

Essential Job Competencies in the Hospitality and Tourism Industry: An Analysis of Employer Expectations for New-Entry Employees in Thailand

Sasithorn Phonkaew^a, Lalida Arphawatthanasakul^b, Piriya Kittivoraphan^c, ^{a,b,c}School of Management and Economics (MSME), Assumption University, Thailand, Email: ^asasithornpho@msme.au.edu, ^blalidaarp@msme.au.edu, ^cpiriyakit@msme.au.edu

The main purpose of this paper is to identify the gap of essential job competencies expected by the hospitality and tourism industry and competencies possessed by new-entry employees based on employer perspectives. A qualitative research design was used by conducting in-depth interviews with 20 key informants from the hospitality and tourism organizations in Thailand. Interview results confirm that there is a gap between job competencies expected by the employers and ones possessed by graduates and new-entry employees. Employers from the hospitality and tourism industry emphasizes more on soft skills (language and attitude) than technical skills (knowledge). Findings could be beneficial to universities and educational institutions that offer hospitality and tourism management programs to adjust their curriculum or teaching and learning plan to emphasize more on foreign language skills and service-minded attitude of their students and graduates.

Key words: *Competencies, Hospitality and Tourism Industry, Employer Expectations, Soft Skills.*

Introduction

Hospitality and tourism industry is one of the world largest and the most important industries that generates nation revenue and employment opportunity to the world economic sector (Saengchai, Thaiprayoon, & Jernsittiparsert, 2019). It generates approximately 319 million jobs worldwide in 2018 (World travel and Tourism council, 2019). For Thailand, the tourism industry has directly generated the innumerable number of jobs in labor market of many different sectors, for instance hotel operations, transportations, food service operations, travel agencies and attractions. Therefore, the hospitality and tourism industry has been a significant source of employment for both Thai and international employees.

The growth of tourism industry in most countries in ASEAN also relies on the beauty of nature and environment to attract international tourists, meaning the increasing demand of employment within the industry. Jernsittiparsert and Chankoson (2019) also concluded about the significant role of environment on the overall tourism industry in Thailand. Practically, about 6 million employment opportunities come from the hospitality and tourism industry in 2018 or about 15.9% of total employment of the country (World travel and Tourism council, 2019). The rapid expansion of the hospitality and tourism industry in Thailand has continuously inflated the demand of employment at all levels especially for highly competent employees at the frontline or new-entry level. Hence, in order to provide sufficient and quality service responding to the increasing number of tourists, a large number of employments are required unavoidably.

According to Department of Employment (2018), it was reported that the total number of students who graduated from the hospitality and tourism management programs was 4,623 in 2018 which increased from 3,085 in 2017 and continues to increase each year despite of the insufficient supply for the current labor market. Even though there are numerous jobs opportunities from rapidly growing hospitality and tourism industry, it remains unclear whether there is a gap between the level of skills and knowledge required by the industry and the job competencies acquired by the graduates. Thus, the prime concern of the industry is that job competencies of new-entry employees are unable to meet the demand of the industry in labor market.

According to the past research of Chaisawat (2000), he supported that the number of graduates and the demand of employees of hospitality and tourism industry are concurrently increasing. However, he indicated that there is still a human resource shortage of new-entry employees who meet the requirements of the industry. A key to resolve these situations is to identify what competency will be required by industry in order to improve the level of skills and knowledge of new-entry employees to meet and satisfy the present and future expected requirement of the industry. Shekhawat (2012) indicated that hospitality and tourism

programs in the universities around the world have been maintaining and emphasizing on developing technical skills in an operation area whereas recent studies indicated that hospitality organizations are actually focusing on the essential of soft skills. This becomes a controversial issue whether there is a gap in job competencies possessed by new graduates and those required by new-entry employees in the context of hospitality and tourism organizations.

The purpose of this research is to determine the essential or key job competencies of the new-entry employees needed in the hospitality and tourism industry from employer's perspective in Thailand. Many research investigated the most important knowledge, skills, and attitudes of employees and their work performance for all industries. However, very few researchers have studied about core competencies of employer's perspective in the hospitality and tourism industry in Thailand. It is also aimed to help enhance graduates' employability skills and to guide institutions and universities to ensure that their graduates would be ready and well-prepared as new-entry employees to achieve the specific outcomes required by industry. To achieve the objective, this study involves primarily on surveying opinions from human resource managers, training managers, and professionals in human resource management from different hospitality and tourism organizations in Bangkok, Thailand to determine the expected competencies of hospitality and tourism graduates as new-entry employees when they are recruited. Next part, the word "competency" will be discussed in more details with many past studies related to this concept.

