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# Checking Into Research

Four UNLV researchers are studying what makes hotel and resort customers tick, then using that knowledge to help industry leaders better serve their patrons.

By Angela Ramsey

Photography by Josh Hawkins

## Blocking the Brain Drain

James Busser and Wen Chang provide resorts with the insights they need to keep star employees.

**T**he hotel-resort industry has long prided itself on its hiring prowess, handpicking and grooming newly hired managers for careers intended to span years, if not decades. So, why are so many entry-level managers resigning just weeks after completing training?

One major hospitality brand recently turned to Harrah Hotel College professor James Busser and his doctoral student Wen Chang for answers. Could deficiencies in its management-training program be to blame?

"They wanted us to take a critical look at the program to find areas for improvement," Busser says. The company's name, he adds, must be kept confidential due to a nondisclosure agreement.

As part of their study, Busser and Chang surveyed dozens of former management-program trainees through several cycles of the training. The two also worked with the company's team of human resources managers to better understand the types of trainees it attracted. They soon learned that only a select few students, identified as stellar performers, were recruited into the program directly out of college. "It's a very competitive program," says Chang. "This organization accepts only a small percentage of students."

Once on board, trainees were assigned a mentor from the company's corporate headquarters, a close advisor whose role involved helping their charges navigate the year-long training process. Training complete, the new managers were assigned to one of the company's hotel or resort properties to begin their careers. Many chose to resign instead.

"Despite a significant investment of money and time in these trainees," Busser says, "the company couldn't keep them following completion of the program."

The reason, the surveys revealed, was pretty straightforward: Employees were leaving because their expectations were not being met. But why? Busser and Chang suspected the mentor-trainee relationship might be playing a role.

"The mentor portion of the program was highly controlled at the corporate level," Busser says. "But it became clear that some unevenness in the training program was occurring at the property level, resulting in situations that were inconsistent with employee expectations."

"We wanted to sort this out," adds Chang. Together the researchers dove deep into the survey data to explore the role mentors played in two specific areas: career development (relating to workplace skills and knowledge) and psychosocial support (the process of integrating

employees into corporate culture).

Busser and Chang discovered that the mentors were doing a better job reinforcing the psychosocial aspects of the program than focusing on career development. The two then met with the brand's human resources managers to recommend more training—this time for the mentors. Mentors, they said, were focusing too heavily on developing personal relationships. Instead, they needed to place more emphasis on developing trainees' knowledge and skills. Focusing on the career-development part, Busser and Chang reasoned, would help trainees develop more realistic expectations about the day-to-day reality of their new careers.

"There needs to be consistency among mentors about how they communicate organizational culture and expectations about progression within the company," Busser says.

Interestingly, trainees who resigned after completing the program didn't appear to depart with hard feelings. Most, in fact, continued to hold a favorable view of the organization.

"The incredible strength of the program is that the employees who were leaving still had very positive feelings about promoting the brand to others," Chang says. She and Busser also discovered that, while employed, the trainees were willing to go above and beyond their duties, which was of huge benefit to the company.

Busser and Chang's study has been submitted to the *International Journal of Hospitality Management* for publication. It is currently in its second round of peer reviews.



**TEAMWORK** Professor James Busser (right) and doctoral student Wen Chang teamed up on research that will help a hospitality brand retain its work team.

Chang, meanwhile, has had no second thoughts about her own training. She recently completed her doctorate and will join the faculty of Iowa State University this fall.

"Ph.D. students here at the Harrah College really get to take advantage of the partnerships that have been formed between the college and the industry over the years," Chang says. "These kinds of research opportunities only happen at UNLV. Doing research projects like this, you can see how your work has an impact."

Busser echoes the sentiment. "The company was so energized by the findings and receptive to moving forward with improvements," he says. "It has been a tremendous experience for all of us involved."

## To Book or Not to Book?

Chih-Chien Chen's research explores why consumers 'seal the deal' when they do.

**W**hat drives customers' decision-making? The question has long fascinated Harrah Hotel College assistant professor Chih-Chien Chen, whose efforts aimed at demystifying consumer behavior have caught the attention of the hotel and resort industry.

Her research, rooted in revenue management concepts, considers consumer behavior as it relates to purchasing. The topic is of particular interest to an industry relentless in its efforts to fill rooms, restaurants, showrooms and casinos.



"Hotels are constantly playing with their price structures and trying to understand the variables that work for or against these price structures," says Chen, who explored the effects of an expanding online customer review landscape in a recent *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing* article.

One factor that affects consumer behavior, according to Chen, is their level of awareness. "Consumers, particularly in the U.S., understand that online room rates fluctuate over time," she says. "For this reason, they are continuously debating whether to wait for prices to drop or to jump on a price because they feel they are at risk of losing a room."

So, what makes a consumer take that final leap and book a room, especially when so many online booking options are available? One influencer is a hotel's cancellation policy.

