

Wages in hospitality: A mystery wrapped up inside an enigma?

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Abstract

The New Zealand hospitality and tourism industry has many of the poor employment relations and working conditions also seen in the international hospitality sector: low pay, low productivity, low yields, high labour turnover and poor career pathways. Money talks and the spotlight will increasingly come on wages due to raising wage rates, and the possible introduction of a Fair Pay Agreement. These drivers are creating a volatile employment relations environment, where opinions are varied and passionate, but empirical data is scarce. This paper seeks to address a significant gap in the academic literature around wages in the hospitality and tourism sector. Data on wages from two online surveys published in 2021 and 2022 show a bleak picture of remuneration and employment conditions in the sector in New Zealand. Firstly, that there are significant issues around low pay and non-compliance with pay legislation in the sector. Secondly, the qualitative data from the open-ended questions shows that employees don't feel they are being paid sufficiently, clearly want better pay and conditions and believe that higher pay would make the sector a better place to work. Further work is required in this field to address issues around employees being paid fairly and clearly – for greater equity and transparency to ensure this no longer remains the mystery and enigma it has for so long.

Keywords: Wages, pay, hospitality, employment, New Zealand

Introduction

The impact of Covid on the New Zealand tourism and hospitality sector has resulted in major disruption to the industry, including business closures, supply-chain issues and significant labour market problems. With signs of increasing international tourist numbers in the summer of 2023 and the reduction of border restrictions on migrant labour, the sector looks poised to begin its return to be a major contributor to the New Zealand economy over the next few years. Despite its past and future importance to the economy, the New Zealand hospitality and tourism industry has consistently demonstrated many of the poor employment relations and working conditions also seen in the international hospitality sector: low pay, low productivity, low yields, high labour turnover and poor career pathways. Severe labour shortages, high inflation and rising wage rates, and the possible introduction of a Fair Pay Agreement have created a volatile employment relations environment, where opinions are varied and passionate, but empirical data is scarce.

This paper seeks to address a significant gap in the academic literature around wages in the hospitality and tourism sector. While several recent reports and presentations by international academics and tourism peak bodies have highlighted issues around pay in the hospitality and tourism sector, academic research both internationally and in New Zealand remains slight. Fáilte Ireland surveyed 1,000 businesses and 3,500 employees in 2022, with employers stating that “unrealistic wage expectations” were one of the main causes of extreme the recruitment challenges they faced (Failte Ireland, 2022). By comparison, 61% of employees felt they were not paid what they were worth and 62% stated higher pay is needed to attract workers in the sector. In the Australian ‘Serving up a Fair Go?’ report, 12% of the respondents said they were paid below minimum wage, 44% reported not receiving pay entitlements for overtime or holiday loadings and over 50% reported no benefits beyond a basic wage (R. Robinson, 2022).

Employer peak bodies, commentators and practitioners have a long history of denying the impact of wages on labour turnover and retention. Before Covid hit, Brexit was the focus of concern in the UK hospitality sector and the answer from a UK employer spokesperson was clear regarding wages: “Raising wages would not attract more British staff. It really is a case of do people want to work in our industry? We are not seen always as a desirable place to work” (O’Carroll 2017). More recently in New Zealand Hospitality NZ Chief Executive Julie White has stated “The prevailing narrative of ‘pay more’ has not been decisive in filling skills gaps – but should not overshadow the fact our businesses pay competitive wages” (*Hospitality Wages Jump 9% to Pass Living Wage*, 2021). The New Zealand Restaurant Association survey their 8000 members in 2021 and found that 58% do not think that offering higher wages would solve the industry’s staffing challenges (*Online Snapshot Survey*, 2021). RANZ also believes that “We currently operate in an environment with extremely robust minimum standards in place, that provides wide-ranging protection for employees” (*Fair Pay Agreements - Hospitality Industry*, 2021).

The importance of wages in the discussion of hospitality and tourism employment remains underdeveloped (Douglas, Williamson & Harris, 2020). In both practitioner and academic literature, the importance of wages seems to be underplayed, with wages often ‘referred to’ in much of the research in the hospitality field, yet is rarely the actual subject of any articles. The hospitality industry is continually defined as ‘low pay’; however, except for Williamson (2017a), there has been little detailed research to discuss contemporary empirical data or comparative and longitudinal data. As the sector recovers from Covid, there remains a significant gap in knowledge regarding the actual state of wages in the industry, the impact wages have on turnover and retention and the true competitiveness of hospitality and tourism remuneration.

