



2 STRATEGIC HRM AND COMPETITIVENESS OF HOTELS IN THE CENTRAL REGION OF GHANA: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF EMPLOYEE COMPETENCIES

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to examine the effect of strategic HR practices on the competitiveness of hotels in the Central Region of Ghana. A secondary objective was to assess the mediating role of employee competencies on the link between strategic HR practices and competitive advantage. The study adopted an explanatory research design, using a purely quantitative approach. The target population comprised of all managers of registered hotels in the Central Region of Ghana. Data were collected through a self-administered survey questionnaire. The available data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling. It was established that strategic HRM practices have a positive influence on employee competencies, which in turn has a significant positive effect on competitive advantage. As a consequence, it was concluded that internal capabilities and competencies are the major sources of sustainable competitive advantage in the hospitality industry in Ghana. The effect of strategic HR practices on competitive advantage was, however, found to be insignificant. These findings require managers in the hospitality industry to continuously employ strategic HR practices such as training and development activities, linking incentive pay to performance, providing staff with a flexible compensation structure and promoting skill-based pay elements in employees' pay package.

Key words – Strategic HRM, competencies, hotel, competitive advantage, Central Region.

INTRODUCTION

The dynamic nature of today's business environment is a signal that HR managers must take a proactive approach to managing their human resources (Allahar, 2018). As suggested by Sunday and Awara (2016), the 21st Century HR manager is required to increase the quality of his leadership, manage the changing business needs for talents and skills, define a forward-looking workforce strategy, foster innovation throughout the organisation and use data analytics to improve HR-related decisions. This moves the traditional HR practice from the administrative role to a more strategic position where HR managers are required to align their HR practices with the core business strategies of the firm (Allahar, 2018). The HR manager now assumes a more strategic role in the management of the firm and is described as a strategic business partner. In this new role, HR managers are responsible for attracting, developing and maintaining a high-calibre workforce

that enables the firm to gain a competitive advantage over rivals (Oppong, 2017). With the strategic human resource management approach, employees are seen as a source of competitive advantage (Darwish & Singh., 2013). Supporting this approach, Oppong (2017) argued that as the traditional sources such as technology and capital are becoming less significant as sources of competitive advantage, the most feasible and innovative alternative is to develop the skills and competencies of employees through strategic human resource management.

There is a theoretical logic in developing the skills and competencies of managers for gaining competitive advantage for a firm. As noted by researchers who hold the resource-based view (Barney, 1991; Hitt, Xu & Cames, 2016; Kehoe & Collins, 2017; Prahalad & Hamel, 1990; Wernerfelt, 1984), only strategically relevant and difficult-to-imitate resources and competencies of the firm can serve as sources of superior performance and drivers



of competitive advantage (Almarri & Gardiner, 2014; Wang, 2009). There is available support for the resource-based view of strategy. Previous studies have shown that developing competitive advantage on physical assets and technological superiority can be imitated quite easily, and therefore cannot build any formidable competitive strategy (Aslan & Pamucka, 2017; Kak & Sushil, 2002). As noted by Barney (1991), building competitive advantage on technological superiority, even once achieved, will quickly erode (Oppong, 2017). Prahalad and Hamel (1990) have also argued that the real sources of competitive advantage derive from the firm's ability to consolidate company-wide technologies and production skills into competencies that are adaptable, rare, imperfectly inimitable and non-substitutable. In buttressing their stance, Prahalad and Hamel (1990) argued that unlike physical assets which deteriorate over time, core competencies are rather enhanced when applied and shared (Aslan & Pamucka, 2017). Kak and Sushil (2002) shared a similar view when they argued that in the era where technologies are constantly altering the boundaries of existing firms, building competitive advantage on core competence is the right approach because advantages resulting from product-price-performance-trade-offs are almost always short term.

Several studies have shown that strategic human resource management is the main source of a firm's competitiveness (Oppong, 2017; Taylor & Finley, 2009). Miller (1987) held this view when he defined strategic human resource management practice as the decisions and actions that relate to the implementation of strategies meant for creating and sustaining competitive advantage. Armstrong (2006, p.29) also made three propositions to the effect that the major source of competitive advantage is strategic human resource management: "first, that human capital is a major source of competitive

advantage; second, that it is people who implement the strategic plan; and, third, that a systematic approach should be adopted to define where the organization wants to go and how it should get there". Other studies have also shown that the competitiveness of a firm lies in its stock of core competencies (Fulmer & Ployhart, 2013; Gilani, Mohammad & Hamid, 2012). Eisenhardt and Martin (2000) confirmed this when they argued that core competencies manifest the ability of an organization to advantageously integrate, reconfigure, gain and release internal resources that enable a firm to achieve competitive advantage over rivals. These other studies reveal that the relationship between strategic HR practice and competitive advantage may be mediated by employee competencies, but despite the growing literature, previous studies have made little effort, if any to investigate the mediating role of employee competencies in this relationship (Oppong, 2017).

The general objective of this study, therefore, is to investigate the mediating role of employee competencies between strategic HR practice and competitive advantage of firms in the hospitality industry in Ghana. The identification and development of key employee competencies are important tools for achieving competitive advantage in knowledge-based organizations (Gilani, Mohammad & Hamid, 2012). Such competencies determine the differences between average and excellent performing firms. The researcher is, however aware that previous studies have been conducted about the hospitality industry in Ghana: hospitality management competency requirement (Anthony, Mensah & Amenumey, 2019); the role of hotels in tourism development (Quarshie & Amenumey, 2018) and utilization of information and communication technologies (Anaman & Dacosta, 2017), but these studies failed to investigate the



mediating role of employee competencies in the effects of strategic HR practice on competitive advantage.

