



# Local Vs Foreign: Who Reigns Supreme? A Study On Perception Of Employers On Employee Possession Of Skills And Knowledge In Maldivian Resort Sector.

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the perceptions of hiring managers in the Maldivian tourism industry regarding the differing competencies and knowledge levels of local and foreign employees. Data was collected through a questionnaire distributed to 175 high-ranking managers and directors responsible for making hiring decisions. In addition to descriptive statistics, hypothesis testing using the independent samples Kruskal-Wallis Test, based on the respondents' nationality, was employed. Descriptive data analysis reveals that local workers excel in teamwork and collaboration skills and possess a greater depth of industry-specific knowledge compared to their foreign counterparts. Further investigation, considering nationality of the hirer, indicates that managers from foreign nationalities share a perspective that local employees have lower levels of competence and knowledge compared to foreign employees. This perception may help explain the lower rate of local employment within the industry.

**Keywords :** Skills, Knowledge, Hiring Decisions, Resorts Sector, Maldives

## Introduction

The burgeoning expansion of the resort industry in the Maldives has not only acted as a magnetic force for tourists but has also attracted foreign individuals in pursuit of employment opportunities within these luxurious enclaves. Remarkably, the resort sector's footprint extends across the Maldivian archipelago, with every atoll, except Gnaviyani Atoll, hosting at least one resort. This strategic proliferation aligns with the government's overarching mission to foster employment opportunities throughout the nation, with particular emphasis on the establishment of gainful employment through these resort establishments.

Despite the government's admirable efforts, a significant portion of the local population continues to seek viable employment opportunities, while concurrently witnessing an influx of foreign laborers entering the Maldivian labor market. Originally, the government instituted a stringent threshold for the proportion of foreign employment permissible in the resort sector, capping it at a maximum of 50%. Unfortunately, the resorts fell short of complying with the prescribed employment ratios between local and expatriate staff. In response to this incongruity, the authorities decided to adjust the ratio to 55% in 2011, aiming to mirror the prevailing employment landscape (Shakoor, 2020) more accurately. This policy shift was rooted in the perceived challenges associated with managing resorts and the alleged dearth of local personnel possessing the requisite skills (Salih, 2013).

Regrettably, a discernible and concerning shift in this ratio is manifest in the latest Maldives Population and Housing Census of 2022, where the ratio now stands at an alarming 70:30, with foreigners increasingly dominating the resort workforce (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Notably, this workforce comprises individuals hailing from South Asian nations, including Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and the Philippines, who occupy a substantial share of operational roles within the resorts. Furthermore, individuals

from other nations are also recruited for specialized high-level technical and professional positions, such as General Managers, Chief Finance Officers, Chefs, and Dive Instructors (Bank, 2015), a rational course of action if local candidates are inadequate in meeting the stringent requirements of these roles.

Nonetheless, the process of employing foreign workers in the Maldives, governed by the “Regulation on Employment of Foreign Workers in the Maldives” (2011/R-22), presents a formidable challenge for employers. It necessitates a meticulous, multi-step procedure involving the acquisition of a work quota, submission of a security deposit, procurement of a work permit card and work visa before commencing employment, and the coordination of expatriate arrivals at Maldivian ports of entry (Saeed, 2015). Furthermore, as per the fifth amendment of the Employment Act 22/2016, companies are obligated to establish Maldivian bank accounts for their foreign employees. Each of these rigorous measures compounds the administrative costs associated with hiring expatriates, in addition to their salaries. In stark contrast, employing local individuals involves a relatively simpler recruitment process, wherein employers can post job openings on internal or external recruitment platforms and subsequently proceed with hiring, culminating in the provision of salaries. The escalation of expenses incurred in the recruitment and selection process can act as a deterrent to sound business decision-making unless it is explicitly established that local residents lack the requisite skills and knowledge for the targeted positions in the resort sector.

During deliberations on the formulation of the Strategic Human Resource Development Plan for the period 2011-2015, employers voiced concerns regarding the perceived deficiencies in Maldivian workers, ranging from skills and ambition to work ethic, and the apparent lack of enthusiasm in pursuing careers within the resort industry (Ministry of Tourism Arts and Culture, 2011). In a striking counterpoint, resort employees disclosed instances of discriminatory practices in recruitment and compensation, suggesting a pronounced preference for hiring foreign individuals on the part of employers.

This scholarly article explores into the intricate dynamics of the resort sector in the Maldives, a sector renowned for its substantial reliance on labor and its essential role as a major generator of employment opportunities, ranking among the top job creators on a global scale (Torres, 2015). Furthermore, the sector in this context offers a diverse spectrum of employment opportunities requiring a range of skills, thus facilitating swift integration into the labor market, particularly for demographic segments such as young individuals, women, and migrant workers (International Labour Organization, 2022). However, the employment practices and decisions made by industry leaders wield considerable influence over the selection of candidates for these roles.

Predictably, employment decisions pivot on an assessment of candidates’ competencies, knowledge, and other vital attributes intrinsic to their prospective roles, with the overarching goal of maintaining the exacting standards of customer service synonymous with these prestigious resort establishments. Nevertheless, building upon the preceding discourse, two compelling questions emerge at the core of this exploration: during the hiring process, as local candidates are compared to their foreign counterparts, do the managers overseeing the selection process perceive specific proficiencies to be better possessed by the locals? Furthermore, does the nationality of the hirer exert an influence on this perception?

