

# Island destination workforce development and inclusion

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*The one island-one resort concept of the Maldives features a distinct upscale tourism experience for visitors that offers seclusion, remoteness, and privacy. In view of each island as its own resort, the isolation among the islands poses unique challenges for workforce development as employees live on the same island where they work to serve the tourists. In an increasingly competitive tourism market, the resilience of the Maldives as a tourism destination stands on the inclusion of its local residents in the workforce. Largely dependent on tourism to sustain the economy, the Maldives persists with environmental concerns, political strife, and rapid socio-cultural changes along with other unprecedented challenges of an island destination. To understand the experiences of the local employees working in remote upscale resorts, the transcendental phenomenology approach was used to capture the essences of the employees' lived experiences. Essences are the building blocks of experiences with narratives filtered into specific essences and sub-essences derived from the one island-one resort model. The examined essences including serenity, solidarity, self-development, discontentment, antagonism, and workplace alienation can advance understanding to promote inclusive tourism policies for transitioning remote island destinations.*

**Keywords:** *one island-one resort, tourism workforce development, lived experiences, phenomenology*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The Maldives is one of the leading upscale tourism destinations in the world and is located in the Indian Ocean southwest of Sri Lanka. An archipelago consisting of 26 natural atolls, the Maldives is composed of 1190 islands with 200 inhabited islands

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and another 115 islands developed as tourist resorts themed under the “one island-one resort” concept (Ministry of Tourism Statistics, 2024). During the early years, fishing was the leading industry contributing to the economy; however, since the development of tourism in the late 1960s, hospitality and tourism in the Maldives continues to evolve within the economy (Najeeb, 2013). The majority of the estimated 515,132 residents live on the main capital island of Male, which geographically consists of two-square miles (5.8 km<sup>2</sup>) of land that is positioned only four-feet (2.4 meters) higher than the sea level (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, 2022). In 2023, the Maldives hosted 1.8 million tourists with an average stay of 7.6 nights and a total contribution to GDP of 22.5% (Statistical Yearbook of Maldives, 2023).

The one island-one resort concept is a promotional initiative by the Maldivian tourism promotion board due to the geographically dispersed nature of the islands while also being used as a positioning strategy to promote the destination to a wider tourist market. Similar to enclave tourism, the one island-one resort concept is where one resort is located on just one island that has self-sustaining facilities and resources (Healy and Jamal, 2017; Sathiendrakumar and Tisdell, 1989). In the one island-one resort concept of the Maldives, both the tourists and the employees of the resort remain on the resort’s island (Auvray, 2010). The tourism industry businesses are the major private sector employers. In 2023, there were 176 resorts in operation with 47% of the resorts operated by local companies, 19% by foreign companies, and 34% operated through joint ventures by both locals and foreign companies (Ministry of Tourism, 2023). Nearly all of the resorts in the Maldives are controlled by either a local hotel group or an international hotel chain and operated through an independent management team (Ministry of Tourism, 2023).

The tourism workforce despite being the highest contributor to the Maldivian economy has fewer locals working in the industry than expatriates. By government regulation, the composition of national to expatriate workers is stipulated at a 50:50 ratio (Ministry of Tourism Arts and Culture, 2011). The total percentage of local Maldivians working in the resorts accounts for 43% of the workforce in the resorts, with 40% males and only 3% female. Expatriates account for 57% of the workforce in the resorts, with 88% males and 12% females (Ministry of Tourism, 2023). Females who comprise approximately half of the population have evaded employment in the resorts predominantly due to the social values of the Maldives, misconceptions of employment in resorts, and the pressures of having to living away from family while working in the island enclaves (Ministry of Tourism Arts and Culture, 2011). Inclusion of local employment in the tourism sector has been critical for the resilience of the destination and society. In their study supporting resilience theory, Hamzah and Hampton (2013) recognize the complex and distinct non-linear nature of island destination resort development over conventional resorts. Part of the competitiveness of tourism destinations have emerged from the representative diversity of the talents among the greater society including the local workforce. Tacit knowledge in tourism businesses for example is required for innovation (McLeod, Vaughan and Edwards, 2010), which can also provide inclusive strategies to engage under-represented residents in the workforce with unique opportunities in sharing deeper aspects of the local culture while providing opportunities for advancement in society. For example, through the engagement of underrepresented residents such as female participation, workforce productivity and competitiveness as a nation increases. Advancing opportunities to underrepresented groups additionally provides upward mobility and equity within hospitality organizations (and society) with less dependence on importing transient labor, particularly at the supervisory level and above (Baum et al., 2020).

As Domroes (2001) noted that although the Maldives is widely acknowledged to be an example of sustainable tourism development, there is a significant disconnect between the aspirations of locals for tourism employment and the demand for skilled and educated labor. One of the causes for this gap in the Maldives may be due to poor policy direction and *ad hoc* government rules. The human resource dimension is one of the most important elements of any industry sector and is particularly significant in service sectors such as tourism, which is characterized by high levels of human involvement in the development and delivery of services or tourist experiences (Baum, 2006a). Working in Maldivian resorts is different from other conventional places of employment with resorts being their own self-contained islands and disconnected from other inhabited islands. Maldivian resorts require that their staff live on the resorts while they are employed, which often means employees sharing accommodation with co-workers, eating cafeteria food, and having to live a restricted life away from their families and homes. Furthermore, building upon the distance of decay effect, phenomena proposed by McKercher and Lew (2003) identified the frictional effect of distance and demand in their study of international tourism flows. Within the Maldives, the majority of tourists upon arrival at the main international airport near the capital island of Male are then transported by sea or seaplane to one of the individual remote island resort locations within the country. Islands closer to the capital island benefit from a demand-side perspective, while from the supply-side, benefits also exist from the closer proximity of the local workforce.

To understand the essence of the experience among local employees working in the one island-one resort concept of the Maldives, transcendental phenomenology is used as both the philosophical paradigm and research approach. While most phenomenology approaches in tourism have focused on the lived experiences of the tourist (e.g. Cohen, 1979), there has been a minimal inquiry into the workforce development perspective (Pernecky and Jamal, 2010). Examining the workforce yields insights into government policy directions toward maintaining competitiveness and resilience as a tourism destination. As the majority of employees are required to live away from their families to work at these self-contained islands due to the geographical nature of the island resorts, socio-cultural considerations are important for sustaining the quality of life of its residents/employees, along with inclusive approaches for development. Considering the perceptions of the local resident employees, overall employee satisfaction, as well as value to the destination and society, is critical to the success of tourism in an increasingly competitive operating environment.

