

A Study on the Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Hospitality Graduates' Employability

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Date Received: 25 January 2022 Revised: 21 February 2022 Accepted: 24 February 2022

Abstract

The hospitality industry was hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, with lockdowns and travel restrictions resulting in huge layoffs and greatly reduced employment opportunities. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative investigation was to study the experiences of International Hospitality Management graduates as they searched for employment during the COVID-19 pandemic when hospitality jobs were scarce. Ten graduates from a university in Bangkok, Thailand, representing five different nationalities participated in in-depth interviews via Line and Zoom applications. It was found that pandemic-related obstacles in job hunting did not deter the participants from seeking employment. When hospitality work opportunities were unavailable (except in China), participants sought employment in other industries and were successful. Instead of viewing the pandemic as a threat or a defeat, most respondents saw it as an opportunity to explore other professions. Exposure to non-hospitality jobs was beneficial, adding value to their resumes and reflecting their resilience. The usefulness of knowledge gained from their degree work varied according to the jobs obtained. While a few expressed interests in the hospitality industry when it recovers, others did not want to be employed in the hospitality industry anymore after experiencing alternative options.

Keywords: *COVID-19 pandemic, employment, hospitality, Thailand*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was totally unexpected and has led to challenging times around the globe, affecting the lives and livelihoods of every person regardless of religion or wealth status (Korstrom, 2020; Krishnan et al., 2020). The disease and efforts to contain it led to worldwide lockdowns, business closures, and rising unemployment, dragging countries into recession, with worsened business performance as a result of reduced consumer spending and decreased savings (Hayri et al., 2020). Every sector experienced the impact of COVID-19, with the hotel industry being hit the hardest (Krishnan et al., 2020).

Thailand was no exception, and even by the first quarter of 2020, early signs of unemployment were evident (International Labor Organization, 2020); numbers continued to increase in both the second and third quarters of 2020 (Open Development Thailand, 2020). New graduates coming into the market during the prolonged pandemic in Thailand had a challenging time as they competed with fellow graduates and more experienced laid-off employees for scarce jobs, particularly hospitality ones (Boonlert, 2020). Highly reputed as one of the world's most popular tourist destinations (Lunkam, 2021), the International Hospitality Management (IHM) major in Thailand was a hit with both local and foreign students alike, with many foreign students hoping to work in Thailand after graduation.

The purpose of this study was to find out the challenges faced by hospitality graduates who had completed their studies during the pandemic and were looking for a job during its prolonged existence. This study will contribute to the scant literature on employment opportunities for hospitality graduates in Southeast Asia during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those who stand to benefit particularly from this study are those in the academic sphere and students in the higher education sector.

Literature Review

The world will always remember the unexpected crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic as it witnessed the closure of many hotels during the first quarter of 2020 (Hayri et al., 2020). Travel and hospitality businesses were negatively affected due to mobility restrictions and social distancing

measures (Gössling et al., 2020). Revenues plummeted in “room, food and beverage, banquet, wedding, and retail shop” (Hayri et al., 2020, para. 1).

Employment during the Pandemic

Aside from a worldwide health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic also created a tremendous negative impact on the entire global economy resulting in massive layoffs, recessions, and lockdowns (Hayri et al., 2020; Nga et al., 2021). The U.S. reported massive job layoffs, and its unemployment rate was the highest since the Great Depression, with an uncertain date for recovery (Petrosky-Nadeau & Valletta, 2020). Thailand’s first lockdown, from the middle of March until June 2020, had a massive negative impact on the economy despite its success in keeping the pandemic under control (Jensiriratanakorn & Jian, 2021; “Signs Point to Higher Job Losses,” 2021). On account of the closure of shopping malls and the majority of businesses during the lockdown (Boonlert, 2020), Thailand faced a loss of 758,000 jobs during the first quarter of 2021, and the numbers continued to increase with gradual business closures. Although job opportunities had increased during the second quarter of 2021, they were not in the hospitality sector, but in other industries such as e-commerce, e-learning, and technology. Thailand found itself in a recession during the second quarter of 2020 (Boonlert, 2020). Things worsened in April 2021 with the third wave of the disease, which was characterized by a higher infection rate and deaths due to the emergence of the Delta variant (“Signs Point to Higher Job Losses,” 2021). University graduates during the pandemic were highly challenged as they stepped into the job arena with very few job prospects, and many who had previous job offers were informed of job cancellations or indefinite postponements (Mongkol, 2020). Not all graduates were without hope; organizations still needed skilled employees who could play a significant role in driving their organizations (“Signs Point to Higher Job Losses,” 2021).

