

A Study on the Usefulness of Internships – Viewed from the Needs of the Accommodation Industry and University Students –

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the issues of internships in the Japanese accommodation industry and clarify the needs of both lodging industry workers and university students. This research conducted two different questionnaires. The first is about the human resource elements that the hotel industry requires in university graduates, and the second is about the feedback from the university students who participated in a one-month internship program at accommodation facilities in Japan. These results showed that mid- to long-term internships designed through industry-academia collaboration are considered to play an important role in the purpose of acquiring the human resource elements essential for the accommodation industry.

Keywords: Accommodation industry, human resource elements, industry-academia collaboration, usefulness of medium- and long-term internships

1 Research purpose and background

1.1 Research purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the issues of internships in the Japanese accommodation industry and clarify the needs of both lodging industry workers and university students. In 2022, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) [1] conducted a survey on the implementation status of internships at 803 universities, 315 junior colleges, and 57 technical colleges in nation. According to the results, the largest number of participants at universities (undergraduate and graduate) did internships less than a week between August and September during the summer vacation period. Although this survey is not limited to the accommodation industry, it can be seen that the duration of internships at Japanese universities is generally quite short. On the other hand, looking at Europe and the United States, for example, the Lausanne Hotel School in Switzerland, which has produced many world-class hoteliers, [2] requires their undergraduate students to do a half-year internship in the second half of the first year, as well as Cornell University Hotel Management Department [3] also requires 800 hours by the time of graduation (undergraduate). In addition, many hospitality universities in Southeast Asia have introduced medium- to long-term internships as a compulsory subject in their curricula. The accommodation industry consists of a wide variety of tasks, and since there is a lot of knowledge and skills that can be acquired through interaction with customers on site, it would be difficult to master those tasks and elements in a short period of time.

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Therefore, this research, from the perspective of internships in the Japanese accommodation industry, clarifies the needs of both lodging industry workers and university students, and propose what is necessary for more meaningful internship programs.

1.2 Research background

Japan Business Federation [4] has pointed out that there is a discrepancy regarding the required human resources between the tourism industry and the universities with tourism related faculties and departments in Japan. One of the reasons indicates that the elements of human resources sought by the industry are not necessarily being developed by the universities. In addition, the job turnover rate in the accommodation and food service industries remains high every year, and in 2020, its rate of university graduates who had worked for three years after graduating turned out to be 51.5%, which is the highest among all industries. On the other hand, due to the pandemic caused by COVID-19, the employment rate in the tourism-related industry has dramatically declined. According to Tokyo Shoko Research LTD. [5], the total sales of 4,983 domestic lodging companies in 2021 decreased by 34.9% compared to 2020, and that was a significant 45.5% decrease compared to 2019, which is the year before the pandemic. Moreover, the "White Paper on Tourism 2022" [6] states that while the total number of overnight guests (314.97 million guests) at hotels and ryokans in Japan in 2021 decreased by 5% compared to that of 2020, it turned out to be 47.1% decrease in comparison with that of 2019. The report indicated that among these figures, the total number of foreign overnight guests decreased by 96.4% compared to 2019, and that of Japanese overnight guests decreased by 35.3%. What has supported the accommodation and food service industry in such a difficult situation was the government's subsidies established after 2020 in the purpose of helping especially small and mid-sized businesses.

Although the sudden decline in demand due to the corona crisis gave a huge impact on securing personnel in the tourism industry, and many of the accommodation industries were actually forced to take measures such as postponing new hiring and reducing the number of hires, the number of domestic travelers and foreign tourists visiting Japan has been gradually recovering in recent years. In fact, from the second half of 2021, there started to a shortage of personnel again just like in 2019. According to the UNWTO [7], the number of international tourists also doubled from 415 million in 2021 to 900 million in 2022, recovering to 63% of its pre-pandemic level. In addition, it forecasts that the number of international tourists will recover by 80-95% in 2023, and it is expected that inbound tourism demand will recover in Japan as well. Assuming the recovery of the tourism industry continues, sooner or later, the industry would have to face more shortage of human resources in the future. Therefore, to alleviate the chronic labor shortage in the industry, this study focuses on the Japanese accommodation industry in particular and examines the challenges of internships to suggest better programs that possibly bridge the gap between hotels and university students.

