

## Current discourses on tourism employment: Perspectives from the Finnish tourism sector

Sanna-Mari Renfors <sup>1\*</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lapland University of Applied Sciences, Finland, Email: [sanna-mari.renfors@lapinamk.fi](mailto:sanna-mari.renfors@lapinamk.fi)

\*Corresponding author

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### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and the changes in the business environment, such as technological developments, have transformed tourism employment. Simultaneously, the complexities of tourism employment and workforce input have been overlooked in tourism research. This study aims to increase overall understanding of how tourism companies and their workforce see the present main discourses of employment together with its challenges and solutions. The context of the study is a niche tourism destination in Northern Europe, Finland where micro-size companies dominate the sector. In this qualitative research, data consisted of ten semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis was performed to capture the attached patterned meanings. The findings confirm that tourism employment has different nuances in different contexts with attracting and retaining a skilled workforce as the major concern. Employing people with specialist skills and upskilling are the key issues strongly interlinked with business growth, competitiveness, and renewal. Business and product development, establishing work ecosystems, innovative means of promoting vacancies in collaboration with authorities, and developing an inclusive organisational culture are suggested as the main solutions to approach employment challenges.

**Keywords:** tourism employment, workforce, tourism sector, Finland, skills development

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## 1. Introduction

The tourism sector provides a wide range of jobs in its different sub-sectors and at different levels as well as in various sizes of enterprises for people of all ages and with different skill levels (Baum & Robinson, 2024; Robinson *et al.*, 2019). ILO (2024) estimates that the tourism sector employs 270 million people, which is approximately 8.2 percent of the global workforce. It is a labour-intensive and people-focused sector, which means that tourism as a sector and its success is dependent on human resources and their inputs (Baum, 2016; Costa *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, companies must pay particular attention to recruiting, engaging, training and retaining their workforce (Baum & Robinson, 2024; Carlbäck *et al.*, 2024; Pelit & Katircioglu, 2022). This is vital since the sector is facing challenges in its human resource management from attracting to offering progressive career opportunities (Baum, 2018).

As said, the skilled workforce is a key element in the business performance, competitiveness and renewal of the tourism sector (Carlbäck *et al.*, 2024). However, recent events such as the COVID-19 pandemic together with geopolitical and economic uncertainty have increased labour shortages as well as mismatches between labour supply and demand in tourism. In addition, labour issues in the sector are becoming increasingly complex due to changes in the external environment, such as technological developments (Liu-Lastres *et al.*, 2023). These have transformed employment in tourism workplaces, but at the same time they offer opportunities to improve related practices (Carlbäck *et al.*, 2024). Indeed, addressing workforce challenges in the fragmented tourism sector calls for new approaches to increase the quality of jobs (Baum & Robinson, 2024).

This study provides an overview and a deeper understanding of the current discourses of tourism employment from companies and their workforce perspective. As Robinson *et al.* (2019) note, the complexities of tourism employment and workforce input have been overlooked in tourism research. Mooney and Baum (2019) agree that tourism research does not fully delve into the study of the workforce in the sector. As Baum (2018) states, the underlying assumptions and inter-relationships in tourism employment are rarely discussed. Without hesitation, the features of tourism employment are problematised even if they are multi-faceted.

Thus, this study is not about problematising the current discourses of tourism employment, as many of the previous studies, but it aims to increase overall understanding of how tourism companies and their workforce see the present challenges of employment and what kind of solutions can be found to respond to those challenges. The research question is: What are the current main challenges and their solutions in tourism employment perceived by the tourism companies and their workforce?

The context of this study is a Northern European country, Finland. Many previous studies about tourism employment have been conducted in countries whose economies are excessively driven by tourism and in some cases, they are also experiencing overtourism. These studies are conducted e.g., in the Mediterranean countries and developing economies. In this study, the case destination is a niche tourism country with a lower number of tourists. Finland is a highly advanced economy, which is at the forefront of digitalisation and sustainable development. In Finland, tourism is considered as a growing service export sector. Tourism's direct share of GDP was 2.4% in 2024 (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2025a). The main target group based on their travel motives is the so-called Modern Humanist, who avoids mass tourism and popular travel destinations and loves to explore nature and its wonders, authentic lifestyle and have an active holiday (Visit Finland, 2020). Indeed, when travelling to Finland, to experience nature e.g., the northern lights and the midnight sun is the main attraction together with the Finnish architecture and design, meeting the Santa Claus and arctic snow-related activities. Therefore, studying the topic in the chosen context provides further insights into the diverse discourses on tourism employment.

