SOFT SKILLS COMPETENCY REQUIRED OF HOTEL MANAGEMENT STUDENTS: THE EMPLOYERS' PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract*:* The importance of soft skills in the hospitality industry cannot be undermined. Hence, developing soft skills competency among students should be of topmost priority for institutes/colleges imparting hospitality management education. The objective of this study is to evaluate the soft skills competency from the employers' perspective of budding hotel management graduates. The research adopts a data reduction technique using factor analysis statistical technique. A structured questionnaire was administered among major stakeholders in the hotel industry. The respondents were asked to give rating, on a 5 point Likert scale, on soft skills competency required of hospitality students. Based on the 10 soft skills competency areas, factor analysis was used to explore and detect the underlying relationship among the identified variables. The data reduction results in the identification of 5 skill components: Communication Skills, Basic Knowledge, Practical & Problem Solving Skills, Interpersonal & Team Skills, Attitude & Commitment Skills. The factors identified could serve as a guiding framework for training and imparting the required soft skills competency for hotel management students in the hotel industry.

Keywords: Hospitality Industry, Soft Skills, Factor Analysis

I.INTRODUCTION

The globalisation has provided with a plethora of opportunities in the hospitality industry. In such a scenario, the biggest challenge of the hospitality educators and employers is to leverage these opportunities by developing the human resources with the requisite employable skills.

The prerequisite for both hospitality management educators and the industry is to identify the key skills and qualities required of the hospitality graduates. It is a mutually-beneficial relationship where the industry is looking for right candidate with the required skills and the hospitality educator is striving to provide with the right kind of skills demanded by the industry.

In their sincere endeavours, the hospitality industry is determined to assess the validate the competencies and skill-sets required for the future budding leaders (Tesone & Ricci, 2005) in order to bring down the turnover percentage and to gear up for the challenges and issues faced in recruitment and retention of quality professionals (Ghiselli, La Lopa & Bai, 2001).

In order to stay competitive, leaders and entrepreneurs in the hospitality field have been scouting for students graduating from various government and private institutes with the desired skills and competencies. Hence, the emphasis is on the way the hospitality educators go about with their curriculum development, learning and training programmes (Tsai, Chen & Hu, 2004).

Pavesic (1991) opined that the hospitality education across the globe has gone a sea-change and has evolved with the changes such as socio-cultural change, technological change, and globalisation. He further elucidated that serious attempts have been made to bring in changes in the existing curricula as well as the competencies of the hospitality professionals.

Nevertheless, the objective of hospitality education is provide the industry with graduates who are industry-ready from day one and have the capabilities of managing the day-to-day affairs and issues without any

reservations (Enz, Renaghan & Geller, 1993). In this regard, imparting knowledge with the right kind of skills has become the single most important agenda of educational institutes imparting skill based education (Tesone & Ricci, 2005; Chathoth & Sharma, 2007). Against this backdrop, the present study makes an attempt to find out the key skills/competencies required of hotel management students by the recruiting hotel companies.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The job market swings between the number of graduates passing out each year and the graduates with wanting of required skill-sets. The paradoxical situation is that on one hand India has the largest workforce with high unemployment and on the other quality human resources are being outsourced or attracted to work in the country. This scenario is due to the fact that students lack employability skills. Soft skills or behavioural skills acquired through formal training that encompass teambuilding skills, organising skills, analytical skills, self-management skills, interpersonal skills are the ones usually deliver competent and skilful graduates (Coll & Zegwaard, 2006).

Most of the employers expect the fresh graduates to be industry-fit with a set of skills and competencies (Yorke & Harvey, 2002). It is the primary responsibility of the educational institutes to introspect and nurture the appropriate skills and competencies and ensure how best these skills are developed (Kember & Leung, 2005).

Further, the employers have also indicated that students are more often not ready to take up the challenges of the workplace and urged upon the educational institutes and universities to produce more employable graduates (Barrie, 2006; Kember & Leung, 2005) by providing transferable skills that can be taken into the workplace (Smith, Clegg, Lawrence & Todd, 2007).

Tas (1988) identified into three categories such as highly essential, very important and moderately important. The essential include six competencies related to soft skills that are very important for maintaining good relationships with co-workers and customers.

According to (Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick & Cragnolini, 2004; Hind, Moss & McKellan, 2007) the domain knowledge of the students is satisfactory.

Hind et al., (2007) are of the opinion that the students can be made more employable by developing their competencies such as team skills, problem solving skills, communication and interpersonal skills.

