

Navigating the Hospitality Maze: Experiences of Non-Hospitality Graduates Employed in Mabuhay Accommodations in Cebu City, Philippines

Mc Jhon L. Julaya^{1*} and Edilyn G. Lopez-Derecho^{1,2}

¹University of Cebu, Cebu City, Philippines

*mjulaya@uc.edu.ph, ²elopez@uc.edu.ph

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences, workplace challenges, coping strategies, and career aspirations of non-hospitality graduates employed in Department of Tourism-accredited mabuhay accommodations in Cebu City, Philippines, and used the findings as the basis for the Mabuhay Navigator Bridging Program. A descriptive phenomenological design was employed with ten purposively selected non-hospitality graduates who were at least 22 years old, residents of Cebu City, and regular employees with at least six months of service. Data were generated through approximately 60-minute structured, in-depth interviews using a researcher-developed guide anchored on Seidman's phenomenological interviewing model; the guide underwent expert content validation. Interview transcripts were analyzed using Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method, supported by interpretative attention to participants'

personal and professional meanings. Ten themes emerged across three inquiry areas. Positive work-life experiences centered on personal growth, fulfillment, and strategies for work-life balance, while negative experiences reflected career transition, multifaceted roles, and industry-related struggles. Workplace challenges involved operational demands and competency gaps, recurring problems with limited organizational response, and coping through resilience and support systems. Career aspirations emphasized education, training, skills development, workforce development, and service innovation. The study concluded that job mismatch can lead to compensatory professional adaptation in which employees reconstruct their professional identities through experience, resilience, and continuous learning. Structured training, credentialing pathways, and institutional support are therefore essential to strengthen employee competence, retention, service quality, and career mobility in mabuhay accommodations.

Keywords: *mabuhay accommodations, job mismatch, non-hospitality graduates, hospitality workforce development, descriptive phenomenology, Cebu City*

INTRODUCTION

The hospitality sector depends heavily on employees who can deliver consistent, responsive, and culturally sensitive service. In the Philippines, mabuhay accommodations represent a broad category of tourist inns, pension houses, motels, bed-and-breakfast establishments, vacation homes, hostels, guest houses, and similar lodging facilities. Their importance has grown alongside the wider accommodation and food-service sector and the recovery of tourism employment. Cebu, one of the country's major tourism gateways, recorded substantial visitor arrivals in 2024 and continues to host a growing mix of traditional and alternative accommodations, increasing the need for a dependable and adaptable service workforce (Department of Tourism [DOT], 2024; Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2023; Province of Cebu, 2025).

A persistent workforce concern is the mismatch between employees' educational preparation and the roles they perform. Hospitality organizations frequently recruit graduates from non-hospitality fields because of labor shortages, transferable competencies, or immediate staffing needs. However, educational mismatch can create adjustment difficulties when employees must master unfamiliar technical procedures, guest-service expectations, emotional labor, and multiple operational functions through on-the-job learning. Research has shown that educational mismatch, person-job misfit, and role-related skill gaps can affect job satisfaction, confidence, retention intentions, and mobility, while experience and workplace learning may partly compensate for formal preparation (Guvener et al., 2020; Marchante et al., 2007; Na et al., 2024).

The issue is particularly salient in smaller accommodation establishments where lean staffing structures may require employees to perform front-office, housekeeping, maintenance, reporting, and guest-service duties within the same work cycle. In such contexts, organizational culture, supervisor support, training, and adaptable human-resource practices become central to how workers manage role strain and maintain service quality (Dawson et al., 2023; Heimerl et al., 2020; Rabiul et al., 2025). Philippine research on mabuhay accommodations has examined guest satisfaction and hiring practices, but less attention has been given to the lived experiences of non-hospitality graduates already working inside these establishments, particularly in Cebu City (Elmedulan, 2024; Escarilla et al., 2024).

Addressing this gap, the study examined how non-hospitality graduates experienced work in mabuhay accommodations, how they coped with workplace challenges, and what they aspired to achieve for their career development. The inquiry was grounded in Holland's vocational perspective, Fiedler's contingency orientation, and Thurow's job-competition perspective, which together illuminate person-environment fit, adaptive responses to situational demands, and the role of trainability and on-the-job learning in employment outcomes (Holland, 1997; Reams, 2023; Thurow, 1975). The study further sought to translate participants' experiences into a practical intervention - the Mabuhay Navigator Bridging Program - for strengthening hospitality readiness, transferable competencies, mentoring, and formal career pathways.

