

## Paradise for Everyone? Exploring HR Solutions for Local and Expatriate Workers in Isolated Environment Through a Case Study of the Maldives.

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### Abstract

*This paper investigates employee well-being and Human Resources (HR) strategies in luxury Maldivian resorts to determine how the current HR practices meet the needs of expatriate and local workers in this remote area. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine local and expatriate employees and an HR manager revealing challenges such as loneliness and adaptation to new cultural norms. While employees cope through technology and HR-provided psychological support, restrictions on facilities and a lack of activities for women remain concerns. HR initiatives, including training programs and salary benefits aim to promote work-life balance and satisfaction. The study highlights the complex interaction between isolation, organizational policies, and individual experiences in the luxury resort industry, offering insights for HR professionals and policymakers aiming to improve employee well-being in isolated workplaces.*

### Key Words:

Luxury resort, Employee wellbeing, Isolated workplace, Human Resources Practices

### Introduction

While the Maldives presents itself as a paradisaical holiday destination with its bungalows atop sapphire seas and immaculate beaches, previous research exposes an uglier side for the workers who maintain this remote haven in the form of employment law breaches and poor employee well-being. The literature has yet to explore how HR departments perceive and address the needs of their employees in this context. This study aims to fill that gap by comparing the lived experiences of employees in luxury Maldivian resorts with current HR practices. Thematically analyzed interview data provided valuable insights into HR strategies including psychological support to alleviate loneliness and training and salary benefits to act as external motivational factors to compensate to some extent for the remoteness of the working environment. An unexpected finding was that HR strategies need to recognize the role played by gender in employee well-being in remote areas like the Maldives. Further similar research into under-studied isolated areas where luxury tourism is booming could include locations such as jungles, mountains and savannahs to determine to what extent the findings from this study are transferable to other remote contexts.

### Literature review

#### Employee perspective

*Employee well-being in luxury establishments*

The workplace environment is a crucial factor for job seekers (Hassan, 2022). Current studies highlight the impact of psychological well-being on economic outcomes, addressing challenges such as excessive workloads, long hours, and limited career opportunities faced by frontline employees (Lee & Moreo, 2007; McNamara et al., 2011). Migrant workers encounter additional issues including low pay, discrimination, and substandard living conditions (McDowell et al., 2007; Najeeb & Barrett, 2019). Seasonality exacerbates those difficulties, making matters such as leave entitlements during peak seasons more complicated (Del Bono & Weber, 2008). Nevertheless, a good level of training in luxury hotels assists employees achieve their career goals as they are eager to stay within the company (Karatepe, 2013). Still, there are gaps in understanding employee well-being, especially in remote environments like islands where workers are significantly impacted by stress and isolation (Douglas et al., 2018). In popular tourist destinations like the Maldives, employment regulations prioritize local hiring, yet expatriate workers remain integral to organizational success, and face issues ranging from inadequate living conditions to limited medical services (Najeeb & Barrett, 2019; Shakeela et al., 2011). This underscores the need for enhanced Human Resources Management (HRM) practices and a more comprehensive understanding of employee well-being within luxury establishments, particularly in areas characterized by remoteness and seasonal fluctuations.

### ***Employee well-being on islands***

Several studies (see Baum, 2012; Mullings et al., 2021; Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018) highlight the unique challenges faced by employees in remote areas, such as expatriate workers adjusting to a new lifestyle without urban conveniences (Mullings et al., 2021). This adaptation process can lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation, ultimately affecting job performance (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018). Furthermore, working in isolated areas can be detrimental to physical and mental health with increased stress among foreign workers (Mullings et al., 2021). Support from family is considered as a crucial mitigating factor for stress and mental well-being in isolated workplaces (Golden et al., 2018). While difficulties such as burn-out and lack of work-life balance are widespread, it has been found that some employees find comfort in the slower pace of life and lower cost of living associated with remote environments (Wieland et al., 2021).

