RESEARCH REPORTS

Workforce localisation in the resort sector of the Maldives

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ABSTRACT *The resort sector of the Maldives has played a vital role in the development of the Maldives, influencing the economy, culture, environment, society, and governance. The resort sector is predominantly staffed by expatriate workers. Therefore, achieving the proper equilibrium between local and expatriate forces with a priority on increasing local employment opportunities is vital. Creating relevant and proactive policies and action plans to build human capital is essential. This study aims to evaluate the current challenges concerned with workforce localisation in the resort sector of the Maldives. This research adopts an exploratory case study approach with the target population being the managers and human resource managers of resorts in the Maldives. The sample population was selected using non-probability purposive sampling. Data was collected using semi-structured, open-ended interviews with 12 participants. The interviews were transcribed and coded, and themes were generated using content analysis. The overarching themes indicate the need for national-level strategies and collective effort from the industry, the regulatory authorities, and educational institutions. The key findings suggest conflicting opinions on striking a balance between expatriate and local workers. The challenge lies in attracting the required workforce from the local population, leading to a reliance on expatriates. The lack of local skills, experience and qualifications adds to the burden of local recruitment. However, findings indicate that areas and roles in the resort sector can be easily localised, thus benefiting the local population. Currently, the government and the resort sector facilitate local development by aiming to close the linguistic proficiency gap, internships, and graduate management programs. The research findings highlight the importance of creating job value, combatting misconceptions and stereotyping, cultivating a work-oriented mindset, and having an inclusive policy paving part-time employment for students. Furthermore, career counselling, real-world learning experiences and training facilities are integral to the success of workforce localisation in the Maldives.*

Keywords: workforce localisation, resort sector, hospitality, human capital development, local employment.

Introduction

Over the past 50 years, tourism has become the most significant sector in the Maldives and contributes significantly to the country's GDP. As of August 2023, there are 173 operating resorts contributing to a total operational capacity of 42,219 beds, with more properties under development in the Maldives (Ministry of Tourism [MoT], 2023a). A considerable number of individuals are employed in the resorts of the Maldives. Maldives Bureau of Statistics [MBS] (2020) reports that there were 15,093 locals and 20,794 expatriates, amounting

to a total workforce of 35,887 employees working in the resorts at the end of 2020. Among the entire workforce, 58% is expatriates. However, the Employment Act of Maldives conditions employers to prefer locals over expatriates (Labour Relations Authority [LRA], 2016). Nonetheless, due to the lack of locals available for resort employment, the Ministry of Tourism (MoT) has regulated a leeway to maintain expatriate jobs at 55% of the total number of employees whilst strongly encouraging employers to prioritise local hiring (Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture [MoTAC] 2013b). The current employment situation in the resort sector indicates an inadequate number of competent locals to meet the industry's employment needs. The study by MBS (2020) on resort employment highlights the need for understanding the labour market, economic diversification, workforce diversity, and formulating improved opportunities for residents, especially women and young people. However, there are few to no studies addressing the issue of workforce localisation in the tourism industry of the Maldives.

Thus, this study aims to analyse the challenges of workforce localisation in the resort sector of Maldives by taking the employers' perspective surrounding the issue of local employment in the resorts. The objectives of this study were to (a) understand the localising strategies adopted by various countries to develop the local workforce; (b) evaluate the existing strategies for assimilation of locals in the hospitality and tourism sector; (c) investigate the current issues and challenges in localising the resort sector of the Maldives; and (d) explore workforce localisation strategies that can be implemented in the resort sector of the Maldives.

The findings of this study shed light on the current situation of local employment in the resort sector. It identifies the challenges in hiring locals regarding their qualifications and commitment to the job. Furthermore, it comments on the effectiveness of the existing localisation practices, such as internships, mentoring programmes, and training initiatives, acknowledging that while such programmes have their advantages, more input is required to create societal awareness and career guidance for potential employees. Finally, it provides recommendations for addressing the challenges in local employment. The findings will enable the government, policymakers, and resort operators to make evidence-based strategies favouring local employability and enhancing job experience for locals.

Literature review

Workforce localisation (WL) has emerged as a significant global issue in recent decades. Currently, the Middle East, the West, China, India, Eastern European countries, and more face issues related to expatriate workforce domination (Bose & Dey, 2018). The components of WL attempt to recruit and develop competent locals to increase job prospects and thus replace or lower the need for the expatriate workforce in both public and private sectors of a country (Cave, 2004, as cited in Waxin et al., 2018; Law et al., 2009, as cited in Alkathiri et al., 2021; Pegram et al., 2018; Waxin et al., 2020). As such, countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), such as Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain, that depend highly on expatriate workforce populations have started implementing various strategies to reduce reliance on expatriates to align with local labour supply and demands (Al-Harrasi & Al-Balushi, 2020; Alkathiri et al., 2021; Waxin et al., 2018). These strategies generally include initiatives aimed at facilitating the skills and capabilities of the local workforce; governments

and private institutions heavily investing in vocational training programs and in education to promote employability (Al-Asfour & Khan, 2014; Al Harbi, 1997, as cited in Al-Asfour and Khan, 2014; Ofosu & Sarpong, 2022; van der Kley, 2020). GCC governments for instance have taken initiatives to develop a conducive climate to support entrepreneurship programs, innovation hubs and business startups (Lawrence et al., 2008, as cited in Sarker & Rahman, 2020; Sarker & Rahman, 2020). Thus, the WL strategies implementation signals the significance of economic diversification and an attempt to decrease the reliance on the expatriate workforce.