Again, it is noted that graduates in the hospitality industry in Cape Coast generally exhibit less than expected competencies for the industry. Thus, as employee competencies are dependent on the nature of HR practices, a study would be required to assess the nature of Strategic HR practices in the study area, to see whether they are capable of leveraging the needed competencies in the industry. Furthermore, since the main objective of Strategic HRM practice is to gain a competitive advantage for a firm, one would be motivated to find out whether firms in the hospitality industry in the Central Region can gain such advantages, as the industry is unable to attract and maintain qualified employees due to its unattractiveness, caused by poor image and remuneration, odd working hours and improper matching of employee qualifications with job positions (Anthony, Mensah & Amenumey, 2019; Khan & Krishnamurthy, 2016). The rest of the paper is laid out as follows: the second part covers the extant literature and development of hypotheses while the third presents the methods, the fourth presents results and discussions of findings. Part five presents the conclusions and implications of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The resource-based theory lays the theoretical foundation of the study. The conceptual framework is built around concepts such as Strategic HR practices, employee competencies and competitive advantage. The relationship among these concepts forms the basis for hypotheses development.

The Resource-Based View of The Firm

One of the major theories underlying the study of strategy and competitive advantage is the resource-based view of the firm. Though this theory may be traced to several scholars (Ansoff, 1965; Hitt, Xu & Cames, 2016; Kehoe & Collins, 2017; Prahalad & Hamel, 1990; Wernerfelt, 1984), it emerged as a popular theory of competitive advantage through the work of Barney (1991). According to Barney (1991), sustainable competitive advantage derives from the internal resources and capabilities that are rare, valuable, non-substitutable and imperfectly imitable. Resources and capabilities are valuable if they have the ability to reduce cost or increase the price of a product or service. They are inimitable if there is no other resource that could be used as an adequate and worthy replacement for them (Thompson & Strickland, 1998). Resources and capabilities are non-substitutable if they do not have strategic equivalents (Bohlander, Snell & Sherman, 2001). Finally, resources are rare if they are currently controlled by one company or a small number of competing companies. According to Barney (1991), the rarity of resources is the most fundamental element of the resource-based theory. In his view, a resource may meet the other three criteria but if it is not rare, another organization can easily conceive and imitate any strategy it provides, thereby reducing its value and the rate of its non-substitutability in the industry or market. Some resource-based theorists (Del Canto & Gonzalez 1999; Lockett & Thompson 2001) distinguished between tangible and intangible resources and capabilities. According to Killen, Kam, Nathalie and Yvan (2012), intangible resources are more likely to be a source of sustainable competitive advantage than tangible resources because intangible resources are relatively rare, valuable, imitable and non-substitutable than tangible resources. Previous studies (Fulmer & Ployhart, 2013; Sachitra, Siong-



Choy & Khin, 2016; Sunday & Awara, 2016) drew the same conclusion when they treated human resources as the most valuable assets of the organization. This conclusion does not mean that physical and other organizational resources are not sources of competitive advantage. The argument on the resource-based view is that such other sources are increasingly accessible and easy to imitate (Jackson & Schuler, 1995; Wen-Cheng, Chien-Hung, & Yien-Chien, 2011). The resource-based theory is relevant for this study because the identification and development of employee competencies, which are part of the internal resources of the organization enable firms to gain a competitive advantage over their rivals.

Strategic Human Resource Management

Practices

Generally, strategic HRM has been defined as either an outcome or a process. Bamberger and Meshoulam (2000, p. 6) defined strategic HRM as the process by which organizations seek to link their human, social, and intellectual capital to the strategic needs of the firm. Ulrich (1997, p. 89) also defined strategic HRM as the process of linking HR practices to business strategy. From an outcome perspective, Bohlander, Snell and Sherman (2001) defined strategic HRM as an organizational system designed to achieve sustainable competitive advantage through people. Storey (2001, p.6) however, defined strategic HRM as both a process and an outcome. According to him, “strategic HRM is the distinctive approach to employment management which seeks to achieve competitive advantage through the strategic deployment of a highly committed and capable workforce using an array of cultural, structural and

personnel techniques”. Thus, despite the increasing volume of research and over-arching popularity of strategic HRM, a consensus has not been reached on the meaning and definition of the concept (Bamberger & Meshoulam, 2000).

Notwithstanding the inconsistencies in defining strategic HRM, Nankervis, Compton and Baird (2005) identified the three main linkages between HR strategy and organizational strategy: (a) the accommodative, (b) the interactive and (c) the fully integrated. In the accommodative linkage strategy, HR strategies loosely follow the already chosen corporate strategies while the interactive linkage strategy is characterised by a two-way communication process between HR strategy and overall corporate strategy in which the HR department serves as an active contributor to strategy development and execution. In the fully integrated linkage strategy, the HR manager seats at the strategic table together with all other senior managers, and is intimately involved in the overall strategic process in both formal and informal interactions. Nankervis, Compton and Baird (2005) described this linkage as the real reflection of strategic HRM that moves the HR partner to a new level as outlined in Table 1.

The activities in Table 1 are generally described as strategic HR practices, defined as the planned HR deployments and activities intended to enable a firm to achieve its goals (Chuang & Liao (2010). Khan, Wood, Shlomo and Rekha (2019) identified recruitment and selection practices, training and development practices, performance appraisal practices and rewards management practices as the most common strategic HR practices.

**Table 1: Strategic Approach to Human Resource Management**

Category	Practice	
HR Planning/ Job Analysis	Encourage employee involvement so there is strong “buy-in” of HR practices and managerial initiatives. Encourage teamwork so employees are more willing to collaborate. Provide employment security.	Include self-managed teams and decentralization as basic elements of organization design to minimize management layers. Develop strategies to enhance employee work/life balance
Staffing	Be proactive in identifying and attracting talent. In selecting new employees, use additional criteria beyond basic skills (i.e., attitudes, customer focus, and cultural fit).	Team-based training. Generic training based on flexibility. Employees responsible for career development.
Training / Organizational Development	Invest in training programs to enhance employees’ skills related to strategic organizational objectives. Provide employees with career opportunities by giving promotional priority to internal candidates.	Include customer service in new employee onboarding and skill development. Give opportunities for employee growth so employees are “stretched” to enhance all of their skills.
Performance management and compensation	Recognize employees by providing monetary and nonmonetary rewards. Offer high compensation contingent on organizational performance as a way to reduce employee turnover and increase attraction to high-quality employees.	Reduce status distinction and barriers such as dress, language, office arrangement, parking and wage/salary differentials. Base individual and team compensation on goal-oriented results.
Employee Rights	Communicate effectively with employees to keep them informed about major issues and initiatives. Share financial and performance information to develop a high-trust organization. Give higher priority to internal candidates for promotion to enhance employee motivation.	Provide employment security for employees who perform well so they are not downsized because of economic downturns or strategic errors by senior management.

