

CREATING A FRAMEWORK FOR HOSPITALITY COMPETENCIES TO FULFILL THE INDUSTRY'S NEED

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the accommodation sector's requirements on competencies for hospitality graduates. The main purpose of this study is to determine what the most desired competencies are and to come out with a framework for hospitality competency. 16 representatives from the accommodation sector in Peninsular Malaysia participated in this study. A Delphi technique was used for data collection. Analyses discovered four important domains to be associated with the 69 hospitality competencies. 37 competency items were categorized under Workplace Domain, 17 competency items under Personal Effectiveness Domain, 12 competency items under Management Domain and 3 competency items under Academic Domain. These findings provide important foundation for creating hospitality competency framework for educational institutions offering hospitality courses to close the gap on current competencies desired by the Malaysian hotel industry.

Keywords: Hospitality Competency Framework, Hospitality Graduates, Accommodation Sector

INTRODUCTION

There has been a remarkable growth in the number of educational institutions offering hospitality management degrees in Malaysia. To date, there are six public and seventeen higher educational institutions offering hospitality degree programmes (Ministry of Higher Education, 2013). Although the number of institution with hospitality programmes is mushrooming, in Malaysia, there is a minimal guideline with respect to the industry's requirements on hospitality graduates' competency.

Competency can be described as the combination of knowledge, skills and attitude that allows a person to perform well at the workplace and includes behaviours that can be observed and measured (Tsai et al., 2006; Kouwenhoven, 2010). In addition, Boyatzis (1982) described competency as important features of a person that determines his or her outstanding performance. Past studies on hospitality competencies discovered hospitality graduates are still lacking in certain skills as required by the industry. Chi and Gursoy (2009) relates globalization as one key contributor to the fast growth and changes of the hotel industry worldwide. Moreover, transformations in world economies, technologies and humanities are other contributors to the constants changes in competencies for the hotel sector (Jauhari, 2006; Whitelaw et al., 2009). Consequently, these changes have produced challenges for hospitality education providers to upkeep with the industry's need. In order for hospitality institutional education to keep pace with these changes, a continuous need to determine the current hospitality competencies is inevitable. Therefore, in coordination with the statement above, the research questions for this study are:

1. What are the Malaysian Hospitality graduates' competencies in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes required by the industry?

2. What is the competency domains required for hospitality graduates?

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is essential to consider what the industries are looking for when hiring graduates (Kay & Rusette, 2000). Therefore, determining the competencies from the industry's viewpoint is necessary. In order to enrich human capital development, the 'Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013- 2025' was introduced in 2013 that emphasized the need for collaboration between the education providers and the industry (Malaysia Education Blueprint, 2013). As Malaysia attempt to be a developed nation by 2020, the introduction of this blueprint is in line with the government's effort to develop skillful human capital. The move is expected to equip future Malaysian graduates with competency desired by the industry.

The importance to possess competencies for successful career in the industry is evident for graduates. In Australia for example, interpersonal skills, problem solving and self-management is considered as salient competencies for hospitality industry (Raybould & Wilkins, 2006). In the Northern America, good attitude is an outstanding skill if graduates were to work in the accommodation sector. This competency should be bundled with the soft and hard skills (Tesone & Ricci, 2005; Sisson & Adam, 2013). It was also revealed that beside interpersonal skills, leadership skills have been critical success in the hospitality industry (Chung-Herrera et al., 2003; Kay & Rusette, 2000).

The research conducted in Ireland revealed the growing emphasized on soft and human relation skills (Nolan et al., 2010). In an earlier study by Connolly and McGing (2006), managers in three, four and five star accommodation sector in Dublin preferred to hire graduates with a balance of both practical and analytical skills. The competencies include people management skills and human resource skills including communication; having good personality; customer service skills; supervisory skills; personnel skills; problem-solving skills; finance skills; accounting and budgeting skills. In addition to such competencies, competency building is a way to gain views from expert in the field (Hong & Wang, 2003).

The concept of competency building has been used to identify competencies for superior performance (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Chung-Herrera et al., (2003) indicated competency building as one way for educational providers to prepare graduates for the industry. This competency building concept has been applied to competency model associated with improving human resources. According to Lucia and Lepsinger (1999), a competency model assisted in determining the knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviours that are needed to perform effectively in an organization. Additionally, the competency model can assist in competency study (Chung-Herrera et al., 2003; Mansfield, 2005).