### ***Employee well-being in the Maldives***

A closer look at employee well-being in the Maldives reveals the complex environment shaped by both regional laws and business norms. Workers in the hospitality industry face various challenges, such as inadequate living conditions and imposition of restricted leave policies during peak season, due its reliance on expatriate labor (Najeeb & Barrett, 2019; Shakeela et al., 2011). Employment regulations mandating a minimum percentage of local hires aim to foster sustainable development, yet migrant workers remain essential to organizational performance (Najeeb, 2011; Najeeb & Barrett, 2019). The practice of assigning a whole island to one resort contributes to the feeling of isolation of employees by restricting their access to basic services and intensifying their sense of solitude (Shakeela et al., 2011). The industry's seasonal nature and limitations of the resort model present further barriers to worker well-being, such as a reduction of meaningful leave benefits and challenges in obtaining legal protections (Najeeb & Barrett, 2019). Despite these obstacles, many expatriate employees are driven by the excitement of travel and professional prospects, indicating a complex environment where financial incentives and concerns for one's own well-being overlap (Baum, 2012). Nonetheless, the body of research highlights the necessity of paying more attention to workers' well-being in the Maldives, as the country's present procedures fall short of meeting the needs of a diverse migratory labor force.

### **HR practices to support workers in isolated workplaces**

HR and employees tend to have diverse needs and interests (Najeeb and Barrett, 2019), however, the role of HR is to develop a positive workplace environment and mitigate negative outcomes in the favor of workers (Wong et al., 2019). When HR anticipates employees' needs, both local and expatriate workers exhibit a lower stress level as the resources and organizational demands are balanced (Torvisco et al., 2022). Indeed, the HR department is expected to serve as a bridge in the gap between the management and employees by guiding, supporting and helping workers (Najeeb, 2016). As the role of HR is to propose solutions to business problems (Najeeb, 2016), they should be aware of the workers' needs and issues related to employees' well-being at the workplace, which provides credence to the

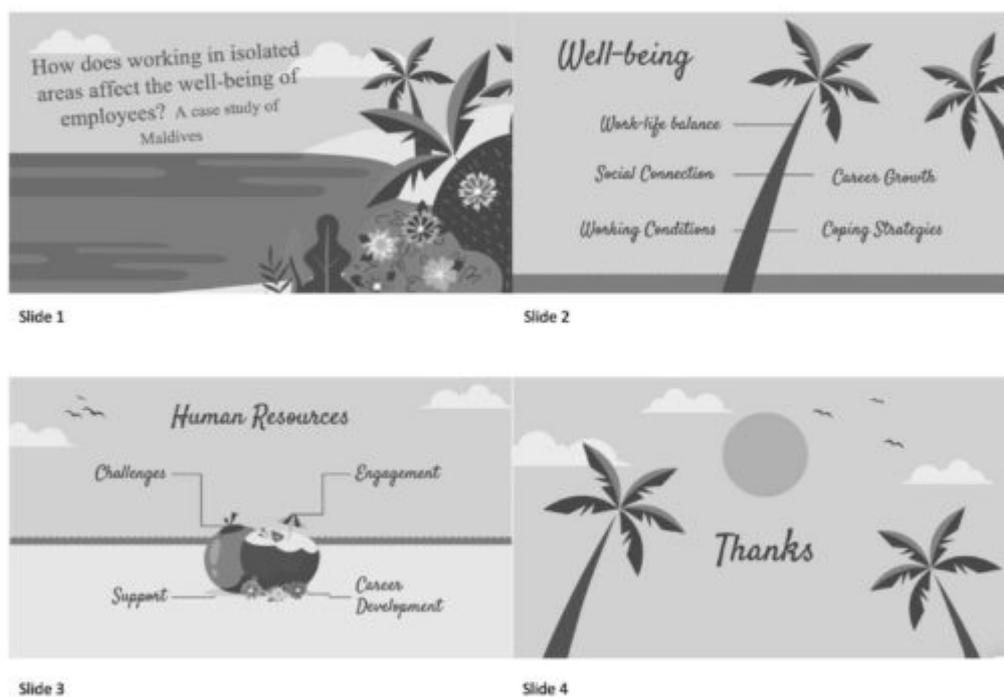
research question this work set out to answer: To what extent do the current HRM practices meet the needs of both expatriate and local workers? A case study of the Maldives.