The principal objectives of this research article can be encapsulated as follows:

1. To investigate the perceptions held by hiring decision makers concerning the skills and knowledge that local candidates are believed to excel in, relative to their foreign counterparts.
2. To empirically determine whether significant divergences in these perceptions manifest when comparing hirers’ nationality, distinguishing between foreign and local hirers.

In light of these objectives, this paper endeavors to address the following research inquiries: what particular skills and knowledge areas are deemed as local candidates’ strengths in comparison to their foreign counterparts, and are there observable disparities in these perceptions contingent upon the nationality of the hirer? By illuminating the competencies in which local candidates excel, this paper aims to identify knowledge gaps that warrant improvement. Additionally, it seeks to provide insights into the potential presence of inherent biases in the hiring process, with regard to the nationality of the hirer.

## Literature Review

This literature review briefs the resorts sector and its labour market situation in the Maldives, and synthesizes the key dimensions considered by scholars in the context of hiring employees within the hospitality industry, with a specific emphasis on the resort sector. It encompasses factors such as knowledge and skills.

## The Resort Sector and its Labour Situation in the Maldives

Tourism has been a crucial economic foundation for countries worldwide, including both developed and developing nations. The Maldives, known for its unspoiled white-sand beaches, clear lagoons with colorful coral reefs, warm waters filled with rich marine life, and islands lined with palm trees (Kundur, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2019; Pambreni et al., 2019; Udriyah et al., 2019), is no different in this regard. The Maldivian tourism

sector, established in 1972, has quickly developed into a strong industry worth billions of dollars and serves as the main driver of the nation's economic success and expansion.

**Table 1: Tourism indicators, 2013-2022**

Year	Tourist Resorts in operation	Bed Capacity	Tourist Arrivals	Central Government Budget Total Revenue	Tourism Revenue *	% share of Tourism Revenue	Resorts % share of GDP
2019	146	33,440	1,702,887	22,077	7,498	34%	20.4%
2020	140	21,446	555,494	12,569	2,747	22%	20.1%
2021	161	38,226	1,321,937	18,917	5,236	28%	10.2%
2022	168	41,049	1,675,303	20,833	6,499	31%	20.4%

\*Tourism Revenue includes tourism tax, GST on tourism, Green Tax, Royalties and resort lease rent. Author calculation using tables 13.2 and 13.3; Statistical Yearbook, 2021, 2022 and 2023.

As depicted in Table 1; although the sector experienced a notable decline in tourist numbers due to the global pandemic and widespread border closures in 2020, it bounced back to its height in 2022 with the total yearly tourist arrivals recording almost pre-pandemic numbers in 2022. While many employees were laid off, and some retained on low pay and government employee benefits, the sector revived back to its full force in 2022, with the revenues climbing up from 2,747 million rufiyaa to 6,499 million rufiyaa in 2022. The sector plays an essential role in generating government revenue, contributing 31% in 2022 (Statistical Yearbook of Maldives 2022, 2023). Furthermore, as underscored by the Asian Development Bank (2015), tourism stands as the primary source of foreign exchange for the Maldives, accounting for more than 60% of the foreign exchange reserves (Asian Development Bank, 2015a). This emphasizes its critical role in financing development initiatives and public expenditures in the country (Ministry of Tourism Arts and Culture, 2011). Furthermore, the sector's share of the GDP was 20.4% in 2022, and it ranks as the second-largest job creator in the Maldives, after the public sector, generating 17% of the jobs within the resorts (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, 2023). It is one sector that highlights expansions in every strategic action plan of the country, focusing on improving employment opportunities for the locals, and improving livelihood of the Maldivian population (Ministry of Tourism, 2023).

Whilst the sector is labour intensive, a general resort requires 1.5 staff per tourist bed, while for a high-end resort, a minimum of 2 staff per bed is a requirement. (Strategic Human Resources Development Plan of Tourism Industry 2011-2015," 2011), Given these requirements, and taking into account the number of beds, the resorts should ideally create around 61,573 jobs to operate effectively. Notwithstanding this, there is a significant level of youth not in employment, education, or training (NEET rate) in the country, with 26.3% of those aged 15 to 24 years falling into this category (Maldives Population and Housing Census 2022; Island and Atoll level Indicator Sheet 2023). According to the Maldives Bureau of Statistics, key reasons cited for unemployment among young people include the lack of job opportunities in their island of residence and challenges in finding suitable employment (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, n.d.). Given the effort of the government in expanding the sector, and bringing these jobs closer to their homes, locals are not taking up these jobs, and these positions are being filled by foreigners. Recent data reveals that out of the 52,435 individuals employed in the resorts, a substantial amount, 36,855 are foreigners (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, 2023). This highlights the importance of addressing workforce dynamics in the resort sectors, in terms of required skills and knowledge important to deliver the Maldivian tourism product.

### Skills and Knowledge for the Tourism Industry

In the aspect of education and employability, knowledge is defined as the factual or theoretical information that students possess within a specific domain, serving as a foundational element in task execution (Wakelin-Theron et al., 2018; Tham et al., 2017; Rachmawati et al., 2019). Acquired knowledge forms a crucial foundation for task completion, yet it alone does not guarantee expertise in task execution. Skills, as described by the same authors, are a person's ability to effectively apply their knowledge to accomplish specific tasks, making them the second determinant of task execution (Hind et al., 2007).

