



Are People the Greatest Asset: Talent Management in SME Hotels in Nigeria during the COVID-19 crisis.

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Are People the Greatest Asset: Talent Management in SME Hotels in Nigeria during the COVID-19 crisis.

Purpose

This paper evaluates approaches to Talent Management (TM) in small to medium-sized enterprise (SME) hotels in Nigeria during the COVID-19 crisis drawing on the Resource-Based View (RBV) of Strategy.

Design/methodology/approach

An interpretivist methodology was adopted, and 42 semi-structured interviews were undertaken with SME hotel owners, self-initiated expatriate (SIE) talent and local workers in Nigerian hotels. A thematic approach to analysis was undertaken to identify key themes.

Findings

The findings highlight how SME hotel owners' reactive and short-term approaches to TM have created problems during the pandemic as they are unable to rely on acquiring SIE talent to fill key skills gaps. Furthermore, failure to capitalise on the expertise and networks of their current SIEs has resulted in a lack of knowledge sharing with other local employees. This results in TM strategies that do not offer differentiated approaches that balance talent flows to achieve competitive advantage.

Implications

SME hotel leaders should adopt a more equitable approach to TM that values all workers rather than exclusively focusing on SIEs. Employment contracts should ensure that SIEs are responsible for training and developing local workers as part of a networking approach to RBV.

Originality

This novel study focused on TM within SME hotels in a Nigerian context during COVID-19.

The findings show how SME senior leaders value SIE talent above local workers and pursue a TM strategy that perpetuates the status quo. The COVID-19 crisis has acted as a catalyst for leaders to recognise the value of local talent and consider a more sustainable approach to TM.

Keywords: Talent Management, RBV, SME hotels, COVID-19, Nigeria

Introduction

At a time when organisations throughout the world adjust to their new normal in the COVID-19 era, exploring the perceptions of Talent Management (TM), the challenges and opportunities company's face, is critical to sustainability within the hospitality sector (Brouder *et al.*, 2020; Baum *et al.*, 2020). TM can be described as the activities and processes that involve the systematic attraction, identification, development, engagement, retention, and deployment of those talents which are of particular value to an organisation to create strategic sustainable success (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2020, p. 457).

Challenges in attracting, developing, and retaining talent within the hospitality sector is not a new problem (Brannon and Burbach, 2021; Jooss *et al.*, 2021; Kravariti *et al.*, 2022) however, the COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated existing difficulties creating further talent shortages as employees exit the sector. This has led to calls for a reimagining of 'Talent Management strategies and practices' within the industry (Jooss *et al.*, 2022; Kirk *et al.*, 2021). This is particularly in those countries already facing considerable TM challenges such as Nigeria which is considered a high-risk environment (Coffey, 2022).

There are multiple broader difficulties in the Nigerian context including: political instability, failure by the government to address ongoing terrorist activities (Ajah and Salami, 2020); economic inefficiency, created by a lack of sound fiscal and monetary policy (Adelowokan *et al.*, 2019) and an inadequate healthcare system (Muhammad *et al.*, 2017). Against this backdrop the effects of COVID-19 have impacted some industries more than others for example the hospitality sector (He *et al.*, 2021).

Fias *et al.*, (2021) observe the hospitality sector in Nigeria has experienced a severe reduction in revenues, downsizing, reduced demand, and business restructuring triggered by the COVID-19 crisis. The hotel sector has been hard hit with Bello and Bello (2021) pointing

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3 to a steep decline in occupancy rates, a significant impact on revenue, owners being forced to
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5 sell off business facilities and large-scale job losses.
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8 As with elsewhere in the world, prior to COVID-19, turnover rates within the
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10 Nigerian hospitality sector were high. For example, Siyanbola and Gilman (2017) noted
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12 many employees left their employing organisation within their first year of employment.
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14 Retention problems in the sector have been attributed to poor working environments, lack of
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16 management support and inadequate reward (Vaquez, 2014). However, the crisis has
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18 amplified these issues, especially for those employed in certain roles (Baum *et al.*, 2020) with
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20 a lack of security (King Fung Wong *et al.*, 2021) and inequitable HR practices increasing the
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22 stress levels for hotel staff (Painter-Morland *et al.*, 2018). In Nigeria the hotel industry is
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24 dominated by small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Oriade *et al.*, 2021) and they
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26 account for 80% of employment in Nigeria and provide 50% of the country's GDP (PwC,
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28 2020).
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34 In this paper TM within the SME hotel sector is explored through the lens of
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36 Resource-Based View (RBV) (Barney, 1991) in the form of valuable skills and knowledge
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38 for a firm (Crane and Hartwell, 2019). The concept of talent flows from the field of TM is
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40 drawn on to illustrate how internal and external talent flows can be balanced to provide
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42 competitive advantage for the organisation (Collings *et al.*, 2019). Developing individuals
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44 within organisations plays a key role in such nurturing capabilities (Wright and McMahan,
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46 2011) to support short term and create long term competitive advantage. This is particularly
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48 important during the COVID crisis as Nigerian SME hotels will need to transform themselves
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50 in order to survive (Järvi and Khoreva, 2020).
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55 The aim of this paper is to fill the gap in our understanding of how the COVID-19
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57 pandemic has impacted TM approaches among SME hotels in Nigeria. This study makes
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several contributions to the existing literature. First, by combining RBV with the notion of talent flows the paper highlights how SME hotel leaders in Nigeria can move towards a more dynamic approach to TM that recognises the value of national talent. Second, by highlighting the importance of facilitating networks between local and foreign workers the paper reveals how skills and knowledge can be shared to improve competitive advantage. Third, the paper highlights the impact of scarce talent on the strategic success of SME hotels in hardship contexts such as Nigeria in times of crisis, showing how TM strategies can be adapted to enable survival in turbulent times.

