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# Multicultural Workforce in Hotel Receptions in Finland: Advantages, Challenges and Requirements

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**Multicultural Workforce in Hotel Receptions in Finland: Advantages, challenges and requirements**

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This Bachelor's thesis was conducted to research the advantages, challenges and requirements of multicultural workforce in an international service environment in Helsinki and more specifically in hotel receptions. The aim of the thesis is to present information to foreigners in Finland, who are interested in working within the hotel industry, about the requirements of a hotel receptionist. Furthermore, this thesis gives information to hotel managers of the advantages and the challenges of hiring multicultural workforce in Finnish hotels and how to overcome possible challenges.

The thesis consists of a theoretical part and an empirical part carried out as qualitative research. The theoretical part explains the basic concepts of culture, multicultural teams and work environment. In addition it explains about hotel front desk operations, customer service and Finnish service environment. Qualitative research method was chosen to conduct the research due to the need of detailed knowledge of the topic from industry professionals. The theme interview questions were sent to seven hotel managers that are managing nationally and internationally well-known hotels within the Helsinki Region and who are in charge of recruitment.

According to literature as well as the research results it can be said that multicultural teams and staff can create several advantages and opportunities for the hotels by having culturally aware and linguistically talented staff to serve their customers. In addition different cultural dimensions as well as language can create significant challenges and disadvantages within the work environment and furthermore to the business. The advantages and challenges of language were raised several times throughout the thesis and it can be said to be the most important factor in recruitment of multicultural workforce.

The results show that issues surrounding language and variety of cultural dimensions can be prevented by careful planning, patient management and training of staff. The interviewed hotel managers felt that the positive impact of multicultural workforce within hotel receptions overcomes the challenges and they would be willing to recruit more international staff to provide more diverse service to their guests.

Keywords: multicultural workforce, hotel reception, Finland, Helsinki

Krista Kortelainen

**Monikulttuurinen Työvoima Hotellin Vastaanotossa Suomessa: Hyödyt, Haasteet ja Vaatimukset**

Vuosi 2016

Sivumäärä 31

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Tämän opinnäytetyön tarkoituksena oli tutkia monikulttuurisen työvoiman hyötyjä, haasteita sekä vaatimuksia kansainvälisessä palveluympäristössä, helsinkiläisten hotellien vastaanotossa. Tämän opinnäytetyön tavoitteena on antaa tietoa ulkomaalaisille tiedosta ja taidoista, joita tarvitaan työskennellessä hotellin vastaanotossa Suomessa sekä esitellä myös hotellien johtajille mahdolliset hyödyt ja haasteet monikulttuurisen työvoiman palkkaamiseen.

Opinnäytetyö koostu teoreettisesta osasta sekä laadullisesta tutkimuksesta. Teoreettinen osaa antaa perustietoa kulttuurista, monikulttuurisista ryhmistä sekä monikulttuurisesta työympäristöstä. Lisäksi työ kertoo hotellin vastaanoton toiminnoista, asiakaspalvelusta ja suomalaisesta palveluympäristöstä. Laadullinen tutkimus valittiin tähän opinnäytetyöhön sopivaksi, sillä aihe sekä esitetyt kysymykset vaativat perusteellista tietoa ja kokemusta alan ammattilaisilta. Teemahaastattelukysymykset lähetettiin seitsemälle hotellipäällikölle, jotka johtavat kansallisesti ja kansainvälisestä tunnettuja hotelleja pääkaupunkiseudulla ja ovat vastuussa rekrytoinnista.

Kirjallisuuden ja tutkimustulosten mukaisesti voidaan sanoa, että monikulttuurinen työryhmä sekä henkilöstö voivat luoda monia hyötyjä ja mahdollisuuksia hotelleille tuomalla kulttuuritietoa sekä kielellisesti lahjakasta henkilökuntaa. Tämän lisäksi voidaan sanoa, että erilaiset kulttuurilliset ulottuvuudet, myös kieli, voivat aiheuttaa huomattavia haasteita ja haittoja työympäristössä sekä yrityksessä. Kielelliset hyödyt ja haitat nostettiin esiin useaan kertaan opinnäytetyön aikana ja sen voidaan sanoa olevan tärkein aihe monikulttuurisen työvoiman rekrytoinnissa.

Tutkimuksen tulokset kertovat, että kielelliset ja kulttuuriset haasteet voidaan estää huolellisella suunnittelulla, kärsivällisellä johtamisella sekä työvoiman kouluttamisella. Haastatellut hotellinjohtajat kokivat monikulttuurisen työvoiman positiivisen vaikutuksen olevan suurempi kuin sen haasteet ja he olisivat valmiita palkkaamaan lisää kansainvälistä työvoimaa, jotta heidän asiakkailleen voitaisiin tarjota monipuolisempaa palvelua.

Asiasanat: monikulttuurinen työvoima, hotellin vastaanotto, Suomi, Helsinki

## Table of Contents

1	Introduction .....	6
2	Culture and Multicultural Work Environment .....	7
2.1	Cultural Dimensions.....	7
2.2	Multicultural Work Environment.....	9
2.3	Multicultural Workforce in Finland.....	11
3	Hotel operations .....	13
3.1	Front Office Operations and Personnel.....	13
3.2	Customer Service.....	13
3.3	Multicultural Customer Service (in Finnish Hotels) .....	17
4	Research .....	17
4.1	Methodology.....	18
4.2	Ethics in Qualitative Research .....	18
4.3	Data Collection and Content Analysis .....	19
4.4	Results .....	20
5	Conclusions.....	24
	References .....	26
	Tables.....	28
	Appendixes.....	29

## 1 Introduction

In today's globalised world the need for professional and culturally knowledgeable customer service personnel has become more important than ever before. Immigration as well as international business and leisure travel have set new requirements for not only the service staff hence also for the companies to adapt their products and procedures to meet and exceed the needs of a great variety of consumers. This often requires companies to recruit individuals from variety of cultures in order to create a successful service environment and furthermore to increase their revenue by meeting the needs and expectations of broader range of customers. In addition this is creating new challenges for managers and companies to manage multicultural teams and to find ways to use their full potential to maximise profits.