Many competency models have been developed earlier for competency study. For example, Katz's 1955 competency model, Sandwith's 1993 competency model and Employment Training Administration (ETA) model. These competency models are either focused on specific competency or a generic competency. ETA model is a generic competency model that is based from competency based approach to training and education. ETA model outlines nine tiers of competency (Ennis, 2008). In this study, the four domains in ETA model; personal effectiveness domain, academic domain, workplace domain and management domain were used to identify the domains for competency items.

Realizing the importance between competency and education and to ascertain what is provided by the educational institutions is relevant with the industry's need, a continuous evaluation of hospitality programme is essential (Jayawardena, 2001). Accordingly, competency based education approach was integrated with education curriculum (Brownell & Chung, 2001). According to Millar et al., (2008), competency is the foundation in

competency based education and is widely accepted in technical and vocational education. Furthermore, in competency based education, one of the characteristic is for educators to focus on competencies desirable by the employers (Kouwenhoven, 2010). Schilling and Koetting (2010) also revealed that in competency based education, the construction of educational process is based on attaining specific competencies and to establish proper learning and assessment outcome. In addition, competency based education will assist educational institution to prepare students for a specific profession.

The competency based approach to education will form the research framework for this study and provide the growth to new findings in this field.

METHODOLOGY

This study was an exploratory study that employed Delphi technique to obtain information on competencies from accommodation sector's representatives. In order to come out with the first round questionnaires, items related to hospitality competencies were compiled from the past studies. Purposive sampling was used as the main aimed of this study is to obtain expert's ability to answer the research questions. Data collection for the first round started in April 2014 and third round was completed in February 2015. From 176 identified representatives of four and five star accommodation sectors in Peninsular Malaysia, 16 panels participated in the study. In order to achieve consensus amongst panelist, this study has to be conducted in three rounds as shown in Figure 1. Questionnaires were used throughout the data collection process. Data collected were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Science version 19.0 Descriptive statistics were utilized to summarize the data.