1.3 Research question

The research question in this study is to investigate whether the current internship in the accommodation industry meets the needs of the hotel employees and the university students.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The accommodation industry with high labor mobility in Japan

Tamura [8] has clarified through her own research that it is relatively common to change jobs to other hotels in the accommodation industry, as gaining experience at a certain hotel tends to be evaluated as a career. In addition, Tamura points out that the background of the industry's unique irregular working hours makes it difficult for hotel employees to feel secure staying in the same workplace. For example, such working environment is not supportive especially for women to work and raise children at the same time, thus, they are eventually forced to change their jobs. Besides the case above, there are various factors that lead to job resignation. This is a particularly concerning situation in the hospitality industry, where talent is believed to have a direct impact on the success or failure of the business.

Normann [9] emphasizes the indispensability of human resources particularly in the service sector describing the characteristics of service companies as being based on "personality intensity." According to him, employees face customers directly in "the moment of truth" where everything is left to the discretion of each employee. Therefore, in the service industry including the accommodation business, the human resource elements of each employee are essential in creating new customers.

2.2 Issues of internship

Hirao and Tanaka [10] commented on one to two week internships, which can be said to be the mainstream in Japan, saying, "There are some opinions that a short period internship is incomplete, such as 'If it's just for a week, you won't be able to entrust the work and will end up with an observation tour.' or 'It is just incomplete so that there is no work to do.'" In addition, Negi, Aoki, and Orito [11] stated, "Because the training period is usually short, such as two to four weeks, there is not enough career development based on what is learned at university," and suggested that short-term training may not be sufficient for companies and universities to complementarily promote learning for students. On the other hand, Kameno [12] said, "It is true that two weeks is not enough but it can be a means to compensate for the disadvantages of the short-term internship by enhancing pre- and post-training." and also "Each internship has a purpose and role, and it is important to appropriately combine these with the educational stage and developmental stage." to emphasize the importance of adjusting internship's periods and contents in accordance with their purposes and roles. In addition, Pusiran, Janin, Ismail, and Dalinting [13] claimed that the tourism industry in Malaysia has an extremely low rate of university graduates entering the industry and indicated that students with good internship experience stay in the industry after graduation, while students with bad experience leave the industry. The study also suggested that quality of an internship may be affected by whether the student understands the content (work) in advance, and by the level of communication with the supervisor in the department to which the student is assigned. Furthermore, regarding internships, they argued that the quality of the internship is essential and there are no minimum standards for the period, however, a certain number of hotels have limits to interns' acceptance. For example, the Shangri-La Rasa Ria Hotel in Malaysia does not accept internships unless they are at least for three months. In this way, it is essential that hotels and universities work together to create the contents and periods for cultivating the human resources that the accommodation industry needs.

2.3 Expected image of human resources

In 2018, the Japan Tourism Agency [14] announced a report by the “Working Group for the Development of Practical Human Resources through Industry-Academia Collaboration,” which recognized the possibility of the mismatch in human resource development between industry and academia. Yajima [15] has pointed out, based on the results of a questionnaire survey he conducted, that many travel agencies do not consider when hiring new university graduates whether or not they have graduated from a tourism-related department. With the results, he is concerned that the companies do not have high expectations for university learning. Furthermore, Morishita [16] analyzed the “Survey on Tourism Human Resource Development,” which Japan Tourism Agency conducted in 2017, regarding both companies (transportation, lodging, travel, theme park, leisure, bridal and other tourism related organizations) and universities (58 universities with tourism majors), and found that the mismatch between industry and academia lies between the “human resources necessary for hiring” that the tourism industry emphasizes and the “management” that universities value as significant knowledge for careers of middle management or above.

In addition, Kobayashi [17] conducted an interview survey of six travel agencies and analyzed the elements expected of new graduates. This research introduced two indicators for measuring human resource factors; a. the “Corporate Human Resource Needs Survey Report” compiled by the MEXT, and b. the “Fundamental Competencies for Working Adults” advocated by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI). In the “Corporate Human Resources Needs Survey Report,” the 15 selected questions related to human resources clarified that all six companies considered “problem setting/solving ability” and “communication ability” as required elements. On the other hand, as a result of examining the criteria for recruiting new graduates from four-year university students using “Fundamental Competencies for Working Adults,” the three abilities of “independence,” “execution,” and “creativity” were considered to be the most important items.