This paper initially presents an overview of literature in the field of hospitality and tourism wages and then presents recent survey wage data from two online surveys published in 2021 and 2022. The survey data is a mix of descriptive statistics and open-ended qualitative comments. A discussion of the findings follows and the paper closes with concluding comments on the significance of this research.

Literature Review

Lambert and Herod (2016, p. 44) highlight low wages as a ‘hallmark’ of precarious work, specifically linking precarity to ‘neoliberalism’s flexible work model’ (Lambert & Herod, 2016, p. 303). Robinson et al. (2019) propose that tourism and hospitality employment sustains deep social cleavages and economic inequalities. Low pay is often conceptualized as little more than an outcome of precarity and weak union power, however a detailed focus on wages as a driver of turnover and a potential engine for improvement of hospitality employment conditions is often weak (Douglas, Williamson & Harris, 2020). While literature on hospitality employment often points to low pay being a common theme (to marshal attention and action), research focused on contemporary real-world data, origins and specifics of low wages in this sector remains surprisingly scarce.

Turnover and wages

International researchers have illuminated high turnover in the hospitality sector through various lenses including retention strategies, job embeddedness and future skills planning (Deery and Jago 2015; Robinson et al. 2014; Solnet et al. 2015), leadership (Gatling et al. 2016), generational difference (Brown et al. 2015) and creativity and job satisfaction (Lu & Gursoy, 2016; Tongchaiprasit & Ariyabuddhiphongs, 2016). Yet there is a remarkable scarcity of literature that links labour turnover directly to low wages. New Zealand-based research has looked at the relationship between exit interviews (Williamson 2009; Williamson et al. 2008) and expressive labour (Poulston, 2015) on turnover, but again, not wages. While a litany of less than desired employment practices have lead authors (Harris, Tregidga & Williamson, 2011; Williamson, 2017b) to describe hospitality as the modern ‘Cinderella’ industry, in terms of research attention, wages can be considered the Cinderella of the Cinderella industry. Thus, in the field of turnover literature in hospitality, a detailed focus on wages seems rare.

Gender and wages

There is a body of work that investigates gender differences in wages in the tourism and hospitality sectors (Fleming 2015; Pozo et al. 2011), which also highlight the vertical and horizontal segregation of women employed in the sectors. Cotilla and Campos-Soria (2021) analyses the factors that determine the gender wage differences in the Spanish hospitality industry. They found that across the wage distribution, the wage advantage for men presents a positive trend (particularly in the higher wage group), reinforcing the existence of the 'glass ceiling'. Gendered wage differences in the hospitality sector are also confounded by occupational segregation, with a greater concentration of women is seen in low-paid occupations, such as cleaning and of men in management (Campos et al., 2011). Oliver and Sard's (2021) found in a Spanish study that a large part of the gender wage gap in hospitality is not explained by worker or company characteristics. However, "the segregation of women into worse-paid jobs and gender discrimination (or unobserved characteristics) seem to be the main sources of the gender wage gap." (p.345)

However, considerable attention is paid to the issues surrounding gender and wages difference in the hospitality industry, with findings in the United Kingdom showing that wage differentials in the favour of men are mostly due to occupational segregation, with men holding higher status jobs (Burgess, 2003). Research in the United States indicates serious wage disparity, especially at the management level, even when controlling for educational achievement, hours worked and structural discrimination (Fleming 2015). Other Spanish research shows that unpaid domestic labour and gender discrimination is the largest determinant of hospitality wage inequality between men and women (Campos-Soria et al. 2015; Ons-Cappa et al. 2017).

Lack of historical analysis

Of particular note is the lack of historical or longitudinal analysis of wages in the hospitality sector. Casado-Diaz and Simon (2016) note that origin of wage differences is a crucial aspect that has largely been neglected. Beyond the origins of wage differences, they further posit that the relative degree of wage inequality in the sector and how it can be explained have also received robust attention or analysis. Dogru, McGinley, Line and Szende's (2019) study of base employee earnings in the hospitality industry in the United States found that employees had the lowest earnings in the US economy, leading them to postulate that both national economic factors and the relative competitiveness of the labour market in a given local affect hospitality earnings growth. The hospitality industry is continually defined as 'low pay'; yet, except for Williamson (2017a), there has been little detailed research to discuss comparative and longitudinal data.

