

## **Old Maids and Stepford Wives ? Room Attendants in UK and Australian Hotels**

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### *Track 1: Management, Work and Organisation*

Employment in hospitality and tourism is significant and growing in both developed and developing countries as attested to by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC). Globally the industry accounts for 238.3 million jobs in 2008, or 1 in every 11.9 jobs, with this figure expected to rise to 296.3 million jobs by 2018, or 1 in every 10.8 jobs (WTTC, 2008). Whilst the quantity of jobs is therefore unquestionable, the *quality* of many of these jobs is another matter entirely. The highly questionable nature of hospitality jobs is especially evident in relation to the job done by room attendants - those workers who clean and 'make up' rooms in hotels for guests' use. Room attendants are described by Wood (1997: 95) as the 'lowest of the low in hotel work', doing work which has been described as 'the hardest job in the hotel' by Bernhardt et al (2003: 42). Yet, rather curiously, academic attention has tended to focus only on particular occupations within the hotel industry - usually those associated with food and beverage - to such an extent that they have come to constitute 'a dominant research paradigm' (Lennon and Wood 1989: 227; also Hunter-Powell and Watson 2006).

Illustrating this paradigm, Adler and Adler's (2004) typology of workers in Hawaiian resort hotels is a useful analysis of work and workers in the hotel industry. However, it remains very broad in its analysis of the demographics, attitudes and preferences of the resort staff. Much less is known about jobs and employees' demographics and preferences in accommodation work that is performed by receptionists, porters and domestics (Lennon and Wood, 1989). Of these occupations, the latter, particularly room attendants, 'are amongst the least skilled of all hotel staff' Lennon and Wood claim, with jobs that are 'physically demanding and dirty ... repetitive and limited in variety and scope' (p. 229). Many of those working as room attendants are what Wood (1997) has described as 'marginal workers' - women, the young, casuals, part-timers, students and migrant workers. Beyond this characterisation however, little is known of these workers or the extent to which the nature of their work may be changing. While Adler and Adler's findings from resort hotels in Hawaii reveal overwhelmingly contented workers 'trapped in paradise', we expect that a typology of room

attendants will be quite different. Yet, the exact nature of such a typology and its implications for the industry remains unexplored. Our research therefore seeks to develop a greater understanding of the nature of work done by room attendants as well as their demographics, attitudes and preferences. In addition, we examine the extent to which policy responses may be developed in order to respond to the needs of housekeeping workers. In doing so, we explore the 'union difference' (Zuberi 2006) and its effect.

The research is case study based, focusing on the nature of housekeeping work in a sample of hotels in the UK and Australia. The case studies consist of interviews with the general manager, human resources manager, housekeeping manager and between four and six room attendants at each of the hotel sites. In addition, interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including employer representatives, trade union officials, temporary work agency managers, and relevant low wage campaign groups. In total, 57 interviews were conducted. The data were coded and analysed thematically, according to the following areas of interest: work organisation; room attendant demographics, attitudes and preferences; working patterns; training and development; and pay and benefits.

Overall, our research develops a contemporary characterisation of housekeeping work in UK and Australian hotels and new insights regarding the demographics, attitudes and preferences of room attendants. Our findings display both similarities and differences in comparison to Adler and Adler's (2004) results, representing both continuity and change in the hotel labour market. Perhaps most importantly, our case studies demonstrate the changing nature of housekeeping labour, in terms of demographics, attitudes and preferences, and the growth of labour utilisation strategies dependent on transient workers in conjunction with union avoidance tactics. While the implications of these phenomena are consistent with cost minimisation strategies adopted by employers, they are largely deleterious for the workers involved whilst concurrently compromising hotels' quality service standards. These results contribute to our understanding of work and labour utilisation in the hotel industry, including its changing character. Moreover, our findings inform contemporary policy debates and we discuss appropriate policy responses required within the industry.

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