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Managing Talent Loss in the Procurement Function: Insights from the Hospitality Industry

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Abstract: This paper sought to extend the existing talent management literature through an exploratory investigation of talent loss resulting from the possible departure of talented employees from the procurement function of hotels. Through a multiple case study of five organizations in the hospitality industry, we found that the departure of talented procurement managers disrupts supply chain operations and leads to a loss of valuable explicit, tacit, and relational knowledge. Procurement managers were found to hold critical skills and knowledge that are essential for the case organizations. Hence, more proactive management strategies were adopted. Managers seeking to minimize the negative impact of talent loss in the procurement function would be well-advised to treat this procurement function as a strategic one and to adopt proactive and documented management strategies. Firms should be aware of the type of important knowledge and of the importance of aligning their strategies with such knowledge. To retain relational knowledge in case of talent loss, strategies should be designed to reduce the firm's reliance on personal contacts and emotion-based trust in supplier relationships. We concluded the paper with implications for future research and managerial practice for managing talent loss, with an emphasis on sustainability in the hospitality industry.

Keywords: talent management; talent loss; knowledge-based view; knowledge management; hospitality; procurement function

1. Introduction

With the current digitization and evolution of business dynamics, the role of the procurement function within firms is becoming increasingly critical to the success and stability of their operations [1]. In successful organizations, procurement acts as a driver of cost efficiency, supplier integration, and supply chain management which contributes to sustaining the firm's competitive advantage [2]. The findings of a survey by Deloitte highlighted that the procurement functions within large corporations are continuously striving to reduce their costs to contribute to strategic targets. By focusing on generating efficiencies and developing stronger supplier relations, 61% of surveyed teams reported better year-on-year savings in 2018 compared to 2017 [3].

Procurement plays a crucial role in the hospitality industry, which contributes over \$2.3 trillion to the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per annum [4]. A knowledge-intensive procurement function acts as a facilitator of supply chain activities [5]. In multinational hotel chains and luxury hotels, the procurement role is even more pronounced, as it facilitates strategic growth and helps hotels to differentiate their final products and services from competitors [6]. In recent years, various luxury hospitality providers, including Marriott and Hyatt, have successfully developed strong procurement functions through working with a specialized hospitality procurement agency, Avendra, to source the best quality items at the most competitive prices [7,8]. The outreach of Avendra's operations, coupled with the valuable expertise and knowledge of their in-house procurement teams, allowed these hotels to streamline their global supply chains and provide the best-in-class experience to their customers [8].

Marriott reported lower year-on-year general and administrative costs due, partially, to the synergies achieved by restructuring current operations into a hybrid procurement setup, allowing for greater transparency and control over the management of contracts and supplier relationships [8,9].

As competition in the hospitality industry intensifies and shifts towards knowledge-based work, hotels need to manage talent flows, as the effective management of knowledge assets is often dependent on a small number of talented employees [10]. Such employees have been referred to as essential and indispensable employees by Starke et al. [11] and as star knowledge workers by Groysberg et al. [12]. Talent has long been widely recognized as one of the most valuable assets held by an organization, as well as a basis for value creation and sustainable competitive advantage [10,13]. In this paper, we adopted a broad view of talent as advanced by Schuler [14]. He characterized talented employees as those who “are special in terms of their competencies; are hard to find and replace; can add a great deal of value to the company; have options to leave at any time; and can help shape the future strategic directions of the company” [14].

Stahl et al. [15] broadly defined talent management as being an organization’s ability to attract, select, develop, and retain key talented employees. Compared to the human resource management literature, there has been much less attention paid to talent management in the hospitality literature, which has commonly defined it as strategies used to recruit, train, and retain gifted, educated, or experienced professionals [16]. Where there has been attention to these issues in hospitality studies, the context has been mainly related to professional competencies [17], psychological aspects such as work-related depression [18], or employee turnover and retention strategies [19].

Surprisingly, there is a dearth of research that has addressed the topic of talent loss in hotels. The term talent loss here goes beyond retention to address the case of the inevitable departure of talented hotel employees. We contend that an understanding of talent loss is of particular importance to hoteliers since it leads to a loss of relational and tacit knowledge, which are difficult to recreate but are nonetheless critical for achieving and sustaining competitive advantage [20–22]. Although hotels must attract and retain talent, little is known about the specific knowledge management processes that hoteliers should put in place to manage talent loss [19]. In this paper, we adopt a knowledge-based view of talent loss, thereby asserting that the generation of a sustainable competitive advantage depends on the effective exploitation of knowledge assets.

In this paper, we focused on talent loss in the procurement function of a hotel. Pivotal positions that contribute the most to competitive advantage [23] include supply management positions because of the narrow and specialized role they play in providing critical knowledge to the organization [24]. To illustrate the contributions of these key positions to a firm’s knowledge base, a McKinsey global survey of procurement executives found that high performers were five times more likely than low performers to employ procurement managers with analytical expertise, deep general management knowledge, and knowledge of a particular category of procurement. Hence, understanding and managing talent and the ensuing knowledge flows in critical positions has become an essential ingredient for superior performance [25]. We argue that not only is the topic of talent loss in the procurement function of hotels underexplored, but also that no prior empirical study has investigated this topic in the geographical context of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which is located in the Arabian Gulf.

Against this backdrop, the objective of this research was to understand how knowledge assets can be leveraged by hotels to support effective talent management initiatives that can help them manage the effects of talent loss in their procurement function. More specifically, this paper sought to (1) characterize the intricacies of the procurement function in hotels in terms of its procurement talent, (2) identify the types of knowledge that could be lost following the departure of talented procurement managers in hotels as well as the subsequent impact of the loss of such talent, and (3) describe the nature of the management strategies adopted by hotels to attenuate the negative impact of the inevitable departure of talented procurement managers. This paper, hence, sought to contribute to the extant hospitality literature on talent management [26,27] while emphasizing the vital role of sustainability in the hospitality industry. In fact, many hotels are increasingly reversing

threats such as the negative impacts of water, energy, and unrecyclable product overuse by investing in sustainability [4]. The adoption of practices involving building a strong relationship with local communities, waste minimization, and the usage of recyclable and reusable products draw attention to the growing central role of sustainability in the hospitality industry [4,6].