Localising strategies adopted by various countries to develop the local workforce

Localisation requires a strategic approach to achieve a healthy balance between expatriates and local workers. Bose and Dey (2018) put up a comprehensive framework consisting of four distinct stages that aim to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of localisation processes. According to Bose and Dey (2018), the first stage is obtaining a genuine commitment to localisation, followed by the second stage, designing the appropriate strategies. Transitioning to stage 3 involves the implementation of the strategies formulated during the preceding phase; and the fourth stage, known as the consolidation stage, encompasses the ongoing maintenance and evaluation of the achievements attained by localisation endeavours (Bose & Dey, 2018). However, the actions of a multinational enterprise (MNE) are not solely driven by internal imperatives to align with the overarching organisational strategy but are regarded as decisions that emerge from the interplay between these imperatives and external influences that compel the MNE to conform to the institutional environment of the host country (Clark & Lengnick-Hall, 2012; Mayrhofer et al., 2019). For instance, the Omanisation policy implemented in Oman created mixed results, where the public sector achieved more success compared to the private sector in workforce localisation, owing to job security, social status, fewer working hours, a fixed income and favourable working conditions and environment (Al Harrasi & Al Balushi, 2020). Furthermore, the Emiratisation initiative in UAE is a social engineering project to address the lack of entrepreneurial spirit among locals and allow investors to hold full ownership to create a sense of nationalistic zeal for locals to participate in economic development (Lawrence et al., 2008, as cited in Sarker & Rahman, 2020; Sarker & Rahman, 2020; Waxin et al., 2018, as cited in Sarker & Rahman, 2020). Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, Saudization focused on local workforce development in a planned manner, particularly toward developing youth with the integration of education and the relevant institutions (Al-Asfour & Khan, 2014; Al Harbi, 1997, as cited in Al-Asfour and Khan, 2014). Countries with WL policies and programs have significantly reduced local unemployment rates even though they cannot be deemed "successful".

Economical, workforce availability, time, and cost of transition

Workforce localisation strategies facilitate the optimisation of local human resources capital development; however, they have positive and negative outcomes.

Having a local head of human resources at resorts and empowering the role together with recruitment and training practices designed to attract locals can enhance workforce localisation (Darwish et al., 2022). Research findings show workforce localisation has the potential to increase labour costs coupled with reduced productivity, and thus, companies prefer expatriates who are available for lower wages with fewer turnover rates (Al-Asfour & Khan, 2014, as cited in Shayah & Sun, 2019; Samarin & Al-Asfour, 2023; Shayah & Sun, 2019). However, Brohman (1996) argues that developing tourism strategies can positively influence local communities if they are prioritised over the industry goals. Therefore, the policies designed as an implementation strategy should keep the local community's desires intact.

Institutional mechanisms established to facilitate tourism developmental strategies may vary significantly among communities concerning local conditions, needs and interests. Tourism planning and designing should transcend the 'state-versus-market' dichotomy that currently characterises much development debate (Brohman, 1996). UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait foreign labour constituted a staggering 96%, 94% and 83%, respectively, while Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Oman had a foreign labour population of 49.5%, 64% and 71%, respectively (Al-Asfour et al., 2022). By 2020, the resort sector of the Maldives had 57.9% and 42.1% of foreign and local workers, respectively (MBS, 2020). Thus, it is essential to understand that WL is not the entire expulsion of the expatriate workforce but achieving a balance based on economic factors and needs.

Cultural authenticity, skills, and training

The foreign influence, the national culture and the human resources activities in the hospitality industry have an impact on demonstrating the cultural authenticity of a destination. Waxin et al., (2018) state that creating local employment opportunities has become a significant concern in the Arab Gulf region, where locals are the minority population. The recruitment and development of a country or region's citizens facilitates employability, which mitigates a country's dependency on expatriate labour (Waxin et al., 2018). In countries such as GCC, locals often must adjust to a dominant expatriate working population, making the locals more foreign to the environment in which they are born and raised (Al-Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2020). The cultural disposition of the UAE and many Gulf countries consider certain jobs unsuitable for citizens as it is associated with social standing and status (Al-Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2020; Sarker & Rahman, 2020). Cultural norms are the main attributed reasons why most Emiratis do not participate in certain kinds of employment (Al-Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2014; Daleure, 2019; Waxin et al., 2018, as cited in Sarker & Rahman, 2020). An effort on a national level should be induced to incorporate private sector-ready workers by reforming and integrating the educational system disciplines with science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (Younis et al., 2023). Therefore, it is of utmost importance to understand the local culture and have more culturally aware policies for organisations to conduct successful localisation programs in the private sector.

Best practices of training and development in building a competent workforce

Rising levels of unemployment among the youth have become a global problem, with more than seventy-five million unemployed locals worldwide. While the reasons for high unemployment among the youth are not clear, 40% of employers believe that most youths seeking employment lack the necessary skills required for entry-level positions at companies (Mourshed et al., 2013). Studies conducted throughout Asia, the Middle East, the United States of America, and the United Kingdom have helped to identify significant strategies which can be used to deliver a highly competent workforce. These strategies involve education and training, coupling technology, instilling work ethics and teamwork, and increasing the morale and satisfaction of local employees (Al-Asfour & Khan, 2014; Miller, 2018; Mourshed et al., 2013; Udani et al., 2015). Saudi Government has focused on increasing the number of educational institutes, practising an all-inclusive educational system, providing international scholarships for locals, as well as introducing vocational training and skills development under General Organization for Technical Education and Vocational Training (Al-Asfour & Khan, 2014). These studies indicate that policies pertaining to workforce localisation must consider different approaches to training and development to build the nationally required skills in a country.

Success factors of localisation

Localisation approaches have been established in various countries in the UAE and GCC; although the success of these initiatives is not as progressive as expected, there have been drastic changes in Qatar's unemployment rates and minor changes in the other countries which have adopted the localisation approach (Barua, n.d.). Through localisation practices, locals will attain higher employment levels and secure the economy by reducing currency leakage out of the country (Harry, 2007). With more locals working in the industry, the government has other benefits, such as protecting the values of the national industries, building trust between local establishments and employees, and minimising recruitment and labour costs (Kernen & Lam, 2014). The indigenisation of the human resources department in organisations is associated with successful workforce localisation policy implementation (Darwish et al., 2022). The most potent determinants of successful workforce localisation are the role played by the human resources director, recruitment procedures, policies, and training (Alanezi, 2014). According to Waxin and Bateman (2016), critical success factors in implementing successful localisation programs are (1) commitment from senior management, (2) strategic talent management programs, and (3) the monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of practices. Therefore, adherence to the success factor frameworks can be a means of facilitating successful localisation efforts.

