

MEDICAL TOURISM: ATTAINING COMPETITIVE EDGES THROUGH HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: *Intense competition is growing among players in the emergent medical tourism industry, given the lucrative returns and fringe benefits that the industry offers to a country. In the Southeast Asia region, destination countries are aggressively position to becoming medical tourism hubs to tap into the pie, escalating the competition. The need to stay competitive coupled with the austere customer- and service- orientation of the hospitality industry, have constantly put medical tourism industry and its sustainability to test. Hence, there is a dire need to attain differentiation and competitive edges to sustain in the industry. The root to medical tourism sustainability lies in the ability to condition its core competencies to be innovative towards challenges to breach diversity barriers, or risked to be shadowed or phased out. Human capital as the core and forerunner of any organisation, is a powerful resource in the hands of competent management and leadership, nevertheless, they can also be detrimental when managed casually. In light of this, medical tourism entities are collectively summoned to foster a dynamic approach in their human resource management (HRM) and leadership development as a competitive edge to sustain. Thus, the expansion and exploration on this proposed conceptual model will constitute favourable future directions for medical tourism.*

Keywords: *Competitive edge, Human Resource Management, Leadership development, Medical tourism.*

Introduction

Medical tourism refers to traveling from one location to another with an intention to obtain medical assistance (Junio, Kim, & Lee, 2017; Guiry, & Vequist IV, 2015; Connell, 2006). Changes in demographic and epidemiological have brought healthcare services into global limelight. More apparently, medical tourism has undergone a seismic change in destination of interest geographically.

Long waiting period, costly healthcare and insufficient coverage of medical insurance, to name a few, in developed countries have resulted in medical seekers to divert their interests to developing countries in search of higher utility differences (Beland, & Zarzeczny, 2018; Connell, 2006; Garcia-Altes, 2005). These prompted medical tourism to emerge as a lucrative business opportunity for countries in Southeast Asia (Seow, Choong, Krishna, & Chan, 2017; Badulescu, & Badulescu, 2014).

The importance of medical tourism to national development is evidential. Amongst others, it generates rising incomes and improved education to the nation (Pocock, & Phua, 2011), induces foreign exchange earnings to the country, and creates employment and business opportunities (Seow et al., 2017; Badulescu, & Badulescu, 2014; Connell, 2013). The growing demand for healthcare services in Southeast Asia have also attributed to rapid growth in private sector (Nguyen, & Wilson, 2017; Morgan, Ensor, & Waters, 2016; Chee, 2010). Consequently, private sectors are encouraged to collaborate and formulate strategic plans on curative improvement and advancement in healthcare services (Institute of Medicine Committee, 2002). The robust growth in the medical tourism industry has also drawn foreign direct investment into the country, which in turn is beneficial to the nation in the forms of improvement in healthcare and tourism infrastructure. Nations recognize the potentials medical tourism bring and thus, gives rise to a growing intensity in competition amongst marketers.

The keystones of medical tourism are customer- and service-orientated, hence it is essential for human capital of the industry to demonstrate versatility and innovation to challenges. One of the dominant challenges in medical tourism is to bridge the diversity gaps between the service providers and the recipients, in this case, the medical entities and the international tourists in order to secure interests, loyalty and retention. The diversity gaps are in numerous forms, to name a few are cultural, language, religion, habitual or preference barriers (Momeni, Janati, Imani, & Khodayari-Zarnaq, 2018; Ghosh, Joshi, & Ghosh, 2017; Kim, Koo, Shin, & Lee, 2017; Aydin, & Karamehmet, 2017; Liu, & Chen, 2013). Inability to bridge the gaps may bring upon encumbrances and adverse effects to the industry and also to the country. Negative reviews and loss of goodwill will result in diminishing appeal to visitors, bringing losses to the medical entities and retarding the growth of the industry. Thus, securing visitors' loyalty and the retention of visitors pose challenges.

The potential of medical tourism to grow further in participating countries in Southeast Asia region is inevitable (Seow et al., 2017; Badulescu, & Badulescu, 2014). Country such as Malaysia is strategically and economically presented itself as one of the strong medical hubs alongside with Singapore, Thailand, India and South Korea. Medical tourism in Malaysia is forecasted to grow at a compounding annual rate (CAGR) of 30.05% over the next 8 years, to estimate at USD3.5 billion in 2024 (Transparency Market Research, 2017). In addition, Malaysia has also emerged as the leader in the global Muslim travel market for eight

consecutive years in 2018, with expectation that this market will reach USD300 billion by 2026 (Malaysia Healthcare Travel Council, 2018). In order to reap such opportunities in an intensive competitive environment, it is imperative to acquire and attain competitive edge.

