Revealing Key Competencies of Hospitality Graduates Demanded by Industry: A 25-year review

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ABSTRACT

Significant changes in the competitive environment of business and education, along with changes in the macro-environment, point to the need for curriculum reform in hospitality management. Determining relevant competencies and skill sets has helped human resource managers over the years to improve hiring and selection practices, in developing strategies to retain managers, and in career planning initiatives. This study is a review of competencies that have been emphasized by hospitality industry leaders for success in the field over the years, and to report similarities as well as key changes in skills demanded of students graduating from hospitality management programs.

Key Words: industry demand, curriculum, competencies, skill sets

INTRODUCTION

Determining relevant competencies and skill sets has helped human resource managers over the years to improve hiring and selection practices, in developing strategies to retain managers, and in career planning initiatives (Chung-Herrera, Enz & Lankau, 2003). There are many reasons for this. One is the high level of “movement” that has plagued the hospitality industry for more than 25 years. Specifically, industry has strived to identify valid job competencies and skill sets required for future leaders (Tesone & Ricci, 2005) in an effort to reduce turnover as well as combat challenges in the recruitment and retention of quality managers (Ghiselli, La Lopa & Bai, 2001). Moreover, hospitality leaders have long demanded that students graduating from industry specific higher education programs possess appropriate management skills and competencies required to remain competitive (Chung-Herrera et al., 2003; Agrusa, Tanner & Coats, 2004). These underscore the critical role of the educational experience and the importance of curriculum development in shaping the industry’s future leaders (Tsai, Chen & Hu, 2004; Dopson & Tas, 2004).

In the U.S there has been a tremendous growth in the number of hospitality programs over the past 25 years. There has also been a palpable shift from the traditional home economics based program to a business-related focus during this time (Rappole, 2000). Chathoth and Sharma (2007) aver that this shift has greatly influenced the
educational experience and curricular structure of hospitality management programs across the country. According to Pavesic (1991), hospitality education has attempted to make significant curricular changes in order to meet the industry’s perceived evolving needs. And, given the shifting nature of all micro and macro-environmental events that have occurred during the past 25-years in the U.S. (e.g. social cultural changes, technological advances, growing concern over sustainability and green practices, globalism), it appears likely that the competencies desired by hospitality professionals have also evolved.

Furthermore, since the 1920s, hospitality educators have leaned on industry leaders for guidance regarding the essential competencies that graduates need for professional success (Kay & Russett, 2000). Despite the emphasis on leading rather than following (Lewis, 1993), by design, hospitality education may not be able to adapt as rapidly to change as the industry it serves (Miranda, 1999). Nevertheless, the goal of hospitality education is to provide industry with graduates that are capable of conducting the affairs of business and maintaining a readiness to approach future management issues without reservation (Enz, Renaghan & Geller, 1993). Knowledge creation in essence has become the most significant objective of educational programs that are oriented to whet the skills of students in meeting the needs of the industry (Tesone & Ricci, 2005; Chathoth & Sharma, 2007).

However, as the sheer number of hospitality degree programs increased so did the criticism that higher education programs were in fact becoming out of touch with the direct needs of the industry (Chung, 2000). Tension has been detected in the hospitality literature between hospitality educators and industry professionals regarding the extent to which higher education is responsible for competency and skill development (Dopson & Nelson, 2003; Harper, Brown & Irvine, 2005; Williams 2005). Arguably industry is “buying a product,” and it is essential that today’s curricular and educational experiences prepare students for leadership (Raybould & Wikins, 2006).

The purpose of this study is to review competencies that have been emphasized by hospitality industry leaders for success in the field over the years, and to report similarities as well as key changes in skills demanded of students graduating from hospitality management programs. Relevant studies in the hospitality field published over the past 25 years detailing such exigency have been analyzed and the findings critiqued. Discussion focuses on how such demands have evolved, and how they have altered faculty perceptions and curricula within hospitality programs across the U.S. and hence, evokes the question, what’s next?

**REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE AND FINDINGS**

In 1983, Buergermeister produced one of the first detailed studies investigating hospitality curricula in higher education. His study indicated that:

> “The need for competent management personnel has created outstanding career opportunities for foodservice and lodging management graduates. This increased demand, however, has also created problems in the development and evaluation of hospitality education. Academic programs in hospitality vary considerably, and there has been little effort to identify competencies for hospitality occupations, especially at the baccalaureate level. The researcher, therefore, undertook this study to develop and assess the educational skills and competencies needed by hospitality managers upon graduation.” (1983, p. 38)

Buergermeister (1983) revealed in his study competencies common to all hospitality entry-level management positions during this timeframe. Specifically, he uncovered that industry deemed customer satisfaction principles, effective leadership skills, such as motivation and communication, as well as training ability and profit realization as essential for any beginning hospitality manager. Interestingly, the key competencies receiving little importance by industry were also reported; they included key computer (hardware and software) skills, as well as the ability to
identify and select proper marketing media. Conducting labor studies and understanding management’s role in collective bargaining were considered competencies also of little importance to the future success of hospitality management in the 1980s.

Buergermeister (1983) further identified the most essential lodging and foodservice related skills critical for future managers. Within the hotel segment, ‘promotion of the safety and security of guests’ was the single identified competency seen as essential for beginning managers in that sector, while the foodservice segment identified, ‘possessing skills to effectively supervise personnel in food production and serving area’ as their single most critical competency demanded of future managers.

Since the publication of this landmark study, considerable attention has been given to the skills and competencies required for success in the industry. Research articles have identified very specific industry needs and demands as they relate to operational areas and industry segments. These studies have identified skills and competencies that have been extremely useful to educators as they fashion curricula for the functional areas and across segments, limited to foodservice, hotels and clubs.

While a thorough review of the hospitality literature revealed other segments – e.g. gaming and meetings and conventions - have made identifying competencies of critical importance, no key studies were found identifying such. Further, in the evaluation of research as it is focused on critical skill development on a global basis, the literature reveals that key competencies are uncovered within such international communities as Spain (Agut, Grau & Peiro, 2001), Australia (Dimmock, Breen & Walo, 2003), New Zealand (Breen, Walo & Dimmock, 2004), India (Jauhari, 2006), Taiwan (Shun-Chuan, 2002), Greece (Christou, 1999), and Russia (Annaroud, 2006). While the scope of the present study evaluates competencies demanded by the U.S. hospitality industry, these other studies reveal skills and competencies that are useful to educators as they create curricula specific to each of the functional areas, across segments and within an international environment.

Foodservice

In a study to determine the competencies needed to succeed in food and beverage operations, hospitality educators, students and industry representatives were surveyed (Okeiyi, Finley & Postel, 1994). The educators and students were at four-year baccalaureate programs; the industry reps were human resource directors and managers from various companies with F&B operations. The questionnaire was geared toward competency requirements for entry-level managers; there were thirty-five competency statements based on the technical and administrative skills as originally identified by Tas in 1988. As might be expected, the three groups varied in their opinion of the importance of the competencies. Nevertheless, there were ten that all three groups considered important or very important; they included:

1. Human Relations
2. Leadership skills and supervision
3. Oral and written communication
4. Customer relations
5. Professional conduct/ethics
6. Time management
7. Energy management
8. Conflict management
9. Recruitment
10. Training
For these items there were no significant differences among the groups. Tableside cooking and bartending were among those competencies the groups did not feel to be as important. Again, there was some variation by group.

Further, the basic competencies of research chefs have also been examined (Birdir & Pearson, 2000). Competence was defined as the skills, knowledge and other attributes that lead to success in a chosen area. The findings suggest that research chefs can be divided into two groups: research-focused chefs and management-focused research chefs. Each group had different competency requirements. For the research-focused chefs the following twelve competencies in order of importance were identified:

1. Knowledge of recipe development and formula ratios
2. Ability to work with a product development team
3. Knowledge of culinary fundamentals and production systems
4. Knowledge of ingredients functionally
5. Knowledge of traditional sauces/stocks
6. Understanding of the complete process of research through production of a product which can be produced in large volumes
7. Knowledge of all commercial kitchen functions and pressures
8. Ability to leverage trends into new products
9. Understanding of food testing
10. Ability to work effectively with other company departments to develop large scale products
11. Knowledge of regional cuisines, including preparation, spicing, and presentation
12. Understanding of changes in ingredients resulting from the research process

All of these competencies were rated very important or higher on a 5-point likert-type scale. For the management-focused chefs the following eight competencies were identified:

1. Ability to work with customer/client groups
2. Knowledge of end user skills (e.g. cooks in national chains)
3. Skilled at food presentation
4. Management skills (delegating and organizing, personnel development)
5. Knowledge of food service operations
6. Skilled at basic computer systems
7. Skilled at presentation of research and plans
8. Skilled at writing accurate reports

