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Investing in Immigrant Workers:

A Profile of the Hotel Career Center

MARCH 2007

Hotel Career Center

Overview

The hospitality industry relies on self-confident workers who have strong interpersonal skills and can communicate effectively with people of many cultures. Yet the industry also employs many recent immigrants with limited English and academic skills. The goal of the Hotel Career Center is to overcome this mismatch and help recent immigrants advance in hospitality careers.

The Hotel Career Center is a partnership of the International Institute of Boston, the Vietnamese American Civic Association, and Hilton Hotels Corporation, Boston's largest hotel property management firm. It offers pre-employment training to job seekers and education and training for employees at five Hilton-affiliated hotels. Much of the education centers around English for Speakers of Other Languages: only 7 percent of pre-employment participants and 14 percent of incumbent workers in the program speak English as their first language. Training for job seekers also addresses job-readiness skills and includes an internship; both pre-employment and incumbent workers benefit from computer courses, career coaching, and customized occupational training.

Since receiving a SkillWorks grant in late 2003, the Hotel Career Center has trained 284 job seekers and workers and posted high graduation rates: 88 percent of participants in the pre-employment program graduate, as do 98 percent of the incumbent workers in the computer workshops and English courses. To date, 79 percent of the job seekers have secured employment in hospitality, which is remarkable for recent immigrants who often have no U.S. work experience. Ninety-five percent of the incumbent workers in the program are still employed at Hilton, also remarkable in an industry with high turnover.

The program has made progress in convincing hotels to increase their investments in advancing the careers of entry-level workers. English courses for employees based on hotel customer service and training workshops for supervisors have helped bridge language barriers that previously undermined promotional opportunities. For the first time, the hotel chain has paid entry-level workers to attend basic education courses and obtain career coaching at work, and it has offered these services on site. The hotels also have instituted policies and programs to assist workers in gaining education and promotions.

Polishing Skills, Changing Directions

Soon after Samira Elazraoui arrived in the United States from Morocco in 2003, she found a job in retail sales. She interacted well with customers and showed strong sales skills but dreamed of a bright future that would be difficult to realize as a salesperson.

The hotel industry offered more promise and Ms. Elazraoui had solid credentials: she spoke excellent English, she had distinguished herself at her previous job, and she was comfortable with customers. But at her first job interview, Ms. Elazraoui became bashful. She spoke softly and avoided eye contact. "In my culture, it is impolite to look a man or a superior or an elder in the eye, so I wasn't used to this," Ms. Elazraoui explains.

She didn't get the job, but intent on finding her way into the business, Ms. Elazraoui talked with a friend who had landed a

position at the Park Plaza Hotel after graduating from the Hotel Career Center. With the friend's encouragement, Ms. Elazraoui signed up—and changed the direction of her life.

The six-week program at the Hotel Career Center addressed the entire process of applying for a hotel job. Ms. Elazraoui shadowed hotel staff, toured local hotels, and learned the computer and customer-service skills they needed. And every day, she allocated 45 minutes to preparing for the interview, enduring rigorous simulations. "The Hotel Career Center polished my skills," she says.

Ms. Elazraoui is now the night audit supervisor at the Hotel @ MIT, earning \$13.75 per hour, and she is on her way in a career she loves.

Program Design

The Hotel Career Center serves low-income immigrants working or seeking work in the hospitality industry. It includes a pre-employment training program—the Hospitality Training Program—and an incumbent worker career ladder training and coaching program. HTP is endorsed by the Massachusetts Lodging Association’s Educational Foundation.

Pre-employment for Job Seekers

The Hospitality Training Program recruits participants through informal linkages to community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, housing authorities, health centers, shelters, career centers, and the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance. The program carefully screens recruits to maximize their chances of success.

Training consists of six weeks of instruction and job shadowing in many entry-level, customer service positions. During the first four weeks, students have 20 hours of intensive customer-service training per week, covering hospitality-specific vocabulary, computers, and workplace communication, as well as tours of local hotels. Students write career plans and then spend two weeks as an intern at a local hotel. All training cycles are coordinated with employers’ hiring schedules to maximize job placements.

Graduates who get jobs at participating Hilton locations immediately enter the Hotel Career Center incumbent worker program and can access further training and services. They also have access to the resources of the International Institute, including an extensive education resource library, computer lab, ESOL instruction, clinical mental health counseling, tax filing assistance, and legal advice/immigration assistance. Career coaches help employees complete the steps in their career plans. Graduates placed outside the Hilton chain receive advanced career coaching.

