

ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY: A CASE STUDY OF MARRIOTT INTERNATIONAL

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Abstract: This paper explores how organizational learning and knowledge management drive competitive advantage in the hospitality industry, using Marriott International as a case study. The focus is on Marriott's training culture, organizational structure, and mechanisms for knowledge transfer that sustain growth and service excellence. A qualitative case study approach was adopted, with Marriott chosen for its global scale and reputation. Data were drawn from secondary sources, including corporate reports, academic literature, and industry analyses. The interpretive method was applied to synthesize findings, ensuring validity through triangulation of multiple sources. The analysis revealed that Marriott embeds learning across all organizational levels. Initiatives such as new hire orientation, daily training for hourly staff, and advanced management development foster continuous skill-building. The company's structure, which combines centralized standards with localized adaptation, facilitates knowledge transfer, innovation, and responsiveness. Key practices include designing training that respects time constraints, equipping employees with foundational skills, leveraging digital tools, and valuing diverse sources of knowledge. The findings demonstrate that organizational learning is not a supportive function but a strategic asset. By embedding training and feedback loops into its operations, Marriott cultivates a culture of inclusivity, adaptability, and innovation. This model explains the company's consistent recognition as one of the best workplaces and underscores the role of knowledge in sustaining global competitiveness. The study also situates Marriott's practices within broader theories of organizational change and learning. It shows how tacit and explicit knowledge interact through processes of externalization, combination, and internalization, creating a dynamic cycle of continuous improvement. Marriott's ability to convert knowledge into practice illustrates how learning becomes a driver of transformation. Continuous investment in employee development is recommended as a pathway to long-term growth, resilience, and service quality in the hospitality industry. This case study contributes to the literature by linking theory with practice, demonstrating how organizational learning translates into competitive advantage. It emphasizes that knowledge is not static but evolves through interaction, reflection, and application. Marriott International exemplifies how a global hospitality leader can embed learning into its culture, ensuring sustainable success in a rapidly changing environment. Future research should compare Marriott's practices with other global hotel chains to identify industry-wide best practices. Additionally, exploring the role of digital learning platforms and AI-driven tools could provide insights into how technology further enhances organizational learning.

Keywords: knowledge, organizational learning, hospitality industry, case study

1. INTRODUCTION

In order for organizations to survive, grow, and remain competitive, they must embrace change. Beyond rapid technological and digital advancements, some of the most significant transformations occur in the sphere of human resources (Duarte & Silva, 2023). People have become the decisive resource for achieving success, and employee knowledge now represents the most valuable capital distinguishing successful individuals and organizations from those that fail (Bogićević Milikić, 2020).

Throughout their careers, many employees will be required to shift roles, making the acquisition of relevant knowledge, skills, intellectual curiosity, adaptability, and a commitment to continuous learning essential for long-term success (Jaganjac & Lukić Nikolić, 2023). As knowledge expands at an accelerated pace, previously acquired competencies quickly become outdated. This necessitates ongoing renewal of existing knowledge, the acquisition of new skills, and support for employee initiatives and innovations that drive further development (World Economic Forum, 2019). Permanent learning and innovation therefore emerge as dynamic, continuous processes fundamental to organizational progress (Lazarević & Lukić Nikolić, 2024).

Managers increasingly recognize that learning and knowledge creation are crucial resources for sustaining competitive advantage. Organizations that embrace continuous learning and effectively utilize new knowledge gain a distinct edge (Abdelrahman et al., 2025). Learning acts as a catalyst for change, while environmental demands and the need for adaptation motivate the acquisition of new knowledge. Ultimately, the core value that defines an organization's competitive advantage lies in what it knows and can perform better than others (Janićijević, 2008). Successful organizations strive to learn faster and more effectively, manage resources efficiently, create superior value for consumers, and deliver high-quality products and services (Cheng et al., 2024).

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate, through the case study of Marriott International, how knowledge and organizational learning shape competitive advantage in the hospitality industry. Particular emphasis is placed on the company's structure, employee training and development systems, and mechanisms for transferring and integrating knowledge within the organization. This paper highlights that continuous learning and investment in human capital are essential drivers of sustainable growth and service excellence in hospitality industry.

2. ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

The concept of organizational learning in management theory gained prominence in the 1990s. Argyris (1977) defined it as the process of detecting and correcting errors, while Stata (1989) emphasized its reliance on shared insights, knowledge, mental models, and organizational memory. In essence, organizational learning builds on past experiences to generate new understanding and capabilities.

Learning drives significant change across all dimensions of an organization shaping managerial behavior, employee performance, team collaboration, production and service outcomes, and goal-setting. Because it enables transformation, organizational learning is often positioned within the broader theory of organizational change (Janićijević, 2006). It expands the behavioral potential of both individuals and organizations (Child, 2005).

Two primary forms of learning can be distinguished (Janićijević, 2007). *Learning before doing* involves systematic information gathering, analysis, and transfer to strengthen the organizational knowledge base. This includes formal education, seminars, workshops, literature, experimentation, and learning from others' experiences. *Learning by doing*, in contrast, relies on trial and error, where positive behaviors are reinforced and negative ones extinguished.

Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) enriched the understanding of organizational learning by distinguishing between tacit and explicit knowledge. *Tacit knowledge* is personal, intuitive, and context-dependent, making it difficult to transfer. *Explicit knowledge*, however, is formalized in documents, standards, and procedures, and can be stored, shared, and transformed. The dynamic interaction between these two forms externalization, combination, and internalization creates a continuous cycle of knowledge conversion. Tacit knowledge becomes explicit through articulation, explicit knowledge is systematized into more complex forms, and explicit knowledge is internalized when employees adopt and apply it in practice. This cyclical process confirms that organizational learning is inherently dynamic and ongoing. Employees continuously accumulate tacit knowledge, articulate it into explicit forms, and re-integrate it into practice. In this way, learning never ceases; it evolves as a perpetual driver of organizational growth, adaptability, and performance (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

Dialogue and discussion represent essential forms of multidirectional communication within organizations, particularly in team settings. They are among the most effective ways of working and learning collectively, as they foster collaboration, knowledge exchange, and problem-solving (Lazarević & Lukić Nikolić, 2024). Dialogue serves as a powerful form of organizational learning, enabling individuals to critically examine their own assumptions while appreciating the participatory nature of others' ideas (Senge, 2003). Through dialogue, participants generate new insights while remaining receptive to alternative perspectives. This process encourages deep reflection, coherence of thought, and the development of shared understanding (Feeney et al., 2023). For dialogue to be effective, certain conditions must be met: members must suspend their assumptions, cultivate trust and respect, and be guided by a leader who facilitates the process. Suspending assumptions does not mean abandoning them, but rather acknowledging and questioning them, thereby creating space for objective evaluation and openness to new perspectives. Discussion complements dialogue by focusing on decision-making. It involves analyzing attitudes, evaluating alternatives, and selecting solutions that all employees can support (Mitchell et al., 2023). While dialogue expands understanding without requiring consensus, discussion channels diverse viewpoints toward collective decisions. When conducted constructively, both dialogue and discussion enhance team learning, encourage innovation, and build skills essential for effective teamwork. Their complementarity lies in the fact that the skills required for dialogue - listening, reflection, and openness are equally vital in discussion, ensuring that organizational learning is both exploratory and action-oriented.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research was conducted as a qualitative case study, with Marriott International selected as the subject. Marriott International, the world's largest hotel group by rooms and revenue, operates more than 9,200 properties with 1.68 million rooms across 144 countries and territories. Its strength lies in a diverse portfolio of over 30 brands from luxury names like The Ritz-Carlton and St. Regis to widely accessible options such as Courtyard by Marriott supported by a robust global expansion strategy (Global Tourism Forum, 2025). The case study method was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of organizational learning and knowledge practices within a complex, multinational hospitality organization.

