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# A COMPARISON OF SKILLS CONSIDERED IMPORTANT FOR SUCCESS AS AN ENTRY LEVEL MANAGER IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY VS. THE SKILLS RECENT GRADUATES POSSESS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents and discusses the findings of a study to determine if the historic gap between the skills industry and education consider important for success as an entry level manager still exists. A review of literature identified a list of skills considered important for success by both industry and higher education. Of the eighty nine skills identified, forty two showed no significant difference, six skills were considered more important by the recruiters and forty one skills were considered more important by the educators. The top 10 skills were the same for both groups; however their order is slightly different.

**Key Words:** management, success, important, industry, education, KSA

## INTRODUCTION

Prior research indicates that a contradiction has existed for more than thirty years between the skills considered important for success as an entry level manager in the hospitality industry and the skills emphasized in post-secondary hospitality education curriculum (Johns & Teare, 1995; Baum & Nickson, 1998; Christou, 1999; Sigala & Baum, 2003). As early as 2000 Christou and Eaton suggested that although hospitality and tourism educators recognized the need for change in the skills required of management trainees, but they have not modified the curriculum or relationship with pedagogy (Sigala & Baum, 2003).

The purpose of this study was to determine if this historical gap continues to exist today and if it does, in what areas. The objective of this study was to identify what skills hospitality recruiters and hospitality educators consider important for success as an entry level manager, compare the two groups to determine if a significant difference still exists, and to make specific recommendations to improve curriculum to better prepare graduates for success. Identifying the skills that hospitality recruiters recognize as important for success as an entry level manager in the hospitality industry has the potential to help post-secondary educators better understand the needs of industry. If the needs of both the hospitality industry and post-secondary hospitality education are better understood, and positively aligned, entry level managers will most likely be more effective and productive.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Olsen (1999) examined research from the 1980's and 1990's and drew the conclusion that changes taking place in the hospitality industry would force hospitality practitioners to think beyond the immediate environment, expanding into the global market of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Research conducted in the ten year gap since Olson supports this conclusion, and confirms the continued existence of a gap between industry and education, making the previous citation by Olson almost cliché (Sigala & Baum, 2003; Okumus & Wong, 2005; Kay & Moncarz, 2007). Current research in the hospitality industry and in hospitality education suggests a need to re-evaluate hospitality education if the goal is to adequately prepare graduates for entry level management positions (Kay & Moncarz, 2007).

Recent trends in the hospitality industry which may have influenced the gap between industry and education include emphasis in the areas of financial management and analysis, human resource management, social responsibility, energy conservation, globalization and diversification (Kay & Moncarz, 2007; Sigala & Baum, 2003;

Chung, 2000). In order to close the gap, developing a balance between the skills considered important for success in the industry and the skills included in post-secondary education needs to become a dynamic process (Steed & Schwer, 2003).

## METHODOLOGY

A review of hospitality industry and hospitality education literature provided a basis for the development of a list of skills identified as necessary for success as an entry level manager in the hospitality industry. The skills identified in the review of literature were used to develop a survey instrument. The survey was distributed to both recruiters in the hospitality industry and hospitality and tourism educators. Recruiters and educators were asked to rate, according to the level of importance, the skills identified as important for success as an entry level manager in the hospitality industry. The data was analyzed with appropriate methodology, to answer the research questions, draw conclusions, and make recommendations based upon the analysis.

The population was defined as individuals employed by hospitality related organizations who have the job responsibility to recruit entry level managers from four year hospitality education programs, and hospitality educators employed by four year post-secondary education programs. The sample was drawn from recruiters and educators associated with the universities identified in a study which ranked the top higher education hospitality programs in the U.S. by Brizek and Khan (2002). This was a convenience sample that facilitated contact with its members and was supposed to represent the best practices in hospitality education. Response rate in a convenience sample might be higher, but the results are limited to the members of the sample and cannot be inferred beyond the sample.