Notably, Wang et al., (2009) conducted a comprehensive analysis of skills deemed critical by tourism managers, categorizing them into two dimensions: skills considered important and those that significantly impact performance. Among the important skills, the top five included oral communication, relationship management, work ethics, customer service, and team working abilities. However, the skills that were most influential in performance were customer service, confidence, work ethics, industry knowledge, and team

working abilities. This comprehensive analysis also emphasizes the varying skills identified as essential for employability by different universities.

Bello et al., (2019) highlighted language and communication as essential everyday skills within the industry, underlining the unique skills demanded in the context of tourism in Malawi, encompassing customer service, communication, accounting, budgeting, finance, tourism and hospitality marketing, and administration. Communication and professionalism were further identified by Baum (1990) as vital soft skills necessary for the sector. Additionally, a separate study pinpointed the most crucial knowledge and skills for the tourism industry, including customer service/awareness, ethical conduct at work, verbal communication, acceptance of responsibility, attention to detail, ability to work under pressure, time management, and motivation (Wakelin-Theron et al., 2018; Dewi et al., 2019; Maghfuriyah et al., 2019).

Further insights provided by Sion Phillpott (2021), a career and entrepreneurship expert, highlighted ten imperative skills needed within the tourism industry encompassing customer service, interpersonal skills, communication, problem solving, language proficiency, teamwork, and attention to detail. Targetjobs.co.uk added to this list adaptability, flexibility, and cultural sensitivity (“Eight Top Skills for Travel and Tourism Careers,” 2023). In a similar vein, topuniversities.com brought to the list empathy and emotional intelligence, stress management, time management as vital skills and knowledge for success in the tourism sector (“5 Essential Soft Skills for Careers in Hospitality and Tourism,” 2022). These literature underscores a diverse array of skills and knowledge as crucial to the tourism industry. However, there are specific knowledge and skills that consistently emerge as central, including customer service, communication and language proficiency, industry knowledge, team working abilities, as well as financial and management knowledge and skills, which forms the basis of this paper.

### **Perceived Skills and Knowledge levels of Locals, and the Justification to Hire Foreigners**

Job opportunities in the resort sector are thought to be diverse, ranging from professional skilled positions to unskilled and semi-skilled workers. According to the general research done to compile the Strategic Human Resource Development Plan 2011, Maldivian school leavers were not “suitable” for the jobs in the resorts. One factor highlighted in these discussions were the skills and knowledge mismatch of entrants into the labour market and the requirements in the resorts. The influx of foreign workers in the resorts sector was led due to the skills mismatch, and they have dominated technical, managerial and professional jobs and that in the tourism sector they control the top-end technical jobs such as general managers, chefs and dive instructors. (Ministry of Tourism Arts and Culture, 2011)

In addition, employers often prefer to hire experienced workers over recent school graduates whose skill levels and training may not meet the job requirements (Human Rights Commission of the Maldives, 2009). It was also highlighted in an internal paper produced to prepare a framework on employment in the Maldives, that, one of the greatest barriers to employment of the locals is the lack of interest and determination to improve their competencies in knowledge and skills to seek work (Ministry of Tourism Arts and Culture, 2011). Hence, it is of great interest to understand whether this perception of the employers still persists, and is the reason behind why locals are shunned while foreigners are hired.

Despite the country enjoying high literacy rates (98% functional literacy rate), commendable recognition in the international arena of secondary education (world top 10 students in Cambridge ‘O’ Level and ‘A’ Levels), there prevails a perception of a mismatch between what is provided through the education system and the skills demanded in the job market. The country has two main institutions engaged in building capacities to cater for the requirement of the resort sector where they have been building capacity for the industry for more than a decade. However, the imported workforce from the neighbouring countries does not seem to be on the decline. Additionally, the substantial workforce from the neighbouring countries engaged at different skill levels may be indirectly implying a lack of a qualified and skilled national labour force. Consequently, a noticeable void is apparent within the current body of literature concerning disparities in knowledge and skills possessed by workforces, and the extent to which the nationality of the hirer exerts an influential impact. This gap underscores the need for this paper to explore these dimensions within the context of this study.

### **Methodology**

The items incorporated in this study were primarily drawn from the research conducted by the authors who developed the FIHRHD Model (Kwok, 2011), with additional questions formulated through direct engagement with resort sector managers. Basic demographic information was collected from the respondents and integrated into the analysis (Azam et al., 2021). The survey was administered to 175 participants, comprising HR Managers and Heads of Departments (HoDs) in selected resorts. The sample was obtained using a simple random sampling method, employing a list of resorts provided by the Ministry of Tourism. A subset of 103 resorts was selected, based on those that were operational at the end of 2020 (Ministry of Tourism, n.d.). The sample size was determined with the assumption that three individuals from each selected resort were involved

in hiring decisions, considering a total population of 309 and a sample of 175 was deemed appropriate (Kenpro, 2016).

The data collection was facilitated through the distribution of a questionnaire via Google Forms, shared through email and WhatsApp. The questionnaire encompassed over 50 questions, although only a selected subset of these questions is discussed in this paper (Azam et al., 2023). The quality of the initial data screening is crucial, as it underpins the acceptability and validity of subsequent analyses (Roni & Djajadikerta, 2021).