Impacts of the Crisis on Tourism and Hospitality

Originating in Wuhan, China, the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak that began in December 2019 spread throughout the world, resulting in travel restrictions that heavily impacted the hospitality industry (Aharon et al., 2021; Fox, 2020); Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Gössling et al., 2020; Wright, 2020) adversely affecting its stability and performance (Aharon et al., 2021). Chinese hotels were the first to experience a decline in occupancy to 75% in January, and as the virus spread, rates fell further, not only in China, but also across the Asia-Pacific region and in other COVID-19 affected areas (Fox, 2020). Around the globe even the most iconic hotels were affected, resulting in a “decline in occupancy rates, liquidity crises, struggling to pay the employees, difficult to afford their commercial mortgages, and low consumers because of the restrictions on the travel” (Annapoorna & Cherian, 2021, p. 2025). Canceled events also led to cancellation of hotel reservations (Fox, 2020).

As a foreign tourism-dependent country, Thailand’s hotel occupancy dropped by 44% nationwide in 2020 (Jensiriratanakorn & Jian, 2021), costing it at least six million jobs (“Signs Point to Higher Job Losses,” 2021). Hotel operations were weak in 2020 and depressed through 2021, with recovery predicted to start at the end of 2021 and last through 2023. It was also predicted that it would take four years for Thailand to recover and reach pre-COVID levels (Lunkam, 2021). Its domestic travel had somewhat recovered, largely attributed to the Thai government’s domestic travel stimulus packages (“Rao Tiew Duay Gan” in Thai), relaxed lockdown restrictions, increased vaccinations, and removal of inter-provincial travels restrictions (Jensiriratanakorn & Jian, 2021; Kasikorn Research Center, 2021).

Recovery from the Pandemic for the Hospitality Business

With patients recovering from COVID-19, the global economy will, in due time, recover as well. However, the greatest economic scars have been felt particularly in the poorest nations. In some such places, marked debt increases were seen, inequalities widened, and the destruction of jobs was the heaviest. Getting back to the pre-pandemic period will no doubt take time. However, advanced countries have suffered fewer impacts compared to low-income countries and emerging markets (Curran & Kennedy, 2021). A variety of factors that are conducive to the gradual and lengthy recovery

of the travel and tourism industry include improved vaccination uptakes, relaxed border restrictions, and simplified procedures enabling travel. The early stages of global hospitality recoveries and reopening have been attributed to domestic and short-haul regional travel. “The U.S. and China were able to curb the virus spread and stabilize domestic activities for the most part of 2021, resulting in a quick RevPAR turnaround” (Jensiriratanakorn & Jian, 2021, p. 12). The Maldives was a successful pioneer in reopening to foreign tourists, although they had not achieved herd immunity (Jensiriratanakorn & Jian, 2021). Recovery to pre-COVID-19 levels is predicted to be in 2023 or later, and the hospitality industry will experience shifts in the post-pandemic era (Krishnan et al., 2020). The road to recovery is going to be a long one, as hotel operators struggle to survive with low occupancy rates (Aharon et al., 2021). Personal leisure is expected to return first via the use of cars to visit friends and relatives, followed by domestic and close-to-home travel. It will take a longer time for international leisure trips to rebound because of some ongoing travel restrictions (Krishnan et al., 2020).

