

Hospitality Industry Expectations of Entry-Level College Graduates: Attitude over Aptitude

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ABSTRACT

Executive Summary

This article reports on the findings of an empirical study conducted with senior hiring executives who represent various sectors of the hospitality and tourism industry in the Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) of Orlando, Florida. The geographic area was chosen for its representation of a number of hospitality and tourism sectors. While the sample represented various sectors, the purpose of the study was to identify perceptions of attributes preferred for entry-level workers primarily in the lodging and restaurant sectors. The article presents background information from the literature, methodologies employed within the study, as well as conclusions and recommendations for future education/industry initiatives in the MSA. The article presents a follow-up to a prior study to determine whether practitioners view embedded attitudinal factors as strongly as had been reported five years prior within the same MSA.

Introduction

Relative to other service industry sectors (financial service and personal service classifications for instance) the full service lodging industry rates highly in the areas of service intimacy and duration; providing personalized services to hotel guests 24 hours per day (Tesone, 2010). Many individuals believe that the hospitality and tourism industry consists of hotels and restaurants. In fact, certain hospitality programs provide preparation in these areas exclusively, such as the School of Hotel Administration established at Cornell University in 1922 (Cornell University, 2010). However, in destination areas like Orlando, Florida, the hospitality and tourism industry subscribes to a broad array of sectors to include lodging (hotels and resorts), foodservice (restaurants, catering, and institutional), conventions, events, transportation (air, land, and sea), recreation (golf, tennis, yachting, and social clubs), entertainment, theme parks, attractions, gaming, health spas, and tours. This broad representation makes cities such as Orlando and Las Vegas, Nevada suitable laboratories to conduct industry related empirical research.

The literature reports that the hospitality industry, in particular, the lodging and foodservice sectors have suffered from high employee turnover (Birdir, 2002; Ghiselli, La Lopa, & Bai, 2001). Operations managers, human resource professionals, and hospitality educators strive to improve assimilation and retention ratios by identifying valid job competencies in future managers, improving hiring practices, and recruiting from educational programs known for producing future hospitality managers with strong industry success potential (Chung-Herrera, Enz, & Lankau, 2003; Guglielmino & Carroll, 1979; Kay & Russette, 2000; Milman & Ricci, 2004). There is an indication that more entry-level employees are being prepared for hospitality positions through formal educational programs (Guide to College Programs, 2004). Emotional labor endurance is a consideration for entry level hospitality service practitioners (Hochschild, 2012).

Understanding job competency expectations that practicing hospitality managers have for high school and college graduates could be useful for business and hospitality educators. The relationship of educational factors to potential industry success remains an important and understudied area of the hospitality literature (Dittman, 1997; Getty, Tas, & Getty, 1991; Hsu, Gilmore, & Walsh, 1992; Tas, 1983, 1988). In lodging and foodservice operations, the general manager is “ultimately responsible for the operation of the hospitality establishment and the supervision of its employees” (Walker, 2004, p. 747). These managers, as well as other functional managers, are the appropriate individuals to assist in the identification of such job competencies. Findings from hospitality studies provide implications concerning competency factors for other service industries such as health care, financial services and retail enterprises.

This article reports the findings of a follow-up study that determined hospitality managers’ competency expectations of entry-level employees who are graduates of local area schools, colleges, and universities. The previous study (Tesone and Ricci, 2005) found evidence to support the commonly worded axiom among hospitality operators that states, *hire for attitude; train for skills*. Both studies took place in the Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) of Orlando, Florida. Respondents were members of a trade association called the Central Florida Hotel Lodging Association (CFHLA). The more recent study involved a certain number of respondents who had not been located in the area when the first study was completed in 2004. While the professional group caters primarily to the needs of lodging managers, members are also representatives from sectors that include theme parks/attractions, foodservice, events, tourism, transportation, entertainment, and recreation.

