature of the HR system components, including new employee training programs. Next, we present the results from a case study that examines new employee training programs that have been implemented by a sample of thirty-one “most admired” hotel and restaurant companies. We conclude with a discussion about the ways in which learning and development programs can be designed and implemented to maximize impact and account for the dynamic influences associated with hospitality settings.

## Effective Training

In their recent review of the research literature on training and development, Aguinis and Kraiger (2009) reiterated the importance of four fundamental requirements for designing and implementing effective training programs: (1) conducting a thorough needs assessment to justify training investments; (2) engaging participants in the learning process using multiple methods of instruction that account for

different learner attitudes, motivations, and abilities; (3) using multi-level criteria and longitudinal procedures for assessing training impact; and (4) adapting to a variety of individual and contextual factors beyond content and design that may mitigate or enhance the extent to which training objectives may be realized.

In addition to the aforementioned requirements, a few scholars have presented strategic models of training that articulate additional requirements for ensuring that learning and development systems achieve their operational objectives, as well as support the firm's overarching business objectives. For example, Tannenbaum (2002) presented a strategic training framework that identifies eight initiatives that can be taken to support an organization's long-term plans. These initiatives cover a wide range of content (e.g., strategic and operational core competencies) and design considerations (e.g., including customers and suppliers in learning programs), and focus on aligning the core elements of a firm's training systems with the firm's business priorities.

On the surface, the requirements specified by Aguinis and Kraiger (2009) and Tannenbaum (2002) and others appear to be relevant for the success of any training program (cf. Noe 2013). However, while the empirical evidence clearly supports the importance of these fundamental requirements and provides a general guide for designing and implementing any type of learning program, there is still much to be learned about the specific nature and roles of the various requirements. As noted above, there is little evidence in the general management literature regarding the content and design features associated with new employee training programs. One step in this direction is Cable and Parsons (2001), who found that presenting newly hired employees with details about the sequence and timetables associated with their employment progression, and providing various sources of social support, had a significant impact on new employees' perceptions about their fit within their new work setting. The hospitality-specific research on this topic, however, has focused primarily on the roles and relevance of various reactions and perceptions among newly hired employees to their orientation experiences (e.g., Kennedy and Berger 1994; Lo and Lam 2002; Yang 2009; Young and Lundberg 1996). Thus, the findings offer limited insight regarding content- and design-related features that may be essential for new employee training programs. This is an important gap in the extant literature. An examination of the fundamental features associated with new employee training programs can provide important baseline information that can be used to develop and implement effective hospitality orientation programs. In addition, this line of inquiry can also provide insights about the ways in which the fundamental program features may vary as a function of various contextual factors (e.g., industry segment, firm size, geographic dispersion). Indeed, due to the

dynamic nature of a firm's competitive conditions, it is likely that the roles and relevance of the fundamental features will vary as a function of those conditions. To address this latter objective in more detail, we will present a brief review of the emerging research on HR flexibility, and then discuss the ways in which the findings can be used to enhance our understanding about the roles and relevance of new employee training programs.

### HR Flexibility and the Implications for New Employee Training

Several scholars have argued that adaptability is a critical requirement for managing competitive settings (e.g., Chakravarthy 1982; Eppink 1978; Sanchez 1995, 1997; Sanchez and Heene 1997). Furthermore, organizations must be able to acquire and utilize a variety of resources, including human resources, to effectively manage competitive threats and opportunities (e.g., Barney 1991; Priem and Butler 2001; Teece, Pisano, and Shuen 1997). The primary assumption is that managers make decisions about using the human resources that are available to the firm based on their perceptions about the external competitive context (e.g., Teece 2007; Way and Johnson 2005). Thus, the degree of perceived environmental dynamism will determine the nature and extent of HR flexibility that may be needed. Current conceptualizations of the HR flexibility construct are based on Wright and Snell's (1998) model, which posits that HR flexibility comprises two general dimensions: resource flexibility and coordination flexibility. HR resource flexibility is evident when the firm's current HR practices and employee capabilities (i.e., skills and behaviors) can be used for a wide range of purposes. For example, resource flexibility in HR practices is evident when firms can use existing selection, training, performance management, or incentive programs to quickly respond to changing customer values or preferences (e.g., incentives for improving service recovery efforts). The second general type of HR flexibility is associated with the coordination of HR practices and employee capabilities. An example of coordination flexibility in HR practices occurs when firms can quickly and effectively utilize or implement alternative HR practices in response to environmental changes, including competitors' HR changes. To date, six empirical studies based on the conceptual model offered by Wright and Snell have demonstrated support for the link between HR flexibility and various subjective and objective measures of firm performance (Beltrán-Martín, Roca-Puig, Escrig-Tena, and Bou-Lluisar 2008; Bhattacharya, Gibson, and Doty 2005; Ketkar and Sett 2009, 2010; Ngo and Loi 2008; Way et al., forthcoming).