Literature Review

Essential Competencies for Hospitality and Tourism Workforce

The foundation of competencies for service industry is the mindsets of being professionals working in the company. Some significant competencies namely outstanding service, customer orientation, perfect operation management, excellent marketing strategy and good cost management were confirmed to lead to the success for hospitality organizations (Jauhari, 2006).

Job competencies have been categorized by several past researchers. Agut and Grau (2002) came up with two different ideas regarding to the word competencies. They are technical skills and generic skills. Number of researchers defined competency of technical skills as a field of knowledge whether in the area of management, IT, computer, languages, economy, financial management, or hospitality and tourism management (Agut and Grau, 2002; Chalofsky, 2007). On the other hand, generic skills (non-technical skills) have been identified as soft skills or as abilities in communication and interpersonal skills that employees should have along with the knowledge (Matteson *et al.*, 2016). Soft skills are personal traits that improve person's skills in job. Past studies found the importance of soft skills that became the

expected qualifications of employees to include teamwork, communication and self-skills above the knowledge, degree classification, intelligence and reputation of the institute the graduate attended (Pazhani and Priya, 2012; Frantz and Misal, 2016). There were some recent past studies that focused on soft skills of graduated students. Saunders and Zuzel (2010) found that the essential instruments that can help graduated students to achieve employability and successful in their career path are soft skills, understanding skills, and personal attributes which benefit themselves. Thus for this reason, it seems that new-entry employees who have soft skills will literally receive the employment and seem to have a longer term occupation success. Their findings about the importance of soft skills toward employability of new graduates also confirmed the study by Clark (1993) who surveyed managers in hotels in UK. He described communication skills as having a nice personality and employees should have these skills in order to perform an excellent job. To sum up regarding soft skills, John (2009) affirmed that technical skills contribute only just 15 per cent of person's professional competence while on the other side, soft skills contribute likely 85 per cent. As it is clear, soft skills play an important role in internship students' success in their chosen occupation.

Many recent studies have been conducted and came to the facts that hospitality and tourism organizations are focusing on an efficient workforce which is a result of the performance of appropriate skills when delivering the service process to customers. It is for this reason that organizations are now looking for employees who have both technical and soft skills (Resumes, 2015). However, hospitality and tourism programs in the universities around the world have been maintaining and emphasizing on developing technical skills in an operation area whereas recent studies indicated that hospitality organizations are actually focusing on the essential of soft skills which are actually needed the most for internship students and graduates (Shekhawat, 2012). In the meantime, hospitality and tourism organizations should provide training programs to new-entry employees with soft skills, not only with professional skills (Hurrell, 2016). It came to managers' mind that there is a huge gap between skills obtained by new-entry employees and skills that managers expect to get from employees (Hurrell, 2016; Resumes, 2015; Shekhawat, 2012).

This problem happens the same in different countries in South Asia. People in these countries have been dealing with no job or unemployment although the number of new graduates has been increasing and the number of job opportunities has been rising at the same time (Singh and Jaykumar, 2019). There are several jobs available in the hospitality industry but just cannot find the persons who have certain skills to fit in. According to Labor Ministry record, it was found that new graduates have been unemployed in many countries in South Asia for example, in Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan (Singh and Jaykumar, 2019). Additionally, as the case in China, it was found that there were more than 38.9 million jobs in hospitality and tourism sector and number of new graduates from colleges and universities continue to grow

too (Hai-yan and Baum, 2006). However, their study also pointed out that China is still struggling with the shortage of qualified employees as the skill that employees have with them are not matching with what the organization is looking for. Referring to Liu (2002), he proposed in his study that a person who work in hospitality should be good at English language communication skills and in order to satisfy customers; it is very important to understand them and understand what they say (Guo, 2004). In line with Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2015), it was found that job applicants barely receive the job in hospitality and tourism market because of poor English communication skills and lack of soft skills (We Forum, 2017). Language and soft skills play important role for employability of new graduates and job applicants.

Hospitality and Tourism Labor Market in Thailand

Thailand's hospitality and tourism sector has become the greatest part in economy in recent years and as far beyond, Thailand's hospitality and tourism sector has helped many other related sectors to boost the economy and compensate for a weak growth in other sectors (SCB - Siam Commercial Bank Economic Intelligence Center, 2016). Additionally, Thailand's hospitality and tourism sector has created direct income from tourists spending especially at hotel and restaurant sectors as well as has created direct jobs, driven investment and brought foreign currency into the country. According to some economic statistics reported by SCB Economic Intelligence Center (2016), the hospitality and tourism sector in Thailand generated more than 10 million workers which are about 1.4 per cent in each year or about 26 per cent of total employment in Thailand.