This thesis is concentrating on the challenges and opportunities of a multicultural workforce within hotel environment and more specifically the front desk, which can be considered to be the heart of any hotel. Hotel reception is the service environment that is visible for the customer and often determines the customers' expectations towards the service and creates the first impression of the hotel. Therefore it is highly important that the first customer encounter is successful and in order for this to happen there needs to be professional customer service personnel to attend a great variety of guests to meet and exceed their needs.

The aim of this thesis is to answer the following questions from a managerial point of view:

- What are the opportunities and advantages for hiring multicultural personnel in hotel reception?
- What are the challenges and difficulties of having multicultural reception personnel in Finnish service environment and how to overcome these challenges?
- What are the key characteristics and skills required from receptionists working in a Finnish hotel?

By answering these questions this thesis work is aiming to give information to foreigners in Finland who are interested in working within hotel industry. The thesis is presenting a managerial point of view of the key attributes one has to acquire to become a professional receptionist. In addition the thesis is presenting to hotel managers the advantages and challenges of having multicultural workforce within hotel receptions.

Firstly this thesis presents the theoretical framework for the research which begins with providing definitions of culture, multicultural work environment and multicultural workforce in Finland. The framework continues with introducing the basics of front desk operations within a hotel and the theory of customer service in general as well as in Finnish service envi-

ronment. The research methodology and the research results are introduced in Chapter 4,. Finally the conclusions of the thesis work are presented in Chapter 5 and suggestions for future research are also included in this part.

## 2 Culture and Multicultural Work Environment

The word culture is said to be originated from a Latin word “colere” which means the permanent habitation and arrangements, for example farming, related to permanent living in one location (Mäkilouko 2003, 17.). Punnett (2009, 19) states the word to be originated from the Latin word “cultura” which means a cult or worship and the members of a cult develop a culture that is based on a specific way of doing things. Mäkilouko (2003) combines the two Latin words by mentioning that the word “cult” is originated from the word “colere”.

Culture as a concept means patterned behaviour of a particular group of people which is learned by upbringing, education and training and is a result of one’s growing environment and is transmitted and shared from one generation to the next. Therefore when attitudes, habits, beliefs and ways of thinking, behaving and communicating are similar amongst individuals in a group of people, it can be said to be culture (Terry 2011, 4.).

Mäkilouko (2003) stated that culture separates individuals of a one group from another and it is called a collective programming of the mind. Without culture communication between humans would be extremely challenging as people would not learn the foundations of social behaviour, their own language and how to relate with other people when they are children. Culture is said to consist of conscious and visible signs as well as subconscious values and habits and these dimensions are combined in employees’ identities and are forming the cultural base for any work community (Yli-Kaitala, Toivanen, Bergbom, Airila & Väänänen 2013, 12-13.).

### 2.1 Cultural Dimensions

Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010) have divided national culture into six different dimensions that distinguish one culture and country from another rather than one individual from another.

These six cultural dimensions are:

- Power distance
- Individualism versus Collectivism
- Masculinity versus Femininity

- Uncertainty avoidance
- Long Term Orientation versus Short Term Orientation
- Indulgence versus Restraint

Power distance can be defined as how people from specific cultures view the relationships between managers and employees. Cultures with high power distance are generally accepting of power that is distributed unequally within the company and believe that everyone has their own role within the hierarchy. Cultures with low power distance are expecting equality in distribution of power and that relationships demonstrate democracy. High power distance cultures believe that leader is someone who employees follow and on the other hand low power distance cultures believe they have an equal right to be part of making decision and leader is seen more as a guide and help for the employees than a person who is giving orders.

Individualism means that a person from that culture is expected to take care of only themselves and within these cultures the social framework is seen as loose compared to collective cultures. Collectivism means that the social framework is tight and individuals are expected to also take care of the members of the society. In work environment a person from a culture with high individualism might be less willing to work as a part of a team and would prefer performing tasks individually.

Masculinity versus Femininity can be defined as the approach to reach targets of a specific culture and can also be said to be tough versus tender-dimension. Cultures that have high masculinity appreciate achievements, assertiveness, heroism and material rewards for success, hence cultures with high femininity prefer cooperation, quality of life and modesty. This dimension needs to be taken into consideration within the work environment in order to find the best ways to motivate individuals from different cultures.

Cultures that feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity can be said to have high uncertainty avoidance index. These cultures are more worried about the future and are trying to control it as in the cultures with low uncertainty avoidance index are more relaxed and not as strict about following procedures.

Long Term Orientation means that the members of a specific culture are more interested in the future and appreciate perseverance, persistence and being able to adapt. Cultures with high Short Term Orientation are more focused in the present and past and value immediate gratification instead of long-term success.



Societies and cultures with high Indulgence index are allowing and valuing basic human drives and needs of enjoying life. Hence Restrained societies are more about following strict social patterns and suppressing indulgence.

## 2.2 Multicultural Work Environment

Work environments require fluent and effective ways of communicating and understanding one another and without culture there would be confusion and conflicts as individuals could not relate with each other. Multicultural teams are sometimes lacking these common patterns of behaviour and communication which can create challenges inside the work community and therefore it is highly important to develop a shared culture at a workplace in order to achieve the company's targets and create an effective work environment. Company culture starts to form when individuals inside a group are putting their own needs aside in favour of common interest and all the individuals agree to follow certain norms and rules of the group (Mäkilouko 2003, 17-19.). Workplace culture is created by the values and a spirit of the community, the hierarchy of social relationships, procedures and the ways of reacting in different situations. These elements are formed of the local regional culture, company culture and minority group culture and therefore understanding the different cultural dimensions mentioned above is highly important also within any work environment (Yli-Kaitala et al 2013, 13.).