The structure of the article is organised as follows. First, the literature review describes the main themes and current discourses on tourism employment and related research. Next, the article presents tourism employment in Finland in details. The methodology section is followed by exploring the findings. Lastly, the article includes a discussion and conclusions together with implications for relevant stakeholders.

## 2. Literature review

Robinson *et al.* (2019) characterise tourism work as precarious. By this, they mean that employment in the tourism sector is often irregular and insecure. It is part-time, fixed-term and temporary work. Work in tourism can be defined as low-paid, low-skilled, migrant-dense, and female-dominated with high labour turnover in common (Baum & Hai, 2019; Mooney & Baum, 2019; Rydzik & Kisson, 2024). In addition, work is seasonal, leading to unemployment and recruiting people who do not consider a career in the sector (Krabokoukis & Polyzos, 2024). Work in tourism can also be described as gig work with an on-demand workforce (Jin & Liu-Lastres, 2025; Liu-Lastres *et al.*, 2022; Stryzhak *et al.*, 2025). These issues have influenced to a poor image of tourism work, which in turn results in difficulties recruiting and retaining skillful workforce (Baum, 2015; Lillo-Banuls *et al.*, 2018). For these reasons, one of the main research topics has been decent work in tourism (e.g., Bianchi & de Man, 2020; Fuchs *et al.*, 2021; Ioannides *et al.*, 2021; Rydzik & Kisson, 2024; Wang & Cheung, 2024; Winchenbach *et al.*, 2021).

Due to labour challenges, HRM researchers call for an entirely novel approach in the tourism sector (Carlbäck *et al.*, 2024). They have highlighted themes such as strategic HRM and sustainable HRM (Madera *et al.*, 2017; Pelit & Katircioglu, 2022). Strategic HRM relates to creating competitive advantage and improving the performance of companies by developing human capital and various HRM practices (Madera *et al.*, 2017). The more evolved approach, i.e., sustainable human resource management (SHRM), links HRM and sustainability. It is defined as an approach to managing human resources and contributes to a sustainable organisation with a more extensive purpose for HRM (Kramar, 2014). Baum (2018) suggests that the challenges in tourism employment could be addressed by adopting a sustainable HRM mindset and integrating its key principles into employment. Furthermore, Mooney and Baum (2019) suggested a research agenda for sustainable tourism workforce which pays attention to both policy and organisational levels to ensure a truly sustainable approach to tourism employment.

Previous studies have also hierarchically structured the discourses on tourism workforce. Baum *et al.* (2016) developed a macro-meso-micro conceptualisation linking the themes in tourism workforce research into these three different layers. This conceptualisation has been later elaborated by Ladkin *et al.* (2023) and Liu-Lastres *et al.* (2023). The main research themes at the micro level, i.e., the individual employee level, have been related to employees' attitudes, characteristics, and behaviours (Baum, 2016; Ladkin *et al.*, 2023). These include values, job satisfaction, work engagement, job performance, self-efficacy, work-life balance, and emotional labour. At the meso level, i.e., the organisational level, research has focused on organisational HRM strategies, practices, and functions (Baum, 2016; Ladkin *et al.*, 2023). At the macro level, i.e., in the wider society, researchers have been interested in labour markets, supply and demand of the workforce, and policy formulation.

Liu-Lastres *et al.* (2023) highlighted that working life in the tourism sector has changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and emphasis is placed more on diversity and inclusion in tourism workplaces. In addition, demographic change and accelerating migration mean that diversity in the tourism workplace is increasing. In other words, a post-pandemic working life should take an employee-centered approach to an inclusive workplace focusing on individuals and their needs in a flexible way (Ladkin *et al.*, 2023; Liu-Lastres *et al.*, 2023). It is deemed important to foster an inclusive organisation culture to engage employees, retain them and attract new employees, as well as commit to employee growth. Therefore, research related to inclusion and diversity in tourism workforce (e.g., Gursoy & Maier, 2023; Hon & Gamor, 2022; Madera *et al.*, 2023) has gained more interest in recent years.