Living wage, Cost of Living and Unions

Work has been undertaken in the area of the minimum wage and hospitality, with authors analysing the impact of significant changes to legislation in this area (Joo-Ee 2016; Radiven and Lucas 1999). Lashley (2016) specifically positions the 'slave wages' found in hospitality against the more hospitable and 'fair' living wage as a potential form of corporate social responsibility. Sturman, Ukhov and Park (2017) explain, while it is essentially unquestioned that COL should influence pay levels, the nature of this relationship in terms of being linear or how strong is the effect is largely unstudied. They found from their study of how COL affects employee wages in the hotel industry that effects present and positive, but diminish at higher compensation levels. Cole, Stuart and Hardy (2022) from a qualitative study of workers' experiences in London hotels, developed a typology that reveals how managers extract additional unpaid labour-time through wage theft. They highlight that an appropriation of additional unpaid labour-time has not been adequately examined in the context of hospitality.

The paucity of research on unionisation and its impact on hospitality employees' working conditions is highlighted by Jung, Sharma and Mattila (2020), in that low rates of unionism could explain the sector's poor labour practices such as low wages (Williamson, 2017). Jung et al., (2020) found that while hospitality employees find the short-term benefits of union membership, such as higher wages, attractive, they are also concerned about the long-term costs. Paradopoulos and Ioannou (2022) urge that greater attention needs to be given to understanding the intersection between past legacies/union power resources and sectoral dynamics as existing studies on employment relations and trade unions in the hospitality industry have not considered the wider institutional-political and economic context

within which hospitality work is located. Based on their study of conditions of employment in the UK and Greece, they found that a tradition of trade unions and collective bargaining in hotels in Greece have contributed positively to the emergence of formal labour-based initiatives and to maintaining an openness to collectivism and collective action, more so than in the UK context.

The New Zealand industry context

The Tourism Industry Association New Zealand's (2015) Skills Report and Tourism Industry Aotearoa's (2018b) Tourism Youth Perceptions Report are all illustrative of an 'invisibility' around wages in industry led research. While the New Zealand Tourism Industry Association (2015) report highlights high turnover and the need for better wages to retain staff, no recommendations are made regarding wages. The Tourism Industry Aotearoa (2018b) report clearly highlights perceived low pay rates as a major barrier for young people considering entering the industry, but makes no recommendations to raise those pay rates. Rather, all reports contain 'boilerplate' suggestions for better 'marketing' of employment in the sectors, improved training, career development and sourcing labour from new markets for the key recommendations.

Research Design

The wage data for this research comes from two anonymous online surveys run in 2021 and 2022. Overall, these surveys captured wage data on almost 1300 hospitality and tourism employees, making this the largest study of its kind ever undertaken in New Zealand. Both surveys were created and hosted on the Qualtrics XM platform. The participants for both surveys were chosen via voluntary response by inviting respondents to the survey link (snowball sampling), however the 2022 survey also used additional support from the Tourism Industry Transformation Plan (ITP) Leadership Group and the New Zealand Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment.

Both surveys analysed the quantitative data with SPSS software and presented the results as descriptive statistics to summarise the sample of respondents as well as identifying sub-groups and proportions of respondents according to demographic dimensions. Qualitative data was thematically analysed to further develop the understanding of consistencies and differences across key employee groups. The 2021 survey consisted of 40 quantitative and qualitative questions and gathered 396 responses in total (55% women). The 2022 survey consisted of 51 questions, including 39 quantitative and 12 qualitative questions. This survey gathered 900 responses in total (60.4% women). The survey methodology was subject to the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee approval. The surveys contained a range of questions on issues including employment relations agreements, working conditions, decent work, psychological contracts, emotional labour, and wages.

Limitations should be noted that the wage questions between the two surveys varied in wording and style and the demographics of the respondents in the two surveys were significantly different. However, the findings and discussion in this paper are not dependant on detailed or advanced quantitative comparison in their nature, but rather present a discussion based on descriptive statistics and qualitative analysis of the combined results of the two surveys.