Again, these items were rated very important or higher on a 5-point likert-type scale. There were also competencies applicable to both; the top 10 included the following:

1. Knowledge of flavors
2. Knowledge of food sanitation
3. Ability to distinguish levels of quality in food products
4. General communication skills (verbal, written, listening)
5. Ability to make decisions
6. Ability to conceptualize new products, processes, systems
7. Ability to keep ego in check
8. Ability to see the "Big Picture"
9. Ability to work in multi-task environments
10. Ability to prioritize projects
As with the others, these were rated very important and extremely important. None of the knowledge, skills and abilities, and behaviors had a mean score that would be considered not important - but some items were considered less important. These included the following:

- Knowledge of finance systems
- Skilled at/with computer presentation programs (PowerPoint, CorelDraw)
- Ability to develop "packaging" for finished products

In total the study had 46 knowledge statements, 38 skill and ability statements, and 23 behavioral statements.

Hotels

Specific to the hotel segment of the industry, two key studies have been published in the hospitality literature since Buergermeister’s 1983 landmark competency study outlining the skill sets demanded by industry. Tas (1988) produced the first comparison study revealing eight essential competencies for management trainees. More than ten years later Nelson and Dopson (2001) uncovered the top relevant skills and abilities the industry deemed as extremely important for future leaders during this time frame, ten competencies were found within this category. Tas (1988), uncovered the following as essential:

1. Manages guest problems with understanding and sensitivity
2. Maintains professional and ethical standards in the work environment
3. Communicates effectively both written and orally
4. Demonstrates professional appearance and poise
5. Develops positive customer relations
6. Strives to achieve positive working relationships with employees
7. Possesses needed leadership qualities to achieve organizational objectives
8. Motivates employees to achieve desired performance

While Nelson and Dopson (2001) revealed the following in comparison:

1. Identify and solve managerial problems
2. Demonstrate leadership abilities
3. Control costs effectively
4. Develop positive customer relationships
5. Adapt the organization to meet customer needs
6. Train and coach employees
7. Manage crisis situations
8. Solve customer problems
9. Develop positive employee relations
10. Demonstrate effective oral communication skills

Clubs

In a study focused on future club management competencies, researchers divided the knowledge, skills, and performance abilities that comprise them into nine domains or areas (Perdue, Woods & Ninemeier, 2001). A domain represents a “set” of managerial competencies that can be considered to characterize it. The nine domains relevant to club management include the following (in order of importance):
Within these domains there were 127 competencies. The club managers that participated in this study indicated the following nine competencies were expected to be the most important/most used:

1. Budgeting
2. Ability to read financial statements
3. Effective communication
4. In-house communication
5. Managing and forecasting cash flow
6. Employee relations
7. Work-life balance
8. Time management
9. Supervision

The following competencies were among those considered to be less important:

- History of clubs
- Lodging operations
- Basic theory of management and history of management
- Yacht facilities management
- Knowledge about the types of clubs
- Knowledge about the rules of golf

**DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

A review of 25 years of studies about the knowledge, skills and abilities industry professionals, students and faculty perceive as important yields some interesting points for discussion. In this section, some emergent thematic findings, some anomalous skills, and some potential changing perceptions of desirable competencies will be discussed.

Several common themes emerged across studies of student competencies for managerial positions across sectors of the hospitality industry. Given that many of the industry representatives were human resource directors and managers from various companies with F&B operations, it is not surprising that knowledge of basic functional areas of management such as training, recruiting, motivating, communication and customer satisfaction were identified as important. This focus on business functions is consistent with the trend of housing hospitality programs in business schools and colleges. It is noteworthy that, as the managers represented properties with F & B operations, the areas identified as important within F & B management included more specific food preparation-related skills, such as knowledge of ingredients, sauces and stocks, and basic culinary production processes. These emphases are less consistent with business school goals of preparing students for management positions whether in hospitality or other industry sectors. Finally, only in the Club Management area was knowledge of financial
management listed as the most important competencies. Given that this was from one of the most recent studies (Perdue, Woods & Ninemeier, 2001), it may be an indication of a trending focus toward financial knowledge, rather than a skill set unique to the club management domain. This warrants further study of current curricula. Two additional themes, communications and customer relations were also threaded through these studies.