Research on HR flexibility for new employee training—particularly pre-opening training—suggests the importance of breadth in content, methods, and evaluation. With regard

to content, it can be argued that new employee training programs should cover a wide range of knowledge and skills that can be applied to a wide range of purposes. For example, consistent with the findings reported by Hinkin and Tracey (2010), we would expect such programs to emphasize strategic content (e.g., the firm's mission, core values, and culture, as well as information about key competitors, market conditions, demand drivers, customer characteristics), as well as interpersonal skills (e.g., behavioral requirements for working in team contexts, especially those that require cross-functional coordination), and technical and task requirements (e.g., operating a property management or point-of-sales system) that are necessary to effectively perform both core and non-core job responsibilities. However, consistent with the contingency notion that is central to the HR flexibility framework, it is likely that the relevance of these various content themes will vary as a function of an organization's needs. For example, strategic knowledge (which focuses on the firm's overarching business goals and values, as well as the conditions associated with each of the firm's business units) may be more relevant for larger firms that operate over a broad geographical area, compared with companies that operate on a more local or regional basis. This contention is based on research that has demonstrated support for the relationship between organizational knowledge (which can be facilitated in part via new employee training) and a firm's business strategy (which in theory accounts for both external and internal competitive influences and demands; e.g., Nag, Corley, and Gioia 2007). Thus, scale differences may have some influence on the relative weights associated with the various types of employee knowledge that can (and most likely, should) be addressed in pre-opening training programs.

Second, with regard to coordination flexibility, we would expect to see a wide array of active and passive instructional methods, including the use of technology-enabled learning systems and multiple facilitators to accommodate differences in learning style and to promote customization of the learning process. In addition, design features such as pre-training assignments (e.g., reviewing policy and procedure guidelines) and post-training follow-up (e.g., goal-setting meetings) should be a central part of flexible training programs that account for the various contingencies that affect training performance and transfer. However, similar to the arguments presented above, the relevance of various instructional methods may vary according to the situation. For example, active, behaviorally focused learning methods should be used for interpersonal skill development, compared with using analytic, concept-based learning methods for strategic skill development. In addition, an individual's background and position will have some influence on the type of training procedures that may be appropriate. For example, training approaches for line staff will be different from that of managers (cf. Law et al. 2013). Thus, the

situation may dictate the relevance of various instructional methods.

Finally, we would expect to see a multi-level approach to training evaluation that accounts for outcomes at the individual-, departmental-, and firm-level of analysis. Each of these characteristics is consistent with each of the fundamental requirements of effective training programs (cf. Aguinis and Kraiger 2009), initiatives included in Tannenbaum's (2002) model, and the fundamental propositions offered by Wright and Snell (1998). Similar to our contentions above, factors such as scale and ownership may have some influence on the magnitude and type of evaluative efforts that are taken to assess the effectiveness of a firm's training initiatives.

In sum, effective and adaptive training programs appear to be those with content that promotes resource flexibility by covering a broad array of individual and strategic topics and are designed, implemented, and evaluated to promote coordination flexibility by accounting for the diverse needs of individuals and their working conditions. The survey described below examines the extent to which these characteristics may be incorporated into new employee training programs that have been developed by a sample of top hospitality companies.

## Method

### Sample and Procedures

Based on the benchmarking procedures that were used by Hinkin and Tracey (2010), we identified fifty-eight hotel and restaurant companies that met the following criteria to participate in this study. They must have (1) a formal, structured training program for new employees, and (2) received at least one national or international award, recognition, or acknowledgment for the quality of their HR function within the past three years (e.g., listed as *Fortune's* Most Admired Companies to Work For). It should be noted that we focused on new employee training programs that have been developed as part of the firm's new-unit pre-opening procedures. This particular form of new employee training is arguably the most comprehensive, robust, and expensive approach to ensuring that newly hired staff possesses the requisite knowledge and skills required to perform their essential job duties and responsibilities. As such, it provides a good context for generating insights regarding our primary research questions.