This study was grounded in the context of the hospitality industry in the Middle East, where the hotel pipeline experienced a growth of 14.8% in 2016 and where several human resource challenges remain [28]. The latter include the attraction and retention of high potential employees, and the effects of localization programs that substitute expatriates with local workforce, thus increasing the potential of talent loss and disturbing knowledge flows. Five case hotels were cross-analyzed. Our unit of analysis was a hotel outlet located in the UAE. We adopted a qualitative research method as it gave a deeper understanding of phenomena under investigation [29].

The remainder of this paper is organized in five sections as follows. We begin with a review of the relevant literature. Thereafter, we present a detailed discussion of our research methodology and a description of the five case studies of hotels in the UAE. Following the within-case descriptions, we describe our cross-case analysis and relate our discussion to the relevant literature, which is brought in whenever necessary. Subsequently, we conclude by highlighting our main contributions to hospitality research and practice, in addition to presenting some insights for hotel managers while emphasizing the importance of talent and talent loss in sustainability initiatives. Finally, we have outlined the main limitations of our study, along with the implications for future research.

2. Literature Background

In the following literature background, we provide an overview of talent management, knowledge in the procurement function, and knowledge loss. We linked these concepts to the hospitality management literature to integrate these streams of research in the context of this study.

2.1. Talent Management

The literature on talent management suggested the use of a differentiated versus an undifferentiated approach to identify talent. The former contends that talented employees are high-potential human resources that could contribute to performance [30], whereas the latter suggests that all employees have potential and that talent management should aim to maximize this potential [31]. Talent has often been linked to the extent to which different positions in an organization sustain competitive advantage, wherein the higher the contribution of a position to value creation and performance, the more it needs to be filled with a high-potential employee [13]. Essential positions that contribute the most to competitive advantage play a critical role in providing important knowledge to the organization [24]. Hence, managing talented employees requires an exclusive approach aimed at attracting and retaining talent, as well as designing and implementing effective management strategies to counter the negative effects of talent loss on organizational performance [26].

Organizational commitment and job satisfaction have often been highlighted as major drivers of talent retention in the literature [32]. A lack of training, promotion opportunities and educational opportunities increases dissatisfaction among talented employees and the likelihood of talent loss [33]. Consequently, organizations need to design jobs that motivate and offer opportunities for advancement as well as learning opportunities to increase retention of talented employees [20,21]. A supportive organizational culture was also found to reduce employee intention to leave, as well as work–life balance programs [21].

The highly labor-intensive hospitality industry is characterized by high turnover rates [34] and high employee mobility, as hospitality employees can easily switch to other jobs or other industries [35]. The lack of job security [36], the shortage of opportunities for promotion [37], and the perceived low status of hospitality work [35] reduce the overall attractiveness of the industry as a setting that is suitable for talent. Attracting and retaining talent in the hospitality industry becomes even more challenging as employees suffer from poor working conditions and emotional exhaustion [38]. Cost-reduction policies

and strategies have exacerbated the challenges of talent management [39]. Consequently, relatively less resources and attention have been allocated to identify key positions, attract talent to fill these positions, and invest in talent management and retention initiatives in the hospitality industry [19].

The hospitality management literature has proposed generic retention strategies for departing employees and has not focused much on managing employees in critical positions that require a specific skill set [17]. Additionally, such research has studied the hospitality industry as a whole, rather than the specificities of talent management in particular key positions in specific settings. Knowledge and skills have a high value in the hospitality industry because they allow employees to achieve higher performance [40]. This is why talent flows have to be managed so that knowledge remains in organizational routines even after the departure of a talented employee [41]. A failure to retain talent or use effective strategies to cope with the implications of talent departure results in a loss of important knowledge that is difficult to replace [21].

Hence, talent loss is likely to result in a decrease in performance and innovation capabilities [42]; it could equally hinder operations and lead to higher costs, at least in the short term [43]. Firms implement management strategies by taking actions aimed at reducing the adverse consequences of talent loss [44]. These strategies target the retention of valuable explicit, tacit, and relational knowledge in case of talent loss. They can be reactive when they are not systematic and are executed after the sudden departure of a talented employee or after a notice of leave is received. Alternatively, they can be proactive when they are systematic and not contingent upon a notice of leave from a departing talented employee.

2.2. Knowledge in the Procurement Function

Though the value of knowledge in supply chain management [45] is not new, there has been a significant increase in the importance and interest in the effects of managing knowledge in supply chain activities on firm performance [46,47]. The procurement function in the supply chain, which pertains to sourcing goods and services [48], is fast becoming more important to organizations due to the strategic role it plays in supporting a firm's competitive advantage [49]. Its responsibilities have expanded from a sole focus of buying goods to forming strategic alliances, outsourcing, collaborating, and integrating with suppliers [50].

The interdisciplinary field of knowledge management and its role in the effective management of supply chains is a growing area of research [51]. Cantor et al. [52] showed the positive role of knowledge management in supply chain activities, as managing knowledge has become an essential ingredient for superior supply chain performance [25,53]. Meanwhile, Ryoo and Kim found that knowledge exchange in a dyadic buyer–seller relationship has a significant positive influence on supply chain performance and trust [54]. Further, Giunipero et al. [49] found that team building skills, strategic planning skills, communication skills such as negotiation and persuasion, and technical skills are critical for procurement managers. Other studies found similar results in terms of the importance of negotiation and team building skills [55].