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experience of local resident employees working in a one island-one resort concept. The objectives of the study were to:

1. Assess the essence of the experience from a workforce development perspective;
2. Examine competitive human resource development policies;
3. Evaluate human resource challenges within the one island-one resort environment that informs competitive and inclusive workforce development practices.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the limited existing literature on the Maldives in terms of the tourism industry, the most researched area is on tourism and sustainability of the Maldivian environment due to the fragile ecosystem (Moritz et al., 2017; Purandare, 2009). More recently,

studies have emerged including the nature and challenges of entrepreneurship as Chia and Muiz (2021) highlighted in their research findings within the context of ongoing challenges facing guest house operators in the Maldives. Their exploratory study emphasized the need for more intensified knowledge among six themes within the guest house sector in terms of strategic operational management and policymaking for the Maldives and wider international markets. Furthermore, with the COVID-19 pandemic affecting travel and tourism destinations across the globe, Chia and Anas (2022) research additionally underscored the continuous need for adapting in times of crisis for guest house operators and entrepreneurs during the pandemic and post-pandemic eras.

Butler (1999) debated whether sustainability is regarded by the same measures between applications of the social (human) society and that of an environmental approach. More recently, Moosa and He (2023) investigated a number of dimensions impacting environmental management practices on corporate responsibility with establishing that the social sustainability dimension demonstrates the highest impact while economic and environmental sustainability impacts followed accordingly. Their research, in the context of small island developing states, further reaffirmed the need for comprehensive regulatory and transparent environmental reporting approaches that lead to advancements in overall sustainability among the dimensions of social, economic, and environmental aspects. In terms of employment regulation, for example, Najeeb (2014) revealed that the unique workforce development needs in the Maldives do not fit a one-size-fits-all approach of a typical destination that is heavily reliant on tourism as a nation. Employment regulation among the private sector has been kept minimal with enforcement a challenge among the geographically disparate islands within the island archipelago of the Maldives (Najeeb, 2014).

Although there exists a number of scholarly works on the human resource development and on the Maldives tourism industry in general, the literature is wide ranging within the context of taxonomies and emotions of employees working in the tourism industry that relate to workforce development as an approach for the resilience of tourism and society. Further inquiry is needed to address the experiences and mindsets of employees to gain a better understanding of the workforce development needs in the island resorts within the Maldives (Shakeela and Weaver, 2012) and tourism in general (Baum, 2006b, 2012; Baum, Kralj, Robinson and Solnet, 2016; Robinson and MacDonald, 2018). Moreover, greater stakeholder involvement of employees and employers will help strengthen employment regulatory compliance while avoiding ambiguous provisions that affect the quality of guest service, employment satisfaction, operational competitiveness and functionality, as well as the overall image of the tourism sector (Najeeb, 2014).

## 2.1 One island-one resort concept

The one island-one resort concept is developed in such a way that it is self-sustained within the island itself inclusive of its own infrastructure with its own power, sewage, water treatment, and accommodation with all the necessary basic requirements for a resort (Carlsen and Hughes, 2008; Jamal and Lagiewski, 2006). Baldacchino (2010) interestingly points out that the isolated island's resorts with their almost perfect portrayals of tropical paradise and seclusion are what is often disconnected from the Maldivian culture. The tropical façade serves to hide the essence of local culture including the sentiments of the residents (Baldacchino, 2010). This is further supported by Moles and Rohmer's (1982) criticism that the Maldives is conceived and

staged as an idyllic place that has no bearing on reality. Auvray (2010) further argues that the Maldivian islands are very much like a theatre with local staff belonging in the backstage that remains hidden from the tourists.

The Maldivian tourism industry, similar to other small island destinations, faces a number of human resource related challenges such as limited career progression, low rates of pay, minimal training and development, unsocial working hours, and poor work conditions (Baum, 2006b). Kusluvan, Ilhan and Buyruk (2010) argue that in order to achieve quality service delivery, customer satisfaction, industry performance, and destination success, the proper management of human resources is crucial. Furthermore, Purandare (2009) advocates that social sustainability in terms of human equity and health is vital to the success in providing hospitality services. Zimmerman (2006) maintains that for the tourism industry to be well maintained in the long run, the involvement of local employees is important and human resource policy should be approached holistically in the context of enclave tourism. Colin and Baum (2003) claim that in a majority of countries, employment in tourism is often regarded as the second choice of career priorities resulting in a high percentage of expatriate labor.

Through the early years of the Maldivian tourism industry, the workforce was mostly composed of local employees working in the areas of design and construction of the resort itself. The resort employees during this era of construction and development were only introduced to basic facilities such that they lived in basic living quarters with palm thatching and shared among a number of staff that provided limited basic necessities such as dining and restroom facilities. In some of the resorts, only the senior staff members had these basic facilities while the other entry-level employees simply had a folding bed positioned in a lone distant place on the island for them to retire after their work (Shakeela and Cooper, 2009).

At the beginning of the 1980s, the Maldivian tourism industry corresponds to a period of involvement in Butler's (1980) destination lifecycle model. During this period, the necessary policies and regulations were formulated addressing the basic rights of employees, requiring adequate sleeping space with proper beds, toilet facilities, and recreational facilities while addressing the total welfare of employees working in the resort. With the implementation of these regulations, resort owners were compelled to comply with the basic requirements of employees' welfare. By the mid-1980s, the accommodation requirements were met by the resort operators; however, the facilities and services available for the workers in these enclaves had widely varied from one island resort to another. Despite the improved facilities, Shakeela and Cooper (2009) maintain that it is still challenging for the majority of Maldivians to work in the resorts due to living away and being segregated from their families.

The result of these socio-cultural factors has led to the increased employment of expatriate employees at the resorts. Another factor in the high rate of expatriate employment is due to the population limitations of workforce availability and the technical skills required to be employed at the resorts. Furthermore, Shakeela and Cooper (2009) specify that in order to increase and retain the local employees in the tourism industry, adequate wages need to be introduced to compensate living away from their community. In the majority of the resorts, expatriate workers in particular, and those working in skill shortage areas where Maldivians are not trained, these employees are paid higher wages and inclusive of health insurance however, this is not the case for the majority of local employees which adds to their discontent in the enclave environment (Shakeela and Cooper, 2009).