Incumbent Worker Education and Career Development

During the program’s first year, Hotel Career Center staff collaborated with hotel supervisors and line staff to conduct two “workplace needs analyses” that informed the development of the incumbent worker training. These analyses led to a focus on English language, communication, and computer skills.

As the Hotel Career Center incumbent worker program has evolved, it includes four primary components:

English for advancement courses are customized to the hospitality industry, and to Hilton hotels in particular. Each course is fourteen weeks long, with three hours of class per week, and offered at four levels. Very low-literacy students can work with volunteer tutors or enroll in the International Institute’s Literacy Program.

Computer literacy workshops are customized to the hospitality industry in general and to Hilton specifically. Each course lasts four weeks, with three hours of class per week and two levels of coursework. International Institute interns provide tutorials and assistance with computers. Students complete writing exercises and submit them via email to gain extra practice in English and computer literacy. Hilton has donated several computers so that students can do coursework off site. Some partner hotels also make computers available to employees at work.

Career coaches help students develop career advancement plans, with short- and long-term professional goals. They meet one-on-one and via group work, classes, telephone, and email. Coaches also work closely with employees and human resources staff.

Asset development and financial services include semi-annual financial literacy classes, a First Time Homebuyer Workshop, and an Individual Development Account program, in which an employee’s contributions are matched. The International Institute has offered free tax return preparation assistance. Ninety-three percent accessed wage supplements, including the Earned Income Tax Credit, over the first two years of the program.

In addition to these core components, Hotel Career Center staff develop specific courses and training opportunities as needed. For example, some hotel employees were not taking advantage of promotion opportunities that required moving to an unfamiliar location. Hotel Career Center staff and Hilton created an innovative solution: cross-site exchanges in which employees spend a day at another facility, shadowing workers there to get a sense of the place and the people. Hilton helped plan the logistics and provides a shuttle for transportation. Forty-one employees participated in this opportunity in the program’s second year. It has been so successful that a new program now “cross trains” employees on different jobs at their current locations.

Hotel Career Center instructors also worked with Hilton’s Boston-area director of training to create and deliver a Supervisory Skills Workshop. Employees

The Hotel Career Center incumbent worker program includes four primary components:

- English for advancement courses
 - Computer literacy workshops
 - Career coaches
 - Asset development and financial services
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interested in advancing to supervisor learn about the skills they will need. By the end of the second year, 72 incumbent workers had participated in this workshop, out of 115 total enrolled in the Hotel Career Center at the time. HCC will continue offering the workshop and plans to expand it to new hotel partners.

Partners and Their Roles

Employers

Employer partners provide significant support for the Hotel Career Center. Each hotel provides 100 percent paid release time for incumbent workers in training, even though the original agreement was for 50 percent. The hotels also release managers, supervisors, and human resources staff to review curricula, attend coordinating meetings, and work with career coaches and participants, and they provide space for the classes and career coaching.

Hilton managers are very supportive of the training and encourage employees to attend classes. Over the years, this support has grown, as witnessed by the creation of cross-site job shadowing and cross-training. Another development in the second year was the introduction of quarterly meetings at each Hilton hotel so that career coaches, general managers, and HR staff can review participants' qualifications and readiness for higher positions. As a result, the hotels promoted twelve program participants in the second year of SkillWorks, compared to just one the first year.

Industry Association

In its second year in SkillWorks, the Hotel Career Center partnered with the Massachusetts Lodging Association (MLA) to expand training to other hotels and help sustain the program. After reviewing the association's Skills and Tasks Results Training (START) for hotel workers, HCC revised its own curriculum to better reflect industry standards. HCC is also introducing an incumbent worker ESOL course at eight MLA hotels. Bunker Hill Community College is part of this training, which is paid for by the Massachusetts Workforce Training Fund.

Community-based Organizations

The International Institute of Boston staffs the Hotel Career Center with a program manager, instructors, and career coaches who recruit some participants and deliver all training and services. The Vietnamese American Civic Association recruits participants and

was a member of the Planning and Evaluation Team for the first three years. The agencies continue to collaborate with a network of community-based organizations to recruit community residents into the pre-employment Hotel Training Program.