The local employment situation in the resort sector of the Maldives

A considerable number of locals work in the resort sector of the Maldives. Data published by the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation (2008) indicates that 9,886 locals and 8,371 expatriates worked in the resort sector in 2006. By 2011,

tourism job opportunities had increased; however, 15% of employed men and 4% of employed females worked in the tourism sector (MoTAC, 2013a; MoTAC, 2013b). Therefore in 2011, the local-to-expatriate ratio was reviewed from 50:50 to 45:55 (MoTAC, 2013b). However, Maldives' fifth tourism masterplan focuses on balancing the local and expatriate workforce by reviewing the expatriate quota system, identifying local shortage areas, and introducing tourism talent visas to attract a highly skilled expatriate workforce (MoT, 2023b). Thus, it is evident that the Government's current focus is finding an equilibrium between locals and expatriates by understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the existing workforce.

The Government of Maldives, educational institutions, and skill development programs

Despite the constant challenges, the government administration has been continuously combating the country's national skill shortage in the past decade. In 2004, to battle the rising youth unemployment in the country with 20,000 unemployed youths, the Government of Maldives, in collaboration with the Asian Development Bank (ADB), started the Employment Skills Training Project (ESTP) to address the intensifying issue (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2015; Noordeen, 2009). The initial consultancy with stakeholders to determine the national skills in demand started in 2007, and the related national vocational qualifications framework began in 2008 and concluded in 2009 (ADB, 2015). The concept of demand-driven education was an alien concept for educators, enterprises, and learners themselves as a shift from the curriculum (what students should learn) to competency standards (what graduates can do at given levels) was not widely accepted in the academic community (Noordeen, 2009). Renewed hopes came with the first national skill development master plan to create the much-needed local talent pool based on national needs (The President's Office, 2021). In addition, the fifth tourism master plan emphasises reforming education and training to align with the tourism industry by increasing digital access points and public-private partnerships for vocational training (MoT, 2023b). Thus, a renewed effort to develop local skills and expertise will benefit the resort sector of the Maldives.

The literature study provides an analysis of the tactics employed by different countries in the field of WL, as well as the obstacles and factors contributing to their success throughout the implementation of these policies. The significance of cultural authenticity, training, and development is underscored by policy makers in the pursuit of establishing a proficient workforce (Al-Asfour & Khan, 2014; Miller; Waxin et al., 2018). Furthermore, Alanezi (2014)

emphasized the importance of institutional processes and regulations that promote local employment, in conjunction with industry best practices in training and development. Within a broader framework, the research recognizes the insufficiency of local talent in meeting the workforce requirements of the business, resulting in a dependence on foreign labour. Hence, it is crucial to prioritize comprehension of the labour market, fostering workforce diversity, and establishing improved prospects for local individuals, with a specific focus on women and the younger demographic. Based on existing scholarly sources, the Maldives has the

potential to expand its localisation efforts by implementing vocational training programs and education initiatives tailored to the specific needs of the sector and the youthful workforce. Based on the comprehensive analysis of the extant scholarly literature, it can be deduced that resort operators and governmental entities have the potential to allocate resources towards the implementation of training and development initiatives, with the aim of both attracting and retaining competent local personnel. Furthermore, it is imperative to undertake initiatives aimed at fostering community awareness and providing career guidance to prospective employees from the local community. The integration of important topics from the literature has been employed to conceptualize the primary areas of attention in this study, as depicted in Figure 1.

The themes identified from the literature suggest that workforce localisation is a joint effort that requires attention from various stakeholders, such as the government and policymakers, resort operators, and authoritative bodies. Furthermore, the strategies need input from educational institutions and support from the local community.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study
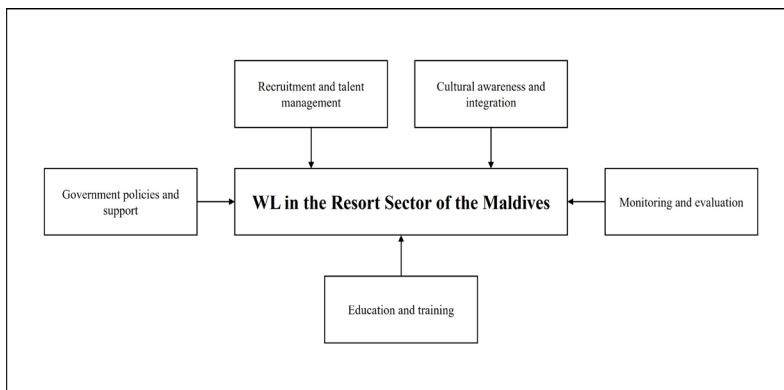
Methodology

This section focuses on the research design and methods applied in the study. It also discusses the ethical considerations of this study.

Research design

This research adapts an exploratory case study approach since the contemporary challenges regarding the topic area have not been studied in a Maldivian context. Exploratory research design, usually consistent with qualitative studies, allows researchers to probe deeper into the topic (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Therefore, this research design captures the phenomena of workforce localisation from the participants' perspective. The target population is the managers and human resource managers of resorts in the Maldives, as the study aims to understand the workforce localisation issues from the perspective of employers in the resort industry. The

sample population was selected using non-probability purposive sampling from 12 different resorts. Table 1 shows the number and type of participants chosen for the study. Data was collected using semi-structured, open-ended interviews until data saturation was reached. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for manual coding.

Table 1.

