

Tourism employment paradoxes, 1946–2095: a perspective article

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Introduction / past perspective

This paper addresses employment in the global tourism industry, searching for evidence for change since 1946 and then casting a speculative gaze forward to 2095. Unlike most facets of the tourism industry, there is a studied argument of limited changes to its employment conditions over the past 75 years. Indeed, Baum and Mooney (2019), casting back to 1933, argue that many of the conditions that underpinned work in the hospitality industry at the time remain identifiable in today's industry environment. These are apparent in the early work of Whyte's (1948, 1949) analysis of US restaurant workers and Chivers' (1973) study of chefs in the United Kingdom. Authors such as Smeral (2004), Baum (2018), and Ioannides and Zampoukos (2018) highlight industry workplace characteristics that, *inter alia*, include precarity, low pay, poor working conditions and intersectional disadvantage seen in jobs of often low quality for women and migrants (Mooney *et al.*, 2017; Robonson *et al.*, 2019). If this 'no change' status is indeed a fair depiction of the industry, there appear few grounds to anticipate any significant changes in the future.

So, we ask, is there anything on the horizon within tourism and its wider socio-economic, technological and environmental context that points to a different world of tourism work emerging over the next 75 years? We are not suggesting that work *per se* will not change. We acknowledge recent studies, such as Bowen's (2016) assessment of the changing role of service workers more generally, arguing that technology changes will force organisations to recruit employees to fill changed roles – those of innovators, differentiators, enablers and coordinators. Based on history, however, even these changes are unlikely to impact employment practices overall. Perhaps there are organisations offering employment opportunities that closely align to best practice in sustainable human resource management. However, overall, the picture remains bleak with little evidence of the emergence of policy designed to effectively address and counter these issues (Baum *et al.*, 2016; Solnet *et al.*, 2014).

One theme that emerges from a review of the stagnant tourism employment narrative since 1946, is how paradox underpins so much of the analysis. Paradox is inherently embedded in social systems such as tourism and tourism employment and socially constructed through language and discourse. Paradox theory accepts that there are contradictory yet interrelated elements in many everyday situations (Lewis and Smith, 2014). Each element may seem logical in isolation but absurd when appearing simultaneously. Accordingly, tourism businesses declaim that their employees are their greatest asset, and yet, in countries such as the UK, tourism and hospitality represent the lowest paid sector within the economy. Identifying, learning to live with and, indeed, embracing paradox may be the way forward for tourism employment if the next 75 years are to be more conducive to change than the wastelands of the past (Robinson *et al*, 2014). Arguably, the main failure of the past 75 years in this field has been our inability to face up to paradox; rather, we deny its existence and continue the search for multiple pots of gold that we can never find (the 'solution' to high employee turnover and recognition of tourism as an attractive career, as examples).

Future perspective

Indeed, what does a 75-year lens into the future hold for employment in what, today, is termed 'tourism'? Not even the most ambitious of futurologists, certainly not those working in tourism, venture that far forward into the mists of time. Without becoming excessively metaphysical in our speculation, we ask: will societies, communities – the reasons for mobilities – still exist in recognisable forms in 2096? Will today's emergent generations be the nonagenarian tourism workforce providing services for their centennial betters? Such speculation is futile and meaningless.

We do, however, believe that paradox, which has underpinned cyclical issues in tourism employment over the past 75 years, will remain foregrounded into the future. A close-up picture of our imminent future highlights the inexorable tsunami of AI, automation and robotisation rolling ever closer, threatening much traditional practice in the tourism workplace, maybe for the good. This scenario, and the continuing rise of work 'ecosystems' (e.g., Subramony *et al.*, 2018) must be set alongside the challenge of ensuring the sustainability of tourism (and employment therein; Scheyvens, 2018). Such innovative processes, while undoubtedly perceived to be beneficial within the neo-liberal economic narrative, pose a real and paradoxical threat to the constrained livelihood choices of disenfranchised youth in the developing world, desperate for work, any work, even tourism work.

Table 1 presents representative examples of paradoxes in tourism employment harking back to the past and imagined into the future. Many alternatives could have been chosen in their stead.

Table 1: Paradoxes in tourism employment

Current paradoxes	Possible ways forward	Emerging paradoxes 21st century
1. The devaluation of the tourism workforce	a. Provision of decent work and a living wage b. Government regulation of over-tourism c. Consumer change in attitudes towards cheap travel and cheap food	1. Robotisation and artificial intelligence reducing and eliminating many tourism jobs
2. Devolving of Human Resource Management (HRM) function in tourism operations	Priority given to HRM and labour-force issues in academic/industry forums	2. Travel and tourism jobs beyond Earth
3. Disregard of the centrality of workers in creating 'authentic tourism experiences'	Refocus vision in tourism education and research	3. Population growth and climate change leading to displacement and hostility/hospitableness challenges and response

Conclusions

Painting a rosy future of tourism employment on a global scale will require the work of a creative and talented artist. Such a vision does not readily come to the eye, given the preceding 75 years of failure. Perhaps the best we can hope for is to recognise and learn to live with a cycle of evolving but inherent paradoxes as they emerge alongside seismic changes within tourism, tourism employment and wider society. As Jules and Good (2014) explain, embracing paradox is a first step in coming to terms with uncomfortable realities, thus enabling us to see new sets of choices, within which may lie pathways to effective and sustainable change.

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