In addition, technology is driving a change in tourism workplace and working structures as well as practices and routines are adapting to the change in technology (Ladkin *et al.*, 2023; Rydzik & Kissoon, 2024). At the same time technology offers many opportunities for employees and provides cost savings for companies (Baum & Robinson, 2024; Rydzik & Kissoon, 2024). Hence, one of the controversial assumptions about future jobs in tourism is that artificial intelligence and robotisation will reduce jobs in tourism and substitute for labour supply (Baum *et al.*, 2020; Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2024). According to Rydzik and Kissoon (2024), this could lead to undermining support for local communities and for the workforce which is relying on precarious work.

### **3. Employment in the Finnish tourism sector**

The context of the study is a niche tourism destination in Northern Europe, Finland. According to the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), Finland ranked first among the 27 EU countries in 2022. It also ranked first in the Sustainable Development Report tracking and ranking the performance of all United Nations member states on Sustainable Development Goals in 2024. Regarding employment, the employment rate of people aged between 20 to 64 was 75.9% in December 2024 and the unemployment rate of people aged between 15 to 74 was 8.9% in Finland (Official Statistics of Finland, 2025). The employment rate between men and women was the same. In general, in the coming years the country's population is ageing, which means that the working population is decreasing. However, the number of immigrants is estimated to increase as well as employment in the service sector (EURES, 2023).

The Finnish tourism sector is dominated by micro enterprises; larger companies are mostly absent from the market. In 2022, the tourism sector employed 141 000 people in the country, representing 5.1% of the total national workforce (Visit Finland, 2023). The share varies by region, with Lapland, for example, having 7.9% of the workforce employed in tourism (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment in Finland, 2024b). In 2022, 52% of all employees in the tourism sector in Finland worked in restaurants, 23% in passenger transport, 12% in various cultural and recreational services, 11% in accommodation, and 2% in travel agency sub-sector (Visit Finland, 2023). Before the pandemic, in 2019, the tourism sector employed around 154 000 people, which was about 5.8% of all employed in Finland. This means that during the pandemic, a large number of employees in the sector moved to other sectors and, more recently, new workforce have entered the sector.

In addition, many of the employment relationships were atypical. This means that, for example in the accommodation and restaurant sector, part-time and short fixed-term work (less than 3 months) of all open vacancies was 57 per cent in 2023 (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment in Finland, 2024b). Staff turnover is also higher than in other sectors, meaning that employees leave the company more often. The tourism sector is also female-dominated and a significant employer of women in Finland. Indeed, the sector's workforce includes more female workers (71%) than male workers as well as 30 per cent are young people between 15-24 years old (Harju-Myllyaho *et al.*, 2022). The proportion of international employees, for example in the accommodation and restaurant sector, made up 26 per cent of the employees in 2023 (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2025b). In addition, 98 per cent of the job vacancies were in occupations with lower-level earnings than the median wages of Finns (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment in Finland, 2024b).

### **4. Findings and discussion**

Qualitative research was chosen as the research methodology. The data consisted of individual, semi-structured interviews (n=10). After identifying potential interviewees, ten interviewees employed in specialist and managerial positions were contacted. Some of the interviewees were also entrepreneurs. One of the most important selection criteria was that the interviewees represented different tourism sub-sectors to get a holistic perspective to tourism employment (Table 1). Their selection was also aligned with the structure of the tourism sector in Finland. Before the interviews ethical approval was

obtained and each interviewee also signed informed consent form to ensure their understanding of why the research is being conducted and what it involves. Each individual interview lasted from 45 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes.

This research was conducted as a part of the larger study in the Pact for Next Tourism Generation Skills (PANTOUR) project with the same data collection procedure in ten European countries. Therefore, the data collection followed the interview guide provided by the project with the interview themes and open and unstructured questions. Similar research was conducted already by the previous project in 2019, and this experience was utilised in developing the instrument for data collection. Thus, the selected interviewees were asked for example the following questions: What will working in the tourism sector and your company look like around 2030? Which changes do you perceive could occur in your company related to the workforce? What kind of people will be working in your company around 2030? How are these employees different from the current workforce? Which new job profiles do you see emerging in your company in the near future and why? Which skills will be needed most in the near future? When the saturation point was reached the data collection was finished.