Selection of participants

	Participant ID	Designation
1	INT001	Manager, Human Resources
2	INT003	Executive Assistant Manager
3	INT005	Manager, Human Resources
4	INT006	Manager, Human Resources
5	INT007	General Manager
6	INT012	Executive Assistant Manager
7	INT013	President, Tourism NGO
8	INT014	Manager, Human Resources
9	INT016	General Manager
10	INT019	Resort Manager
11	INT020	Manager, Human Resources
12	INT021	Director, Learning and Development

The transcribed data were re-organised in the order of the themes of the questions, as answers were provided elsewhere in response to other questions. The research team read the answers for each question for familiarisation. This step was constructive to the coding process as the answers to the questions were spread out within the interview since the interview process had open-ended, probing questions. Once the data were organised, the general coding process was initiated, where meaningful text segments were identified and labelled as open codes. The open codes were organised in a codebook to crosscheck any overlapping codes with similar contexts and maintain consistency in the codes. Next, the data were systematically coded using the codebook as a reference. Similar codes were highlighted and grouped to categorise them according to the emerging themes. The process was iterative and required constant comparison of the new data segments with previously coded ones to ensure consistency and refine the codes, as necessary. The entire process was annotated with insights and interpretations that surfaced during the coding process, which aided in clarifying the ideas and integrating the findings with the existing literature. Next, the codes were examined using thematic analysis to examine the coded data for overarching themes and patterns. Other members of the research team reviewed the themes and patterns to ensure the consistency and validity of the analysis.

Ethics

Participants were briefed about the purpose of the research before conducting the interviews. Participants' rights and involvement in the study were explained, and their written consent was obtained. The anonymity of the participants was maintained as a top priority since this research contains sensitive information regarding their employment statuses. None of the findings reflects any individual thought or specific workplace or position. Participants were given the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

Findings

The codes generated from the findings were reviewed and summarised into six themes (Figure 2). The themes discuss the opinion of resort employers regarding local versus foreign employment, the challenges of striking a positive balance between local and foreign employment, resort departments with high potential for localisation, current practices and strategies, and recommendations for bringing a positive change in localising the workforce. This section discusses the themes of this study in detail.

Figure 2. Key themes from the findings
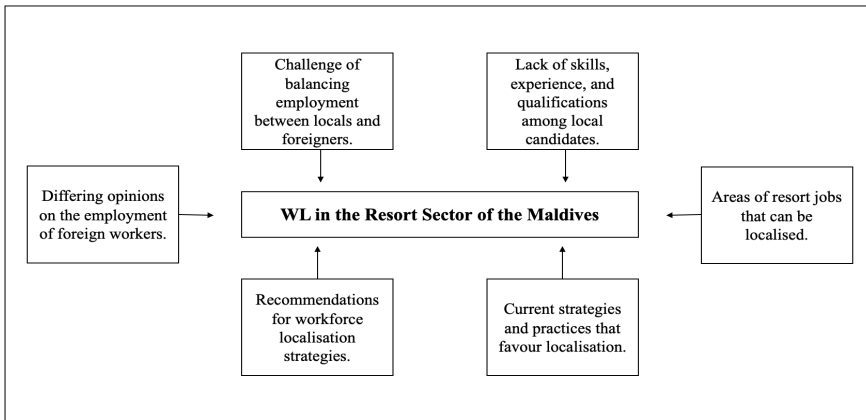
Theme 1: Differing opinions on the employment of foreign workers

The Maldives' tourism sector faces complex challenges regarding the employment of local and foreign workers. There are differing opinions on the employment of foreign workers in the Maldives resort sector. Findings show that while some consider hiring foreigners necessary to meet the industry's labour demands, others see it as a barrier to creating employment possibilities for the locals. Employers in the resort sector raise questions regarding the viability of the current strategies in local employment and its prospective financial effects. Some contend that specific jobs, particularly those at the managerial level, call for specialised knowledge that might not be easily accessible among locals.

"It is not a huge challenge except for the leadership work. That's where I find it difficult. I find there is a scarcity in local leadership roles, but in other roles, there is no issue" (INT021).

"It is an issue in term of economic perspective, but on operational level we are more concerned on doing the job done, so we don't mind whether we have local or foreigner as long as we can do the job. But in term of economic perspective and effectiveness of certain jobs, we prefer locals" (INT016).

Similar findings were corroborated by studies done in the Middle East, which showed that local employment contributed to higher labour costs and decreased productivity, causing some companies to favour expatriates who are willing to work for lower wages and exhibit lower turnover rates (Al-Asfour & Khan, 2014; Samarin & Al-Asfour, 2023; Shayah & Sun, 2019). However, there is general agreement that initiatives should strike a balance between foreign and domestic employment, particularly in marketing the distinctive cultural and eco-tourist identity of the Maldives.

"Because when you look at the tourism product in the Maldives, we are marketing tourism as a local product. We place more focus on eco-tourism based on local culture, with the cultural theme. We cannot bring that theme by employing more expats" (INT005).

Studies show that local employment in tourism signifies sustainable cultural tourism and global acceptance of the authenticity of the tourism product (Boakye, 2022; Feihan & Chongliang, 2020). As the Maldives tourism sector continues to grow, finding the right balance between foreign expertise and local talent remains a crucial part of continuous growth initiatives for the sector.

Theme 2: Challenge of balancing employment between locals and foreigners

The interviews identified that balancing the employment of locals and foreigners in the Maldives resort sector is challenging. One of the main reasons highlighted by employers was the lack of qualified locals for certain positions. Additionally, local candidates' preference for employment, particularly atolls, poses challenges for employers to recruit locals in some regions of the country.

"Locals look forward to the job opportunities from the resort located within atolls which the locals belong to. They don't want to go away from the atolls" (INT003).

