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Title: Tourism and hospitality industry employees' experiences of career shocks and career resilience

Year: 2024

Version: Publisher's PDF

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Please cite the original version:

Törn-Laapio, A., Ekonen, M. & Heilmann, P. (2024). Tourism and hospitality industry employees' experiences of career shocks and career resilience. In: Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Tourism Research, ICTR 2024.

<https://papers.academic-conferences.org/index.php/ictr/article/view/2197/1863>

Tourism and Hospitality Industry Employees' Experiences of Career Shocks and Career Resilience

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Abstract: Employees in the tourism and hospitality industry (THI) have experienced a wide range of sudden changes that have had various impacts on their careers. *Career shocks* are disruptive and extraordinary events often caused by factors outside the focal individual's control and that trigger a deliberate thought process concerning one's career. Although career shocks are usually difficult to predict, we can prepare ourselves in advance by developing career resilience. *Career resilience* refers to an individual's ability to adapt to new situations, overcome negative ones and recover from changes. Research is exceptionally important, especially from the perspective of the THI, which has suffered from a wide range of crises which have caused a significant decrease in workforce engagement and labour shortages. This research aimed to study the experiences of THI employees in career shock situations and how career resilience has affected these situations. The research questions were: What kind of career shocks have employees experienced during their careers? What kind of consequences have these career shocks had on employees' careers? How have career shock situations strengthened their career resilience? This study was conducted based on a narrative approach and the data consisted of 30 career narrative writings of the students of the Tourism and Hospitality Management master's degree programme. A three-phase qualitative inductive content analysis was used as an analysis method. The results suggest that employees have experienced a wide range of career shocks during their careers, partly because the THI and workplaces have been sensitive to change. According to the data, career shocks could be categorised into global, organisational, and individual level shocks. Employees experienced career shocks and their consequences mainly positively. In addition, the experiences of surviving career shock situations strengthened individuals' career resilience in many ways. This study highlights the importance of understanding individuals' experiences of career shocks and the ways to prevent uncertainty to retain employees in the workplaces and an industry suffering from labour shortages.

Keywords: Tourism, Hospitality, Tourism And Hospitality Industry, Career Shock, Career Resilience, Employee

1. Introduction

An individual's career development has become more complex and difficult to predict (Akkermans et al, 2018). The significance of career shocks from outside individuals and workplaces for career development has increased (e.g., Akkermans and Kubash, 2017). Despite this, organisational and management studies still emphasise the individual's own agency in career development in the desired direction (Akkermans and Kubasch, 2017; Hall et al, 2018; Akkermans et al, 2021a).

The theoretical and conceptual basis of the study lies in career research, and it examines the meaning and consequences of unexpected events, such as career shocks, for careers and career resilience (Akkermans et al, 2020; Akkermans et al, 2021b). Studies on career shocks have shown that they influence, e.g., career planning (Seibert et al, 2013), career success (Kraimer et al, 2019) and employability (Blokker et al, 2019). In this study, the concept of career shock refers to 'an exceptional and surprising event from outside the individual, which the individual cannot control, and which initiates the individual to reflect on his own career as a result of uncertain future prospects' (Akkermans et al, 2018).

Although career shock is difficult to predict, it is possible to develop ways to cope with it in the best possible way in advance. Developing career competencies, in this study career resilience, helps in coping with career shocks (Seibert et al, 2016). The concept of resilience has been defined in many ways. It refers to the ability to recover from adversity and continue previously known activities afterwards (e.g., Lengnick-Hall et al, 2011; Luthans et al, 2006). Career resilience refers to the ability to continue progressing towards current career goals with resources and strategies developed in advance. Resilience is a critical factor in surviving career shocks. (Seibert et al, 2016.) Organisational resilience refers to how well employees withstand adversity and recover from it to move on (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). 'Career resilience is an essential survival skill in the 21st century' (Cascio, 2007), and it is crucial in today's turbulent working life (e.g., Peeters et al, 2022).

Career resilience has been defined as ‘a developmental process of persisting, adapting, and/or flourishing in one’s career despite challenges, changing events, and disruptions over time’. Career resilience has been thought of as a process, which includes personal factors (individual characteristics/skills, attitudes, career history, behaviours/habits) and contextual factors (supportive workplace, job characteristics, supportive family). Career resilience affects career satisfaction, intentions to change careers and subjective career success. It is less restrictive than an ability or outcome, and it considers the different mechanisms that help a person deal with career disruptions, thereby providing deeper insights into how people become more career resilient. (Mishra & McDonald, 2017.) Optimism and confidence (Fletcher and Sarkar, 2013), faith (Pargament, 2001) and embeddedness in social networks (Ekonen and Heilmann, 2021) are crucial attributes for resilience at the individual level (Ma et al, 2018).