3 Method

3.1 Data Collection

This research applied a questionnaire survey to clarify the needs of both companies (hotels) and participants (university students) regarding internships. The questionnaire can be divided into two parts. The first is about the human resource elements that the hotel industry requires in university graduates, and the second is about feedback from university students who participated in an internship in the accommodation industry for about a month.

First, a questionnaire on human resources was conducted using the “Google Forms” between August 26th and September 8th in 2022. As a result, we received responses from a total of nine hotel industry employees: three from a Japanese luxury hotel (Tokyo), one from a foreign luxury hotel (Tokyo), three from a Japanese/foreign joint venture hotel (Chiba Pref.), and two from a resort hotel (Kanagawa Pref.). Second, a questionnaire for university students who participated in the one-month internships was conducted also using the “Google Forms” between September 7th and September 15th in 2022. The one-month internship programs were implemented at three different accommodation facilities in Japan in August 2022. As a result, we were able to obtain responses from 13 university students (five males and eight females).

3.2 Data Analysis

The questionnaire on the required human resource elements for the lodging industry has mainly two parts: attributes and necessary human resources. Nine employees from four accommodation facilities in Japan have cooperated with the survey. These facilities are categorized as follows; a. City hotels: one Japanese, one foreign-owned company, b. Resort hotels: one Japanese company, and c. Airport hotels: one Japanese/foreign joint venture company. As for the human resources elements, respondents were asked to select each necessary element for the accommodation industry from three perspectives: quality, ability, and knowledge. The three perspectives are based on the data used in the “Human Resources Needed by Companies and Recruitment Trends” in the “Questionnaire Results on Recruitment and Expectations for University Reforms,” released in January 2022 by the Japan Business Federation (Keidanren) [18]. Keidanren's questionnaires are considered to be reliable, as they are conducted on 1,500 representative member companies in Japan, and have been taken up by various organizations and media as an index to capture the hiring needs of domestic companies at any given time. In addition, each category of qualities, abilities, and knowledge shows specific contents based on the “Fundamental Competencies for Working Adults” advocated by the METI, so it is possible to be able to more clearly grasp the elements required in the hotel industry. Besides qualities, abilities, and knowledge, the questionnaire received responses regarding how much values the lodging industry workers weigh on the academic history of university students.

The feedback survey from the 13 university students who participated in the one-month internship programs can be divided into three parts: attributes, internship period, and changes in their feelings toward the accommodation industry. The participants did the internship at three different hotels in Japan: five at a Japanese luxury hotel in Tokyo, four at a Japanese/foreign joint venture hotel in Chiba prefecture, and four at a resort hotel in Kanagawa prefecture.

4 Results

Tables 1 and 2 are questionnaires about the human resources sought by accommodation industry workers. Table 1 shows the attributes of the respondents, and Table 2 shows the responses regarding human elements.