As part of a study recently published in *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Chen tested a variety of cancellation models,

examining penalty fees, dates, and times to see how these affect the booking behavior of potential guests. "Traditionally, hotels have adopted a one-size-fits-all cancellation policy," Chen says, "in which customers accrue standard penalties for cancelling within 24 or 48 hours of their reservation." She thought departing from this model might make a difference.

And so it did. Chen's big research takeaway: Consumers are drawn to hotels that take a more nuanced and—you guessed it—more lenient approach when it comes to cancellations.

Although Chen writes about human behavior as an academic, the subject carries personal meaning for her. "When I was little, I was always very curious," says Chen, who grew up in Taiwan before leaving to study in the U.S. and earning a doctorate at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. "I liked to observe people, and I liked to inquire."

Chen's inquiring mind has led her to explore other research questions, including

how perceptions of room occupancy influence consumers' decision of whether or not to book. In a study published in the *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, she explored the idea of integrating shaded diagrams for online room selections, much like the diagrams used when choosing concert or airplane seats.

"On a direct level, you are selecting a room, but indirectly, you are seeing how many rooms are booked," Chen says. "I believe the introduction of that occupancy information will affect the customer's behavior. The idea is that when rooms seem scarce, the less consumers care about price."

Chen advises hotel managers to remain "creative and fluid" with respect to pricing strategies. Hotels seem to be taking note. "One year after we published the article regarding occupancy rates, we've seen this room-selection model being used online in smaller hotels," she says.

It would seem reasonable for someone whose research focuses on hotel stays to occasionally take a break, book a nice room, and enjoy a proper getaway. But like the hospitality industry, Chen's mind works 24 hours a day. "I'm always writing down research questions," she says, "even when I'm on vacation."

#### WHEREFORE WE

**BOOK** When it comes to booking hotel rooms, Chih-Chien Chen's research uncovers when we'll put money on the line and why, helping resorts thrive.



#### The Science Behind Employee Loyalty

Anthony Gatling measures 'workplace spirituality' to gauge hospitality employee satisfaction.

For years, Harrah Hotel College's Anthony Gatling, an assistant professor, has used data-driven analyses to test factors affecting workplace culture, leader commitment, and performance. One of these factors is, surprisingly, "spirituality."

This form of spirituality, Gatling says, is not of a religious nature. Rather, it is the pursuit of meaning and purpose, a sense of community, and alignment of professional values in the workplace.

"The conflation of spirituality and religion is common, but these are two distinct concepts," he says. "Religion can be divisive. Spirituality in the workplace, on the other hand, enables leaders and employees to see how their work has higher purpose and fulfills the need to belong and to be interconnected. Workplace spirituality should not only be a cultural objective, it should be a strategic imperative."

A former restaurant-industry executive, Gatling spent more than 20 years observing firsthand how leadership development affected companies' culture and employee attitudes.

"All hospitality organizations want their leaders to have an emotional connection to the organization," Gatling says. "They want

them to create an environment where they and their employees can see the higher purpose in the mission.”

Gatling’s passion for leadership and organizational development has carried into his academic work at UNLV. In a study recently published in the *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Gatling and co-authors Jungsun Kim (an assistant professor in the Harrah Hotel College) and John Milliman (a professor of management and organization at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs) tested relationships among workplace spirituality, organizational commitment, and turnover in 190 hospitality supervisors.

Although many hospitality organizations may not consciously recognize what Gatling calls an “innate link between hospitality and workplace spirituality,” they are indeed looking for answers when it comes to strengthening organizational culture; increasing employee commitment; and reducing the costly impact of poor employee-retention rates, which have been climbing steadily in the last five years. In fact, from 2014 to 2015 alone, the turnover rate in the U.S. economy’s hospitality segment rose to 72.1

percent from 66.7, according to the most recent Bureau of Labor Statistics figures.

Gatling sees this “innate link” through the lens of what management scholars refer to as self-determination. In the business context, Gatling says, “self-determination theory proposes that all human beings are intrinsically motivated to fulfill three core psychological needs in the workplace: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When organizations enable greater empowerment, encourage creativity, engage intellectual potential, [and] provide a social setting where leaders have a sense of purpose and belonging, these psychological needs are fulfilled exponentially.”

Gatling’s findings suggest that workplace spirituality increases the commitment level of hospitality supervisors and decreases turnover. “It’s clear that workplace spirituality strengthens leaders’ emotional connection to their organization and significantly reduces the intentions of supervisors to quit their jobs,” he says.

The big takeaway for the hospitality industry, Gatling says, is that organizations should be intentional in creating, maintaining, and enhancing their cultures through the development of their frontline leaders.

“It makes strategic sense,” Gatling says, “and is the key factor that will separate the good from the great in the hospitality industry.”

### Hospitality in Hospitals

Dina Zemke uses hospitality expertise to solve problems in health care.

“I never thought I would be involved in medically focused research,” says Dina Zemke, Harrah Hotel College assistant professor. “There is, however, a cross-discipline appeal to the questions we are asking.”

