

All work and no play? What hotel employees prefer as team-building interventions

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This study investigated what hotel employees preferred as team-building activities among 11 types of interventions. Data were collected from 102 employees in a four-star hotel in the Netherlands. Results showed that socialising was the most preferred team-building intervention, whereas outdoor fun was the least preferred by employees. Through a series of Exploratory Factor Analyses, the newly developed scale was revised to include five main types of team-building interventions (i.e. socialising, interpersonal communication, work content, creative problem-solving, and outdoor fun). Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: team-building interventions, employee perceptions, hotel industry

Introduction

Team-building interventions are practised by many business organisations, including hospitality companies, in order to improve team morale, cohesion, and performance (Klein et al., 2009; Tews et al., 2013). Managers and practitioners conduct a wide array of team-building activities such as indoor or outdoor games, social events, athletic or sports activities, and business-related forums and discussions (Salas et al., 1999; Klein et al., 2009).

The literature on team-building interventions shows a hugely diverse range of activities being performed under the term “team building” (Miller, 2007; Klein et al., 2009). From gentle activities such as having drinks in a bar to extreme sports like go-karting in the mud, team building can take on countless forms. Although descriptive studies have substantially contributed to the understanding of what types of team-building interventions are generally practised by organisations, some issues still remain. One such issue is the lack of knowledge in terms of which types of team-building activities employees desire the most. Research shows that team building is being frequently performed (Salas et al., 1999), though it can embrace many forms of activity (Miller, 2007). Team building, when properly implemented, can have positive effects on the team (Klein et al., 2009). However, what is unclear is which types of team-building activities employees, instead of managers and team-building facilitators, actually prefer. This study aims at developing a clear typology of team-building interventions and identifying which types of team-building interventions are preferred by hospitality employees, as well as to what degree these preferences may differ across various demographic groups (i.e. age, gender, nationality).

By investigating the preferences for main categories of team-building interventions among staff at a four-star Dutch hotel, this study makes two unique contributions to the literature on team-building interventions and organisational

behaviour in hospitality. First, through reviewing the literature on team-building interventions, a team-building typology is developed and a scale to measure this typology is created for the use of future research. Second, instead of investigating what managers and team-building facilitators prefer to organise as team building, this study examines what employees desire and prefer. The value of this focus is self evident. If the management truly intends for team-building interventions to lead to positive effects such as increased morale and improved work performance, knowing what employees actually want as team building may very well be the crucial first step in achieving that goal.

Team building defined

As team-building interventions can encompass a wide range of activities, it is easy to forget or ignore what such interventions are defined to be. Team-building interventions, also sometimes referred to as team-development interventions, are high-interaction activities designed to enable work teams to achieve results better, meet team goals, and accomplish work tasks (Salas et al., 1999; Klein et al., 2009). Team building has four main components – goal setting, role analysis, -solving, and interpersonal relations (Klein et al., 2009; Robbins & Judge, 2014). Goal setting involves team members clarifying various work-related goals towards which they work and identifying ways to achieve them; role analysis involves team members discussing and analysing their own as well as others’ roles in the work team in order for discrepancies and disagreements in perceptions to be addressed and solved; problem-solving focuses on systematically identifying and discussing ways of solving task-related or process-related work issues; interpersonal relations involve interactive, group-based activities or interventions designed to build trust, encourage open communication, and increase team cohesion (Salas et al., 1999; Klein et al., 2009; Robbins & Judge, 2014).

Team building: a typology

In practice, it is rare that a single team-building event can incorporate all the four abovementioned components. Most team-building interventions would focus on one or two out of the four key components (Klein et al., 2009). In other words, it is common for a team-building intervention to only focus on interpersonal relations by letting team members share with each other personal information in order to increase trust and liking (e.g. Mitchell, 1986), or focus on two components such as combining problem-solving with goal-setting (e.g. Buller & Bell, 1986). It has also been reported that certain team-building interventions organised by businesses and organisations do not readily fall into any of the four main categories. For instance, when it comes to activities such as group-cooking, or a creativity workshop, or a chocolate-making workshop, it is rather unclear in which category these activities should belong. Consequently, there is the need to integrate the theoretical components of team building with the main categories of reported team-building interventions practised by organisations in order to create a team-building typology that includes a wide range of possible interventions.