According to Huo et al. [56] a procurement manager requires strategic, conceptual, and teamwork skills, whereas other employees in the procurement department need operational and technical skills [57]. Giunipero et al. [49] emphasized the importance of the procurement manager's strategic skills in building and managing supplier relationships, supplier evaluation and selection, strategic cost reduction, and establishing and improving supplier integration and collaboration. When the procurement function has a more strategic role in organizations, the procurement manager skills become vital in sustaining competitive advantage [49].

The procurement function requires a diverse set of knowledge and skills, since it relies heavily on personal interaction, coordination, and collaboration within and across organizational boundaries [58]. Additionally, the procurement function is the connection point and interface between an organization and its supplier network [59]. Procurement managers can be described as boundary spanners, since they hold knowledge that allows them to solve problems, create opportunities, communicate

information, and mediate relationships between the firm and its suppliers. Zhang et al. [60] showed that procurement managers build trust with suppliers on an individual basis and that they achieve better results when they possess professional knowledge and the ability to negotiate and compromise.

2.3. Knowledge Loss

Talent loss is an important driver of knowledge loss [61]. The latter is an important event for organizations [42]. Perrott [61] defined it as “the intentional or unintentional evaporation of knowledge that accumulates from learning and from individual and collective actions”. It is triggered by various factors such as employee turnover [62], organizational forgetting [63], alliances [64], acquisitions [65], and outsourcing [66].

Knowledge loss due to employee turnover has been studied extensively from a strategic human resource management perspective. For instance, Inkpen and Tsang [67] addressed the issue of workforce instability and its negative impact on internal knowledge transfer, whereas Droege and Hoobler [68] argued that tacit knowledge is in greater danger of being lost, than explicit knowledge, in case of talent loss as the former is captured in individual memories, while the latter is codified and stored in information systems and databases.

According to Massingham, previous research on the impacts of knowledge loss may be summarized into three areas [69]. First, its impact on remaining employees, who suffer from anxiety, stress, job insecurity, or anger, or work disruption, which leads to decreased morale and productivity. Second, its impact in terms of subject matter expertise and relationship management, since employees who leave take with them their tacit and relational knowledge, thus depleting the firm’s knowledge base and hampering knowledge routines. Third, its impacts on organizational capabilities such as innovation and problem-solving, leading to a loss of performance.

Summary of the literature:

- Procurement managers build trust with suppliers on an individual basis and should possess professional knowledge and the ability to negotiate and compromise.
- Procurement managers need strategic skills to build and manage supplier relationships.
- Knowledge management is essential in supply chain management.
- Tacit knowledge is more exposed than explicit knowledge in case of talent loss.
- Firms should design and implement effective management strategies to counter the negative effects of talent loss. These strategies target the retention of valuable explicit, tacit, and relational knowledge. They can be reactive or proactive.

3. Methodology

Since understanding and managing talent loss in hotels is relatively understudied, a case study methodological approach was chosen in an attempt to shed light on this phenomenon. Case studies are particularly useful where there is a desire to understand some particular problem or situation in greater depth [70]. In this exploratory investigation, five case studies were cross-analyzed. Eisenhardt suggested that studies of between 4 and 10 cases are optimal [71].

Case study research can contribute in a holistic way to all phases of theory development [71]. Our reliance on the case study methodology was used to collect and analyze rich qualitative data as a basis for theoretical insights, while highlighting areas for theory development. By making explicit the process involved in the collection and analysis of data, the objective was to progress our current understanding of managing talent loss in hotels.

3.1. Research Setting and Case Selection

This paper focused on hotels located in the UAE, which is roughly the size of Portugal. The UAE is situated along the south-eastern tip of the Arabian Peninsula. The country has 700 km of coastline, 600 km along the Arabian Gulf and 100 km bordering the Gulf of Oman. The UAE is a constitutional

federation of seven emirates: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al-Qaiwain, Ras al-Khaimah, and Fujairah. According to the Dubai Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing (DTCM), tourism contributes around 20% of Dubai's direct GDP [72].

Although the Middle East's share of the global travel market is only about 5%, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) expects the region to grow at an average annual rate of 7%, the highest in the world [72]. Indeed, hotels in the Middle East have outperformed both Asia and Europe in the last two years [73]. According to the latest EY Middle East Hotel Benchmark Survey Report, Dubai's occupancy reached 86.9% with an ADR (average daily rate) of \$293, which led to an overall RevPAR (revenue per available room) of \$255 in the first quarter of 2018.

The case studies conducted aimed to investigate talent loss in the procurement function of UAE hotels. Therefore, the unit of analysis was the organization. We adopted a theoretical sampling approach to increase external validity [74] by selecting diverse hotels representing a variety of theoretically defined constructs taken from the literature on talent management, knowledge management, procurement and supply chain management, and hospitality management. Our theoretical sampling approach also sought extreme cases along dimensions such as structure, behavior, and performance in order to more easily explore and observe contrasting patterns in the data [75]. Indeed, we envisaged that our diverse cases would generate contrasting results, leading to theoretical replications [74,76]. To this end, and to cast a wider net, we contacted twenty hotels, among which were independent hotels as well as hotels belonging to different renowned chains. Nonetheless, we limited our sample to four- and five-star hotels that employed a manager in charge of the procurement function.

For various reasons mainly related to confidentiality and time availability of key respondents, only nine hotels agreed to participate in our study. However, we were unable to gather the needed information from three of these nine hotels due to unanticipated difficulties in accessing all the key informants. Ultimately, the determining factor for which case firms were included was their willingness to engage with the study. Thus, the remaining five hotels constituted our final sample, as they offered a distinctive and excellent setting in which to observe the phenomenon under investigation. They also provided us with considerable and easy access to rich and valuable data and information. Consequently, our research relied on five in-depth case studies. We promoted external validity through the research design itself, since our five case organizations were identified as a mix of globally and locally owned hotels. To guarantee respondent anonymity, we used a generic name for each case company (Hotels A–E). A summary of the characteristics of the five case hotels is provided in Table 1.