### Methodology

In order to answer the research question, a qualitative, interpretive research approach was used in the form of a revelatory case study which provided insight into a previously unexplored phenomenon (Yin, 2009), involving the Maldives as the selected region of research (Veal, 2018).

The themes covered in the 45-minute to two-hour long interviews were derived from the literature: work-life balance, social connection, working conditions, career growth and coping strategies and were phrased as open-ended questions, such as, “How has working in an isolated area affected your ability to maintain a work-life balance?” in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the individuals’ perspectives (Friborg & Rosenvinge, 2013). An informal tone was maintained throughout the interview and text supplemented with was shown on the screen to guide the interviewee, see figure 1 below.

**Figure 1. Images shown during the interview**



The participants, four Maldivians, five expatriate workers and one HR manager, were selected purposefully to provide insights into the specific situation rather than randomly for reasons of representativity and generalization as would be required in quantitative work (Schoch, 2019). To guarantee anonymity, pseudonyms were used for participants, see Table 1 below.

**Table 1. Interviewees' demographics**

Pseudonyms	Department	Position	Gender	Age	Nationality	Previous resort working experience
E1	Food & Beverage	Hostess	Female	31	Ukrainian	3
E2	Spa	Spa manager	Female	42	Filipino	7
E3	Sales	Manager	Female	38	Russian	2

E4	Front Office	Duty manager	Female	27	Swiss / French / American	5
E5	Front Office	GEM (Guest Experience Maker)	Male	26	Kazakh	2
L1	Front Office	Duty manager	Male	28	Maldivian	4
L2	Front Office	Bell supervisor	Male	26	Maldivian	3
L3	Housekeeping	Executive housekeeper	Male	36	Maldivian	6
L4	Front Office	GEM (Guest Experience Maker)	Male	28	Maldivian	7
HR1	Human Resources	Learning and development manager	Male	42	French	1

To assure internal validity, a pilot interview was conducted before the data collection process which led to adding more questions to the interview schedule. The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As is typical in exploratory case study research, this study has restricted external validity and there is no aim to generalize the findings (Clark et al., 2021; de Saint-Georges, 2018) rather, it gives voice to otherwise unheard locals and expatriates working in a particular remote luxury environment. This is in contrast to most social research which involves participants who are usually white, educated, and from industrialized, rich and democratic countries (Henrich et al., 2010).

#### *Limitations of the approach taken*

The constraints of this study include the online nature of conducting interviews and the resulting lack of face-to-face interactions, particularly for those respondents who did not know the interviewer well. It is hoped that the findings of this study will have transferability rather than generalizability and will act as “working hypotheses” for future work in remote areas as Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Eisenhart (2009) describe. Data from the HR perspective is limited to that provided by the sole HR employee participant but this is not uncommon in case study research. The insider positioning of the interviewer, with her professional experience of working in the Maldives, provided a layer of knowledge (Teusner, 2016) and ease of access (Mercer, 2007) possibly not available to outsiders, however, this same positioning could potentially lead to interview bias (Mercer, 2007) which was at the forefront of her mind during data collection. Finally, the interviewer was attentive to and guarded against the potential for this insider positioning to lead to subjectivity in the data analysis (Chowdhury, 2014).