The percentage of women working on the isolated island resorts in the tourism industry in the Maldives is also very low due to the nature and negative perception

of the tourism industry. Traditionally, women were expected to manage their households and those who commenced working in the tourism industry were stereotyped and considered holding a job that was not dignified. Furthermore, given the male dominant nature of the tourism industry since its beginning, there was little consideration for female employees in terms of the living conditions on the one island-one resort enclaves. The perception by the majority of the Maldivian population when the local tourism industry began was that resorts were not a safe environment for the local Muslim female to work.

Local employees also experience a great deal of human resource related issues such as the absence of a contract between the employer and the employee when locals are hired, leading to unfair dismissals of employees. A good example of this was the dismissal of three local employees working at a Maldivian resort due to submission of a petition to the Ministry of Tourism, Maldives as a result of being treated unfairly and demanding better care for employees by their management (Jameel, 2008). Shakeela and Cooper (2009) assert that despite the proposed employment ratio being at 50:50, operators are frequently not in compliance with the established rules by the respective authorities. Furthermore, Shakeela and Cooper (2009) report that due to the lack of an adequate labor act dating back to 2009, the monitoring mechanism remains a challenging process for the regulatory bodies to ensure that all resort operators adhere to the government policies and regulations.

There is a perception that many locals are also discouraged by unfair practices aimed at them while working in the resorts. Scholars (Jamal and Lagiewski, 2006; Shakeela, Ruhanen and Breakey, 2012) point out that due to the close relationship between the government and the tourism elites, regulatory oversight is occasionally withheld resulting in minimum wage and living condition disputes. Although there are regulations that exist, they are selectively enforced and while changes were brought for the employment of local Maldivians, it was not consistent and resulted in the employer exerting undue power over employees through different means, such as withholding wages and benefits, and termination of employees if they protest (Niyaza, 2011). The United States Department of State raised concerns of the unethical treatment of employees including expatriate labor who were working in unfavorable conditions resembling forced labor (Shakeela et al., 2012). As Lockhart (1993) points out that for tourism to be successful on small islands states, the benefits that locals receive should not be equivalent to that of leftover crumbs from the table of the wealthy.

## 2.2 Employment implications

Factors hindering people from working in the Maldivian resorts can be examined among social, human resource, economic, institutional, and religious factors (Shakeela, Ruhanen and Breakey, 2011). Further revealed by Shakeela et al. (2011) is how each factor individually contributed to dissuading locals from seeking employment in the tourism industry. These include negative perceptions of the industry, isolation from family, being confined to work in the resort islands, and parental influence. One factor also revealed that the perception held toward the tourism industry as being a place where alcohol and nudity are the norm, goes against the religious values and beliefs of the Maldivian nation and hence labelled as an immoral industry that is especially not suitable for female employees.

The other key social factor was living away from family where employees indicated that the distance away from family is one of the major challenges preventing them from enjoying the work environment on the island resorts because unlike other jobs,

they do not get to see their family or friends after the end of the workday (Shakeela et al., 2011). Social isolation is also a factor as some Maldivian residents feel that the resorts have no social life for the employees, as there is little to do other than interacting with the same people on a daily basis. The human resource factors were associated with poor employee facilities, discrimination, lack of employee commitment to work, and disinterest in certain jobs. Lastly, the institutional factors including lack of employment contracts, absence of labor market supply, and insufficient taxation systems also fuel further challenges.

The experience of workers in the Maldivian tourism industry points out that even though tourism is considered a good income earner, most stay on for just a few years, earn enough money and return to their families or go abroad for further studies (Auvray, 2010). Female employment is an example of the slow changes in the Maldivian society due to conservatism and the way gender is considered from a societal standpoint with men far outnumbering women in the tourism industry even though the rate of working women away from the home is slowly increasing. Jamal et al. (2007) report that the state has an important role to play in ensuring that the best interests in the welfare of the employee care be of high priority so that expected services provided for the tourists visiting the Maldives are of the highest quality in standards of luxury. Furthermore, inclusive workforce development practices help to support the economy and positively impact social issues where the government and regulatory policy have not been successful (de Lange and Dodds, 2017). Similar to the nature of tourism, workforce development does not exist with clear boundaries as the wider interrelated interests among social, cultural, political, and economic dimensions increase complexities (Cooper, 1995; Dodds and Butler, 2009; Solnet et al., 2014). Although numerous challenges persist, there have also been positive improvements especially with regard to the dynamic issues of human resource development in the tourism industry in the Maldivian islands.

### 2.3 Phenomenology

Although not a typical research approach from a conventional perspective, phenomenology is both a philosophy and a method that has been widely exploited by qualitative researchers in an attempt to comprehend the experience of individuals in different contexts (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). Phenomenology was initiated by Edmund Husserl (1931) who explored the way people live in the world in addition to views of the world and the person as one and the same rather than the world being as a separate entity. According to Giorgi (2009) at the commencement of his research, Husserl thoughts on phenomenology was also supported by Martin Heidegger, though later the two philosophers went their different ways due to disagreements on comprehending the viewpoint of phenomenology. Therefore, to understand subjects, researchers must understand their contexts in the way the subjects live (Hegel, 1949; Moran, 2002; Schmidt, 2005). An epistemological approach informed by phenomenological ontology would seek to understand the structures and types of a given experience (Burrell and Morgan, 1979).

Phenomenology as a distinct research approach has been gaining momentum with beneficial insights related to the tourist experiences (Hayllar and Griffin, 2005; Ingram, 2002; Li, 2000; Wassler and Schuckert, 2017; Willson, McIntosh and Zahra, 2013). However, Savin-Baden and Major (2013) argue that phenomenology is not limited alone to a philosophy or paradigm but rather can be used as both a method and a philosophy. Aligned with Arani's (2016) position that phenomenology affords researchers an up-close portrayal of the lived experiences of those in the tourism industry,

transcendental phenomenology seeks to find bases of knowledge that are doubt-free. It is constitutional in the sense that it ignores abstract claims other than what makes up the world. In phenomenology, philosophy and method have significant overlap (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013); however, transcendental phenomenology by Husserl, supports the identification and understanding of the essence in regard to the meaning of the lived experiences of employees working in confined areas such as the Maldivian island resort enclaves.

Transcendental phenomenology seeks to uncover the underlying essence of the conditions and qualities that make up an experience (Cilesiz, 2011). A starting point in the phenomenological approach would be to describe a typical situation (Giorgi, 1985). The idea is for the researcher to hold that a phenomenological stance enables the focus for the participant to live the experience as a “Gestalt” that is, in its wholeness, by attempting to prevent any judgement one may have about the phenomenon “epoche” (Sadala and Ferreira, 2002). The word epoche was used in Greek philosophy to mean the suspension of judgement, for Husserl it meant setting aside assumptions and describing what appears to pure psyche (Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell, 2004).