Literature Review

Resource-Based View and Talent Flows

The RBV of strategy holds that the growth of firms is constrained by the resources it has (Barney, 1986; 1991) particularly the management skills that people within the firm may possess (Lockett, 2005; Penrose, 1959). The key to sustainable competitive advantage, it is argued, lies in possessing firm-specific resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable (unique), and non-substitutable, dubbed VRIN (Barney, 1986; 1991; Rumfelt, 1986). Valuable and rare resources are deemed to be those that are in limited supply and not equally available to the firm's competitors (current and future). Inimitability relates to resources that are not easily replicated by other companies and non-substitutability refers to those that cannot easily be replaced by other resources (Lockett *et al.*, 2009).

RBV has been criticised for being static in orientation (Beltrán-Martín and Roca-Puig, 2013; Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000). It has also been asserted that the so-called Penrose Effect can occur when managers fail to continually develop their own skills and knowledge (Lockett, 2005) and at the same time do not share their expertise with other talent. By failing

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3 to do this they limit the ability to enact the environment in which the firm operates (Collins,
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5 2021; Miller, 2019).

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8 In short, stocks and flows of talent in and out of firms have the potential to generate
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10 valuable skills and knowledge for a firm (Crane and Hartwell, 2019). Approaches to
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12 developing individuals within organisations play a key role in such nurturing capabilities
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14 (Wright and McMahan, 2011). A TM strategy that is designed to facilitate talent flows is one
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16 such approach (Collings *et al.*, 2019).

20 21 **Talent Management**

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23 TM can be defined as ‘the systematic identification of pivotal positions that differentially
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25 contribute to an organisation’s sustainable competitive advantage on a global scale’ together
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27 with ‘the development of a talent pool of high-potential and high-performing incumbents’
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29 and ‘the development of a differentiated HR architecture to fill these roles with the best
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31 available incumbents’ (Collings *et al.*, 2019, p. 543). The practices that underpin a strategic
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33 approach to talent management are designed to attract, develop, and retain talent, a key
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35 source of competitive advantage (Kabwe and Okorie, 2019).

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40 A proactive TM strategy is one in which a firm effectively identifies threats and
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42 opportunities, seizes opportunities, and then incorporates, develops, and reconfigures both
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44 internal and external resources in response to changes in the business environment (Harsch
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46 and Festing, 2020). However, the underpinning TM systems and processes through which
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48 these resources are managed are key to this success (Ambrosius, 2018; Jooss *et al.*, 2019).
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50 According to Glaister *et al.*, (2018), TM approaches that are focused on building networks to
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52 develop and share expertise will result in better organisational performance. It has been
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54 argued that individuals who have engaged in global mobility have access to more networks
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56 than those who do not (Crane and Hartwell, 2019; Mäkelä and Suutari, 2013).
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3 When seeking to develop a balanced portfolio of talent within an organisation, leaders
4 buy-in or develop talent or do both (Cooke *et al.*, 2021). A reliance on buying in talent alone,
5 however, is not held to offer firms a sustainable source of competitive advantage as without
6 training and development they may choose to leave the organisation leading to a decreased
7 imitability of human assets (Ambrosius, 2018). On the other hand, an approach that
8 emphasises developing only those identified as talent may result in a few more motivated
9 individuals with high levels of skills, knowledge and to networks (Kabwe and Okorie, 2019).
10 However, such an approach relies on retaining this valuable talent and may result in feelings
11 of inequity and demotivation amongst those who do not receive such preferential treatment
12 (Kirk, 2016; 2020; Painter-Morland *et al.*, 2018). Arguably, what is needed is a strategy that
13 balances talent flows and recognises the potential of all employees (Kirk, 2019).
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29 The approach adopted depends in some part on the attitudes to TM of the HR
30 managers and the degree to which they believe that talent is rare or common and innate, or
31 capable of being developed (Meyers *et al.*, 2020). It is also linked to the size and structure of
32 the organisations concerned with small and agile companies with flat hierarchies tending to
33 use ‘individualized TM’ that emphasise flexibility and autonomy; family businesses adopting
34 more paternalistic approaches and multinationals favouring ‘sophisticated TM’ with
35 standardised processes (Harsch and Festing, 2020). It is also influenced by the nature of the
36 business with specific challenges facing SMEs in the hotel sector that necessitates a different
37 approach to TM.
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50 *TM, SMEs and the Hospitality Sector*

