

A Study on Improving the Employability of Hospitality Students in the Present Scenario

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to understand how to improve the employability of hospitality management students in India. Whilst there is huge demand for quality manpower, most of the students graduating from hospitality management institutes do not possess the requisite skill sets. There are several skills that are specifically required in the hospitality sector. These include competencies in the four main broad functions that define hospitality management including food production, food & beverages, front office and housekeeping. Other competencies include fluency in English, the ability to think logically and the orientation towards quality and people management. In addition there are soft skills such as impeccable grooming, the ability to speak English, communication, problem solving, planning and organizing and self-management skills. The hospitality sector is best suited for individuals who like working with people, who are extroverted and who have specific levels of knowledge, behavioural skills and personality traits in India. A lack or a gap in any of these skills and competencies leads to a situation where there are unfilled vacancies on the one hand and unemployable young persons on the other. In addition, hiring of persons without the requisite skills is risky as the competitiveness of a hospitality chain is dependent on the ability of its staff to deliver exemplary customer service. This ability in turn depends on the level of skills and training provided to the staff. The primary data collection tool is a questionnaire administered to 100 respondents from hospitality management institutes in India. It was found that there is overwhelming focus on technical skills only. Even here, the training touches only on the basics of the four hospitality verticals. There is little or no focus on new emerging fields, personality development, soft skill training. Even the selection processes were found to be faulty with scanty preparation being given for interview selection. In light of these findings, suitable recommendations have been made. This research would have served its purpose if, hospitality management institutes in India use its findings to upgrade their curriculum and prepare 'job – ready' hospitality professionals.

Introduction

The hospitality sector in India has been experiencing an average revenue growth of almost 11% since 2013 (Sah, 2014). While new international chains are entering the country, existing chains such as the Marriott, Accor and Best Western are expanding their footprint into tier 2 & 3 towns (Piselli, 2014). However, in order to realize the full potential of the Indian Hospitality sector, there is an urgent need to bridge the gap between demand and supply of quality manpower. According to Mint (2013), the inadequate supply of quality manpower is today, the biggest challenge facing the Indian hospitality industry. As against the demand for almost 200,000 new

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recruits every year, the total number of students graduating in hospitality management is just 18,000 (Gupta and Thimmaiah, 2015). Only 60% of these graduates consider joining the hospitality sector (Gupta and Thimmaiah, 2015). Of these, it has been found that only 6% to 8% have the skills required to make them directly employable (Bala, 2015). It may be inferred here that the candidates graduating from management institutes in India are lacking in skills that will make them employable. This lack of competency is alarming given that by 2020, India is projected to become the third most popular tourist destination in the world with the tourism sector accounting for 58,140,000 jobs (or 10.4% of the total employment in India) by then (Gupta and Thimmaiah, 2015). India's ability to make good on this predicted potential will largely depend on its ability to improve and close the gaps with respect to quality manpower.

Research Question

How can the employability of hospitality students in India be improved?

Aims & Objectives

- To study the current skills and competencies that is required by the hospitality sector.
- To examine the gap between expectation from industry and the competencies being developed by current hospitality educational programs in hospitality management institutes.
- To suggest changes in the curriculum of hospitality training institutes in order to meet the requirements of the current and future trends in the industry.