**Table 1.** Interviewees profiles

Interviewee (I)	Job title	Sector	Gender
1	Entrepreneur	Travel agency	F
2	Entrepreneur	Restaurant	F
3	Entrepreneur	Restaurant	F
4	Entrepreneur	Restaurant	F
5	Entrepreneur	Programme service	M
6	Manager	Hotel	F
7	Specialist	Hotel	F
8	Manager	DMO	M
9	Specialist	DMO	F
10	Manager	Visitor attraction	F

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. It is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within the data, which are interpreted (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Brown, 2017; Naeem *et al.*, 2023). In other words, it helps to organise and describe the data in detail and understand its various aspects (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, themes related to tourism employment were generated, which capture essential meanings in the data. First, the data were transcribed and quotations representing various viewpoints selected. The data were closely examined to identify recurring patterns and the most relevant keywords i.e., essential terms and phrases of the data for further analysis.

Using keywords as a basis, the data were coded with an inductive approach i.e., the codes emerged from the data (cf. Braun & Clarke, 2006). The codes similar in meaning were categorised and grouped under headings to answer the research question. The patterns and relationships among codes were carefully interpreted. In this process, the codes were constantly compared to understand the differences and similarities. The final themes are presented in table 2. In this study, these themes capture the patterned meanings the workforce attaches to tourism employment. The findings section also includes a rich description of the data.

#### 4. Findings

Three major themes representing the current main discourses on tourism employment derived from the analysis. These themes describe how tourism employment, its challenges and solutions are perceived by the tourism companies and their workforce. The first theme “Employment is increasing but what about the workforce?” is about the challenges and solutions to attract and retain workforce.

The second theme “How to ensure the necessary skills?” is related to the challenges and solutions to guarantee the needed specialist skills in tourism businesses to prosper. The third theme “Good or bad digitalisation?” is about understanding how technology and digitalisation impact on jobs and business activities and the related challenges and solutions. The next table (table 2) summarises the key contents of these three themes.

**Table 2.** Tourism companies and their workforce perspectives on tourism employment

Themes	Challenges	Solutions
<b>Employment is increasing but what about the workforce?</b> Attracting and retaining workforce to match labour supply and demand at operational, specialist, and managerial level jobs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Working in the tourism sector has a poor image</li> <li>- Work is low-pay and shift work</li> <li>- Work is highly seasonal</li> <li>- Career development opportunities are missing at the managerial level</li> <li>- Poor understanding of the job possibilities in tourism and how to make the most of one’s skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Workforce mobility from season to season</li> <li>- Product development to increase employment outside peak seasons</li> <li>- Recruitment of international workforce and development of an inclusive organisational culture</li> <li>- Innovative promotion of job opportunities and vacancies</li> <li>- Collaboration between companies and authorities</li> <li>- Ensuring excellent employee experience, treating employees like customers, understanding their individual needs</li> <li>- Upskilling the existing workforce</li> </ul>
<b>How to ensure the necessary skills?</b> Securing the necessary skills to operate a profitable business, be competitive and grow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The level and type of skills needed vary according to the company size</li> <li>- Specialist skills are urgently needed for business profitability, growth and competitiveness</li> <li>- Micro-size companies need specialist skills but cannot employ full-time experts</li> <li>- Work in a specialist job position puts a lot of pressure and stresses employees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Work ecosystems to share a specialist working for several companies at the same time to share costs</li> <li>- Ensuring support for employees working in specialist job positions to secure their well-being at work</li> <li>- Constant upskilling to cope with daily jobs, development of a culture of lifelong learning</li> </ul>
<b>Good or bad digitalisation?</b> Understanding how technology and digitalisation impact jobs and business activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Digital skill requirements increase in all levels and types of jobs</li> <li>- Specialists in new technologies are urgently needed</li> <li>- New tech-related job profiles emerge in bigger companies</li> <li>- Sustainability and responsibility are connected to digitalisation</li> <li>- Excellent face-to-face customer service is a competitive advantage</li> <li>- Digital advancements are connected to the increase in remote and hybrid work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increasing understanding of how digitalisation, its solutions and tools can be integrated in business models, products, services and practices</li> <li>- Educating labour force about the digitalisation and related jobs in the tourism sector</li> <li>- Constant digital skills development with short training</li> <li>- Ensuring flexible work arrangements when possible</li> </ul>