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53 Kravariti *et al.*, (2021) note that international TM research in the field of hospitality and
54 tourism is a small, but emerging field with the focus to-date tending to be on multinational
55 hotels (Jooss *et al.*, 2019; Jooss *et al.*, 2021; Marinakou and Giousmpasoglou, 2019). The
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3 limited research so far indicates that there are certain challenges unique to SMEs within the
4 hotel sector, such as resource constraints, problems with poor reputation etc. that result in an
5 ad-hoc approach to TM (Chung and D'Annunzio-Green, 2018). Thus, due to different
6 institutional and structural factors facing SMEs in the sector, it has been argued that the so-
7 called 'best practice' approach to TM is not appropriate (Krishnan and Scullion, 2017).
8 Rather, it has been asserted that the approach to TM needs to reflect the complex and unique
9 nature of the sector (Sheehan *et al.*, 2018).
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20 Within Sub-Saharan Africa there are particular challenges facing SMEs with respect
21 to their approach to TM with many firms relying on family members to run the hotels and
22 limited skills available in the local population (Tichaawa and Kimbu, 2019). Chefs are a
23 source of talent that is in particularly short supply (Wan *et al.*, 2017) as are other talented
24 future leaders, both in Africa and more widely (Baum, 2019) creating the 'Penrose Effect', a
25 key constraint to growth (Lockett, 2005).
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34 Some have suggested that SME hotel owners should seek to recruit Generation Z
35 individuals as an untapped source of talent and that TM practices should be designed to
36 attract this age group, such as offering a clear career path etc. (Goh and Okomus, 2020). This
37 is proving difficult even for multinational organisations, as Okpara and Kabongo's (2011)
38 study in Nigeria revealed. Multinational hotels rely, to a great extent, on corporately assigned
39 expatriates to fill specialist positions in executive management, and particularly in the food
40 and beverage roles (Situmorang and Japutra 2019) and this is also the case in Nigeria
41 (Nwokorie and Aneeke, 2019). However, it is more common for self-initiated expatriates
42 (SIE) (Howe-Walsh and Kirk, 2021), to work for small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)
43 rather than multinational organisations (Jokinen *et al.*, 2008). SIEs are defined as 'employees
44 who decide to migrate to another country for work' (Howe-Walsh and Schyns, 2010 p. 262),
45 are employed locally providing an opportunity to facilitate cross-cultural understanding and
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3 an international outlook in their workplaces, they remain an important part of available global
4 talent (Vaiman *et al.*, 2015).
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8 Whilst it has been noted that recruiting SIE talent to work in Nigerian SME hotels can
9 offer a potential means of capacity development; this is dependent on the expatriates'
10 willingness to share their knowledge (Samuel, 2015). It is also influenced by how well the
11 expatriates can culturally adjust within the country (Okpara, 2016). This is especially the case
12 for expatriates working in challenging environments (Gannon and Paraskevas, 2019) and
13 Nigeria is considered to be a risky environment and is on the topmost dangerous countries for
14 2022 (Coffey, 2022; Onwudiwe and Raufu, 2022).
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25 These factors all impact on the hospitality sector within Nigeria, but particularly the
26 SME hotels that are seeking to compete with larger MNEs for scarce talent (Etuk and Igwe,
27 2016). Within Nigeria the education system has been criticised for not equipping the local
28 workforce with the skills to compete with foreign talent (Ogele, 2020). However, the current
29 COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these existing problems with even luxury hotels in
30 Africa struggling to cope due to their reliance on tourism from abroad (Giousmpasoglou *et*
31 *al.*, 2021). According to Okon (2021, p.38-39) the hotel industry has been one of the hardest
32 hit especially in Nigeria where the sector was 'one of the most dynamic and innovative and
33 fast-growing sectors of the economy'. The question remains as to whether hospitality
34 expatriate talent will return to their jobs in other countries once the pandemic ends or not
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51 The over-reliance on buying in rather than growing talent (Cooke *et al.*, 2021) means
52 that hotel owners cannot necessarily develop a proactive approach to TM. Instead of
53 benefitting from balancing their talent stocks and flows (Crane and Hartwell, 2019) they may
54 be limiting their sustainability and ability to grow in the longer term. They may also be
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3 risking demotivating other employees through an inequitable approach to talent management
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5 (Kichuk *et al.*, 2019). The research aim of this interpretivist study into TM within SME hotels
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7 in Nigeria is to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the SME hotels'
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9 approaches to Talent Management in Nigeria.
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12 13 **Methods**

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15 We adopted a qualitative, interpretivist methodology using semi-structured interviews, which
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17 according to Holliday (2002) is appropriate for understanding and analysing the nature of
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19 organisational practices in the real world of business and management. The logic of
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21 interpretivist philosophy is that rather than being objectively determined, organisational
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23 reality (e.g., TM practices) is socially constructed by social actors – such as managerial and
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25 non-managerial employees (Robson, 2011). As contended by Miles and Huberman (1994),
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27 this exploratory approach to qualitative research makes it possible for researchers to
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29 potentially gather and analyse raw (or rich) data, which according to Creswell and Poth
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31 (2018) is crucial for gaining more in-depth insight into the subject of inquiry.
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37 While the focus of the study is on SME hotels in Nigeria; the definition of SMEs has
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39 remained largely contested across the globe (Krishnan and Scullion, 2017). Hence, we
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41 selected SMEs according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
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43 (OECD, 2020) of an organisation employing fewer than 250 employees and a turnover not
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45 exceeding EUR 50 million utilised in previous research within hospitality (Sardo *et al.*,
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47 2018). Based on this definition, the SMEs are categorised under micro (with maximum 10
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49 employee), small (11-50 employees) and medium (51-250 employees) companies (Savov *et*
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51 *al.*, 2020). The companies selected for this study fall within the small to medium-sized
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53 category.
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Using cluster probability sampling, we identified the SMEs hotels for this study.

According to Saunders *et al.* (2012), this method allows the researchers to encompass the key geographical zones of the country in which the study is being conducted. Nigeria has a population of over 200 million (National Population Commission, 1988 – 2022), with 36 states – grouped into six geopolitical zones: North Central, North East, North West, South West, South East and South (Chiaka *et al.*, 2022). While Abuja falls within the North central, Lagos South West and Port-Harcourt South (Adewuyi and Emmanuel, 2018; Chiaka *et al.*, 2022); these states are among the three Nigerian major cosmopolitan and commercial cities, where people from nearly all Nigerian tribes/regions live and work (Avis, 2019).

Seven SME hotels were selected from three major cities across these clusters – namely Abuja, Lagos, and Port-Harcourt. The hotels met the inclusion criteria, which includes operating in Nigeria and employing between 45 to 250 local workers and self-initiated expatriates. Participants within the hotels were identified through purposive sampling to ensure that the interviewees had the knowledge to respond to the questions (Bryman and Bell, 2015). The respondents were identified on the basis that their profile was representative of the range of roles, length of service, ethnicity, gender and age of the target population within the hotels identified Saunders *et al.* (2012).

Please refer to Table 1.0 for a list of participants.