Competency-based Education

The more current extant literature appears to reinforce the importance of attitudinal factors as influential components of job/person fit for most hospitality entry level positions. A number of studies relative to workplace competencies have been reported in the hospitality literature over the past 25 years (Mansfield, 2012). A recent study of management competencies provided a comprehensive list of management domains that were determined to be applicable to practitioners within the private club sector (Koenigsfeld, Perdue, Youn, and Woods, 2011). That study was presented as an update to a seminal series of reports published by Purdue et al (2000, 2001, 2002). Similar criteria were applied to later investigations of competencies with emphasis on the full-service lodging sector that rendered cohesive findings with those of Purdue et al (Tesone & Ricci, 2005, 2006). A later research project applied the processes of the work done by Tesone and Ricci to the golf and country club sector rendering consistent findings with those of the previous studies (Fjestul & Tesone, 2008). Finally, Tesone and Ricci (2012) are currently in the process of conducting research based on an updated model of management domains. As mentioned previously, the component of emotional labor associated with the performance of intimate levels requires the expenditure of emotional labor. Hence, attitudinal factors associated with job/person fit increase the likelihood that service providers will demonstrate individual resilience relative to position requirements (Hein & Riegel, 2012). Similar results were previously reported by Chapman, Genevieve, and Lovell (2006) who suggested that competency frameworks excluded key skills and attitudinal factors required for performance within hospitality organizations. Additionally, one study argued the absence of attitudinal factors generated deficiencies concerning competency models specifically aimed at entry level workers in Taiwanese hotels who were trained within hospitality schools (Tsai, Goh, Huffman and Wu, 2006). Finally, an investigation of country club operational entry level workers found the requirement for a broad range of technical skills combined with specific attitudinal qualities (Fjelstul, 2007). A number of findings from the extant literature supported the intent to engage in this replicated study. This approach is relevant to competency studies as was demonstrated by Perdue et al (2000, 2001, 2002).

Respondents

The respondents in the replicated study closely mirrored the classifications identified in the earlier investigation. This mirroring is one indicator of the sustainable environment concerning senior-level senior level industry managers in the MSA. The breakdown of practitioners by specialty remained similar in terms of the percentage of lodging managers (46.2% in the current study, versus 46.7% in the previous study). This indicates the steady hotel/lodging presence of the greater Orlando and central Florida MSA. The variation of the other areas may indicate a shift in duties/roles outside of the role of lodging manager. Categories changed with those listing themselves as “other” dropping from 26.5% to 5.2% in the current survey. Another category that saw a noticeable drop was marketing which shifted from 35.3% to 6.5%. Perhaps these marketing professionals have changed membership to other categories or different associations within the MSA.

Table 1 provides a description of respondents (n=156) from these sectors.

Table 1
Hospitality & Tourism Practitioner Areas of Specialty

	N	Percentage
Areas of specialty		
Hotel/Resort Operations	72	46.2%
Marketing	10	6.5%
Others	8	5.2%
Convention, Meetings, CVB, Government	12	7.7%
Corporate office	6	3.9%
Restaurant Operations	14	9.1%
Human Resources	9	5.9%
Accounting, Technology, Administrative	7	4.5%
Food Service (other than restaurant)	8	5.1%
Tours, Transportation	5	3.3%
Cruise Operations	2	1.3%
Airline Operations	3	1.3%

Purpose and Methodology of the Study

The purpose of the study was not so much to compare recent findings to those previously discovered. It simply was to re-determine practitioner perceptions of desired competencies of entry-level workers who are graduates of business and hospitality education programs in the current hospitality work environment. A census of current hospitality managers who are members of the CFHLA was undertaken over the past year. Currently, there are approximately 169 lodging and related sector members of this organization. The CFHLA is designated as the world's largest regional trade group for lodging and related professionals (Central Florida, 2012).

