INFORMATION MANAGEMENT AS A TOOL FOR SUPPORTING DECISION-MAKING: a case study of hotels in Balneário Piçarras, Brazil

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to analyze information management in hotel companies as a tool to support decision-making. Information is essential in any kind of decision-making process, and it is no different in the hospitality business. The hospitality sector of Balneário Piçarras – a city located in the state of Santa Catarina, Brazil - was chosen as the object of study. As to methodology, the first step was to perform a literature review based on secondary sources. Afterwards, a questionnaire based on Grigolo's model (2009) provided data for analysis. The questionnaire, which comprised 88 closed-ended questions, was emailed to managers from five hotels in Piçarras. The approach is mostly qualitative, characterized as exploratory and descriptive, relying on literature review and a case study as investigation procedures. The results of this research may contribute to a better understanding of information management related to the hospitality business in Piçarras. The results indicate that it is possible to work with communication elements in a broader sense, aiming at the ongoing improvement of decision-making processes.

INTRODUCTION

The features and flow of information generated both inside and outside a company are relevant for enabling and supporting any decision-making process. Thus, it is worth analyzing how the hospitality industry in Piçarras manages information, and the real importance it carries in this business.

Regarding organizational communication, Kunsch (2006) states that this area has been increasingly treated in a more professional, systematic fashion, whether due to the increasing importance it has assumed in the management of contemporary organizations, or to the evolution of academic studies in this field.

In this respect, the author emphasizes that companies must plan, manage and think strategically about way they communicate "in order to take a position before society and face all challenges offered by contemporary complexity" . It is impossible to address information management without mentioning a few theories developed in the communication field.

It is worth highlighting the following quote by Anjos, Anjos and Silva Jr. (2008): "Changes undergone by organizations in the hospitality industry have led this same industry to recognize the importance of restructuring its processes and innovating strategic information management".

The objective of this research was to analyze information management in hotel companies as a tool to support decision-making processes, strategies, resources and chosen methods, as well as detecting possible flaws and opportunities for improvement in this area.

The research focused on Balneário Piçarras, a city in the state of Santa Catarina, Brazil. Piçarras is located 8 km from Beto Carrero World, Latin America's largest theme park, and 98 km from Florianópolis, the state capital. Five hotels in Piçarras were selected as the object of study. The names of the hotels will not be stated here, to maintain confidentiality.

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Firstly, bibliographic research was carried out, to establish a theoretical basis for the discussion of concepts. The results of this review were then used to develop the theoretical background of the paper, which is presented in sections, according to specific themes.

Next, field research was conducted. The case study consisted of five beach resorts in Piçarras, with similar features to one another. Finally, this paper presents the results of the analysis on data collected from a questionnaire designed according to Grigolo's model (2009). The instrument/questionnaire was applied to internal clients (managers) to gain a final view of the situation of the object of study.

This paper bears characteristics of both bibliographic investigation and case study. It is supported by literature review, since it proposes an exploratory research with an essentially qualitative approach, considering the analysis of data extracted from the questionnaires.

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THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Hospitality is an activity whose goal is service delivery. Davies (2002) defines hospitality as the industry of goods and services whose main purpose is to provide accommodation. The objective of a hotel is to meet its guests' needs by providing quality service, which will certainly project a positive image (MURPHY, PRITHARD & SMITH, 2000).

The management of hospitality services is related to tourism in that it is a chain made up of producers, distributors and customers, plus the issue of accommodation quality (FOSTER, 1971).

Loverlock and Wright (2004) affirm that "a service is an act or effort that benefits clients through some desired change in - or on behalf of - the service recipient". Kotler (2000) complements this concept by saying that "a service is any act or effort, essentially intangible, that one party may offer to another and that does not result in the ownership of anything — in other words, a service may or may not be related to a concrete product".