Literature Review

Educational Mismatch and Person-Job Alignment in Hospitality

Educational mismatch occurs when a worker's formal preparation does not correspond closely with the knowledge or skills expected in the assigned occupation. In hospitality, this mismatch can be complicated because front-line service work combines technical procedures, interpersonal communication, emotional regulation, and rapid problem-solving. Marchante et al. (2007) found that work experience can compensate for some educational shortfalls, while Guvener et al. (2020) showed that skill mismatch is multidimensional rather than reducible to credentials alone. More recent evidence indicates that alignment between a graduate's field of study and work role is associated with job satisfaction and turnover intention, underscoring the practical importance of educational and occupational fit (Na et al., 2024).

Holland's vocational theory proposes that work outcomes improve when personal orientations and occupational environments are congruent, while the broader person-job fit literature similarly emphasizes compatibility between worker characteristics and job demands (Holland, 1997; Nauta, 2010). Yet mismatch does not automatically determine failure. Workers may develop competence through experience, restructure routines, and apply transferable abilities in communication, problem-solving, leadership, and customer relations. This adaptive possibility is consistent with contingency thinking, in which effective performance depends on the alignment between individual capabilities and situational demands rather than on a single ideal worker profile (Reams, 2023).

Work Environment, Well-Being, and Retention

Hospitality work is strongly shaped by organizational and relational conditions. Heimerl et al. (2020) identified supervisor relationships, scheduling reliability, and opportunities for personal development as important contributors to job satisfaction. Dawson et al. (2023) likewise demonstrated that hospitality organizational culture

influences job satisfaction, citizenship behavior, service recovery performance, and intention to leave. These findings are relevant to non-hospitality graduates because unfamiliar role expectations may be easier to navigate when workplace relationships provide guidance, feedback, and psychological support.

The intensity of front-line hospitality work can also generate stress through shifting schedules, emotional labor, work-family conflict, and guest-related demands. Wong et al. (2021) documented the consequences of occupational stressors for hotel employees, while Karatepe and Kilic (2015) showed that managerial support can reduce the negative consequences of work-family conflict and emotional exhaustion. Teng (2023) further highlighted how work-leisure dynamics relate to hospitality employee well-being. Together, these studies indicate that resilience is important, but sustainable performance also depends on organizational practices that prevent employees from absorbing recurring operational problems on their own.

Training, Upskilling, and Workforce Development

Training is a principal mechanism for narrowing the gap between transferable knowledge and hospitality-specific performance. Chen and Shen (2012) emphasized experiential learning and internships as pathways for translating classroom learning into professional competence. Varra et al. (2021) similarly distinguished general from technical skills in hospitality jobs, showing the need for role-relevant preparation. As service environments become more technology-dependent, continuous upskilling and reskilling are increasingly necessary for workers to remain effective and adaptable (Adeyinka-Ojo et al., 2020; Bennett & McWhorter, 2021).

Workforce development is most effective when training is reinforced by onboarding, mentoring, and supportive human-resource systems. Süveges and Kurucz (2024) emphasized the value of structured mentoring and training during employee integration, while Rabiul et al. (2025) linked human-resource practices and adaptability with commitment to quality service. For employees who enter hospitality without a related degree, formal certification, simulated practice, and staged mentoring can therefore transform trial-and-error learning into a more coherent pathway toward competence and career mobility.

Mabuhay Accommodations and the Cebu Context

The Philippine mabuhay accommodation sector occupies an important space between formal hotels and smaller lodging establishments. National tourism and business statistics show the sector's contribution to employment and accommodation supply, while Cebu's strong visitor volumes intensify demand for reliable front-line service (DOT, 2024; PSA, 2023; Province of Cebu, 2025). At the establishment level, Elmedulan (2024) found that guests value ambience, hospitality, and added service value in DOT-accredited mabuhay accommodations, demonstrating how employee capability directly affects the guest experience.

Human-resource practices within mabuhay accommodations are therefore central to service consistency. Escarilla et al. (2024) identified hiring, inclusion, training, legal compliance, competence assessment, and technology integration as interrelated concerns among human-resource practitioners in selected Philippine mabuhay accommodations. The present study extends this line of inquiry by examining the employees' perspective in Cebu City. Rather than treating non-hospitality graduates merely as a staffing solution, it investigates how they reconstruct professional identity, manage role demands, and envision pathways for advancement within hospitality.