We sent e-mails to senior executives in the fifty-eight selected companies that included a brief overview of the study, and asked the respondent or another knowledgeable person in the company to complete the survey described below. As profiled in Exhibit 1, a total of thirty-one companies agreed to participate: sixteen quick-service, fast casual, casual, and fine dining restaurant companies, and fifteen

### Exhibit 1: Company Profiles.

Characteristic	Hotels	Restaurants	
<b>Size</b>			
<25	1	6	
25-50	4	4	
51-100	2	2	
>100	8	4	
<b>Geographic dispersion</b>			
U.S. only	5	11	
International	10	5	
<b>Ownership</b>			
Public	6	5	
Private	9	11	
<b>Structure</b>			
Own	2	Franchise	3
Manage	6	No franchise	13
Both	7		

hotel, casino, and resort companies. The participating companies operated from five to more than 30,000 units regionally, nationally, or internationally. Respondent titles included director of operations, chief operating officer, managing partner, senior director of human resources, senior vice president of operations, and co-founder.

### Survey

Based on our analysis of the previous research on training effectiveness and HR flexibility discussed above, and the survey development procedures offered by Hinkin (1998), we designed a questionnaire to assess the new employee pre-opening training policies and procedures that had been implemented by the participating companies. The items were constructed to assess the following components of new employee training:

1. Training duration and content:
  - a. The amount of time (days) that was dedicated to content associated with (i) strategic knowledge regarding the firm's brand, culture, and competitive conditions; (ii) technical skills associated with the core and non-core job responsibilities; and (iii) interpersonal skills that were required to facilitate motivation and teamwork; and
  - b. The order in which each content area was introduced.
2. Training design and implementation:
  - a. Percentage of content that was designed by (i) corporate and (ii) unit-level staff,
  - b. The number of trainers that were used (i) overall and (ii) by content area,

**Exhibit 2:**  
Duration of Training by Position and Content Area.

	Hotels	Restaurants
Management staff		
Strategic content	3.0	4.6
Technical content	5.2	11.5
Interpersonal content	2.0	2.5
Subtotal	10.2	18.6
Line staff		
Strategic content	2.4	3.4
Technical content	9.5	9.1
Interpersonal content	1.4	2.4
Subtotal	13.3	14.9
Total	23.5	33.5

Note. Duration reported as average number of days.

- c. The amount of time that was dedicated to (i) passive training methods and (ii) active training methods,
- d. Use of pre-training assignments, and
- e. Amount and type of cross-training.
3. Evaluation and costs:
  - a. Measures of training effectiveness;
  - b. Overall training costs or total training budget, including cost allocation to various stakeholders (e.g., corporate, property, developer, owner).

All questions were segmented by level of either management or line staff, and trends regarding similarities and differences across the various profile characteristics (e.g., segment, scale, dispersion) were examined. After we received the questionnaires, we interviewed each respondent via telephone to review and clarify survey responses.

## Results

**Training duration and content.** As shown in Exhibit 2, the amount of training time for new employees was similar for restaurants and hotels, but that was not the case for new management hires, and restaurant hires particularly. The overall time allotted for manager training was about eighteen days for the restaurant segment and about ten days for the hotel segment. Most of this difference was due to the amount of time spent on technical content—more than eleven days for restaurant managers, compared with about five days for hotel managers. One possible explanation for this disparity may be differences in staffing practices across the two industry segments. For example, one of the hotel respondents reported that they “hire only experienced managers who don’t need a lot of training.” Thus, due to differences in the scope of operational functions, it may be that

**Exhibit 3:**  
Types of Instructional Methods by Content Area.

Content area	Method type	Hotels %	Restaurants %
Strategic	Passive	73.80	65.10
	Active	26.20	34.90
Technical	Passive	61.30	51.10
	Active	38.70	48.90
Interpersonal	Passive	55.60	60.71
	Active	44.40	39.29

the hotel companies utilize more robust procedures for sourcing and selecting their operational leaders. Another possible explanation for the differences across segments is that restaurants may be more idiosyncratic than hotels regarding operational processes and systems. Thus, additional time may be necessary to address the specific features of the various processes and systems. Moreover, unlike hotels, restaurants are often heavily dependent on repeat business from the local market. Thus, they may spend additional time to prepare staff so that they can deliver a high level of service quality when they open the doors.