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One can affirm that the hospitality service is unique, impartial and perishable, for it only occurs for as long as the client is hosted. Hoffman and Bateson support this idea by stating that (2003, p. 45) "being perishable is a peculiar feature of services that do not lend themselves to being kept nor stored, and neither do they allow the retrieval of their unused capacity".

Las Casas (1991) argues that "services are transactions performed by a company or by a businessperson whose objective is not associated with the transfer of goods".

Integrating information and knowledge about products, services and decisions is a game changer within the vital function of representativeness over information management – that is, the more one understands his/her area, the more one can work with it (FREITAS & LESCA, 1992).

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Information management has only recently begun to be studied as a science. Barreto (2002) summarizes the temporal idea of Information Science in three moments: information handling (1945-1980); relations between information and knowledge (1980-1995); and interactive knowledge (1995...). Information handling stands out within this context. It emerged at the end of the Second World War, with the aim of "sorting, organizing and controlling the explosion of information", since there was no solution for this that could be envisaged at the time (BARRETO, 2002, p. 71).

As to information management, Beuren (2000, p. 46) states the following: "Managers lack information about the company's purpose and external environment as a means of identifying threats and opportunities, aiming at a competitive, dynamic response" - hence the importance of information management in the decision-making process. The objectives of information management are to plan information administration, to develop and conserve information systems and services, to favor organizational efficiency, and to acknowledge demands for both internal and external information (OLIVEIRA & BERTUCCI, 2003).

On the subject of information administration, Lesca and Almeida (1994) detect three types of organization: those that manage information as a planned resource; those that manage information in a segmented manner without impairing their strategic character; and those that simply do not manage information at all, whether strategically or as a means to increase their competitive edge. Information then can still be regarded as a "key element in the making of pertinent, sensible and quality decisions" (LESCA & ALMEIDA, 1994, p. 67).

According to Guimarães and Évora (2004, p. 72), the way information is obtained, organized, recorded, restored, and eventually used, allows managers to work with it more reliability, increasing the possibility of reaching perfection when making decisions. Rezende (2005) expresses the idea that "data is transformed into information and, consequently, into knowledge".

It can be concluded that information makes a major difference in decision-making in many fields of activity. It is no different in the tourism area, where information also needs to be managed so that the desired results and success can be achieved.

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Every company has times when decisions need to be made, whether in simple daily situations or in cases that can have more far-reaching consequences, and where the decision-making requires more concentration and elaboration.

The act of decision-making can lead to great evolution or even disastrous implications. Therefore, it is important to reflect on and understand this process, and the subtleties that can affect it.

In Magalhães' (2014) point of view, organizations that channel information which is useful to their objectives and, as a result, create strategies at the right moment are more likely to innovate, develop and become pioneers. Adding to this idea, it is suggested that information channeling is imperative for the development of the decision-making process, as shown in Figure 1.

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Figure 01 – The individual's decision-making process
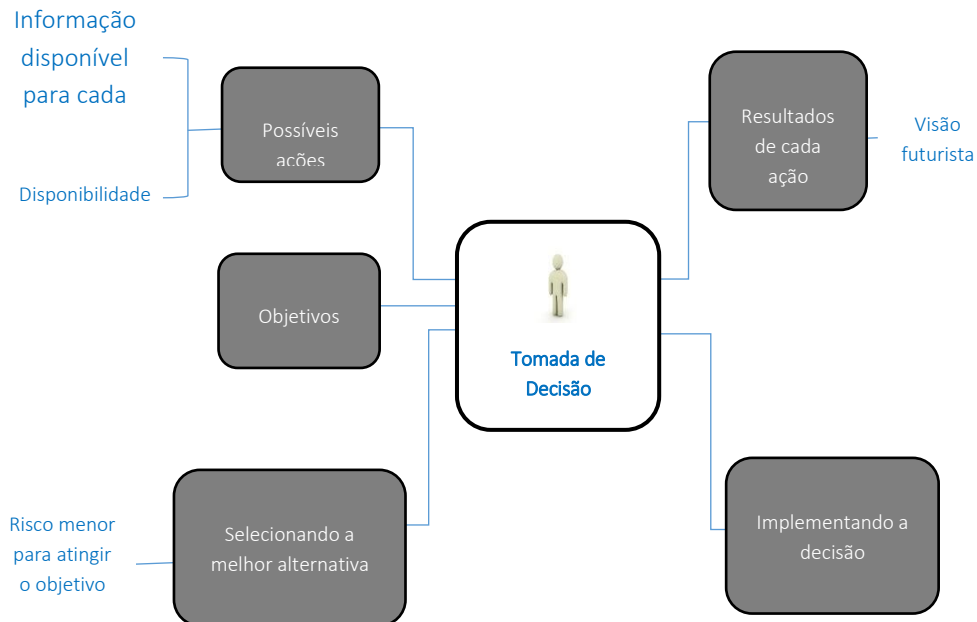
Source: Adapted from Magalhães (2014) and (Rodriguez, Barcenas & Lópes-Huertas, 2012).