Yet, the hospitality and tourism sector provides job opportunities for a million jobs but Thailand still encounters with lack of skills of employment. And Thailand is among few countries in ASEAN that English is not an official language. Several recent studies point out the importance of language skills among Thai employees in hospitality and tourism industry such as in convention hotels (Wongwiwattana and Suwetwattankul, 2019) and in tourism-related employment (Batra, 2016). Furthermore, SCB Economic Intelligence Center (2016) reported that Thailand hospitality and tourism industry needs specific skill to fulfill those job opportunities. Service skills are outstanding but employees just cannot communicate with tourists. They cannot speak English or Mandarin and this brings overall service quality down. Since employees are a key to organization success, hospitality and tourism sectors should take a serious concern through language skill beyond just basic knowledge like IT (information technology), marketing and management. Therefore, the prime problem is the competencies of new-entry employees as the supply of the industry are unable to meet the demand of the industry labor market.

Research Methodology

This section presents research design being adopted. After reviewing the literature regarding competencies and the gap between acquired and expected competencies of employees from some past studies, the researchers decided to use the qualitative research as the research design based on in-depth interviews. Veal (2006) stated that the qualitative research design could provide an in-depth understanding of the topic and obtain insights more effectively.

Participants: or key informants for this study include human resource managers, training managers, and recruitment managers from human resource management departments of 20 organizations in the hospitality and tourism industry in Bangkok, Thailand. They were considered as key informants as their responsibility relates to recruitment of new-entry employees and training of employees for their organizations.

Data Collection: Semi-structured, personal in-depth interviews were conducted during Career Weeks in February and in July 2019 at one university. Several hotels and MICE (Meeting Incentive Convention and Incentive) and event management companies sent their human resource personnel to join those Career Weeks for job recruitment right on the campus of the university. In-depth interviews based on open-ended questions were conducted with these human resource personnel by three researchers who used the same interview guide. It is to ensure the validity of findings based on investigator triangulation that is when a qualitative a study uses multiple investigators or researchers to observe or collect data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Each interview session lasted about 45 minutes to one hour.

Data Analysis: The interview results were transcribed into content analysis All interview responses were noted as scripts and then categorized to identity patterns or themes. Then themes from interview data were connected and interrelated with the related literature from previous part. Finally, analysis was made in terms of comparing similarities and differences of responses between hotel organizations and MICE or event management organizations.

Research Findings

In this section, findings from interview data obtained from 20 organizations in hospitality and tourism industry are elaborated and presented. Based on the respondent profile, most of respondent employers comes from hotel organizations (85%) and some from MICE (Meetings, Incentive Travels, Conventions, and Exhibitions) and event management companies (15%). Most of them are senior human resource managers who have more than 10 years of work experiences in the field (75%), the rest are non-senior managers (25%).

Top Competencies Identified By Hotels and MICE and Event Management Companies

There are some similarities and differences regarding the top five competencies expected from the new-entry employees by employers from hotel organizations and MICE and event management companies. Attitudes and language skills were ranked in the top two competencies similarly between these two groups of organizations, whereas the third rank was different. Communication and social skills were ranked third as expected competencies by hotels, but for MICE and event management companies, technology skills and creativity were in the third rank for expected competencies. Knowledge and technical skills were agreed by all key informants that they were one of the top five competencies that new graduates or job applicants for new-entry employees should possess. Table 1 shows the ranking of competencies between hotels and MICE and event management companies.

Table 1: Top FIVE job competencies ranked by two key informant groups

Ranking	Hotels	MICE and Event Management Companies
1	Right attitudes	Language skills
2	Language skills	Right attitudes
3	Communication and Social skills	Technology skills and Creativity
4	Knowledge and Technical skills	Communication and Social skills
5	Technology skills and Creativity	Knowledge and Technical skills

The Gap of Expected Competencies and Acquired Competencies

Interview results obtained by key informants from participating hotels and MICE and event management companies represent employer perception from the hospitality and tourism industry. The mismatch or gap between competencies expected by employers and ones possessed or acquired by new-entry employees exists and is confirmed in the current study. Several respondent employers agreed that due to the rapid rise in hotel and MICE development in Thailand, there is not enough workforce with the right competencies to fill available positions. In other words, they are facing challenges both in terms of quantity and quality of the new-entry employees. One employer remarked: “We often have to compromise and accept new-entry employees from what are available.” The companies may accept people with skills lower than their job requirements. They must also provide training for a long period of time before the new employees can perform their duties as expected.

