



Research note

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THE EFFECTS OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP ON EMPLOYEES' OUTCOMES IN THE SERBIAN HOTEL INDUSTRY

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Abstract: Modern human resource management involves a series of methods that ensure employee satisfaction, intending to achieve organizational goals. The perception of hotel staff as a factor of market success implies the creation of a working environment within which the performance of employees would be adequately used for these purposes. Consequently, the need for extensive research of leaders who will be able to respond to all business and social challenges arises as a basic prerequisite for achieving enviable business results. This paper aims to examine the impact of servant leadership on positive and negative outcomes in the field of hotel business. For the purposes of the survey, 412 hotel workers, employed in various hierarchical positions, were surveyed. The results of the research indicate a positive correlation between servant leadership and job satisfaction and work engagement, that is, a negative correlation between this leadership style and turnover intention and burnout. Furthermore, regression analysis confirmed the direct impact of servant leadership on job satisfaction and work engagement, as well as turnover intention. This study fills theoretical gaps in the aspect of choosing purposeful leadership styles in the sphere of hotel business in Serbia.

Keywords: hotel management; leadership; employees' outcomes

1. Introduction

Servant leadership as one of the most popular concepts among various leadership styles, has found its application in the hotel industry. Effective leadership, determined by the right choice of leadership style, as a factor of business success, initiates the need for extensive research of leaders of the modern age who will be able to successfully respond to all business and social challenges. The term servant leader was first mentioned by Greenleaf (1970) and has since received a lot of attention in current research literature. Servant leadership is defined as a leadership-oriented approach based on identifying the priority needs and interests of followers and correlating them with the interests and organizational goals of a larger community or company (Eva et al., 2019). Applying ethical principles during leadership, a servant leader creates a specific work environment for their followers, based on

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mutual trust (Dutta & Khatri, 2017). Although in a large number of papers, servant leadership is viewed through a prism of similarity to other leadership styles, a high degree of morality, humility, and authenticity are just some of the characteristics that significantly differentiate the servant from transformational, transactional, charismatic, and other types of leaders (Andersen, 2018; Wu et al., 2013). Servant leadership as one of the most popular concepts among various leadership styles has found its application in the hotel industry. Research shows that employees guided by a servant leader (Yang et al., 2018), through psychological capital (Bouzari & Karatepe, 2017), show a significant level of work engagement and satisfaction with their job (Karatepe et al., 2019; Karatepe & Talebzadeh, 2016).

Job satisfaction is observed through the level of emotional state achieved, which is perceived as the result of a positive or negative workplace assessment (Al-Refaie, 2015). Furthermore, this positive employee outcome is viewed through the prism of the quality of a particular business position, which manifests itself through certain performance, stress, pressures as well as adequate working conditions (Jung & Yoon, 2015). According to some studies, adequate communication between leaders and followers, through a clear emphasis on goals and granting autonomy in their realization, is the basic prerequisite for creating a sense of satisfaction (Baquero et al., 2019; McPhail et al., 2015).

Integrating scientific and practical attitudes, some authors have defined the concept of engagement as a comprehensive concept manifested by a desirable state from an organizational point of view, as well as adequate dedication, energy, and focused effort (Nahrgang et al., 2011). According to Blomme (2012), the role of manager–leader has a very strong influence on work engagement. Adequate leadership support and the application of a purposeful leadership style contribute to employee engagement through various trainings in achieving goals, overcoming individual and group conflicts, and timely feedback delivery (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018). Based on the previous facts, the study seeks to examine the following research questions (RQ):

- RQ₁: There is a positive effect of servant leadership on job satisfaction;
- RQ₂: There is a positive effect of servant leadership on work engagement.

Every business faces difficulties due to employee turnover since it can result in lower production and significant expenses (Raza et al., 2021). Caused by severe job dissatisfaction, employees' intention to leave work is considered the last step within the framework of cognitive assessment (Namin et al., 2022). According to a recent survey, more than 60% of employees in the hotel sector were ready to leave their current jobs (Asgar et al., 2020). The causes of such "devastating" results are reflected in low wages, poor ability to advance, stagnant careers (Li et al., 2019), and a stressful work environment (Park et al., 2020). These stressors cause psychosomatic changes, which are considered the root cause of job burnout and they result in the loss of productivity and poorer business performance in employees (Jiang et al., 2021). Hotel workers represent a typical group of employees who are exposed to job burnout syndrome due to excessive exposure to emotional and mental stress (Choi et al., 2019). According to research by some authors, servant leadership has contributed to reducing the sense of job burnout (H. Zhang et al., 2012), and thus of the intention to leave the organization (Hakanen & van Dierendonck, 2013). According to theoretical views, the following is assumed:

- RQ₃: There is a negative effect of servant leadership on the turnover intention;
- RQ₄: There is a negative effect of servant leadership on job burnout.