Therefore, employers often prefer local personnel, particularly those near Malé city, but face challenges in atolls farther from the capital, where workers may need more hospitality industry experience. The current "one island, one resort" approach affects local workers in the industry, and there is an overwhelming need for the government and tourism operators to facilitate reliable commuting options and family-friendly environments in resorts to streamline employment and community needs (MBS, 2020; Shakeela et al., 2011). While some of the

participants perceive the employment of expatriates as necessary to meet labour needs, others see it as a cultural and economic challenge, raising concerns about the long-term viability of such activities. Studies from the GCC also confirm that workforce localisation raises labour costs with higher turnover rates while reducing productivity; therefore, businesses choose to hire expatriates who may work for less and have lower turnover rates (Samarin & Al-Asfour, 2023; Shayah & Sun, 2019). Another prevalent issue for employers was the lack of loyalty and dependability among local workers. However, several businesses are committed to prioritising hiring locals and have exceeded their local-to-expatriate ratios.

> *"I'm very happy to say that we have always over exceeded our target of having locals vs. expatriates" (INT014).*

High employee turnover has been linked with organisation-specific and employee-specific reasons (Avcıkurt et al., 2023; Michael & Fotiadis, 2022; Mohsin et al., 2023), and the findings from the Maldivian resort sector relate to both, attributing to the need for better HR strategies and the alignment of employees' personal and professional needs for a healthy work-life balance.

Although measures to boost local employment in the hospitality industry are beneficial to the local economy, the findings are far from the expectations. The need to favour local employment is stressed by auditors and regulatory organisations, who frequently make recommendations and look for explanations when the ratios are skewed.

> *"What we are forcing upon is to have, more number of local hosts, as per the percentage ratio" (INT006).*

> *"So, highly different resorts will have different strategies, and also it depends on where your highest turnover occurs. I mean, a resort might want to, might be able to 100% localise the housekeeping, but may not be able to localise their F&B even to 30% so, and then many resorts will just offset these different department and section strategically, based on where their strengths and weaknesses lie, so, and every resort will have their own strategy directions as to where they want to go" (INT019).*

However, the actual implementation varies, whereby some of the resorts exhibit the results by hiring local junior hosts while falling short of the intended local employment criteria.

> *"I think we are getting the results, we have about six to seven junior hosts in our resort. So yeah, we are getting the results. But, it is not up to the mark, I would say, we have a lot of things which we have to work upon" (INT006).*

> *"I find there is a scarcity in local leadership roles, but in other roles there is no issue" (INT005).*

> *"More managements preferred expatriates for higher levels" (INT001).*

Furthermore, there is space for improvement in the effectiveness of graduate employability, as very few graduates are immersed in resort careers.

> *"like I said, I mean, if you compare to 100% of the people, I mean colleagues who graduate or students who graduate from the universities, just imagine how many of them end up in a hotel. That itself shows that the effectiveness is not up to the best yet" (INT006).*

> *"It's not extremely productive yet, it's not very effective, I've seen a lot of people who have done tourism degree working somewhere else" (INT021).*

Local employment continues to be hampered by geographic distribution, family commitments, and preconceptions about working in resorts.

> *"Locals like to work in, they look for jobs close to Male' because their family might be residing in Male' or, the same thing is true for other atolls, resorts in other atolls main sectors. For example, if we look at Ari Atoll, the staff who are working from nearby islands would prefer to work in the Ari Atoll. So, it all depends on the population and the willingness of the locals, where they want to, where their family resides and where they want to work" (INT016).*

Industry branding, open policies, and cooperation between domestic and foreign brands are being implemented to shift views and promote meaningful engagement to increase the impact of these tactics. Following rules and laws that emphasise the significance of ethical behaviour is essential. The general problem is in aligning hiring with operational demands and open positions. The current workforce ratio policy is acknowledged as a focal point or guidance but needs proper authoritative monitoring and is not considered adequate.

Theme 3: Lack of skills, experience, and qualifications among local candidates

Employers voiced their concerns about the need for more skills, experience, and qualifications among the local employees. Qualities such as dedication, dependability, and loyalty to the job are essential factors employers seek. Employers expressed that foreign workers frequently showed better commitment to their jobs, owing to the fact that expatriates are on the island solely for the job and are free from other distractions.

> *"So, your expatriates, once they are in the Maldives on a specific work visa, they can't move around, they are stuck with one employer. But Maldivians, have the freedom to move around, they sometimes don't even care to give proper notice according to the employment" (INT019).*

Studies show that due to the structured nature of employment contracts, expatriates are typically goal-oriented and rank higher in work engagement (Chen et al., 2023; Moufakkir & OuakOuak, 2022). On the other hand, local employees'

freedom in moving between employment and regions was highlighted by the participants as an explanation for this mentality, which results in inconsistent commitment and frequent job changes. However, this viewpoint differs among other employers who believe that local employees can match or even go beyond the passion shown by expatriates with the proper training, support, and commitment from employers.

HR departments of resorts in the Maldives consider several elements and criteria while recruiting employees. The candidates' attitude, charisma, and motivation are the key features the interviewed employers emphasised, and it is believed that attitude and a constructive mindset are essential qualities that can be strengthened through training.

> *"As long as the person has a positive attitude and is willing to serve people and is willing to work in a triple industry like the hospitality, we are willing to train. So, it's not a question of qualification, I think it's more question of attitude"* (INT019).

Employers value qualities such as tolerance, open-mindedness, and acceptance of diverse cultures and backgrounds (Gebbels et al., 2019). The set of qualifications and skills required for hospitality jobs vary depending on the employment position; thus, it influences recruiting decisions. Candidates with prior industry experience are frequently sought out, as are those who have completed studies in the hotel industry. In addition to having a strong command of English and the ability to communicate successfully with visitors, other vital characteristics include computer literacy and communication skills.

Participants of the study discussed that foreign nationals are more frequently hired for senior management jobs due to their considerable expertise and skill set. However, employers stressed that nationality is not the sole deciding factor; employment is based on qualification, experience, and skills. Employers also expressed that they find it difficult to attract local employees to certain professions, such as specific technical positions and high-level management roles; hence, employers are compelled to hire expatriates. Studies from the European hospitality industry show that senior management candidates must possess leadership, administrative, and creative skills proficiency, with the latest competencies in line with industry standards (Carlisle et al., 2022; Temizkan & Yabanci, 2020). Despite the difficulties, it is acknowledged that dedication, dependability, and skill development are areas that require focus for supporting a robust local workforce in the resort industry of the Maldives.