We also found differences in the number of days spent on pre-opening training based on organizational size and whether firms were publicly or privately held. Larger hotel companies (>100 properties) spent considerably less time, about eighteen days, than smaller companies, which averaged about twenty-eight days on pre-opening training. However, the reverse was true for the restaurant segment. For the larger restaurant companies, that average number of days for pre-opening training was about forty-five days, versus twenty-eight for smaller firms. In addition, privately held hotel companies committed considerably less time to training than their publicly traded counterparts, but the reverse was found for the restaurant segment, with public companies dedicating markedly more time on pre-opening training than the privately held firms. Our analysis of these and related findings will be discussed in more detail below. However, it should be emphasized that due to the sample size, a conservative approach should be used when interpreting and generalizing from these results.

Most of the companies covered the strategic content first, and then addressed technical and interpersonal skill requirements (Exhibit 3). This trend was particularly salient in the restaurant segment, with all companies but one reporting that they began by discussing their brand, competitive conditions, and culture, compared with two-thirds of the hotel companies. The primary rationale was that for new staff members to be effective, they must have a clear understanding of how their individual roles fit within the broader organizational context. For example, one respondent noted, “We always start with the ‘wow’—our culture—and move immediately into branding. We want our staff to know the big-picture

expectations first.” While none of the restaurant companies reported starting with interpersonal skills, four of the hotel companies initiated their programs by focusing on this content area. Only one each of the restaurant and hotel companies began with technical skills. No substantive differences in content sequence were found based on comparisons across the various company profile characteristics.

*Training design and implementation.* In terms of design, the respondents indicated that about two-thirds of the program materials were developed by corporate staff, primarily relating to the strategic topics, and the balance was developed by property level staff. Those percentages were almost identical across industry segments, size, and the other profile characteristics. The primary rationale was that much of the requisite knowledge was universally relevant, but there was also a need to incorporate content that is specific to a particular location (e.g., customer trends and team dynamics). For example, one respondent noted,

All of the brand- and culture-related content is corporate [i.e., designed by corporate staff], motivation and teambuilding [i.e., interpersonal content] is a mix [i.e., some is designed by corporate staff, and some is developed by the property trainers and managers], and all of the technical [content] is property driven.

In terms of facilitation, the hotel and restaurant companies assigned multiple trainers to facilitate new employee training across each of the content areas. Most of the hotel and restaurant companies used a formulaic approach to determine the number of trainers needed (e.g., one trainer for every twenty to twenty-five employees per hotel department, and one trainer for every four to five employees per restaurant department). However, a common response was that “the number will vary immensely, based on the size of hotel [or restaurant] and number of employees.” About half of the companies assigned one trainer to facilitate the strategic or interpersonal content, and then used a different trainer (e.g., department head, or manager, or systems specialist, such as point of sale) to facilitate the technical content. A vast majority of the respondents—26 of the 31—indicated that they included management and line staff in the sessions that covered strategic and interpersonal content. The primary rationale was to ensure that everyone was “on the same page” and “working as a team.” Again, there were no appreciable differences when comparing firms on the basis of size, geographic dispersion, or other characteristics.

The trends regarding learning methods were fairly consistent across all property characteristics. Exhibit 2 shows the amount of time that was dedicated to passive and active training methods for both industry segments. The passive training methods we asked the respondents to consider

included lecture, reading, discussion, and audiovisual (AV). These four methods are the most commonly used for facilitating basic knowledge and skill acquisition, and can be used across a wide array of formal and informal learning settings (Noe 2013). For example, Four Seasons sends collateral such as their employee handbook to new employees via e-mail with instructions to review and learn the key policies and standards prior to their first day of employment. Although there’s no instructor and the process is completely self-paced, there is, of course, follow-up during the formal orientation process.

The active training methods we included were simulations, demonstrations, and on-the-job training, which are most commonly used for facilitating advanced behavioral and skill-based learning objectives (Noe 2013). Indeed, companies such as Four Seasons, Marriott, Starbucks, Wegmans, and many of the “Most Admired” companies (cf. Hinkin and Tracey 2010) spend considerable time using simulations and experiential learning techniques (e.g., role-playing) to help employees learn and demonstrate behaviors that are consistent with their service standards. Overall, the training methods that we included in our survey appear to be quite representative of the facilitation options that can be used in many training contexts and especially those designed for new employees.