Insert Table 1.0 here

Data collection

Following the steps adopted by previous TM studies of SMEs (see Chung and D’Annunzio-Green, 2018; Festing *et al.*, 2013), 42 employees with a varied range of roles (including general managers, HR managers, head waiters/waitresses, sales and logistics managers and non-managerial workers) were interviewed. These participants are selected due to their

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2
3 knowledge of the practices in the Nigerian hotel business and the associated talent
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5 development issue within the industry. According to Heneman et al. (2000), top management
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7 executives are responsible for making decisions that relates to employees' management, and
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9 organisational strategic planning including the implementation of TM practices in SMEs
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11 (Cardon and Stevens, 2004). Likewise, the experience of ordinary employees is crucial in
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13 providing insight into how management's TM policy and practices can affect their
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15 development (Joyce and Slocum, 2012). Given the difficulty of gaining access for data
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17 collection in the developing economies such as Nigeria, we contacted relevant gatekeepers
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19 and subsequently potential participants for written, informed consent prior to data collection
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24 (Creswell, 2013).

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27 We also explained that we had been granted full ethical approval from the relevant
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29 university committees in compliance with the fundamental principles governing ethical
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31 approaches to research (Patton, 2015). Drawing upon the interrelated themes from the RBV
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33 and TM literatures, interview guides for both employees and hotel management were
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35 developed, for instance questions 4, 8, 9, 13, 14 and 15 specifically relate to RBV. The
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37 remainder are linked to either TM or are designed to explore experiences during COVID-19.
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39 A pilot study was undertaken to further refine these protocols (see Appendix I).
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44 In accordance with COVID-19 safety guidelines for social distancing, we conducted
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46 the interviews online (through social media: WhatsApp). Each interview lasted between 60
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48 and 90 minutes. Despite assurances of confidentiality and the use of pseudonyms in ensuring
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50 anonymity (Creswell and Poth, 2018), only 5 participants consented to audio recording of the
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52 interviews, as the remaining 37 expressed concern about their voices being identified.
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54 Consequently, detailed notes were taken and read back to the participants at the end of each
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56 interview, so that they were able to confirm that what was written was a true representation of
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58 their participation (Patton, 2015). In this circumstance not recording was deemed to be the
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3 best approach as the interviewees would not have participated without this assurance
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5 (Rutakumwa *et al.*, 2020).
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8 *Data analysis* 9

10 The data was analysed using Brooks et al.'s (2015) template approach to thematic analysis to
11 develop a coding template. Firstly, tentative broad themes from RBV theory (for example
12 reactive, short term etc.) and the TM literature (for instance talent flows etc.) were identified
13 and used to guide the empirical study (Bonache, 2020). In analysing the data, an iterative
14 approach was adopted moving between the theory and the data. This enabled a structured but
15 evolving approach to be followed enabling the researchers to answer the project's research
16 question (Cunliffe, 2011). To reduce analytical bias (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) coding was
17 undertaken by the researchers independently and the results were compared across the team
18 and used to prepare the final template.
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31 Themes identified were organised into clusters relating to RBV and TM strategy and
32 from these some integrative themes emerged: context; organisational and individual factors
33 that recurred within each interview. Themes identified *a priori* from the theory are
34 distinguished from novel themes that emerged from the data using italics. Three novel themes
35 emerged: *perpetuating the status quo*, *preventing learning*, and *valuing potential talent*. The
36 final coding template is depicted in Figure 1.0 below.
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50 **Findings** 51

52 The findings show the impact of the external environment on hotels during a time where the
53 implications of COVID-19 are less understood in the context of SME hotels in Nigeria.
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55 Novel themes were identified from the data. These are *perpetuating the status quo*,
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57 *preventing learning*, and *valuing potential talent*. The themes encapsulate the lack of
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3 consideration given by the senior hotel leaders to valuing and developing talent which in turn
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5 impacts sustainability and firm growth in the longer term.
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10 *Perpetuating the status quo*