Asia’s growth was reported to rebound faster in 2021 than in 2020, but various economies within the region were on divergent paths as determined by the extent of vaccine rollouts, domestic outbreaks, and benefits reaped from the global recovery (Alegado, 2021). The Chinese economy showed signs of recovery, as it was successful in keeping the pandemic under control for approximately one year (Curran & Kennedy, 2021). Its strategy was revised to cater to the large domestic Chinese market and short-distance travelers, as international travel was restricted (Krishnan et al., 2020). Thailand, in its attempts to gradually increase foreign tourists, “reopened its doors to fully vaccinated travelers from 63 countries without a quarantine requirement since November 1, 2021.” This was on top of its original Phuket Sandbox program that in 2021 had successfully “attracted 60,000 visitors from July to October, with the top five markets” (Jensiriratanakorn & Jian, 2021, p. 3).

The Delta variant caused a re-emergence of the pandemic just as things were starting to get better (Jensiriratanakorn & Jian, 2021). As a further complication, while the world was starting to gradually recover from the pandemic with increased vaccinations, “the latest new variant of SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19), B.1.1.529 (Omicron) first reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) by South Africa on November 24, 2021” (CDC COVID-19 Response Team, 2021, p. 1731). This newest threat has been a tremendous hindrance to the global recovery, with Europe witnessing a large surge in COVID-19 cases, and other countries set to follow in due time (Ray, 2021). Things were optimistic with Thailand’s reopening on November 1, 2021, but then, “a fresh whiplash in travel sentiment from the Omicron variant has put the brakes on recovery prospects in 2022” (Worrachaddejchai, 2021, par. 1). The “most likely scenario for Thai hospitality business is U-shaped gradual recovery until 2024, starting with domestic leisure travel, which has already resumed (Worrachaddejchai, 2021, par. 3).

Objectives and Research Questions

Graduating from university during the prolonged two-year COVID-19 pandemic ushered in a very difficult time for former university students as they looked for employment in a very competitive job market with limited and scarce job opportunities. This was especially so for hospitality graduates, as the hotel industry was highly affected by a tremendous drop in occupancy rates, resulting in many employees being laid-off and some hotel closures. The objective of this study was to find out IHM graduates’ experiences in their search for employment during the COVID-19 pandemic when hospitality jobs were almost impossible to find. The research objectives were as follows:

1. To find out how hospitality students went about hunting for a job during the pandemic.
2. To find out the types of jobs hospitality graduates secured during the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. To find out participants’ interest in returning to the hospitality industry after the pandemic.
4. To discover the extent to which hospitality degrees were useful in their current lines of work.

Methodology

The qualitative research methodology chosen for this study was phenomenology, an approach that investigates “various reactions to, or perceptions of, a particular phenomenon” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2019, p. 338) by focusing on commonalities in the lived experiences of a particular group. In this study, the difficulties of seeking employment in the hospitality industry during the COVID-19 pandemic were explored, and data were collected through in-depth interviews. The COVID-19 pandemic did not permit normal face-to-face interviewing; hence, in-depth interviews averaging about 45 minutes each were conducted through three platform channels during the month of July 2021. The channels were: (a) Line Video Calls (Thailand and Singapore); (b) WeChat Video Calls (China); and (c) Zoom (Myanmar). Purposive sampling was used to align with the intent of the phenomenon being investigated. Participants had to meet two main criteria: namely, be a hospitality graduate who had graduated from Thailand, and was looking for employment during the pandemic period (end of 2019–2021). Ten participants participated in the study, completing a simple e-survey that provided basic demographic information prior to their interview sessions.

