

Investigation of Attitudes and Perceptions of Human Resource Managers at Hospitality Establishments Regarding Affirmative Action Programs A Case Study in Eskişehir-Turkey

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions and attitudes of human resource managers at some hospitality organisations regarding the employment of disadvantaged individuals as part of affirmative action program in the province of Eskişehir-Turkey. This study is a qualitative study focusing on real cases to inspire other organisations. The data were collected through active interviews, and the collected data was analysed through the use of manual qualitative data analysis methods. The findings of the study reveal that perceptions of human resource managers regarding disadvantaged individuals at hospitality organisations are closely related to disabled individuals. They do not have positive attitudes towards the employment of disadvantaged individuals in tourism as part of affirmative action programs. They are also against positive discrimination of disadvantaged individuals in the employment in tourism for some reasons. All these findings suggest that participants are confused about some terms regarding affirmative action.

Keywords: Affirmative action, employment, tourism, disadvantaged individuals, hospitality organisation

Introduction

The issue of affirmative action has been a major debate among policy makers and administrators managing organisations for long years. Affirmative action (AA) is related to workplace policies and practices aiming to eliminate any discrimination in any workplace among the members of protected classes (Crosby et al., 2006). It is commonly believed that the terms of affirmative action (AA) and equal opportunity (EO) are two closely related terms to one another, and they can be used synonymously. However, they are actually two terms which significantly differ from one another in many ways. The first difference between the two terms is that EO is mostly reactive. It means that EO attempts to remove any discrimination when it occurs. However, affirmative action plans aim to prevent any discrimination within an organisation before it takes place reacting in a proactive way (Crosby et al., 2006). Affirmative Action Programs (AAPs) have been a controversial issue for employment policies in most workplaces throughout the world. With the help of the AAPs, policy makers aim to reduce traditional discrimination practices among employees.

AAPs started to be a major concern in the USA first in history, but it has become a popular issue throughout the world in time. Governments around the world have started to pass new regulations and laws encouraging and leading organisations to decrease any discrimination practices in workplaces (Jain, Sloane, Horwitz, Taggar, & Weiner, 2003). The regulations passed in these countries require organisations to adopt equal opportunity policies and to improve the employment opportunities for the members of underrepresented groups in the society. As individuals employed in organisations have been subjects to AAPs, understanding their psychological reactions to AAPs used in workplaces has been very important. Psychological reactions of employees at organisations such as attitudes of employees play significant roles in the development of affirmative action policies and in the implementation of the AAPs in workplaces. In the determination of the effectiveness of the AAPs in workplaces, managers and employees' supportive attitudes towards the implemented AAPs

are very important for organisations (Hitt & Keats, 1984). As a consequence of this fact, many types of research have been carried out in the field to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of the workers and administrators in organisations. To have a better understanding of affirmative action, which is the subject of this study, it is very important to have a clear definition of "attitude". Attitude is defined as an evaluative judgment regarding an object (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). If employees and managers' attitudes towards AAPs can be understood better in organisations, it becomes easier for those implementing AAPs in organisations to manage any AAP related issues. For example, positive support or any resistance to AAP can be managed more effectively in such cases (Bell, Harrison, & McLaughlin, 2000). The most basic aim of this study is to come up with new evidence based on a different context for the AAPs and reactions of human resource managers towards it.

Structural Features of Affirmative Action Programs

The most important structural feature of AAPs is the amount of the focus on applicants' demographic traits such as gender and race-ethnicity, and therefore the relevant research in the literature has focused on these two traits briefly mentioned above. The AAPs used in research are classified into four types as suggested by Sanders (2004)

The first of these is opportunity enhancement. In this class, AAPs offer assistance to the subject group members before the decision of employment was made. This is done with the help of focused recruitment or training. In this category, demographic traits of the applicants are disregarded in the employment decisions. Just opposite, their primary aim is to have more target group members in the pool of qualified candidates to have more alternatives. Thus, decision makers have more alternatives to select and the average quality of the chosen ones are higher than the case when less target group members are available in the selection pool for the decision makers in employment.