Individuals from variety of cultures who are working together on tasks that exceed the borders of different nations and cultures and are working towards shared objectives are called multicultural teams (Shokef & Erez 2008, 178.). In recent years the amount of multicultural teams has increased significantly and the studies conducted about the performance of the teams are contradictive, as multicultural teams can be highly creative and effectively performing hence conflicts has also been proven to take place and therefore the teams can perform in lower levels. Individuals inside teams who have variety of values, languages, experiences and beliefs can be highly effective together in problem solving, however this can also create misunderstandings, mistrust and miscommunications (Dyer Jr., Dyer & Dyer 2013, 219.). Therefore it can be stated that cultural diversity in teams is creating advantages as well as disadvantages for the companies. It depends mainly on how well the members of the team are working with each other and how well the common culture of the work group has been adapted in the daily routines.

A team that has individual members from a great variety of cultures instead of having more than just one representative from one, specific culture can perform more effectively. The latter option can create sub-teams, which are formed from individuals from the same or simi-

lar culture and these sub-teams can create friction between the other members of the team that are representing the minority culture. Employees working in a multicultural environment are more likely to be open-minded towards different cultures, new ideas and perspectives and therefore the team can operate more effectively and creatively with problem-solving (Hopkins 2009, 107-108).

As mentioned previously multicultural teams also create challenges which can be avoided and prepared for with professional, efficient and culturally aware leadership. However in order to succeed in this the working community, employees and professional societies need to support the diversity policies of the company to use the full potential of the multicultural personnel and gain the competitive advantage in the international markets. Preconceptions, inadequate language and communication skills, variety of opinions in how to conduct the tasks efficiently and increasing requirement of flexibility are some of the issues that are faced in multicultural teams (Sorainen 2007, 180.).

A team that consists of individuals from several different cultures usually evolve by one of the four ways; integration, assimilation, separation or marginalisation. In order to create a high-performing multicultural team, the team needs to absorb all the best aspects from different cultures and adjust them to suit their targets. This approach is called integration. Assimilation means that the individuals from the minority cultures are adapting and yielding to the majority culture inside the team voluntarily.

Separation on the other hand means that the individuals from minority culture are not able to adapt and are keeping their distance from the majority culture of the team. When the members of the minority culture are forced to adapt to the majority culture and are forced to abandon their own way of conducting work, this is called marginalisation. Therefore the most desirable approach for achieving high-performance, motivated and functioning multicultural team is integration. Assimilation approach can also work effectively, however it eliminates the purpose of forming a multicultural team, where the separation and marginalisation approaches are most probably causing conflicts and low-performance levels within the multicultural teams (Mitchell 2000, 162.).

Globalisation has forced companies to adapt new codes of conduct in order to compete in the international markets to gain advantage over competitors. In addition to the financial and material competition companies need to achieve advantage in human resources. Workforce with high competence level, innovative thinking and potential to develop is a highly desirable asset for any company operating in international markets. Success in the global markets is closely related to how companies attract, develop, engage and motivate their workforce according to the strategic needs and targets of the company (Caligiuri, Lepak & Bonache 2010,

1, 4-5.). Cultural diversity is often viewed as an area of difficulty within companies operations instead of them embracing the opportunity to use cultural diversity as an asset (Adekola & Sergi 2007, 165-167.).

Cultural diversity can create more stimulating working environment and also create new business opportunities through individuals from different cultures. These individuals can provide valuable knowledge about the politics and legal aspects in a new business environment which assists the company to start business successfully in new countries or regions (Hopkins 2009, 107-108.). In addition multicultural workforce is seen to attend diverse clientele more efficiently and also enhance the image of the company and the whole organisation as an attractive and diverse employer (Sorainen 2007, 179-180.). Sorainen (2007) pointed out that cold weather and rarity of language are some of the factors which push culturally diverse workforce away from Finnish labour markets; however a multicultural working environment could become the pull factor for Finnish companies to attract more competent employees from abroad and therefore achieve international success.

### 2.3 Multicultural Workforce in Finland

Throughout the history, Finland has had very little experience of being the host country for international migration compared to the other Nordic countries. The post-Cold War period affected Finland to open their strictly guarded borders and in the 1980's the country's international migration grew strongly. Migration to Finland also increased significantly when the country became a member of the European Union in 1995, which started a greater mobility of people and valuables between Finland and other European Union countries (Vilkama 2012, 425.). Finland has mainly been a country of emigration where Finnish citizens have moved from the country in search of a better life abroad. During the past 150 years over one million Finns have emigrated from Finland, mainly to the United States and Australia in addition to the neighbouring country Sweden (Martikainen, Saari & Korkeasaari 2013, 26-27; Vilkama 2012, 421.).

An extensive emigration of Finnish workforce to Sweden in the 1970's to 1980's was creating a shortage in workforce and employers were hiring foreign labour in short-term basis which was supposed to be the beginning of a wide scale plan to increase multicultural workforce in Finland. The depression prevented the plans to increase work-based immigration at that time, however in the beginning of 1990's the number of immigrants was growing again due to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Work-based immigration was minimal during this time and government was mainly concentrating in immigration based on humanitarian reasons. The government became interested in increasing work-based immigration again in the beginning

of 2000's due to change of demographics in the country, such as the aging of working population. The programme of immigration in 2006 was primarily targeting the development and increase of work-based immigration and approach to migration from passive to active. This programme was never implemented hence in 2008 the demographic situation of the ageing population was changing and this restrained the discussion to increase work-based immigration (Sorainen 2014, 12- 14.).