Literature Review

The competencies required by the hospitality sector may be broadly divided into domain knowledge and soft skills. Domain knowledge corresponds to the four functions of hospitality. Food production is related to the design and preparation of food. According to Dimmock et al., (2013), a thorough grounding in bakery, speciality kitchen and cold section preparation is most essential here. Harkison et al., (2012) point out that in addition to this knowledge, a critical requisite is passion, the ability to work hard for long hours, willingness to do manual work, the ability to think, ideate, create and manage people is very important. The ability to lay tables as well as to devise ways to maximise business is important. Piselli (2014) says that the ability to innovate and create new products / dishes is an important requirement. The Food and Beverages function involves taking care of guest needs in restaurants, bars and cafeterias. Apart from knowledge of fine cuisine, other skills include the ability to stand for long hour's patience and orientation towards the customer. The ability to mix, make and serve drinks, create menus, develop new dishes, plan events and manage bars are critical new skills in the F&B function (Ogbeide, 2012). A newly emerging role is that of the sommelier or a wine master. A well-developed palate, knowledge of the wine industry and a good pronunciation in French are critical skills here (Sharma and Jaypee, 2013). The Front Office function makes guests feel welcome and ensures that their stay is free from any hassles, till their departure. Good front office skills are going to be very important in future as they set the tone of the guest's stay, creates an impression of the hotel and make the guest feel special (Jauhari, 2012). Soft skills are very important here. These include very good communication skills, a cheerful countenance, willingness to help and assist, the ability to handle difficult guests/situations and the willingness to learn are very important to this function. The housekeeping function is responsible for creating a clean and attractive environment in the hotel. Considered to be a back end task, Gale et al.,(2013) points out that housekeeping is actually the fastest growing sector in the hospitality industry. The most important skill here is an eye for detail and training in standard operating procedures. These ensure maintenance of standards of cleanliness, comfort and aesthetics at all points of the hotel. As in front office, people skills are also very important. A fast growing, additional segment is spa and fitness (Angappapillai and Shanmugasundram, 2013). The skills that will be in demand here are related to beauty, fitness and wellness training.

Apart from domain knowledge, soft skills are also important. Bala (2015) points out that potential recruits for the hospitality industry must exhibit distinct traits and attributes. The most important of this is an extroverted personality and an orientation towards service / people. Candidates must indicate that they like people and evince a passion to assist them, solve their problems, anticipate their needs and deliver so as to exceed their expectations (Gupta and Thimmaiah, 2015). This calls for candidates with the right attitude, who are determined, self-motivated and pragmatic. Another critical skill is the ability to speak and communicate in the English language (Sah, 2014). This is because, English is the language that is invariably used whilst communicating with guests in Indian hotels. A knowledge of other foreign languages is not essential, though a definite plus.

O'Mahony and Sillitoe (2014) points out the importance of teamwork and problem-solving abilities. In addition there is the need for individuals who take initiative and enterprise, who are able to plan and organize events, who can self-manage themselves, evince a disposition to constantly learn and who possess basic technology skills. Gale et al., (2013) say that it is important that every hospitality management graduate develop leadership skills including human resource, conceptual and analytic skills. These skills have assumed

importance given the growing trend for institutions like corporate organizations, hospitals, defence establishments, retail companies and even banks to outsource their hospitality functions (Harkison et. al., 2011). In this scenario, there will be high demand for persons with the requisite self-management and leadership skills who, along with their domain expertise, will be able to adequately cater to the needs of these organizations.

Jaykumar et al.,(2014) states that soft skills are equally, if not more important, than domain knowledge skills, for the employability of hospitality management students. Specific, domain knowledge skills can be learnt at various places of employment. However, from the employability point of view it is important to develop skills like leadership, customer service skills, the ability to analyse data, communicate effectively, and solve problems, creativity, adaptability and human resource skills. According to Jauhari (2013), hospitality institutes in India are more focussed on imparting domain / technical skills. Sah (2014) found that even here the curriculum is outdated with students developing irrelevant competencies. The curriculum is not oriented towards management / soft skills that will make the students more employable. Based on this analysis, the conceptual model as indicated in figure 1 is constructed.