For strategic content, both hotels and restaurants generally applied passive training methods (e.g., lecture, discussion, AV) more than active training methods (e.g., simulations and role-plays, on-the-job techniques). Similar trends, though not as distinct, were found for the other two content areas. A somewhat surprising finding (due to the highly interactive nature of work in operational settings) was that more than half of the hotel companies and ten of the restaurant companies relied quite heavily on passive learning methods to facilitate interpersonal skill development. For example, lecture and discussion methods represented between half to three-quarters of the facilitation methods used by nine of the hotel companies, and half of the restaurant companies. In addition, about four hotel firms and six restaurant operators used internet- or web-enabled instructional methods. No other salient trends emerged based on comparisons across the other profile characteristics.

About half of the hotels and restaurants in our sample reported using pre-program assignments as part of the new employee training process, most commonly, reading the employee handbook and completing new hire paperwork (e.g., tax and benefits forms). The primary rationale was that it was important to get new employees “up to speed” as quickly as possible. In contrast, those that did not report using pre-program assignments voiced some rather strong sentiment regarding this practice. For example, one respondent stated,

I am not a believer in overburdening employees. It sends the wrong message. From my perspective, information needs to be



given in bite-sized portions. When you give an employee a huge workload from day one, you set a precedent that knowing facts is the most important factor in being successful.

Finally, just over half of the respondents in our sample reported using cross-training as part of the new employee training process. The results were nearly identical for both industry segments, and no discernible trends emerged when making comparisons by size, dispersion, or other characteristics. Most of the cross-training efforts were focused on jobs within a particular department (e.g., “Bellmen are trained to perform concierge and front desk duties . . . [and] servers are trained to perform busser duties”). Moreover, as one respondent noted,

This [cross-training] is an evolving process. It is becoming more important . . . for labor optimization and efficiency, and protects the business by giving us more flexibility . . . It [also] leads to job enrichment and gives more responsibility, especially to high performers.

In contrast, and similar to some of the comments regarding the use of pre-program assignments, those who reported that they do not use cross-training expressed some rather strong negative sentiment about this practice. For example, one respondent stated, “I do not see the value in cross-training. We want them [new employees] to be the best at their assigned job.”

**Training evaluation.** The hotels and restaurants used a variety of assessments of the effectiveness of their new employee training programs. Guest satisfaction or guest feedback regarding the service experience was most common, used by all hotels and six restaurant companies. Another common evaluation metric was the use of formal knowledge or competency testing. Half of the restaurant respondents indicated using this criterion, and about one-fourth of the hotel respondents did so. Similarly, six of the restaurant respondents reported using behaviorally based assessments (e.g., checklists, observations), as did three of the hotel respondents. Finally, five of the restaurant respondents reported using financial indicators of training effectiveness (e.g., overall profit and loss performance, variance between actual and forecasted training budget), but just two of the hotel respondents did this.

**Training costs.** Most of the respondents in our sample were unable to report specific costs associated with new employee training, but the few who did gave a wide range of estimates, from \$350 (which does not include labor or payroll costs) to \$4,000 per trainee. Sample responses regarding the lack of detail in this regard ranged from, “I’m not sure we can answer this; finance would have a better idea” to “Will vary immensely by location and size of the hotel.”

## Discussion

The results from our investigation demonstrated that the firms in our sample appear to be using a fairly structured though somewhat customized approach to designing and delivering pre-opening training programs for new staff. The benefits of this type of approach include higher degrees of consistency in both process and outcomes, and lower costs through economies of scale—critical requirements for firms that are pursuing growth strategies that include multi-market operations. Congruent with the requisites for effective training programs outlined by Aguinis and Kraiger (2009), Noe (2013), and Tannenbaum (2002), our finding that pre-opening training programs were developed using a collaborative approach between corporate and property staff suggests that the firms in our sample have attempted to account for at least some of the property- or unit-specific training needs, which is an important first step in designing training initiatives. In addition, we found that a broad range of passive and active training methods have been utilized in the training programs, which suggests that the firms have attempted to account for the different types of learning needs among the training participants. Last, we found that most companies used several individual and operational metrics to assess the effectiveness of their pre-opening training efforts. Thus, it appears that this sample of most-admired firms have addressed most of the key training requirements in a direct and comprehensive manner.