Apart from skills and qualifications, other factors impact striking a balance between local and foreign workers. Employers highly seek language proficiency, cultural attitudes of career responsibilities, and local workforce preparedness.

> *"Guest service agent or a butler, one of the job specifications is foreign language. Foreign language, mainly we consider the general European languages or Asian, Chinese or Japanese. If we have qualified locals who are skilled in language, definitely we would hire locals for that position"* (INT016).

In addition, literature shows that a significant barrier in attaining qualified

locals relates to the need for a well-organised educational system and curriculum to prepare locals for hospitality careers (MoT, 2023). Employers argue that resort familiarisation trips alone are inefficient as they do not generate enough interest in students considering hospitality jobs as a career pathway. Therefore, organisations must take the initiative to connect with the Maldivian educational system to introduce modules within the curriculum to align it more in line with the hospitality job market demands.

Theme 4: Areas of resort jobs that can be localised in the resort sector

There are a variety of viewpoints regarding areas in the hotel industry that are appropriate for local hiring, but there is universal agreement on specific roles that can be localised. These include finance, Information and Communications Technology (ICT), HR, culinary arts, food and beverage (F&B), housekeeping, and other hospitality service-related positions. Employers stated that locals have the potential and ability to succeed in various departments, as evidenced by the industry's growth in hiring locals for HR, culinary arts, and housekeeping jobs.

> *"Like finance, IT, HR, so these are the jobs which also exist in the hotel industry. So, that could also be an area where your students can look to" (INT003).*

The importance of the culinary arts is particularly emphasised, focusing on delivering the uniqueness and authenticity of Maldivian cuisine.

> *"I think culinary has a huge scope…We are talking about destination cuisine. So, who's going to make authentic Maldivian food than a Maldivian himself or herself? I can't expect Italian chef to cook garudhiya. That taste, that flavour, that ingredient will not come" (INT013).*

Employers also point out that due to legal requirements, certain roles that call for specific licences, including HR leadership and transportation, are more likely to be filled by locals. Although local employment across departments is acknowledged as a possibility, efforts to increase the localisation of positions, particularly at the leadership and management levels, still require much attention.

Theme 5: Current strategies and practices that favour localisation in the resort sector

In the Maldives, efforts are underway to address the complex relationships between local and foreign employees in the hospitality industry. Resorts and educational institutions are using a variety of tactics to promote increased local participation, guided by the government's responsibility of maintaining a specified employment ratio, although it lacks the envision of regulations by the LRA.

> *"It is not enough; we have to do more…in every level, the policies and procedures and laws and everything should focus on tourism industry to build a skilled workforce or to give internships or even indirect support for the industry. So that is one strategic level thinking that we all should have" (INT016).*

Aiming to close the gap in linguistic proficiency, educational attainment, and cultural perspectives of employment duties, there are current initiatives in place, including internship programs (MoT, 2023), educational alliances (The Maldives National University [MNU], 2023b; Visit Maldives, 2021), and skill development courses and projects (Maldives National Skills Development Authority [MNSDA], 2021). These initiatives are bringing the resorts in Maldives closer to having a trained and diverse local workforce in the industry as it develops.

The resorts included in this study noted that they are actively pursuing measures to support local employment and skill development. All the participating resorts have initiated Graduate Management Programs, working with local universities, colleges, and schools, attending job fairs, and providing internship opportunities to attract local talent. The focus is developing a local employee base with the ideal mix of technical abilities, attitude, and hospitality business knowledge. Five out of the 12 resorts mentioned that they prioritise employing locals more than foreigners by promoting the vacancies on local platforms first and by having a locals-first policy. With explicit goals for female employment across the industry, initiatives are taken to boost the representation of local women in the sector. Moreover, a focus on maintaining a specific ratio of local to foreign personnel in different roles is placed on succession planning, which is evident from the fifth tourism master plan (MoT, 2023b). Overall, these programs show a dedication to developing local talent and creating a knowledgeable workforce within the Maldives' hospitality sector..

Theme 6: Recommendations for workforce localisation strategies in the resort sector

Employment issues in the resort sector of the Maldives require state engagement at the parliamentary level to prioritise locals and safeguard regional prospects. Addressing the root causes of the problem, such as misconceptions about the business and stereotypes surrounding local employees, is crucial.

> *"Some students and parents believe doctors, teachers, nurses, and pilots have the only future here. They are not aware of future scope of hospitality. They can't even accept this is also an industry which can be learned and gained skills"* *(INT001)*.

The interviewed employers suggest improving the existing employment situation by promoting the value of all jobs within the sector, encouraging part-time work while studying, and from entry-level roles to get operational experience. They advocate for comprehensive career counselling, expansion of training facilities, internships, real-world learning experiences, and localising crucial positions. According to a study conducted in Malaysia, graduates exposed to simulation-based gamification learning processes in hospitality studies show more rigour in solving issues in the hospitality business and better comprehending the effects of humanising technology (Ragavan & Balasubramanian, 2021). Additionally, Goh and Okumus (2020) proposed a 10-step strategy to attract and retain young workforce, including a focus on job attitudes, career pathways, flexible work schedules, on-the-job training, pay transparency, community involvement, mentoring programs,

equal opportunities, fair working conditions, and celebrating young talent and success. Notably, the recommendations from the employers determined from the findings align with global best practices in retaining local employees.

The interview data suggests that a multifaceted strategy is needed to close the gap between local and foreign workers in the hotel sector. Strategies should be implemented from the beginning of education, emphasising raising a generation of qualified locals who are optimistic about the future of the sector. Vocational training programs and skill development efforts should be incorporated into the educational system, and industry-related training sessions should be a staple of high school and college curricula. Local hotel institutes and vocational training facilities should be strengthened, and fresh graduates may benefit from internship programs to gain real-world experience and improve their employability.