The second structural feature of AAPs is equal opportunity, which is the elimination of any discrimination within the organisations. AAPs do not allow decision makers to put a negative focus on membership in an AAP target group. The third one is tiebreak AAPs. Members of the target group are preferred more often over the others if their other qualifications are equivalent. Thus, the amount of positive weight put on the target group is kept at the minimal level. The last structural feature of AAPs is strong preferential treatment AAPs. This one prefers members of the target group even when the qualifications they have are less than those owned by the non-target group members. Thus, more weight is put on demographic traits.

In brief, affirmative action programs are workplace policies and practices designed to reduce historical forms of discrimination based on demographic distinctions among employee. These programs aim to increase the number of individuals from disadvantaged groups in the work areas where they have been underrepresented traditionally. These programs also help organisations to find out any discrimination within the organisation monitoring the employees well. This is done with the systematic collection of the data from organisation building cause and effect relationship regarding the detected problem.

Affirmative Action for the Employment of Disadvantaged Individuals in Tourism

The employment opportunities in different sectors are mostly based on the match between the job necessity and the qualifications that applicants have regarding the applied job. If the match is good between the job necessity and qualifications, the employment becomes more functional. The match mentioned may be very difficult for those with some significant disadvantages. According to the 30th article of the labour law numbered 4857 and according to the labour law numbered 3713, there has been some quota by the authorities regarding the employment of disadvantaged individuals, physically handicapped individuals and former convicts in the public and private sector. There has been no other legal regulation regarding the employment of other disadvantaged individuals. Therefore, it is very important to focus on the employment of all the disadvantaged individuals in tourism except the ones defined by the law. It can be suggested here that even the employment of the disadvantaged individuals regulated by law are not positively treated by the sector representatives. Therefore, what they think about affirmative action programs is a great wonder. Affirmative action is defined as the whole of the policies, strategies, methods and practices developed for the benefit of disadvantaged individuals in the society. The purpose of affirmative action programs is to help the disadvantaged individuals to be treated more advantageously in their workplaces and education lives than normal individuals (Akbaş and Şen, 2013). Banning discrimination for the purpose of assuring equity within a society seems to cause more social problems. When individuals need to be treated differently because of some features, there is also a need to take some measurements regarding the

elimination of the disadvantages caused by these features. The measures that are also named as affirmative action tend to provide a real equality in employment rather than having equality in word within workplaces (Karan, 2009). Whereas the criteria for equality in employment have been made clear in labour law and constitution, practitioners do not feel clear about them when a need emerges for equal employment in business life. The attempt to ensure real employment equality through affirmative action programs has always been subject to labour contracts and regulation. It is also hard to find an adjudication regarding affirmative action in Turkey, affirmative action is evaluated depending on features of each event emerging in business life (Ulucan, 2013). As tourism has many sub-branches, employment of disadvantaged individuals is closely related to employers' perceptions and implementations regarding affirmative action in workplaces. That is why; this study has great significance as it aimed to raise awareness regarding affirmative action programs in the hospitality industry through a qualitative research.

METHOD

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions, experiences, attitudes and views of human resource managers regarding the employment of the disadvantaged individuals in 7 hospitality establishments in the province of Eskişehir. To do that, the following research questions were looked for answers within the scope of this study;

What are the perceptions of the human resources managers regarding disadvantaged individuals?

What are the views of the human resources managers regarding the employment of the disadvantaged individuals in the hospitality industry?

What are the views of human resources managers regarding the affirmative action in the employment of disadvantaged individuals in hospitality industry?

Is there any interesting experience of human resource managers with any disadvantaged individuals?

Limitations of the Study

This qualitative study was conducted at only 7 hospitality establishments in the province of Eskişehir. The biggest limitation of this study is that it was conducted at a few hospitality establishments. Therefore, it is difficult to make generalisations using the findings of this study, which is always so in qualitative studies by their nature. However, qualitative studies can have inspiring findings for other establishments operating in the same sector.

Design of the Study

This study aims to fill in a gap regarding perceptions of human resources managers in hospitality industry regarding affirmative actions and strategies in Turkey. A qualitative case study approach was used in this study to answer the research questions and objectives. This approach uses rich in-depth interviews to gather data (Berg 1989). This study is grounded in an interpretive paradigm attempting to see the events through insiders' perspective (Jennings 2001). One reason for using a qualitative approach is to collect rich information from the participants because it cannot be done so effectively through standard quantitative instruments (Veal, 1997). Qualitative research is flexible and they allow researchers to be creative for the detailed analysis of research data collected in the study. Human resource managers were primarily chosen as participants in the study due to their knowledge regarding their company's operational strategies in employee hiring.