The interview protocol consisted of three parts: Part 1—Job searches during the pandemic (three questions); Part 2—Basic employment profile (four questions); and Part 3—Current employment (four questions). There was a total of eleven open-ended structured questions. The demographic and current employment profiles of the ten hospitality graduates are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1 *Demographic and Employment Information*

Participant	Gender	Age Range	Nationality	Country of Employment	Position
Participant 1	Female	21–25	Thai	Thailand	Customer Service
Participant 2	Female	21–25	Thai	Thailand	Sale and Marketing Executive
Participant 3	Male	26–30	Nepalese - Japanese	Thailand	Board of Directors Assistant
Participant 4	Female	21–25	Thai	Thailand	Sales Engineer
Participant 5	Female	21–25	Singaporean	Singapore	Assistant Chef
Participant 6	Female	21–25	Vietnamese	Thailand	Support and Administration
Participant 7	Male	26–30	Myanmar	Myanmar	Unemployed
Participant 8	Male	21–25	Chinese	China	Management Trainee
Participant 9	Male	21–25	Chinese	China	Customer Relations & Business Development
Participant 10	Female	21–25	Chinese	China	Management Trainee

Results

The results of the study are reported under four themes (Table 2) and correspond to the four research questions: (a) Theme 1: Job search platforms used; (b) Theme 2: Employment during the pandemic; (c) Theme 3: Expressed interest in returning to the hospitality industry after the pandemic, and (d) Theme 4: Alignment of current employment with their hospitality major.

Theme 1: Job Search Platforms

Although using social media is a current trend in job hunting, participants also relied on other methods such as walk-ins, referrals, and using the services of a Japanese Recruitment Agency. Participants from different countries relied on different social media platforms. Those looking for a job in Thailand relied on Jobsdb.com, JobThai, Facebook, and LinkedIn. Participants who were applying for jobs in their homelands went through different channels. In Myanmar, the respondent applied through Facebook job listings, while Chinese hospitality graduates relied on a Chinese Hospitality Application platform. A Singaporean who decided to apply for a job in her home country received her

employment offer through mycareerssg, which is the job website used by most Singaporeans. The Nepalese-Japanese participant had received a job offer through a referral, and was looking forward to being vaccinated, as he had just received a conditional job offer in a hotel on an island in Thailand. Of all the ten hospitality students, three of them were employed in the hospitality industry in China. Three others worked in the Food and Service establishment, while the rest (three) were working in industries completely unrelated to hospitality (IT, Entertainment, and an electronics manufacturer). The number of jobs each participant had held varied. Four of the participants were in their first job, three were in their second place of employment, and two were working in their third job. Participant 7, who started out working in the hotel but had lost his job because of the pandemic, was studying to pass a Japanese proficiency test and hoping to get an engineering job in Japan.

Table 2 *Themes in Summary*

Theme	Description
Theme 1: Job Search Platforms	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Social media was used widely, with each country using different platforms. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. China: Hospitality application b. Myanmar: Facebook c. Singapore: mycareerssg d. Thailand: Jobsdb.com, JobThai, Facebook, and LinkedIn 2. Other approaches included: referrals, recruitment agency, walk-in.
Theme 2: Employment during Pandemic	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Plentiful hotel positions in recovered Chinese economy. 2. Zero Thai hotel jobs for hospitality graduates. 3. Travel restrictions prevented outbound job opportunities. 4. Foreign language abilities opened up job opportunities in Thailand. 5. Graduates turned to alternative industries/professions.
Theme 3: Expressed Interest After Pandemic	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Chinese want to work in better paid and reputable hospitality jobs abroad, return to hospitality industry. 2. Two participants were waiting to move back to hotels. 3. Half of participants decided that hospitality was no longer for them.
Theme 4: Alignment of Current Employment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Full usage of hospitality knowledge in hotel positions. 2. Only customer service aligned with work in alternative industries.

Theme 2: Employment during the Pandemic

Graduating and seeking a job during the pandemic, particularly in the highly impacted hospitality industry, was extremely challenging. Table 3 provides the time periods taken to obtain a job.