Although research exists in terms of the emotions and taxonomies of employees working in hospitality and tourism (Kim and Agrusa, 2011), there is minimal research focused on the experience of tourism employees within the context of phenomenology. Pernecky and Jamal (2010) accentuated phenomenology as being a lucrative means of research adding value to a variety of stakeholder perspectives while comprising potential tourism research subjects including workers, hosts, tourists, students, local business, and members of the community. Tourism employment has a long-held assumption that the creation of jobs equates to good tourism development; however, to support inclusive tourism, a greater depth of inquiry and analysis is needed on these isolated communities (Biddulph and Scheyvens, 2018; Li, 2000; Riley and Szivas, 2009). In reference to the review of literature both on the local employees working in the one island-one resort concept of the Maldives and from the phenomenological approach, the focus of this research is to provide a more vivid concept of what are the true essences from these phenomena that employees experience as an integral community stakeholder on these secluded enclaves for the resilience of tourism. The prevailing context regarding the resilience of tourism is rooted in communities (Butler, 2018).

### 3 METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Tourism industry in the Maldives

The researcher’s “wheel of choices” conceptual exploration model by Savin-Baden and Major (2013) delineate how the significant choice moments of qualitative research interrelate. Based on the researchers’ wheel, the qualitative research lens focuses on phenomenology from a philosophical position as well as an approach to explore individual experiences of employees working in the island resorts of the Maldives. The data were collected through written narratives and analyzed using the *QSR International’s* NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) while adapting the process flow based upon a study by Wassler and Schuckert (2017) on the lived travel experience to North Korea. In order to collect the data, the local employees were asked the narrative question to describe their feelings and experience of working in an island environment in the Maldives. Local employees working in the resorts were emailed the narrative

questions and asked to share their experiences to find out the essences of working while confined to a one island-one resort concept.

Narratives argued by Giorgi (2009) are far better than traditional interviews for transcendental phenomenology analysis to extract in-depth information on the actual feelings of respondents. Wassler and Schuckert (2017), propose that respondents normally write narratives using their true feelings similar to actual experiences in their normal attitude. Hence, it is at the discretion of the researcher how the data are presented in the context of transcendental phenomenology. In phenomenology particularly while collecting data, the person that the researcher is interviewing, regardless of gender, personality, race, or nationality is of minimal consequence but rather the experience of the person central importance to the outcomes of the investigation (Wassler and Schuckert, 2017).

### 3.2 Participants of the lived experiences

To comprehend the experience of the local employees, respondents were required to work on the resort islands of the Maldives. The sampling for the study included the local employees in the Maldivian tourism industry. A total of 65 narrative interview questions were sent via professional contacts to the employees working in different resorts of the Maldives with 54 narratives returned back to the researcher via email and after eliminating narratives that replicated each other 46 respondents were used for comparison in this study.

The respondents consisted of 46 Maldivian resident employees from 28 different island resorts in the Maldives with a description of the demographic variables in presented in Table 1.

The 46 narrative interview responses reached an identifiable level of saturation to come to an understanding of the employee's experiences while working in these resorts.

*Table 1 Profile of respondents*

Variable	<i>n</i> (%)
Gender	
Female	17 (36.96)
Male	29 (63.04)
Age	
18–30 years	18 (39.13)
31–40 years	17 (36.96)
41–50 years	9 (19.57)
51–60 years	2 (4.34)
Marital status	
Single	22 (47.83)
Married/partnered	16 (34.78)
Divorced/widowed	8 (17.39)
Education	
High school	7 (15.21)
Some college	9 (19.57)
College degree	30 (65.22)
Occupation	
Non-supervisory	28 (60.87)
Supervisory	18 (39.13)

Furthermore, the focus was mainly on the depth of information shared by the respondents as part of identifying the essences of the experience. A context-specific sampling approach (Andriotis, 2023) was administered based on the nature of the research objectives and scope of the study. In phenomenology, according to Englander (2012), what really matters is the quality of information received rather than the number of total sample population. Recently emerging as a philosophical approach to inform study of the lived experience, phenomenology can produce diverse and wide-ranging theoretical perspectives (Pernecky and Jamal, 2010).

### 3.3 Data collection from narrative interviews

To ensure reliability and validity, as highlighted by Wassler and Schuckert (2017), the phenomenological technique of bracketing out previous experience and self-awareness was adopted. Bracketing or *epoche* refers to keeping aside personal perspectives. A concern by Spiegelberg (1960) is with prior held views, assumptions, and theoretical leanings that asks the researcher to be open-minded and judgement free in describing the subjective experiences of others with no hypothesis or prior expectations. Savin-Baden and Major (2013) similarly clarify that bracketing is not necessarily ridding oneself of one's prior thoughts and viewpoints, but ideally putting aside ideas, knowledge, and thought related to the phenomenon under study. The concept of reflexivity can also however, open the potential for the co-production of knowledge in tourism leading to critical engagement among complex and fuzzy entanglements that are often characteristic of the nature within qualitative research (Ateljevic et al., 2005).

Three steps recommended by Spiegelberg (1960) as a guide to understanding transcendental phenomenology include: intuiting, analyzing, and describing. For Savin-Baden and Major (2013) phenomenology is about appreciating what the phenomenon means to the person's actual experience. This is a useful technique to understand a subject's experience, understand consciousness, and to identify the essential features of what constitutes a phenomenon. Taking the lead from Spiegelberg, the Savin-Baden and Major's (2013) approach builds upon the principles including: phenomenological reduction, description, and the search of essence, that serves as the theoretical model used to identify essences (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994).

The first step involves bracketing, which is a fresh view of the research matter. It means setting aside any previous held beliefs, assumptions, and even prejudices about a subject and understand it only from the experience of the subject (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). This stage accounts for the practical aspects of the research with the compilation of narratives using the NVivo qualitative data analyzing software. Narratives that replicated each other were eliminated resulting in a total of 46 contributor narratives. The second step is to describe the way language is used to communicate an experience or group of experiences to others. This idea of construction means a departure from the present and delving deep into the phenomenon. The last step in this approach is ascribing meaning and context of a phenomenon and it is where the essence is determined. Husserl recommends a technique called free imaginative variation to identify essences (Moran, 2002). This means that the researcher makes some alterations to the essence being studied and evaluates what changes have taken place (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). The result at this stage leads to the essence of the experience (Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell, 2004). Identifying an essence is similar to the process of naming where you tend to use a word or phrase that best describes the nature of the object (Owen, 1994). Once the data are imported, the coding process commenced with the themes and essences being generated.