The data collection method used in this study to address the research questions was qualitative interviewing. Qualitative interviewing can be in-depth, semi-structured or loosely structured forms of interviewing as suggested by (Mason, 2002). For this study, the data collection was done through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 7 different hotel managers to gather data regarding affirmative action. Many advantages of interview techniques as a data collection method have been suggested by researchers. Jennings (2010) suggests that semi-structured interviews can be used to reorganise and expand the responses. The semi-structured schedule provides a relaxed interview setting for both the interviewer and interviewee. Each interview was also type recorded for the further analysis of the collected data.

Participants

7 hotel managers were communicated within the scope of this study in the province of Eskişehir, and they were briefly informed about the aim of the study. They were also informed about the data collection instrument and procedure. All of them volunteered to participate in the study.

Interview Form and Data Collection

Semi-structured interview technique was used in this qualitative study to collect data from the human resources managers. The interview form consisted of four open-ended questions. The interview questions were given to the participants through e-mail prior to the interviews upon their request. Then interviews were arranged through phone calls with the human resource managers and then the interviews were conducted with them in their workplaces. The questions developed for this study were directed to the participants and the answers were type recorded for further data analysis. The active interviewing technique was used in this study and this technique takes the advantage of interviewee's personal experience accepting him/her as an authority on the examined issue. At this point, the interviewer is responsible for keeping the conversation focused on the key points of interest, but they should also be ready to revise the interview questions under the light of the emerging new ideas. The questions which were asked to the participants are as follows;

Who are the disadvantaged individuals according to you? What do you recall when you are mentioned about disadvantaged individuals?

What do you think about the employment of the disadvantaged individuals?

What do you think about affirmative action in the employment of the disadvantaged individuals in tourism sector?

Do you have any interesting experience that you had with any disadvantaged individual? If there is, could you tell us about it, please?

Data Analysis

The data collected through semi-structured interviews were analysed with descriptive data analysis method. The analysis was done in four stages. At the first stage, a framework was formed with the help of the research questions of this study for data analysis. Thus, it was made clear under which themes the collected data could be grouped. It was very important to combine the collected data under relevant themes in a logical and meaningful way. After that, the organised data were defined and direct quotations were presented from the interviews. Following this stage, the findings of the study were explained and meaningful relationships were built among them. Cause and effect relationships among the findings were made clear to support the discussion, and relevant comparisons were made among different cases.

Validity and Reliability

Qualitative studies are considered to be reliable when the data is collected and analysed in one hand by the same individual (Kirk & Miller, 1986). Therefore, the interviews in this study were conducted by only one individual and the collected data were also analysed by the same individual to make the study a reliable one. Then the analysis procedure was revised and edited by the other researchers to increase the validity and reliability of the study. On the other hand, validity in active interviews, as in this study, is obtained through the conversational approach in data collection in field research (Platt, 2002). Opposed to the survey interview, which is a common way of data collection in quantitative studies, it is possible for both parties of interactions to clarify meaning in communication in active interviews. Another reason why this study is a valid one is that the findings of the study were shared with the participants of the study, and they confirmed the findings. The findings of the study were also shared with a field expert, and they were discussed in detail. The data of the study were also stored in confidence by the researcher for any further confirmation in the future. The process of data analysis was explained in detail. For the external validity, the stages of the study were explained in detail. Direct quotations from the interviews were also presented in the study to support the findings of the study.

Results

In this qualitative study which was conducted at 7 hospitality organisations in Eskişehir province aimed a few things, one of which is to reveal the perceptions of human resource managers at some hospitality organisations towards disadvantaged individuals in employment. The following question was asked to the human resource managers in the interviews as the first

step, “Who are the disadvantaged individuals according to you? What do you recall when you are mentioned about disadvantaged individuals? The findings obtained are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Findings regarding the perceptions of managers towards disadvantaged individuals.

Disadvantaged Individuals	Participants (P)
Disabled individuals	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7
Drug users	P1, P3, P5, P7
Terror-stricken	P6
Former sentenced persons	P2, P3, P5, P7
Those with different sexual preferences	P3
Immigrants	P4
Those from shelter houses	P4

When the replies given to this question in the interviews were analysed, it was found that the participants' perceptions regarding disadvantaged individuals varied from one another and significantly differed. All of the participants placed “disabled individuals” under the category of disadvantaged individuals. However, 4 of the participants replied the question as “drug users”, “former sentenced individuals” and “immigrants” as shared answers. That makes it clear that the human resource managers of the subject hospitality organisations had deficient knowledge of disadvantage individuals when all answers are considered.