3.2. Data Collection

An interview guide was prepared by the researchers based on the research objectives and main issues to be explored (see Appendix A). The research instrument focused on the following themes: talent loss, the procurement function, knowledge lost following the departure of talented employees in the procurement function, impact on the hotel, and the strategies adopted to mitigate talent loss.

We promoted data reliability by using a case study protocol [76]. Interviews were conducted with each informant in English and by both co-authors, which allowed one researcher to conduct the interview and another to take notes and record the interview. To control the quality of the information, all informants were promised anonymity and confidentiality of their responses as well as the identity of the hotels. Key informants in this study included procurement managers, human resource managers, and general managers.

After developing a case protocol for face-to-face interviews, to ensure consistency, the questionnaire was pretested and validated by two experts in the fields of tourism and hospitality management, two experts in talent management, and two experts in procurement and supply chain management. Data collection occurred over a period of ten months across the end of 2016 and the beginning of 2017. Discussions with each interviewee lasted between two and three hours. The respondents were given a brief introduction beforehand about our study and its purpose, along with the interview questions.

Following each interview, the researchers recorded and cross-checked facts as well as their individual impressions and insights. Besides saving the email communications, the interviews and telephone conversations with the respondents were transcribed. To enhance construct validity, we asked interviewees to review the respective case study transcript during the data collection phase. Triangulation using available documents, limited observations, and company websites also helped us to validate our data for better integration of the theories. In addition to multiple visits to the premises of each hotel, we searched online for possible articles on each hotel. Moreover, a few supplier- and inventory-related documents were shown to us during the interviews. Still, searching for such secondary sources did not result in insightful or contradictory information about the case hotels. Subsequently, the interview results were compiled to produce a detailed case study report for each organization. A similarly organized case database was created for each hotel. At the end of this process, we ended up with a total of 90 transcript pages for the five case hotels.

Table 1. Summary of Sample Hotel Characteristics.

Name of Hotels	Type (Local/International)	Opening Year in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)	Number of Full-Time Employees	4 or 5 Stars	Number of Rooms	Key Informants
Hotel A	International	1993	394	5	375	Procurement Manager Director of HR General Manager
Hotel B	Local	1978	210	4	253	Procurement Manager Director of HR General Manager
Hotel C	International	2003	208	5	250	Procurement Manager Director of HR General Manager
Hotel D	Local	2008	63	4	100	Procurement Manager HR Manager General Manager
Hotel E	International	1993	305	5	317	Procurement Manager HR Manager General Manager

3.3. Data Analysis

Through our set of open-ended interview questions, we were able to construct a detailed picture of how each hotel managed talent loss in its procurement function. The analysis followed the sequence of steps described by Miles and Huberman [29], which consists of data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification. For each interview, data reduction followed the guidelines of Sharma and Vredenburg, using literature-based codes grounded in existing literature [77]. We followed a systematic way to conduct the data analysis and avoid redundancies through the following steps. Each researcher started by carefully reading and manually summarizing the individual transcripts, one topic at a time. For each topic, we thoroughly examined the transcripts and developed meticulous notes. We condensed these notes to produce brief summaries of each interview. We were also able to fill the gaps in the transcripts where the initial recording was unclear by following-up with the respondents and seeking further explanations, corrections, or clarifications as needed.

Coding was considered complete when we reached a consensus among the researchers on each construct. To this end, thorough discussions took place among the researchers to enhance internal validity throughout the data analysis phase. In effect, each case was individually coded, and then compared to the coding results to ensure consistency. We organized the interview data based on responses to specific questions and used the same categories of information for all case hotels. This

enabled us to conduct a rigorous cross-case analysis. More specifically, we based our initial coding on tagging excerpts of text that corresponded to predetermined categories and interview questions. This enabled us to broadly code all interviews in terms of, for instance, departure of talented employees in the procurement function, knowledge lost following such turnover, impact on the hotel, and strategies adopted to deal with such loss. This approach relied on our understanding of what was meaningful in the data given the predetermined conceptual categories and how they related to the interview questions. The codes were arranged in the form of five within-case displays. Our cross-case analysis started with a careful look at the similarities and differences among the cases. We subsequently related and contrasted our results to the theoretical insights and empirical findings contained in the literature on talent management and knowledge loss. The next section presents the findings of this study.

4. Results: Within Case Analyses

4.1. Hotel A

This five-star hotel has 375 rooms and 394 full-time employees. It opened in the UAE in 1993. The procurement department had four employees, including the procurement manager, two procurement assistants, and a clerk. The procurement manager was responsible for all critical decisions, as operations were centralized. The overall potential of talent loss was deemed high, though respondents stated that operations would only slow down in the short term. The General Manager explained that “the possible departure of the procurement manager would be an important event . . . impacting all the functions, specifically in the procurement department.” The procurement manager had valuable knowledge to deal with technical, managerial, relational, and strategic issues. Problem-solving and strategic negotiation skills were critical for the hotel. Relational knowledge was compromised as it was based on collaboration and trust. The HR and General Managers also insisted that, in the case of the departure of the procurement manager, her knowledge would be difficult to transfer or rebuild. According to the HR manager, “the possibility of losing important network connections is high in case of departure of the procurement manager . . . time would be needed to regain the trust of the suppliers.” Though tacit knowledge was believed to be at stake, knowledge about suppliers, products, and services was not regarded as vulnerable, since it was captured in the hotel’s databases.