Sources: Pfeffer (1995), Chuang and Liao (2010)

Effective recruitment and selection practices enhance the firm’s chances of finding the best candidates for any advertised position (Bartunek & Moch, 1987). Talents may be recruited internally by rehiring former employees or promoting existing employees. Training and development practices consist of the procedures and methods used by HR managers to instil learning among members of the organization. Whiles training is a short-term learning activity for the acquisition of specific skills meant for doing a particular job, development equips employees with general knowledge and competencies required

for future responsibilities. Performance appraisal practices are used to evaluate, compare and provide feedback on employee performance while reward and compensation practices consist of the processes and actions taken by HR managers to make equitable net monetary payments to their employees (Sunday & Awara, 2016).

Concept of Core Competency

Boyatzis (1982) defined competency as the underlying characteristics of a person that leads to or causes effective and outstanding performance.



Competency is also defined by Aslan and Pamukcu (2017) as the ability to effectively turn or transform knowledge into action. The definitions of competency are usually classified into two – the American definitions which explain competency as the underlying attributes of a person and the British definitions which view competency as a set of performances or standards. Competencies become “core” when: (a) they are not easy for competitors to imitate, (b) they can be re-used widely for many products and markets, and (c) they contribute to the end consumer’s experienced benefits (Enginoglu & Afrikan, 2016; Kawshala, 2015). The origin and popularity of core competency may be traced to the works of Prahalad and Hamel (1990). Before the 1990s, managers held the product-market strategy view of Porter (1985) that effective strategies are built on a careful “structural analysis” of one’s industry (Gilani Mohammad & Hamid, 2012). In the late 1980s, practitioners who adopted Porter’s strategy began to question their feasibility as they were easily imitated by rivals (Gilani, Mohammad & Hamid, 2012). Thus, in their famous study entitled “core competence of the corporation”, Prahalad and Hamel (1990) postulated that unlike the product-market strategies of Michael Porter which were easily copied by competitors, a strategy built on the foundation of a deeply embedded organizational capability can create a sustainable and relatively inimitable advantage (Kak & Sushil, 2002). According to Prahalad and Hamel (1990), the processes on which managers build their strategies of customer responsiveness, innovation, flexibility and speed were extremely people dependent. As a result, while managers were judged on their ability to restructure, declutter and delayer their corporations in the past, in the 1990s and beyond, they will be judged on their ability to identify, cultivate and exploit the core competencies that make growth possible.

Competencies in the hospitality industry

Tas (1988, p. 41) defined managerial competencies as “those job activities and skills judged as essential to perform the duties of a specific position”. In order of importance, Tas (1988) identified human relations skills, professional ethical standards, diplomacy, and effective oral and written communication skills as the most relevant employee competencies in the hospitality industry. Similarly, Sandwith (1993) identified five competencies, including conceptual/creative, leadership, interpersonal, administrative and technical (Lisa & Allison, 2013). Bhardwaj and Punia (2013) also identified 12 types of employee competencies, including communication, team-working, proactiveness, vision, self-management, result-orientation, strategic-orientation, ambition, persistence, decision making, risk-taking, and creativity. While there is an enormous diversity regarding employee competencies as discussed in the preceding review, Tas (1983) identified the six most relevant competencies for hotel workers as (a) managing guest problems with understanding and sensitivity, (b) maintaining professional and ethical standards in the work environment, (c) demonstrating poise and a professional appearance, (d) communicating effectively both in writing and orally, (e) developing positive customer relations and (f) striving to achieve positive working relationships with other employees. According to Tas (1983), following the continuous dynamic market conditions, flexibility and quick reaction are the hallmarks of the hospitality industry. In that regard, specific skills are very critical for the management of such industries (Bhardwaj & Punia, 2013). Much of the literature has shown that competency requirements vary with the type of job, position or the organization where the competency is required. As a result, several firms have defined their respective competencies. However, scholars such as Lucia and Lepsinger (1999) and Woodruffe (1992)



have argued that there is a set of generic competencies that is applicable regardless of roles, positions and levels in the organizations.

Concept of Competitive Advantage

Ansoff (1965) defined competitive advantage as the isolated characteristics or particular properties of individual product markets which give a firm a strong competitive position. Porter (1985) described competitive advantage as the firm's ability to create superior value for its buyers, where superior value means offering lower prices than competitors for equivalent benefits or providing unique benefits that more than offset a higher price. The concept of competitive advantage became popular through the works of Porter (1985). Porter identified three types of competitive advantage that a firm can possess: cost leadership, differentiation, and focus, and described them as generic strategies (Wen-Cheng, Chien-Hung & Yien-Chien, 2011). The focus strategy has two variants, cost focus and differentiation focus, resulting in four strategies – cost leadership, differentiation, cost focus and differentiation focus (Porter, 1985). The first two strategies seek competitive advantage in a broad range of industry segments, while the last two are applicable in a narrow segment. In the cost leadership strategy, the firm sets out to become the low-cost producer in its industry. According to Porter (1985, p. 12), “the sources of cost advantage are varied and depend on the structure of the industry. They may include the pursuit of economies of scale, proprietary technology, preferential access to raw materials and others”. In the differentiation strategy, the firm seeks to be unique in its industry along some dimensions that are widely valued by buyers but cannot be equally offered by competitors. In practice, the firm may select one or more attributes that are widely considered by customers as producing desired benefits and uniquely positions itself to meet those benefits. Based on the uniqueness of products, the firm can

charge premium prices to reflect the cost of production and extra value-added features provided for the consumer. In this way, the differentiation strategy provides customers with clearer reasons why they must prefer one product over the other.