Following the first question addressed to the participants, the following question was asked; “ What do you think about the employment of disadvantaged individuals in tourism sector?” The answers received for this question varied from one another, some of which were positive and some of which were negative. Some extracts are given below and then they are analysed.

“Government should take more responsibility in the employment of disadvantaged individuals to increase the employment rates in the sector as should be in all sectors. I do not think that the government has done enough in this matter” (P1)

“It is our duty to help those individuals in their employment and manage their lives as normal individuals” (P2)

“Organisations do not seem to volunteer in employing such individuals if they are legally forced to do so” (P3)

“I do not think we need enforcement to employ such individuals in tourism because qualification is important in tourism sector as it is a service based sector” (P4)

“The government should employ such individuals in public sector, but it should not legally for private sector in employment of disadvantaged individuals. We are a private sector and we have to struggle to commercially survive but public sector does not have such concern” (P5)

“I should not be forced by the government in the employment of disadvantaged individuals. I need to employ the people who will have a real function in the operation of the organisation” (P6)

“It is not appropriate to employ such individuals in all sectors. Tourism is one of these sectors which need special qualification. If we employ everybody as they are disadvantaged in tourism, we will have big problems” (P7)

The replies received from the participants reveal that more than half of the participants were against the employment of disadvantaged individuals in tourism. In other words, they had negative perceptions regarding the employment of disadvantaged individuals in tourism. Their main concerns seem that they consider tourism a sector which is service dominant. Employees have to interact with customers face to face most of the time and they consider disadvantaged individuals as problematic ones to allow them with clients. Two participants suggested that tourism is not a sector where

such individuals could be employed freely. They state that public sector is one where such individuals need to be employed. What is interesting is that their replies all show that they consider disadvantaged individuals as potential source of problem in their employment.

To find out the perceptions and attitudes of human resource managers towards affirmative action, the following question was asked to the participants; *"What are your views as human resources managers regarding the affirmative action in the employment of disadvantaged individuals in hospitality industry?"*

"I am not positive for affirmative action plan in the employment of disadvantaged individuals in tourism because I personally believe that they will cause a lot of problems within the organisations. Our sector is based on service and interaction between employees and customers. I believe that employment of such individuals as part of affirmative action will give serious damage to the operative capacity of the organisations" (P1)

"As a manager of this organisation, my priority is to employ the individuals whose qualifications match the needs of the job in my organisation. If I have to obey the requirements of affirmative action programs, I will have to employ those with irrelevant skills and qualifications" (P2)

"I am against affirmative action in employment in tourism. Tourism is a service dominant sector and interaction is very important in this sector. If you employ disadvantaged individuals as affirmative action programs require, you risk a lot of things" (P3)

"When affirmative action is implemented in hospitality organisations in tourism, it will lead to serious and irreversible consequences in the organisation. It is against the principle that relevant job should be given to the relevant employee with relevant qualifications regarding tourism and service delivery" (P4)

"Qualification should always have the priority in employment. Employment of such individuals as part of affirmative action programs can be good in some sectors, but tourism cannot be one of those because employees have great significance in hospitality organisations" (P5)

"As we have difficulty in finding the right employee for the right position, it would be more difficult to do so if implementing affirmative action in employment is done. Public sector is the right place to employ such people as they have no concern regarding profitability" (P6)

"I do not think it is a right way of increasing the employment of such individuals in tourism. We are different, and this sector is very sensitive. Skill is very important. Where will I place such people in my workplace?" P7

All of the findings obtained from the participants regarding affirmative action in employment in tourism reveal that all of the human resource managers are against affirmative action programs because of some concerns. Almost all of the participants stated that tourism, especially hospitality establishments need skill and qualification based employment as it is a service sector. The interaction between employees and customers has primary significance, so employees should be selected considering their skills and qualifications. As their perceptions are negative towards affirmative action in the employment of disadvantaged individuals in tourism, especially hospitality establishments, their attitudes are also negative towards affirmative action in tourism.