Findings

Key wage findings from the 2021 survey

- 13% of the respondents did not receive payslips that show deductions and gross pay to their wages*
- 18% did not receive the adult minimum wage*
- 22% of the respondents did not receive the correct penalty pay or time off in lieu days for working public holidays*
- 20% did not receive their correct holiday pay*
- 42.9% did not receive any benefits other than their basic pay
- 48.3% indicated there was no opportunity to get a pay rise or promotion in their current role

* (All of these conditions are required under current New Zealand employment law)

This survey also included some interesting qualitative results from the open-ended questions. An indicative quote here from one respondent was: *“By playing into the company culture you were favoured by the boss, which lead to opportunities for pay rises. But he would turn on you in a second”*. Another said *“I don't feel respected for example when I have to fight/argue to get a legal treatment (public holiday paid, using annual leave instead of sick leave when sick, withholding a part of the wage subsidy)”*. When employees were asked what would make tourism and hospitality a better place to work, the top responses were better pay and conditions, pay the Living Wage, and better pay progression.

Key wage findings from the 2022 survey

- Only 84.8% of respondents always got wage slip*
- 7.5% of respondents were not paid adult minimum wage. This figure rose to 9% when frontline workers were separated out*
- 68% of frontline workers were paid less than \$24/hr
- Only 71% always get correct holiday pay*
- Only 66% always get paid for every hour they work – 11.5% never do, and 18.3% sometimes do. The main reason given for not being paid for every hour of work is being on a salary and working hours above their contract without extra pay
- 68% of the respondents always received paid or time off in lieu days*
- 71% always get correct holiday pay*
- 42.6% never get extra pay or benefits

* (All of these conditions are required under current New Zealand employment law)

This survey also included some important qualitative results. As one respondent said *“How she works it makes it hard to find if it's your right amount. If you ask about it she re-directs the conversation to Covid”*. Even understanding their pay was challenging as another described: *“The new payslips that employees have to print out themselves look poorly designed and sometimes they show up late. Last year it had been a while before payslips were updated”*. When employees were asked the reasons for wanting to leave the tourism and hospitality sector, the top responses were that pay wasn't sufficient and/or poor work life balance.

When asked what would make tourism and hospitality a better place to work, the top responses were:

- 33% said better pay and conditions
- 8% said more staff
- 8% said more regular hours
- 8% said better managers

The most concerning results, that would demand immediate attention and resolution are the failure to pay the minimum wage, failure to meet legal obligations regarding holiday pay and compensation for working public holidays. In addition, general low wages and lack of opportunities for promotion and extra pay are priorities for future attention. See Table 1 for the summary of findings results.

Discussion

In a 1939 radio speech, Winston Churchill used the phrase ‘It's a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma’ to describe a situation that was difficult to comprehend. The phrase seems apt for describing the findings from the surveys in this study– that is why are the basics of pay in terms of paying people fairly and clearly still such a problem for many in the hospitality sector? The findings show two important things: firstly, that there are significant issues around low pay and non-compliance with pay legislation in the sector. Beyond the reality of having the lowest average hourly pay rate of any measured sector in New Zealand (see Figure 1), there is a disturbing lack of employer compliance with the basic pay minima required by employment law in this country. A significant proportion of employees don't get: regular payslips; correct holiday pay; correct public holiday rates; the correct minimum wage; or even paid for every hour they work. In addition, many employees never get extra pay or benefits over their basic pay and often fail to get opportunities for pay rises and promotions.

Sadly, reports using the same survey approach from Ireland, Scotland and Australia show very similar results (Curran & Cairnes, 2021; Hadjisolomou et al., 2021; R. Robinson, 2022).

Secondly, the qualitative data from the open-ended questions shows that employees don't feel they are being paid sufficiently, clearly want better pay and conditions and believe that higher pay would make the sector a better place to work. The contrast between the employees' perspectives and the views of employers and their representative bodies is stark. Irish and UK employers bemoan "unrealistic wage expectations" (Failte Ireland, 2022) and argue that "raising wages would not attract more British staff" (O'Carroll 2017), while their employees call for better pay. In New Zealand many employers and their representatives believe "Our businesses pay competitive wages" (*Hospitality Wages Jump 9% to Pass Living Wage*, 2021) and suggest that offering higher wages would not solve the industry's staffing challenges (*Online Snapshot Survey*, 2021). Hospitality New Zealand suggesting that the sector pays a competitive wage illustrates the disconnect from reality that a lack of solid data around wages had allowed. As Figure 1 shows, the hospitality sector offers the lowest hourly pay in the country, as measured by Statistics New Zealand – and this has been the case for over 20 years (Williamson, 2017). Through this research on hospitality employment conditions – especially including the crucial arena of pay, we can clearly see the diametrically opposed perceptions of employees and employers.