In cost focus and differentiation focus strategies, the firm identifies a target segment based on differences such as unusual needs of buyers or the unique production and delivery system that best serves the target segment (Porter, 1985). In this way, the firm seeks cost advantage or differentiation depending on whether it adopts the cost focus strategy or the differentiation focus strategy for achieving competitive advantage in the chosen segment (Nuryakin, 2018; Porter, 1985). Firms that adopt the cost focus strategy tend to exploit differences in the cost behaviour of the segment while those that adopt the differentiation focus strategy exploits the special needs of buyers in the chosen segment. By concentrating exclusively in the selected segment, the focuser firm gains an advantage over broadly-targeted competitors who poorly serves the unique benefits (Nuryakin, 2018).

Development of Hypothesis

Strategic HR practices and employee competency

Several studies have shown that employee competencies are developed through effective HRM practices (Alsabbah & Hazrillzwar, 2014; Soomro & Shamsi, 2011). Most frequently, HRM practices that are empirically investigated in relationship with employee competencies include recruitment and selection, training and development, performance appraisal and reward management (Brockbank, Ulrich & Beatty, 1999).

In relation to recruitment and selection practices, previous studies have shown that these practices are capable of enhancing employees' competence (Bartunek & Moch, 1987; Misnan & Mohammed, 2007). A study by Muraga (2015)



maintained that the first step in matching the competencies and capabilities of prospective candidates against the demands and rewards inherent in the vacant job is to recruit and select candidates effectively and efficiently. Similarly, Mwangi (2013) found that companies that properly design recruitment and selection practices are usually capable of boosting the competencies of their employees. Obisis (2011) also observed that top-performing companies devote considerable resources and energy to creating high-quality selection systems because an effective recruitment and selection practices can lead to the attainment of sustainable employee competencies. For Nicoleta (2011), a company is likely to improve its employee competencies and perform better if it selects the right people for the job.

Several studies have espoused the significant relationship between training and development practices and employee competence (Appiah, 2010; Manoj, 2013; Otoo & Mishra, 2018). Otoo and Mishra (2018) found a positive significant relationship between training and development and employee competencies. According to Manoj (2013), training and development strategically harness the skills and competencies of employees. Similarly, Appiah (2010) and Harrison (2000) contend that training and development practices positively enhance employee expertise and competencies. Nadarajah, Ramesh, Nurul and Yusliva (2012) also found that the benefits of training and development can improve the overall competence and performance of employees in an organization.

There is hardly any direct study of performance appraisal and employee competencies in the African context, but related studies in Western countries have shown that the two constructs have some positive relationship. In a study by Muraga (2015), a significant positive relationship between performance appraisal and employees' hard and soft skill competencies was found. A similar conclusion

was drawn by Ahmad and Bujang (2013) on one hand, and Katerina, Andrea and Gabriela (2013) on the other hand. According to these authors, an organization can derive appropriate work competencies from its employees only when management is able to appraise the full contribution of employees, provide feedback on employee performance and help them to get over previous mistakes. These studies show that there is a strong positive relationship between performance appraisal and employee competencies. The relationship between reward systems and employee competencies have also received much investigation in the literature. According to Ryan and Sages (2009), an employee who is equitably rewarded for outstanding performance is likely to embark on more progressive ways to acquire further skills and competencies. Allahar (2018) also argued that given a well-designed pay system, employees are likely to take a greater initiative by dedicating their leisure times to growing their skills and competencies in order to increase performance. Gupta and Shaw (2014) have also argued that if a compensation system can promote improved employee performance, then it can also motivate other desirable behaviours such as the acquisition of relevant skills and competencies. On the basis of the preceding review, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1: There is no significant positive relationship between Strategic HRM practices and employee competencies

Employee competencies and competitive advantage

Many studies have explored the relationship between employee competencies and competitive advantage (Aziz, 2019; Daud, Ahmad & Azwardi, 2013; Papula & Volna, 2013). Having examined the relationship between employee competencies and sustainable competitive advantage in Air-Cargo Forwarding, Cheng and Yeh (2007) found that the



sustainable competitive advantage enjoyed by Air-Cargo Forwarding was as a result of their internal resources, capabilities and logistics. Among the three competencies, the ability of staff to provide better customer service was found to be the most critical. Strategic alliance with external firms was also found to create a sustainable competitive advantage for Air-Cargo Forwarding. Similarly, Agha, Alrubaiee and Jamhour (2011) examined the effect of employee competencies on competitive advantage and organizational performance in the Paint Industry of the UAE. It was found that employee competencies had a strong and positive impact on competitive advantage and organizational performance. Jerab, Mustafa and Atilla (2011) examined the impact of core competencies on competitive advantage among tourism companies in Istanbul and found that there was a statistically significant relationship between core competencies, competitive advantage and company success. Knowledge management systems, key work processes, staff skills, company facilities, and unique resources were the most crucial core competencies that enabled the companies to gain competitive advantage. In a recent study, Choge, Namusonge, Nambuswa and Musau (2018) found a significant correlation between core competencies and competitive advantage among 25 banks within Eldoret town, Uasin-Gishu County. A more recent study by Aziz (2019) also revealed that organizational capabilities accounted for 93% of the total variance in competitive advantage.

On the basis of the preceding review, it is hypothesised that:

H₂: There is no significant positive relationship between employee competencies and competitive advantage

Strategic HR practice and competitive advantage

Several studies have been carried out to investigate the effect of strategic HRM practices on

competitive advantage. Halbast and Atan (2019) investigated the impact of strategic human resource management practices on the competitive advantage of selected universities in the Erbil City of Iraq. Results of the study show that strategic HRM practices had a linear and positive influence on competitive advantage, human capital development and commitment of employees. Much like Halbast and Atan (2019), Emeagwal and Ogbonmwan (2018) investigated the perceived role of strategic human resource management practices in achieving sustainable competitive advantage for 12 universities in TRNC, Turkey. The study found that strategic HR practice had a positive effect on both human capital and commitment of employees.