### 5.1. Employment is increasing but what about the workforce?

The interviewees agreed that employment in the tourism sector is expected to increase in Finland, even if the business environment is not stable, and the global political and economic development poses many threats to the sector. In general, the attitude towards the future development of the sector and its employment is positive as a restaurateur (I3) explained:

*“The future of tourism and the tourism sector... is a growing sector. And yes, I see it growing in the future. So, I see the sector in a very positive light in that sense.” I3*

However, many interviewees expressed concerns about employment in tourism, as working in the sector is no longer perceived as glamorous and trendy as decades ago. Tourism companies find it difficult to attract a skilled workforce because of the low pay and working hours. The sector often involves shift work, which is perceived as a challenge, especially by young employees with families. Indeed, tourism work is considered as precarious. A specialist working in a DMO (I9) highlighted the employment challenges as follows:

*"It is so easy to travel these days, so travelling no longer has the kind of image that it used to have, but it is seen as something like basic drudgery and quite challenging... working hours and pay, so the glamour is missing."*

A specialist working in a hotel (I7) concluded that:

*"This sector has certain structural problems, not just low pay. What makes this such a transit sector for many people is also the shift work... how to combine it with the rest of life."*

In addition, seasonality was considered a major problem in employment. The seasonal nature of the sector makes it challenging to find employment off-seasons. As a result, tourism companies do not retain workers as they tend to look for more permanent and "real" work from other sectors. This also presents a challenge for the employers who invest a lot of their resources in orientating new employees to the workplace. However, the main tourism season in the northern Finland is the winter and in many other parts of the country the summer season attracts more tourists. This provides an opportunity for labour mobility according to seasons. In addition, it was strongly suggested that one way to tackle seasonality challenges is for companies to invest in innovative business and product development to increase tourism, and consequently tourism employment. A small tour operator (I1) explained that:

*"In a small business, you need to keep your bread and butter even in the winter months, and then you need to develop your operations so that there is enough work for every month. In our case, this has meant finding new target groups and geographical areas to operate in."*

One of the key issues for employment in the tourism sector is the small number of mid-management level vacancies and the large number of operational level vacancies. This results in a lack of career development opportunities in management positions. On the other hand, the growing number of international employees working in the sector is seen as a solution to the shortage of the operational level employees in Finland. English is becoming more common as a language of customer service, which will support the growth in the number of international employees in a variety of jobs. However, this often requires a change in attitudes and organizational culture within the company. As a result, many companies still experience barriers to changing their own practices to be able to employ international workforce, even if they understand the need. A hotel manager (I6) noted that:

*"However, the majority of our customers are Finnish, so we are forced to take people to this reception and restaurant who can speak Finnish. All the instructions are in Finnish, but...yes, of course, we have also translated them into English...but when all the systems and everything else is in Finnish, it has been a bit of a challenge."*

And a manager working in a DMO (I8) elaborated that:

*"Who will do the work in the future? Although this sector employs a lot of people, it employs a lot of people doing basic operational work. Then, for example, young people do not necessarily want to work*

*in the sector.... so, we need international workforce, who then work at the operational level in this sector."*

Indeed, interviewees suggest that the image of tourism work should be developed as a solution and its job opportunities communicated better. This could increase attractiveness and prestige of tourism jobs in the eyes of job seekers. The interviewees pointed out that there is a lack of understanding of the variety of jobs in tourism and of how to make the most of one's skills in the sector. To find employees, tourism companies should use a variety of modern and innovative means, such as social media tools, to promote their vacancies and cooperate extensively with authorities. A manager working in a DMO (I8) stated that:

*"For example, we have had vacancies in digital development, but it is really challenging to find people who are interested and understand the context. Even if there are digital professionals, they don't come to work in tourism, they prefer working in the Robotics Center. There is a need to rebrand the whole tourism sector to attract people."*

Furthermore, the findings show that it will be increasingly important to find measures to retain employees. The interviewees mentioned that taking care of the employees and guaranteeing excellent employee experience are the key issues. It is essential to consider employees as individuals with their own strengths and organise their tasks accordingly. It is equally important to upskill them because the business environment is changing fast. A small tour operator (I1) pointed out that:

*"If we just consider the needs of the employees and the team in the same way we take into account the needs of the customers, it's no different."*

## 5.2. How to ensure specialist skills?

The situation is challenging, especially for the smallest tourism companies. On the one hand, a micro-size company needs employees with specialist skills to cope with the changing business environment, but at the same time, employees are expected to be able to work in many different positions and perform various tasks. Moreover, many micro-size businesses do not have the resources to hire the needed expertise, which poses challenges for business development and requires a very innovative mindset from the entrepreneur. As a hotel manager (I6) expressed that:

*"If we get an employee who knows everything about one thing, but knows nothing about anything else, we won't do anything with someone like that. Our tasks are so varied that we need that kind of broader knowledge."*

A small tour operator (I1) continued that:

*"If the company had a chance to grow, I would hire five people right away. I would know exactly what they would do in the company."*

As many micro-size tourism companies are unable to hire the necessary skills on a full-time basis, the solution is related to networking. The interviewees agreed that freelancers will be increasingly used as specialist skills will be needed. This means that employment in the tourism sector will be more networked: an employee will work for several companies at the same time. Because of their expertise, employees work as independent freelancers and are subcontracted when their expertise is needed. In practice, tourism companies can subcontract, for example, marketing and communication services or project management, rather than hiring a separate person full-time to do the job. This supports business

growth and profitability, which in turn helps to reduce seasonality. A restaurateur (I3) commented that:

*For example...it's demanding to master such a large number of different technologies and keep up to date with how they're evolving. Digital services will probably be outsourced to some extent and freelancers used more and more. There will be shared employees between different employers"*

And a small tour operator (I1) highlighted that:

*"I think the tourism sector is about networking. Employees just change their working clothes according to whose job they are doing. Employees set up their own companies or just invoice through a billing service. For example, communication may no longer be done by companies themselves but bought in from outside. Not everyone needs to have the exact skills. If you can't do everything yourself, you buy services from a specialist."*

Furthermore, changes in the business environment and, consequently, in the job content and tasks are increasing the need for specialist skills in companies of all sizes. The changes result in highly specialist job profiles especially in bigger companies. This puts pressure on employees as they feel that their responsibilities are increasing. If their skills are highly specialised, they may not get the support needed from their supervisors and colleagues to carry out their tasks. They feel inadequate and are more likely to experience stress, which in turn has a negative impact on their well-being at work. A specialist working in a hotel chain (I7) explained the issue as follows:

*"This job is so autonomous that I can't ask anyone for help. For example, if I have a technical challenge, I have to ask our Chief Analyst for help with these problems, IT support will not help me. And when I'm on summer holiday... There is no one to replace me."*

Employees feel that the specialist job profiles mean that they must constantly update their skills to cope with their daily jobs. They need to be able to learn new things quickly and have a growth mindset to adapt for the constant change. The interviewees also mentioned that if they do not constantly develop themselves, they are not competitive in the job market and cannot perform their tasks. A specialist working in a hotel chain (I7) pointed out that specialist skills development is a long journey for an employee:

*Yes, I would say that I've been doing this for a year and a half now and I think that I know something...that may sound terrible, but the specialisation has gone very far... it takes a long time to develop those skills.*

### 5.3. Good or bad digitalisation?

One of the main reasons why the business environment is changing at a fast pace is digitalisation. This results in an urgent need for experts in smart solutions, tools and platforms and digital content creation. Examples include the use of artificial intelligence in marketing, data management for decision making, and process automation supported by robotics. In addition, basic jobs in the sector at the operational level, such as receptionist, require much more digital skills than before. For example, the importance of digitalisation in the jobs and the required skills is seen as follows by a specialist working in a DMO (I9):

*"Data....related to sales... then the predictability and making scenarios and steering the business is relevant. Above all, it is data analysis we clearly need."*

A restaurateur (I4) continued that:

*“The use of robots, it's quite an interesting thing, where robotics can be used in restaurants. Certainly, in such larger restaurants...they use it already today. Robots can do a lot in food preparation; this probably will increase.”*