## **Findings and discussion**

### **Geographical isolation**

One of the main themes expressed by the employees was the impact of geographical isolation on their well-being and work-life balance although perceptions differed between the locals and expatriates. Local participants acknowledged the remoteness of the Maldives, but this did not seem troublesome as L1 noted: “You are in the middle of our Earth ... surrounded by the sea,” while L2 mentioned, “[we are] living far from the civilization” and always staying on the island. None of the local respondents felt the isolation was problematic, indeed, L3 stated categorically, “I never feel loneliness,” and for many it was advancements in communication technology which alleviated this feeling. Interviewees were in touch with their families through “phone calls” and “social media” as “Internet is provided on the island for the team members as well without any additional charge” (L1). Expatriate participants on the other hand viewed isolation more negatively, describing the challenge of being away from home and loved ones, having limited access to ordinary amenities, and experiencing difficulty adapting to a different way of

life. These findings are congruent with Golden et al. (2018), Ozcelilik and Barsade (2018) and Wieland et al. (2021), who mentioned that the main challenge associated with isolation is adaptation to a new lifestyle. Shared accommodation was a challenge faced by line staff with participants mentioning that they have to share rooms for four or six people and cultural differences complicating living standards. Expatriate workers noted it was difficult to rest in accommodation as not all roommates respect the personal space of others. The management-level staff stated they have better living conditions and more private space than their line staff colleagues supporting the finding of Najeeb (2011). Expatriate employees expressed more concerns about facilities than their local counterparts, suggesting a need for further improvements corresponding to the findings of Douglas et al. (2018). Finally, female participant E3 noted that there were few activities women could join in with indicating that well-being might be considered to be a gendered issue.

To mitigate the negative impacts of isolation, HR1 prepares “a lot of activities” such as “going to the beach” and “increasing...trips to Male” and offers a “higher salary” to compensate for being away from the employees’ loved ones. All respondents acknowledged the importance of HR efforts in arranging activities that contribute to employee well-being, with L1 noting, “Human Resources in the Maldives, they understand, since it is an isolated area and the mental health being of team members is very important.” L3 mentioned that “cultural trips” were organized by HR for expatriate workers to enhance their understanding of local life. Attending to the matter of gender, HR1 admitted they consider integrating “a female only gym time” which seems insufficient provision for the “40% of female employees” (E3). This finding is considered to be a novelty as previous studies did not explore gender as a specific phenomenon, mainly focusing on religion (Domroes, 2001) and gender roles (Bayhan Karapinar et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2023). HR1 recognized the impact of isolation on employee well-being and adaptation, particularly evident during employees’ initial “first 2–4 weeks in the Maldives.” The absence of infrastructure, especially in pre-opening resorts, exacerbates the challenge of acclimatizing to an unfamiliar environment. HR1 highlighted the psychological strain associated with isolation, workload and “separation from family...[and] ... social friends,” emphasizing the need for early assessment of employees’ mental health, which is in line with Golden et al.’s (2018) findings. To address this issue, HR1 explains that resorts maintain on-site medical staff to identify “first signs of depression...or anxiety,” with provisions for referral to psychologists in Male, underscoring HR’s proactive approach to employee welfare. Additionally, an “open door policy” operates in the Maldivian resort where HR1 works, facilitating employees’ access to HR staff. This demonstrates that HR and hotels are adapting to changes in order to reduce negative effects of isolation on employees’ well-being (Mullings et al., 2021) and improve business performance (Ponting, 2020).

### ***Career opportunities and professional growth***

Throughout the interviews, participants emphasized career growth opportunities within the industry, with E1 noting the availability of “cross-training” and “lectures” for staff interested in development. Despite this, both locals and expatriates noted a lack of training from employers, with local staff (L2) highlighting a scarcity of industry professionals and expatriate workers (E1, E3, and E4) mentioning insufficient education for Maldivian employees. Local employees highlighted the superior career prospects in international resorts compared to local ones, although E3 observed a tendency for locals to go “into stagnation mode” when reaching desired positions due to entrenched attitudes. Contradicting this, local employee L1 noted “a lot of experience [gained] with regards to the hospitality and guest relations in Maldives,” contrasting it with the broader business perspective offered by city hotels. Regarding salary benefits, E3 noted that “the Maldives is now very attractive in terms of salaries”, providing an opportunity “to save a lot” as reported by L1. Overall, some expatriates initially struggled with isolation but eventually found opportunities for career growth. Najeeb (2011) noted that climbing the career ladder is also a possibility for local workers but this was not consistently observed by the expatriates interviewed.