Similarly, having investigated the direct relationship between human resource management practices and competitive advantage for Kuwaiti manufacturing companies, Alajmi and Meshref (2016) found that HRM practices had a significant positive impact on competitive advantage. Solani and Ramesh (2012) also investigated the relationship between human resource management practices and competitive advantage in the Banking sector of India. The authors found that through a centralized recruitment and selection system, effective transfer of training, empowerment and mutual communication, firms in the banking sector of India were able to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. Following a desk-top review of literature, Munteanu (2015) also sought to examine the relationship between strategic HR practice, innovation and competitive advantage. The author also found that strategic HR practice helps management to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. According to the author, "in this age of chaos, simple human resources practices are necessary but not sufficient to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. On this basis, the following hypothesis is formulated:



H₃: There is no significant positive relationship between Strategic HRM practices and competitive advantage

Mediating effect of employee competencies on the link between strategic HRM practices and competitive advantage

The resource-based view holds that sustainable competitive advantage derives from the firm's core competencies (internal resources and capabilities) that are rare, valuable, non-substitutable and non-imitable (Barney, 1991). According to Killen, Kam, Nathalie and Yvan (2012), while some of the resources and capabilities may be tangible, the intangible resources are more likely than the tangible resources to serve as a source of sustainable competitive advantage because, comparatively, they are rare, valuable, inimitable and non-substitutable. Prahalad and Hamel (1990) have also treated human resources as the most valuable assets of the firm from a strategic point of view. Given that the major goal of strategic HRM practice is to gain a competitive advantage for a firm through the effective deployment of human resources, as held by Barney (1991), Wernerfelt (1984), Prahalad and Hamel (1990) and Darwish and Singh (2013), it can be inferred that strategic HRM practices have the potential of leveraging the core competencies of a firm for achieving sustainable competitive advantage. Based on this review, it is hypothesized that:

H₄: Employee competencies do not positively mediate the effect of strategic HR practice on competitive advantage

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The study adopted an explanatory design, using the quantitative research approach. According to Keith (2005), the quantitative approach is appropriate when the emphasis is on measuring

variables and testing hypotheses that are linked to general causal explanations.

Target Population and Sampling Procedure

The target population for this study comprised all General Managers of hotels in the Central Region. The phrase, "General Managers" is appropriate because unlike developed countries where there are large scale hotel facilities with managers, supervisors and front desk agents performing separate jobs, the job of a supervisor and front desk agent is embedded in the job description of managers in all the small hotels in the Central Region (Anaman & Dacosta, 2017). As part of their job descriptions, General Managers also give information to guests, check-in and check-out guests and offer any other services required by the guests (Anthony, Mensah & Amenumey, 2019). In all, there were 303 licensed hotels in the study area (Ghana Statistical Service, 2019). The Central Region was purposively chosen for this study because it is noted for attracting a lot of visitors due to the presence of popular tourist attractions such as the Elmina Castle, Cape Coast Castle and the Kakum National Park, as well as events like the Pan African Historical Theatre Festival and the *Oguaa Fetu Afahye* (Anaman & Dacosta, 2017). The total number of General Managers was 303 (Ghana Tourism Authority, 2018).

As it is usually unnecessary to study every unit directly in social science research (Keith, 2005), 169 subjects from the total population of 303 were sampled based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination formula. The sample size satisfies the analytical technique adopted for this study. According to Hair, Risher, Sarstedt and Ringle (2018), the minimum sample size should be equal to 10 times the largest number of indicators used to measure a single construct. In this study, Strategic HRM practice and competitive advantage had the largest number of indicators (14-items each). 10



multiplied by 14 gives 140 which is well below the sample size of 169. Thus, the chosen sample size is scientifically justified. As there were 5 types of hotels in the study area, Yamane's (1967) formula for proportional stratified sampling technique was used to select sub-group samples in proportion to the size of each category of hotel in the population. For instance, the 3-star hotels with a population of 4 managers had

a sample of two (i.e., $4/303 * 169$). The 2-star hotels had a sample of eight (i.e., $15/303 * 169$) while 1-star hotels had a sample of 15 (i.e., $27/303 * 169$). The budget hotels, with the highest number of managers, had a sample of 139 (i.e., $250/303 * 169$) while the Guest Houses had a sample of five (i.e., $7/303 * 169$) as presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Study Population and Sample

Hotels	No. of Hotels	No. of managers	Sample
3-Star	4	4	2
2-Star	15	15	8
1-Star	27	27	15
Budget	250	250	139
Guest House	7	7	5
Total	303	303	169

Source: Ghana Tourism Authority (Hotel Directory, December 2018)

Measurement of Constructs

Three variables were measured in this study: strategic HR practice, employee competencies and competitive advantage. The constructs were assessed on a seven-point Likert scale in which 1 represented "Least Agreement" and 7 represented "Total Agreement". The author adapted the scale developed by Soomro and Shamsi (2018) for measuring Strategic HRM practices. The original scale comprised of 19 items classified under five sub-headings, including Strategic Management Process (SMP), Organizational Strategy and Key Strategic Initiatives (OSKSI), Organizational Decision-Making Process (ODMP), Within HRM Hierarchy (WIHR) and Outside HRM Hierarchy (OHH). The revised version had 14 items. The survey scales used by Tesone and Ricci (2005) for measuring the competencies of hospitality managers in Central Florida were adapted for measuring employee competencies in this study. The original scale contained 31-items segregated into three competency dimensions: knowledge, skills, and attitudes. There are 7 sample items for knowledge, 11 for skills and 13 for attitudes. Items that scored very

high (above 0.85) were considered more favourable. The number of items, therefore, became 13 for this study: knowledge (4), skills (4), and attitudes (5). Finally, the measurement items developed by Thatte (2007) and used by Sachitra (2016) and Sukati, Hamid, Baharun, Huam and Fazila (2011) were adopted for measuring competitive advantage in this study. The scale comprised of 14 items, categorized into five sub-headings: price (2 items), quality (4 items), delivery dependability (2 items), product innovation (3 items) and time to market (3 items).