When Finland joined the European Union, the country was not prepared for the increasing number of immigrants and asylum-seekers, which created issues in the employment, housing and educational services. The government created guidelines for the service sectors in different municipalities to accommodate the changes. In 1999 the first Act of Integration came in to force, which was aiming to enhance the equality of migrants and their integration to the Finnish society by actions that promote achieving the skills and competence required to survive in the society and to provide instant subsistence and care to asylum-seekers (Ministry of Interior 2013.).

Reforming of the integration law started in 2009 and it came into force in September 2011. The law stated that in the beginning of the government reign, a national agenda of integration is required to be composed. The first agenda was accepted in 2012 and it is monitoring the needs of migrants especially in social and healthcare, education, housing and employment sectors and the aim is to promote active participation of immigrants in the society. The agenda was in action until the year 2015. The reformed law differs positively from the previous law in the matter of promoting participation in the Finnish society and the co-operation and communication between different demographic groups (Ministry of Interior 2013.).

Official Statistics of Finland (2012) has stated that every tenth of 25 to 34 year old people in Finland are from a foreign background. In the capital area, which consists of the cities of Helsinki, Vantaa, Espoo and Kauniainen, every fifth of the same age group is from a foreign background. The largest amounts of immigrants come from Estonia and Russia which is followed by Sweden and Somalia. The total amount of immigrants moving to Finland has increased from the year 1990 with 13 558 immigrants per year to 31 507 immigrants per year on 2014. The Ministry of the Interior in Finland (2013) predicts in their Government Resolution on the Future of Migration 2020 Strategy-report that by the year 2040 the total amount of foreign nationals in Finland is going to be 705 300 people, which creates new opportunities for the country and in addition new challenges to the government in handling the integration process of immigrants. By the end of year 2014 the number of foreign citizens in Finland was 216 838.

### 3 Hotel operations

#### 3.1 Front Office Operations and Personnel

Front office is often seen as the communication center and the heart of the hotel which consists of several different operations and work stations. Front office has the actual reception, cashier, information-desk and telephone switchboard. The work stations and reception operations vary between the hotels according to the size, standards and ownership of the property. Hotel reception is the service environment that is visible for the customer and often determines the customers' expectations towards the service and creates the first impression of the hotel. Therefore it is highly important that the first customer encounter is successful. When customer is entering the hotel for the first time a smiling receptionist acknowledging this customer immediately will make a great difference on the first impression the customer has of the hotel.

Hotel receptionists work does not only include customer service hence also sales of the hotel services which is a key part of increase in revenue and furthermore the success of the business. Receptionists are required to have extensive knowledge of the services and products within the hotel and they need to be knowledgeable of the public transportation and other services in the surrounding area. Receptionists are required to master several different areas of expertise in order to be successful in their everyday work. Main tasks for receptionists are customer service, managing reservations, welcoming customers, billing and checking customers in and out.

Receptionists need to be familiar with the hotel software, use of email and the used currencies and payment types. Receptionists are required to serve customers with a positive attitude, be well-organized, have a sense of responsibility and pay attention to details, hence the reception handles monetary transactions and are responsible for customer safety in case of fire or other emergencies. Being able to multitask is one of key traits when working in hotel reception as the staff is required to serve several customer at the same time while answering multiple phone lines and handling variety of paperwork. Front office is often a busy place, however the receptionists need to ensure every customer is served without haste and in a personalised way (Rautiainen & Siikonen 2007, 106, 108-123.).

#### 3.2 Customer Service

Customer service means the way a company is conducting the interaction between the personnel and the customer. Customers can be either internal or external and customer service

can be defined as the ability of employees to deliver products and services to these customers (Lucas 2012, 7.). Good customer service relies on the needs and expectations of the customer and it is seen as one of the key matters in hotel industry as well as other business sectors in order to gain loyal customers and furthermore increase in revenue. Customers feel more comfortable to use the services and products from a familiar and trusted company, as they know that the correct service will be provided on schedule and moreover the customer will be reassured on the reliability of the company (Hayes & Dredge 1998, 3-9.). Rowson (2009) points out that a majority of the companies are concentrating on attracting new customers instead of embracing the opportunity to sell additional products or services to loyal customers who are in fact more likely to purchase these additional services as the loyal customers are already familiar with the hotel and their service standards. Attracting a new customer also requires more financial input and resources from the company in comparison to maintaining and developing already successfully commenced relationship with a regular customer.

Nowadays consumers have a larger scale of products and services to select from and an excellent customer service can be the competitive advantage and the so called tie breaker for a hotel in a competition against other accommodation providers. Before the multinational companies, mass markets and production, there was a special, personal connection between the customers and the shopkeepers where the needs and wants of a customer could be predicted and therefore met effortlessly. After globalisation started a need for professional customer service personnel became more important for companies in order to meet the customers' needs while effectively conducting the strategy of the company (Hayes & Dredge 1998, 3-8.).

Lucas (2012) stated that businesses had to change dramatically as the focus has been shifted to providing quality service from the dependence of manufacturing. It is highly important for companies to emphasise the importance of good customer service to the personnel hence it has been stated that negative experiences of customers are easily shared to other consumers and the positive experiences are more easily left unshared. Misunderstandings and mistakes will occur in customer service situations when so many variables and especially when humans are involved (Rowson 2009, 8-13.).

Most of the customers have some general expectations in service situations which need to be fulfilled in order to achieve customer satisfaction. A customer expects an honest and polite customer servant who is handling the customer with respect. Customer servant is expected to be efficient in a way that the customer is not kept waiting without a reason and the personnel is expected to know how to conduct their tasks according to the company's standards. In addition it is highly important to the customer that the service personnel are following

through with their promises and that the customers are getting the services and the products that have been promised (Hayes & Dredge 1998, 16-17.).