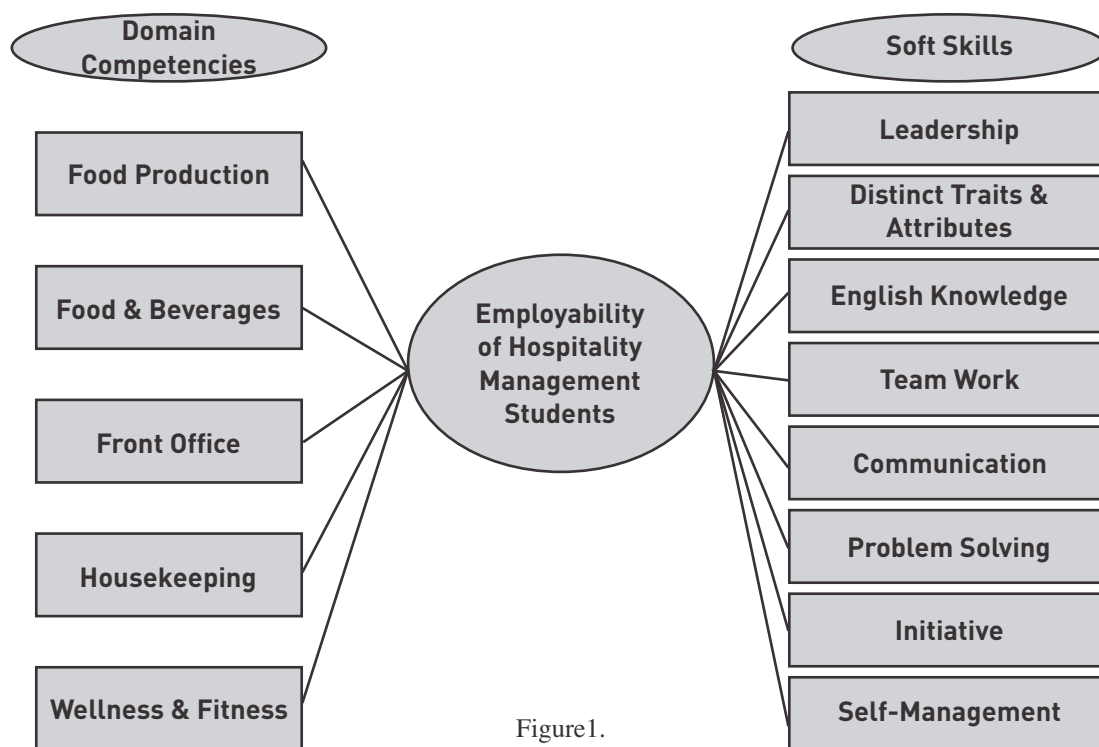


Figure 1.
Conceptual Model – Employability

From figure 1 it is observed that the two broad competencies that determine employability of hospitality management students include domain / soft skill competencies. Each of these broad competencies is further developed as indicated.

Methodology

This method in this research is quantitative using both secondary and primary data. A study of the secondary data sources will indicate that the emerging trends in the hospitality sector in India and what will be the skills that are demanded from students. This study of the literature will be used to formulate a conceptual model comprising of skills and competencies being asked for. The primary data will be gathered through an online questionnaire administered by the researcher to the management of 100 hospitality management institutes throughout the country. The main purpose of the questionnaire will be to examine what, in the institute's opinion, are the skills required by the sector, the kind of facilities and infrastructure they provide to their students, their admission procedures and how well they are able to foresee emerging trends in the hospitality sector and whether they are able to adequately adapt their curriculum in accordance with these trends. The analysis of this primary data will be made with reference to the conceptual model where the gaps between expectations from industry and the competency levels being developed at hospitality management institutes will be examined. The main focus here will not just be on identifying gaps in competencies / soft skills but in also ascertaining emerging

trends in the hospitality sector and the skills that will be required and most in demand by the sector in the future.

Analysis & Discussion

Respondents were asked as to what roles they groomed their students for and their responses are summarized in table 1.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Weighted Average	Interpretation
	4	3	2	1		
Cook / Chef / Kitchen Hands	82	18	0	0	3.8	Strongly Agree
Waiter / Steward	88	12	0	0	3.9	Strongly Agree
Bartender	2	6	28	64	1.5	Disagree
Sommelier	0	1	25	74	1.3	Strongly Disagree
Receptionist /	92	8	0	0	3.9	Strongly Agree
Housekeeping	86	14	0	0	3.9	Strongly Agree
Gaming Attendant	0	0	15	85	1.2	Strongly Disagree
Any other?	0	0	0	0	0.0	Strongly Disagree

Table 1. Roles

Table 1 indicate that the main roles students are groomed are also the most conventional ones and include those of chef, waiter, receptionist and housekeeping. However, new emerging professions such as bartender, sommelier and gaming attendant are ignored. Table 2 indicates responses related to food production.