## 4 RESULTS

The findings from the narratives developed the key words to identify the resulting essences from the experiences shared by local resort employees. The narrative responses were imported to NVivo as sources while classifying along the categories of gender and the various island resorts that the employees were currently employed. From the description of the experience, coding was done based on the identified essences or themes with related content gathered through the nodes. There was no limitation in terms of the word length of the narratives completed by the respondents resulting in variations in terms of the themes identified from the descriptions. The following is an example of the extracted meaning of one of the respondents shared experience:

*Working in a resort gives me lots of pleasure as it gives a good source of income to build my own world with my family. On the other hand, it is a very tough life as it is difficult to balance personal life. Most of the time family needs to be skipped due to the work. The number of hours or leisure time with family is almost not there. Living or working in the resorts makes you more educated than working anywhere else in the country. Have an ultimate chance to meet people from different parts of the world and it makes us to realize what life is and what we [Maldivians] are lacking in our life. Simply it's a pleasure to work in a resort in the Maldives and with modern technology it makes life too easy to balance with work. Family is just always with us. (Male, Resort Room Attendant, 2020)*

The obtained meaning from NVivo was converted to phenomenological expressions as the lived experiences of the employees working in the island resorts of the Maldives. According to Wassler and Schuckert (2017), a second tier understanding of the narrative and meaning units can be derived from the transformation. It is important that multiple respondents be differentiated, and common structural description essences be independently observed (Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell, 2004). Moran (2002) also suggests that researchers should refrain from explanations until the phenomenon have been understood within, which is a key point highlighted and similarly emphasized by Husserl in transcendental phenomenology. Crowell (2001) maintains that analyzing meaning from transcendental phenomenological experiences could be a subjective process that is a potential limitation. The following are examples of the key dimensions identified from the experiences.

### 4.1 The dimension of serenity

The serenity dimension presented in Table 2 is associated with the natural beauty of the work environment based on the island resort. Essences identified from this dimension are harmony, tranquility, blissful, seclusion, and splendor. Respondents ( $n = 26$ ) related the peacefulness of working in such an environment away from the hustle and bustle of city life work environments.

### 4.2 The dimension of solidarity

The solidarity dimension exhibited in Table 3 is mainly composed of essences such as unity, cohesion, camaraderie, humbleness, comfort, and enjoyment. This dimension was agreed upon by most of the respondents ( $n = 32$ ) as they enjoy making friends with people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Table 2 *Serenity examples*

Meaning
<i>Maldives is a group of islands, we spend days surrounded by nature in the secluded resort life, if a resort is built on a private island away from the local life, it is easy to work and it's easy to manage. There won't be any influence of local citizens or the central government in a private island, there will be no vehicles, no crowds, no political strikes and also pollution free environments. (Male, Resort Human Resources Manager, 2020)</i>
Transformed meaning
States how the surroundings with nature in the private and secluded island resort and away from all pollution
Phenomenological expression
Reports the natural work environment in a secluded resort island free from pollution

Table 3 *Solidarity examples*

Meaning
<i>The best part of my experience in working in the resort is I've learned to live among people of different cultures, making close friendship with them. These colleagues are there for you when you are in need. The team spirit is great with good team synergy. (Female, Resort Front Desk Agent, 2020)</i>
Transformed meaning
States that the team spirit is high in the workplace helping one another when in need, friendships among people from different cultures are maintained
Phenomenological expression
Reports on the team spirit of the people working in the organization. Unity and harmony exist in their relationship.

### 4.3 The dimension of self-development

The self-development dimension illustrated in Table 4 is linked to essences such as amazing, success, excitement, dynamic, patience, and euphoria. Respondents consider that living in the resort islands provided them with opportunities to professionally develop themselves from this learning environment. Furthermore, working in these enclaves requires a lot of patience and the challenging environment allows staff to develop themselves in a number of aspects to progress in their career ladder. As they are based in the resorts, they are able to save their wages with minimum expenses, as the basic facilities such as food, accommodation, and laundry are free services. Most of the respondents ( $n = 34$ ) agreed with the above-mentioned essences.

### 4.4 The dimension of discontentment

The discontentment dimension represented in Table 5 is associated with essences such as stress, unhappiness, depression, distress, annoyance, and displeasure. The result of these essences from this dimension followed with nearly all the respondents ( $n = 45$ ), due to sharing accommodation and consequent social issues. Other concerns raised were the unsuitability of the food available to local employees, prolonged working hours without days off, and the limited recreational facilities during the employee's free time.

Table 4 *Self-development examples***Meaning**

*I am pleased to work and live in an upscale environment with the top-class facilities, there is a lot of scope for career advancement. Earning a good salary and visiting family weekly or monthly is one of the most important things for an employee, which most of the resorts are committed. It is quite easy to save money when working at a resort, because most of your time is spent working at the resort, so there is little chance of going out and spending it all. (Male, Resort Assistant Front Office Manager, 2020)*

**Transformed meaning**

States how the work environment helps for professionalism along with personal development and financial security

**Phenomenological expression**

Reports on the personal and professional development opportunities while working in the resort and at the same time the financial benefits of living in this environment

Table 5 *Discontentment examples***Meaning**

*The food is of a multinational flavor. There are times that one will not get all the delicacies required however, the canteen food is not of a good quality and a disappointment. In my experience, some have moved resorts just because the food was not up to one's expectations. (Female, Resort Human Resources Coordinator, 2020)*

**Transformed meaning**

States how disappointed with the available food for staff and impact of the experiences of other staff moving to another workplace due to this fact

**Phenomenological expression**

Reports on the disappointment with the food available for employees working at the resort

#### 4.5 The dimension of antagonism

Exhibited in Table 6 is the antagonism dimension that resulted in essences such as rigid, resentment, bitterness, hostility, rivalry, and aggression. This is mostly due to the power exercised by the top management or the operators in regard to unfair rules and regulations imposed on employees. Furthermore, due to the nature of the small employee community, there are rivalries among colleagues including the management as well as discrimination among employees. The negative essence from this dimension is considered to be at a lower level ( $n = 6$ ).