Customer servant working in a hotel reception needs to have a certain combination of knowledge, competence and personal attributes in order to create successful and satisfying service situation for the customer as well as the customer servant. Rautiainen & Siiskonen (2007) divide the central features of service quality the hotel receptionists provide in to six different sections;

- Professional competence
- Attitude and behaviour
- Approachability and flexibility
- Reliability and credibility
- Normalisation
- Reputation

Professional competence consists of the receptionist's technical skills, as for example the knowledge of the hotel software, and the skills to solve customer's problems before they are affecting them negatively. Professional and motivated attitude as well as behaviour from the receptionist is a requirement that is highly important and very visible to the customer in a service situation. Approachability and flexibility means that the service is easily reachable for the customer and the customer servant is approachable and keen on helping the customer. This also consists of the hotel taking customers' needs and wants in to consideration while developing services and training reception staff. It is important for the customer to feel like they can rely on the services the hotel provides and that promised services are delivered in a timely manner.

Part of the reliability and credibility is also the receptionist having the customers' best interest in mind. Normalisation is when the receptionist is seeking a solution to the customer's problem and is trying to normalise the situation after problems occurred with the service. Reputation is an outcome and a combination of all of the features mentioned above, as reputation means that the customer believes and relies on the hotel's values and feels like they are getting quality service and products in return for their money (Rautiainen & Siiskonen 2007, 100.).

Task-centrism and technical customer service are typical issues during customer service situations in hotel reception, hence the receptionists are avoiding mistakes and are trying to be prompt. Task-centrism often occurs when the customer is in a hurry and requires the check-in or check-out situation to be as fast as possible. This means that the communication between the receptionist and the customer is left to a minimum and the communication is

very formal and stiff. The receptionist is required to have skills to operate effectively, however also customer-friendly, under pressure and operate in a timely manner when needed. Receptionists cannot leave the communication to short sentences as it can come across as abrupt service. Also highly important factors are eye-contact and a genuine smile from the receptionist which indicates to the customer that the receptionist is there to serve and help them. Eye-contact also indicates that the customer has been acknowledged, which is followed by a greeting that welcomes the customer to the hotel.

Other verbal and nonverbal communications which consist of for example tone of voice, pauses, silence and facial expressions, displays the receptionist service attitude to the customer, in either a negative or a positive way. Nonverbal communication can be perceived in a negative way and can be interpreted as unprofessional and unfriendly service when the reception is busy and the receptionist might have a negative tone of voice or facial expressions that demonstrate the busy situation (Rautiainen & Siiskonen 2007, 101-102.). A key feature to customer service in addition to communication is the receptionists' versatile knowledge and management of the hotel's own service and product supply to a certain cluster of customers.

Hotel customers can be divided into business travellers and leisure travellers which is important information for the receptionist in order to meet and exceed customer expectations and provide appropriate services and products to the customers. Business customers can be demanding with the flow of services; they are expecting fast, fluent and precise service as they are often operating according to a tight schedule. Leisure customers appreciate positive service experiences at the reception and are expecting local knowledge from the receptionist in order to find places and activities according to their interests.

Both traveller groups are expecting their problems to be solved in a timely matter before the issue affects them negatively (Rautiainen & Siiskonen 2007, 100-103.). One of the key factors of succeeding in customer service is a competent and professional customer service manager. Customer service manager needs to be able to motivate the service personnel by encouraging and reinforcing the employees' sense of self-worth and point out the importance of their contribution to the company. It is highly important to praise the personnel when they have conducted their tasks well, hence also to give feedback in a polite, yet constructive way, when something has gone wrong (Hayes & Dredge 1998, 24-31.).



### 3.3 Multicultural Customer Service (in Finnish Hotels)

Finnish customer service can be described as prompt, efficient and precise with emphasis on keeping promises in regards to services and products. It is common for Finnish service etiquette to use courtesy words, as for example “thank you” and “you are welcome”, during service situations and also formally address the customer, especially if they are older than the customer servant. In Finland addressing a customer formally does not mean using titles in front of surnames. For example in German service etiquette the titles Herr and Frau are used in front of the surnames and in England customers are addressed as Sir or Madam (Rautiainen & Siiskonen 2007, 100-103.). In Finnish language the customer servants use the word “te” instead of the word “sinä”, to address the customer formally. “Te” is a plural form of the word “sinä” and when translated in English language both of these words means “you”, which can mean either one person or many people.

Multicultural customer service requires cultural knowledge and adaptability from the customer servant to be able to change the style and language of the service between different customers from multiple nationalities and cultures. The customer servant’s personality and ways of working have a high impact on either succeeding or failing in this (Nieminen 2014, 26.). The best way to guarantee that the customer is getting quality service is to choose a service language that is most natural for the customer and the language they can express themselves easily in. This means that the receptionist should be able to perform all service situations and answer all questions with that specific language which is fairly challenging as the customer base in hotels varies greatly and all receptionists cannot speak multiple languages.

In addition to the service language, the foreign customer is expecting to get personalized service according to the standards of their own national service culture. This can be for example dry cleaning and concierge services which are commonly expected by Asian, American and Russian customers, however which are not usually expected by Finnish customers (Rautiainen & Siiskonen 2007, 103.).

## 4 Research

A good research process starts with an in-depth thinking, evaluation and definition of a research topic and furthermore developing the precise research questions. What does the researcher want to find out, which research methods are suitable for the specific research topic, how and where is the research going to be conducted. The important part is for the researcher to do ground work on the subject from literature and other sources in order to understand the background and history on the subject. The researcher should be looking in to

the theories and try and offer a new or different perspective about the subject. All of the above should be included in a good research plan. A research plan is a guideline for the researcher to the right path; what is the target of the research and what is the researcher going to do along the research process. As guidelines the research plan should be only there to show the way and it can be revisited when help is needed and furthermore the research might take a different direction during the process which should result in changing the research plan accordingly (Boden, Kenway & Epstein 2007, 19, 36-37.).