Program Management and Governance

The Planning and Evaluation Team is responsible for program coordination, communication, decision making, and evaluation. This group includes the HR directors of each hotel partner, the Hilton area director of training, the housekeeping director, and International Institute staff.

Outputs and Outcomes

The table summarizes key qualitative outcomes in the first two years of the Hotel Career Center. In addition, gains for HCC participants are reflected in qualitative measures. Most important is increased confidence—which translates into increased willingness to try new things, take on new roles, and consider returning to school.

Hotel Career Center

The data for 2004-2005, covering December 2003 through November 2005, has been validated by the SkillWorks evaluators. The data for 2006 is preliminary; it covers December 2005 through November 2006. The total participants served is a non-duplicated count of people receiving any of the following training or non-training services: occupational training, coaching, literacy, ESL, placement assistance, retention assistance, referrals, tutoring, mentoring, and mapping career pathways. The number of participants completing training includes multiple counts based on incumbent workers who participate in multiple training courses.

	2004-2005	2006
Pre-employment Participants	104	49
Completed Pre-employment Training (includes vocational and non-vocational skills)	92	50
Placements	82	42
Incumbent Workers Enrolled	115	60
Incumbent Workers Completed Training	260	185
Incumbent Workers Promoted	12	14

Placing half of the participants at non-Hilton sites presents a challenge and an opportunity for the HCC. The challenge is that these workers lack access to Hilton incumbent worker training, and their access to career coaches is limited (although coaches follow up as much as they can). Also, the program has a difficult time tracking these workers for evaluation and pro-

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gram improvement. However, the workers are placed within the industry, and the program gains access to more hotels, which improves its prospects for reaching scale.

Systems Change Outcomes

In addition to its quantifiable outcomes for participants, the Hotel Career Center has changed the way hotel employers value and invest in education, training, and career advancement.

Enhanced advancement opportunities: Prior to SkillWorks, many supervisors assumed that immigrant workers had little interest in advancement. Supervisors now understand workers' desire to advance and also their limited awareness of available opportunities and how to pursue them. Workers know more about those opportunities and, just as important, they are more confident about pursuing them and asking for assistance.

Increased employer commitment to career advancement for entry-level workers: The employer partners have introduced 100 percent paid release time so that entry-level workers can attend basic education courses and career coaching. They have offered these services at the hotels, making them easier for employees to attend. As reported by Hotel Career Center staff, hotel managers are very supportive of the program and the participants.

While deepening the commitment of its Hilton partners, HCC is expanding to other hotels—and, therefore, enhancing employer commitment to this workforce. The regional vice president for Hilton Hotels has also changed the firm's incumbent worker training policy. Previously, new hires had to wait six months before they could participate in training. The waiting period is now 90 days, recognizing the value of training to retain and advance workers.

Introduced career supports and processes for workers within employer partners: New work supports created through HCC include cross-site job shadowing opportunities and intra-site cross-training. Career coaches work closely with HR staff and participants to encourage job retention in this highly seasonal industry. To date, no HCC participant has been laid off during a slow season.

HCC and human resource staff review job openings collectively to identify appropriate job opportunities for HCC's pre-employment and incumbent worker participants. HCC staff also receive the Hilton's weekly job list, which helps them understand hiring needs, job opportunities, and trends.

Altered the employer's culture: According to Hilton managers participating in SkillWorks, the HCC is so ingrained in the workplace that employees *expect* the training and coaching to be institutionalized and perhaps expanded. This puts pressure on management to support the program's sustainability.