2. Materials and methods

The purpose of the research is to examine the effects of servant leadership on positive or negative employee outcomes. The research was conducted using the method of surveying employees in hotel companies in Serbia and data collection was realized in the time interval from March to December 2022. The sample consisted of 412 respondents employed at all hierarchical levels in the hotel organization. The questionnaire used for the purpose of the research consisted of two units. In the first, the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents were measured, such as gender, age, education, and hierarchical level of work. The second part of the questionnaire was created from five instruments: the attitude of employees toward servant leadership (Liden et al., 2014), job satisfaction (Lytle, 1994), and work engagement (Schaufeli et al., 2006), as well as intentions to leave (Singh et al., 1996) and burnout syndrome (Maslach et al., 1997). After collecting the data, statistical processing was initiated through correlation and regression analyses which involved the application of the IBM SPSS 21.00 software package.

Through the Cronbach alpha coefficient, the reliability of the scales was checked, taking into account that the values of this coefficient were greater than .7 (DeVellis, 2003). The strength and direction of the linear relationship between the two variables was examined by correlation analysis. The Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) was used, the values of which indicate bond strength (small = .10–.29; medium = .30–.49; strong = .50–1), while the sign determines whether the correlation is positive or negative (Cohen, 1988). In order to investigate the connections between the observed variables, regression analysis was used, which implies a predictor variable through which they were examined relating to dependent variables. Predictor contributions were measured on the basis of statistical significance $p < .01$ and $p < .05$.

3. Results and discussion

Of the total number of respondents in the survey 42.2% of them were men and 57.8% were women. By analyzing the age structure, almost half of the respondents (46.8%) are between 30 and 39 years old. Approximately equal representation (23.5%) was of the respondents aged 20 to 29 and 40 to 49 (22.3%). The lowest number of respondents (0.5%) is less than 20 years old. Of the total number of respondents, the largest percentage of them have a bachelor's degree (51.5%), followed by respondents with a master's degree (22.8%). Slightly more than a fifth of respondents hold a high school degree (21.8%), while the lowest percentage of the respondents have a PhD, only 3.9%. Nearly a fifth of respondents (19.7%) are in positions of senior management, while 37.6% of the respondents are in non-managerial positions. A position in lower management is performed by less than a fifth of respondents (18.2%). Middle management accounts for about a quarter of the respondents (24.5%).

Based on the analysis of the mean values (Table 1) and the rating of the scale as a whole ($M = 3.71$), the servant style of leadership was recognized by the respondents. The Cronbach coefficient of this scale is satisfying considering that it amounts to $\alpha = .81$ (DeVellis, 2003).

Based on the overall rating of the scale ($M = 4.07$), the respondents expressed

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and reliability scale

| Variables | M | SD | α |
|--------------------|-------|-------|----------|
| Servant leadership | 3.717 | 0.782 | .81 |
| Job satisfaction | 4.068 | 0.847 | .92 |
| Work engagement | 3.683 | 0.766 | .89 |
| Turnover intention | 2.922 | 0.493 | .87 |
| Burnout | 2.666 | 1.061 | .81 |

Note. M = sample mean; SD = standard deviation; α = Cronbach coefficient.

satisfaction with the job. If it starts with the attitude that job satisfaction is perceived as a result of a positive assessment of the workplace, grades, and the mean values of individual claims of respondents are supported by such an attitude. The reliability of the job satisfaction scale is extremely good ($\alpha = .92$). The respondents expressed moderately positive mean values according to job engagement claims, with the scale overall rated at an average of four ($M = 3.68$). The reliability of the working engagement scale is good ($\alpha = .89$). Based on the low overall scale rating ($M = 2.67$), it can be concluded that the respondents' responses are not in line with the claims that describe the intent to quit the job more closely. The reliability of the scale of intent to leave work is good ($\alpha = .87$). The burnout syndrome scale was rated at an overall score of three ($M = 2.92$), with an analysis of the mean values of individual claims pointing to the absence of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization as key dimensions of this negative business outcome. The reliability of the job burnout scale is good ($\alpha = .81$).

In order to examine the effect of servant leadership on the aforementioned positive and negative employee outcomes, the Pearson's correlation coefficient was used (Cohen, 1988), which is shown in the following Table 2. Based on the values in Table 2, it is observed that servant leadership is positively and moderately associated with work engagement ($r = .440^{**}$) and job satisfaction ($r = .453^{**}$), and poorly and negatively related to turnover intention ($r = -.283^{**}$) and job burnout ($r = -.27^{**}$).

Table 2. Correlation analyses—values of Pearson's coefficient (r)

| Variables | Servant leadership | Job satisfaction | Work engagement | Turnover intention | Burnout |
|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------|
| Servant leadership | 1 | | | | |
| Job satisfaction | .453 ^{**} | 1 | | | |
| Work engagement | .440 ^{**} | .790 ^{**} | 1 | | |
| Turnover intention | -.238 ^{**} | -.539 ^{**} | -.401 ^{**} | 1 | |
| Burnout | -.027 ^{**} | -.123 ^{**} | -.044 ^{**} | .432 ^{**} | 1 |

Note. ^{**} $p < .01$.