According to interviewees, digitalisation and digital skills are also connected to sustainability and enable companies to operate in a climate-friendly and resource efficient way. Digital tools support companies in managing their impact on the environment by planning, operating, monitoring, and improving their actions. In addition, these tools e.g., enable companies to identify the sources of their carbon dioxide emission by calculating their carbon footprint and learning how to reduce it. Digital tools also help them in various circular economy practices to prevent and minimise waste. A restaurateur stated that (I4):

*“This carbon dioxide emissions measurement and control... It's still in its infancy, but I do believe that in 10 years it will be quite normal in the tourism sector. It is about the way they are measured and managed.”*

Another restaurateur (I2) explained that:

*“There is not much food waste in the restaurant because we use the ResQ app. All the leftovers are sold to customers through the app at the end of the day... we can get the ingredients price from there.”*

Interviewees often speculated on how digitalisation will affect the future of jobs in the sector. They stressed that operational level jobs require physical presence, and do not believe that digitalisation will significantly reduce the number of jobs. For example, food preparation, room cleaning, transportation, and tour guiding require workforce. Many interviewees highlight that digitalisation supports operational level jobs and increases customer satisfaction as certain services are automated, for example in a hotel reception. At the same time, they stressed that customer interaction and face-to-face customer service will, on the contrary, become a competitive advantage for tourism companies. A restaurateur (I3) estimated that:

*“You can't completely digitalise jobs in the tourism sector. Someone must put dishes in the washing machine. Perhaps, there will be more of a development where people will check into a hotel online in advance, or augmented reality can be used to make instructional videos and then self-service things like that.”*

And an entrepreneur from a programme service company (I5) continued that:

*“AI will be a really interesting tool for us to update online contents. We do not have to do social media posts ourselves, but these will be automated. We just tell AI what we kind of contents we want.”*

Interviewees also feel that remote work is increasing in the tourism sector, also due to digitalisation. Currently, remote and hybrid work is seen as a possibility in the tourism sector for all office tasks, such as sales, marketing and administrative tasks. When digitalisation advances, opportunities for working remotely will increase. However, tourism employees' attitudes towards remote and hybrid work are both positive and negative. Employees perceive the flexibility to work occasionally from home increases their well-being at work. They also state that they need social interaction and are pleased to meet and mingle with colleagues face-to-face at work. They also highlight that remote work as such has a negative

impact on the sector, e.g., as people go out to have lunch in restaurants less often during the working day. As a specialist working in a hotel (I7) explained:

*"I could work completely remotely, and it would be technically possible. But what brings me to the workplace is that I eat a hotel breakfast here every morning and lunch in our restaurant as the personnel benefit. At home I can work in peace, of course... but being here at work has its own clear value, and I am grateful that I have the opportunity to do both."*

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

Sure, the findings of this study reflect the same topics in tourism employment as in the previous studies. Its nature is precarious and seasonal as well as the lack of managerial level positions hinders career development. In addition, job seekers with specialist skills do not understand what kind of jobs the tourism sector has to offer and how they can make use of and apply their skills in this context. As Baum *et al.* (2016) expressed, attracting and retaining skilled employees is and has been a major issue in the tourism sector. The recent changes in the business environment have also stressed topics such as DE&I, technology adoption, well-being at work and the gig economy (Lastres *et al.*, 2023; Robinson & Baum, 2024). For example, one of the prevailing discourses is the future of jobs in tourism in the era of digitalisation (Baum *et al.*, 2020; Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2024), which is also present in the findings.

In sum, the findings confirm that tourism employment is a truly complex issue and has different nuances in different contexts. Its features vary according to the volume of tourism, geographical location and business size. For example, in Finland, seasonality poses severe difficulties to tourism employment from multiple perspectives. As a solution, the findings propose that the seasonal workforce could be shared among employers in winter and summer destinations around the country to get them employment opportunities all year round and transit from one season to another. Another solution is business and product development outside peak seasons to support increasing employment all year round.