Moreover, many of the features we examined appear to be consistent with some of the characteristics associated with HR and coordination flexibility (Wright and Snell 1998). For example, in terms of content, the training programs incorporated all three major types of knowledge and skill—strategic, technical, and interpersonal. In addition, the time spent on these content areas for line staff was quite similar, even across the industry segments and the other profile characteristics. In terms of design and implementation, multiple trainers were involved in program facilitation. Moreover, roughly half of the hotels and restaurants incorporated pre-program assignments and cross-training as part of the pre-opening training process. By incorporating content that addresses a wide range of knowledge and skills (i.e., resource flexibility), and utilizing a number of diverse learning methods (i.e., coordination flexibility), it appears that this sample of hospitality companies have taken concerted efforts to develop a work force that can be responsive and adaptive to a broad array of demands and needs.

However, while there was some consistency across the companies we surveyed, the results also showed a fairly high degree of variability in many of the new employee training practices and procedures, and some of this variability may be attributed to adaptive efforts to account for the dynamic and variable nature of their respective business

environments. In particular, there were several differences that appear to be a function of industry segment, notably the number of days for management training. Indeed, industry segments can differ along a variety of dimensions, such as the supply of labor, concentration or density, and related competitive factors. In that regard, a review of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Current Employment Survey showed that the food services and drinking establishments sector has accounted for more than 80 percent of the jobs added to the U.S. economy since December 2009.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, employment in other leisure and hospitality sectors, including accommodations, was fairly flat over the same time period. As such, the amount and nature of the pre-opening training, as well as other HR activities (e.g., recruitment and selection) must account for these and related influences to maximize the benefits of this important activity.

The use of multiple trainers, along with the joint development of training content by corporate staff and unit-level staff, are clear examples of coordination flexibility in new employee training. Moreover, about half of the hotel and restaurant companies in our sample incorporated pre-training assignments and cross-training into their pre-opening training programs for new employees. Ensuring that employees can learn their role responsibilities quickly and develop broader levels of proficiency are clear indicators of efforts to build resource flexibility (i.e., using existing HR practices to develop employee capabilities that can be used for a wide range of purposes). However, there is a caveat here in that the utility of practices such as cross-training clearly depend on the complexity or scale of operations. In this regard, we note the numerous upscale and luxury respondents who found it critical to ensure that individuals master their assigned tasks and duties before engaging in efforts to learn the job requirements in other positions. By contrast, respondents in select-service and restaurant settings suggested the importance of ensuring that individuals can fulfill multiple responsibilities from the onset of their employment.

Finally, in terms of evaluation, the organizations in our sample use a wide range of individual and unit-level criteria to assess the effectiveness of pre-opening training. While it may be difficult to determine the specific contributions of new employee training to outcomes such as service quality, customer satisfaction, and top-line revenue, some conclusions about program utility can be drawn by examining and linking the results from multiple indicators of training effectiveness. For example, if competency assessments demonstrate that newly trained employees possess requisite knowledge and skills, then it is more likely that service quality, customer satisfaction, and financial targets will be realized (cf. Noe 2013). However, we were surprised that so many of the companies in our study were unable (or perhaps unwilling) to provide specific details regarding the

actual financial costs associated with new employee training. We understand that obtaining precise information in this regard may be difficult, but it is not possible to assess the economic benefits of this process absent such information.

### *Implications for Theory, Research, and Practice*

The implications of our findings point to the conceptual foundations for HR flexibility, and the mechanisms by which HR systems and embedded components are related to various individual, organizational, and external factors. First, current conceptualizations of HR flexibility place a great deal of emphasis on the role that the external environment plays on the nature and form of a firm's HR system (cf. Tracey 2012). However, the variability in content and design-related features revealed in this study suggest HR flexibility may be due to influences other than the firm's business environment, for example, differences in the availability of qualified individuals in the local labor market. In markets where the available supply of qualified employees is low, pre-opening training may play a more prominent role in ensuring that employees possess the necessary job requirements. However, such differences may also be a function of the emphasis or efficacy of other HR system components that are used to acquire, develop, and retain high-performing employees. So even if labor markets are tight, the nature and extent of pre-opening training may not need to be extensive if the firm utilizes robust practices for hiring individuals who possess the skills and abilities needed to be effective in their roles. Thus, while conceptualizations of the HR flexibility regarding the linkages between HR systems and external environment have clarified some of the adaptive requirements for enhancing business performance, additional consideration is needed regarding the nature and forms of flexibility among the various HR system components.