In reviewing descriptive studies (e.g. Kriek, 2007) and commercially published books (e.g. Miller, 2007) on how to organise team building, I identify three main existing typologies which can be integrated to create a new one that encompasses most variants of team-building interventions. The scholarly literature presents team building as to include goal setting, role analysis, problem-solving, and interpersonal relations (Klein et al., 2009; Robbins & Judge, 2014). Descriptive empirical studies categorise team building into indoor fun, outdoor fun, socialising, assessments, and work issues (Kriek, 2007). Last but not least, commercially, team-building interventions may include creativity and problem-solving, trust cohesiveness and team work, motivation, and communication (Mackin, 2007; Miller, 2007).

Team building in hospitality

Team-building interventions are practised in the hospitality industry as in other, different industries and fields (Salas et al., 1999; Klein et al., 2009; Tews et al., 2013; Han et al., 2016). Tews et al. (2013) reported team-building interventions to include activities such as company-sponsored athletic teams and bowling nights, whereas Han et al. (2016) described socialising activities such as birthday celebrations and dining out together as examples of team-building activities. Studies show that these team-building activities could generate positive effects such as increased performance and decreased employee turnover (Tews et al., 2013; Han et al., 2016). However, little research exists with regard to what hospitality employees themselves desire in terms of performing specific team-building activities. Tews et al. (2013) found that high levels of manager support for fun activities in fact weakened the relationship between team-building-like activities and sales performance among hospitality staff. Employees may be more supportive of team building that is not directly associated with management practice. As such, it is important for scholars and researchers to understand what employees in this industry prefer and desire as team-building interventions.

Method

Participants and procedure

Data were collected from employees in a four-star hotel in the Netherlands. Participants from all major operational and administrative departments (Front Office, Housekeeping, Food and Beverage, Human Resources, Reservations) were each given a questionnaire to complete. During morning or evening briefing meetings, questionnaires were administered to employees in order to capture self-reports of personal preferences for various types of team-building activities. Participation in the study was voluntary and confidentiality was assured.

A total of 120 employees were approached to fill out the survey and 102 fully completed surveys were returned, giving a response rate of 85%. Of the employees, 65% were female. The average age was 22.5 years ($SD = 6.4$). In terms of nationality, 62% were Dutch, 25% were Chinese, 6% were German, and the rest were other nationalities. Demographic and basic organisational factors related to the respondents are shown in Table 1.

Data collection instrument

A scale was developed to be included in the survey to measure different types of team-building interventions. I utilised the team-building typologies presented in the literature review section to create this scale. Eleven types of team-building activities were incorporated: socialising, indoor fun, outdoor fun, addressing work issues, assessments, role analysis, goal setting, problem-solving, creativity, trust and cohesion, and communication. Each dimension was measured with three items. Employees' preferences were captured using a 7-point Likert scale.

Data analytic approach

In terms of identifying respondents' preferences for the different types of team-building interventions, descriptive statistical measures (mean and standard deviation) were used on the 11 types of activities. Comparative analyses (t -tests

Table 1: Sample profile

	Number of respondents	%
Age		
17–19	36	35
20–22	59	58
23–24	7	7
Gender		
Female	64	63
Male	38	37
Nationality		
Dutch	63	62
Chinese	26	25
German	6	6
Other	7	7
Team size		
1–5	42	41
6–11	47	46
12–16	12	12
17–23	1	1
Position		
Operational	64	63
Supervisory	38	37
Total	102	100

and ANOVAs) were also performed to reveal any potential differences in terms of employees' preferences across different demographic factors. Furthermore, in order to check the quality of the used scale and to further improve it, I performed additional analyses. Reliability was assessed with Cronbach's alpha and scale validity was evaluated via a series of exploratory factor analyses (EFAs). Principal component extraction with Promax rotations were performed on the scale. Factors were detected based on variances accounted for being greater than one (Eigenvalue > 1).

Results

The preferences for the 11 types of team-building activities are shown in Table 2. The team-building activity preference that was rated the highest was socialising ($M = 5.49$, $SD = 0.93$), whereas the lowest was assessments such as personality assessments and/or skill assessments ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 1.26$). Outdoor fun activities showed the highest standard deviation ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 1.51$), indicating employees' opinions and preferences for this type of activity varied the most greatly.