The findings from this research show there are concerning levels on non-compliance with New Zealand employment law around wages in a significant number of hospitality workplaces. This is a sector with a significant 'rump' of workplaces that are not meeting common expectations for decent pay. It is concerning that many employees were not given clear and/or timely information about their pay, showing that many experience a lack of transparency about their pay. This we believe is another symptom that all is not right, in that if pay is fair, why wouldn't an employer make this clear. Further research is needed in hospitality studies on not just levels of pay, but also including pay information including benefits, paid and unpaid leave, tips, overtime, and pay information and documentation. The results support previous research in New Zealand and internationally that depict the hospitality sector as having significant levels of low pay, and we should expect high levels of labour turnover and poor work conditions to be associated with this.

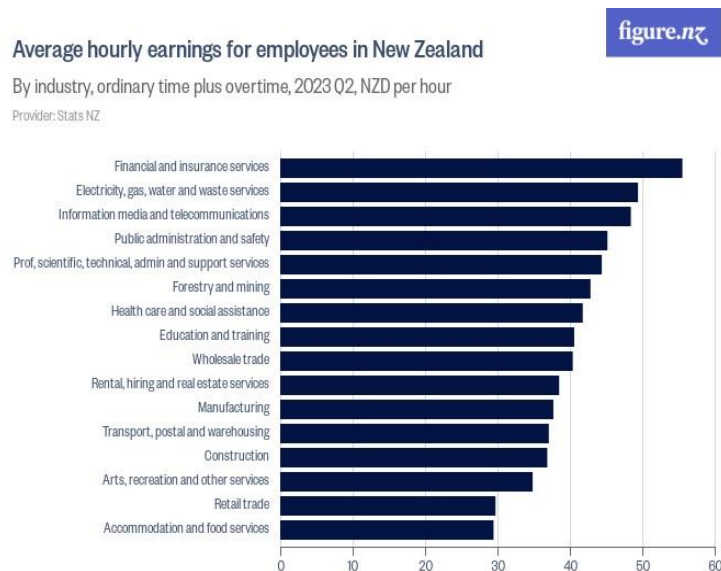
Conclusions and Implications

The data presented in this paper is from the largest and most detailed survey research on wages in the hospitality and tourism sector ever undertaken in New Zealand. It provides important empirical evidence in an area that suffers from considerable unsupported speculation and opinion, often driven by opposing positions from employers, unions and political parties. The findings from the two surveys show that wages do matter, pay is largely insufficient according to most respondent employees, nor is it often meeting legal requirements. Until such inadequacies are addressed, it is expected that tourism and hospitality will remain high turnover industries. Future research needs to capture employer drivers for low pay and for failing to meet legal requirements for pay and conditions. Also, for work that examines the extent to which this could be a gendered issue given the majority of the respondents in the study were women. The customer could also be an important voice for addressing this issue – as are customers happy with a martini served on the rocks (underpinned by low pay and poor employment conditions)?

2021 Findings	
13%	Did not receive payslips that show deductions and gross pay to their wages
18%	Did not receive the adult minimum wage
22%	Did not receive the correct penalty pay or time off in lieu days for working public holidays
20%	Did not receive their correct holiday pay
42.9%	Did not receive any benefits other than their basic pay
48.3%	Indicated there was no opportunity to get a pay rise or promotion in their current role
2022 Findings	
84.8%	Always got wage slip
7.5%	Not paid adult minimum wage.
68%	Frontline workers were paid less than \$24/hr
71%	Always get correct holiday pay
66%	Always get paid for every hour they work
68%	Always received paid or time off in lieu days
71%	Always get correct holiday pay

Table 1 – Summary of Results

Figure 1 – Average Hourly Earnings



Statistics New Zealand

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