	Most Important	Important	Unimportant	Very Unimportant	Weighted Average	Interpretation
	4	3	2	1		
The ability to cook a variety of foods / cuisine	84	16	0	0	3.8	Most Important
The ability to innovate, be creative always	3	9	3	85	1.3	Very Unimportant
Willingness to do manual work	12	16	14	58	1.8	Unimportant
Ability to work hard, stand for long hours	25	26	38	11	2.7	Important
Create promotional offers through new food offerings	0	2	30	68	1.3	Very Unimportant
Laying the table, presentation of the food.	24	23	18	35	2.4	Unimportant

Table 2. Food Production

While the ability to dish out a variety of cuisines and work for long hours are considered to be important, the ability to innovate, to be creative, to attractively present food, even the willingness to do manual work are regarded to be unimportant. Table 3 indicates responses related to food & beverages.

	Most Important	Important	Unimportant	Very Unimportant	Weighted Average	Interpretation
	4	3	2	1		
The ability to understand customer requirement and serve them accordingly	86	14	0	0	3.9	Most Important
Knowledge of food, cuisine, beverages	95	5	0	0	4.0	Most Important
Managing Bars, mixing drinks	12	18	26	44	2.0	Unimportant
Juggling bottles at bars / create excitement when serving	0	8	30	62	1.5	Unimportant
Sommelier skills – ability to serve up specialty wines	0	1	29	70	1.3	Very Unimportant
The ability to devise new and innovative menus	10	13	35	42	1.9	Unimportant
Knowledge of Foreign Languages	0	0	25	75	1.3	Very Unimportant

Table 3. Food & Beverages

Respondents acknowledged the importance of good customer service, understanding customer requirement and knowledge of food and

beverages. However, skills that are now in demand, including creativity and innovation in menu formulation, knowledge of foreign languages, sommelier skills and bartending skills are regarded as being unimportant. Table 4 indicates responses related to housekeeping.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Weighted Average	Interpretation
	4	3	2	1		
We do not accord much importance to housekeeping as it only relates to keeping the place clean	35	46	7	12	3.0	Agree
We only focus on how to maintain expected levels of cleanliness.	85	15	0	0	3.9	Strongly Agree
Our students are trained to not just clean but to arrange items aesthetically and to make guests comfortable	23	14	21	42	2.2	Disagree
It is important to smile and be cheerful whilst going about housekeeping duties	12	15	39	34	2.1	Disagree

Table 4. Housekeeping

Table 4 indicates that students are trained to adhere to SOP's related to housekeeping. However, the overall importance of housekeeping is not highlighted. Nor are students trained to go beyond maintenance of cleanliness aspect of housekeeping – such as aesthetic arrangements and the ability to be cheerful even whilst going about housekeeping chores. Table 5 indicates responses related to the English language.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Weighted Average	Interpretation
	4	3	2	1		
We assume that our students know enough English to communicate properly. They do not need any special classes in English.	92	8	0	0	3.9	Strongly Agree
Tourists come from many countries and not all speak English. Hence while English is not as important as it is made out to be	88	12	0	0	3.9	Strongly Agree
English is very important. We conduct special classes in spoken English to improve communication skills of our students	25	12	36	27	2.4	Disagree

Table 5. English

Table 5 indicates the cursory manner in which knowledge of English and related communication skills are treated. Most of the institutes assume that students possess enough English language and do not need specialized training in English. Table 6 indicates responses related to leadership skills.