Proactive management strategies were adopted and implemented to cope with talent loss. Job rotation, task delegation, weekly team meetings, briefings, and training programs were used to transfer tacit knowledge to employees. Strategic alliances with critical suppliers were also considered valuable in the retention of supplier-related relational knowledge. Although procurement processes were not well-documented, the hotel used a procurement system to record all transactions and supplier information. The General Manager explained that, “the use of this system minimizes the effects of key employee departure as it keeps track of supplier information.” This hotel resorted primarily to internal recruitment to identify replacements in case of talent loss, thereby shortening the knowledge transfer and transition process.

4.2. Hotel B

This local four-star hotel has 253 rooms. It was established in 1978. Among its 210 full-time employees, the procurement department had 5 full-time employees, including a procurement manager, a secretary, and three employees who handled cost controls, orders, and inventory. The occurrence of talent loss was estimated to be low. According to the HR manager, “employee turnover is not very damaging for the procurement function . . . without a procurement manager, the hotel’s operations would continue to be performed as usual.” Valuable knowledge here was described as experiential knowledge, relationships with suppliers, and interpersonal skills. Knowledge about suppliers existed in written format as well as basic databases that included supplier information. Nevertheless, respondents considered that performance would be affected temporarily in case of talent loss, and emphasized the loss of experience related to the supply market and networking skills.

Assessment was conducted after the departure of the procurement manager based on the time needed to find a replacement and to train her. This hotel was using a reactive approach to deal with talent loss. Training was conducted after a notice of leave of two to three months was given and after a replacement was identified. One month was typically needed to train the newcomer. This was considered enough time to transfer all tacit knowledge. Nonetheless, long-term relationships with a small network of suppliers managed talent loss.

4.3. Hotel C

This hotel was established in the UAE in 2003. The 250 room facility belongs to an international chain of five-star hotels. Among the 208 full-time employees, 6 employees were working in the procurement department. There was a procurement manager, an assistant manager, a procurement executive, a procurement officer, and two storekeepers. Talent loss was high, as there was no documented procurement policy. The HR manager admitted that “no employee can replace the procurement manager and the knowledge transferred is always limited.” He added that, “it will take the new manager a while to understand how suppliers work and to manage supplier networks.” The types of knowledge that could potentially be lost included strategic, managerial, and relational knowledge. Talent loss could also lead to the selection of unreliable suppliers and could impair the effectiveness of internal and external networks. It could also diminish the department’s capacity to initiate beneficial contracts with new suppliers and to manage existing supplier relationships. As long-term relationships with suppliers had a significant personal aspect, especially with strategic alcohol beverage suppliers, the departure of the procurement manager could lead to the loss of loyal suppliers.

Databases were used to codify and store important supplier information. A proactive approach was used to manage talent loss, whereby training programs, task delegation, and employee shadowing were used to pass on valuable tacit knowledge to the newcomer. Respondents also noted that they enjoyed a level of supply chain stability that facilitated the process of building long-term relationships with strategic suppliers.

4.4. Hotel D

This local four-star hotel was established in 2008. It has 100 rooms and 63 full-time employees. The procurement manager possessed valuable knowledge that included supplier information as well as knowledge related to operations and procedures. Although employees participated in the procurement process, final decisions were made by the procurement manager who stated that, “it is a one-man job ... and I make the final decisions ... I decide about which supplier to select and which one to terminate because I have the knowledge and I know which supplier has the best prices, best quality, and best delivery times.” Long-term relationships with suppliers would be impacted in case of talent loss, since relationships were based primarily on direct personal contacts and trust. The procurement manager also insisted that, “I make sure I build a long-term relationship with the suppliers I trust.” Having a small network of suppliers helped to manage the effects of talent loss.

In case of the procurement manager’s departure, interpersonal, negotiation, and technical skills would be lost. Relationship development would be negatively impacted and would be difficult to rebuild. Supplier information and purchase history were captured in databases. Since a two-month leave notice was required, respondents asserted that the hotel had enough time to look for a substitute and to prepare her for the transition. Therefore, the possibility of facing talent loss was deemed low and reactive strategies were used in dealing with talent loss. Management techniques included regular employee training and face-to-face meetings. The procurement manager considered her employees able to handle the manager’s duties in case of emergency.

4.5. Hotel E

This five-star hotel was established in the UAE in 1993. The hotel had 305 employees and was part of an international hotel chain. The procurement department had four employees, including one manager, one assistant, and two procurement officers. According to the respondents, the departure of the procurement manager would result in the loss of valuable managerial, leadership, and negotiation skills, and relational knowledge. The probability of talent loss was deemed high, but did not require formal and documented management strategies. The procurement manager's capacity to identify new suppliers and negotiate new deals was recognized as critical. Because of the complexity of the service purchase process, the departure of the procurement manager could negatively impact the department's operations. Moreover, respondents considered that long-term relationships with strategic suppliers would be affected in case of talent loss. Overall, operations would be briefly disrupted in case of talent loss, until a replacement was found.

A proactive approach was adopted to manage talent loss. However, respondents insisted that knowledge about suppliers, sourcing processes, and operations could easily be written down or stored in databases. While employees were regularly trained to improve their skills, knowledge sharing initiatives were used to transfer critical tacit knowledge. The HR manager noted that, "with a two-month leave notice, the departing procurement manager can handover all processes to the new recruit."

5. Cross-Case Analysis

By treating the procurement function as a transactional or a strategic function, a hotel assigns a high or low strategic value to the procurement manager's position [78]. Hence, hotels decide the extent to which the procurement function is critical to operations and is core to business strategies. More transactional procurement managers are valued for the technical and operational skills that enable them to understand the procurement process and manage a range of day-to-day operations and transactions with suppliers. In contrast, procurement managers are more involved in creating and leveraging long-term partnerships and networks with critical suppliers and in designing and implementing business strategies when they are assigned a more strategic role.