This study fills several research gaps. Firstly, we need more research to understand career shocks and there is a need to study their consequences for employees’ careers (Peeters et al, 2022; Mishra and McDonald, 2017). Career shocks can cause career disruption or affect the search for new opportunities if the current job or position is not meaningful. A career shock can force employees to change their career direction (Nair and Chattarejee, 2021). Secondly, in this study, career shocks are examined from the perspective of career resilience. Career shocks are usually hard to predict, but employees can prepare for them in advance by developing career resilience (Blokker et al, 2019). Career resilience means an individual’s ability to adapt to new situations, overcome negative events and recover from changes (Seibert et al, 2016). It is a significant resource (Bimrose and Hearne, 2012) and helps to cope with adversity during a career (Verbruggen and De Vos, 2020). More research is needed on its meaning for individuals and workplaces (Han et al, 2021).

Career shock and career resilience are under-researched phenomena in the THI as well. The research has focused on crises faced by employees (Zheng et al, 2022), students’ insecurity, professional career anxiety and career prospects (Üngüren and Kaçmaz, 2022; Seyitoğlu et al, 2022; Bernaraba et al, 2022). Career shocks lead to a risk of losing employees (Pak et al, 2021). Career resilience reduces the uncertainty experienced by the individual in crisis situations and thereby increases well-being at work.

2. Methodology

In 2021 Finland, compared to 2019, had more than 20,000 fewer employees working in the THI, and there are significant challenges as regards the availability of skilled labour (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, 2022). The industry has long faced challenges in terms of attractiveness, recruitment and employee retention, and there is also fierce competition between organisations for skilled labour. The industry faces challenges related to a negative employer image and employee engagement. (For example, O’Leary and Deegan, 2005.) In addition, the THI is one of the most critically affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, both globally (UN, 2021) and at the Finnish level. Business restrictions led to collapsed incomes, job losses and, most importantly, high uncertainty for employees (e.g., Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). The economic situation in the THI has worsened since autumn 2022 (Yang et al, 2021). Due to the attractiveness of the sector, it would be important to engage employees in organisations and to improve employer image (see, e.g., Törn-Laapio and Ekonen, 2021).

In this study, the data consisted of 30 career narrative writings of master’s programme students (Tourism and Hospitality Management), which was based on the writing request: ‘Your task is to write your life story, career path and reflections on the future.’ In the analysis, we applied qualitative inductive content analysis (Azungah, 2018) to identify career shocks and career resilience in shock situations in the narratives written by students working in the THI. Content analysis summarises and classifies information, where words and phrases that have the same meaning or that are related to the same theme fall into the same categories (Cavanagh, 1997). The analysis was carried out in three phases (see, e.g., Hsieh and Shannon, 2005).

3. Findings

3.1 Career Shocks and Their Consequences

3.1.1 Global-Level Career Shocks

According to the data, the *COVID-19 pandemic* caused a variety of shocks for companies in the THI. The pandemic caused layoffs and, for those who stayed on, it led to the *expansion of the job content*, covering tasks as needed. At the same time, there were challenges as regards finding new employees:

'For the last two years, because of the pandemic, I've mainly been doing the jobs of restaurant manager, chef, driver and supporting people on sick leave. Now I'm gradually trying to get out of the job I was hired for, but it will be a long time before I can make up for two years of backlogs and train new staff to replace those who have left.' (R3)

The pandemic also caused *uncertainty* about whether it is worth pursuing a career in the THI anymore. Employees began to make back-up plans for their careers. For some, the thought of leaving provided emotional security in the face of an uncertain future. However, it did not necessarily lead to a definitive decision to leave, but rather remained at the level of a thought. The industry and work content seemed to be attractive despite the uncertain prospects:

'I seriously considered a change of industry and applied for a few jobs. This was perhaps more of a mental thing for me than a real option. It created a certain comfort during the layoff, knowing that if things got discouraging and kept going, there was a way out.' (R14)

As a result of the pandemic, activities in the industry came to a standstill. For some, it offered *an opportunity to stop and reflect* on their career in more detail. The stagnation caused by the career shock gave a sudden respite from the hectic working life:

'The pandemic brought the whole industry to a standstill and, although it eventually led to a change in my own case, it perhaps only hastened and sealed a process that had begun several years ago... I had time to think about what I wanted out of life.' (R27)

According to the data, the employees had experienced several redundancy negotiations during their careers. Some respondents felt that layoffs, caused partly by the pandemic, had eventually forced them *to move forward* in their careers. Without an external push factor, the career would have stagnated in the same familiar and unmotivating position:

'I have experienced two cases of redundancy negotiations in different workplaces, which have also been very instructive experiences. The first ones were awful and yes, the second ones also made me cry when the employment relationship ended quite unexpectedly. However, in retrospect, I am pleased that the decision to move on was, in a way, made on my behalf. Personally, I might have been stuck with tasks that were not actually ones I enjoyed.' (R30)

3.1.2 Organisational-Level Career Shocks

The respondents had experienced several organisational-level career shocks. Some had *lost their jobs* after an *organisation's bankruptcy or a takeover*. Recovering from these shocks was often easier when there were plenty of jobs available in the industry and a new job was found immediately without career interruption:

'I myself have twice lost my job when 'a ship was sold or flagged out.' Fortunately, I have never been unemployed for more than a few days or a week but have always found new work.' (R8)

Some experienced negative career shocks after *changes in management*. The changes had led to a significant deterioration in terms of their duties and so they were forced to *look for a new job* that would better suit their own life situation. On the other hand, it was ultimately a positive turning point:

'After returning from maternity leave, a lot had happened in the meantime. The restaurant manager had changed and there had also been changes in the kitchen staff. In two months, I was given 100 hours of overtime, after which, at the start of the Christmas holidays, I decided to look for another job. This job was no longer suitable for a mother of young children. Organisation X was looking for a restaurant manager. I sent in my application and soon after the interviews, I heard that I had been offered the job. Thus, I turned a new page in my life once again.' (R3)

The source of the career shock was sometimes *poor management*. This impaired the employee's well-being at work and put the organisation at risk of losing an employee. One participant described how her boss bullied her at work. Fortunately, she had the courage *to speak up about the unpleasant matter*. The supervisor was finally given a warning and everything turned out well:

'One of my supervisors had it in for me. He belittled me to the rest of the work community when I wasn't there. He always bullied me in front of others when I went to demand an induction, which was my right. I felt bad during my early days at that company, until I dared to speak up and tell his supervisor about the bullying. He got a warning, and I stayed in the house.' (R18)

The employees had experienced positive career shocks that pushed them forward. Getting a *surprising job offer* was one example. The industry offered new career opportunities, at least for those who had a good reputation. Many considered afterwards that the decisions had been wise ones, and compared it to winning the lottery:

'I changed job, because I got a call from Organisation X asking me if I wanted to take a job as a kitchen assistant. It was the lottery of my life! I have never dared to play the lottery again, because I believe that you can only win once in a lifetime.' (R3)

3.1.3 Individual-Level Career Shocks

According to the data, the respondents had experienced several individual-level career shocks. For some, the cause of the career shock was a matter that related to their own personal wellbeing, e.g., *career exhaustion or burnout*. Experiencing burnout has been a major turning point in life, both personally and professionally. It forces you to *reflect on your personal values* at work and to take better care of yourself:

'I experienced burnout, which was a major turning point for me, both in my professional and personal life... During that period of sick leave, I took stock of my life values and their order of importance. I decided that I did not want to be in that situation a third time...' (R9)

For some, taking a *voluntary career break* from working life, such as family leave, has also made it possible to *re-evaluate their career* from different perspectives. This has resulted in reflections and decisions regarding how much of one's life one wants to give to work and how much to other areas:

'However, with family leave, I have found that I value myself and my free time so much that I don't want to go back to that. With young children around, my ability - and, in a way, my willingness - to be flexible is much more limited.' (R2)

Career shock was also caused by other people's personal networks, both in private and working life. For example, a *spouse's job-related relocation* caused a career shock. In these cases, participants had to quit their jobs and look for another job in a new city. This forced them to *change their personal career direction* and find a new job:

'The move from my place of study to Southern Finland was guided by my spouse's work, and I made my own choices in line with it.' (R9)

Personal networks have also played a significant role in causing career shocks. The role of friends has been of great importance from the early stages of their careers, and the importance has not diminished in the later stages. These networks have *led to several career opportunities*:

'While I was finishing my studies and working part-time as a barman, a friend gave me the opportunity to go and help as a dishwasher on board the XX ship. I'm still there 18 years later. Friends have been the biggest influence on all my career paths: whether it's working in a bar, doing promotional experiments for different products, or working on a ship, I've always found my way into jobs through my friends.' (R8)

3.2 Career Resilience in Career Shock Situations

According to the data, career shocks have strengthened career resilience in many ways. The respondents felt that even difficult situations have turned out to be positive turning points in their careers and they have been able to learn from them. Career shocks have *strengthened positive faith in the future*. For example, the loss of a job has led to a new and even better job than before. The result can be even better than expected:

'My career has had its ups and downs. I've been made redundant and have also been able to progress in my career. I feel that adversity has only taught me. After the initial disappointments, they have been a turning point in my career. That's why, for example, I'm not afraid right now that my current job will end, but I believe that it will lead to something different and maybe even better.' (R11)