It is important that our students learn how to :	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Weighted Average	Interpretation
	4	3	2	1		
make effective business presentations	12	9	38	41	1.9	Disagree
maintain a positive attitude always	25	24	35	16	2.6	Agree
work well with fellow employees	15	85	0	0	3.2	Agree
resolve conflicts	25	20	27	28	2.4	Disagree
function well in stressful situations	12	15	38	35	2.0	Disagree
maintain a high energy level	0	28	39	33	2.0	Disagree
empathize with others	12	19	45	24	2.2	Disagree
able to work independently	0	0	55	45	1.6	Disagree

Table 6. Leadership Skills

Of the leadership skills indicated in table 6, only the ability to work as a team and to keep a positive attitude are mentioned as being important. Respondents disagree about the importance of other skills. Table 7 indicates responses related to admissions and student selection.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Weighted Average	Interpretation
	4	3	2	1		
We take all students as long as they are able to afford our fees and clear our entrance exams	92	8	0	0	3.9	Strongly Agree
We consider only those students who are extroverts, with pleasing personality	0	0	25	75	1.3	Strongly Disagree
We consider grooming and appearance whilst choosing students	12	25	23	40	2.1	Disagree
We conduct personality tests as part of our admission procedures	0	1	29	70	1.3	Disagree

Table 7. Student Selection

Table 7 indicates that as long as students are able to afford fees and clear entrance tests, they are eligible. Their aptitude for the hospitality industry is not considered. Table 8 indicates placement processes.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Weighted Average	Interpretation
	4	3	2	1		
We tie up with various corporates and hotels to place our students	95	5	0	0	4.0	Strongly Agree
Our degree is highly valued in the market and hence our students find it easy to get jobs without our help	97	3	0	0	4.0	Strongly Agree
We groom our students on how to face interviews, possible questions that they might face and answers to these questions	12	3	45	40	1.9	Disagree
We provide our students with good internships so that they gain good experience which can be counted in the job interviews.	10	12	45	33	2.0	Disagree

Table 8. Placement Process

From table 8 it is observed that respondents believed the reputation of their institutes / degree as sufficient guarantee for placement. They tie up with hotel chains to place students. However, they disagree that they provide students with internships with which they can get experience or groom them to face interviews.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The empirical findings corroborate those of the literature review. It is apparent that the current focus of training in Indian hospitality management institutes is on technical skills related to the four conventional verticals of the hospitality industry. However, even here, training in newly emerging fields – such as wellness, spa, bartending, speciality cuisine – is not provided. Most critically, training in soft skills, personality development, communication and English is not provided or not given enough importance. From the literature it was identified that leadership skills is going to be a key differentiator amongst students for employment as the current need is for individuals who can work independently, communicate well, take decisions and are able to provide superlative customer service. However, training in leadership is not being provided. The aptitude of students for hospitality training is not considered nor are they sufficiently groomed for the interview processes.

In light of these findings, the following recommendations may be made:

- There is an urgent need to upgrade technical content of curriculum pertaining to food production, F&B, housekeeping & front desk. There must be focus on gaining knowledge on food / beverages, developing ability to innovate, invent, create, an orientation towards customer service and the ability to see “the larger picture” even in such tasks such as housekeeping.
- Students must be prepared for the reality of hard work, long hours and the need to maintain a cheerful countenance even in stressful conditions.
- The institutes must upgrade the skills of their teaching faculty, the methods of delivery of curriculum and training infrastructure. The institutes must focus on new emerging trends, interface more with international hotel chains to gain new insights on what skills will be required in future and make adequate provision to train students in these emerging trends, whatever they may be.
- Along with technical skills, students must be well trained in soft skills. These include impeccable grooming, communication skills, knowledge of good English, willingness to learn, work in a team, provide good customer service and maintain positive attitude at all times.
- Institutes must realize that not all individuals are suited for the hospitality sector. Screening and personality tests that examine student’s people orientation, grooming, appearance and knowledge must be put in place. This will ensure that only those with the aptitude for the hospitality sector get admitted in the first place, which will improve prospects of their employability.
- Students must be groomed as to how to face interviews, what questions may be asked, gaps in knowledge filled. This will also increase their chances of selection.

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