Data Collection and Analysis

The survey method was adopted in this study. The researcher used a structured survey questionnaire. The first section consisted of background questions on demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the respondents, including sex, work experience, and academic qualification. The second section consisted of 41 measurement items comprising of strategic HRM (14), employee competencies (13) and competitive advantage (14). The survey questionnaires were self-



administered to the managers between 1st to 27th April 2020. An application for a permit was sent to the managers by the researcher on 21st March 2020. On a date arranged by each manager, they were met by the researcher in their various offices. Instructions to the managers regarding survey completion were included in the questionnaire. All the questionnaires were retrieved by 27th April 2020. Of the total of 169 questionnaires distributed to the managers, 110 were

deemed valid, leading to a 65.09% response rate. The remaining 59 were incomplete.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A summary of the respondents' profile is presented in Table 3. The results show that more females, representing 75 participated in the study as compared to 35 males

Table 3: Demographic Information

Variables	Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	35	22.72
	Female	75	68.18
Length of service	1-4 years	62	56.36
	5-9 years	45	40.91
	10-15 years	3	02.73
Type of hotel	3-star	2	01.80
	2-star	7	06.36
	1-star	14	12.73
	Budget	82	74.55
Age	Guest House	5	04.56
	Up to 45	88	80.00
	46-60	21	19.10
Qualification	Above 60	1	00.90
	Bachelor	27	25.00
	HND	71	65.00
	Others	12	10.00

Source: Field Survey, (2020)

Majority of the respondents (65%) had obtained the Higher National Diploma (a vocationally related qualification) which is generally relevant for hospitality operations since most of the vocational and hospitality management programmes were previously mounted by Polytechnics. Twenty-five (25%) of the respondents had also obtained a Bachelor's degree while the remaining 10% had other certificates. A total of 88 respondents, representing 80% were 45 years old or below while 21 respondents were within the age range of 46 and 60. One respondent was above 60 years. More than half (56.68) of the respondents had worked in the hospitality industry for between 1 and 4

years while 41% had worked in the industry for between 5 to 9 years. The remaining 2.32% had worked for 10 to 15 years. The majority (74.55%) were employed in the Budget while the least respondents (1.80%) worked in the 3-Star hotels. The rest was 6.36% for the 2-Star, 12.73% for the 1-Star and 4.56% for the Guest House.

Measurement and Structural Model Assessment

Both measurement and structural models were evaluated for this study. In both cases, the Smart PLS Software was used.



Measurement model fit

The measurement model was assessed in order to determine the reliability and validity of the constructs in the study. The reliability of the constructs in this study was measured using outer loadings, Cronbach Alpha and Composite Reliability tests. The results are presented in Table 4. According to Henseler, Ringle and Sarstedt (2015), loadings between 0.4 and 0.7 are acceptable and high. Examining the outer loadings of the latent variables as captured in Table 4

indicate that the loadings for all the constructs are between 0.707 and 0.855. The indicators of the above-mentioned loadings were retained in the model because they all met the set thresholds. In addition, the Composite Reliability and Cronbach Alpha scores, as presented in Table 4 also indicate good reliability for the model. Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.7$ is acceptable and high while Composite reliability of 0.7 or higher is acceptable and high.

Table 4: Reliability Assessment

	Items	Loadings min-max	Cronbach Alpha	Composite Reliability
SHRMP	ODMP (1-4), OHH (1-6), OSKSI (1,3,4), SMP (1,2), WIHR (1-3)	0.707-0.855	0.963	0.966
EC	CCA (1-5,7), CCK7, CCSA (2-9)	0.719-0.885	0.963	0.966
CA	CADD (1-2), CAPI (1-3), CAQ (1-4)	0.796-0.885	0.951	0.958

Discriminant validity test was also done to verify the uniqueness and distinctiveness of each

construct relative to other constructs in the model. The results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Discriminant Validity (Heterotrait - Monotrait Ratio)

	CA	EC	SHRMP
CA			
EC	0.776		
SHRMP	0.700	0.923	

The discriminant validity values in Table 5 indicate that there is discriminant validity of the constructs used for the model. According to Henseler, Ringle and Sarstedt (2015), a latent construct has discriminant validity when its HTMT ratio is less than 1.00. As in Table 5, the discriminant validity values ranged from 0.700 to 0.923.

Assessment of the Structural Model

The assessment of the structural model follows the sequence suggested by Hair, Jeffrey, Sarstedt and Ringle (2019). The standard criteria

involved assessing first, the path-coefficients, the effect size (f^2), the statistical significance (P-Value), the relevance of the path coefficients (T-statistic) and the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). The coefficient of determination (R^2), the adjusted R^2 and the blindfolding-based cross-validated redundancy measure Q^2 were also measured. Path-coefficients were used to assess the contributions of the predictors to the variance in the endogenous latent factor. The capacity of this model was assessed with co-efficient of determination (R^2). The effect size (f^2) was used to quantify the contributions of the predictors to the

**Table 6: Path Coefficients - Direct Effects**

Structural Path	Path Coefficient (β)	Effect Size (f^2)	P-Value	T-stats	VIF
SHRMP → EC	0.892	3.905	0.000	34.196	1.000
EC → CA	0.699	0.231	0.005	2.853	4.905
SHRMP → CA	0.062		0.801	0.252	4.905
SHRMP → EC → CA	0.225		0.006	2.771	
			R^2	R^2	AVE
				Adjusted	
SHRMP					0.615
EC			0.796	0.793	0.643
CA			0.569	0.554	0.958

changes in the dependent variable (Ahrholdt, Gudergan & Ringle, 2019). The results of the structural model are presented in Table 6. The results indicate that the link between Strategic Human Resource Management Practices (SHRMP) and Employee Competencies (EC) is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$; $p = 0.000$). Also, the link between Employee Competence and Competitive Advantage (CA) is statistically significant ($p = 0.005$). However, the link between SHRMP and Competitive Advantage is not statistically significant ($p = 0.801$). The “T-Statistics” bootstrapping was also run. Using a two-tailed t-test with a confidence interval of 5%, the path coefficient is significant if the T-statistics is larger than 1.96. In Table 6, it can be seen that SHRMP→EC and EC→CA were statistically significant with T-statistics of 34.196 and 2.853

respectively. That notwithstanding, SHRMP→CA was not significant as it has a T-statistics of 0.252 (See Table 6). Again, the VIF values met the threshold as suggested by Craney and Surles (2007). According to the authors, Variable Inflation Factor (VIF) values of above 10 indicate multicollinearity among independent variables. In this study, the results in Table 6 show that the VIF values were all below 10. In summary, the proposed model has met all the requirements of a good model.