#### 4.1 Methodology

The research method used in the thesis work is called qualitative research which focuses in inquiring information from the professionals and specialists of the researched topic which can lead to more personalized and detailed outcomes avoiding generalisation (Glenn 2010, 104; Lapan, Quartaroli & Riemer 2012, 3-4.). Glenn (2010) pointed out that qualitative research is more explorative compared to quantitative research which means that the research is not necessarily aiming to test a certain hypothesis from the beginning, however eventually the results of the research could support a theory related to the subject. Therefore qualitative research method is suitable for research that requires in-depth information and does not require the opinion or experiences of the general public which in other words means a large amount of data.

The main questions when conducting qualitative research are why and how, instead of how many and how much. Keegan (2009) advised that some projects and questions which require qualitative research methods are for example exploring global or culture issues, new product or service development, understanding a specific market, brand or social issue and changing organizational culture. Hence this thesis is addressing cultural differences and advantages within hotel reception environment, qualitative research is the better choice to get in-depth information on the subject. For this thesis the research has been implemented by sending theme interviews to Hotel and Reception Managers who are in charge of reception personnel recruitment and management.

#### 4.2 Ethics in Qualitative Research

Ethical dilemmas can easily occur as the researcher is interacting with individuals or groups of people and therefore misunderstandings and misinterpretations are highly possible. In addition the researched subject might be sensitive either towards the individual, the community or in global level which requires ethically correct code of conduct from the researcher. This

means that the questions need to be conducted in a way that it does not offend the interviewee or others.

The researcher also might portray the person in question in a way that one can be recognized by others which is not desirable when the topic is sensitive and a recognition is not wanted by the interviewed person. Another ethical problem could be that the interpretation of the researcher is not accurate and one cannot recognize themselves or their own community from the outcome of the research (Lapan, Quartaroli & Riemer 2012, 19-20.). Major ethical issues in qualitative research can be avoided by following three fundamentals which are drawn by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research in the United States on the Belmont Report that was released in 1979.

The first fundamental is beneficence which means that the researchers should aim to minimize the harm towards individuals and aim to maximize the good outcomes towards the humanity. The second part is that the researcher should make sure that the research participants get the benefits of the research by avoiding exploitation, unconsidered and unreasonable behaviour. Respect and courtesy towards the research participants is the third fundamental in avoiding ethical dilemmas while conducting a research (Lapan, Quartaroli & Riemer 2012, 22-28.).

This thesis is discussing the issues and advantages of having multicultural and multinational personnel working within reception service environment and therefore it can be a sensitive topic for some considering the resent refugee crisis and immigration discussions in Finland and all over Europe. This research and thesis is not covering issues such as racism or discrimination hence it is barely addressing the advantages and disadvantages of multicultural teams and personnel. In addition this thesis is giving information to immigrants in Finland on what attributes to develop in order to pursue career within hotel industry and more specifically in hotel reception.

### 4.3 Data Collection and Content Analysis

Before starting to analyse and report data it is highly important to make sure during the collection of data to gain understanding of what have been collected, understanding of words and managing the data effectively which means summarizing and organizing data in a way that it is easily accessible. Successful analysis of qualitative data requires focus on a specific key question while some other questions are disregarded as they do not provide valuable or relevant information towards the research.

The researcher needs to familiarize oneself with the data and search for a specific statements or repeating themes inside the conducted interviews which can be supporting a theory. The general approach to analysing interviews is to compare the answers between a set of interviewees and recognize a certain theme which needs to be distinctly defined. The analysis process of qualitative data results on the researchers own perspective and critical thinking on the data and what they see as important for the research topic and what they think the answers of the interviewees implicate without using another authors views or other possible sources as references (Blaxter 2010, 212, 232-242.).

Blaxter (2010) stated that research without reporting is more or less pointless as the results cannot be accessed later hence there can be also other ways of presenting results than just writing a report, as for example oral presentations. The reporting process requires the researcher to write either continuously or in cycles that creates a draft of a certain theme or chapter and then proceed to another theme which can make the researcher to return to previous subject to modify it according to the new ideas and perspectives gained during the writing process.

It is also highly important to rework the written text to avoid repetitions, refer to previous or upcoming chapters and alter the length or structure of the writing. As mentioned earlier the themes and key issues need to be visible to the reader which should be the focus of the researcher while reporting the results. Key themes need to be well structured, related and supporting each other for the reader to understand the results. The final part of reporting should include checking the grammar, titles, contents and references for possible mistakes, final additions or most importantly checking if the author has stayed inside the topic and themes, and in addition if the title of the report implicates the contents effectively (Blaxter 2010, 250-254, 280-284.).

#### 4.4 Results

As mentioned previously this research was conducted by sending theme interviews to seven Hotel Managers working in established, nationally and also internationally recognised hotels located in the Helsinki Region. The Hotel Managers as well as the subject hotels taking parting in this research will be kept anonymous. The purpose of this theme interview was to get in-depth information from hotel industry professionals regarding the need for multicultural workforce in hotel receptions in Finland and to determine the main requirements for personnel working in hotel reception.

Most of the subject hotels could be classified as business hotels, however some of them also offer a variety of banqueting, conference and leisure facilities. The first question of the interview will determine the main customer base for the subject hotels and the percentage of Finnish and foreign guests in the hotels.