Prior to conducting the original study, the researchers conducted a review of literature to identify specific research in the area of lodging and foodservice manager job competencies (Tas, 1983, 1988; Chung-Herrera, Enz, & Lankau, 2003; Perdue & Ninemeier, 2001; Rutherford, 1987; Sapienza, 1978). The literature review was combined with the results of two focus groups conducted with lodging managers and lodging management educators from central Florida in the original study. Since the purpose of this study was to replicate the exact protocol used five years earlier, the same instrument was utilized. These findings were utilized to assist in the development of a 42-item questionnaire. The purpose of this investigation was to explore the factor structure underlying the items in the questionnaire to verify consistency with previously published literature. The maximum likelihood estimation procedure was used to extract the factors. Kaiser's rule was used to determine which factors were most eligible for interpretation. This is not unreasonable given that factor analysis has as its objective reducing several variables into fewer factors. Using this rule, three factors were extracted explaining roughly 74.08% of all the variable variances. Additionally, respondent ratings of knowledge, ability, and attitude for new-hires in the lodging industry were judged to be highly reliable for the managers to whom it was given, with a reliability of .9509. The investigators administered the questionnaire to the general population of CFHLA members, receiving 156 appropriate responses.

to be working within the first two categories with a small number (about 5%) Practitioner respondents were asked to indicate their organizational position classifications within four discrete categories that included: *Manager, Executive, Owner, Other*. As with the previous study the majority of respondents were described describing their work as entrepreneurial or consultative.

Employee Recruitment and Selection

This section of the questionnaire surveyed practitioner opinions concerning the quantity and backgrounds of qualified human resources available to the industry. Respondents were evenly divided in their opinions concerning whether sufficient numbers of qualified applicants were available for vacant positions within the industry with one-half reporting “yes” the other, “no” and no neutral responses.

Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes expected by Employers

The practitioner participants in the study noted knowledge, skills, and attitudinal qualities that indicate worker success in the industry. More specifically dominant skills and abilities were noted in the areas of teamwork, communications (listening skills, verbal and writing skills, and empathy with others), and guest/customer services. Other job related requirements were found in general knowledge, professional image (grooming, attire, and demeanor), comprehension of performance standards, and realistic job/career expectations. This study also identified some attitudinal priorities such as pride of service, prioritizing needs of others over needs of self, and achievement. Ranked items appear in Table 2

Demographics of the Respondents

The demographics of the respondents participating in the follow-up study closely resembled those found in the original investigation. The gender split remained similar with males comprising 60.1% of the survey population and females at 39.9% (current study) versus 43.0% female and 57.0% male previously. Mean years worked in the hospitality industry was 12.8 in the current survey versus 13.3 in the previous. The increase in select service hotel properties in the MSA may be one possible explanation for this reduction in overall experience level.

Table 2
Practitioner Perceptions of Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes

Rank		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
	Knowledge			
1	Knowledge of grooming and professional image standards	154	4.40	0.80
2	Knowledge of guest services standards	156	4.22	0.78
3	Knowledge of the realities involved in this type of work	153	4.19	0.97
4	Knowledge of business management and ethics	152	4.01	0.78
5	Knowledge of hospitality products and services	156	3.79	0.90
6	Knowledge of basic terminology used in the industry	156	3.60	0.89
7	Knowledge of the leadership and organizational structure	154	3.65	0.95
	Skills and Ability			
1	Ability to work as part of a team	156	4.58	0.78
2	Effective listening, verbal and written communication skills	156	4.53	0.68
3	Ability to project a professional image	152	4.50	0.75
4	Ability to empathize with the guest experience	154	4.43	0.77
5	Ability to anticipate guest wants and needs to provide service.	153	4.42	0.81
6	Ability to deal with daily uncertainties and changes in routine	153	4.27	0.87
7	Ability to balance the needs of multiple guests at a given time	155	4.28	0.79
8	Ability to generate an attitude of trust among co-workers	155	4.11	0.72
9	Ability to make creative decisions to achieve service standards	156	4.21	0.89
10	Ability to minimize use of resources while providing services	153	3.83	0.94
11	Administrative skills for cash/credit settlements, forms and reports	153	3.89	0.88
	Attitude			
1	Takes personal pride in satisfying the needs of others	156	4.34	0.79
2	Prefers helping others before the satisfying the needs of the self	155	4.29	0.83
3	Tendency to move toward possibilities, as opposed to avoiding negative outcomes	155	4.21	0.85
4	Defines self as empathetic to the needs of others	155	4.20	0.70
5	Prefers working with people over working with administrative tasks	156	4.15	0.86
6	Defines self as outgoing and social	153	4.18	0.89
7	Prefers solving problems over following procedures	154	4.00	0.79
8	Prefers working in pleasant surroundings over clinical environments	156	4.10	0.90
9	Prefers working as part of a team over doing individualized work	155	3.95	0.87
10	Prefers each day to be different over each day being the same	155	3.90	0.87
11	Prefers challenging work over regimented work	155	3.89	0.89
12	Believes hard work is rewarded through promotion	156	3.79	0.90
13	Prefers creative work over analytical work	154	3.89	0.94