Okeiyi, Finley & Postel (1994) mentioned that one of the essential competencies for food and beverage managers are soft skills.

Mayo & Thomas-Haysbert (2005) in their study to find out the competencies required of hospitality & tourism graduates identified that communication skills and motivational skills as the two important skills.

Johnson, Ghiselli, Shea & Roberts (2011) after an extensive research on the competencies required for managers and supervisors of lodging and food & beverage industries in US found out that communication skills, interpersonal skills, leadership and customer focus as the key skills to perform the job.

Gursoy, Rahman & Swanger (2012) emphasized on the changes taking place in the hospitality industry in terms of their expectations of hospitality schools. According to them, it is leadership that was rated as the topmost soft skill in the 2009 survey.

Sisson & Adams (2013) made a survey to find out the competencies that were essential for entry level managers. They identified 33 competencies which were segregated into three levels: hard skills, soft skills and mixed skills. 13 competencies comprise the hard skills; 16 of them as soft skills; and, 4 competencies as a combination of hard and soft skills. They further expounded that the key soft skills required are professional demeanor, leadership skills, interpersonal skills and customer relations skills.

According to (Cho, Schmeizer, & McMahon, 2002) communication skills and IT skills are among the most important skills needed for hospitality graduates.

Baum (2006) highlighted the importance of emotional intelligence and customer relationships in the hospitality industry.

Raybould & Wilkins (2006) identified interpersonal skills, problem solving skills, self-management skills and leadership skills as the key competencies to carry out the tasks. Beer (2009) conducted a study taking into the consideration the competencies in demand across the globe. After an in-depth survey of hospitality management programmes, he concluded that cross-cultural sensitivity, adaptability, and effective communication in another language are some of the most important skills.

Pizam (2011) highlighted the importance of soft skills in the hospitality industry. According to him, hospitality students need to be well versed with good manners, civility, and proper speech, in addition to technical and conceptual skills and hospitality competence.

Baum & Devine (2007) identified interpersonal skills, customer care and communication skills as the most important skills needed for front office personnel.

III. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of the study is to evaluate the soft skills competency from the employers' perspective of budding hotel management graduates.

IV. METHOD OF STUDY

4.1 Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive research design was used to conduct the study.

4.2 Samples

A sample survey of 200 numbers of respondents from 8 classified hotels in Bhubaneswar were taken.

4.3 Data Collection

The primary data was collected from the supervisors and managers of four core areas viz., Front Office, Housekeeping, F & B Service and F & B Production using a well-designed questionnaire. Whereas, the secondary data was collected from websites, annual reports, journals, etc.

4.4 Procedure

The questionnaires were given to the respondents and instruction was given by the researchers to all the respondents regarding the method to be adopted for recording their response. The respondents were requested to take the survey as they were made to understand that the data collected will be used for research purpose only and the information will be kept confidential. Each statement on the survey was measured using 5-point Likert Scale ranging from 1- strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree. SPSS was used to analyse the data as per the objective of the study and tests like Descriptive Analysis and Factor Analysis were applied to ascertain the result of variation.

4.5 Method of Analysis

Factor analysis was undertaken for the study using a co-variance matrix as input to test the factors to evaluate the distinctiveness of the measures used in this study. The co-variation among the variables is described in terms of a small number of common factors along with a unique factor for each variable.

Table – 4.5.1

Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	1.532	19.162	19.162	1.532	19.162	19.162
2	1.428	17.601	36.763	1.428	17.601	36.763
3	1.327	16.567	53.33	1.327	16.567	53.33
4	1.255	15.710	69.04	1.255	15.710	69.04
5	1.121	14.355	83.395	1.121	14.355	83.395
6	1.099	13.234	96.629			

7	.986	12.003	108.632			
8	.914	11.333	119.965			
9	.813	10.146	130.111			
10	.564	7.778	137.889			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis

Source: Primary Data

The Table-4.5.1 shows that out of ten variables of Soft Skill Competencies only five factors are extracted. 50% of data is variable and 50% is invariable.