Further comparative analysis showed no gender differences in terms of employees' preferences for the 11 types of team-building activities. However, there were significant differences among employees of various nationalities. Analyses of Variance (ANOVA) showed that work issues ($F = 12.28$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.01$), assessment ($F = 10.18$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.01$), role analysis ($F = 14.43$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.01$), goal setting ($F = 5.61$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.05$), problem-solving ($F = 9.42$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.01$), creativity ($F = 8.71$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.01$), and trust and cohesion ($F = 5.70$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.05$) all exhibited statistically significant differences (see Table 3). In all seven types of team-building interventions, Chinese employees showed the highest levels of preferences (see Table 3).

I performed exploratory factor analyses (EFAs) on the 33 items representing the 11 types of team-building interventions in order to uncover underlying factor structures. I performed the EFA using principal component extraction with Promax rotations. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test of sampling adequacy yielded a result of 0.81 and the Bartlett test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 1\,560.38$, $df = 300$, $p < 0.001$), indicating the sample was adequate and appropriate for the EFA. After removing cross-loadings and factors with only one item, the EFA revealed a five-factor structure (see Table 4). I reran all descriptive and comparative analyses on this revised scale.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics and reliability indices on original scale

	Mean	SD	Cronbach's alpha
Socialising	5.49	0.93	0.67
Goal setting	4.68	1.28	0.89
Communication	4.65	1.16	0.82
Trust & cohesiveness	4.59	1.26	0.82
Indoor fun	4.40	1.15	0.55
Work issues	4.37	1.48	0.87
Role analysis	4.27	1.37	0.87
Problem-solving	4.26	1.12	0.76
Creativity	4.14	1.23	0.82
Outdoor fun	4.13	1.51	0.83
Assessment	3.97	1.26	0.79

Note: $N = 102$. Each factor was measured with three items

Table 3: Preferences for team-building interventions by nationality

	Nationality	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>
Socialising	Dutch	5.38	1.02	1.40
	German	5.34	0.84	
	Chinese	5.73	0.71	
Outdoor fun	Dutch	4.06	1.43	1.70
	German	3.50	1.24	
	Chinese	4.55	1.57	
Indoor fun	Dutch	4.26	1.08	1.42
	German	4.17	1.50	
	Chinese	4.69	1.18	
Work issues	Dutch	3.85	1.42	12.28**
	German	4.61	0.71	
	Chinese	5.37	1.16	
Assessment	Dutch	3.61	1.15	10.18**
	German	3.33	0.87	
	Chinese	4.74	1.10	
Role analysis	Dutch	3.76	1.27	14.43**
	German	4.00	1.10	
	Chinese	5.23	0.92	
Goal setting	Dutch	4.35	1.38	5.61*
	German	4.56	0.45	
	Chinese	5.30	0.78	
Problem-solving	Dutch	3.99	1.09	9.42**
	German	3.56	0.89	
	Chinese	4.92	0.75	
Creativity	Dutch	3.82	1.17	8.71**
	German	3.73	0.65	
	Chinese	4.89	1.07	
Trust & cohesiveness	Dutch	4.62	1.15	5.70*
	German	3.00	1.44	
	Chinese	4.85	1.33	
Communication	Dutch	4.47	1.21	1.46
	German	4.67	0.84	
	Chinese	4.93	1.12	

Note: N of Dutch = 63, N of German = 6, N of Chinese = 26; other nationalities excluded from this analysis

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Descriptive analysis (see Table 5) showed that socialising was again the highest rated team-building activity ($M = 5.49$, $SD = 0.93$), whereas outdoor fun was the least preferred category of team-building interventions ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 1.51$). Comparative analysis showed no gender differences in terms of preferences for the five types of team-building activities. However, there were significant differences among employees of various nationalities. Analyses of Variance (ANOVA) revealed that interpersonal communication ($F = 3.12$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.05$), work content-related improvement ($F = 14.29$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.01$), and creative problem-solving ($F = 9.68$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.01$) exhibited statistically significant differences (see Table 6).

Discussion

This study developed a typology for team-building interventions and a scale to measure the common types of team-building activities, investigated hotel employees' preferences for the various types of team-building interventions, and examined the extent to which these preferences varied across different nationalities. Based on published articles and literature, 11 types of team-building