The perspectives of operational level work prevail in tourism research which assumes that tourism is a low-skill sector (Ladkin, 2011; Robinson *et al.*, 2019). As the research on tourism employment has focused on the precarious nature of tourism work from an individual perspective, it ignores the multifaceted nature of the skills needed in all sizes of companies. However, in a niche destination, where the sector is dominated by micro-size companies, employing people with specialist skills is strongly interlinked with business growth, competitiveness, and renewal of tourism companies. Specialist skills support micro-size companies to expand their business to new target groups and geographical areas as well as bigger companies to increase their cost-efficiency. Bigger companies potentially hire employees with specialist skills to specialist job profiles such as data analysts, but smaller companies cannot afford to do so.

Therefore, it is suggested that work ecosystems, where multiple micro-size companies share an employee, can be established to guarantee the specialist skills needed. Previously, many tourism researchers have stressed gig-economy, i.e., a system of freelance and flexible employment enabled by a digital platform, creating problems and conflicts in the labour market (Stryzhak *et al.*, 2025). However, the gig workers are also seen as an asset supporting business growth in project-based assignments (Jin & Lastres, 2025). It can be stated that the findings agree with Ladkin *et al.* (2023) that employment is moving from mere gig-economy to complex interconnected work ecosystems.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that digital skills are the most crucial type of skills for a tourism company to thrive, yet these skills are also the main skills gap. Hence, the specialist skills referred to in

the study are often digital skills related to the use of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, robotics, virtual and augmented reality, and data analytics. The findings are in line with those of Carlisle *et al.* (2023) and Minor *et al.* (2024) who stated that tourism companies mostly lack these skills. The findings also agree with Carlisle *et al.* (2023) that specialist digital skills are an integral, not a separate, part of tourism employment. This shows that tourism companies should invest in digital skills development, but this can be tricky for a micro-size company.

Without a doubt, the findings show that upskilling is a central, cross-cutting discourse in tourism employment. It is the key to retaining employees and supporting their well-being at work as well as operating a profitable, competitive business, which can take advantage of the changing business environment. Bigger tourism companies provide this training in-house to their employees systematically, but the challenges lie in smaller tourism companies. Due to the low volume of tourism and state-funded vocational and higher degree education, private entities providing training for tourism stakeholders are almost non-existent. Previously, one solution has been Visit Finland Academy, which is a tailored approach with intensive trainings to develop skills of the micro-size tourism companies in the Finnish context by the national tourism board. However, the government has cut Visit Finland's fundings practically halving it. This restricts its activities in the near future and poses challenges in ensuring sufficient skills as well as restricts companies' access to training.

In addition, the findings show that to ensure labour supply at operational level jobs, it is important to develop an inclusive organisational culture and recruit more international workforce. When comparing the figures, the tourism sector employs a high number of international employees (16 %) in Europe (Eurostat, 2024). In Finland, for example in the accommodation and restaurant sector, even 26 % of the employees are from foreign origin (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2025b). However, their employment is concentrated in the regions e.g., Lapland and Helsinki, where the number of international tourists is also higher than in the other parts of Finland. As a result, attitudes towards employing international employees vary across the country. The regions attracting international tourists are far more ready to employ international workforce, but the other regions still find barriers to do so.

Otherwise, the findings show that tourism companies and workforce perspectives are quite well aligned with the policy makers' viewpoints in Finland. The national tourism strategy (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2024a) sets out that it is of utmost importance to assure the supply of skilled workforce by increasing the attractiveness of the sector as a workplace. Anticipating the new skill requirements and developing specialist skills by responding to the tourism sector's needs with targeted, short-term and flexible training is essential. In addition, the strategy outlines the importance of developing recruitment processes, promoting the recruitment of a skilled international workforce and supporting labour mobility across the country according to summer and winter seasons. It is also vital to increase well-being and satisfaction at work to engage and retain the workforce. Both the strategy and the findings also emphasise that seasonality should be mitigated with product development.

In the future, the connection between business development and employment could be one of the research topics to further innovate business activities that could have an impact on good quality jobs. In addition, more research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of tourism work ecosystems to find potential solutions to employment challenges by developing tools to share the workforce with specialist skills. As the recruitment of the international workforce is also seen as a solution to labour shortages, its barriers should be identified to improve its preconditions in tourism companies also in regions with a smaller volume of international tourists.

Limitations of the study are related to the fact that it concerns only one country and its current discourses on tourism employment. This means that the findings cannot be generalised, but they contribute to increasing overall understanding of how tourism companies and their workforce see the present discourses of employment together with its challenges and solutions.

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