Separate self administered closed ended questionnaires using the same skills but different questions to identify demographic characteristics were developed for the recruiters and educators to collect data to answer the research questions. The instruments contained questions designed to identify skills considered important to the success of entry level managers and questions to identify the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Three days prior to the beginning of the study, members of the sample were sent an e-mail to introduce the research study and to ask for their participation and support. Subsequently, a cover letter outlining the study and a link to the questionnaire was e-mailed to the members of the hospitality recruiter and educator sample. A software program was developed to automatically send e-mail messages one at a time to the sample in order to overcome firewalls and spam filters which can block email messages sent in mass quantity. At the end of the collection period 127 recruiter (20.2% response rate) and 161 educator (27.1% response rate) surveys had been collected.

An independent t-test was used to determine if a gap existed between the mean of the skills identified by the recruiters and educators. The "Levene's Test for Equal Variances" was used to determine if the assumption of the t-test had been met with  $\alpha = (.05)$ . If  $p \geq \alpha$ , there was no statistical significant difference in the level of importance between item means of the recruiters and the educators. The larger the t value, the greater difference between the means of the two independent groups; in this study a two-tailed t test was used. In order to better understand the results of this study, a demographic profile, identifying characteristics of both the educators and recruiters is provided.

## RESULTS

Characteristics of the hospitality recruiters indicated that 49.6% of the respondents were female and 37.0% were male; the majority or 46.3 % of the respondents were between the ages of 30 and 49. The primary job responsibility of 41.7% of the respondents was as a recruiter and 67.0% had earned a Bachelor's Degree. Additionally, 85.8% had never taught at the post-secondary educational level. 49.6% of the respondents classified their organization as Hotel/Lodging, and 26.8% as Food & Beverage facilities. Characteristics of the hospitality educators indicated that 65.2% of the respondents were male and 29.8% were female; the majority or 57.1% % of the respondents were between the ages of 40 and 59. 90.7% of the respondents had some type of industry experience.

Research question one asked: What skills do hospitality recruiters believe are important for graduates of post secondary education programs to possess in order to be successful as an entry level manager in the hospitality industry? Table 1 lists the skills that respondents who were recruiters believe are important for success as an entry level manager, ranked ordered by recruiter mean (RM). Twenty six skills had a mean over 4.0, indicating they were

considered very important for success. Thirty eight skills had a mean between 4.0 and 3.0, indicating they were important for success. In contrast, twenty five skills had a mean below 3.0, indicating they were not considered important for success. Of the eighty nine skills, sixty four were considered important for success ( $RM \leq 3.0$ ); the remaining 25 skills were not considered important for success ( $RM \geq 2.99$ ).

Research question two asked: What skills do hospitality educators believe are important for graduates of post-secondary hospitality education programs to possess in order to be successful as entry level managers in the hospitality industry? Table 1 lists the skills respondents who were educators believe are important for success as an entry level manager, compared to the recruiter ranking. Thirty skills had a mean over 4.0, indicating they were considered very important for success. Forty seven skills had a mean between 4.0 and 3.0, indicating they were important for success as an entry level manager. In contrast, twelve skills had a mean below 3.0, indicating they were not considered important for success. Of the eighty nine skills, seventy seven were considered important for success ( $RM \leq 3.0$ ); the remaining twelve skills were not considered important for success ( $RM \geq 2.99$ ).

Research question three asked: Is there a significant difference between the skills hospitality recruiters and educators believe are important for graduates of post-secondary hospitality education programs to possess in order to be successful as an entry level manager in the hospitality industry? Three analytical comparisons were utilized to address this research question; ranking comparison, an independent *t*-test and historical classification. Based upon the results of the rank ordering of the skills, the independent *t*-test and the level of importance comparison, a difference between the two groups continues to exist.

Table 1 lists all eighty-nine skills by recruiter means (RM) in descending order along with the corresponding educator mean (EM); historic classification (C) difference between the recruiter and educator means (mdif); *t* value (*t*); degrees of freedom (*df*) and *p* value (*p*) for each skill. The first ten skills are the same for both recruiters and educators, but the only difference is the ranked order in which they appear. Of the last ten skills listed, eight are the same with the only difference being the placement in the ranked order in which these eight appear in the list. The remaining sixty eight skills, which fall between the first ten and the last ten, have a gap in rank placement ranging from no difference to seventeen places.