| TAB 1. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF RESPONDENTS IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY (ELEMENTS OF HUMAN RESOURCES) | | |
|--|---------------|---------------|
| | | (N=9) |
| Attributes | Frequency (n) | Percentage(%) |
| ◆ Gender | | |
| Male | 6 | 66.7% |
| Female | 3 | 33.3% |
| ◆ Age | | |
| 20s | 0 | 0% |
| 30s | 3 | 33% |
| 40s | 3 | 33% |
| 50s | 2 | 22% |
| 60s | 1 | 11% |
| Over 70s | | 0% |
| ◆ Hotel Type (Japanese or foreign capital?) | | |
| Japanese hotels | 5 | 56% |
| Foreign capital hotels | 4 | 44% |
| ◆ What kind of hotel do you work for? | | |
| City hotel | 5 | 55.6% |
| Resort hotel | 2 | 22.2% |
| Others | 2 | 22.2% |
| ◆ Which department do you work for? | | |
| Rooms | 0 | 0.0% |
| Food and beverage | 1 | 11.1% |
| General Affairs/Human Resources (Management) Department | 7 | 77.8% |
| Sales and Marketing Department | 1 | 11.1% |
| Others | 0 | 0.0% |
| ◆ How long have you been in the hotel industry? | | |
| Less than 3 years | 1 | 11.1% |
| 3 years to less than 5 years | 0 | 0.0% |
| Five years to less than ten years | 2 | 22.2% |
| Ten years to less than fifteen years | 1 | 11.1% |
| Fifteen years to less than twenty years | 3 | 33.3% |
| Twenty years to less than twenty five years | 1 | 11.1% |
| Twenty five years to less than thirty years | 0 | 0.0% |
| Thirty years to less than thirty five years | 0 | 0.0% |
| Thirty five years to less than forty years | 0 | 0.0% |
| More than forty years | 1 | 11.1% |
| ◆ What is your position? | | |
| General manager | 0 | 0.0% |
| Executive assistant manager | 0 | 0.0% |
| Director | 4 | 44.4% |
| Section manager | 3 | 33.3% |
| Others | 2 | 22.2% |
| ◆ Please tell me how many rooms your hotel has. | | |
| Less than 100 rooms | 0 | 0.0% |
| More than 100 rooms and less than 150 rooms | 2 | 22.2% |
| More than 150 rooms and less than 200 rooms | 1 | 11.1% |
| More than 200 rooms and less than 250 rooms | 0 | 0.0% |
| More than 250 rooms and less than 300 rooms | 0 | 0.0% |
| More than 300 rooms | 6 | 66.7% |

| TAB 2. INFORMATION OF RESPONDENTS IN THE HOTEL (ELEMENTS OF HUMAN RESOURCES) | | |
|---|---------------|---------------|
| | | (N=9) |
| Questions | Frequency (n) | Percentage(%) |
| ◆ What qualities do you look for in particular in college graduates in terms of hiring? (Multiple answers allowed up to 3) | | |
| Independence | 6 | 66.7% |
| Teamwork/Leadership/Cooperation | 8 | 88.9% |
| Ability to execute | 2 | 22.2% |
| Power to keep learning | 4 | 44.4% |
| Flexibility | 1 | 11.1% |
| Ethics | 1 | 11.1% |
| Mental strength and endurance | 2 | 22.2% |
| Sociality | 1 | 11.1% |
| Others | 0 | 0.0% |
| ◆ From a hiring standpoint, what are the particular abilities you look for in a college graduate? (Multiple answers allowed up to 3) | | |
| Ability to set and solve problems | 3 | 33.3% |
| Logical thinking | 3 | 33.3% |
| Creativity | 5 | 55.6% |
| Ability to listen to others | 2 | 22.2% |
| Ability to transmit information | 2 | 22.2% |
| Ability to utilize information and data analysis | 1 | 11.1% |
| Cross-cultural understanding | 3 | 33.3% |
| Foreign language ability | 6 | 66.7% |
| Others | 0 | 0.0% |
| ◆ What knowledge would you expect from a college graduate in particular from a hiring perspective? (Multiple answers allowed up to 3) | | |
| Knowledge and education that goes beyond the boundaries of the humanities and sciences | 7 | 77.8% |
| Basic knowledge in the field of study | 4 | 44.4% |
| Expertise in your field of study | 2 | 22.2% |
| Expertise in mathematics, data science, AI, and IT | 2 | 22.2% |
| Professional qualification | 4 | 44.4% |
| Others | 1 | 11.1% |
| ◆ From a hiring standpoint, what is the most important "learning experience" of university graduates? (Multiple answers allowed up to 2) | | |
| Academic history at university | 2 | 22.2% |
| Internship experience | 6 | 66.7% |
| Study abroad | 2 | 22.2% |
| Acquired qualification | 1 | 11.1% |
| Extracurricular activities | 4 | 44.4% |
| Others | 1 | 11.1% |