The collected data underwent analysis using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 26. SPSS provides a platform for generating statistical data and facilitates the execution of quantitative analyses (Rahman & Muktadir, 2021). Descriptive statistics enable the concise summarization of data, offering insights into the fundamental characteristics and perceptions of the study's respondents. While it does not, in itself, permit the formulation of definitive conclusions, it serves as a crucial step guiding researchers toward the application of advanced statistical methods suitable for drawing inferences from the data (Allen, 2017).

Furthermore, the study conducted additional analyses employing hypothesis testing, specifically utilizing the independent samples Kruskal-Wallis Test. This test is a non-parametric method employed to assess the presence of statistically significant differences among two or more groups related to an independent variable concerning a continuous or ordinal dependent variable (Ostertagová et al., 2014). To ensure the validity of this test, several assumptions were verified. Firstly, the dependent variable, which consisted of 5-point Likert scales, was assessed at an ordinal or continuous level and the independent variable, at categorical. The independent variable was the nationality of the respondents, which was categorised as Maldivian and Other. Thirdly, the assumption of independence of observations was upheld, as no participant could belong to more than one group. Lastly, the data distribution for the various subgroups was assessed, revealing slightly varying shapes. Consequently, the Kruskal-Wallis H test was employed to compare the mean ranks instead of the median (Frost, 2023). The objective of this analysis was to ascertain whether there were discernible differences in responses based on the subgroup with which the respondents identified.

## Findings

Before delving into the core findings aligned with the paper's objectives, the study's participants are presented to understand whose perspectives and beliefs are being presented in this paper.

### Profile of Respondents

As depicted in Table 2, the composition of survey respondents revealed that the majority, 114 (82%), were male, and a significant proportion were Maldivians (82%). A substantial 70.29% of the respondents fell within the age range of 28 to 47, while those aged between 18 to 27 constituted less than 10% of the participants. A significant portion (70.86%) of the respondents reported being married, with 22.86% identifying as single. In terms of educational attainment, 50.86% of respondents held an undergraduate degree or above, and 28.57% had a secondary or higher secondary level or below education. Additionally, 12.57% of the respondents possessed a relevant professional certification.

The data further reveals that 95.43% of the respondents were employed by the organization, whereas the rest considered themselves as entrepreneurs, and establishment owners. A substantial portion (52%) of respondents reported earning an income exceeding 30,001 MVR, and the rest (48%) earned an income between 10,001 MVR to 30,000 MVR.

Furthermore, the data indicates that 63% of the respondents held management-level positions, and the majority (93.71%) reported being full-time staff members. In terms of their years of experience within the same establishment, 69.14% had worked for more than 10 years, while less than 1% had less than one year of experience within their current establishment. With regard to their overall industry experience, 48.6% possessed 10 or more years of experience, while 3.43% had less than one year of industry experience. Regarding their experience in managing people, 33.14% had over 10 years of experience in this capacity, 50.86% had between 3 to 10 years of experience, and 16% had less than a year of experience in managing people.

**Table 2: Respondent's Profile**

		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	144	82.29%
	Female	31	17.71%
Age	18 to 27	17	9.71%
	28 to 37	69	39.43%
	38 to 47	54	30.86%
	Above 47	35	20.00%
Nationality	Maldivian	144	82.29%

	Indian	11	6.29%
	Srilankan	5	2.86%
	Netherlands	2	1.14%
	Swedish	1	0.57%
	Philippines	2	1.14%
	Russian	1	0.57%
	Japanese	1	0.57%
	Other (unspecified)	8	4.57%
Marital Status	Single	40	22.86%
	Married	124	70.86%
	Divorced/Widowed	11	6.29%
Level of Education	Primary Education	8	4.57%
	Secondary and Higher Secondary Education	42	24.00%
	Undergraduate	54	30.86%
	Postgraduate and above	49	28.00%
	Professional Certification	22	12.57%
Employment Status	Owner of the Establishment	4	2.29%
	Entrepreneur	4	2.29%
	Working for the Organization	167	95.43%
Income Level	< 10,000 MVR	0	0.00%
	10,001 MVR to 20,000 MVR	46	26.29%
	20,001 MVR to 30,000 MVR	38	21.71%
	> 30,001 MVR	91	52.00%
Respondents Job level	Associate Level (Management)	16	9.14%
	Mid/Senior Level (Management)	32	18.29%
	Manager Level (Management)	63	36.00%
	Director Level (Senior Management)	28	16.00%
	Executive Level (Senior Management)	36	20.57%
Type of employment	Full-Time Staff	164	93.71%
	Contract Staff	11	6.29%
Years of experience in the establishment	< 1 year	1	0.57%
	1 to 3 years	7	4.00%
	3 to 5 years	13	7.43%
	5 to 7 years	12	6.86%
	7 to 10 years	21	12.00%
	> 10 years	121	69.14%
Years of experience in the industry	< 1 year	6	3.43%
	1 to 3 years	18	10.29%
	3 to 5 years	16	9.14%
	5 to 7 years	26	14.86%
	7 to 10 years	24	13.71%
	> 10 years	85	48.57%
Years of experience in managing people	< 1 year	28	16.00%
	1 to 3 years	33	18.86%
	3 to 5 years	23	13.14%
	5 to 7 years	22	12.57%
	7 to 10 years	11	6.29%
	> 10 years	58	33.14%
Total		175	100.00%

In this study, a predominant number of respondents were male, which aligns with the prevalent gender distribution within the resort sector, where a substantial majority of employees are male, as evidenced by recent employment data from the 2022 Census (Census 2022; Provisional results 2023), where 89% of resort sector employees were male. The highest number of respondents fell within the age group of 28 to 47, and the majority were full-time staff members employed by the respective establishments. About 70% of the respondents possessed a tertiary-level or higher education, and slightly over half of them reported monthly earnings exceeding 30,000 rufiyaa. In terms of professional experience, 81% of the respondents had previous exposure to the resort industry, with 62% having served in the same establishment for a significant duration. Moreover, more than half of the respondents had accumulated over 5 years of experience in managing people.