**Table 1**  
**List of Skill with *t*-test results Rank Ordered**

Item	Recruiter		Educator		mdif	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	
	C	Mean	Rank	Mean					Rank
Integrity	EI	4.76	1	4.72	1	0.04	.609	284	.543
Enthusiastic; maintains a positive attitude	KSA	4.69	2	4.62	3	0.07	.894	283	.372
Is willing and able to learn	KSA	4.65	3	4.70	2	-0.05	.693	284	.489
Maintains professional work standards and appearance	KSA	4.61	4	4.58	5	0.03	.466	284	.642
Committed, hardworking, conscientious worker	EI	4.60	5	4.56	6	0.04	.505	284	.614
Listening Skills	T	4.59	6	4.61	4	-0.02	.192	274	.848
Focus on service quality	EI	4.58	7	4.44	8	0.14	1.812	274	.071
Takes initiative	EI	4.49	8	4.37	10	0.12	1.508	279	.133
Clear and effective communicator	EI	4.46	9	4.51	7	-0.05	.519	283	.604
Flexible; can adapt to change	KSA	4.46	10	4.42	9	0.04	.516	284	.606
Manages Stress Anger Anxiety	EI	4.46	11	4.29	13	0.17	2.019	281	.044
Guest services	KSA	4.44	12	4.08	23	0.36	3.479	271	.001
Attention to detail	KSA	4.38	13	4.30	12	0.08	.882	274	.379
Leadership skills	EI	4.31	14	4.04	25	0.27	2.852	284	.005
Able to Identify/Solve Problems	T	4.27	15	4.32	11	-0.05	.577	283	.564
Organizational skills	KSA	4.26	16	4.29	13	-0.03	.329	281	.742
Understands importance of orienting, training and developing employees	KSA	4.25	17	4.09	22	0.16	1.449	282	.148

Assertive; exhibits self-confidence	EI	4.19	18	3.99	31	0.20	2.075	283	.039
Motivates Others	KSA	4.18	19	4.01	29	0.17	1.74	283	.082
Sexual harassment and managing diversity	KSA	4.17	20	4.25	15	-0.08	.808	259	.420
Makes decisions	EI	4.15	21	4.08	24	0.07	.792	272	.429
Open to new ideas; innovative/creative	KSA	4.11	22	4.13	19	-0.02	.135	281	.893
Sets and meets personal goals	KSA	4.08	23	4.12	20	-0.04	.392	272	.696
Manages conflict	EI	4.07	24	3.98	32	0.09	.915	274	.361
Basic work experience	T	4.03	25	4.03	27	0.00	.133	273	.998
Can empathize with others	EI	4.01	26	4.04	26	-0.02	.295	282	.768
Utilizes resources effectively	KSA	3.95	27	3.95	34	0.00	.004	272	.997
Service style and standards	KSA	3.93	28	3.97	33	-0.04	.317	207	.752
Understands a business environment	KSA	3.93	29	3.90	37	0.03	.265	273	.791
Maximizes employee productivity	KSA	3.85	30	3.87	41	-0.02	.172	282	.864
Empowers others	EI	3.81	31	3.75	48	0.06	.507	274	.612
Works independently with little or no direction	KSA	3.81	32	3.93	35	-0.12	1.168	282	.244
Diplomatic leader	KSA	3.78	33	3.65	51	0.13	1.193	.274	
Food and beverage quality	T	3.77	34	4.01	30	-0.24	1.960	200	.051
Food safety and sanitation	T	3.76	35	4.25	16	-0.49	3.621	192	.000
Charismatic personality	KSA	3.73	36	3.25	64	0.48	3.917	273	.000
Culture and diversity	KSA	3.73	37	3.80	45	-0.07	.610	261	.543
Delegates tasks and responsibilities	KSA	3.73	38	3.78	46	-0.05	.541	282	.589
Shift management/employee scheduling	T	3.64	39	3.88	40	-0.24	1.904	261	.058
Responsible alcohol service	T	3.62	40	4.19	17	-0.57	4.047	172	.000
Food safety and the law	T	3.61	41	4.03	28	-0.42	3.054	188	.003
Logical/analytical thinker	KSA	3.61	42	3.92	36	-0.31	3.227	274	.001
Crisis management skills	KSA	3.58	43	3.62	53	-0.04	.338	273	.736
Understand a profit and loss statement	KSA	3.56	44	4.15	18	-0.59	5.082	272	.000
Cost control	KSA	3.55	45	4.10	21	-0.45	5.204	223	.000
Ability to analyze data	T	3.50	46	3.90	38	-0.40	3.740	272	.000
Public, guest/employee liability	KSA	3.50	47	3.89	39	-0.39	3.199	205	.002
Utilizes accounting procedures/controls	T	3.46	48	3.69	49	-0.23	2.168	270	.031
Safety programs	KSA	3.41	49	3.86	42	-0.45	3.909	258	.000
Contamination and spoilage	T	3.39	50	3.86	43	-0.47	3.128	196	.002
Budgeting	T	3.36	51	3.85	44	-0.49	4.181	217	.000
Acts as a change catalyst	EI	3.35	52	3.12	69	0.23	1.965	284	.050
Food and beverage product knowledge	T	3.33	53	3.59	55	-0.26	2.2320	261	.021
Accounting principles	T	3.26	54	3.77	47	-0.51	4.502	261	.000
Strategic manager	KSA	3.26	55	3.16	65	0.10	.884	273	.377
Understand hospitality sales and marketing	T	3.26	56	3.65	52	-0.39	3.224	261	.001
Accurately forecasts revenues/expenses	T	3.25	57	3.47	58	-0.22	1.736	273	.084
Has a college/graduate degree	KSA	3.18	58	3.53	56	-0.35	2.749	283	.006
Purchasing and inventory management	T	3.14	59	3.49	57	-0.35	3.172	259	.002
Familiar with labor laws	T	3.00	60	3.47	59	-0.38	3.254	283	.001