Misunderstanding about working in the hospitality and tourism industry is further explained by employers. Many of the new-entry employees have a misunderstanding on what is to be

like working in hospitality and tourism industry. They are interested in the glamorous aspect of the industry such as beautiful ambience of work environment, while they are not aware of the hard-working aspect demanded by the industry. This results in high turnover rate of new-entry employees as mentioned by some employers.

Importance of Soft Skills as Top Competencies Expected by Employers

Language skills are the most important skills required for the success in the hospitality and tourism industry as identified by all respondent employers at the current study. English is not the mother-tongue language of Thai people. Many employers commented: “English language skills, including reading, writing, speaking and listening, is a must while the third language including Chinese, Japanese and Korean is a plus.” Some employers confirmed: “As the industry serves international tourists from around the world, employees who can communicate well in many languages will stand out as the company’s valuable assets.” This is because they can effectively satisfy the guests with their good command of English and thus contribute to the success of the organization.

Moreover, communication and presentation skills, especially to people from different generations were mentioned by both hotels and MICE organizations. As Thailand is facing aging society, people from younger and older generations are working together in a team. Therefore, these skills are essential. With aging Thai society and a big generation gap in the workforce, employers show concern over the attitudes of people from the new generation. One employer remarked: “New generation tends to lack patience, have over-confidence and not-open to suggestions from older generation.” Selection of appropriate words in communication between employees and customers become equally important with the one among employees from different age groups. Employees with good language and communication skills are essential for the success of organizations in the hospitality and tourism industry, especially for the country where English is not an official language like Thailand and some other countries in Asia (such as China, Japan, and Korea, etc.)

Attitude was also ranked as another top competency expected from new-entry employees in the hospitality and tourism industry. From the perspective of employers, the right attitudes of new employees joining the industry include service mind, passion to work and can-do attitudes. Attitudes include both personality or personal character and the way of thinking. One employer remarked: “The first thing we are looking for at the job interview is a smile.” Positive thinking will also make the candidates stand out from others. Moreover, willingness to learn and self-learning ability are also expected. Good values and beliefs such as honesty, loyalty and work discipline were also emphasized by the employers.

Sixteen organizations out of 20 (or 80 per cent) ranked attitudes as the most important competencies of all. Only four organizations weighted language skills over attitude. All respondent employers agree that attitude is an essential competency that can contribute to the company's high quality of service. One employer explained: "Attitude refers to positive energy which drives individuals move forward." It is the core competency that enables employees not only to perform their best in normal circumstances, but also to allow them to remain calm and make right decisions when facing difficulties. Employers spot the candidates' attitudes from very first few seconds of the meeting or what is known as the first impression. The employers said they use interview questions to further reconfirm their judgement. For example, they explained: "the candidates who have passion to work and grow in this field are those who know exactly which positions they want to work". The job candidates who have good potentials to work will also prepare themselves well by doing a good research about the company they apply and thus have a good knowledge about the company. This also shows that they choose the company to apply based on their interests.

Emergence of Technology Skills and Creativity as Competencies Expected by MICE and Event Management Employers

Additionally, trends in competency requirements in the industry were also explored during the interviews. Employers show no concern over the technology-related competencies. They do not worry that the new-entry employees in this generation will have difficulties in using advance technology. Many employers commented: "No specific technology skills were specified as hiring requirements for new-entry employees."

Hotel employers believe that new generations are fast learners when it comes to information, media and technology skills. In general, they have good information, communications and technology (ICT) literacy. While some positions such as sales manager may require technology skills in using specialized computer program, "new-entry employees are not expected to have any specific technology skills," mentioned by hotel employers.

Employers from MICE and event management companies, on the other hand, remarked: "Graduates who are creative and have interest in innovation would have an advantage." Unlike hotel business which has established rules and service standards, MICE business is more flexible in terms of operating procedures, leaving a large opportunity for employees to apply their new ideas. Due to this nature, employers are looking for new-entry employees who have self-learning ability, creativity to develop an improvement plan and good presentation skills and technology skills.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Our study indicates that there is a gap between essential job competencies expected by the hospitality and tourism industry and competencies possessed by new entry employees in Thailand based on employer perspectives. Such shortage of competent workforce in hospitality and tourism industry is phenomenal not only in Thailand but also in other countries, both developed and developing countries such as United Kingdom, Malaysia, China and India. Even though the number of hospitality and tourism graduates in those countries has increased rapidly to meet the fast expansion of tourism industry, there is a deficiency of employees with right employability related skills to meet the demands of the employers (Singh and Jaykumar, 2019).