At Hotel A, the procurement manager was praised for her problem-solving and strategic skills and her capacity to negotiate and purchase strategic products and services that were described as rare and non-substitutable. Hotel A considered the procurement manager a strategic and valuable resource. Respondents at Hotel D emphasized the importance of the operational and technical skills of the procurement manager, which justified the use of reactive management strategies to cope with talent loss. Losing the important tacit and relational knowledge held by the procurement manager if she were to quit was deemed high, and motivated the adoption of a more proactive management approach at these two hotels.

More strategic procurement managers integrate and align the hotel's supply chain processes and systems with key partners [79]. This enables the hotel to streamline and improve the process of knowledge exchange and the flow of activities in the procurement function [80]. They use their skills and knowledge to optimize their supplier networks by identifying and selecting key suppliers, evaluating supplier performance, and rationalizing their supply base [81,82]. They also emphasize supplier evaluation, selection, and auditing as essential activities in the initiation and termination of supplier relationships, especially when dealing with a large pool of suppliers [83]. Conversely, more transactional procurement managers dedicate fewer resources to these key supply chain activities and less attention to the optimization of their supply base [81].

For instance, Hotel E, which belongs to an international hotel chain, attracted strategic and trustworthy suppliers that offered customized solutions to meet the hotel's needs. The role played by the procurement manager at the contract formation stage and her capacity to conduct strategic negotiations with critical suppliers was of major importance for Hotel E. In contrast, Hotels B and D, which had small, local supplier networks, valued the procurement manager's relationship management

skills over her capacity to initiate new contracts or end existing ones, as the latter did not require any particular attention from the hotel. At Hotel C, the procurement manager was a key knowledge resource in negotiating contracts for critical products or large orders, as well as an important resource for managing long-term relationships with the few trustworthy alcohol beverage providers in the region. Because of a limited number of suppliers in the market, Hotel C's respondents estimated that managing the relationships with alcohol suppliers was a critical task and would compromise the hotel's operations in case of the sudden departure of the procurement manager. The procurement manager's capacity to manage long-term relationships with other strategic suppliers was also regarded as critical for the continuity and performance of the hotel's supply chain operations.

Procurement managers play a critical and active role in knowledge transfer, centralize important tacit and relational knowledge resources that are essential for the firm's operations, and occupy a central network position in the supply chain [84]. As a link between the suppliers and the hotel, they hold valuable tacit, explicit, and relational knowledge [85]. While explicit knowledge could easily be codified and stored into knowledge repositories, tacit knowledge is difficult to capture and to pass to employees. It is stored in individual memories and has to be leveraged and diffused at the group and organizational levels and embedded in organizational routines to ensure it remains within the hotel in case of talent loss. Additionally, relational knowledge is a result of the long-term relationships established with strategic suppliers, which are built to a large degree on emotional and personal connections, unlike short-term relationships which have a more transactional base. Supplier relationship management capabilities would likely be negatively affected in case of talent loss, as trust would be significantly hampered. Both knowledge-based trust, which relates to the supplier's willingness to share relevant supply chain knowledge with the procurement manager, and emotion-based trust, which relates to the person-to-person emotional connection, would be quite difficult and slow to replace in case of talent loss [86].

It is challenging for a hotel to capture the tacit knowledge of a departing strategic procurement manager, especially in a short amount of time, given the more intangible nature of such knowledge. Different management strategies, such as training or mentorship programs or face-to-face interactions, could help to retain the critical tacit knowledge held by the procurement manager. More transactional procurement managers rely on codification tools and databases to store the more technical and operational knowledge used to manage day-to-day supply chain operations.

Three case hotels (A, C, and E) used strategic alliances with key suppliers to minimize the negative impact of losing important knowledge. Hotel C respondents noted that being a branch of an international renowned hotel chain increased the stability of the supply chain and facilitated the development of long-term relationships with strategic and trustworthy suppliers. Conversely, Hotel B did not focus on succession planning or training, as face-to-face interactions with supply chain employees were believed to be sufficient to transfer the procurement manager's tacit knowledge. However, with no formal processes in place to prevent or manage talent loss, precious tacit knowledge was compromised in case of the sudden departure of the procurement manager. Hotel B therefore underestimated the implications of talent loss. Apart from the use of basic databases to store supplier information, management strategies allowing knowledge codification were also nonexistent at this hotel, and orders were processed manually through emails and phone calls. Moreover, Hotel B and D respondents asserted that building long-term relationships with a small network of suppliers was an excellent management strategy to retain essential relational knowledge in case of talent loss. Then again, since relational knowledge in small and stable supply networks is essentially linked to a person rather than to a function, talent loss could easily affect these long-term relationships built with strategic suppliers.

Meanwhile, Hotel D used training programs and face-to-face meetings to pass tacit knowledge to supply chain employees. While there was an apparent absence of sophisticated knowledge codification strategies in Hotel B, our results showed that Hotel D was using a wider variety of management strategies to retain explicit and tacit knowledge and cope with the negative impact of talent loss.

Although there was no formal and documented process of management at Hotel E, it intentionally resorted to training programs and other knowledge sharing initiatives to diffuse important tacit knowledge and, thereby, prepare other employees to handle the duties of the procurement manager in the case of her departure. The summary of the cross-case analysis is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Cross-Case Analysis.