In order to prove the proposed research questions, simple linear regression was used (Table 3). The effect of servant leadership on job satisfaction (RQ_1) indicates the significance of the model $F(1,411) = 105.637$; $p = .000$, which in this case, explains 20.5% of the variance. By inspecting the beta coefficient, the increase in servant leadership by one standard deviation ($SD = 0.78$) follows an increase in job satisfaction by 0.45 standard deviation ($\beta = .45$; $p = .000$). The result was following previous research studies conducted among hotel workers and flight attendants, in which the predictive impact of servant leadership on job satisfaction was proven (Bauer et al., 2019; Ilkhanizadeh & Karatepe, 2018; Ozyilmaz & Cicek, 2015).

Table 3. Regression analyses with servant leadership as a predictor

| Variables | R^2 | F | β | t | p |
|--------------------|-------|---------|---------|--------|------|
| Job satisfaction | .205 | 105.637 | .453 | 10.278 | .000 |
| Work engagement | .194 | 98.610 | .440 | 9.930 | .000 |
| Turnover intention | .080 | 35.726 | -.283 | -5.977 | .000 |
| Burnout | .001 | 0.303 | -.027 | -0.551 | .582 |

Note. R^2 = coefficient of determination; F = value of two mean squares calculations; β = unstandardized beta coefficient; t = test value; p = significance.

In order to analyze the following research question (RQ_2), and based on the results obtained, the significance of the model $F(1,411) = 98.610$ is observed; $p = .000$, which explains the 19.4% variance, with an increase in servant leadership by one standard deviation ($SD = 0.78$) followed by an increase in job engagement by 0.44 standard deviations ($\beta = .44$; $p = .00$). Similar results stem from studies conducted in the field of hospitality, in which it has been proven that servant leadership meeting psychological needs stimulates work engagement, which will directly affect the business performance of employees (Chen & Peng, 2021; Kaya & Karatepe, 2020). In order to examine the effects of servant leadership on the intention to leave work (RQ_3), it can be observed that the model is statistically significant $F(1,411) = 35.726$; $p = .00$. The unstandardized beta coefficient notes an increase in servant leadership by one standard deviation ($SD = 0.78$) followed by a decrease in the intention to leave work by 0.28 standard deviation ($\beta = -.28$; $p = .00$). Despite numerous theoretical positions that agree to confirm this hypothesis, there are a number of studies within which it has been proven that this leadership style contributes to reducing the intention to leave (Y. Zhang et al., 2019). The influence of servant leadership, as a predictor variable on the dependent job burnout variable did not show statistical significance $F(1,411) = 0.30$; $p = .58$. Therefore, the RQ_4 is rejected. Such results are not in accordance with the theoretical premises and studies conducted (H. Zhang et al., 2012).

4. Conclusion

By researching the defined topic of the effect of servant leadership on the employees' outcomes of hotel companies, four research questions were derived, the impacts and relationships of which were examined through correlation and regression analyses. Pearson's correlation coefficient confirmed that a servant leader, through moderately positive influence, contributes to job satisfaction and work engagement with hotel workers. On the other hand, this leadership style, according to the negative outcomes of the business, develops negative connections. The results of the regression analysis confirmed the predictor effect of a servant leader on job satisfaction and work engagement. The confirmed research questions support the claims of individual authors, according to which the servant leader, with their participatory leadership style and ethical behavior, contributes to the sense of job satisfaction (Cheng et al., 2020). Also, ensuring autonomy in work for the followers during the realization of goals leads to a higher level of motivation for the job, resulting in greater engagement (Aboramadan et al., 2020). Servant leadership is considered a suitable leadership style in the business of hospitality organizations since hotel employees are exposed to a large amount of stress and exhausting working hours. Servant leadership through empowerment and support creates a working atmosphere in which the needs of followers will be met (Bavik, 2020). This theoretical view, according to which servant leadership encouraging positive employees' outcomes influences the reduction of negative ones, such as turnover intention, has been confirmed in this research. The reasons for rejecting the last research question should be sought in the adverse working conditions of hotel workers, who, due to excessive requests from guests, are often exposed to great stress and pressure. This interpretation is in line with the claims of some authors, according to which job burnout, despite positive leadership styles, occurs due to untimely identification of potential threats to workers' resources, which implies the inability to accumulate adequate numbers and loss of personal resources (Wheeler et al., 2012).

The research contains certain limiting factors. Taking into account the appropriateness of sampling, generalization of the results is not advisable. Also, the examined variables were measured in one time period, which can be a limiting factor, if we take into account the seasonal operations of hotel facilities. Based on the above limitations, it is possible to single out several basic directions for future research. First, within this study, research was conducted in the sphere of hotel business on the territory of one country. With the aim to improve and expand the database on the representation of servant leadership in the business of hotel industry, as well as to examine the impact of this leadership style on employees' outcomes, it would be useful to conduct research in the surrounding countries, especially those with similar service cultures such as Montenegro and Croatia. Secondly, servant leadership as a purposeful style of leadership in hotel companies in Serbia and the predictor influence of servant leaders on employees' outcomes were the basis of this research. In order to examine and compare, the future research could, in addition to servant leadership, examine some other leadership styles, such as transactional, ethical, and charismatic.

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