Human resource managers were asked the following question to reveal their perceptions and attitudes towards affirmative action in the employment of disadvantaged individuals in hospitality establishment; *"Do you have any interesting experience that you had with any disadvantaged individual? If there is, could you tell us about it, please?"* Only one of the participants had an interesting experience with any disadvantaged individuals in the past, and the other participants had no experience or they do not remember any experience regarding this issue. The experience is as follows;

"At one of the organisations where I worked as a manager, our human resource responsible employed a former sentenced person in the organisation. When we examined his qualification for the most appropriate placement within the organisation, we decided to employ him in the kitchen as a person responsible for the transfer of the consumable materials in the kitchen, but he, in time, requested to work in the frontline to interact with consumers as he found himself qualified for it not to make him feel that he was positively discriminated in the organisation. However, we had problems with him and many consumers delivered many complaints about him. When asked him for explanation, he said that he was negatively discriminated within the organisation by the other employees and managers as he was a former sentenced person. We had to stay silent but

complaints continued in time and we could not speak about this matter with him. We had to dismiss him, which was a bad experience for us” (P3)

Whereas only one participant suggested a negative experience with the employment of any disadvantaged individual, it was a negative one. In his experience, it was clear that the disadvantaged employee exploited the fact that he was employed as a disadvantaged individual. When the participants' perceptions and attitudes are considered under the light of the responses given to the former questions directed in the interviews, it can be suggested that human resource managers are negative towards affirmative action and employment of disadvantaged individuals in tourism.

Discussion

The findings of this qualitative study suggest that the perceptions of human resource managers at hospitality organisation in Eskişehir province are closely related to disabled individuals, physically or mentally. Therefore, it can be suggested under the light of this finding that participants have low level of awareness regarding disadvantaged individuals. In fact, the term of “disadvantaged individuals” is more comprehensive than disabled individuals. As they mainly focus on “disabled” individuals when asked about disadvantaged individuals, they mainly associate disadvantaged individuals with disabled individuals, which is the main cause of the confusion here.

When considered from the point of employment of disadvantaged individuals in tourism, it can be suggested that they are not positive towards their employment in tourism. The main reason for that, as suggested by the participants in the relevant replies to the relevant question in the interview, they consider tourism as a service dominant sector. Therefore, interaction is very important between customers and employees and they do not feel sure about the rapport between customers and disadvantaged individuals when employed in their organisations. They believe that any mismatch in the interaction between customers and employees will cause reversible consequences for the organisation.

Participants' reactions to affirmative action seem to be parallel with their reaction to employment of disadvantaged individuals in tourism. They do not volunteer to employ disadvantaged individuals in tourism as part of affirmative action programs. They believe that tourism is a too risky sector to positively discriminate disadvantaged individuals in tourism because skills and qualifications possessed by those employed in tourism. When individuals are subject to affirmative action in employment in tourism, they believe that they have to ignore the skills and qualifications sought for, which in time leads deterioration in service delivery and customer satisfaction in hospitality organisations.

After all those findings, it can be concluded that tourism cannot be considered as a sector where affirmative action can be implemented in employment of disadvantaged individuals in tourism. However, those operating in tourism sector, especially in hospitality organisations, can be asked for their ideas before putting legal forces in the employment of disadvantaged individuals not to cause the negative consequences mentioned above by the participants. That does not mean to say that tourism should be excluded from affirmative action, positive discrimination in employment of such individuals, but further studies and field work should be done to raise awareness of human resource managers at hospitality organisation regarding the difference between disabled individuals and disadvantaged individuals. Thus, human resource managers' perceptions can be changed positively to help them adopt positive attitudes towards the employment of disadvantaged individuals in tourism. If they have less concern about the performance of those employed as part of affirmative action, their employment rates in tourism can be increased.

In brief, it can be suggested that human resource managers' false perceptions regarding disadvantaged individuals are the main barrier to the employment of such individuals in tourism. The interaction between the sector and policy makers should always be kept alive. Even disadvantaged individuals should undergo skill and qualification analysis for better placement in workplaces to increase their job performance. Thus human resource managers' perceptions and then attitudes will change for positive in time. The conclusions draw here are based on some hospitality organisations in Eskişehir province. Further and more comprehensive research can be conducted on more organisations to test the findings of this qualitative study. Further research can focus on this.

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