#### 4.6 The dimension of workplace alienation

In this dimension, displayed in Table 7 is the essences identified as pressure, separation, isolation, cruelty, and harassment. The issues mostly being confined to an island and staying away from their community, family, and friends. They do not get off days as often as they want due to the pressure of working and living away in the resort for long periods of time that leads to isolation. Similarly, essences such as harassment and tarnished reputations was particularly experienced by female respondents, as sometimes they feel that the work environment in which they work is not safe and secure. Furthermore, due to the male dominated culture, female respondents are primarily exposed to harassment resulting in the tarnishing of their image or dignity due to the

Table 6 Antagonism example

Meaning
<i>Working in the Kitchen team comprised mostly all male, expat workers. Though some of them were professional there was a lot of discrimination. I enjoyed being financially independent but did not enjoy the kitchen due to ongoing bickering on my back simply because I was a woman.</i> (Female, Resort Line Cook, 2020)
Transformed meaning
States on the status of the work environment in reference to gender and subjected to discrimination along with bickering because of being a female employee
Phenomenological expression
Reports on the male dominated work environment and experiencing discrimination along with bickering simply for being female

spreading of rumors and slander from one employee to another. The essences identified in this dimension is relatively high among the respondents ( $n = 31$ ).

The following subthemes of serenity, solidarity, self-development, discontentment, antagonism, and workplace alienation are identified in further detail.

#### 4.6.1 Serenity

The majority of tourists visiting the Maldives consider the destination as a paradise on earth (Auvray, 2010). As pointed out by a respondent however: *“Remote location is one, space is another, probably seclusion away from city life”* (Male, Resort Assistant Restaurant Manager, 2020). Some of the respondents were very content in working in such a natural and peaceful environment while avoiding the pollution of the urban environment as stated in the following:

*“There is no doubt about the harmony and tranquility that we get to experience while working in a remote location. For many it could be a second home, but for me it is my first home. I take my leaves and off days in the resort and I have never felt bored”* (Female, Resort Yoga Instructor, 2020). Furthermore, similar positive responses were reflected as stated: *“Good fresh air, no pollution, easy slow life, great beach to enjoy swimming or snorkeling. Great place to save money”* (Male, Resort Director of Engineering, 2020).

The serenity of the natural environment aligns with Woosnam’s (2011) framework of emotional distance that is also similarly connected to the dimension of solidarity within the varying levels of closeness. Within the remote distance of the islands in the Maldives, there can paradoxically exist a shared experience of closeness through the natural environment. With a high level of emotional connection, opportunities exist to nurture the positive relationships among employees through the natural elements; however, if low levels of emotional connections exist then organizational events may be needed to create team-oriented activities for shared experiences among employees that can help to realize commonalities among each other amid the various other differences that may exist.

#### 4.6.2 Solidarity

Woosnam’s (2011) exploration of the role played by emotional solidarity resulted in shared beliefs and interactions fostering general positivity and improved service for tourists. As reflected in a respondent’s statement: *“Accepting the fact that*

Table 7 Workplace alienation examples

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**Meaning**

*For not, having settled with family and children I felt something was lacking, which was imbalance of work life. Sometimes I felt it was rather boring very isolated from close friends, relatives and parents. Finally, I have decided to quit. My conclusion was it was good to work in such kind of environment at certain limitation, not the rest of your life. Parental responsibility is invaluable and important for both parents. Raising a child was not a responsibility of only one parent. (Male, Resort Rooms Manager, 2020)*

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**Transformed meaning**

States on the lonely status away from family realizing how lacking life was without them, leading to leaving the job

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**Phenomenological expression**

Reports on the lonely status one experiences while working away from family in the resorts and experiencing the emptiness causing job abandonment as it was believed that both parents should equally bring up the children

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*living and working in the resort is unique ... enrichment of one's life ... meeting new people from different countries. Share the culture and respect the differences"* (Female, Resort Front Office Attendant, 2020). Solidarity is associated mostly with positive essences among the employees and the organizational culture. Employee expressions highlighted that: *"Working at this resort feeling happy never felt alone, friendly nature and working with many nationals knowing their culture, in one word this is a mini world. Not only making friendship with other nationals also become friends with me enjoying work with pleasure not with pressure. With available networks able to keep in touch with family"* (Female, Resort Human Resource Trainor, 2020). Furthermore, the solidary dimension builds camaraderie and good team effort as stated: *"... coming to experience of working in a resort, it's blissful I have put up 24 + years' of experience ... personally I am not feeling any difference in working in island in terms work, happy with my supportive friends"* (Female, Resort Auditor, 2020).

The dimension of solidarity builds upon Woosnam's (2011) notion of the levels of interaction which can bond residents with tourists that can be embraced through shared behaviors over beliefs. This similarly extends Durkham's (1995 [1915]) original theoretical framework based upon the shared behavior and activities of tourists that helped advance an understanding of emotional solidarity through common activities. Improved relationships among team-based functional orientation may help to support greater interactions with other employees and possibly extending to improved performance and a positive guest service culture.

#### 4.6.3 Self-development

For a tourism experience to be memorable, it requires positive essences (Tung and Ritchie, 2011). As demonstrated by a respondent: *"Overall, working in a resort is hard... staying away from family is hard but it's all worth it ... rewarding experience and a great career ... enjoyable experience ... new adventures ... career an added value ... the flexibility to work"* (Female, Resort Assistant Sales Manager, 2020). The self-development dimension is one of the most positive aspect of the essences among most of the employees. Hence, it was expressed from employee's that: *"we are always*

*in a race against time. We deal with some esteemed hotel brands and deal with highly professional individuals all the time, from which we constantly learn a great deal. Living on an island can be very challenging as it is extremely congested with multi personality and people from different cultures, but a willingness to adapt and be flexible in every situation gets you through every day. I highly recommend it as the most enjoyable workplace to be and a company which invest in their people with training opportunities to boost morale and career advancement”* (Male, Resort Food Service Manager, 2020).

The self-development dimension facilitated through learning and training opportunities may support positive morale that leads to a positive emotional essence through participative and interactive learning activities. The essence of the memorable experience proposed by Tung and Ritchie (2011) examined the conceptual underpinnings of self-development in creating memorable experiences existing within a facilitated and highly interactive environment. The positive essence of the memorable experience was enabled through some level of self-development to realize a cherished experience. Between higher levels of solidarity and self-development a reciprocal relationship may exist to support both dimensions.