Different life experiences and positive attitudes have created faith that things will turn out for the best in the end. The *attitude towards difficulties has become more relaxed*, even though various unexpected events occur in their careers:

'I believe that things tend to work out, and life experience has supported this belief. I have two degrees and in my working life I've done just about everything possible, apart from working as a checkout clerk. So, I don't take it too seriously, even if there are unexpected changes in my working life.' (R7)

Accepting a sudden job offer has required courage and tolerance of uncertainty. You cannot know in advance whether the decision to leave your current job will be the right one in the end. *The courage to take risks* in one's own career is apparent in several participants' answers. Jumping into the unknown is always a risk and needs courage:

'I have often seized opportunities by chance, and they have brought a lot of good in my career. Taking a chance requires courage and the ability to tolerate uncertainty. In those situations, you must understand that you can make the right choice as well as the wrong one.' (R10)

Survival of career shocks relates to career resilience in many ways. Even if you have learned something about career shocks before, they can still come as a surprise even to a more experienced employee. That is why some respondents have developed several methods of coping with different situations. These have formed a *toolbox of coping methods* for employees, from which you can choose the appropriate method for the given situation:

'I've learned a lot from the surprising changes, but sometimes they are "too unexpected" for me, too. Depending on the change and the situation, I use different "coping methods." Usually, I try to influence, respond, learn, change or do something about it as quickly as possible, but if there are no quick solutions, in the worst situation, I take a step back and follow the situation for a couple of days, and sometimes I also wait until the issue resolves itself.' (R12)

Some respondents described the *ability to act practically* without paralysis in a career shock situation as a survival skill. That is, they try to concentrate on the issue at hand and put emotions aside in the career shock situation. As this respondent wrote, this skill has been useful in working life because it helps to continue working and solve problems even in the most difficult places:

'I have it in me to be tough in times of challenge and crisis. I have always focused on the practicalities first: what has happened and how to resolve it. I am a very rational person during a crisis; I don't give much room to emotions; I focus on reasoning. In a way, this has also become an asset in my professional life, as I can act rationally under pressure and solve problems and conflicts effectively.' (R14)

4. Discussion and Implications

To address the shortage of skilled labour in the THI, as well as to improve the image of work and the attractiveness of work in the sector, it is important to understand ways to promote employee engagement and commitment. So far, researchers have paid little attention to career shocks and their consequences, as well as career resilience in career shock situations in the THI. This research helps to broaden the understanding of career shock and career resilience experiences of THI employees. It is critical in enhancing the understanding of individuals' experiences of career shocks and ways to prevent insecurity to retain employees in workplaces and in the industry, which is suffering from labour shortages. Previous studies have shown an increase in career shocks affecting individuals' careers, caused by factors outside the individual and workplace factors (e.g., Akkermans and Kubash, 2017).

The findings revealed that THI employees had experienced global, organisational and individual level career shocks during their careers, and these caused both positive and negative consequences on one's career. The COVID-19 pandemic, which had a major impact on companies in the field, emerged as the main global cause of career shocks. Based on the results, the shocks caused temporary expansion of the job content and uncertainty, which are negative consequences. On the other hand, the pandemic gave people the opportunity to stop and reflect on their careers and forced them to move on (e.g., Akkermans et al, 2020). Career shocks at the organisational level included, for example, job losses, changes in management or poor management. On the other hand, the organisational changes also brought new job opportunities and job offers. The individual-level career shocks related to well-being were burnout, changes in personal values, voluntary career breaks and career reassessments. People's personal networks also influenced career shocks, such as family relocations, but, on the other hand, networks enabled new career opportunities. Consistent with past research, this study supports the finding that there exists diversity of career shock events and the variety of their consequences for employees' careers (e.g., Seibert et al, 2013; Kraimer et al, 2019; Blokker et al, 2019). Career shock experiences have strengthened career resilience and created a strong belief and self-confidence that it is possible to survive in challenging situations in the future (e.g., Fletcher and Sarkar, 2013; Bonanno et al, 2006).

As a practical implication, it is crucial that supervisors comprehend the diverse career shocks employees may experience and their consequences. Therefore, they can individually support the employee's adaptation to sudden career shocks. Because the tourism and hospitality industry is sensitive to changes, proactive preparation for career resilience is essential from both individual and managerial perspectives. Strengthening proactive career resilience can promote coping with career shock situations (e.g., Akkermans et al, 2020) and enhance the workforce situation in the industry.

The study is not without its limitations. One inevitable limitation concerns the generalisability of the findings. As the data was collected from employees in the Finnish THI, these findings cannot be generalised to other organisations globally. For this reason, there is a need for future research that would cover other countries to

provide more in-depth knowledge of this subject. The other limitation is that the amount of data was quite small, so we need more data in order to obtain more reliable results.

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