		KSA	3.06	61	3.46	60	-0.40	3.159	260	.002
Public relations	Staton-Reynolds	KSA	3.06	61	3.46	60	-0.40	3.159	260	.002
Ratio and profit analysis		T	3.05	62	3.68	50	-0.63	4.993	260	.000
Hazard communication		T	3.04	63	3.46	61	-0.42	3.187	258	.002
Participates in continuing education		KSA	3.00	64	3.11	71	-0.11	.819	274	.413
Develops operational systems/controls		T	2.99	65	3.15	67	-0.16	1.263	272	.208
Security Operations		T	2.92	66	3.62	54	-0.70	5.732	258	.000
Front desk operations		T	2.92	67	3.07	74	-0.15	1.048	224	.296
Contributes to the organization's energy management programs/going green policies		KSA	2.89	68	3.14	68	-0.16	1.926	227	.055
Economics		T	2.84	69	2.99	78	-0.15	1.186	258	.237
Data management		T	2.79	70	3.16	66	-0.37	3.173	257	.002
Energy management /conservation/sustainability		KSA	2.72	71	3.32	62	-0.60	4.910	199	.000
Reservations operations		T	2.71	72	2.99	79	-0.28	2.057	226	.041
Menu planning /management		T	2.69	73	3.27	63	-0.58	4.902	261	.000
Telecommunications		T	2.65	74	2.89	84	-0.24	1.929	260	.055
Wages, salary and benefits administration		T	2.64	75	3.09	72	-0.45	3.668	260	.000
Housekeeping operations		T	2.64	76	3.06	75	-0.42	3.273	214	.001
Convention /conference management		KSA	2.60	77	2.93	81	-0.33	2.643	218	.009
Facility maintenance and repair		T	2.58	78	3.08	73	-0.50	4.203	224	.000
Software /Hardware Management		T	2.58	79	3.01	77	-0.43	3.481	257	.001
Waste management		KSA	2.57	80	3.12	70	-0.55	4.357	258	.000
Contractual services		T	2.54	81	2.98	80	-0.44	3.472	213	.001
Convention /meeting planning services		KSA	2.51	82	2.97	83	-0.46	3.585	209	.000
Globalization		KSA	2.40	83	3.02	76	-0.62	.4771	225	.000
Speaks a foreign language		T	2.39	84	2.84	85	-0.45	3.896	282	.000
Utilities and mechanical systems		T	2.30	85	2.80	86	-0.50	4.411	258	.000
Renovations and capital improvement		KSA	2.25	86	2.60	88	-0.35	2.957	258	.003
International issues		KSA	2.24	87	2.97	82	-0.73	.5878	225	.000
Health/recreation operations		T	2.22	88	2.57	89	-0.35	3.020	260	.003
Facility planning design and décor		KSA	2.12	89	2.62	87	-0.50	4.229	259	.000