A well-developed and dynamic HRM and leadership development will cultivate a workforce, of all levels of management, to portray high degree of commitment, resilient to challenges, and uphold professionalism in their conducts. Such intellectual capital is a competitive edge (Wright, Dunfold, & Snell, 2001) to drive growth, ensuring delivery of quality and securing goodwill. In light of the above, formulation, adoption and roll-out of a dynamic HRM policies are vital to pursue a sustainable medical tourism.

Literature Review

HRM and leadership development in medical tourism industry

Both government and private sector in the industry play crucial roles in providing innovative business development plans to capture the high potentials in the Southeast Asia economies. For instance, government and industry players strive to attain internationally recognised accreditations such as Healthcare Accreditations Certification Program (HACP) and Joint Commission International (JCI) awards to procure public acceptance and global recognition towards the ability to deliver quality healthcare services (Ganguli, & Ebrahim, 2017). On the other hand, such moves are inconceivable without proper planning and corresponding development in leadership together with sound HRM to acquire competitive edges to achieve sustainability. The complexity of behavioural study requires intangible resources from effective leadership skills. Leaders through its influencing power could induce and enforce entrepreneurship culture; a facet to sustain growth through innovations, new concepts and effective strategies both in domestic and international operations (Nathan, & Lee, 2013). It requires professionalism in administration and management of medical tourism industry such as delivery of excellent products and services does reflect the importance of investment in human capital (Inyang, & Esu, 2008). Strategically, producing qualified and trained medical staff and healthcare professional to breach diversity to meet varying demands remain a challenge (Sopoaga, Zaharic, Kokaua & Covello, 2017). HRM characterises the process of skill specialisation of labour through recruiting, training and licensing, career progression and business motivation. Thus, when a “sustainability” philosophy permeates an entire organisation’s outlook and operations, it will instigate trust, loyalty and ultimately will persuade interests from many medical seekers worldwide.

Leadership can be defined as an influence relationship between leaders and followers with the proposition to implement changes that reflect their shared purposes of outcome (Daft, 2011). Players of healthcare industry are prompted to ensure they are modelling employees not just for the present, but rather for the environment in which they will be heading in the future (Minter, 2010). In addition, appropriate leadership style can enhance work performance by inducing trust and organisational citizenship behaviour (Altuntas, & Baykal, 2010; Choong et al., 2018). In the context of medical tourism, top management and medical practitioners are required to model themselves at the present in a more sustainable, authentic way than many of their predecessors have done before (Storey, Holti, Hartley, Marshall, & Matharu, 2015). It is essential for tomorrow’s leaders in healthcare sector to have entrepreneurial skills for business growth, job creation, skills and knowledge collaborations across organisations to solve

problems. Thus, contemporary HRM that comprehends the development of capable, qualified and reliable leaders throughout their organisations is crucial to organisational success.

Literature Arguments

Theoretical Background

In the literature backdrop, various theories were established to support the critical roles of human resources on operational and organisational performance. Among the salient theories are resource based theory and competitive-based theory. Resource based theory (Barney 1991) postulated firm's specific resources that are valuable, rare and non-substitutable such as medical professionals are highly regarded as one of the most critical assets in the medical institutions. Yet, it is subjected to the deployment of well- designed human resource policies and practices in the healthcare administration. Whereas, competitive-

based theory emerged for the decisions makes in terms of its actions and reaction to ensure the dynamics of competition between the industry rivals. Hence, it is important to emphasise the need for the healthcare industry to think strategically by involving dynamic HRM together with the ability of strategic leaders to counter any emergent challenges, thus improving its competitive outlook.

Competitive advantage in medical tourism

The World Competitiveness Report defined world competitiveness as the country's ability to create higher wealth than its competitors. Countries are competing for popularity among medical tourists by offering attractive packages of highly-valued medical services at competitive price (Santos, Melo, Queiroz Claudino, & Medeiros, 2017). Nonetheless, Dwyer and Kim (2003) highlighted that securing interest of medical tourists on destination choice needs to be greater than appealing experiences of international tourists in order to achieve competitive advantage. Shedding light in competitive perspective, national diamond of Porter (1990) addresses the main structure of competition among nations, i.e. tourist destination and attraction. Apparently, the ability to manage and allocate resources is critical to secure medical tourists' choice of destination. Strategies such as investment in education, training and development of human resources, investment in capital resources, construction and maintenance of infrastructure, preservation of natural physical resources as well as cultural preservation are important. Hence, attaining the competitive edge of medical tourism is highly depended on the strategies and efforts employed on the resources effectively over long term. In other words, the basic conditions that determine the attractiveness of a medical tourism destination depend on the available resources and how to bring innovation to these resources to achieve the goals and objectives.