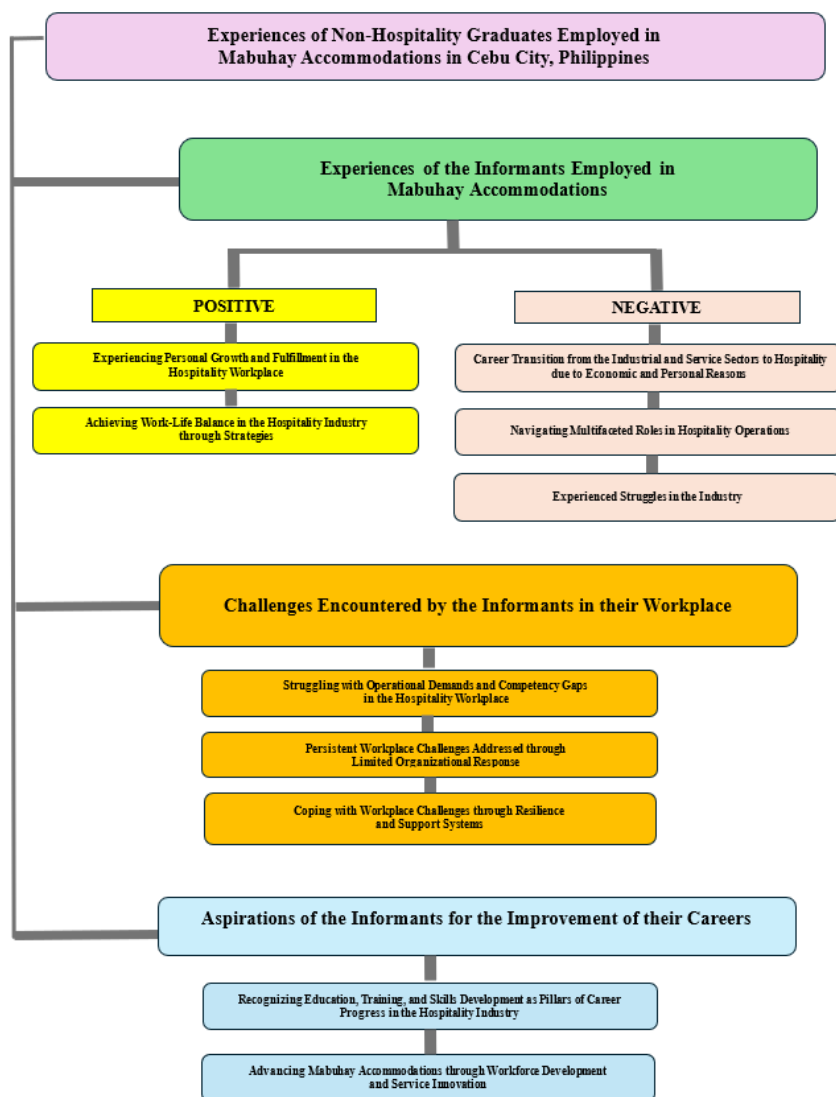


Figure 1. *Thematic Categories of the Experiences of Non-Hospitality Graduates Employed in Mabuhay Accommodations in Cebu City, Philippines*

METHODS

Research Design

The study employed a descriptive phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of non-hospitality graduates working in mabuhay accommodations in Cebu City. The design was appropriate because the inquiry focused on how participants experienced and interpreted their daily work, challenges, coping processes, and career aspirations. Descriptive phenomenology seeks to remain close to participants' accounts while identifying the essential meanings of a phenomenon (Jackson et al., 2018; Neubauer et al., 2019).

Research Locale

The research was conducted in three Department of Tourism-accredited mabuhay accommodations in Cebu City: Metro Park Hotel Cebu in La Guardia, Lahug; iPark Hotel and Residences in Apas, Lahug; and WJV

Inn Lahug along Salinas Drive. These establishments were selected because their workforces included employees without formal tourism or hospitality degrees and because their lean staffing structures provided a relevant setting for examining role adaptation, multitasking, and workplace learning.

Participants and Sampling Technique

Ten primary informants were selected through purposive sampling. Eligible participants were at least 22 years old, registered residents of Cebu City, regular employees of mabuhay accommodations for at least six months, and graduates of non-hospitality degree programs. Employees aged 21 or younger, those with less than six months of service, and employees with hospitality-related degrees were excluded. Purposive selection ensured that all informants had direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation.