First, in Table 1, which shows attributes of the respondents, 66.7% were male and 33.3% were female. By the age group, 33.3% were 30s, 33.3% were 40s, 22.2% were 50s, and 11.1% were 60s. About 90% of the respondents were between 30s and 50s. In the question of the type of accommodation facilities that the respondents work for, 55.6% were city hotels, 22.2% were resort hotels, and 22.2% were others. (The reason why “others” was selected can be assumed that the “Airport Hotel” was included in the target facilities of the survey. It is a foreign-affiliated brand with about 400 guest rooms, including facilities such as weddings, conference rooms, pools and gyms, thus it can be thought that some of the respondents answered without being able to judge whether it was a city hotel or something else.) With regards to the respondents' departments, 77.8% were the general affairs/human resources (administration) department, 11.1% were the food and beverage department, and 11.1% were the sales/marketing department. Next, regarding the length of working experience, 33.3% were 15 to less than 20 years, 22.2% were 5 to less than 10 years, 11.1% were 10 to less than 15 years, 11.1% were 20 to less than 25 years, 11.1% were less than 3 years, and 11.1% were 40 years or more. In overall, the range between “more than 5 years to less than 25 years” was approximately 70%. In terms of the positions of respondents, 44.4% were the middle management (managers, section chiefs, etc.), 33.3% were team leaders (supervision of small groups, etc.), and 22.2% were others. This result showed that about the 70% respondents had some kind of management roles. Finally, with regards to the number of guest rooms in the accommodation facility, 66.7% were more than 300, 22.2% were more than 100 to less than 150, and 11.1% were more than 150 to less than 200 rooms.

Table 2, which shows the human resource elements required in the accommodation industry, clarifies two findings. The first is about the specific human resource elements based on qualities, abilities, and knowledge. In qualities, 88.9% were “teamwork, leadership, and cooperativeness.” There is a possibility that those elements are unique in particular to the accommodation industry where various operations complement each other for 24 hours a day and 365 days a year. With regards to ability, “foreign language ability” was high at 66.7%. Foreign language proficiency was not ranked high in the Keidanren's questionnaire for general companies, thus it can be understood that this is also a characteristic of the hotel industry where a variety of people use different languages with focus on English. In terms of knowledge, 77.8% answered “knowledge and education beyond the boundaries of the humanities and sciences,” which is the same as the results of the Keidanren survey. The reason for this result indicates that there has been a tendency for most companies to expect data analysis capabilities as well as the abilities to apply AI and DX knowledge particularly in recent years. The second is about expected learning experience. For this question, 66.7% of the respondents answered “internship experience.” This result reveals that the employees tend to value experiences over university learning. In addition, internships could possibly prevent mismatches between the industry and university students. Furthermore, it is essential to promote mid- to long-term internship programs that allow the industry and the participants to cultivate the human resource elements listed above.

| TAB. 3 UNIVERSITY STUDENTS WITH 1 MONTH INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE | | |
|--|----------------------|----------------------|
| | | (N=13) |
| Attributes & Questions | Frequency (n) | Percentage(%) |
| ◆ Gender | | |
| Male | 5 | 38.5% |
| Female | 8 | 61.5% |
| ◆ What year are you? | | |
| First year | 4 | 31% |
| Second year | 2 | 15% |
| Third year | 7 | 54% |
| Fourth year | | 0% |
| ◆ Please choose one of the reasons why you applied for this internship participation. | | |
| I was interested in the tourism industry. | 1 | 7.7% |
| I was interested in the accommodation business. | 9 | 69.2% |
| For experience. | 3 | 23.1% |
| ◆ Please tell us your overall impression after participating in the internship. | | |
| • Very good | 6 | 46.2% |
| • Good | 3 | 23.1% |
| • Neither good nor bad. | 2 | 15.4% |
| • Not good | 2 | 15.4% |
| ◆ Please tell us about the work you have been involved in this internship. (Multiple answers are possible) | | |
| Rooms (front, bell, reservation, etc) | 4 | 30.8% |
| Food & Beverage (restaurant, cafe, banquet, room service, etc.) | 12 | 92.3% |
| House Keeping | 1 | 7.7% |
| ◆ Please compare before and after participation and choose one that explains your feeling towards "the accommodation business". | | |
| Became more interested in the accommodation industry than before participation. | 4 | 30.8% |
| Became NOT interested in the accommodation industry than before participation. | 4 | 30.8% |
| There is no particular change before and after participation. | 3 | 23.1% |
| Others | 2 | 15.4% |
| ◆ Did you think that your boss and seniors in your department were appropriate during the internship? | | |
| (1) Very appropriate. | 7 | 53.8% |
| (2) Appropriate | 2 | 15.4% |
| (3) Neither Agree Nor Disagree. | 2 | 15.4% |
| (4) Not very appropriate | 1 | 7.7% |
| (5) Not appropriate | 1 | 7.7% |
| ◆ How do you think of this internship period when knowing the business content of the accommodation business? | | |
| (1) Short | 1 | 7.7% |
| (2) A little short | 0 | 0.0% |
| (3) Appropriate | 7 | 53.8% |
| (4) A little long | 2 | 15.4% |
| (5) Long | 3 | 23.1% |