Connecting human resource with competitive advantage

Theoretically, the three pillars of an organisation are people, objective and structure (Robbins, & Coulter, 2018). In practice, people or human resources are highly regarded as one of the most vital resources in organisations. As such, organisations endeavour to expend time and monetary efforts to focus on HRM which aims to improve efficiency, quality, customer satisfaction and competitive advantage. Wright, Dunfold and Snell (2001) suggested that human resource practices facilitate the shaping of dynamic capability and intellectual capital, paving the way to the attainment of core competencies. The role of HRM is fundamental in forming the medical

industry competitiveness by enhancing capabilities and morale of medical staff and teams. Some fine-tuned HRM practices such as training, development and retention, performance appraisal with compensation are often established to enhance the motivation and specific attributes of medical employees (Mondy, & Martocchio, 2015).

Focusing leadership talent as core competencies

Leadership development remains essential to improve organisational performance and contribute to sustainable competitive advantage. Leaders exercise their discretion in the acquisition, development and deployment of organisational resources. They are also responsible to assure the quality of product/services and the delivery of value to organisational stakeholder (Maak, & Pless, 2006; Rowe, 2001). In healthcare industry, the forces that govern competition in the business are applied to quality of the services rendered (Scurlock, Raikhelkar, & Nierman, 2011).

Walimbwa, Hartnell and Misati (2017) found that good leadership is significant in inducing employee willingness to share ideas that aimed to improve the competitiveness of an organisation. Employees who have developed strong emotional bond with their leaders will be influenced by the leader and perceived themselves as members of the organisation (Gu, Tang, & Jiang, 2015). From the perspective of hospital leadership, leadership development is required to offer unique and a highly differentiated service experience to their patients. This may include an outstanding record on patient safety, 24-hour in-house ICU coverage, latest ICU technologies adoption with e-health system as well as mastering the utilisation of high cost hospital resources (Scurlock et al., 2011).

Leadership as utmost priority for human capital development

Present studies describe the role of HR is to select, recruit and implement strategies for organisations to develop leaders' capabilities (Lopez-Cabrales, Bornay-Barrachina, & Diaz-Fernandez, 2017; Du Plessis, 2010; Paine, 2008; Du Plessis, & Huntley, 2009). Training, education and development can often thought of as fundamentals for HRM but the differences must be understood to build and preserve the organisation's leadership and management capacity effectively (Sonnino, 2016). No doubt, leaders face an endless amount of challenges ranging from cost cutting, meet customer demands to strategic planning. Nevertheless, it is the leaders, who envisage the future and enable the organisation to make the most of each employee's contribution. Hence, it is important for healthcare services providers to produce talented, qualified, influential and pro-active leaders. Empowering leaders in decision making allows flexibility and quick-response in problem solving and crisis in medical care units. As leadership is a combination of both in-born abilities and the subsequent nurturing of such skills, it is suggested that an integrated approach between HR and leadership development is what determines the success on healthcare business performance.

Proposed Conceptual Research Framework

Figures, Diagrams and Pictures

Based on the above discussion, the proposed conceptual research framework in Figure 1 is developed as a guide to identify the variables towards attaining competitive edges in medical tourism industry.