#### 4.6.4 Discontentment

Essences such as sadness, lack of joy, anger, and fear led to emotional exhaustion along with levels of deviant behavior (Grandey and Goldberg, 2007; Oatley et al., 2006). As conveyed by a respondent: *“I didn’t plan to come to the resort industry, normally no Maldivian ever comes to resort by their heart, but to earn money, same as living on an oil rig or an anchored ship ... there are no official working hours ... personal life is also more exposed”* (Male, Resort Sous Chef, 2020). Discontentment is associated with essences leading to distress in the work life of employees as indicated: *“Due to no off days means not being able to see my family as often as I want. This means that the quality of time, which can be spent with the family, is very limited. Moving up in the career ladder, the jobs in this industry becomes a 24-hour job, which is very time consuming and highly demanding. It also leaves very limited time for socializing at the resort. Living in a resort, most of my friends have drifted away due to limited time spent with them”* (Female, Resort Sales Manager, 2020).

A cause for disappointment by most of the respondents was the accommodation and food on the resorts for the employees. Hence, respondents expressed that: *“...not much option of foods (especially line staff who cannot dine at the guest restaurant). Staff accommodations is not up to standard (Maldivian government should have set minimum standard of accommodation built by the company)”* (Male, Resort Food & Beverage Server, 2020).

Discontentment may result from the display effect between the service provider (employee) and guest in a closely lived environment where employees share a highly intimate living proximity to guests staying at the resort in the one island-one resort concept. The display effect originally proposed by Hochschild (1983) and later extended through the research of Grandey and Goldberg (2007) occurs when human feelings are commercialized as display rules through service interactions where the employee is expected to suppress their personal feelings to display feelings related to more positive essences such as solidarity and serenity effects. According to Hochschild (1983), the display effect has high personal costs which often result in elevated levels of social distress, unhappiness, displeasure, and disappointment among employees in a prescribed service environment.

#### 4.6.5 Antagonism

Anxiety, discrimination, unfairness, and feelings of threat are caused by the undue influence of superiors. As revealed by a respondent: *“More rigid rules are made without consent from all members ... feels like a work camp ... as a female employee living and working in a limited space with limited freedom of movement - island problems like jealousy, gossip, unproductive clique groups misunderstanding, and miscommunication occur ... stay to myself and minimize interaction with resort staff other than during work hours”* (Female, Resort Reservation Agent, 2020). This type of essence usually results in fight or flight responses (Turner and Stets, 2006) as many respondents felt they were discriminated against while being ferried back to the island or the city and raised concern that: *“... the transport system and management is sometimes unfair. The seaplane seats are not guaranteed as one can be bumped due to many reasons. Because the staff are given the lowest priority.”* Furthermore, as expressed by a respondent: *“... the manager and above are provided with medical insurance from all over the world. However, the assistant manager and below are getting medical coverage from the local hospital. I believe that this resort should provide medical insurance for all colleagues”* (Female, Resort Assistant Manager of Food & Beverage, 2020).

The leadership influence on the antagonism dimension can be through the essence of resentment, rigidity, bitterness, rivalry, aggression, and hostility which may be evident in the organizational culture. Stets (2010) contends that social structures often regulated by organizational culture, for instance, can accelerate the negative essence of pressure with an overwhelming sense of oppression leading to the alienation of a group from the larger social or organizational structure. This resulting alienated social culture highlighted by Turner and Stets (2006) and Stets (2010), advanced the popularized analysis of Hochschild's (1983) research on emotions and socialization among the lived experiences of shared norms within sub-cultures.

#### 4.6.6 Workplace alienation

Working in a hotel resort can be stressful with prolonged hours that could lead to alienation and sabotage (DiPietro and Pizam, 2008; Kim and Agrusa, 2011). As expressed by a respondent: *“With time I found it too boring in the island ... limited social interactions away from the normal community and claustrophobic ... don't see that I would be able to stay in a resort for my whole life”* (Female, Resort Guest Relations Host, 2020). Workplace alienation was identified as isolation being the most concerning essence due to separation from family and friends while working in the resorts. However, female respondents also raised concerns about workplace harassment from male colleagues as conveyed in the following sentiment: *“My initial experience at the resort was really not good, the management at the resort was not at all considerate and supportive of female staff. About eight people were asked to share one room with bunk beds. The isolated nature of the island was really lonely sometimes for a female to work, not everyone was understanding as there are very few females working in the resorts. Sometimes you do not know whom to trust as the next day the perception of others working in the department is changed, tarnishing your dignity”* (Female, Resort Club Assistant, 2020).

As reported by DiPietro and Pizam (2008), workplace alienation is more likely to occur due to managerial styles in a hospitality setting rather than the physical nature of a remote environment. Similarly, Kim and Agrusa (2011) stressed the need for organizational coping intervention and particularly among female employees in the unique and highly interactive social setting of hospitality. The workplace alienation dimension

may be accelerated due to a lack of nurturing leadership that positively contributes to the essence of self-development (success), serenity (harmony), and solidarity (unity) with the opportunity to minimize discontentment (boring) and antagonism (hostility) dimensions through more supportive leadership styles.

## 5 DISCUSSION

In phenomenology, essences are emotions derived from individual experience that form a phenomenon with emotions and examined as lived experiences (Denzin, 1990). Essences or emotions are complex and difficult to define, however, their validity and significance are seldom suspect (Izard, 2010). Hence, the results have revealed the essences of Maldivian employees working in the one island-one resort model as illustrated in Figure 1.

The key dimensions arise from the work environment of employees being confined to the island resorts with the essences related to each dimension. The essences that emerged in the findings suggest that most of the dimensions identified are mixed with both negative and positive essences. The one island-one resort model of the Maldives is considered to be a microcosm with a large number of the respondents associating the islands with positive essences relating to the island resort as a great place to work with a learning environment to enhance their career in tourism. A majority of the respondents are not content with the fact that they have to be isolated from their families and social life. It was stressed by the respondents that when young and energetic, working on the island resort is a perfect place to be employed however, when responsible for a family with children it becomes difficult and creates a great deal of problems when staying away from home.