**Communication skills**

The mention of communication skills, whether as a category or more specifically as oral and written communications is common throughout each of these studies. The ability to speak on one’s feet to customers, employees, managers, suppliers, and partnering agencies is a skill needed and used on a daily basis. Furthermore, being able to communicate ideas to lead, instruct, motivate, train, and coordinate often involves writing skills. Effective communication continues to be important for positions in hotel management, F & B management and club management.

**Customer relations focus**

Several of the studies reviewed here cite the importance of customer-focused skills. It is only in the listing of Chef competencies and in the club management domain that customers were not mentioned. This is surprising in the club arena, given that the nature of the business is serving members (as repeat customers) of the club facility. Such skill sets as the ability to resolve customer problems, manage guest problems with understanding and sensitivity, and solve customer problems were cited throughout these studies.

**Computer-related skills**

While some common management themes emerged from the analysis, some areas of the discipline were overlooked to a great extent. One of these is computer-related skills. Missing from the lists of knowledge and skills desired by hospitality industry professionals over the past 25 years are skills related to computers and technology. Given that this is probably the area with the most significant growth and advances affecting all industry, it is likely that its importance would be elevated and that hospitality managers within all sectors would expect higher levels of competency. In fact, 25 years ago, curricula addressing computer skills focused on how to use word processing programs such as Word and spreadsheet such as Excel, and perhaps included opportunities to learn or fine-tune PowerPoint skills. The growth of social media venues and the corresponding opportunity for businesses representing all sectors of the economy points to the need for the development of skills in this area.

**Security and safety**

Of particular interest is the 1983 study that cited security and safety of guests as one of the most important competencies students should learn in a hospitality management program. This item was not replicated in subsequent research, however, until the Nelson and Dopson (2001) study. One of the competencies listed as important was the ability to manage crises situations. It is not clear whether this was intended or perceived as related to terrorist activity. Given the events of 9/11, it is likely that knowledge of evacuation procedures and other responses to possible terrorist threats could be considered even more important today.

**Indicators of Change and Rationale for Updated Studies**

A review of the literature indicates some stability of basic skill factors. This is not surprising, as the “how-to” procedures of food service management, hotel operations and club management (a combination of the former two) has not changed significantly. However, changes in several environmental factors affecting both higher education and the hospitality industry serve as indicators of changing needs and emphases in appropriate curricula.
First, the number of college-level programs in hospitality and tourism management as well as culinary education has grown. Judging by the quantity of institutional memberships in the professional academy, I-CHRIE, there are more than 250 degree-granting institutions in the hospitality discipline. Furthermore, the number of graduate degrees has nearly doubled during the past ten years alone. It will be important to distinguish the differences, if any, in the knowledge and skill sets of students earning master’s degrees. This increased growth points to a change in the competitive environment and likely the focal point of those programs have changed or need to change. Educational programs may need to reposition themselves and industry professionals may seek different areas of knowledge or emphasis from graduates. Finally, the placement of hospitality management programs within schools and colleges has evolved somewhat. There has been movement away from food science and home economics-related colleges and toward business schools as more and more departments are either moved or developed within them.

At the same time, changes in demographics, the economy, the political/legal environment, and the technological environment have changed the landscape of business and the ways in which firms compete. For instance, the flattening of our world has led to a global economy requiring a more globalized perspective. Outsourcing of reservation systems, customer service and retention programs and loyalty programs are some of the changes taking place in the hospitality industry. These changes are not limited to the United States, but relate to our increasingly global economy.

Recent scandals and subsequent legal prosecution and public scrutiny toward breaches of ethical conduct by executives in large corporations within the financial and other industries has brought increasing attention to corporate responsibility. While training in ethics has been noted in previous studies, this is a potential area of change or increasing relevance.

One of the most significant and rapidly changing facets of the hospitality business in the past ten years is the emphasis on issues surrounding sustainability and green procedures. A Director of Sustainability for Hyatt Hotels was featured as a keynote speaker at the most recent I-CHRIE Conference in San Francisco. Surely, knowledge of green policies and taking steps toward sustainability across industry sectors warrants some attention in hospitality management curricula.

In conclusion, significant changes in the competitive environment of business and education, along with changes in the macro-environment point to the need for curriculum reform in hospitality and tourism management. These changes represent a call for new data from industry professionals to guide the educational process in the hospitality discipline.

REFERENCES