Plans to work in hospitality upon graduation were dashed for participants with the exception of three Chinese graduates, who were capable of landing hotel jobs back in China, as the Chinese economy was recovering well from the pandemic and was almost back to normal. Relying solely on a Chinese hospitality application, Participant 8, who had originally planned to work in Thailand, returned home to China and successfully received a job offer there as a management trainee in the field of food and beverage. Participant 9 had a bad experience working in a front office in China; he discovered that hotel jobs were no longer for him, and moved on to a customer relations and business development position in a Chinese IT company. As a foreign graduate with two hospitality internships outside China, Participant 10 shared that, “it was much easier for me to get a job, but it was still challenging and difficult to get a much-coveted Management Trainee position in a 5-star hotel”. She also mentioned that “although there were many hospitalities positions out there in China, the salaries were not very good.”

Table 3 *Graduation and Job Search Details*

Participant	Graduation	Started Job Search	Time in Getting a Job				
			Before Graduating	1–3 Months	4–6 Months	7–12 Months	> 1 Year
Participant 1	March 2020	December 2020		1			
Participant 2	October 2020	September 2020		1			
Participant 3	March 2020	June 2020		1			
Participant 4	June 2021	March 2021	1				
Participant 5	June 2020	December 2019	1				
Participant 6	October 2020	January 2021			1		
Participant 7	December 2020	October 2019	1				
Participant 8	February 2020	January 2020	1				
Participant 9	February 2020	July 2020					1
Participant 10	July 2021	May 2021	1				
Total			5	3	1	0	1
Percent (%)			50	30	10	0	10

A participant (1) who had formerly interned in the Maldives and received a job offer there was unable to travel after graduation “because of the lockdown and working restrictions in the Maldives. I was unsuccessful in applying for hospitality jobs, and am currently working in a hospital’s food company as a Customer Service staff.” Participant 6 was another victim of travel restrictions. Although she had a management trainee job waiting for her in Vietnam, she was unable to fly and had to resort to job hunting in Thailand. Interestingly, two foreign graduates, a Vietnamese (Participant 6) and a Nepalese-Japanese (Participant 3), were able to get employment in non-hospitality companies in Thailand through referrals because of their native language skills. Participant 3 also mentioned that “I had applied for a hotel position in Thailand, and am waiting to be vaccinated to be eligible to start work.” A native of Myanmar (Participant 7) had worked in a hotel back in Myanmar for five months, but had to leave because “my hotel, together with many other hotels, had to close down because of COVID-19.”

Many participants expressed that they had graduated at a difficult time when Bangkok faced the first most stringent lockdown. Applications that had been sent to hotels were usually unsuccessful because hotels were closed, staff were laid off rather than hired, and vacant hotel positions were usually management-level positions for which the participants, being new graduates, were not qualified. Participant 2 shared that “as hotels were mostly closed, I couldn’t apply for a hospitality job. Therefore, I worked as an Assistant Manager at my mother’s restaurant, and then started to look for a job in December 2020, and got a sales position after one month.” Facing the same problem, Participant 4 helped out in her family business for the first six months before deciding to branch out into different industries. It took her one year and four months before receiving a job offer through a Japanese recruitment company. Participant 5’s experience was different, as she started off in a sugar factory in an administrative position and, like other hospitality graduates, failed to hear from hotels regarding her job applications. With the worsening of the pandemic and no job opportunities, she decided to open a noodle shop because of her love for cooking. As a Singaporean, she eventually decided to try applying for a job in Singapore, and received a job offer as a waitress in a Thai restaurant in Singapore; later on, she moved on to being an assistant chef.