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12 The approaches to TM within the seven SME hotels during COVID-19 is very similar. The
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14 focus has been on retaining rare, valued SIE talent and reducing the number of local workers
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16 perceived to be less valued and in abundant supply. As a SIE operations manager in Hotel A
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18 told us,
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22 ‘Since my arrival here, our approach has only just started to really change, due largely to
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24 COVID-19. Our new focus is to cut down operational cost such as staff, electricity etc,
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26 which are high at the moment - while improving on performance’ (MHA02).
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30 Locally recruited workers were seen to be more substitutable, as a SIE sales and promotions
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32 manager in Hotel D asserted (MHD15), ‘We usually substitute local workers with local
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34 workers.’ However, COVID-19 has changed this situation as a SIE food and beverage
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36 manager in Hotel A explained,
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40 ‘But now it is difficult to find foreign talents who are willing to come to Nigeria due
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42 to COVID. On the other hand, COVID is forcing us to reduce our local talents, in
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44 order to reduce cost, because we are not operating at full capacity anymore.’
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46 (MHA03)
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50 The shared perception was that, as a SIE sales manager from Hotel B said, COVID-19 has
51
52 ‘crippled the hospitality industry in Nigeria’ (MHB08). He explained as a result the Hotel
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54 managers were ‘in the process of renegotiating’ contracts with local employees. A senior
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56 receptionist in Hotel E (MHE21) stated, ‘there is no change yet to the talent management
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3 approach here' except for what she described as a temporary 'sharp reduction' in the number
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5 of local workers being retained.
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9 Many described problems attracting SIE talent to come to the country since the
10 pandemic has begun, as a SIE HR manager in Hotel C said, 'COVID-19 is making it difficult
11 for essential workers to come here from other countries' (MHC10). Many hotel owners
12 reported a 50% or greater drop in profit which was driving this approach to TM. This creates
13 a challenge as SME's are unable to rebalance their talent flows to accommodate the rapidly
14 changing environment created by COVID-19.
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23 The negative effect of these approaches to TM on the local workers is apparent. Many
24 participants told us how they had received pay cuts, for instance a waitress in Hotel A said,
25 'They pay us half salary and sometimes late, but you dare not ask why, because we are in
26 pandemic' (EHA25). A housekeeper in Hotel C described a similar experience saying, 'Since
27 COVID-19, the treatment has been getting worse by day. They make you work and pay you
28 later and lower than before' (EHC29). Others described being laid off without notice. A
29 housekeeper in Hotel D recounted how she had been sent home for months and then abruptly
30 recalled. None of the local workers we spoke to were optimistic about a positive change in
31 the TM strategy. As a junior receptionist in Hotel C said bitterly, 'Nothing will change, they
32 will continue to rely on cheap labour from the local market and continue to spend huge
33 money on foreign workers' (EHC30).
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49 The strategy of buying in talent perceived to be valuable and rare from abroad was
50 clearly presenting problems. However, some managers informed us that they did not intend to
51 try to change their TM strategy. As a SIE manager in Hotel D simply said, 'We'll amplify our
52 existing strategy of recruitment and strike a good cost-profit balance' (MHD14). On the other
53 hand, a reactive watch and wait TM strategy is being favoured by some as a deputy
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3 housekeeping manager in Hotel E asserted, 'With this pandemic, we have to keep close watch
4 of the direction in which the hotel business is headed toward, this will help us to make
5 necessary changes as we deem fit' (MHE21).
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10 For some SME hotel owners recruiting SIE talent was still perceived to offer the best
11 opportunity to gain competitive advantage despite the impact of COVID-19. As a SIE
12 marketing manager in Hotel C said, 'Similarly, most hotels here survive by recruiting experts
13 from abroad, which is necessary for competitive edge, we are no different.' (MHC12). This
14 emphasis on buying in talent results in little differentiation between SME hotels, that are all
15 adopting a static approach to RBV. Similarly, there is a shared perception that training local
16 workers is not the responsibility of the SME hotel. As one SIE manager stated 'this is not a
17 training ground, this is a working platform' (MHE18). As a SIE deputy director of sales in
18 hotel F commented 'Currently, [during the pandemic] we do not have the system in place for
19 standard training and development. We recruit locals with previous experience, while foreign
20 experts are recruited based on their qualification and acquisition of skills and many years of
21 experience' (MHF23). The result of this approach precludes local workers from gaining the
22 skills and knowledge needed to be considered key talent.
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41 *Preventing learning*

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43 Prior to the onset of the current pandemic the approach in the hotels was to buy in
44 already trained SIEs, not to provide training to local workers and to deter SIEs from
45 networking to share knowledge, thereby developing local talent. The problems created by this
46 lack of emphasis on SIEs sharing knowledge has been exacerbated during the current
47 pandemic as the local workforce are perceived to lack the skills and knowledge to substitute
48 for the SIEs, who are now in short supply. As a SIE manager in charge of accommodation in
49 Hotel C explained, 'I don't train anybody, I'm contracted to serve as the lodging manager, the
50 HR department is responsible for training' (MHC11). Additionally, this was also reinforced
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3 in the SIE employment contracts where there is no requirement to train local workers. The
4
5 local workers view of why the SIE managers are reluctant to to share knowledge to support
6
7 development is encapsulated by a hotel housekeeper ‘Remember, they would rather not have
8
9 any interaction that will help you learn anything useful about the hotel job from them,
10
11 because they are worried that once you learn what they know, then you will replace them’
12
13 (EHG41). This is reiterated from another housekeeper from Hotel C, who explained that both
14
15 before and during the pandemic they,
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19
20 ‘work like slaves as local recruits and that’s what they [hotel owners] love, because
21
22 they don’t have to pay us well or spend money to give us training. They believe
23
24 foreign experts are genius in managing hotel business, so they worship them’
25
26 (EHC29).
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30 By continuing to fail to encourage knowledge sharing through networking, SIE managers are
31
32 precluding tacit knowledge being passed to new and existing workers and thereby limiting
33
34 opportunities for individual and organisational growth. As a SIE promotions and marketing
35
36 manager from Hotel B (MHB07) explained, ‘But because some hotels want to save cost, they
37
38 hire foreign experts for the sole purpose of performing the specific roles - rather than
39
40 supporting and helping others to understand how to perform such roles.’ This makes it
41
42 challenging, if not impossible to grow talent within the hotels and does not constitute a
43
44 strategic approach to TM which is designed not only to attract and retain SIE talent, but also
45
46 to develop local talent. However, some of those we spoke to described possible changes in
47
48 this approach in the future because of the pandemic which arguably would better position
49
50 them to respond to changes in the environment. For instance, a SIE operations manager in
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52 Hotel A said,
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3 'First thing first, is to cut down operational and maintenance cost, which is our
4
5 biggest challenge in the current pandemic. Then we need to invest more in foreign
6
7 talents, who will help to develop the local talents in the long run' (MHA02).
8
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10
11 A similar view was expressed by a SIE director of housekeeping in Hotel B who told us,
12
13 'moving forward, we intend to recruit experts to specifically train local talents' (MHB06). In
14
15 Hotel C a SIE accommodation manager stated, 'For me...training and development of local
16
17 recruits would be considered a wise investment'(MHC15). The same approach was being
18
19 considered in Hotel E according to a SIE deputy hotel director,
20
21

22
23 'One way to reduce cost is to train as many local recruits as possible. Yes, it will cost
24
25 some in the short-run -it's called investment, because you will need them in the long
26
27 run. This approach will save you the high cost of hiring foreign experts' (MHE18).
28
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30
31 This more proactive TM strategy would suggest a change in how some managers are viewing
32
33 local workers and perhaps the beginning of a recognition of their potential value.
34
35

36 ***Valuing potential talent***

37
38 The impact of COVID-19 has started to affect attitudes towards Nigerian employees with
39
40 some hotel owners starting to realise that local talent could be a source of competitive
41
42 advantage. As a SIE CEO in Hotel G said,
43
44

45
46 'In the long-term, we are thinking to change our strategy, whereby we rely less on
47
48 foreign experts and optimise local skills that are available to us – through better
49
50 training and development schemes' (NHG39).
51
52

53
54 This requires a more equitable approach to TM that recognises the value of all workers. It
55
56 necessitates an RBV strategy designed to nurture talent as well as acquire human assets
57
58 through talent flows. To-date the talent flows in and out of the hotels have been based on a
59
60 reactive and short-term approach that have not constituted a sustainable approach to TM.