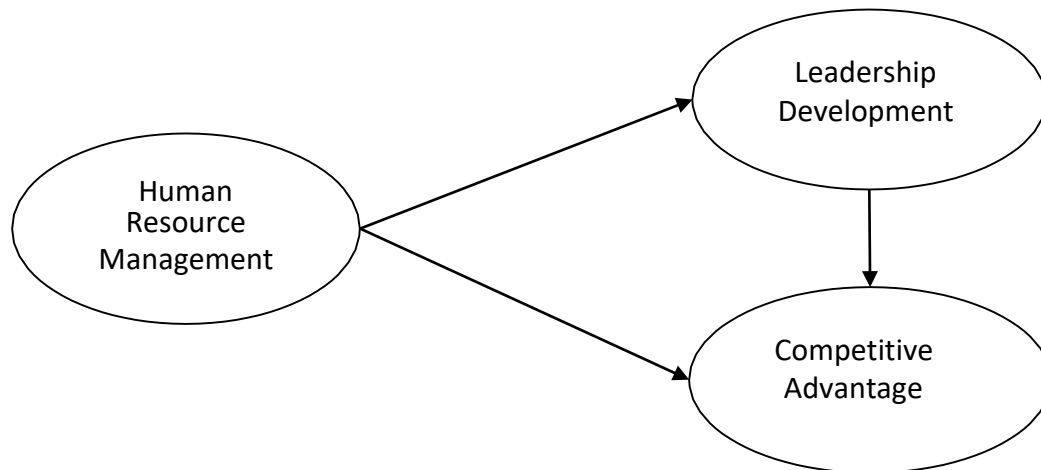


Figure 1: Proposed conceptual framework

Exploring the Potential of Manpower In Malaysia

Medical entities in Malaysia can rely on improvement on HRM to sharpen competitive edge, for instance enhancement in human resources' skills, knowledge, practices and protocols which are firm- specific, rare and difficult to be appropriated in the industry. Medical entities also, can further enhance their competitive edge in terms of quality of medical treatment, shorter waiting time, and wellbeing of patients during their recovery phase. Well-developed human resource policies and practices of the medical entities are expected to emulate favourable employee work attitude and behaviour. This end can be met by developing value added treatment packages, promotional activities on hospital services, established networking with overseas representative, handling inquires and rendering healthcare travel assistance to potential medical tourists. Focusing on customer orientation will improve operational efficiency of management team, specialists, nurses and the supporting staff. This will lead to provision of high value in healthcare services together with competitive pricing which are hard to be replicated by competitors. In a nutshell, the way how employees are managed will determine the attributes, motivation and capability of employees which will lead to higher medical service quality, customer satisfaction as well as competitive advantage (Bowen, 2016) in medical tourism industry.

The Way Forward

The setup of government agencies, for instance the Malaysia Health Travel Council (MHTC) aims to shape and promote Malaysia as one of the most preferred healthcare service providers in the world. It facilitates the development of medical tourism in the country by encouraging

strong collaborations across industry players through establishment of public-public and also public-private partnerships. On national level, the procurement of government-to-government agreements across countries, for instance, with Libya, Oman and Kazakhstan, has assisted in elevating Malaysia in the eye of international medical tourism by allowing the citizens of these countries to enjoy funded healthcare services in Malaysia. In addition, MHTC has collaborated with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to cater for “halal healthcare treatments” by providing Muslim friendly environment, amongst others are halal foods, halal medical treatments, and prayer rooms. Such move and interaction will ultimately contribute to a sustainable development in medical tourism.

In addition, through joint efforts with other countries, human capital development of Malaysia can be polished to work towards achieving competitive advantage. For instance, conducting joint medical conferences and talks by medical professionals, encouraging exchanges of medical professionals, launches of trade missions and international tourism fairs will assist in, not just strengthening the political ties between countries, but also the adoption of the best practices and policies in HRM and leadership development. Such bilateral collaborations will contribute significantly in promoting medical tourism in Malaysia by shaping a setting to work hand-in-hand and in a well-coordinated mechanism, ensuing higher success in medical tourism sustainability. Further, medical tourism capitalists can undertake studies of joint tourism programmes to develop attractive and value-adding tour packages. Given the existing tourism platforms and infrastructures, Malaysia is prepared and stands to gain from the expansion in medical tourism and the tourism industry in general.

Concluding Comments

Medical tourism brings additional resource and economic benefits through various forms. Malaysia healthcare industry should poise for structural change together with rigorous promotions which involve healthcare activities such as medical incentives and institutional infrastructure to uphold standards and quality given. The conceptual model proposed above partially addressed on research needs to attaining competitive edges in medical tourism industry. In conclusion, the prospects of the country’s medical tourism industry remain optimistic where strong government initiatives, aggressive hospitals’ marketing efforts and continuous media exposure will successfully propel the medical tourism industry. Nevertheless, the benefits of healthcare system may come at an expense to the potential medical travellers should there be any mismanagement in human resource practices and mishandling of right leadership. Therefore, the respective key stakeholders and HRM developers should vigilantly monitor the progress of the globalisation trend to ensure continuous growth in medical tourism industry.

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