Table 4: Exploratory factor analysis

Items	Factor 1 ($\alpha = 0.92$)	Factor 2 ($\alpha = 0.84$)	Factor 3 ($\alpha = 0.86$)	Factor 4 ($\alpha = 0.83$)	Factor 5 ($\alpha = 0.67$)
Workissues2	0.88				
Workissues3	0.85				
Roleanalysis3	0.85				
Assessment2	0.80				
Roleanalysis2	0.79				
Goalsetting1	0.78				
Goalsetting3	0.71				
Roleanalysis1	0.69				
Problemsolving1	0.55				
Communication1		0.87			
Trustcohesiveness2		0.77			
Trustcohesiveness1		0.74			
Trustcohesiveness3		0.73			
Communication3		0.46			
Creativity2			0.85		
Creativity1			0.80		
Problemsolving3			0.71		
Problemsolving2			0.71		
Creativity3			0.70		
Outdoorfun2				0.92	
Outdoorfun3				0.90	
Outdoorfun1				0.71	
Socializing2					0.80
Socializing1					0.76
Socializing3					0.71

Note: $KMO = 0.81$; $\chi^2 = 1\,560.38$; $df = 300$; $p < 0.001$

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis; Rotation Method: Promax with Kaiser Normalisation; Rotation converged in 6 iterations; Factor loadings below 0.40 compressed

Table 5: Descriptive statistics and reliability indices on revised scale

	Mean	SD	Cronbach's alpha
Socialising	5.49	0.93	0.67
Interpersonal communication	4.63	1.11	0.84
Work content-related improvements	4.34	1.17	0.92
Creative problem-solving	4.16	1.14	0.86
Outdoor fun	4.13	1.51	0.83

Note: $N = 102$

Table 6: Comparative analysis on revised scale

	Nationality	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>
Socialising activities	Dutch	5.38	1.02	1.40
	German	5.34	0.84	
	Chinese	5.73	0.71	
Interpersonal communication	Dutch	4.57	1.06	3.12*
	German	3.67	1.11	
	Chinese	4.90	1.19	
Work content	Dutch	3.91	1.13	14.29**
	German	4.17	0.56	
	Chinese	5.18	0.76	
Creative problem-solving	Dutch	3.88	1.07	9.68**
	German	3.57	0.72	
	Chinese	4.86	0.91	
Outdoor fun	Dutch	4.06	1.43	1.70
	German	3.50	1.24	
	Chinese	4.55	1.57	

Note: N of Dutch = 63, N of German = 6, N of Chinese = 26; other nationalities excluded from this analysis

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

interventions were identified, which were further categorised into five main kinds – socialising, interpersonal communication, work content-related improvements, creative problem-solving, and outdoor fun. The most preferred type of team-building intervention was socialising. Nationality differences were found in interpersonal communication, work content-related improvement, and creative problem-solving in that Chinese staff members preferred high levels of these activities compared to their European counterparts.

Theoretical implications

The findings of this study make several contributions to research literature on team-building interventions and organisational behaviour in hospitality. First, this study has developed a typology of and a scale for the existing team-building interventions, encompassing 11 different types of team-building activities – socialising, indoor fun, outdoor fun, addressing work issues, assessments, role analysis, goal setting, problem-solving, creativity, trust and cohesion, and communication. This typology is based not only on academic literature (e.g. Klein et al., 2009; Robbins & Judge, 2014), but also on empirical literature (e.g. Tews et al., 2013; Han et al., 2016) and commercial publications (e.g. Mackin, 2007; Miller, 2007). The development of this typology and the corresponding scale enables further empirical research on how organisations conduct team-building interventions.

Second, the results of this study show that socialising appeared to be the most preferred team-building intervention by employees. This finding is in stark contrast to academic literature which generally defines and portrays team building to be work-related (e.g. Klein et al., 2009; Robbins &

Judge, 2014), and commercial literature which focuses on creativity, problem-solving, and communication exercises (e.g. Mackin, 2007; Miller, 2007). The surveyed hotel employees do not seem to share those views. Employees appear to associate team building primarily with socialising or social activities, as shown by the results of this study. These social types of activities are also shown to be the most preferred team-building interventions according to the perceptions of the survey employees.

Third, the outcomes of the EFAs show that goal setting, analysis of work issues, as well as role analysis were grouped into one category according to the empirical data provided by the hotel staff. This is also a deviation from the literature which categorises goal setting, role analysis, and problem-solving into distinct classifications (Salas et al., 1999; Klein et al., 2009; Robbins & Judge, 2014). Employees do not view them as such. They recognise them as one and the same kind of team-building intervention in terms of the way they perceive them and the way they prefer them. Klein et al. (2009) reported that many team-building interventions combined multiple components (e.g. Friedlander, 1967; Morrison & Sturges, 1980; Hughes et al., 1983; Buller & Bell, 1986; Eden, 1986; Bushe & Coetzer, 1995). In view of the findings of this study that employees do tend to cluster all work-related team-building interventions as one general group, it is not surprising that, in practice, work-related types of team-building interventions are commonly and frequently combined.