1
2
3 The local workforce has received far less favourable treatment with low salaries and
4 little if any opportunities for training and development. The situation worsened during
5
6 COVID-19. This has clearly resulted in feelings of inequity and demotivation, which is a key
7
8 problem with such an approach to TM. The result for these SMEs has been high levels of
9
10 voluntary turnover amongst this group of employees. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the
11
12 inflow of SIE talent has slowed, and the outflow of local talent has accelerated through forced
13
14 layoffs. The managers we interviewed described difficulties in attracting SIE talent which
15
16 was forcing them to think differently about local talent. As a marketing manager in Hotel B
17
18 said,
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24 'No hotel can function without local employees in Nigeria. To be honest, I think
25
26 locals can perform any role including general housekeeping, general kitchen work,
27
28 waitresses, and they can also perform HR and rooms-booking roles among others, but
29
30 they need to be trained adequately (MHB07).
31
32

33 This has resulted in a lack of balance in terms of the flows of talent within the SME hotels
34
35 which is inhibiting their ability to develop a sustainable approach to TM. All the hotel senior
36
37 leaders we interviewed are pursuing the same reactive TM strategy failing to develop their
38
39 talent capabilities. Thus, they are unable to develop a competitive advantage in the Nigerian
40
41 SME hotel sector.
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43

44 The findings highlight the problems associated with the static, reactive approach to
45
46 TM within the seven SME hotels. These include a reliance on buying in SIE talent, failing to
47
48 develop local workers, leading to an approach to RBV that does not recognise the value of
49
50 local talent.
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53 **Theoretical implications**

54
55 First, by combining RBV (Barney, 1991) with the notion of talent flows the paper
56
57 highlights how SME hotel leaders in Nigeria can move towards a more proactive approach to
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1
2
3 TM that recognises the value of national talent. The study contributes to the literature by
4
5 identifying two novel themes that underpin this static, reactive to approach to TM. These are
6
7 *perpetuating the status quo* and *preventing learning*. The themes explain the lack of
8
9 consideration given to talent (Crane and Hartwell, 2019) which in turn impacts sustainability
10
11 and ability to grow as a business in the longer term. This is exacerbated in hardship
12
13 destinations, such as Nigeria, where there are complex economic, political, and societal issues
14
15 (Bello and Bello, 2021). Other threats such as the COVID-19 pandemic intensifies the impact
16
17 of the Penrose Effect (Lockett, 2005; Penrose, 1959), however, paradoxically leads to the
18
19 emergence of the third theme which is *valuing potential talent*. In this study the findings
20
21 support that the current crisis has compelled SME hotel leaders in Nigeria to recognise the
22
23 value of local workers as potential talent. This finding is arguably making SME hotel leaders
24
25 consider a more proactive approach to TM based on the need for a balanced approach to
26
27 talent flows.
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34 Second, by highlighting the importance of facilitating networks (Glaister *et al.*, 2018;
35
36 Kabwe and Okori, 2019; Makela, 2007) between local and foreign workers the paper reveals
37
38 how skills and knowledge can be shared to improve competitive advantage. Through an RBV
39
40 lens, the stronger the Penrose Effect (Lockett, 2005; Penrose, 1959) i.e., the more leaders
41
42 limit their own and others learning and development, the more likely an inequitable (Kirk,
43
44 2016; 2019; 2020; Painter-Morland, *et al.*, 2018), and unsustainable TM strategy will result.
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49 Third, the paper highlights the impact of scarce talent on the strategic success of SME
50
51 hotels in hardship contexts such as Nigeria in times of crisis, showing how TM strategies can
52
53 be adapted to enable survival in turbulent times. An opportunity exists to reduce the reliance
54
55 on recruiting SIE (Howe-Walsh and Schyns, 2010) talent and to take advantage of the chance
56
57 to hire and develop local workers, who are in abundant supply. Furthermore, there is a
58
59 possibility for sustained future competitive advantage for those SME hotels that are able to
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1
2
3 enhance, combine and reconfigure their talent flows to account for the changing environment
4
5 going forward (Harsch and Festing, 2020).
6
7

8 **Practical implications and recommendations**

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10 Based on the findings, it is recommended that SME hotel leaders adopt a more equitable
11
12 (Kirk, 2016; Kirk, 2019) approach to TM that values all workers rather than exclusively
13
14 focusing on SIEs (Howe-Walsh and Schyns, 2010). To facilitate this, employment contracts
15
16 should ensure that SIEs are responsible for training and developing local workers as part of a
17
18 networking (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Granovetter, 1973) approach to RBV (Barney, 1991).
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22 To further enhance the skills and knowledge of all workers, it is proposed that the
23
24 hotel leaders offer internal training and development beyond induction to ensure human asset
25
26 growth (Ambrosius, 2018) for the future. To support this approach, hotel leaders should
27
28 explore the feasibility of moving towards some harmonisation of other HR practices, such as
29
30 performance and reward management, career development etc. (Howe-Walsh and Schyns,
31
32 2010). This will reduce the perceived inequities between SIEs and locals and help to sustain a
33
34 viable talent pipeline.
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38 **Conclusions**