$\alpha = .05$

An independent sample *t*-test was used to compare the means of the two groups. Analysis of the mean difference between recruiters and educators indicated 6 skills (6.7% of the 89 skills) were considered more important by recruiters. The six skills which hospitality recruiters found statistically more important than hospitality educators for success as an entry level manager are listed below:

- Managers Stress, Anger and Anxiety
- Guest Services
- Leadership Skills
- Assertive; Exhibits Self-Confidence
- Charismatic Personality
- Acts as a Change Catalyst

Analysis of the mean difference between recruiters and educators identified 41 skills (46.06% of the 89 skills) that were considered more important by educators. The forty one skills identified as statistically more important for success by educators are listed below:

- Food safety and sanitation
- Responsible alcohol service
- Food safety and the law
- Logical/analytical thinker
- Understand a profit and loss statement
- Cost control
- Ability to analyze data
- Public, guest/employee liability
- Utilizes accounting procedures/controls
- Safety programs
- Contamination and spoilage
- Budgeting
- Food and beverage product knowledge
- Accounting principles
- Understand hospitality sales and marketing
- Has a college/graduate degree
- Purchasing and inventory management
- Familiar with Labor Laws
- Public relations
- Ratio and profit analysis
- Hazard communication
- Energy management/conservation/ Sustainability
- Reservations operations
- Menu planning /management
- Housekeeping operations
- Wages, salary and benefits administration
- Facility maintenance and repair
- Convention /conference management
- Software /Hardware Management
- Waste management
- Contractual services
- Convention /meeting planning services
- Globalization
- Speaks a foreign language
- Utilities and mechanical systems
- Renovations and capital improvement
- International issues
- Health/recreation operations
- Facility planning design and décor
- Security Operations
- Data management

Analysis of the mean difference between recruiters and educators identified 42 skills (47.2% of the 89 skills) with no statistically significance difference between the two groups in the levels of importance as a skill important for success as an entry level manager.

The means of the skills were separated by group and by classification and were summed so that the mean of the mean could be calculated for each of the historical categories; the results are presented in Table 5. The Emotional Intelligence skills mean of the mean for the recruiter's was 4.24 and 4.15 for the educators. The mean of the mean calculation for KSA skills was 3.57 for recruiters and 3.73 for educators. The Technical (T) skills mean of the mean was calculated at 3.16 for recruiters and 3.5 for educators. The results indicated that recruiters place a higher level of importance on Emotional Intelligence Skills than educators, and educators placed a higher level of importance on KSA and Technical skills than do recruiters.

Of the eighty nine skills, recruiters identified 29.2% of the skills as very important, 42.7% of the skills as important and 28.1% as not important, whereas educators indicated that 33.7% of the skills were very important, 52.8% were important and 13.5% were not important. These results identified a gap between the two groups in the number of skills which fell into each of the three categories; very important, important, and not important.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS & CONCLUSIONS**

A comparison of the recruiters and educators' gender found 49.6% of the recruiters were female, compared to 29.8% of the educators; while 37.0% of the recruiters and 65.2% of the educators were male. The majority of the recruiters were between the ages of 30 and 49; compared to the educators who were between 40 and 69 years of age. The disparity in age points out that these two groups come from different generations, coupled with the divergence in gender indicates that the responses were based upon two completely different perspectives. The recruiters' responses could be influenced by the avant-garde perspective, while the educator's responses may be from the old guard perspective.

While 83% of the recruiters had earned a either a Bachelor's or Master's Degree, 85.8% had never taught in a post secondary education setting. In contrast, 65.9% of the educators had earned a Ph.D., with 90% having some form of industry experience. The recruiters' side of the nature of postsecondary education is based upon

their experience as a student, whereas a majority of the educators' understanding of the hospitality industry is drawn from both industry and academic experience.