	Procurement Manager Type (Transactional/Strategic)	Relationship Management/Initiate New Contracts	Potential of Talent Loss	Management Approach (Proactive/Reactive)	Management Strategies (Explicit/Tacit/Relational)
Hotel A	More strategic	Relationship management	High	Proactive	Explicit: databases and information systems Tacit: job rotation, task delegation, face-to-face, training programs, internal recruitment Relational: strategic alliances
Hotel B	More transactional	Relationship management	Low	Reactive	Explicit: written and basic databases Tacit: face-to-face Relationship: small supplier network
Hotel C	More strategic	Relationship management initiate new contracts	High	Proactive	Explicit: databases and information systems Tacit: training programs, task delegation, shadowing Relational: strategic alliances
Hotel D	More transactional	Relationship management	Low	Reactive	Explicit: databases and information systems Tacit: training programs, face-to-face, internal recruitment Relationship: small supplier network
Hotel E	More strategic	Initiate new contracts	High	Proactive	Explicit: databases and information systems Tacit: knowledge sharing initiatives, training programs, internal recruitment relational: strategic alliances

6. Discussion and Conclusions

6.1. Contributions to Theory

The hospitality industry is often characterized by poor talent-retention strategies, including limited career advancement opportunities [19]. When key employees leave a hotel, there is a probability of talent loss that impeding the hotel's capacity to perform and compete [87]. Departing talented hotel employees can take with them tacit knowledge, networks of contacts, and long-term relationships. The retention of this critical knowledge through management strategies is, therefore, essential for the continuity and performance of the hotel's operations [88].

This study addressed the paucity of research on this topic and sought a deeper understanding of talent loss in a key position in hotels by identifying the types of knowledge that could be lost and the strategies that could manage talent loss [89]. Hotels often lack the requisite ability to identify and discern the types of knowledge leaving the hotel. They might also be unable to adequately assess the importance and value of the lost knowledge for the hotel's operations and performance.

6.2. Contributions to Practice

We found from our cross-case analysis that hotels that perceive the potential for talent loss as low tend to use reactive approaches to cope with it. In contrast, those that perceive the potential of talent loss as high for their operations tend to develop proactive strategies to manage it. By adopting a knowledge-based view of talent loss, we acknowledge that it is essential for hotels to manage their knowledge resources more effectively. Hotels should also focus on purposefully aligning their knowledge retention strategies with their context of operation and the type of critical knowledge in the procurement function, among other key positions.

By analyzing talent loss from a knowledge perspective instead of adopting an HR perspective, we have contributed to the talent management literature by enriching it as we have uncovered the

intricacies of talent loss in the hospitality industry. Our results show that when hotels value the strategic skills of procurement managers, they tend to perceive this position as critical for the hotel's operations and as a source of competitive advantage. Procurement managers in international hotels deal with strategic issues, handle supply chain operations, and manage supplier networks. International hotel chains consider the procurement manager function to be a strategic resource and estimate that the potential of talent loss is high. These hotels understand the importance of the key knowledge held by procurement managers for the hotel and adopt a proactive approach to manage talent loss. In comparison, local hotels tend to underestimate the possibility of talent loss, perceive the procurement manager position as a rather operational function, and emphasize the importance of technical skills and knowledge of processes and procedures for the hotel's operations.

Our case hotels acknowledged the importance of relationship management and the possibility of losing critical relational knowledge in case of talent loss, as supplier networks are often built on personal contacts. Trust between the suppliers and the procurement manager was described as being very difficult to transfer or rebuild. To minimize the negative impact of talent loss on their supplier networks, international hotels developed strategic alliances with critical long-term suppliers. These partnerships, which are often negotiated at the headquarters level, increase the stability of supplier networks.

Overall, managing supplier relationships was considered a more critical task than initiating new contracts or ending existing ones for a majority of hotels. Our findings emphasized the essential role of relational knowledge in managing supplier relationships [90] and the critical contribution of the procurement manager in building and managing supplier networks in a hotel. A strong procurement department can provide a tactical advantage in the sourcing of products and services, supplier management, and supply chain integration [2]. The collective expertise of procurement can also be utilized as a source of sustainable strategic development, driving collaborative innovation and knowledge-sharing with suppliers, with long term impacts on growth and profitability [2,91].

Interestingly, the possibility of losing important relational knowledge following the departure of the procurement manager did not trigger the use of any specific retention strategy in international or local hotels. These hotels recognized the challenge of retaining knowledge that is built on personal contacts, yet small supplier networks were perceived to be more resilient than larger networks, although the literature indicates that smaller supplier networks are built on person-to-person contacts, which puts relational knowledge in danger in case of talent loss [86].

Regardless of whether they adopted a reactive or proactive management approach, all our case hotels used different strategies to transfer and retain critical tacit knowledge. Nevertheless, some of them did not even have any documented management strategy, or did not intentionally use these strategies to specifically retain tacit knowledge. This finding indicates that such hotels are still unable to identify and assess which type of knowledge could be in danger in case of talent loss. Many hotels also lack the ability to intentionally align the types of knowledge that could be lost with the appropriate management strategies.

Overall, hotels that described the procurement function as a more strategic one adopted a more proactive management approach and used a wider variety of strategies to capture tacit knowledge. Our case hotels were rather confident about their ability to identify a replacement and quickly transfer critical tacit knowledge within the leave notice period. Meanwhile, local hotels used less sophisticated strategies than international ones to retain tacit and explicit knowledge. Overall, hotels heavily used information systems and databases to record supplier information and keep track of past orders, although local hotels relied more on written documentation and basic software to process orders and store supplier information. Investments in more advanced information systems were deemed costly and not necessary even at international hotels.

6.3. Managerial Implications

First, since more strategic procurement managers hold more tacit and relational knowledge than transactional ones, hotel managers should adopt a more proactive management approach to cope with the implications posed by their departure. This means that hoteliers should make extensive investments in knowledge management tools that aim to retain the valuable knowledge at stake before a sudden or even a planned departure of such managers. It is also recommended for hotels to use a proactive rather than reactive management approach, even when they perceive the role of the procurement manager as a transactional rather than strategic one. Investing in a proactive management approach will allow them to document their process and invest in a wider variety of strategies that help transfer, diffuse, and capture tacit knowledge in organizational routines, thus retaining more critical tacit knowledge. As such, hotel managers should not underestimate the tacit knowledge held by transactional procurement managers. Additionally, local hotels should invest more in strategies that retain explicit knowledge, such as information systems and databases. Moreover, hoteliers should implement personalized training approaches such as mentoring programs to improve knowledge transfer and retention, thereby increasing the effectiveness of the hotel's management strategies.