> *"Government should standard up with the power of parliament level to defend the opportunities in hospitality to locals and review the figures to give more importance to the locals" (INT020).*

> *"Going back to the basic encouraging and ensuring that there are strong academic opportunities for people, along with the practice, practical is also an important part of it" (INT021).*

Such strategies should be holistic and require collaboration between the government, resorts, educational institutions, and industry groups (Alanezi, 2014; Darwish et al., 2022; Waxin & Bateman, 2016). Supporting industry-related research and working with associations can also help identify areas for improvement in strategy and policy.

Participants in this study highlighted that the Maldives is trying to resolve the issues surrounding local vs. expatriate workers in the hotel sector, with the groundwork laid by the government's commitment to retain a specific percentage of local workers. Both resorts and educational institutions have undertaken various methods and programs to promote the involvement of regional talent in the business, such as awareness-raising initiatives, partnerships with academic institutions, and internship programs.

Limitations

This research solely focused on the Maldivian resort sector and its perception towards localising its workforce within a limited scope of the Maldivian tourism industry. Therefore, it does not shed light on the localisation issues of the industry, such as guest house tourism, safari tourism, aviation, tourism marketing, and destination management. Future studies are suggested to delve into the various sectors and understand the localisation issues and the impacts of foreign employment on the tourism industry of the Maldives. Furthermore, this study focused solely on the perspective of employers in the resort industry. Hence, the researchers believe that future research needs to explore the viewpoint of employees to attain a holistic idea of the workforce issues in the resort sector.

Another limitation the team identified was the sensitive nature of some of the issues discussed in the interviews. Participants needed to be more open in expressing concerns regarding local employment and policy adherence. However,

the researchers had the opportunity to reiterate the safety of the participants by ensuring their anonymity and confidentiality of the information shared.

Discussion and Recommendations

The tourism industry of the Maldives is proliferating with multiple projections for development. The government of the Maldives envisions tourism expansion by bed capacity, venturing into new markets, and introducing new tourism concepts (Government of Maldives, 2019). Furthermore, the Strategic Action Plan 2019-2023 aims to reduce irregular expatriate employment by 35% by 2023 (Government of Maldives, 2019). Therefore, by analysing the current challenges concerned with workforce localisation in the resort sector of the Maldives, this study aims to present the employers' perspective surrounding the issue of local employment in the resorts. The findings of this study highlight the current issues with local and foreign employment and discuss recommendations for the relevant stakeholders to improve the resort sector's local employment sustainably.

The study was conducted with 12 employers from the resort sector, including human resource managers and general managers. The key findings of the study were summarised into six key themes. The themes are presented in Figure 2.

The findings of the study suggested that employers have mixed opinions on the consequences of local versus foreign employment, as there were benefits from local and foreign employees in the resort sector. One of the main arguments was that employers target to recruit candidates with the right attitude, skills, and experience. In contrast, some employers believe that many local candidates lack the qualities sought out by the employers. The interviewed participants also believed that local employees lack job commitment and dedication due to the geographic isolation of resorts and the enclave tourism concept, which poses challenges for local employees to spend time with their families. On the other hand, employers consider specific areas in hospitality that can be localised, such as housekeeping, F&B, culinary, and back-of-the-house departments such as finance and accounting, HR, and ICT. Moreover, many of the interviewed employers also trust local candidates can perform job tasks equally or better than expatriates, given the right guidance for career planning, mentoring, and proper training opportunities. Furthermore, there is a consensus among employees that the community's perspective towards hospitality careers must change positively.

The discussions with the resort employers have generated promising outcomes that will enable the government, policymakers, resort operators, and hospitality training institutions to devise strategic action plans to address localisation challenges. Employers highlighted the importance of creating value for all resort jobs to make locals more attracted to hospitality careers. There is a community bias regarding resort employment, especially around 'room boys' or 'waiters,' that they do not account for respectable careers (The International Labour Organization [ILO], n.d.). To change the view of locals regarding hospitality jobs, employers need to create attractive job structures, provide physically and mentally healthy working environments, foster knowledge sharing, and support innovation (Lugosi & Ndiuini, 2022; Wang, 2019). Creating job value can foster a healthy mindset regarding hospitality careers, attract young locals to pursue resort jobs, and enhance the job satisfaction of existing employees.

Employers also believe that the Maldives resort sector needs to embrace the

part-time and casual working culture, enabling more locals to engage in resort employment even if they cannot commit to full-time jobs. Given the enclave nature of the resort sector and the challenges in commuting from one island to the other, it is challenging to regulate part-time and casual jobs. Therefore, exploring sustainable and feasible transport operations and investing in off-island operations for back-of-the-house functions such as accounts, marketing, payroll, laundry, and bakeries could produce desirable employment solutions for locals residing in nearby islands. It was noted that career counselling needs to begin at an early age, and students and parents interested in the industry must receive proper awareness and guidance about a resort's working and living conditions. Studies conducted around the world support the idea that career advice programmes improve students' employability, along with self-awareness, opportunity awareness, decision-making skills, and transitioning learning abilities (Dopson et al., 2021; Pitan & Atiku, 2017; Teeuwisse & Brannon, 2020). Hence, career guidance workshops in islands, schools, and higher education institutions, along with mentor programmes, can produce promising results in attracting local candidates for resort job vacancies.