Customer base:

- Hotel 1 - Executive guests, investment bankers and international politicians
- Hotel 2 - Business travellers
- Hotel 3 - Finnish and international business travellers, banqueting guests and families
- Hotel 4 - Business and leisure travellers
- Hotel 5 - Business travellers and conference guests
- Hotel 6 - Business travellers and international leisure groups
- Hotel 7 - International business travellers

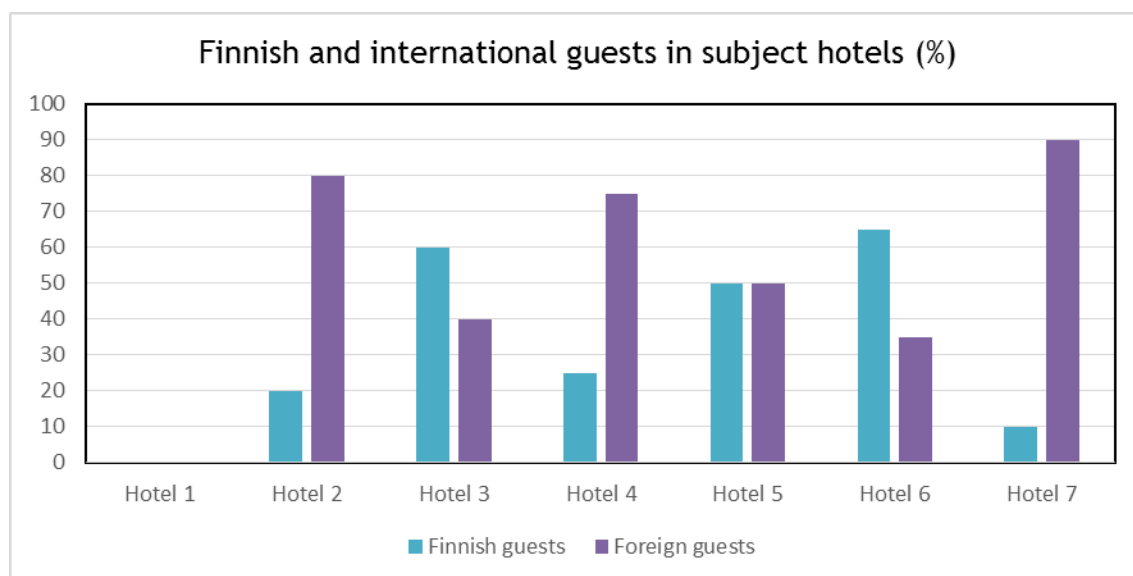


Table 1: Finnish and international guests in subject hotels (%)

As Table 1 indicates, three of the seven subject hotels have more foreign guests using their services than Finnish guests and only two of the hotels have more Finnish guests. Hotel 5 has a customer base of 50% Finnish and 50% foreign guests. Hotel 1 did not have percentages of ratio between Finnish and international guests, however according to the Hotel Manager they have significantly more international guests using their accommodation services.

The second question of the interview revealed that the biggest group of international guests using hotel accommodation in Helsinki region are Russians, Chinese and Japanese guests. These are followed by Swedish, American, German and English guests. The above information and numbers indicate that a significant amount of business for these seven hotels come from

international guests and furthermore it can be said that having culturally aware and multilingual personnel in reception is highly important for the success of these hotels.

Language becomes a significant factor as the biggest number of international guests are coming from countries such as Russia and China where English language is not commonly used or heard in everyday life. To enhance this statement one Hotel Manager specifically mentioned that Russians are highly appreciative of getting customer service in their own language and therefore this particular hotel would be very keen on hiring staff that speaks Russian. In addition for the guests expecting to be served in their own language, they expect professional, kind, knowledgeable and individual service from hotel receptionists. Guests are making requests and wishes which are expected to be fulfilled and expectations to be exceeded. Receptionists are expected not to say no and they have to be able to solve the guests' small issues promptly.

While recruiting new reception staff the recruiters take into consideration the applicants' language skills. The applicant needs to be fluent in Finnish, English and Swedish, however knowledge of other languages are an advantage when applying for a front of house position. Other factors that were mentioned to be important in the recruitment process by all of the interviewees were attitude, being spontaneous and having experience in customer service and having a passion towards it. Extremely important characteristics for hotel receptionists are to be able to handle stressful situations, being a good team player and having a willingness to improve. The most important factor of all is that the applicant is a good fit for the team and has the right kind of character.

Hotel 5 is the only one of the subject hotels which does not currently have international staff working in the hotel reception. All other subject hotels have and have had a great variety of staff from different countries, such as:

- Estonia
- Russia
- United States
- Canada
- Turkey
- Lebanon
- Kazakhstan
- Belgium
- Hungary
- Italy
- Portugal

All the Hotel Managers have mainly positive experiences from international staff working in the hotel receptions. They specifically mentioned multicultural staff does not only bring diversity into the work community hence they also educate other receptionists of different service cultures. There has been a positive effect on the service provided in these hotels as the staff has become more culturally aware and knowledgeable. Foreign staff members have also taught other receptionists to say phrases in other languages which can really make a lasting impression to international guests during greeting, check-in and check-out. One Hotel Manager also specifically mentioned that the language skills, especially English, has improved significantly amongst the Finnish staff that has been working with international personnel.

The interviewees also recognised some challenges with international staff working in hotel reception. All Hotel Managers mentioned that the biggest issue is the Finnish language. Even though most of these hotels are very international they are still located in Finland and need to accommodate the locals as well. Finnish guests are expecting, as any other hotel guests are, to be served in their own language which can sometimes create difficulties if the receptionists is not fluent in Finnish. The service can sometimes come across as abrupt and rude due to weaker language skills and therefore it is highly important for receptionists to speak fluent Finnish. In hotel reception spoken Finnish is not the only part where one needs to be fluent as the receptionists are also responsible for handling and answering multiple emails. If a receptionists is not able to write professional and linguistically correct emails this can create more work for receptionists writing fluent Finnish.

One interviewee also mentioned that the challenges they have come across with foreign staff have been the lack of discretion, challenging the hierarchy and not having a filter regarding what to say to hotel guests. These issues seem to be an outcome of different cultural dimension and understanding of service culture. This specific hotel overcame these challenges by discussing them through with the staff, creating personal development plans and providing systematic training. It was also mentioned that foreign staff can be facing a culture shock when moving from their own countries to Finland, where long winter and darkness can make it hard to integrate to the lifestyle and the community. This can also negatively affect the performance at work and furthermore the service the hotel guests receive.