Given that a majority of the respondents have substantial industry experience, extended tenures within their current establishments, and notable experience in managing personnel, they are deemed to possess a commendable level of knowledge and expertise in the workings of the resort sector, along with the requisite skills and knowledge essential for the effective operation of a resort.

### Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were employed to assess the extent of consensus regarding the various skills that respondents believed Maldivians excel in compared to their foreign counterparts. A measurement scale utilizing mean scores was adopted, with five distinct levels: 1 – 1.80 indicating “Strongly Disagree,” 1.81 – 2.60 representing “Disagree,” 2.61 – 3.40 signifying “Neither Agree nor Disagree” (Neutral), 3.41 – 4.20 denoting “Agree,” and 4.21 – 5.00 connoting “Strongly Agree.” This approach was utilized to quantify the constructs and assess the levels of agreement among the respondents (Pimentel, 2010).

Table 3 illustrates the descriptive statistics for a set of 7 items related to skills and knowledge. These items were evaluated using a numerical rating scale ranging from 1 to 5 to gauge employers’ perceptions regarding the statements. The analysis of the degree of agreement on these items was conducted by examining the mean and standard deviation for each individual item.

**Table 3 Descriptive Statistics for Skills and Knowledge compared across Locals and Foreigners**

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
1. Compared to a foreign employee, a local employee has better finance knowledge	2.86	.963	Neutral
2. Compared to a foreign employee, a local employee has better management knowledge	3.19	1.032	Neutral
3. Compared to a foreign employee, a local employee has less industry specific knowledge	2.44	1.003	<b>Disagree</b>
4. Compared to a foreign employee, a local employee has better management skills	3.14	.998	Neutral
5. Compared to a foreign employee, a local employee has better critical thinking skills	3.18	1.018	Neutral
6. Compared to a foreign employee, a local employee has better teamwork and collaboration skills	3.48	1.108	<b>Agree</b>
7. Compared to a foreign employee, a local employee has better people skills	3.30	1.052	Neutral

Upon examining Table 3, it becomes evident that employers’ perceptions, with respect to skills, particularly in management skills, critical thinking skills, and people skills, generally trended toward a neutral stance. This indicates that employers did not discern a significant disparity in the possession of these skills between local and foreign employees. Nevertheless, one statement, “Compared to a foreign employee, a local employee has better teamwork and collaboration skills,” yielded a mean score of 3.48, signifying that a notable portion of respondents inclined toward the belief that locals outperformed in teamwork and collaboration skills.

Turning to the aspect of knowledge, as Table 3 illustrates, in terms of finance and management knowledge, the responses exhibited a neutral disposition. However, it is worth noting that the statement “Compared to a foreign employee, a local employee has less industry-specific knowledge” garnered a mean score of 2.44. This score indicates that respondents disagreed with the statement, suggesting their perception that locals possess more industry-specific knowledge.

While two statements advocate for the preference of hiring locals over foreigners, and the other five statements neither endorse locals or foreigners, it raises questions regarding the factors influencing hiring decisions. If knowledge and skills are indeed essential determinants, the data implies that more Maldivians should be employed. However, recent data indicates that 70% of the resort workforce comprises foreigners, necessitating a closer examination of this incongruity.

### Inferential Statistics

Further scrutiny of the 7 statements was conducted to explore into potential disparities in perceptions based on the nationality of the respondents. This facet of the analysis involved the application of inferential statistics, specifically employing the Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test separately for each statement.

**Table 4: Hypothesis testing using Kruskal-wallis Test on each statement of knowledge, to see whether there is a difference based on nationality.**

Null Hypothesis	Sig.	Decision
Compared to a foreign employee, a local employee has better finance knowledge is the same across categories of Mald Or Other.	0.000	Reject the null hypothesis.
Compared to a foreign employee, a local employee has better management knowledge is the same across categories of Mald Or Other.	0.000	Reject the null hypothesis.
Compared to a foreign employee, a local employee has less industry specific knowledge is the same across categories of Mald Or Other.	0.207	<b>Retain the null hypothesis.</b>

The initial three statements pertained to knowledge, specifically encompassing finance, management, and industry-specific knowledge. As detailed in the descriptive analysis provided in Table 3, for the first two knowledge-related statements, respondents generally maintained a neutral stance, neither concurring or dissenting from the statements. Conversely, for the third statement, respondents exhibited disagreement. To investigate whether disparities existed across nationality groups of the respondents, hypothesis testing was employed, as delineated in Table 4.