The themes mentioned by the HR manager were aligned with those of the employees but, unsurprisingly, framed more positively. He mentioned two specific training practices: “cross exposure” practice, which allows individuals to “do a 40-hour training” within a desired department and switch roles as well as “internal career transitioning positions.” In an attempt to address the problem of high turnover in the Maldives, HR1 stated they can help with outside transfers, while trying to retain

employees who they try to attract through “salary and benefits” with “an extra \$500”. Previous studies (see Najeeb, 2011; Najeeb & Barrett, 2019) pointed out a significant gap in salaries for expatriates and local workers, prioritizing a need for a change in HRM practices. Professional growth opportunities are also linked to salary considerations (Najeeb, 2011), with HR leveraging strategic incentives like salary extras to attract and retain talent.

Despite employees' adaptability to isolation, separation from family poses a significant challenge particularly for expatriate resort workers. To address this, HR1 notes that psychologist support is available, underscoring a commitment to employee well-being but in a reactive rather than proactive manner. Additionally, HR1 emphasizes equitable treatment for all nationalities and offers monetary benefits and career development programs.

Returning to the research question, this work has demonstrated that the current HRM practices explored in the Maldives anticipate the needs of both expatriate and local employees to a certain extent by providing communication tools, training, financial benefits and reactive psychological help to compensate for isolation, while lacking the required improvements in infrastructure and diversified recreational activities for especially for female workers.

### **Implications for the industry**

This study into the experiences of local and expatriate staff in a remote luxury hospitality setting demonstrates that in such an environment, salaries are unsurprisingly a great attraction and compensate for the living conditions for both locals and expatriates. It has shown too that HR must attend particularly to providing female expatriate workers whose needs have previously not been specifically attended to with appropriate living conditions and activities to safeguard their mental well-being. Clearly defined plans for career growth seem to mitigate feelings of loneliness such remote locations can instill in expatriate workers while the ambition to “climb the ladder” is not experienced in the same way by local workers who express a desire to receive more training from individuals they see as “professionals”. A pro-active stance by HR personnel is recommended to intervene early if signs of difficulty in acclimatizing become apparent and the researchers suggest developing a sense of openness regarding mental health difficulties if these might be seen as troublesome and even shameful depending on the cultures of the individuals concerned.

While the study has provided some insights into how the well-being of employees is affected by working in isolated areas, there are still more questions to be answered. The study has focused only on the area of Maldives. Therefore, conducting an in-depth analysis of the employees working in the luxury segment in different geographical locations could provide valuable insights into more unique challenges faced by staff and the HR response in different types of remote areas including jungles, mountains, savannahs and bushland where high-end luxury establishments are flourishing. Moreover, it is recommended to conduct quantitative research about the effectiveness of HR practices addressing worker well-being in isolated areas. These findings could benefit businesses by integrating initiatives and incentives which would potentially reduce stress and anxiety during the acclimatization period of resort staff.

### **Conclusion**

The study compared employee and HR perspectives on well-being and working conditions in a case study of a luxury resort in the Maldives. Isolation emerged as a significant factor for expatriate workers, leading to negative emotions like depression and anxiety mitigated to some extent by technological solutions to communication. An ability to adapt to the new environment was seen as crucial. HR initiatives focused on promoting work-life balance through activities and services like training programs and reactive psychological support. Nevertheless, restrictions on facility use were noted, along with a lack of activities for women, a novel finding. The study reaffirmed the influence of factors like salary benefits and career opportunities on employee satisfaction and turnover rates, emphasizing HR's role in providing competitive benefits. Overall, the research offers valuable insights into the interplay of isolation, organizational policies, and individual experiences in a remote luxury resort setting.

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