Theoretical Grounding for Attitudinal Factors

The theoretical grounding for attitudinal factors incorporated into the instrument was grounded in a commonly used psychological science called Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) discovered by Bandler and Grinder (1975). This aspect was not reported in the first iteration of the study. The concept combines mental processes with language. The science is incorporated into practice by the vast majority of mental health therapists, as well as a very small number of HR practitioners (Muran & DiGiuseppe, 1990). It is based on the work of Milton Erickson (Barker, 1985). The premise is that internal and external dialogues result in alterations of neuro-pathways. Personality traits indicating an individual's preferred responses to external environmental stimuli may be determined by diagnosing *meta-programs* that determine likely behaviors (Wood, 2006).

A similar study addressed the capacity to identify personality compatibilities among groups of individuals using NLP meta-analysis applications (Stretcher & Counts, 2008). Another report focused on the influence of genetics on behavior that may be predicted through data analysis combined with observations of speech patterns (Hill, 1973). Brown and Graff (2004) suggested that meta-program diagnostics may be used to identify various aspects of personality traits and associative behaviors among college students. Another education related investigation yielded the finding that NLP techniques may be used to as an interpersonal communication model alternative for the determination of personality traits that influence the soft skills of workers in the area of interpersonal communication (Schulz, 2008).

There are reports that focus on the relationship of personality traits to worker performance in the NLP literature. One investigation identified the use of combined NLP and coaching techniques used to enhance customer relationship management. Millar (1990) employed NLP techniques in firms to enhance interpersonal skills among certain groups of introverted engineers. A similar study focused on the building of rapport among coworkers and customers using NLP meta-analysis diagnostics (Nickles, Everett, & Klein, 1983).

As the sparsely presented accounts found within the extant literature indicate, there have been a number of NLP diagnostics and intervention programs instituted within organizations. Hospitality practitioners would not be expected to be familiar with these techniques. However, the experienced high-level executive would anecdotally possess the ability to identify behavioral success factors associated with observations of preferred performers in the work settings. The assumption is that these prior observations come to mind when presented with desirable behavioral qualities associated with workers. Additionally, undesirable characteristics likely reside within the memories of the respondents to the instrument. It was evidenced that respondents gravitated toward the desirable characteristics by assigning high priorities to the positively related NLP meta-program oriented suggestions.

Lessons Learned from the Practitioners

The researchers learned from this study that, in practice, hospitality managers hire primarily for attitude and secondarily for specific knowledge and skills. This statement has been the anecdotal mantra of hospitality managers for over a decade. While the questionnaire met with statistical reliability criteria, the skills/abilities and attitude sections were closely correlated. For instance, item one in the *Skills and Ability* section aligns closely with ranking 2 in the section labeled *Attitudes*. It is clear that these hiring executives prefer interpersonal interactive abilities over productivity and concrete work processing skills (rankings 10 and 11 under *Skills and Ability*).