In the context of the first two statements, the null hypotheses regarding the nationality of the respondents were refuted. This signifies that the hypotheses “Compared to a foreign employee, a local employee has better finance knowledge is the same across the categories of respondents’ nationality, Maldivian and Other” and “Compared to a foreign employee, a local employee has better management knowledge is the same across the categories of respondents’ nationality, Maldivian and Other” were both found to be invalid. Conversely, for the third hypothesis, the null hypothesis was upheld, signifying that the hypothesis “Compared to a foreign employee, the local employees have less industry knowledge is the same across the categories of respondents’ nationality, Maldivian and Other” held true. The Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test outcomes indicate that when the hypothesis is rejected, it implies the presence of distinctions across the categories (Ostertagová et al., 2014). In this case, for the first two statements, distinctions were observed between the responses of Maldivians and foreign hirers while for the third statement, no disparities across nationality categories were evident.

Among the three knowledge-related statements, the sole hypothesis that withstood scrutiny was the one associated with industry-specific knowledge, suggesting that the respondents disagreed with the statement that local employees possess less industry-specific knowledge compared to foreigners. This disagreement was consistent among the respondents, regardless of their nationality.

The four statements related to skills include; management, critical thinking, teamwork and collaboration, and people skills. The following table depicts the null hypothesis and the resulting decision.

**Table 5: Hypothesis testing using Kruskal-wallis Test on each statement on skills, to see whether there is a difference based on the nationality.**

Null Hypothesis	Sig.	Decision
Compared to a foreign employee, a local employee has better management skills is the same across categories of Mald Or Other.	0.000	Reject the null hypothesis.
Compared to a foreign employee, a local employee has better critical thinking skills is the same across categories of Mald Or Other.	0.000	Reject the null hypothesis.
Compared to a foreign employee, a local employee has better team work and collaboration skills is the same across categories of Mald Or Other.	0.000	Reject the null hypothesis.
Compared to a foreign employee, a local employee has better people skills is the same across categories of Mald Or Other.	0.000	Reject the null hypothesis.

As delineated in the descriptive analysis provided in Table 3, with regard to the four statements related to skills, respondents predominantly adopted a neutral position, refraining from unequivocally agreeing or disagreeing with the statements in the majority of cases. However, in contrast, for the fourth statement, “Compared to a foreign employee, a local employee has better teamwork and collaboration skills,” respondents expressed agreement. To explore potential variances in responses across different nationality groups of the respondents, hypothesis testing was applied, as elucidated in Table 5.



Upon examining Table 5, it becomes evident that all null hypotheses were rejected suggesting that distinctions were indeed observed between the responses of Maldivian and other hirers for all the skills-related hypotheses examined.

In contrast to the situation regarding industry knowledge, where local employees were deemed to outperform foreigners and this viewpoint was consistent across nationalities, the statement concerning teamwork and collaboration skills failed to uphold the hypothesis. This indicates that there exists a distinct disparity in responses between Maldivian respondents and those of other nationalities concerning this particular statement.

### Discussion

The results in Table 3 indicated that local employees were considered better by the employers at work and collaboration skills and industry specific knowledge. A mean score of 3.48 indicated that most of the respondents perceived that locals are better at teamwork and collaboration skills and a mean score of 2.44 indicated that the majority of respondents disagreed on the statement that locals have less industry knowledge compared to the foreign counterpart. The latter meaning that the majority of respondents perceive that locals have a better knowledge of the tourism industry per se.

Local employees being better at teamwork and collaboration skills when compared to their foreign counterparts may be due to the sharing of same or similar cultural beliefs, and values among them. According to Feitosa et al., (2017) culture influences the functioning of teams through its impact on ease of communication, managing or mitigating conflict, among others. At the formation of a team, team members make inferences about others based on the differences that they observe, the surface-level diversity, which according to Riordan (2000) are age, sex, and race/ethnicity. How the members interact with each other and how the team shares information and makes decisions are impacted through these interactions (Phillips et.al., 2006).

Undeniably, the authentic tourism product is best delivered by locals. The tourism slogan for the Maldives prior to 2011 was the “Sunny side of Life”. The new slogan launched in 2011 was “Always Natural”, which, according to the authorities, includes the delightful charisma of the people of the Maldives, to sustainability and to the ultimate tourism experience delivered to the customer (Breaking Travel News, 2011). The current slogan, “Rediscover Maldives” again stands on the concept of the sunny side of life, where “sunny” is not limited to weather but also encompasses the nature of people. (Maldives Marketing & Public Relations Corporation, 2020). The promise of a tourism product beyond just a place, and placing people at the center of the offering would demand skills and knowledge related to native culture and its people (Baum et al., 2007). The concept that Maldivians are better at industry specific knowledge in comparison to their foreign counterpart may be due to this inherent knowledge from being born and bred in the island life which equips the locals to understand the flora and fauna of the islands, and are better informed on the history and culture of the country. Furthermore, the one island one resort concept and the workings of the industry in terms of tours and local entertainment which would build easy engagement with the tourists could be another positive aspect as regards to industry knowledge. Furthermore, locals would be more aware of the industry standards and procedures practiced in the Maldives tourism industry.

However, when it comes to the skills of teamwork and collaboration, and industry-specific knowledge, there is a striking consensus among both Maldivian and Other employers. These skills hold paramount importance in the sector, as highlighted in the literature (Giannotti, n.d.). Individuals’ native to the Maldives naturally possesses a deeper understanding of the products and services offered, along with an intricate knowledge of industry standards and regulations. Furthermore, their grasp of the country’s rich history and cultural heritage is invaluable in the tourism sector.