Data collection relied primarily on secondary sources, including corporate reports, academic literature, industry analyses, and publicly available materials. These documents provided insights into Marriott's corporate values, particularly the principle of "People First," which emphasizes the central role of employees in achieving business success (Marriott Serve 360 Report, 2022). In addition, scholarly articles and professional publications were reviewed to contextualize Marriott's training programs, organizational structure, and knowledge management practices within broader trends in the hospitality industry.

By triangulating data from corporate documents, industry rankings, and academic studies, the research sought to ensure validity and reliability. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of how Marriott leverages knowledge and organizational learning as strategic tools for sustaining growth, service quality, and global competitiveness in the hospitality sector.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Marriott International has responded to workforce challenges by developing training programs specifically tailored to the needs of frontline employees. Their strategy highlights several key practices (Kitterman, 2025):

- **Respecting time constraints:** Short, relevant, and digestible learning modules allow busy hourly workers to build skills without disrupting daily tasks.
- **Providing foundational skills:** Training in basic tools, such as email and scheduling software, equips employees for managerial responsibilities.
- **Listening to employees:** Feedback channels, including surveys and focus groups, ensure training reflects real-time needs.
- **Valuing diverse teachers:** Lessons can come from colleagues across all roles, not only formal leaders.
- **Leveraging digital tools:** Mobile-friendly, bite-sized content and AI-driven translation make learning accessible across Marriott's global workforce.

Marriott's model demonstrates that effective learning and development extend beyond advanced training to embrace inclusivity, adaptability, and respect for frontline employees. By embedding these principles, the company fosters employee engagement, career growth, and organizational resilience. Equally important is Marriott's organizational design, which balances centralized standards with localized flexibility. Corporate teams establish global benchmarks for quality, service, and brand identity, while regional leaders and property managers adapt these frameworks to local regulations, cultural expectations, and guest preferences. This dual approach ensures consistency across the brand while encouraging innovation at the property level. Together, Marriott's training culture and organizational structure transform learning into a strategic asset. By integrating training, feedback loops, and localized adaptation into its operations, the company not only preserves service quality but also cultivates organizational knowledge that drives innovation, resilience, and long-term competitiveness in the hospitality industry.

Key impacts of Marriott's organizational structure on organizational learning and knowledge (Ahmed, 2025):

- **Clear hierarchy:** Defined responsibilities from corporate to property level streamline communication and clarify accountability, which supports knowledge transfer across tiers.
- **Specialized teams:** Functions such as HR, finance, marketing, and technology create knowledge hubs that accelerate decision-making and disseminate expertise throughout the organization.
- **Local adaptation:** Regional leaders contextualize corporate standards, embedding local insights into Marriott's global knowledge base. This strengthens organizational learning by integrating diverse perspectives.
- **Expandable framework:** The structure accommodates both new builds and conversions, enabling Marriott to replicate and scale its learning systems efficiently.
- **Training culture:** Leadership and skills programs ensure managers are equipped to apply corporate knowledge while fostering continuous learning at the property level.
- **Fast response mechanisms:** Property leaders act quickly on guest feedback and market changes, turning real-time insights into organizational learning that informs broader strategies.

- **Brand-based innovation:** Separate brand divisions experiment with new ideas without disrupting others, creating a portfolio of knowledge that enriches the company as a whole.
- **Agile leadership:** Executive roles are restructured as needed, ensuring decision-making remains flexible and responsive, which sustains a dynamic learning environment.

Marriott's structure transforms learning into a strategic asset. By embedding training, feedback loops, and localized adaptation into its operations, the company not only preserves service quality but also cultivates organizational knowledge that drives innovation and resilience. This model explains why Marriott consistently ranks among the best workplaces: its learning systems empower employees at every level, from frontline associates to executives, to contribute to the company's growth.