Theme 3: Expressed Interest in Returning to the Hospitality Industry after the Pandemic

Two of the three Chinese participants who are currently management trainees in hotels said that they would definitely remain in hospitality, and all planned to pursue hospitality roles outside of China, as jobs abroad were far better in terms of compensation and prestige. Waiting to be fully vaccinated,

Participant 3 said that he was on the waiting list to work in a hotel in Thailand, and is definitely willing to work in the hospitality industry as it recovers. Participant 1, who had previously interned in the Maldives and had later received a job offer, was unable to fly into the Maldives due to COVID-19. She said that “I’m looking forward to transiting back to hospitality in the Maldives in the future when things open up.” As for Participant 6, who is currently employed in a support and administrative position, she said that “I don’t think I would go back to hospitality. I will find it hard to adapt to working in the hotel as it means a ten-hour shift on a rotation basis, and I don’t think it’s OK for me now.” The remaining participants had other plans outside of hospitality. With a former degree in engineering, a graduate from Myanmar, Participant 7, said: “I am not going to work in hotels anymore, and living in Myanmar is very hard right now because of the military regime that started on February 1, 2021.” He is currently studying Japanese and awaiting employment in Japan in the field of engineering. Participant 2, on the other hand, plans to go abroad to study Japanese and help her mother’s friend in Japan run a Thai restaurant there. With an uncertain future ahead, Participant 4 said that “If the economy improves and things go back to normal, I may think of something that I can deal with by myself and will start my own company.”

Theme 4: Alignment of Current Employment with the Hospitality Major

Participants employed in the hotel/accommodation industry unanimously agreed that their current jobs were definitely related to their hospitality major, while those in food services establishments stated that they were partially related to their major. Others who held positions in non-hospitality fields, such as sales, administrative support, and a factory felt that their jobs were almost completely different from hospitality, but their jobs contained a minor customer service component. Participant 2, who was in sales and marketing, said that “it’s completely different,” while a support and administrative employee (Participant 6) said that “90% of my job is completely unrelated to hospitality, but 10% of it is related to customer service.”

Participant 1, working in customer service, compared her job in a very interesting way. She shared that “my job is similar but just in a different industry setting. If I were to work in a hotel, I would be at the front desk, meeting customers. However, in my current position of customer service for a food catering business in a hospital, I meet with guests in their rooms.” Participant 8, who worked in hospitality, mentioned that “since I’m in hospitality, the knowledge gained could be used. However, there are other knowledge and skills that can only be received while working.” While in his previous hotel job, Participant 9 said that “All of the hospitality knowledge gained had been useful—in Food and Beverage and Front Office.” Participant 5 mentioned that “I lost quite a lot of knowledge as I wasn’t in the hospitality business. It’s been nine months, and working six days a week with Sunday as a laundry day, I haven’t had the time to practice my cooking either.” Starting off in a position as an Assistant to the Board of Directors, Participant 3 said that hospitality knowledge was “fantastic and very useful”, but when he was transferred to the current entertainment industry, he said that “IHM courses were not useful, but business-related courses were in Virtual Reality.” Although in sales, Participant 4 said: “I found hospitality knowledge useful from my internship and university in working with customers. There’s a change from servicing guests to customers. Reservation training during the internship also has helped me with emails.” Another participant (2), who was also in sales, had a different opinion, as she said that only 20% of specialized knowledge gained was used. Participant 6, who was in a support and administrative position, replied that “I think, not on a large scale. But there were some things I could use such as budgeting, risk management in projects.”

Discussion

Theme 1: Job Search Platforms

The platforms employed by the participants in job applications were similar to the ones used prior to the pandemic, such as job applications through social media, referrals, and walk-ins. Referrals were still a very effective method of getting a job (Ngotngamwong, 2021). The new knowledge acquired from this study was the usefulness of various platforms that were used in Singapore (mycareerssg),

Myanmar (Facebook), and China (Hospitality app only used in China). The duration in obtaining jobs varied from one participant to another, but all obtained jobs with the exception of Participant 7, who had in fact started working in a hotel, but later became unemployed when the hotel closed down.