In contrast, for the remaining aspects of knowledge and skills explored in this paper, there is no clear winner between locals and foreigners. The distinctive differences in how Maldivian employers and employers from other nationalities perceive these attributes are a cause for concern. It is disconcerting to observe that substantial government investments have not yielded desired outcomes. Research conducted to formulate the Strategic Human Resource Action Plan 2015 revealed employer concerns about the local workforce’s deficiencies in knowledge and skills. Subsequent master plans outlined strategies to address this issue. The Maldives National University and Villa College have been diligently preparing potential candidates for the hospitality sector over the past two decades. Most colleges and universities in the Maldives offer management and finance programs at the undergraduate and master’s levels. The table below presents the number of graduates in the listed education fields from 2019 to 2021.

**Table 6: Graduands of Relevant disciplines from Higher Education Institutes; 2019-2021**

FIELD OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING	Graduate Output								
	2019			2020			2021		
	Both sexes	Male	Female	Both sexes	Male	Female	Both sexes	Male	Female
Accounting and taxation	274	114	160	215	77	138	644	176	468

Finance, banking and insurance	8	4	4	68	24	44	65	30	35
Management and administration	1,634	614	1,020	1,333	525	808	2,574	768	1,806
Marketing and advertising	10	6	4	44	11	33	178	21	157
Hotels, restaurants and catering	80	56	24	35	28	7	196	24	172
Travel, tourism and leisure	42	19	23	181	167	14	30	0	30

Source: Table 7.30: Student enrollment and graduate output in higher education institutions in Maldives by sex, 2021; Statistical Yearbook of Maldives; 2022, Maldives Bureau of Statistics

In 2021, a significant number of students completed their education in different fields. Notably, 709 students obtained accounting and finance-related certifications, with 71% of them being female. Furthermore, 2752 students graduated from management-related programs in the same year, and 71% of them were females. In the domain of Hospitality and Tourism, 226 students successfully completed their studies, and the majority, 89%, were female (*Maldives Bureau of Statistics*, n.d.).

Within the context of the resort sector, skills like management, critical thinking, teamwork, and interpersonal abilities are paramount (Jiang & Alexakis, 2017; Nadda, 2022). Given the dynamic nature of this industry, swift decision-making and the ability to handle challenging situations, including difficult customers, are crucial. While colleges may not offer specific courses dedicated to these skills, they are effectively imparted through various pedagogical methods. Group activities, classroom debates, and assessments play an essential role in nurturing these skills among students. These competencies are systematically evaluated at different educational levels, suggesting that graduates are well-prepared in these aspects.

Possessing knowledge alone does not guarantee employment. Securing a job requires proactive efforts. The key question here revolves around the initiatives of Maldivian higher education institutions to equip the Maldivian workforce adequately. Opportunities abound for locals to acquire the requisite skills, even in areas where the Strategic Human Resource Development Plan of 2011 (Ministry of Tourism Arts and Culture, 2011) notes as areas which necessitates foreign personnel, due to lack of locals. Evidently, respondents in the study do not perceive a substantial knowledge gap as an obstacle, and data indicates a sufficient number of individuals receiving education in relevant fields within the Maldives. Yet, foreign nationals continue to be recruited to fulfill these positions. This prompts inquiries into factors contributing to this phenomenon, from a different perspective; the availability and willingness of local candidates to work in the sector. Does the enclave model of tourism in the Maldives play a role? Could it be attributed to the industry being predominantly male-centric, with women often juggling their roles as family caregivers, making long-term employment challenging for them in the sector? The statistics highlight a majority of female graduates in these knowledge-based domains, suggesting the need for structural changes in the sector to enhance female participation.

While this study reveals disparities in the perceptions of Maldivian employers compared to employers of other nationalities, it remains unclear whether these differences are the primary drivers behind the prevalent hiring of foreigners. A retrospective analysis of the 2014 census statistics provides insight into this matter, as it suggests that Maldivians constituted the majority of managers in the resort sector at that time. Although this demographic composition may have evolved over time, the absence of more recent data necessitates us to make this assumption. In 2014, approximately 63% of managers and 41% of professionals and technical staff in the resort sector were Maldivians, based on the author's calculations using data from the Maldives Bureau of Statistics. Therefore, it is not straightforward to assert that foreign hirers inherently prefer to recruit foreigners.

The existing literature highlights the tendency of hirers to gravitate towards certain biases (Thomas & Reimann, 2022), and the claim that in-group bias is inherent in the sector form the narrative on significant numbers of foreigners. In-group bias is the preference for one's own group and disapproval of outsiders (Bendick and Nunes, 2012), driven by a desire to enhance self-esteem through positive attributions to the "in-group" and negative ones to the "out-group" (Weeks et al., 2017). In hiring, HR employees may favor candidates who resemble them, fostering a personal connection. For example, younger managers tended to rate younger candidates more favorably for job qualifications and potential (Finkelstein et al., 1995). This bias also extends to attributes like gender, ethnicity, and shared interests. Rivera's research (2012) emphasized the role of shared culture in hiring decisions, often surpassing productivity considerations.