Second, different strategies that help transfer critical tacit knowledge should be deployed by hoteliers to reduce the negative consequences of talent loss. Succession planning, employee shadowing, and training programs are a few examples of effective strategies that hoteliers should implement to minimize the effects of talent loss. Hoteliers should also develop a broader talent pool within the procurement department in relation to negotiation and networking skills, as well as knowledge about the process of initiating new suppliers and terminating existing ones.

Third, hotel managers should set strategic alliances with critical suppliers and involve other employees in this process to reduce the concentration of personal contacts and emotion-based trust in supplier relationships. Succession planning and employee shadowing can also facilitate this strategy. Developing strong, collaborative relations with suppliers can enable hotels to gain access to better quality products or services [90]. In this sense, in the right organizational environment, procurement can act as a hub of specialized knowledge which contributes to fostering absorptive capacity and promotes a culture of internal and external collaboration and knowledge acquisition [90].

Fourth, hotels should identify the types of knowledge that are at stake in order to devise carefully aligned and relevant strategies. To achieve this, hoteliers need to assess and, if needed, develop their ability to categorize the hotel's talented employees based on the value that they create for the hotel. As argued above, the accurate identification and evaluation of any possible talent loss is a prerequisite to designing successful proactive strategies.

Finally, as hotels could lose talent to other areas in hospitality, it is essential for hoteliers to adopt modern approaches to talent management by starting with high-impact positions. Since talent has a high value, is scarce, and is difficult to replace, hotels should also invest in well-established retention techniques related to employee motivation and job satisfaction, in addition to reducing the negative impacts of talent loss.

6.4. Limitations and Future Research

Research limitations could be considered opportunities and avenues to explore in future research. This qualitative case study did not seek to draw generalizable implications. Our data were limited to five case hotels and their accessible documents. Hence, drawing reliable conclusions from such a sample is difficult. Moreover, this research was subject to both respondent and researcher bias. Future research should seek more supportive material and more respondents to ensure a more rigorous triangulation [76]. Additionally, as this study employed a multiple case-study methodology to collect qualitative data from five hotels operating in the UAE, our findings may not be generalizable to hotels from other countries and regions. Since we focused on four- and five-star hotels, future research should investigate a larger pool of different hotel types across different settings to explore the intricacies of talent loss (e.g., modern independent hotels and other structures in the hospitality industry).

We relied on in-depth interviews with managers of our case hotels, potentially biasing our results by their views and perceptions. Quantitative methods and large data sets could be used to empirically examine the effects of talent loss on hotels' performance. The past two decades have seen an exponential interest in sustainability-related innovation and performance in various industries, especially in the hospitality sector [92,93]. The topic of achieving high levels of innovation and performance in sustainability has been addressed in a plethora of studies, and even in special issues in renowned research journals. Such studies have also emphasized the critical importance of talent [94–96]. However, to the best of our knowledge, no study so far has addressed the issue of talent loss in this context. We believe that our study provides important findings and insights to investigate talent loss in the context of sustainability in hospitality, as well as in various other industries. With its predicted negative impact on tacit and relational knowledge, talent loss could limit the scope of sustainability practices and even reduce organizational commitment to such initiatives. However, the adoption of more proactive management strategies to tackle the phenomenon of talent loss could help to retain critical knowledge resources and provide further support for sustainability initiatives.

Longitudinal studies and survey-based research should also be conducted to explore in more detail the different phases of talent loss in various settings, perhaps even using multiple levels of analysis, such as at the individual level and the supply chain level. For instance, future research could explore the impact of talent loss if the departing employee joins one of the hotel's suppliers, as opposed to a competitor. Research in the hospitality field should also capitalize on the theoretical advancements achieved in other fields (e.g., knowledge management) and use more integrative approaches to improve the understanding of the mechanisms of talent loss and talent management in hospitality, among other topics of interest. It would be beneficial to conduct survey-based research to assess the contribution of different key positions in hotels to value creation and to empirically link the different types of knowledge that could potentially be lost with specific management strategies. Finally, further investigation of the role of relational knowledge and trust in supplier networks across different settings would improve our understanding of how to retain critical relational knowledge in case of talent loss.

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Appendix A. Selected Interview Guide

1. Please describe the procurement process.
2. Who selects key suppliers? Who negotiates contracts with key suppliers? Who decides what to order and in what quantity?
3. Describe the procurement department (structure and job responsibilities).
4. Who is managing the supply chain? Do you have a formal and documented monitoring process in place?
5. What types of valuable knowledge do you (as a Procurement Manager) have?
6. How much of your knowledge is documented or could be found? Is a lot of it tacit?
7. Are there other employees in your hotel who have valuable knowledge related to procurement, sourcing, supplier relationships, etc.? Provide examples.
8. Do you think that the possible departure of one of these people should be considered an important phenomenon to the procurement function and the hotel?
9. Do you think your hotel considers turnover of key employees an important phenomenon for the procurement function and the rest of the hotel?
10. How important is talent loss due to turnover, in terms of impact on the Procurement Department and the hotel?

11. What would happen if the Procurement Manager left the hotel? (i.e., impact on the functioning and performance of procurement and the hotel).
12. What valuable knowledge would definitely be lost?
13. How long would it take to train another Procurement Manager if the manager left the hotel?
14. How is your hotel dealing with this phenomenon? What strategies does your hotel currently have in place to deal with the departure of key procurement employees or managers? Any future plans?
15. Do you think your hotel is reactive or proactive in dealing with talent loss? Explain with examples please.
16. How do you transfer knowledge to others in the Procurement Department (or hotel)?

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