Such questions are the subject of Zemke’s ongoing exploration of what hospitals should be doing to boost patient satisfaction. “Hospitals want to know what defines a good patient experience. Where did things go right? Where did things go wrong?” Zemke says. “This is where the fundamentals of good customer service come into play.”

Striving for happy clients is nothing new to administrators at both hotels and hospitals. As with the hospitality business, the health care industry has long been aware that patient satisfaction, or its opposite, has a big effect on peer recommendations, repeat business and, ultimately, revenue. But since the 2012 introduction of the federally mandated Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) in 2012—a reporting initiative that allows patients to rate their hospital experiences—patient opinion holds even greater sway.

“Medicaid and Medicare reimbursements are tied directly to HCAHPS scores determined from patient-experience surveys,” Zemke says. “Health care providers with low patient-satisfaction scores get less reimbursement. That’s why the health care industry has turned to the hospitality field to find insight.”

For Zemke, who earned a doctorate in hospitality administration from UNLV in 2003, the hospital study was a departure from her typical research. That work had primarily focused on hotel design—specifically, the effects of ambient noise, scents and hotel cleanliness on guests. But she was convinced to change course after Harrah Hotel College Dean Stowe Shoemaker—a notable researcher in the area of hospitality in health care—urged her to join him on the study, which had been commissioned by a local hospital.

Zemke, Shoemaker, and a small research team (including UNLV psychology professor



**CULTIVATING ZEN**  
Workplace culture is sacred when it comes to employee retention, according to Anthony Gatling.



Noelle Lefforge and Indiana University's Olena Mazurenko and Nir Menachemi) began the project by surveying patients, employees, custodial staff, administrators, and physicians at the hospital. They then delved into an analysis of relationships among hospital personnel, identifying the most important factors that contributed to positive patient experiences.

Their findings, which appeared in the Sep./Oct. 2015 issue of *Journal of Healthcare Management*, suggested that hospitals tend to do well when addressing basic patient needs such as toilet accommodations and meals. Complex issues are more problematic. The researchers found that issues such as scheduling (e.g., too much charting, not enough communication); dysfunctional equipment; a lack of sufficient staffing; and problems during discharge often left patients less than completely contented. In addition, satisfaction scores plummeted when patients and their families witnessed discord among staff. "The more surgeons, nurses, and hospitalists disagree with one another, the more unhappy patients get," Zemke says.

According to Zemke, good communication is a salve that remedies: "Like any guest in any hotel, patients want to be listened to, and they feel better when they receive accurate, timely information." Such rapport can be transformative, says Zemke, resulting in decreased patient recovery times, lower infection rates, and improved therapeutic outcomes—positive effects that, for hospitals, result in better HCAHPS scores and increased reimbursements.

After they concluded the study, Zemke and the research team revisited their data, this time with a

different research objective in mind. "The notion that the patient is the only customer with specific needs is an oversimplification," Zemke says.

Instead, they focused on defining a variety of "customer" groups that exist within the hospital setting—including not only patients but physicians, insurance providers, and patients' family members. These results will be published in an upcoming *Journal of Healthcare Management* article.

Both studies ultimately challenge the norms of the relationship between patient and health care provider while broadening the definition of

customer. "As long as so many choices are available in health care, providers are going to have to take a hard look at all of their customer relationships," Zemke says.

The work has warmed Zemke to the idea of crossing disciplines for other projects. She recently worked with a UNLV student in the School of Dental Medicine's orthodontics program to delve into how attention to consumer preference and more effective marketing strategies might improve the bottom line for orthodontic practitioners.

## UNLV's IGI Shares Gaming Expertise With the World

Since its inception in 1993, the International Gaming Institute (IGI) at UNLV has grown into a major hub for the global gaming industry, providing gaming-related research and programming to 50 jurisdictions throughout the world.

Today's IGI includes a number of centers aimed at ensuring the continued vitality of gaming worldwide. The Center for Gaming Innovation and Hospitality Lab, funded by the

Nevada Governor's Office of Economic Development, supports students seeking to bring both patent-worthy concepts to the casino/internet gaming space and creative, technical solutions to challenges facing integrated resorts. The International Center for Gaming Regulation, a newly created partnership between IGI and the William S. Boyd School of Law, is another state-supported program. It offers custom educational curricula and

research services for gaming's worldwide regulatory community.

"These centers of excellence cover the two areas—innovation and regulation—that serve as the crucial foundation for the long-term health of gaming and hospitality economies, and we're proud to partner with the state of Nevada in building for our future," said Bo Bernhard, executive director of IGI and a professor in UNLV's Harrah Hotel College.

The IGI recently hosted the 16th International Conference on Gambling and Risk Taking, an event that attracted more than 600 researchers and scholars from 31 countries. The conference, held at The Mirage Hotel in Las Vegas, included sessions on the evolution of the casino-resort industry, gambling research, hospitality management, law, and other topics. Gaming mogul and The Mirage founder Steve Wynn was the event's keynote speaker.