However, the employment process, especially within resorts with local management, is unlikely to be devoid of local involvement in the decision-making process. Although international chains may have foreign decision-makers at the helm, other factors could underlie the disproportionately low hiring of locals. Which leads to the possibility of other biases in hiring; stereotyping and confirmation biases. Stereotypes, often defined as assigned attributes stemming from prevailing beliefs about specific groups (Koch et al., 2015), encompass a range of biases, including those related to race, culture, and gender (Greenwald and Banaji, 1995). Stereotyping

represents an implicit bias in decision-making and is notably prevalent in the context of hiring (Whysall, 2018; Kawakami et al., 2005). During the hiring process, HR professionals may link specific candidate traits (e.g., race, gender, hobbies, previous roles, attire) to prevalent positive or negative stereotypes, then use these stereotypes to assess a candidate's qualifications (Mondy and Martocchio, 2016), as maybe the case for the Maldivians, who are to some employers lacking in discipline and obedience (Ministry of Tourism Arts and Culture, 2011). Additionally, confirmation bias is the inclination to seek information that supports preexisting judgments (Nickerson, 1998), often resulting in overvaluing arguments in favor of these judgments while downplaying or disregarding contrary evidence (Beck, 2014). Numerous studies have highlighted the susceptibility of HR employees to this bias (Linos and Reinhard, 2015) and these biases influencing HR employees' final judgments on job suitability. The initial impression is prone to stereotyping bias, and during the interview process, HR professionals tend to seek information aligning with their initial perception and ignore evidence to the contrary (Whysall, 2018) leading to confirmation bias.

This prompts further consideration of whether biases against locals, regardless of the hirer's nationality, play a role, resulting from concerns about their assertiveness and perceived difficulty in control. Additionally, apprehensions about potential labor disputes or engagement with the Labor Relations Authority (LRA) due to discriminatory practices may deter the recruitment of locals. Such incidents have occurred in the past, causing disruptions in the smooth operation of some well-established resorts.

### Conclusion

The results of this study conducted in the Maldives resort sector reveal a prevailing belief among hirers that local employees exhibit a superior understanding of the industry when compared to their foreign counterparts. Additionally, locals are considered to excel in teamwork and collaborative skills, suggesting a perceived advantage in this aspect over foreign employees. Moreover, the findings indicate that, as assessed by employers, there is no substantial disparity in the skill levels and industry knowledge between locals and foreigners. In sum, these findings collectively support the notion that employers in the resort sector have a positive view of the capabilities of local candidates, deeming them either equal to or better suited for employment in resorts.

However, it is noteworthy that the study also unveils a distinct perspective held by employers of other nationalities when assessing the knowledge and skill levels of locals relative to foreigners. Despite this perceptible divergence, the study does not conclusively establish a causal link between this distinct perspective and the substantial presence of foreign workers in the resort sector. This prompts further inquiries into the motivations and interests of local job seekers in the sector, seeking to understand any potential barriers or concerns that may deter them from pursuing employment opportunities. Consequently, additional research is warranted to explore the dynamics that underlie the decision-making processes of both local job seekers and employers in the Maldives resort sector.

### Implications

The implications of this study are significant for hiring managers, resort management, students, educators, and policymakers.

Firstly, considering the substantial presence of foreign workers, it is imperative for hiring managers to implement induction programs tailored for foreign employees to familiarize them with the standards and procedures specific to the Maldivian tourism industry. Secondly, organizing biannual integrational activities that facilitate cultural exchange and team building between local and foreign employees is vital for industry growth. Thirdly, orienting new recruits to both the organizational culture and the local culture is crucial to facilitate a seamless integration into the workforce. Additionally, resort management should prioritize personnel development to ensure that the sector can support a workforce of the highest quality, equipped to handle the industry's diverse demands.

The findings also bear important implications for students, educators, and policymakers. For students and future employees, it is essential to acquire knowledge and skills relevant to the sector, especially within the local context. Additionally, understanding and mentally preparing for the unique "one island, one resort" concept and its implications for working in such establishments is crucial.

Educators, the institutions responsible for preparing future employees, should first engage with the sector to identify skill gaps and mismatches in the potential labor market and adjust curricula accordingly. This may involve incorporating financial knowledge and ensuring that the curriculum aligns with the industry's needs. Secondly, evolving with changes in work culture and content is vital, incorporating practical experience requirements as a mandatory component to demonstrate responsibility within the industry.

Lastly, for policymakers, a comprehensive study on the human resource needs of the tourism sector is necessary, leading to a long-term framework that maximizes the benefits of both imported and local labor while minimizing the crowding out of local workers. Caution should be exercised in indigenizing employment in the tourism sector, particularly concerning the significant number of international brand resorts in the Maldives. An important policy directive should encourage the recruitment of local labor and reduce foreign control over the hiring and selection processes within resorts, potentially through mandatory local placements in HR manager positions.

In addition, the notable gender disparity among students graduating in these fields warrants further investigation. A well-rounded, educated, and disciplined workforce is vital to mitigate social issues arising from unemployment and the heavy reliance on foreign labor.

### Limitations and further research

This study acknowledges several limitations. Firstly, the data primarily relied on information provided by employers, and the analysis is constrained to a limited set of items within the research instrument. A more focused study utilizing a comprehensive instrument with additional items specifically targeting various skills and knowledge areas related to the resort sector could offer deeper insights into the subject. Future research is encouraged to incorporate a broader spectrum of skills and knowledge relevant to the industry.

Additionally, forthcoming researchers may explore the perceptions and distinctions among subgroups, building upon the propositions and hypotheses formulated in this study. To facilitate a more profound understanding of human behavior and experiences, future research efforts may consider the inclusion of qualitative data. Such endeavors hold the potential to address lingering questions and unresolved matters regarding local human resource experiences and behaviors, thereby enriching management theory.

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