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While recruiters place a heavier emphasis on skills classified as emotional intelligence, educators continue to concentrate on technical and KSA's skills. Beyond the skills of integrity and enthusiasm, the ability to learn is ranked as the number three skill considered very important by recruiters. Post secondary education is designed to build a framework, from which a graduate continues to develop as a manager. Recruiters seem to be focused on skills which can be generalized across all areas of the hospitality industry. This would include a trend toward skills which are less tangible, those which are incorporated in the methods a graduate draws upon as a manager, and those speaking to a manager's character, rather than skill which are technical and specific to a particular task. This would be analogous to developing a manager who functions as a silo organization versus a manager who can work as a vertically integrated manager.

It appears that recruiters are looking for entry level managers who possess the general capabilities to perform as a manager rather than as a manager who can only perform in a specific area. This calls into question the necessity of hospitality education as an isolated discipline; would hospitality managers be better served with general business degree augmented by practical experience in the hospitality industry? Developing a graduate who can function in this manner would require educators to move outside their historic comfort zone of academia and work to build a program which develops all aspects of the student rather than isolated segments.

The greatest disparity between the two groups appears to be between the skills considered important and not important. A comparison of the distribution between the levels of importance assessed by the recruiters and educators indicates that there may be a need to re-focus hospitality education, deemphasizing the skills recruiters consider not important and shifting a greater focus on the skills considered as important.

The current economic climate, which appears to be mirroring the early 1980's, a time of high unemployment, economic uncertainty and a turn toward downsizing in the industry (Johns & Teare, 1995), may once again force industry and academia to take a closer look at their current position in the hospitality industry. Advances in technology over the past twenty years have significantly changed the way hospitality organizations function, with a greater emphasis placed on the process an organization follows to achieve its goals. In addition, the present pace of change in the world may indicate that the requirements of the hospitality industry will outpace education, increasing the gap between the two organizations. The newest generation of potential post secondary education students, who are the recipients of education and professional experience, may find the dichotomy against their inner nature and may look for alternatives to achieve their professional goals.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

Recruiters will continue to search for individuals who possess the skills necessary for success as entry level managers; the question is where will they look to find these individuals? It has been suggested that the benefits of a post secondary education go beyond the subject matter knowledge; rather it's learning to navigate the process which is of substantial benefit to the graduate and in turn to the organizations. As alternative methods of preparing students for a career in the hospitality industry continue to emerge, will they provide industries with graduates who are as well rounded as those who graduate from a four year post secondary institution. Will graduates of these alternative methods of education be any more competent in the skills considered important for success than those who graduate from a post secondary hospitality? The disparity between the types and quality of hospitality education programs available to potential students is vast. Industry will ultimately determine the strengths and weaknesses of each program based on whether they will hire graduates of the program. In the future, we may find that either the students or the recruiters assess the cost benefit ratio only to determine the cost of post secondary education outweighs the benefits?

The inability of educators to adapt to the current needs of industry may lead students to seek degrees from institutions which can provide the skills which are considered important for success by industry. Historically, change in post secondary academia had been painstakingly slow, and often by the time change does occur, it is only to find that it is once again time to re-evaluate the process. The hospitality industry is in a state of continuous evolution, one which is constantly looking for a new idea to spark the interest its stakeholders while making use of the newest technology. This is an environment which does not appear compatible with the structure of current post-secondary universities. At some point in the future, post secondary education could either learn to adapt to the



needs of industry or they may find that the need for post secondary hospitality education has diminished. Based upon the disparity of findings one might ask "is a formal college education necessary for success as an entry level manager in the hospitality industry?"

## **FUTURE RESEARCH**

Studying generational differences between recruiters and educators, and the influence the generation gap has on the expectations of recruiters and educators toward the skills considered important for success as an entry level manager in the hospitality industry would be beneficial to both groups. In order to begin to close the gap between the two groups it is important to understand the underlying characteristics which may be the motivation for the gap.

Research which identifies the competency level of graduates in the skills considered important for success as an entry level manager could be beneficial to both groups. Understanding the graduate's level of competence in these skills could help recruiters develop realistic expectations for the entry level managers they hire. In addition, information about graduate competencies could help educators identify and close gaps in their programs.

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