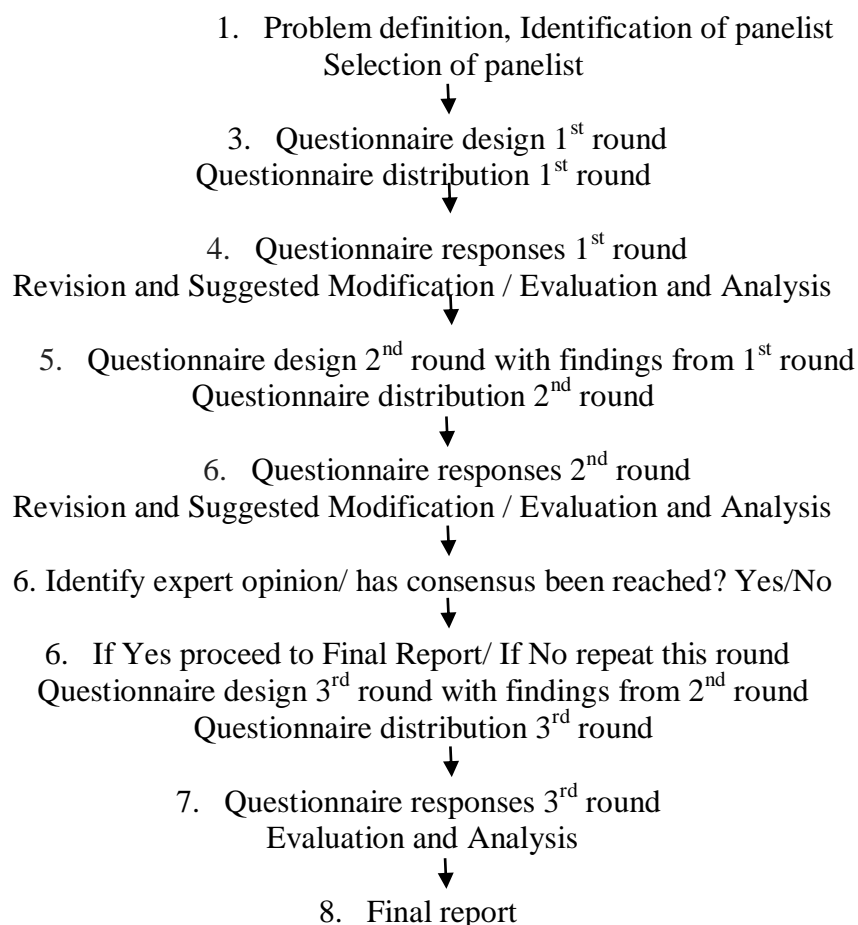


Figure1. Modified Delphi Technique for this Research

RESULTS

Respondents' Characteristics

This study looked at industry's requirements of graduates competencies. Results for the demographic characteristics revealed that the sex ratio of the samples presents a distribution of 56.3% female and 43.7% male. The majority of respondents were aged from 41 to 50 years old. 56.3% are holding the post of human resource managers, 28.1% are general managers and 15.6% are from other management post. In terms of characteristic of respondent's working condition, 65.6% were from four star and 34.4% were from five star accommodation sector.

Analyses of Mean

In round one, panelist considered all 69 competency items as essential for hospitality graduates. Therefore, in round two these competencies items were further tested and the mean score revealed that 5 competency items are considered very essential by the industry. These competencies items scored the highest mean ranges from 4.5 to 4.69 namely; communication skill (M=4.69), professional grooming and appearance (M= 4.62), ability to work as a team (M=4.62), consistent customer service (M=4.56) and knowledge on customer service (M=4.50). From these 5 competencies, panelist categorized professional grooming under personal effectiveness domain, while the other 4 competency items are categorized under workplace domain. There were 24 competency items with mean scores above 4.0 to 4.44.

Table1. Competency items with mean score above 4.0

<i>Competency Items</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Commitment to high performance	4.44
Develop effective working relationship	4.44
Ability to adhere to standard operating procedures (SOPs)	4.44
Develop positive customer relations	4.38
Demonstrate listening skills	4.37
Give and receive feedback on performance	4.31
Ability to take on additional responsibilities	4.25
Demonstrate sense of responsibilities	4.25
Possesses basic problem solving skills	4.25
Computer knowledge on standard Microsoft office	4.25
Possesses a leadership abilities	4.25
Maintain professional and ethical standards in the work environment	4.25
Flexible team player	4.25
Ability to motivate others	4.19
Demonstrate cultural awareness in dealings with staff and guests	4.19
Managing personal stress and emotional control	4.13
Able to write a simple business report	4.13
Demonstrate time management skills	4.13
Able to communicate effectively across different departments	4.13
Develop management skills	4.12
Possesses people (HR)skills	4.06
Able to perform multi- tasking	4.06
Able to prioritize task	4.06
Positive thinking while facing difficulty	4.06

Domains for Competencies Items

Workplace Domain

Analyses of percentage revealed that 37 competency items were categorized by panels to be in workplace domain. Competency items under this domain includes perform multi- tasking, understand unique characteristics of lodging industry, adhere to standard operating procedures (SOPs) and other hotel policies and procedures, knowledge on general hotel operations, develop staffing schedules, work as a team, demonstrate operations and supervisory skills, develop positive customer relations, maintain professional and ethical standards, demonstrate empathy in dealing with customers and staff, deliver exceptional and consistent customer service, develop effective working relationship with fellow associates, managers and others, give and receive feedback on performance and communication skills (oral, professional writing and email etiquette).

Other competency items that were categorized by panels as workplace domain were ability to trace and identify operational problems, operationally focused and flexible, understand and implement measures for energy efficiency in hotels and protect the environment, emphasize personal development, prioritized training and on- the- job opportunities, flexible team player, knowledge of inventory and cost control, ability to supervise subordinates, work independently and without close supervision, communicate effectively across different departments, develop workflow according to specific operations, assist in promotional activities and public relation strategies, knowledge on customer service, demonstrate time management skills, handle change effectively, knowledge of sales skills and knowledge of health, safety and hygiene, understand basic building utilities and facilities, implement internal control systems in response to an identified problem, write a simple business report, delegate responsibility and authority, manage meetings to ensure productivity, manage crisis situations and ability to use developed technology to assist in daily hotel operations.