This research explores the expected competencies of new-entry employees joining hospitality and tourism industry in Thailand based on employers' perspectives. While hospitality and tourism programs at universities in Thailand and other countries have focused on preparing the students with knowledge or technical skills (Shekhawat, 2012 and Singh and Jaykumar, 2019), our findings show that the hospitality and tourism employers in Thailand are primarily looking for the soft skills or non-technical skills more than knowledge. Knowledge is not an important factor when it comes to recruitment process in hospitality and tourism industry in Thailand.

Based on our findings, the employers in the hospitality and tourism industry in Thailand confirmed the essential competencies for new-entry employees to include the right attitudes (service mind, passion to work and positive thinking), followed by foreign language skills (English and the third language), communication and social skills. Moreover, the right values and beliefs such as honesty, patience and work discipline were highlighted. Since hospitality and tourism industry is a service industry in which human interaction is crucial, the success of the employee performance and thus the success of the organizations depends largely on employees' soft skills or non- technical skills (Shekhawat, 2012; Hurrell, 2016 and Singh and Jaykumar, 2019).

Similar to our findings, social skills or soft skills were reported to be the most important competencies for managers working in hospitality industry in the UK (Clark, 1993). Furthermore, the study of managerial employees in Scottish tourism sector confirmed that enthusiastic and committed attitudes are current required competencies while creative and innovative skills are the future required competencies in addition to enthusiastic and committed attitudes. The study of entry-level hotel employees in China revealed non-technical skills, especially communication and interpersonal skills to be the most important skills for front-office employees in four and five-star hotels (Hai-yan and Baum, 2006). The study of India hospitality and tourism industry pointed out that having knowledge alone is not



enough, how the employees apply the knowledge is more important (Singh and Jaykumar, 2019). Moreover, the study of hospitality employees in Ghana showed that employee competencies are very important as they act as the mediator of the relationship between human resource development (HRD) practices and organizational performance (Otoo and Mishra, 2018).

For practical recommendations, firstly, universities and educational institutions should prepare students not only with knowledge or technical skills but rather focus on encouraging them and guiding them to develop the right attitudes and strong non-technical skills. These employability competencies should be incorporated into the university's curriculum and training (Andrews and Higson, 2008). Secondly, more partnership and collaboration among universities, the government and the industry should be reinforced. This will help in improving the curriculum and internship program to prepare students with the right attitudes, skills and work experience relevant to their future careers and effectively meet the needs of the employers. Thirdly, the hospitality and tourism organizations should invest more in human resource training and development. The study in the hospitality and tourism organizations in Ghana showed that HRD training and development has a significant impact on the level of both non-technical and technical competencies of employees and thus in turn reflects on the performance and success of the organizations (Otoo and Mishra, 2018). Training and development should be focused on soft skills like foreign languages, communication skills, and right attitudes in service.

This study also reveals a difference between expected competencies of entry-level employees required by hotel employers and those required by MICE (Meetings, Incentive Travels, Conventions, and Exhibitions) and event management employers in Thailand. Employees with willingness to learn, self-learning and innovative and creativity skills are sought by MICE employers, but not by hotel employers. This is due to the nature of MICE businesses in which requires their employees to use their ideas to create innovations, much more than the hotel businesses in which the strict rules and regulations and the standard operating procedures (SOP) exist and require the set of practices. The true picture of both MICE business and hotel business should be portrayed right from the start at the educational institutions so that students develop the realistic job or career expectations. Moreover, a supportive work environment should be provided by the hospitality and tourism organizations in order to attract and retain good employees as well as reduce high turnover rate.

One of the limitations within this study is the profile of the sample. The respondent employers were selected only from big international chain hotels and big MICE organizations in Bangkok who joined the Job Fairs or career weeks at a private university. Different results may occur if the respondent employers are selected from small local hotels and small MICE businesses in Thailand.



This study suggests further studies to explore essential job competencies of new-entry employees from the perspective of small local hotels and MICE and event management companies. Local and non-chain hotels might need different competencies than ones from large and international chain hotels. Similarly with MICE businesses, this study found that creativity skills were needed in MICE but not in hotel businesses for entry-level employees. Further studies should also explore in more details on job competencies needed by MICE businesses and event management companies. Findings from a small number of sample size of the current study might be substantiated by further evidences from the increase in number of interviewees or from different samples or even from different industries or countries.

Finally, the gap between expected competencies and acquired competencies of new entry employees in the hospitality and tourism industry could be reduced by increasing the importance of soft skills, foreign language skills (especially English competency), and right attitudes about service into the curriculum of higher education as well as to the training programs by independent training centers. Knowledge or technical competencies might be important in many industries, however, they are not in the top three competencies required by employers in the hospitality and tourism industry. And lastly, creativity and innovative skills might be an interestingly new competency required by the employers.

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