Research Instrument

Data were generated using a researcher-developed structured interview guide with main questions and follow-up prompts. The guide was anchored on Seidman's phenomenological interviewing model and was designed to explore participants' experiences before entering hospitality, their current work-life realities, the challenges they encountered, coping strategies, and aspirations for career advancement (Seidman, 2019). A personal-information survey was also used to establish relevant participant background. The interview guide underwent content validation by an expert with doctoral-level preparation and extensive experience in business administration or hospitality management, and revisions were made based on the evaluator's recommendations.

Data Gathering Procedure

The research protocol was submitted to the University of Cebu Research Ethics Committee (UCREC) and a Certificate of Protocol Approval was obtained before recruitment and data collection. After institutional endorsement and permission from the participating establishments, eligible informants were invited and scheduled according to their availability. Written informed consent was secured before each interview. One-on-one interviews were conducted in a setting preferred by the informant, lasted approximately 60 minutes, and were audio-recorded with permission. Participants were allowed to use the language in which they were most comfortable. Recordings were transcribed for analysis, with the researcher maintaining reflective notes and documentation throughout the process.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method. The researcher repeatedly read the transcripts for familiarization, identified significant statements, formulated meanings, grouped related meanings into thematic clusters, developed exhaustive descriptions, articulated the fundamental structure of the phenomenon, and returned interpretations to participants for validation. This systematic procedure supported traceability from participants' narratives to the final themes and is consistent with applications of Colaizzi's method in qualitative research (Wirihana et al., 2018). The thesis also used interpretative attention to clarify how informants understood their experiences in relation to personal and professional identity.

Ethical Consideration

The study followed the ethical principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, and autonomy. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and informants could decline questions or withdraw without penalty. Confidentiality and privacy were protected by limiting identifiable information and securing research records. Trustworthiness was strengthened through member checking, expert review, triangulation of available interview materials and field documentation, an audit trail, bracketing, and reflexivity. These procedures were used to minimize researcher preconceptions and preserve the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity of the participants' accounts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. *Synthesis of Emergent Themes*

Inquiry Area	Emergent Themes	Analytical Essence
Work-life experiences	Personal Growth and Fulfillment; Work-Life Balance through Strategies; Career Transition for Economic and Personal Reasons; Multifaceted Roles; Struggles in the Industry	Professional growth coexisted with adjustment pressure, multitasking, shifting schedules, and educational mismatch.
Challenges and coping	Operational Demands and Competency Gaps; Persistent Challenges with Limited Organizational Response; Resilience and Support Systems	Employees compensated for limited preparation and recurring workplace problems through adaptability, faith, family, hobbies, teamwork, and informal learning.
Career aspirations	Education, Training, and Skills Development; Workforce Development and Service Innovation	Informants sought formal credentials, technical training, better staffing, communication, inclusive service, and improved facilities and systems.

Work-Life Experiences in Mabuhay Accommodations

The first research area produced five themes that revealed a dual experience of growth and strain. On the positive side, participants described Experiencing Personal Growth and Fulfillment in the Hospitality Workplace. Daily guest interaction, workplace guidance, and repeated practice strengthened interpersonal communication, English-language confidence, and self-worth. One informant explained that working in the accommodation helped him "conquer" his fear of speaking English with foreign guests. Participants also described pride in learning hotel procedures and satisfaction in becoming competent despite entering the sector without formal hospitality preparation. These accounts illustrate how experiential learning can partly compensate for educational mismatch and help workers develop an emergent professional identity, consistent with evidence that experience and learning can mitigate skill gaps (Marchante et al., 2007; Na et al., 2024).

The second positive theme, Achieving Work-Life Balance in the Hospitality Industry through Strategies, showed that several participants maintained manageable boundaries through predictable shifts, team assistance, and deliberate personal routines. However, balance was not uniform. Some participants reported rotating schedules, 12-hour duties, fatigue, childcare demands, or competing study obligations. These contrasting experiences reinforce hospitality research showing that scheduling conditions, organizational support, and work-family dynamics are central to employee well-being and retention (Heimerl et al., 2020; Karatepe & Kilic, 2015; Teng, 2023).