Building on the first implication, our results also provide insights about the roles and relevance of the two major types of HR flexibility. As noted above, additional conceptual clarity and detail is needed regarding the nature and form of flexibility among HR system components. Similarly, additional consideration is needed regarding the contingencies that may dictate the priorities regarding resource flexibility in relation to coordination flexibility. For example, under low or moderate levels of industry dynamism, efforts to promote resource flexibility may be quite effective for ensuring high-quality service performance (e.g., extending existing customer service training programs to develop skills so that employees not only respond to guests' requests and needs, but also anticipate their requests and needs). However, as the level of dynamism increases, firms may have to shift their attention to coordination flexibility to effectively cope with the increase in competitive complexity and challenge (e.g.,

developing and implementing a wide array of training programs that promote multifunctional customer service skills that extend beyond a particular individual's position or organizational role). Going forward, additional consideration should be given to the ways in which factors such as industry dynamism may influence the extent to which these basic forms of flexibility are needed.

The results from our study can be used to guide future research in at least two other ways. First, the results provide additional details regarding the nature and form of flexible HR systems. While it is useful to distinguish between resource and coordination flexibility, a closer look at the characteristics associated with the various components of a firm's HR system may provide additional details about the ways in which organizations can adapt to the dynamic nature of their business environments. For example, the new employee training programs we examined included content that covered a wide range of strategic, interpersonal, and technical knowledge and skills. Moreover, these content features addressed universally relevant and location-specific needs. By extension, these training-specific forms of resource and coordination flexibility may also be evident within flexible staffing and performance management procedures. As such, future research should examine the nature and form of flexibility associated with all of the functional components of the broader HR system.

Second, the results from our study suggest that while flexibility is necessary to cope with changing environmental conditions, there may be associated boundary conditions that may limit the impact of adaptive HR practices. The controversy regarding cross-training is an example. Cross-training in new employee training programs may be relevant for jobs that are low in complexity, but that may not be true for more complex jobs, where the inclusion of a cross-training component may substantially limit or delay the extent to which new employees learn their primary role responsibilities and achieve satisfactory levels of proficiency. Moreover, service quality, productivity, and related outcomes may be compromised. As such, future research should examine not only the nature and form of flexibility associated with the specific functional components associated with the broader HR system, but it may also be fruitful to investigate the conditions under which flexible training, staffing, and performance management systems may be optimized.

## Conclusion and Future Directions

While this study has been descriptive in nature and provides some needed insights regarding new employee training practices, we still have much to learn about how this type of training should be conducted. The work force's continued evolution comes with both challenges and opportunities. For example, younger people are much more comfortable

with use of technology, and the increase in nonnative English speakers in the hospitality industry has huge implications for increased use of computers, iPads, and other forms of technology that can be used in training. There are also a number of questions that remain unanswered. How long should training take? What is the ideal sequence of content? What is the best way to coordinate training development? Who should conduct training? How much should it cost? Future research should attempt to answer these questions.

It should be emphasized that our research design prohibits any firm conclusions about the effectiveness of the pre-opening training practices that we examined in this study. Similarly, we cannot make any inferences regarding the effectiveness of the various flexibility components that we identified. However, in light of the nature of the firms that participated in this exploratory study, it is likely that the various content, design, and implementation features have some tangible impact on the success of these most-admired companies.

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## Notes

1. [www.hotelnewsnow.com/Articles.aspx/8635/Hotel-Investors-Gauge-Q2-results](http://www.hotelnewsnow.com/Articles.aspx/8635/Hotel-Investors-Gauge-Q2-results).
2. Current Employment Statistics Highlights, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, July 2013.

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**Bruce and Tim** are professors of management at the School of Hotel Administration. Their research focuses on a wide range of topics in the human resources management and organizational behavior disciplines. The remaining authors were graduate students in the School of Hotel Administration's Master's of Management in Hospitality program during the time period in which the study was conducted.