The findings are also presented in Figure 1. The results indicate that SHRMP substantially explains 79.6% of the variance in Employee Competencies. It can also be observed that SHRMP and EC moderately account for 55.4% of the variance in Competitive Advantage. The results in Table 6 and Figure 1 also show that the indirect effect (SHRMP→EC→CA) is statistically significant ($t = 2.771$, $p < 0.05$: T).

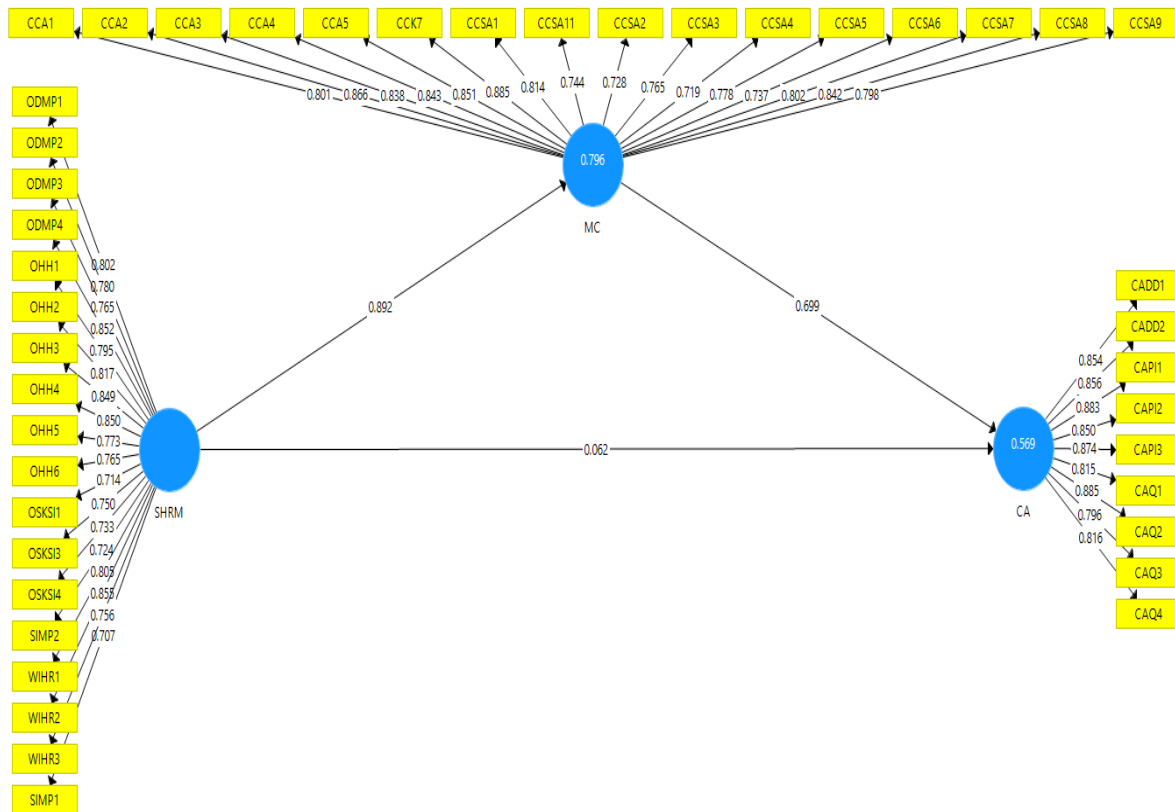


Figure 1: PLS-SEM Output

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study proposed four main relationships: (1) Strategic HR practices and Employee competencies; (2) core competencies and competitive advantage (3) the mediation of employee competencies on the relationship between strategic HRM practice and competitive advantage, and (4) Strategic HR practices and competitive advantage. Strategic HRM practice in this study was represented by four HRM practices, including recruitment and selection practices, training and development practices, performance appraisal practices and rewards management practices. The discussion of results follows the same sequence.

Strategic HR Practices and Employee Competencies

The first hypothesis sought to assess the relationship between strategic HRM practices and

employee competencies. The results, as presented in Table 6 and Figure 2 show that there is a significant positive effect of strategic HRM practices on employee competencies in the study area ($\beta = 0.892$, $t = 34.196$; $p = 0.000$). Thus, the hypothesis that; “There is no significant positive relationship between Strategic HR practice and employee competencies” is rejected. The results imply that hotel managers in the Central Region are likely to improve the competencies of their employees if they strategically carry out recruitment and selection practices, training and development practices, performance appraisal practices and rewards management practices as proposed by Khan, Wood, Shlomo and Rekha (2019). These findings support the assertion that recruitment and selection practices significantly improve employee competencies (Obisi, 2011; Nicolata, 2011). The results also support the conclusions drawn by Mwangi (2013) that a well-designed training and



development programme is capable of providing trainees with the opportunity to acquire and share relevant employee competencies. Again, the results reflect the findings of Muraga (2015) that competency-based compensation policies motivate employees to develop their own skills and competencies with little or no support from their organizations. Finally, the results are in line with the findings of Ahmad and Bujang (2013) and Katerina, Andrea and Gabriela (2013) that employee competencies can be improved if management is able to appraise the full contribution of their employees, provide feedback on employee performance and help them to get over previous mistakes. Thus, strategic HRM practices are inevitable in promoting and improving the competencies of employees in the hotel industry.

Employee Competencies and Competitive Advantage

The study also assessed the relationship between hotel employee competencies and firm competitiveness. The results (Table 6 and Figure 2) show that there is a significant positive relationship between employee competencies and competitive advantage ($\beta = 0.699$, $t = 2.853$; $p = 0.005$). By implication, the hypothesis; *“There is no significant positive relationship between employee competencies and competitive advantage”* is rejected. These findings support previous findings by Aziz (2019) that organizational capabilities account for about 93% of the total variance in competitive advantage of firms in the food processing industry in Malaysia. The results also reflect the findings of Cheng and Yeh (2007) that the sustainable competitive advantage enjoyed by Air-Cargo Forwarding is derived from their internal resources, capabilities, logistics and strategic alliance with external firms. Similarly, the results are in line with the findings of Agha, Alrubaiee and Jamhour (2011), Jerab, Mustafa and Atilla (2011) and Choge,

Namusonge, Nambuswa and Musau (2018) that there is a statistically significant relationship between employee competencies, competitive advantage, organizational performance and company success. By implication, this study has confirmed that firm competitiveness significantly relies on the stock of employee competencies in the organization. The findings of this study confirm previous studies that employee competencies play an important role in achieving competitive advantage, albeit a developing country context (Aziz, 2019; Choge, Namusonge, Nambuswa & Musau, 2018; Jerab, Mustafa & Atilla, 2011; Agha, Alrubaiee & Jamhour, 2011; Cheng & Yeh, 2007).