Finally, the finding of this study that employees' preferences for the different types of team-building interventions varied across nationalities suggests that cross-cultural research on team building is an interesting and potentially fruitful avenue for future research. The ANOVA outcomes show that Chinese employees exhibited higher preference levels for creative problem-solving, work content-related improvement, and interpersonal communication interventions compared to their German and Dutch counterparts. This finding is in line with prior research showing employees from more collectivistic cultures are more open towards team- or group-based events, activities, and interventions (Robbins & Judge, 2014).

Practical implications

The findings of this study have a number of practical implications for employees and managers in the hospitality industry as well as other business fields. First, managers and team-building organisers ought to recognise and take into consideration what employees themselves want or prefer as team-building interventions. Much attention has been paid to ensure that team building produces measurable effects such as increased employee motivation and enhanced work performance (Salas et al., 1999; Klein et al., 2009). To better ensure that team building is effective in eliciting such outcomes, one should organise and conduct team building in a manner that is consistent with the genuine desires and wishes of the staff. When the objectives and the intentions of the team-building organisers match the preferences and wishes of the employees, there would be a greater chance for the team-building interventions to be successful and to produce the outcomes desired by the organisation.

Second, our finding that outdoor fun exhibited the lowest mean and the greatest standard deviation ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 1.51$, see Table 2 and Table 5) indicates to managers

and team-building organisers that this specific type of team-building activity is in itself a rather dubious form of team-building intervention. Overall, it is the least preferred type of team-building activity, as shown by the lowest mean; and it elicited much variation in terms of perceptions and preferences among employees. Thus, managers and team-building organisers should be cautious implementing this rather controversial type of team-building activity.

Finally, socialising appears to be the most preferred type of team-building intervention according to the perceptions and opinions of employees themselves. In both the original scale containing 11 types of team-building activities and the EFA-revised scale containing five types of team-building interventions, this form of team building received the highest liking and exhibited the lowest standard deviation ($M = 5.49$, $SD = 0.93$, see Table 2 and Table 5). An obvious practical implication is that managers and team-building organisers may preferentially consider this form of team building for potential team events.

Potential limitations and future research

The findings of this study need to be considered in view of two potential limitations. First, the sample is small. Although the KMO test and the Cronbach's alpha values indicate satisfactory sampling adequacy and measurement reliability, the number of participants is still limited and the findings may not generalise widely to hotels of different sizes, types, or in other geographical locations. Future research may seek to replicate the findings of this study. In addition, I would recommend that any hotel or organisation that conducts regular team-building interventions should carefully research the preferences and wishes of their staff in terms of the type of team-building interventions to be implemented. Such an investigation, which is simply to administer, can provide clear information to the management and team-building organisers regarding which type of team-building interventions are the most fruitful to conduct.

Second, with the research design of this study being descriptive and quantitative, the findings do not reveal why employees preferred socialising (mostly indoor, as the phrasing of the items indicate) and disliked outdoor activities as team-building interventions. It is plausible that socialising sounded attractive to the respondents because it would suggest something informal and voluntary; as such, the real reason for employees to prefer socialising is not the act of socialising with colleagues, but rather, because it is not a mandatory and formal task. Therefore, there is the need to better understand why the hotel employees surveyed in this study exhibited the preferences as shown by the findings, which represents a fruitful and interesting future research avenue.

Conclusions

Relying on empirical (e.g. Kriek, 2007), commercial (e.g. Miller, 2007), and meta-analytic (e.g. Klein et al., 2009) literatures, I developed a team-building typology containing 11 categories (i.e. socialising, indoor fun, outdoor fun, addressing work issues, assessments, role analysis, goal setting, problem-solving, creativity, trust and cohesion, and communication). Data collected from 102 hotel employees showed that

socialising was the most preferred, and outdoor activities were the least preferred team-building interventions. Furthermore, through exploratory factor analyses, the scale measuring the 11 types of team-building interventions was refined to include five types of team-building activities – socialising, interpersonal communication, work content, creative problem-solving, and outdoor fun. The same pattern of preferences were shown by the newly refined scale. Finally, some differences were detected in terms of preferences for team-building interventions among employees of different nationalities. Employees from a more collectivistic culture showed stronger preferences for team-building activities compared to employees from more individualistic cultures.

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