Another critical area of focus identified from the study was hospitality training and education. In the current era of the fourth industrial revolution, educational institutions must use innovative strategies for teaching and learning, such as gamification and simulated learning environments. Such tactics may be especially effective for hospitality training since using situated cognition theory in hospitality training contributes to the theoretical understanding of the role of learning context and has significant ramifications for training that aspires for rigour and efficiency within budget, location, and time restrictions (Konovalova & Demenev, 2020; Lui & Goel, 2022). The dynamic nature of the simulation fosters a spirit of competition among learners. It enables them to learn valuable skills for problem-solving and teamwork, as demonstrated by 'The Waiter Game,' an online training tool developed to support the training activity of young learners (Cantoni & Kalbaska, 2010). Additionally, business simulations enhance practical skills and hotel management practices, using modern technologies like cloud computing and virtual reality to increase participation, enhance content quality, and maintain emotional engagement (Hán et al., 2020; Konovalova & Demenev, 2020). Thus, exploring contemporary hospitality training approaches from global best practices can assist in creating a competent local workforce for the future.

Moreover, as hospitality employers are seeking candidates with the right attitude and mindset for hospitality, the mindset must be created and instilled in local hospitality students and training institutions. Leading hospitality schools across the globe also emphasise the importance of leadership, skill sets, human centricity, entrepreneurial thinking, and embracing diversity as the essential qualities they try to instil in their students (Les Roches, 2023; Schmitt, n.d.; The Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management [EAHM], 2023). Local training institutions and educators can incorporate such values into the teaching and training curricula to inculcate the desired hospitality qualities in their graduates.

Based on the findings from this research, recommendations can be initiated at the policy or legislative level to transform the future of hospitality employment and favour localisation. For instance, developing dependable transport infrastructure within the tourism zones will encourage more locals to engage in resort employment, as they can travel back to their families more frequently. As discussed above, it

will also enable more locals to take part-time or casual jobs in the resorts. The discussion around resort placement near communities and in islands has been going around for years, and positive outcomes have been observed over the past decade, such as the introduction of guesthouse tourism and better ferry systems within atolls (Maldives Financial Review [MFR], 2021; Shakeela & Cooper, 2009; RTL, 2023). However, resort operators need to create feasible duty schedules and more family-friendly environments for the betterment of resort employees.

Interviewed employers also highlighted that regions of the Maldives, being geographically isolated, need more training and skill development opportunities. Current initiatives to introduce training centres across the country provide opportunities for locals to attain training and qualifications, such as the 'Junior Colleges' project by the Ministry of Higher Education (Public Service Media [PSM], 2021). Additionally, public as well as private institutions have established their campuses, learning centres, and outreach centres in different atolls and islands, increasing the opportunity for locals to study while staying close to home (IUM Holdings Pvt. Ltd., 2023; MI College, 2023; MNU, 2023a; Villa College, 2023). Furthermore, the Maldives Qualifications Authority (MQA) recognises alternative learning modes, such as blended learning, E-learning, and distance learning (MQA, 2021). Although these initiatives foster country-wide learning, conducting a needs assessment throughout the country is vital and it is also important to focus training initiatives on regions lacking the necessary hospitality skills and qualifications. This would enable employers to focus recruitment efforts on nearby islands and attain qualified locals for resort vacancies.

Conclusion

Tourism is the bedrock of the Maldives economy. The resort sector, dominated by luxury brands, plays a pivotal role in developing the island nation. With employment opportunities available across the country, tourism has become a prominent industry that has experienced rapid growth since its inception. The industry is primarily dominated by foreign companies that have cemented their presence in global markets. Although foreign investments have boosted the economy, they come with dire consequences. Economic leakage is the biggest challenge the nation faces whereby employment forces are dominated by expatriates and are the leading factors contributing to it. In addition, the challenges of developing human resources for the industry have become a pressing issue with current institutions not being able to meet the demands of the industry and the stereotypical stigmata set around working in resorts. Although the industry is considered a champion and a blessing for the nation, it has garnered challenges in developing human resources that are cultivated locally. Thus, this research on workforce localisation examined the challenges experienced in developing proactive measures, from the lens of resort employers to build local human capital that can bring a balance, by revitalising local employment opportunities.

As the first of its kind, this research delved deeper into understanding how the industry supports and builds a local workforce in the resort sector. Therefore, an exploratory approach was adopted to capture the perspectives of employers considering localisation challenges, the effectiveness of current employment strategies, and the initiatives taken by employers to attract locals into resort employment. Consequently, this research employed a qualitative methodology, whereby semi-structured interviews were conducted with executive and managerial

level personnel from 12 different resorts. The findings were examined through thematic analysis, with particular attention given to the need for the development of strategies at the national level and the requirement for joint efforts between the private sector, government agencies, and academic institutions.

This research highlights the complex nature of the resort employment landscape and shows that there is a lack of soft skills among the pool of local employees and candidates compared to expatriates. Additionally, the lack of experience among the locals, especially for managerial positions, exacerbates the preference for selecting locals. Lack of educational attainment amongst locals also adds to the challenges of building a resilient and capable workforce. The local institutions can step up and meet the demands of employers in the resort sector, however, external forces such as socio-cultural actors, political discourses, and the existing regulations hinder bringing a balance to the workforce localisation. The government and resort employers need to adopt a role in facilitating the development of local human capital by bridging the linguistic proficiency gap. In addition, the facilitators should create mechanisms to attract and retain locals in resort employment.

The augmentation of employment opportunities holds significance in the socio-economic landscape of resort employment. This necessitates a collaborative effort towards countering misconceptions and stereotypes surrounding resort jobs. Moreover, the cultivation of realistic work flexibilities serves as a pivotal mechanism to empower locals in resort employment. Therefore, this requires the adoption of work-integrated learning experiences such as training facilities and outreach centres strategically positioned throughout the country that have the capabilities to meet the demands of resort employers. The implications of this study summarise future recommendations to enforce localisation at different stakeholder levels. Findings from this study have weighed upon the pressing issues regarding localisation, the current strategies being implemented, and the future recommendations to improve local employment in the resort sector of the Maldives. This research can therefore assist future studies of other tourism industry sectors and investigate the localisation issues in depth.

Statement of Conflict

The authors have no known conflict of interest to declare.

Acknowledgements

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