On the contrary, the majority of the respondents believed that from a financial point of view the savings are very high since the resort provides all the meals for the staff, accommodation, and free laundry service without other expenses that are incurred while living in an inhabited island. Resort work can be beneficial in terms of saving of one's income and meeting different tourists from around the world. Resort employees sacrifice their established family and friends while meeting new people at the resort. Once employees start their family life, it is more challenging due to the difficulties of going home often after work as well as having limited time to take off from work to support their families. For female employees, working in this isolated environment indicates that it takes a great deal of courage from their perspective to stand up against the negative perception of the Maldivian community who may be against female employment on an isolated island in the tourism industry. Furthermore, the challenges and difficulties that female employees experience in the male dominant work environment persist among local females working all positions in these island enclaves. The findings of this present study advance Moosa and He (2023) prior research supporting the need for workforce policies positioned within the unique nuances related to the overall sustainability of tourism in the Maldives and the novel one island-one resort concept with employees in close living proximity to guests. Furthermore, the findings of this present study advance the need for greater stakeholder involvement that extend beyond one-size-fits-all policies (Najeeb, 2014) and to consider multi-dimensional employment approaches (employee participation) that maximize productivity and resident well-being (Chia and Muiz, 2021), leadership development to anticipate change (Chia and Anas, 2022), and overall sustainability through proactive corporate social responsibility initiatives including positive social development.

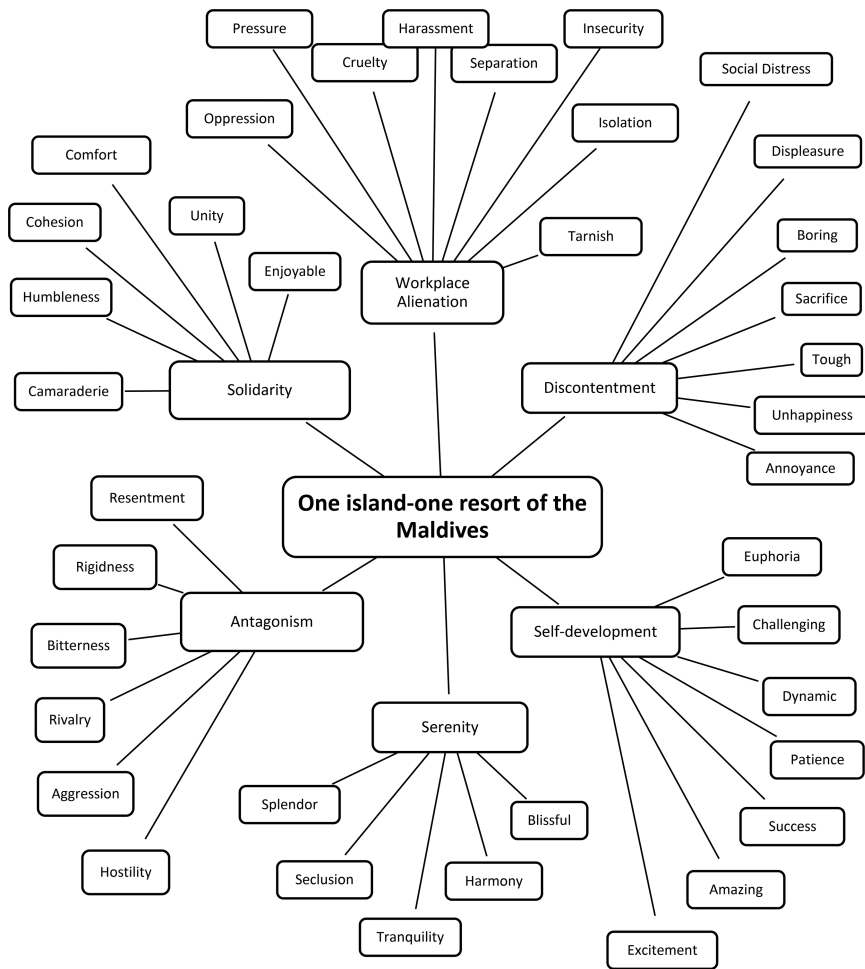


Figure 1 Essences of local employees working in the one island-one resort of the Maldives

## 6 CONCLUSION

The transcendental phenomenology belonging to Husserl’s school of thought was considered in order to understand the essences from local employees’ who have experienced working in the isolated resorts of the Maldives. The results in terms of the identified essences are a mix of both positive and negative essences among the six dimensions of meaning interpreted from narratives shared by the local employees working in the one island-one resort concept of the Maldives. Working in an isolated island resort requires a great deal of patience in addition to high levels of flexibility from both the employee and management perspective.

The contributions from this study have portrayed how the local employees view their work environment and the essences revealed through the participant responses.

In assessing the essence of the experience, in the first research objective, workforce development considerations must extend beyond the physical dimension of the island and experience. For example, although employees appreciated the physical beauty and tranquility of the idyllic island and overall resort property itself, this appreciation did not extend to other aspects of their experience and in particular in regard to fostering positive relationships between employees as well as management. In this remote island setting, there is a heightened need for further consideration of other social, emotional, intellectual, and psychological dimensions as evidenced in the results of the employee narratives. Even the physical aspect of the employee living quarters on the island was not suitable for fostering employee well-being that could also be serving as an obstacle in fostering positive relationships and fueling antagonism between employees themselves as well as between employees and management.

With respect to the second research objective of this study, an opportunity exists for management to integrate competitive human resource development policies to foster employee work/life well-being that is uniquely tailored to remote island resort destinations where employees live in close proximity to guests. While the physical nature of an upscale guest experience can vastly differ from that of an employee's life, greater emphasis on employee development can be structured to support the social, emotional, intellectual, and psychological dimensions through strategic leadership initiatives that build further elements with training centered on aspects of trust, understanding, and well-being. Addressing these key findings will improve overall employee satisfaction, which will lead to better service and maximize value for the resorts, as well as the tourist's experience while visiting the destination.

In connection to the third objective of this research, the human resource challenges within the one island-one resort environment require an emphasis on progressive development opportunities for employees as well as inclusive workforce development practices and particularly in consideration of structures of power, culture, and gender equity that positively leverages workforce diversity.

Practical industry implications at an organizational level in remote resort island locations involve heightened human resource approaches that move beyond policies and procedures. At the heart of well-designed human resource development programs are the effective channels of communication and feedback. In examining the essences in this study, for instance, identifiable themes emerged that can help identify opportunities and challenges among diverse workforces. Coupled with emerging technologies, multiple sources of information can be gathered that can help to personalize employee development plans based on a network of feedback personally (face to face), socially, as well as through emerging technologies. Soliciting feedback among a number of sources and stakeholders (Najeeb, 2014) for instance, can take on a network approach for workforce development initiatives rather than one-dimensional learning initiatives and policies based on isolated or single sources of information.

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