The Future: Planning for Sustainability

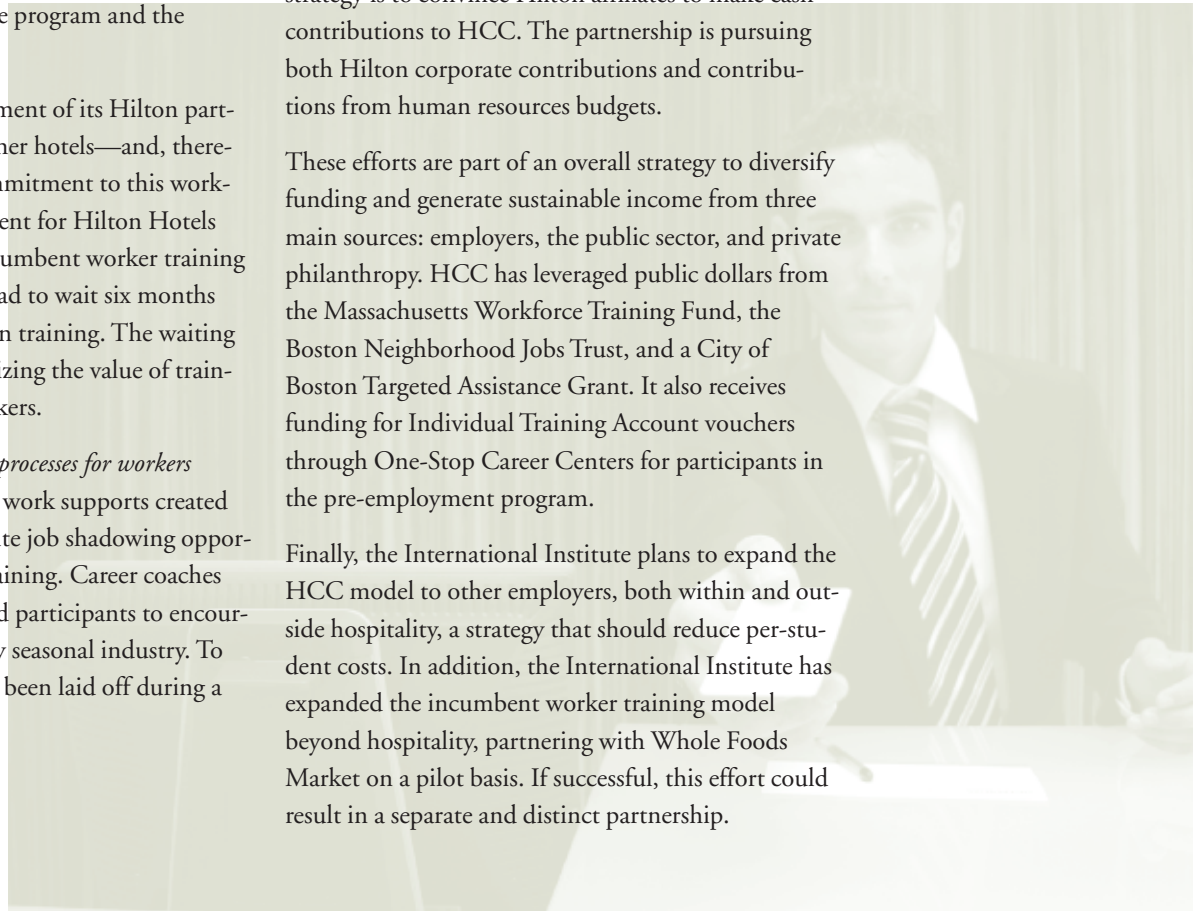
HCC is approaching sustainability from multiple fronts. At the frontline, Hotel Career Center staff are seeking ways to reduce costs and serve employees and employers more efficiently. Combining instructor and career coach positions at each hotel is one example. Another is to enlist hotel senior staff to provide some training, as in the Supervisory Skills Workshop.

At the level of partnership, HCC wants to leverage tuition reimbursement programs to support entry-level training; one hotel has agreed to reimburse an employee for obtaining a GED. Another part of this strategy is to convince Hilton affiliates to make cash contributions to HCC. The partnership is pursuing both Hilton corporate contributions and contributions from human resources budgets.

These efforts are part of an overall strategy to diversify funding and generate sustainable income from three main sources: employers, the public sector, and private philanthropy. HCC has leveraged public dollars from the Massachusetts Workforce Training Fund, the Boston Neighborhood Jobs Trust, and a City of Boston Targeted Assistance Grant. It also receives funding for Individual Training Account vouchers through One-Stop Career Centers for participants in the pre-employment program.

Finally, the International Institute plans to expand the HCC model to other employers, both within and outside hospitality, a strategy that should reduce per-student costs. In addition, the International Institute has expanded the incumbent worker training model beyond hospitality, partnering with Whole Foods Market on a pilot basis. If successful, this effort could result in a separate and distinct partnership.

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SkillWorks, a five-year public/private partnership, is addressing the needs of employers for more skilled workers and of workers for more and better access to jobs that pay a family-supporting wage.

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