Three negative themes described how the mismatch was experienced operationally. Career Transition from the Industrial and Service Sectors to Hospitality due to Economic and Personal Reasons reflected participants' movement from factories, sales, household responsibilities, and other service jobs into hospitality in search of safer, more stable, or more socially rewarding work. Navigating Multifaceted Roles in Hospitality Operations captured the reality of lean staffing, in which employees performed housekeeping, front-office, maintenance, reporting, laundry, and guest-assistance duties beyond a narrow job description. Experienced Struggles in the Industry included adjustment to shifting schedules, physical fatigue, emotional strain, long hours, demanding guests, family responsibilities, and uncertainty caused by limited prior hospitality experience. The findings suggest that adaptation was shaped not only by individual motivation but also by the organizational conditions under which role expansion occurred (Dawson et al., 2023; Wong et al., 2021).

Workplace Challenges and Coping Mechanisms

Three themes characterized the second research area. Struggling with Operational Demands and Competency Gaps in the Hospitality Workplace described the combined pressure of high guest expectations, staffing shortages, simultaneous tasks, supply constraints, cancellations, maintenance concerns, and limited

familiarity with hospitality procedures. Participants often learned technical and service competencies through observation, meetings, managerial directives, and trial and error. One housekeeping participant described the difficulty of maintaining 59 rooms with only three staff members, illustrating how operational capacity and skill development were intertwined. These findings support the argument that hospitality employers need role-specific technical preparation rather than relying solely on general employability skills (Varra et al., 2021).

Persistent Workplace Challenges Addressed through Limited Organizational Response captured the recurring nature of manpower shortages, delayed supplies, maintenance lapses, and guest complaints. Although monthly meetings, temporary purchases, hiring attempts, and selected renovations provided some relief, participants reported that solutions were often delayed or short-term. This pattern shifted the burden of maintaining service continuity to frontline workers, who improvised while awaiting formal action. Hospitality research similarly emphasizes that organizational culture and human-resource practices shape whether employees can sustain service quality under pressure (Dawson et al., 2023; Rabiul et al., 2025).

Coping with Workplace Challenges through Resilience and Support Systems showed how participants relied on perseverance, self-regulation, faith, family motivation, hobbies, collegial assistance, and emotional distancing to remain productive. Prayer, children, entertainment, art, and teamwork were repeatedly described as sources of strength. These strategies demonstrated considerable personal resilience, yet the findings also caution against treating resilience as a substitute for organizational support. Evidence from hospitality settings indicates that managerial support, learning opportunities, and supportive work systems are critical for reducing strain and sustaining employee engagement (Karatepe & Kilic, 2015; Wong et al., 2021).

Career Aspirations and Professional Development

Two themes emerged regarding future career improvement. Recognizing Education, Training, and Skills Development as Pillars of Career Progress in the Hospitality Industry reflected participants' desire to complete formal education, pursue hospitality-related learning, and obtain competency certification. Several informants specifically identified TESDA NC II training, particularly in housekeeping, as a practical pathway for gaining recognized competence and improving employability. Their narratives suggest that formal learning served not only as skill acquisition but also as a source of professional legitimacy, confidence, and mobility. This supports the broader literature on experiential and competency-based preparation as a bridge between academic background and workplace readiness (Chen & Shen, 2012; Süveges & Kurucz, 2024).

Advancing Mabuhay Accommodations through Workforce Development and Service Innovation extended these aspirations from the individual to the organization. Participants called for continuous training, adequate staffing, stronger English and interpersonal communication, inclusivity training, improved amenities, better equipment, clearer problem resolution, and service innovations that respond to diverse guests. This mirrors findings from Philippine mabuhay accommodations that hiring, training, competence assessment, inclusion, and technology are interdependent components of a growth-oriented workplace (Escarilla et al., 2024). It also aligns with research emphasizing continuous reskilling as hospitality becomes increasingly technology-intensive and service expectations evolve (Adeyinka-Ojo et al., 2020; Bennett & McWhorter, 2021).

Mabuhay Navigator Bridging Program

The findings informed the Mabuhay Navigator Bridging Program, an intervention designed to convert the transferable strengths of non-hospitality graduates into hospitality-specific competence. The program is organized into two phases. Phase I contains three intensive modules: Hospitality Ethos and Cultural Alignment; Essential Operational Hard Skills, including Front Office Management Systems and operational simulation; and Leveraging Transferable Competencies by mapping prior skills to hospitality tasks. Each module is designed for five days of training at eight hours per day. Phase II provides a 90-day period of post-program integration, mentoring, and career mapping. The design is consistent with the study's emphasis on fit, adaptability, workplace learning, and structured support (Holland, 1997; Süveges & Kurucz, 2024).