Personal Effectiveness Domain

17 competency items were categorized under personal effectiveness domain, namely: ability to develop a personal career plan, demonstrate sense of responsibilities, set personal objectives, professional grooming and appearance, demonstrate listening skills, demonstrate cultural awareness in dealings with staff and guests, ability to prioritize task, ability to work in a pressurized environment, ability to manage personal stress and emotional control, positive thinking while facing difficulty, demonstrate high level of personal skills, commitment to high performance, ability to handle change creatively, effective influence skills and strong analytical skills, ability to take on additional responsibilities and basic problem solving skills.

Management Domain

In management domain, panelist engaged 12 competency items to be under this domain. The items were ability to develop management skills and ability to write a standard operating procedure (SOP), ability to identify target markets, ability to develop a marketing plan, ability to forecast revenues and staffing needs, ability to interpret financial statements, ability to train others, ability to analyze financial statements, using ethics in decision making, ability to demonstrate people skills, ability to motivate others and demonstrate leadership abilities.

Academic Domain

From the results, it was revealed that 93.3 percent panelists agreed that three competency items were categorized under this domain. The items were basic computer knowledge on Microsoft office, knowledge on technology and knowledge of multiple languages.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The results reveal that Delphi technique is an effective tool to acquire industry’s opinion on graduate’s competency. The main purpose of the study is to create a framework of hospitality competencies for Malaysian graduates. Throughout the three rounds of Delphi, 69 competencies items are identified as essential competency for hospitality graduates. Most of the competency items in this study are significantly consistent to the previous study in hospitality competencies such as by (Tsai et al., 2006; Raybould & Wilkins, 2006; Sisson & Adam, 2013). These findings also support most other studies on competencies indicating the most essential competencies for hospitality graduates are associated with soft skills namely the communication skills whether oral communication or professional writing skills. Professional grooming and appearance of graduates are also crucial as hospitality industry deals with customers; therefore good appearance will provide good impression for the hotel’s guest.

This study also reveals that panelists identified and categorized all 69 competency items under the four domains although panelists are free to recommend other domain which they think are appropriate and suitable with the competency statements. The 4 domains identified are workplace domain with 37 competency items, personal effectiveness domain with 17 competency items, management domain with 12 competency items and academic domain with 3 competency items.

It is interesting to note that panelists identified 3 competency items as academic domain. These competencies are computer knowledge on standard Microsoft Office, knowledge on technology and knowledge on multiple languages. Previous literature by Mayburry and Swanger, (2010) identified knowledge on technology and knowledge on Microsoft Office as information technology domain. In Tsai et al., (2006), knowledge of multiple languages is associated with interpersonal skills domain. Although these competency items are significant with past studies, it is revealed that in this study, academic domain is highlighted as a new domain underlying hospitality graduate’s competencies for these 3 items.

The implications associated with the findings of this study may be useful for both hospitality educational providers and future hospitality graduates. The findings are hoped to assist colleges and universities offering degrees programme related to hospitality management to strengthen the curriculum aligned with the findings. It is noteworthy for hospitality educational providers to form strategic partnership with the hospitality industry. It is also apparent from these findings that hospitality education providers should incorporate competencies required by the industry in order to produce future Malaysian hospitality graduates who are competitive in the work market and have a grasp of recent competencies. Figure 2 shows a Framework for Hospitality Competencies from the Industry’s Perspective.

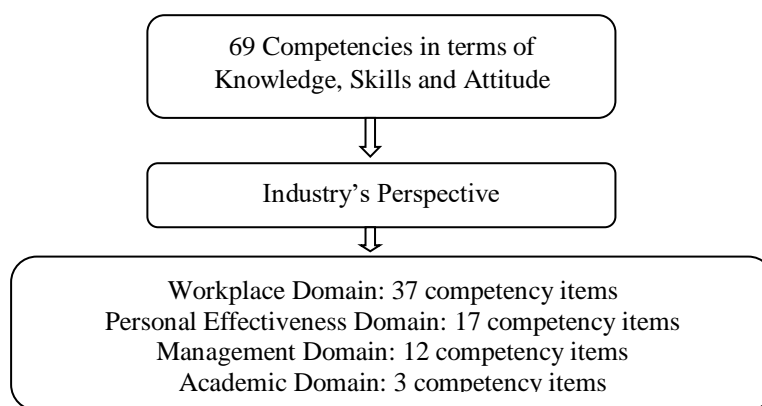


Figure2. Framework for Hospitality Competencies

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