Theme 2: Employment during the Pandemic

There is no debate regarding the difficulties of finding work at a time when unemployment was prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic (Nga et al., 2021). The experiences shared by the participants were extremely interesting, with each story being different. The majority of the participants (80%) were capable of getting a job by at least the third month after graduation; 30% already had a job offer prior to graduation. Only 20% had a more difficult time, which is basically the norm for new graduates. This was a good indication of participants' employability despite the pandemic, the unavailability of hospitality jobs, and the difficulties of finding work in a scarce job market. However, three Chinese participants were able to work in hotels in their home country, as the Chinese economy was recovering well from the pandemic (Jensiriratanakorn & Jian, 2021).

The non-Chinese were not as fortunate, as their economies were not recovering, and they were still experiencing the effects of the pandemic with lockdowns, hotel closures, layoffs, and limited positions in the hospitality industry (CDC COVID-19 Response Team, 2021). The majority of those incapable of getting hotel jobs turned to other industries instead of just waiting for hospitality jobs to open up for them. That was a good decision, because the pandemic that started in Thailand in March 2020, as well as the world, is ongoing and punctuated with multiple lockdowns as a consequence of the emergence of troubling variant strains (CDC COVID-19 response team, 2021).

Half of the participants were foreigners who had intentionally undertaken their undergraduate hospitality studies in Thailand with plans of working in hotels in Thailand. All of them had to eventually leave for home because of the situation. Aside from the difficulties of job hunting, international travel restrictions also prevented job opportunities from being realized by two participants (Mongkol, 2020; Sobieralski, 2020). They were examples of the many lost job opportunities due to international travel restrictions.

Theme 3: Expressed Interest in Returning to the Hospitality Industry after the Pandemic

Half of the participants were interested in continuing to work in the hospitality industry after the pandemic abates and things start opening up again. The other five participants thought otherwise, with each participant moving along a different path away from hospitality. Their decisions to either stay or leave the hospitality industry demonstrated the amount of passion and interest that International Hospitality Management graduates truly had in the hospitality industry. It was not surprising that some participants who had experienced a different working environment decided to continue on in a non-hospitality path after the pandemic is over. Going abroad had an appeal for five participants. All three Chinese participants wanted to move abroad when things open up, while a Thai participant was waiting to take up her position in the Maldives, and another Thai participant planned on moving to Japan to work in a restaurant there.

Theme 4: Alignment of Current Employment with the Hospitality Major

The degree of usefulness of knowledge acquired from their undergraduate International Hospitality Management studies varied from one participant to another. Those working in hotels were able to fully utilize the knowledge in their positions. Non-hospitality employees, on the other hand, stated that they were capable of using some knowledge in their current roles, some more than others. This is typical, depending on how much knowledge could be used and incorporated. It is usual for graduates to use the knowledge they acquired in their positions related to their studies, and some of this knowledge would still be valuable if they were to work in a different field. The amount of knowledge usage would vary according to the industry concerned. One point made by a participant is also worth mentioning here: when one does not work in the hospitality industry for some time, the relevant knowledge tends to be lost.

Conclusion

The pandemic and the obstacles in job hunting did not deter participants from seeking employment. When hospitality opportunities were unavailable (with the exception of China), participants made strategic moves to seek employment in other industries and were successful in getting jobs. This indicates that they were resilient and were able to use the knowledge gained in hospitality in their current positions/jobs to varying degrees, meaning that their hospitality education had not gone to waste. Instead of viewing the pandemic as a threat or loss, it was helpful to perceive it as an opportunity to explore other professions and be exposed to non-hospitality jobs. This added experience outside of hospitality would add value to their resumes and work experience, helping them to become better-rounded individuals.

Recommendations

Being adaptable to a rapidly changing and dynamic environment is an essential trait that is valued by employers. Participants flexibility and openness to new experiences was commendable and definitely an excellent tool for survival in an ever-changing world that is filled with uncertainties. It would be interesting to replicate this study with a different group of participants, such as flight attendant trainees or other majors that were greatly impacted by the pandemic.

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