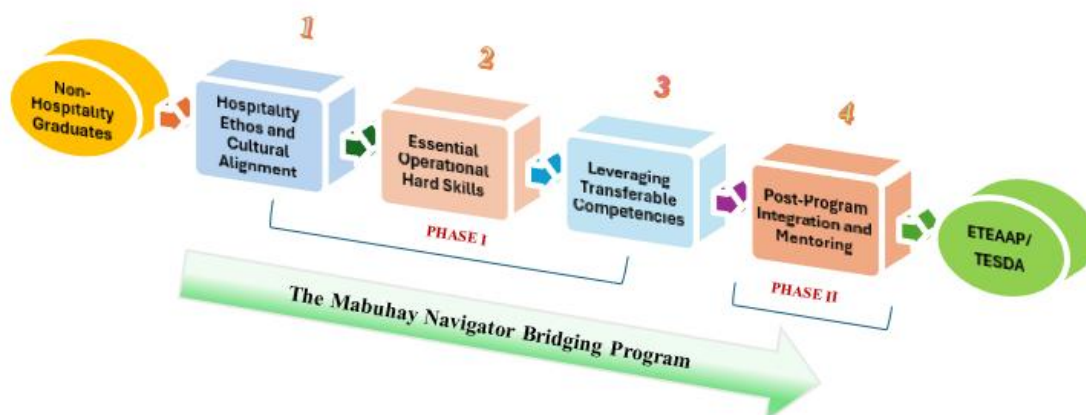


Figure 2. *Proposed Mabuhay Navigator Bridging Program for Non-Hospitality Graduates Employed in Mabuhay Accommodations*

As a practical output, the program responds directly to the study's reported competency gaps, emotional adjustment needs, and desire for recognized career pathways. It positions non-hospitality graduates as trainable contributors whose prior abilities can be converted into guest-ready competence through contextualized training, simulation, mentoring, and links to external credentialing. The program also provides a basis for mabuhay accommodation administrators, TESDA, and the University of Cebu to coordinate workplace learning, NC II certification pathways, and recognition of workplace-acquired competencies through mechanisms such as ETEEAP.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the experience of non-hospitality graduates in Cebu City's mabuhay accommodations is best understood as a process of compensatory professional adaptation. Participants entered hospitality from diverse educational and occupational backgrounds and initially encountered technical, operational, emotional, and identity-related difficulties. Through repeated practice, transferable skills, resilience, supportive relationships, and exposure to guest service, many gradually reconstructed their sense of competence and came to view hospitality not merely as temporary employment but as a viable professional pathway.

At the same time, individual adaptation did not eliminate structural constraints. Multifaceted roles, manpower shortages, recurring supply and maintenance problems, inconsistent organizational responses, and limited formal hospitality preparation continued to create strain. The findings therefore show that professional growth is most sustainable when personal resilience is reinforced by systematic organizational training, recognized credentials, mentoring, and accessible educational pathways. The Mabuhay Navigator Bridging Program translates these conclusions into a structured mechanism for strengthening workforce readiness, service consistency, employee confidence, retention, and long-term career mobility.

Recommendations

Mabuhay accommodation administrators should institutionalize structured onboarding and in-house competency development for employees whose degrees are not aligned with hospitality. Training should prioritize front-office procedures, housekeeping standards, guest communication, complaint handling, emotional-labor strategies, inclusive service, digital systems, and cross-functional coordination. Staffing, supply management, maintenance escalation, and feedback channels should also be strengthened so that recurring operational problems are addressed through sustained corrective action rather than temporary workarounds. The Mabuhay Navigator Bridging Program may be adopted or pilot-tested as a staged model combining intensive training, simulation, mentoring, and career mapping.

TESDA should expand awareness of and access to relevant competency certifications, particularly housekeeping, front-office operations, and guest-service programs, while considering pathways that acknowledge prior workplace learning. The University of Cebu may further strengthen ETEEAP mechanisms for recognizing documented hospitality competencies acquired through employment and structured bridging programs. Future studies may assess the effectiveness of the Mabuhay Navigator Bridging Program, trace the longer-term career trajectories of non-hospitality graduates, and examine how organizational learning, employee well-being, and service quality interact across other mabuhay accommodations and tourism destinations in the Philippines.

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