39
40 The study explores how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted SME hotels' approaches to
41
42 TM in Nigeria. Analysis of the findings from seven SME hotels shows how SME hotel senior
43
44 leaders over-emphasise the importance of SIE talent as assets i.e. possessors of knowledge,
45
46 information, and skills. Additionally, the study reveals how local workers are regarded as
47
48 expendable and easily substitutable rather than considered as valuable assets to be retained
49
50 and developed. This TM strategy is inequitable as it results in unfair treatment of local
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52 workers. This different treatment is reinforced by a deliberate strategy of preventing learning
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54 resulting in a failure to develop networks between SIE talent and local workers to enable and
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56 encourage the sharing of knowledge.
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3 However, the pandemic has resulted in a growing recognition amongst some of these
4 senior leaders that there is a need to adopt a more proactive approach to RBV that capitalises
5 on the skills and knowledge of both the SIEs and local workers to create a sustainable TM
6 strategy in the long-term. This may signal a change in attitude by hotel senior leaders who are
7 beginning to recognise the value of local talent. This may result in a unique or inimitable
8 (Ambrosius, 2018) TM strategy offering a real competitive advantage for the SME hotels by
9 enabling them to pursue a differentiated strategy to balance their talent flows. Thus COVID-
10 19 may be the catalyst for a movement towards a more equitable approach to TM that is more
11 strategic and sustainable.
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25 **Limitations and future research**

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27 As with other research, there are limitations to the study. The paper provides a snapshot from
28 seven SME hotels in Nigeria during Autumn 2021 when vaccination rates in Nigeria
29 remained low and tourism is lagging in terms of recovery. The sample was chosen based on
30 interviewees willingness to participate and may have precluded potential participants with
31 differing views. However, the study provides insights into more equitable and sustainable
32 approaches to TM. The paper utilises illustrative data from an interpretivist perspective
33 however, future research would benefit from a quantitative approach over a longer time
34 period to consider the long-term impact of COVID-19 in the SME hotel sector within
35 Nigeria. Additionally, the sample could be expanded to include multinational companies
36 within Nigeria and other countries and contexts to reflect differing experiences of the impact
37 of COVID on TM practices.
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3 **Figure 1: Coding Template**
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5 **Themes:**
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7 Talent Management Approach

8 ***Perpetuating the status quo***
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10 Reactive approach to resourcing talent

11 Short-term attitude to human resource planning

12 Static position not adjusting to changing context

13 Resource-Based View (RBV) of Strategy
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16 Talent Management Approach

17 ***Preventing learning***
18

19 Buying in rather than developing talent

20 Limited training offered

21 Stifling growth through lack of knowledge sharing

22 RBV approach that fails to develop internal resources
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24 Talent Management Approach

25 ***Valuing potential talent***
26

27 Equitable approach to developing resources

28 Proactive measures to embrace opportunities

29 Future-focused perspective with long-term planning

30 RBV approach that begins to value local talent
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32 Talent Management Approach

33 **Talent Flows**
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35 Balanced stocks and flows of talent

36 Networking to disseminate knowledge

37 Equitable approach to ensure fairness

38 Sustainable RBV strategy to support competitive advantage
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40 **Integrative Themes:**
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42 Context
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- 44 - External factors for example, societal, economic, and political accommodated within
45 RBV strategy
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47 Organisational
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- 49 - Seeking differentiated RBV strategy to gain competitive advantage
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51 Individual
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54 - RBV approach that results in The Penrose Effect – management fail to identify,
55 value, and develop talent
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Table 1: List of participants

No	Code	Description of participants	Gender/ Age	City Branch	Established in/Category	Nr of Years with Hotel
Hotel A (HA)						
1	MHA01	HR Manager	M/ 55 yrs.	Lagos	1985 – (5*)	5
2	MHA02	Operation Manager (Expatriate)	M/ 49	Abuja	1986 – (5*)	7
3	MHA03	Food and Beverage Manager	F/ 52	Lagos	1985 – (5*)	4
4	MHA04	Administrative Manager (Expt.)	M/ 45	Abuja	1986 – (5*)	5
5	MHA05	Senior Receptionist	F/ 41	Lagos	1985 – (5*)	6
6	EHA25	Waitress	F/ 32	Lagos	1985 – (5*)	6
7	EHA26	House Keeper	M/ 39	Abuja	1986 – (5*)	5
		4m + 3e = 7 interviewees				
Hotel B (HB)						
8	MHB06	Director of House Keeping	M/ 50	Port-Harcourt	2016 – (4*)	4
9	MHB07	Marketing Manager (Expt.)	M/ 40	Lagos	2011 – (4*)	8
10	MHB08	Hotel Sales Manager	F/ 30s	Abuja	2019 – (4*)	4
11	MHB09	Maintenance Manager (Expt.)	M/ 42	Port-Harcourt	2016 – (4*)	5
12	EHB27	General Kitchen Worker (cook etc)	F/ 34	Port-Harcourt	2016 – (4*)	5
13	EHB28	House-keeper (room/bed cleaner etc)	F/ 32	Lagos	2011 – (4*)	6
		4m + 2e = 6 interviewees				
Hotel C (HC)						
14	MHC10	HR Manager	F/ 46	Abuja	1995 – (3*)	5
15	MHC11	Lodging Manager (Expt.)	F/ 49	Lagos	1999 – (3*)	7
16	MHC12	Marketing Manager (Expt.)	M/ 47	Abuja	1995 – (3*)	5
17	MHC13	Administrative Manager (Expt.)	M/ 48	Lagos	1999 – (3*)	7
18	EHC29	House keeper/Waiter	M/ 29	Abuja	1995 – (3*)	4
19	EHC30	Junior Receptionist	F/ 36	Lagos	1999 – (3*)	6
		4m + 2e = 6 interviewees				
Hotel D (HD)						
20	MHD14	Deputy Hotel Manager (Expt.)	M/ 46	Lagos	1987 – (3*)	8
21	MHD15	Marketing Manager (Expt.)	M/ 39	Abuja	1988 – (3*)	6
22	MHD16	Senior Receptionist (Expt.)	M/ 44	Abuja	1988 – (3*)	5
23	MHD17	Administrative Manager (Expt.)	M/ 48	Lagos	1987 – (3*)	9
24	EHD31	House keeper/Waitress	F/ 26	Lagos	1987 – (3*)	6
25	EHD32	General Kitchen Operator	F/ 25	Abuja	1988 – (3*)	5
		4m + 2e = 6 interviewees				
Hotel E (HE)						
26	MHE18	Deputy Hotel Director (Expt.)	M/ 54	Abuja	2016 – (3*)	5
27	MHE19	Assistant HR Manager	M/ 47	Abuja	2016 – (3*)	5
28	MHE20	Deputy Housekeeping Manager	M/ 38	Lagos	2017 – (3*)	4
29	MHE21	Senior Receptionist (Expt.)	F/ 35	Lagos	2017 – (3*)	4
30	EHE33	General Kitchen Operator	F/ 35	Abuja	2016 – (3*)	5
31	EHE34	House Keeper/Waiter	M/ 35	Lagos	2017 – (3*)	5
		4m + 2e = 6 interviewees				
Hotel F (HF)						
32	MHF22	Director & Sales Manager	F/ 45	Port-Harcourt	2009 – (2*)	7
33	MHF23	Dep. Director (Expt. + JV)	M/ 44	Port-Harcourt	2009 – (2*)	5
34	MHF24	Administrative Manager (Expt.)	M/ 42	Port-Harcourt	2009 – (2*)	6
35	EHF35	Maintenance Worker	M/ 31	Port-Harcourt	2009 – (2*)	4
36	EHF36	House Keeper/Waitress	F/ 28	Port-Harcourt	2009 – (2*)	4
37	EHF37	General Kitchen Operator	M/ 35	Port-Harcourt	2009 – (2*)	5
38	EHF38	Junior Receptionist	F/ 30	Port-Harcourt	2009 – (2*)	4
		3m + 4e = 7 interviewees				
Hotel G (HG)						
39	MHG39	CEO & Operation Director	M/ 52	Port-Harcourt	2004 – (2*)	8