These findings suggest that educators should include affective learning outcomes in educational programs designed to fulfill the requirements and preferences for employment in the hospitality and tourism industry. Paramount concerns among the practitioners responding to this survey included: teamwork, empathy, anticipation of customer (guest) needs, and a high tolerance for ambiguity as skills and abilities. As far as *Attitudes*, the practitioners rated pride in helping others, priority of others' needs over self, optimism, and empathy as core values. Also, the respondents noted the issue of realistic job expectations. These findings may give educators in business and hospitality management programs clues concerning the learning outcomes that suit the perceived needs of hospitality and tourism employers in the central Florida MSA.

Conclusions

The practitioners who responded to the survey instrument represented a wide range of hospitality and tourism industry sectors, with strongest concentrations in the lodging and foodservice categories. Respondents indicated a deep sense of satisfaction with their industry career choices that is evident in a large percentage of individuals who would recommend hospitality careers to friends and family members. As to the perceived existence of a shortage of qualified workers to fill positions in the industry, respondents were evenly opposed with answers of *yes* and *no*. The majority of practitioners did, however, express an interest in recruiting individuals from secondary and tertiary education programs. Their perceptions concerning the levels of preparation of graduates from these programs were mixed however.

Suggested Collaborative Initiatives among Educators and Industry Practitioners

The central Florida hospitality & tourism industry sectors could strive to restructure themselves from industries that employ people in jobs, to industries that offer lifetime career opportunities. By providing career ladders and increasing the opportunities for personal development for each employee, tourism firms will be able to overcome the stigma that is often attached to this industry, namely low paying jobs, in poor working conditions, with high turnover rates. Tying every job in the organization to every other job, and providing the necessary training to be promoted along the career ladder, will not only improve the motivation and satisfaction of the employees and reduce labor-turnover, but will also attract more talented and educated individuals and thus totally change the industry's image.

The hospitality and tourism industry, in cooperation with external tourism training and educational institutions, could endeavor to create more realistic expectations than students have of the industry and its occupations. One possible reason for the high turnover rates that are common in the hospitality and tourism industry is the false and unrealistic expectations of new employees, removed “and” especially those coming out of secondary and higher education programs. Those employees arrive at work with glamorous expectations of fun, plenty of travel, excellent pay, and plush managerial jobs. When confronted with reality they are severely disappointed, and often quit when a better job becomes available. To prevent this disappointment, educational institutions, with the assistance of the industry, should provide the students with a more realistic and less “rosy” picture of the industry and thus prepare them for “real life.” It is plausible to suggest that one of the reasons that the central Florida employers gave high ratings to the quality of university tourism education in central Florida is the realistic presentation of career expectations imbedded across hospitality and tourism curricula in the region.

The hospitality and tourism industry could provide its tourism training and educational institutions with more opportunities for internships and practical training. A large proportion of the employers commonly admit that the industry was not providing the educational sector with sufficient opportunities for student internships and practical training. If students are to be trained in subjects that are relevant to the workplace, then they have to be given the opportunity to observe and learn how the theoretical material that is presented in class is manifested at work. Though not always an immediate benefit to the employer, increasing the number of internships and practical training opportunities may have a significant effect on the overall quality of incoming employees. Once again, secondary level educators can learn from the higher education experience where mandatory internship requirements are common among university programs of hospitality and tourism management. To accomplish that, all industry sectors should provide internship opportunities, which often result in job offers for high performers upon graduation.

The findings of the study suggest the existence of a strong relationship among college-level hospitality programs and industry practitioners. These relationships may become stronger through new initiatives. Also, secondary institutions could seek to establish working relationships with human resource management practitioners for the purpose of the collaborative sharing of information that will enhance the perception of graduate preparation upon entry to the workforce. While this article reports the findings of a study within hospitality organizations, it provides implications for other service industries such as health care, financial services and retail enterprises.

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