## 5 Conclusions

Based on the written sources and the interviews of seven Hotel Managers, the dilemma of advantages and challenges regarding multicultural workforce is evident. International workforce can often offer cultural knowledge and language skills that local staff are unable to provide. These skills and traits can be highly beneficial financially and reputation wise for hotels that are accommodating large number of international guests. Multicultural staff does not only offer diverse service to specific group of guests by themselves, hence they are also educating each other of different service cultures and languages. Hotel guests appreciate to be served in their own language and therefore having reception staff from variety of countries and having multiple languages spoken within the hotel can pleasantly surprise guests and make them return to a specific hotel during their next visit.

Having culturally aware and knowledgeable staff can also enhance the customer service situation in a positive way and in addition prevent misunderstandings. Receptionists can come across as rude if the guests are not spoken to in a specific way by using courtesy words and titles in front of their names that are generic to use in the guest's culture. Some non-verbal ways of communicating as well as habits in Finnish service culture can be quite offensive to international guests which the customer service personnel might not be aware of. This could be for example pointing at something with only one finger which is considered impolite in a number of countries. Misunderstandings can be prevented by educating the reception staff of the requirements, habits and cultures of different countries.

The most important factors in the recruitment of hotel receptionists are fluent Finnish, English and Swedish skills, spontaneity, having a right attitude and experience in customer service. In the results it was mentioned that language is the most challenging aspect of hiring international staff in hotel receptions. If the receptionists are not confident and fluent in the language spoken this can come across as rude and abrupt service to guests and in addition have impact on other receptionists by increasing their workload. In addition it was mentioned that different cultural dimensions between cultures can create issues if the staff is, for example, challenging the hierarchy of the work environment. Despite of the language and cultural issues all of the hotel managers would be interested in hiring more multicultural staff in hotel receptions. The solution for these issues are continuous education, feedback and creating personal development plans for all reception staff. Language skills and cultural knowledge of staff will grow while working as long as they are willing to learn and develop.

There are many advantages of having multicultural reception staff, however the challenges of local language and cultural differences can sometimes overshadow the opportunities international staff can bring to companies. Having a well performing multicultural team in a hotel



reception requires patient and competent manager who gives feedback in a constructive way and knows how to develop the necessary skills to match the service environment.

This Bachelor's thesis topic is relative to the constantly increasing discussion of immigration and free movement of people within the European Union. In today's globalised world international tourism and business is increasing and this creates more requirements of multicultural and furthermore culturally aware staff that can communicate fluently in several languages. This Bachelor's thesis only considers a managerial point of view regarding multicultural workforce. In order to get more insight information of the need of multicultural workforce in Finnish hotels a future research of the international and national guests' expectations of the reception staff would be beneficial. This could be carried out with quantitative research method by conducting a survey targeting the opinions of hotel guests regarding the customer service provided within the hotels.

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## Tables

Table 1: Finnish and international guests in subject hotels (%) .....	21
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## Appendixes

Appendix 1: Interview questions - Finnish.....	30
Appendix 2: Interview questions - English.....	31

## Appendix 1: Interview questions - Finnish

1. Minkälainen asiaskunta käyttää hotellianne ja mikä on kansainvälisten asiakkaiden arvioitu prosentuaalinen osuus majoittujista?
2. Mitkä ovat suurimmat ryhmät kansalaisuuden perusteella, jotka käyttävät hotellinne palveluita suomalaisten asiakkaiden lisäksi?
3. Otatteko asiakkaidenne kulttuurilliset vaatimukset (esimerkiksi kielen ja ei-verbaalisen kommunikoinnin) huomioon kehittäessänne palveluitanne ja palkatessanne asiakaspalveluhenkilökuntaa? Jos kyllä, kuinka teette tämän?
4. Mitä asiakkaanne odottavat vastaanottonne henkilökunnalta ja kuinka varmistatte, että asiakkaidenne odotukset ja tarpeet täytetään?
5. Mitkä ovat tärkeimmät taidot sekä luonteenpiirteet, jotka otatte huomioon palkatessanne vastaanoton henkilökuntaa?
6. Onko teillä tällä hetkellä tai ollut aikaisemmin vastaanotossa henkilökuntaa, jotka tulevat muualta kuin Suomesta? Mistä nämä työntekijät ovat kotoisin?
7. Mitä hyötyjä olet huomannut muualta kuin Suomesta tulleen työntekijän tuovan vastaanottoon? Minkälaisia haasteita ja ongelmia olet kohdannut monikulttuurisen työvoiman johtamisessa ja kuinka selvitit kyseiset tilanteet?
8. Uskotko, että teille olisi hyötyä palkata vastaanottoon töihin muualta kuin Suomesta tulleita työntekijöitä ja minkälaisia hyötyjä uskot sen tuovan? Minkälaisia haasteita ja ongelmia uskot ulkomaalaisen työntekijän aiheuttavan vastaanotossa suomalaisessa hotelliympäristössä?

## Appendix 2: Interview questions - English

1. What kind of customer base do you have in your hotel? What is the approximate percentage of international customers using your accommodation services on daily or monthly basis?
2. What is the largest group by nationality staying at your hotel excluding Finnish customers?
3. Do you take cultural requirements (as for example language and non-verbal communication styles) of your guests' nationalities into account when developing your services and recruiting customer service personnel and if you do, how are you doing this?
4. What are your customers expecting from your reception staff and how are you making sure your customers' needs are met?
5. What are the core skills and characteristics you take into account when hiring reception staff?
6. Do you currently have or previously had reception staff from different national and cultural backgrounds and where were they originally from?
7. What advantages are there of having a member of staff from a different cultural background? What kind of challenges and difficulties did you notice in managing a staff member from a different national background and how did you overcome these issues?
8. Do you think there would be advantages and opportunities in hiring reception staff from different national and cultural backgrounds in your hotel and what do you think these would be? What kind of challenges and difficulties do you think would occur of having multicultural reception staff?