40	MHG40	Deputy CEO (Expt. + JV)	M/ 51	Port-Harcourt	2004 – (2*)	6
41	EHG41	House Keeper & Kitchen Operator	F/ 29	Port-Harcourt	2004 – (2*)	5
42	EHG42	Junior Receptionist	F/ 29	Port-Harcourt	2004 – (2*)	4
		2m + 2e = 4 interviews				
Total :42		Total Managers: 25 Total Employees: 17	M = 24 F = 18			Min. 3 Max. 9
Key Guides:						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manager Hotel A (MHA) – Manager Hotel F (MHF) = MHA01 - MHF22 • Employee Hotel A (EHA) –Employee Hotel G (EHG) = EHA25 – EHG42 						

Interview Guide**Appendix I****Hotel Employees Main Questions:**

1. How do you define talent/highly skilled workers?
2. What do you see to be the advantages and disadvantages of relying on local labour or on expatriate labour?
3. How were you recruited?
4. How inclusive would you say the approach to talent management is in this hotel? (i.e. does it encompass all employees or only certain ones?)
5. To what extent, if at all, would you say those identified as talent receive different treatment from other employees? Can you please give me some examples?
6. Has the Covid pandemic impacted on your working life? If so, how?
7. How do you seek to overcome any challenges (Covid) you face?
8. Do you believe that you personally have any advantages over employees from other competitor hotels? If so, what advantages do you perceive you have?
9. To what extent, if at all, are you encouraged to network with other staff? Does this include those identified as talent and those who aren't? How, if at all, is this facilitated?
10. What training and development opportunities have you been offered, if any? When? What training do you feel you haven't been offered that you need?
11. To what extent, if at all, do you believe local employees and expatriate talent benefit from interactions with each other?
12. What do you believe is the level of turnover within the hotel? Does this differ between different groups of employees? Between talent and non-talent?
13. To what extent would you say that there is potential substitutability of different skills and knowledge in different roles in the hotel? For example?
14. What is considered to be the rarest and/or most valuable skills/knowledge/abilities in the hotel? Why?
15. What do you anticipate is going to happen going forward in terms of the impact of Covid on jobs?
16. Have you been out of work during the pandemic at any stage?
17. To what extent do you think there are other job opportunities open to you outside this hotel? Has this changed over the pandemic? If so, how?
18. What factors would influence your decision to stay working for the hotel or leave and find another job?

Hotel Managers Main Questions:

1. How do you define talent/highly skilled workers?
2. Do you have talent pools? (for example, future potential talent, high-level talent etc.) If so why/ if not, why?
3. What do you see to be the advantages and disadvantages of relying on local labour or on expatriate labour?
4. To what extent do you believe you are in a position to compete for talent (local and expatriate) with a) other local SMEs and b) MNEs?
5. How were you recruited?
6. How inclusive would you say the approach to talent management is in this hotel? (i.e. does it encompass all employees or only certain ones?)
7. Do you currently have any skill/knowledge shortages? If so, in what roles?

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8. What characteristics (skills, experience, knowledge) do you think are valued by your employer?
 9. How important is it that newly recruited talent 'fit' into the organisational culture? How do you believe the hotel seeks to ensure that they do?
 10. Were you offered an induction? If so, what did this include?
 11. To what extent, if at all, would you say those identified as talent receive different treatment from other employees? Can you please give me some examples?
 12. Has the Covid pandemic impacted on your working life? If so, how?
 13. How do you seek to overcome any challenges (Covid) you face?
 14. Do you believe that you personally have any advantages over employees from other competitor hotels? If so, what advantages do you perceive you have?
 15. To what extent, if at all, are you encouraged to network with other staff? Does this include those identified as talent and those who aren't? How, if at all, is this facilitated?
 16. What training and development opportunities have you been offered, if any? What training do you feel you haven't been offered that you need?