Marriott begins with a new hire orientation that introduces employees to the company's culture, brand, and local operations. Hourly staff receive about 15 minutes of daily training in core areas such as culinary, room operations, and purchasing. The Gateways program further develops discipline-specific skills in fields like finance, HR, IT, loss prevention, PR, and sales (HM Staff, 2010). For managers, Marriott offers more than 20 training programs delivered through certified trainers, property-based leaders, and self-directed online learning. These sessions emphasize group interaction, practical exercises, and performance evaluation. Hotel-based programs include (HM Staff, 2010):

- **Essential Skills for Supervisors and Managers:** 15 modules covering communication, hiring, coaching, team building, conflict management, business basics, and stress management.
- **InMotion!:** Hands-on cross-departmental learning to prepare supervisors for broader management roles.
- **Get On Board:** Orientation for new managers, focusing on Marriott's culture, policies, and international lodging practices.
- **Ashridge Virtual Learning Resource Centre:** Online resources for self-paced learning.

Additional offerings include (HM Staff, 2010):

- **Property Strategic Planning Implementation:** A two-day program for leadership teams before new hotel openings.
- **Courtyard by Marriott International University:** Specialized training for Courtyard brand managers on positioning, service standards, pricing, and food and beverage strategies.
- **On-Property Programs:** Workshops such as Passports to Success for hourly associates.
- **Effective Training Skills:** Certification in facilitation techniques, experiential learning, and understanding learning styles.

Table 1 provides a structured overview of Marriott International's training and development programs, highlighting how learning is embedded at every organizational level.

Table 1. Marriott training and development programs

Program type	Description	Focus areas
New Hire Orientation	Introduces employees to Marriott's culture, brand, and local operations	Company values, brand identity, property-specific practices
Daily Training for Hourly Staff	15 minutes of training each day	Culinary, room operations, purchasing
Gateways Program	Discipline-specific training for hourly non-management employees	Finance, HR, IT, loss prevention, PR, sales
Management Training Programs	20+ courses delivered by certified trainers, property leaders, and online learning	Group interaction, practical exercises, performance evaluation
Essential Skills for Supervisors and Managers	15-module program	Communication, hiring, coaching, team building, conflict management, business basics, stress management
InMotion!	Hands-on cross-departmental learning	Broader hotel expertise, preparation for management roles
Get On Board	Orientation for new managers (internal/external hires)	Marriott culture, policies, international lodging practices
Ashridge Virtual Learning Resource Centre	Online self-paced learning	Flexible access to training resources
Property Strategic Planning Implementation	Two-day program before hotel openings	Leadership team preparation, strategic planning
Courtyard by Marriott	Specialized program for Courtyard brand	Brand positioning, service standards,

International University	managers	pricing, food & beverage strategies
On-Property Programs	Workshops for hourly associates	Passports to success, In the beginning, and other property-based training
Effective Training Skills	Workshop and certification	Facilitation techniques, experiential learning, understanding learning styles

Source: Adapted from HM Staff (2010). HR: Marriott employee training and development program. Hotel Management. Retrieved from <https://www.hotelmanagement.net/human-resources/hr-marriott-employee-training-and-development-program> (17 February 2026)

These programs are important because they embed learning at every level of the organization, ensuring that both frontline staff and managers continuously build skills aligned with Marriott's culture and standards. By layering orientation, daily training, and advanced management development, Marriott strengthens knowledge transfer, employee growth, and long-term organizational effectiveness.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The case study of Marriott International highlights how organizational learning and knowledge management function as central pillars of success in the hospitality industry. Marriott's layered approach to training spanning new hire orientation, daily skill-building for hourly employees, and advanced management development ensures that learning is embedded at every level of the organization. This comprehensive system not only equips staff with the technical and interpersonal skills required for their roles but also reinforces the company's culture of "People First," where employee growth is directly linked to service excellence and customer satisfaction. The findings demonstrate that Marriott's organizational structure, which balances centralized standards with localized flexibility, creates an environment where knowledge can be effectively transferred, adapted, and expanded. Corporate teams provide global benchmarks, while regional leaders and property managers contextualize these standards to meet local needs. Moreover, the company's openness to diverse sources of knowledge valuing lessons from colleagues across all roles illustrates a culture where learning is democratized and innovation can emerge from any level. Future research should compare Marriott's practices with other global hotel chains to identify industry-wide best practices. Additionally, exploring the role of digital learning platforms and AI-driven tools could provide insights into how technology further enhances organizational learning.

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