Magalhães, using same reasoning of Choo and Rocha (2006), declares that companies must assist the individual or manager – as is the case in this paper - in order to reduce uncertainties in the decision-making process. This reduction of uncertainties can occur in at least three different ways. The first one is having the information necessary to structure a situation of choice. The second relates to gathering the information necessary to define preferences and select rules, and the third has to do with gathering information about feasible alternatives and their possible consequences.

Regarding the relevance of information in the decision-making process, Maximiano (2009) argues that the difference between reason and intuition can be correlated with the difference between information and opinions/feelings. The author explains that the larger the information basis, the more rational the process. Similarly, the higher the proportion of opinions and feelings involved, the more intuitive the process becomes.

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Put into those words, the flow and management of information are clearly vital for making decisions with confidence, despite the natural and proportional emotional interference, given that the decision-making process is experienced and performed by a human being.

Also in relation to the individual's participation in the decision-making process, Chiavenato (2003) mentions that "...each person is involved rationally and consciously, choosing and making individual decisions as to rational behavior alternatives". The same author determines that, in a nutshell, people are "information processers, opinion creators and decision makers".

Thus, the individual or professional in charge of making the decision should be integrated into the organization and design methods that will generate adequate information flow. This allows effective management in such a way that information will suffer the least interference and will be used at the most suitable moment, for efficient decision-making.

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METHOD

This is mostly an exploratory research, however it does have some descriptive characteristics, since the authors extended on the analysis of the responses and sought to describe phenomena. The results, meanwhile, were analyzed using a qualitative approach (GIL, 2008).

An electronic questionnaire was offered to five hotels located in Balneário Piçarras, but only three of them replied. Questionnaires were applied to the hotels' managers. The instrument was modeled after Grigolo (2009), and was divided into the following stages: questionnaire adaptation; application; analysis.

RESULTADOS E DISCUSSÕES

The three hotels that responded to the questionnaire will be hereafter referred to as "X", "Y" and "Z". All of them were built between the 1970s and the 1990s, and their management

structures are made up of family members and private institutions. The three hotels are open all year round; nonetheless, there is a notable difference between the number of reservations during high and low seasons.

Occupancy rates range from 100% during the high season to 20-25% in the low season, with average annual occupancy rates of 30-40%. Families are the most frequent type of guests, representing around 50-70% of the hotels' clients. The hotels are also used by business tourists, who represent 20-30% of the guests.

Only two of these hotels used outside consultancy services such as accounting, legal, and promoting/marketing consultancy. As to the managers/maintainers who responded to the questionnaire, two are male and one is female. Two of them are aged 20 to 30 years, and only one is over 50 years of age. Years in company range from less than 8 months up to 3 and 5-plus years, and all the respondents had at least a one year of experience in the tourism business.

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The questionnaire consisted of 88 questions, with the respondents selecting from options 1 to 5: "totally disagree", "disagree more than agree", "neither agree nor disagree", "agree more than disagree" and "totally agree".