Strategic HR Practice, Employee Competencies and Competitive Advantage

The study further sought to examine whether employee competences mediate the relationship between Strategic HRM Practices and competitive advantage. The Nitzl, Roldan and Cepeda (2016) procedure for assessing mediating effects in PLS-SEM was adopted in this study. The procedure involves comparing the direction and significance of the indirect and direct path coefficients to establish full or partial (competitive or complementary) mediation effects (Hair, Sarstedt, Christian & Mathews, 2016). The results in Table 6 and Figure 2 show that the indirect effect (SHRMP→EC→CA) is statistically significant ($t = 2.771$, $p < 0.05$: T). However, the direct path coefficient between SHRMP and CA was insignificant (0.801). Therefore, the hypothesis that employee competencies do not mediate the relationship between Strategic HR practice and competitive advantage is supported (Nitzl, Roldan & Cepeda, 2016). These results are inconsistent with the logic that the major goal of strategic HRM is to gain a competitive advantage as held by Darwish and Singh (2013). The results are also not in line with the findings of Almarri and Gardiner



(2014) and Wang (2009) that only strategically relevant and inimitable resources and competencies can serve as sources of superior performance and drivers of competitive advantage. Similarly, the results do not support the findings of Hitt, Xu and Cames (2016) and Kehoe and Collins (2017) that strategic HR practice has the potential of leveraging the core competencies of employees, which in turn, has a positive significant effect on competitive advantage. Generally, the results show that in Ghana and most developing countries, firms in the hotel industry do not have inimitable resources. As mentioned earlier, the hotel industry is unattractive due to poor remunerations and odd hours of work. Thus, in their current state, achieving competitive advantage would be very difficult because their internal capabilities and competencies are cheap, common, imitable and substitutable. This is especially the case with budget hotels which form about 75% of the hotels in this study.

Strategic HR Practices and Competitive Advantage

The researcher also sought to investigate the relationship between strategic HR practice and competitive advantage. The results, as presented in Table 6 and Figure 2 show that there is no significant relationship between strategic HR practice and competitive advantage ($\beta = 0.062$, $t = 0.252$; $p = 0.801$). Thus, the hypothesis that; “*There is no significant positive relationship between Strategic HR practice and competitive advantage*” failed to reject. These findings contradict the findings of previous studies which maintained that strategic HR practice has a linear and positive influence on competitive advantage (Halbast & Atan, 2019; Emeagwal & Ogbonmwan, 2018; Alajmi & Meshref, 2016). Perhaps, these results may be due to the fact that the respondents are not deep into strategic HRM or they do not value it as a strategic tool in the industry. A further study may be conducted to investigate the

relationship between strategic HR practice and competitive advantage in other parts of Ghana to confirm the findings in this current study.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study is the first to comprehensively investigate the interdependencies among the three-link-elements: strategic HR practice, employee competencies, and competitive advantage in the context of the hospitality industry in a developing country like Ghana. Previous studies in the literature were conducted in an academic environment (Emeagwal & Ogbonmwan, 2018; Halbast & Atan, 2019), manufacturing companies (Alajmi & Meshref, 2016), the banking sector (Solani & Ramesh, 2012) or were conducted through a desktop review of the literature (Munteanu, 2015). The proposed model, therefore, flings more light on the connections among strategic HRM practices, employee competencies and competitive advantage in the context of a developing country. The major theoretical contribution of this study is the use of the resource-based approach to explain the relationship between strategic HR practice and competitive advantage. The results of this study confirm the resource-based view that only internal capabilities and competencies can generate a sustainable competitive advantage for a firm. This conclusion is based on the assessment of the relationship between hotel employee competencies and firm competitiveness which produced a significant result ($\beta = 0.699$, $t = 2.853$; $p = 0.005$).

In addition to the potential theoretical contributions, the study has significant practical implications. First, the results show that strategic HRM has a significant positive effect on employee competencies. These results require managers in the hospitality industry to continuously ensure that they employ relevant strategic HR practices such as evaluating employee training programmes, exposing employees to different kinds of training and



development activities, linking training and development programmes with the company's business strategy and organizing training programmes at least once in a year. The findings on reward systems and employee competencies also imply that HR managers in the industry should pay attention to the compensation system of employees in the industry. They can do this by linking incentive pay to performance, providing staff with a flexible compensation structure and promoting skills-based pay elements in employees' pay package.

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of strategic HR practice on competitive advantage in the hospitality industry in Ghana. The study confirmed previous findings that strategic HRM practice has a significant positive effect on employee competencies, which in turn has a positive influence on competitive advantage. Given the objectives of the study and the resultant findings, as discussed in the preceding sections, it is concluded in this study that internal capabilities and competencies are the major sources of sustainable competitive advantage in the hospitality industry in Ghana. As much as 69.9% of the variances in competitive advantage was explained by employee competencies in the study results (see Beta value in Table 6). Again, from the results of this study, it can be concluded that employee competencies do not mediate the relationship between Strategic HRM practices and competitive advantage. This conclusion stems from the fact Strategic HRM practices had an insignificant effect on competitive advantage (0.801, Table 6).

The results of this study have some limitations. The study was conducted in the Central Region of Ghana. Though the Region has popular tourist attractions like Elmina and Cape Coast Castles as well as the Kakum National Park, a nationwide study could have made some difference and improve

the replicability of the findings. Future studies should focus on expanding the scope of the study by targeting other regions in the country. Another study should look at the effects of hotel managers' competencies on Strategic HR practices in the hotel industry.

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