Table 3 indicates the results of questionnaires from the university students who participated in the one-month internships.

The respondents of this survey were 13 university students (five males and eight females). Among them, four were in their first year, two were in their second year, and seven were in their third year. As for the jobs they were involved in during the internships, 30.8% were the accommodation, 92.3% were the food and beverage, and 7.7% were the housekeeping. Next, 69.2% of the respondents answered that they participated in the internship because they were interested in the accommodation industry, and with the tourism industry together, 76.9% were interested in the industry. As for the overall impression after participating in the internship, 69.3% said it was “very good” or “good”, while 30.8% felt it was “neither good nor bad” or “not good.” Regarding the interests in the lodging industry before and after participating in the internships, 30.8% answered that they had become more interested in the accommodation industry than before, but another 30.8% answered that they had lost interests after the internships. Furthermore, while 69.2% of the respondents indicated that their supervisors’ responses and behaviors during practical training were “very appropriate” or “appropriate,” 30.8% responded that they were “neither agree nor disagree”, “not very appropriate” or “not appropriate.” Finally, regarding the length of internships, 53.8% said it was “appropriate,” and 38.5% said it was “slightly long” or “long.”

5 Discussion

In this research, a questionnaire survey clarified (1) the image of human resources sought by the accommodation industry and (2) feedback from university students who participated in an internship for about a month. As mentioned, the required human resource elements through the results were “teamwork, leadership, and cooperativeness,” “foreign language proficiency,” and “knowledge and education beyond the boundaries of the humanities and sciences.” It also turned out that “internship” was the highest for the valuable experience among university students’ learning experiences when hiring is concerned. On the other hand, looking at the feedback from university students, although about 30% of them said that they became more interested in the lodging industry, about the other 30% said that they had lost interests in the industry compared to before participating. These results indicate that short-term internships are not sufficient enough for lodging industry and university students to foster the necessary elements listed above as well as to nurture positive feelings towards the industry.

One of the main reasons why most of the internships conducted at universities in Japan are short-term lies that the university students generally take part in the internships during their school break, which is either a month in summer or winter. In the future, with implementing medium to long-term internships as an option, each university needs further discussions on how to incorporate meaningful internship programs into its curriculum. In addition, in practical faculties such as tourism faculties, it is important not only to deepen the knowledge of the discipline through classroom lectures, but also to offer an educational product that can be used immediately in practice.

The Limitations with this survey however is that the target hotels are spread out among city hotels, resort hotels, foreign-affiliated hotels and Japanese-affiliated hotels, and there is possibility that differences can be seen in the survey results depending on the management styles and operation systems of each organization. For example, when comparing city hotels and resort hotels, they have differences in their peaks and off-seasons. In addition, the perception of internships may differ between foreign companies and Japanese companies. In principle, foreign

companies are unlikely to accept internships less than a month, but some Japanese companies may accept internships for as long as two weeks. Therefore, it is better to examine each hotel category to have more precise data. Furthermore, although this study analyzed the feedback only from one-month internship participants, in order to verify how the training periods affect the change in their feelings, data from medium- and long-term internship participants should be collected in the future.

Lastly, internships have characteristics that could affect perceptions of both the industry and the university students in accordance with the conditions of the market, the relationship between the company and the university, the location, the duration, the physical strength and psychological state of the participants, etc. Therefore, it is indispensable that the industry and the university closely work together to design meaningful internship programs for the prosperity of the future's Japanese accommodation industry.

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