All the respondents consider information to be fundamental to the daily running of the hotels. Their answers clearly indicate the importance of information in the managers' decisions when running their businesses in the city of Piçarras.

When solving problems, the respondents are not really concerned about following a previously organized, precise script - such as numerical/statistical spreadsheets produced by the company's sectors – in order to choose the right direction in the decision-making, thus reflecting effective change in the hotel's strategic administration.

That being said, it is worth noting that strategic management seeks to combine strategic planning and administration into a single process, and "assures that all required

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organizational changes will happen and that several organizational levels will participate in the decision-making process" (TAVARES, 2000).

When it comes to the information sources used in the management of these hotels, all the research participants relied on the support of data that was either incomplete, or under-used. Nevertheless, they did use software that is supposed to cover all the information management needs, such as the Queóps software - licensed by Lexsis Systems - and the Met Hotel software. In this respect, it is worth quoting Oliveira (1993, p. 34), who states that "information is any kind of data that supports the decision-making process", and that must be explored in order to enhance management power.

Regarding strategic information management, the respondents recognized its importance and the need for accurate data in the area of hospitality, but were not able to clearly distinguish which items of information are truly useful when planning the future of their businesses.

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When analyzing information that helps assess the performance of the business' promoting/marketing area – i.e. the area through which tourists come to know about the hotel's services -, it was observed that not all the respondents used traditional media to promote information outside the hotel.

Having said that, other responses point out that the choice of a channel for transmitting information is more relevant to hotels that collect data to support decisions than to those that do not. Managers can, for instance, use informal conversations and meetings to distribute the information needed in that area.

According to this analytical perspective, and considering that strategic information management can contribute to the development and survival of hotel businesses (Freitas & Lesca, 1992), this paper described the universe of information management internally, as investigated in three hotels. The results generate awareness as to strong and weak features related to information management, and motivate the next step to be taken: the

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presentation of propositions for improving information management with strategic purposes in the hospitality business.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is worth mentioning that all respondents were quite courteous and showed interest in the research, which is evident not only because of their cooperation, but also in the fact that they looked forward to receiving feedback from the authors, such as practical recommendations for supporting and improving their management practice. Moreover, all the respondents gave their attention to the matter in hand, and considered the advice provided and the information acquired to be crucial.

The respondents recognized the role that information plays, both during the productive process and in the administrative processes, especially in the making of decisions that concern the organizational plans followed by the hotels. On the other hand, it was observed that these hotels lack administrative techniques that match the reality of this market. Therefore, Beuren (2000, p. 46) has a point when she mentions that "managers lack information about the company's purpose and external environment as a means of identifying threats and opportunities, aiming at a competitive, dynamic response".

Concerned to ensure efficiency, transparency, credibility, and access to information, the respondents point out that it is necessary to invest in mechanisms that cause information to flow in a more professional, reliable and solid way, through the creation of information products and services that guarantee success in the decision-making process.

This research, though, has its limitations. Since this is a case study, generalization is restricted, and it is not possible to draw conclusions as to other hotels, even those from the same work area or geographic region. After all, the hotels mentioned in this research are heterogeneous and should be considered within their own sectors, based on specific characteristics of their management practices, their managers' choices and goals, and any contextual factor that influences them.

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In conclusion, it is clear to see that the information generated by this research contributes to outlining the current situation of these hotels, and provides some advice on how to deal with the behavior of both internal and external forces. In this way, it is possible to assess the accuracy of the decisions made, the skills required in the decision-making process, the hotels' current performances, and occasional threats and opportunities. This research could even be repeated in the future in order to verify whether these conditions have changed.

Therefore, not only does this paper contribute to a better understanding of information management related to the hospitality business in Piçarras, but it also indicates that it is possible to work with communication elements in a broader sense, aiming at the ongoing improvement of decision-making processes. Thus, the authors of this work recommend that, after the preliminary presentation of this research, respondents are alerted as to circumstances that may still be inconsistent, and guided in how to overcome them.

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