Table-4.5.2

Component Matrixa

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
Communication Skills	.660	.356	-.342	-.067
Practical & Problem Solving Skills	.442	.432	.056	.265
Interpersonal & Team Skills	.543	.561	.287	.657
Initiative & Enthusiasm	.213	.129	.056	-.412
Attitude & Commitment Skills	.279	-.091	.151	.192
Computer Know How	.299	.568	-.067	.057
Leadership Skills	.293	.372	-.325	-.271
Motivation Skills	.276	-.083	.041	.178
Basic Knowledge	.397	.254	.563	-.056
Organisation Skills	.245	.348	-.221	.428

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis

a. 5 components extracted

Source: Primary Data

Table-4.5.2 shows that out of ten variables of Soft Skills Competencies only five factors are extracted, they are Communication Skills, Interpersonal & Team Skills, Practical & Problem Solving Skills, Basic Knowledge and Attitude & Commitment Skills.

Table-4.5.3

Mean Overall Employer's Opinion about Soft Skills Competencies Required of Hotel Management Graduates

Sl.No.	Soft Skills Competencies	Mean
1	Communication Skills	3.98
2	Practical & Problem Solving Skills	3.81

3	Interpersonal & Team Skills	3.84
4	Initiative & Enthusiasm	3.42
5	Attitude & Commitment Skills	3.68
6	Computer Know How	3.39
7	Leadership Skills	3.59
8	Motivation Skills	3.33
9	Basic Knowledge	3.79
10	Organisation Skills	3.46
	Grand Mean Index	3.62

Source: Primary Data

In table- 4.5.3, the overall opinion of the employers is more than moderate. The grand mean index score of 3.62 implies that employer's expectation about the soft skills competencies requirements from the hotel management students is to a large extent up to the maximum level. The mean scores 3.98, 3.84, 3.81, 3,79 & 3.68 correspond to Communication skills, Interpersonal & Team skills, Practical & Problem solving skills, Basic knowledge and Attitude & commitment skills respectively in that order.

4.5.4 Factor Analysis, Eigenvalues, Variance

Factor 1 (Communication Skills): Factor 1, *Communication Skills* with an Eigen value of 1.532 (Table- 4.5.1) that accounted for 19.16 per cent of total variance and mean value of 3.98. The relatively large proportion of variance explained by this factor suggests that communication skill is an important soft skills competency required by the hospitality managers from hotel management graduates.

Factor 2 (Interpersonal & Team Skills): Factor 2, *Interpersonal & Team Skills* with an Eigen value of 1.428 (Table- 4.5.1) that accounted for 36.76 per cent of cumulative variance and a mean value of 3.84. The relatively large proportion of variance explained by this factor implies that it is also an important soft skills competency required by hotel companies from hotel management graduates.

Factor 3 (Practical & Problem Solving Skills): Factor 3, *Practical & Problem Solving Skills* with an Eigen value of 1.327 (Table- 4.5.1) that accounted for 53.33 per cent of cumulative variance and a mean value of 3.81. The relatively large proportion of variance explained by this factor implies that it is a determining factor for soft skills competency required by hotel companies form hotel management graduates.

Factor 4 (Basic Knowledge): Factor 4, *Basic Knowledge* with an Eigen value of 1.255 (Table- 4.5.1) that accounted for 69.04 per cent of cumulative variance and a mean value of 3.79. The relatively large proportion of variance explained by this factor implies that it is a key component along with the soft skills competency that is required by the employers from hotel management graduates.

Factor 5 (Attitude & Commitment Skills): Factor 5, *Attitude & Commitment Skills* with an Eigen value of 1.121 (Table- 4.5.1) that accounted for 83.39 per cent of cumulative variance and a mean value of 3.68. The relatively large proportion of variance explained by this factor implies that it is a determining factor for soft skills competency required by hotel by the managers in hotel industry from hospitality graduates.

V. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Both the literature review and the findings of the study from 8 classified hotels in Bhubaneswar city, Odisha show that hospitality professionals/practitioners perceive some of the key soft skills and competencies such as communication skill, interpersonal skill & team skills, practical & problem solving skills, basic knowledge and attitude & commitment skills being very important. These findings suggest that there are a few discrepancies or skills gap between hospitality institutions and the industry in terms of developing the practical competencies of the students, that is, the "soft skills competencies" as aforementioned. Overall, the implication of the above findings is that the hospitality management institutes should attend to those competencies perceived as essential for the hospitality industry and provide programmes to develop them.

VI. SUGGESTIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The best way to teach soft skills is through role modeling. Hence, role modeling is the most effective way than the formal academic teaching methodology. Bandura's Social Learning Theory in the year 1986 suggests that people tend to learn from each other through modeling (observation and imitation) and reproduction of behaviours. Taking a cue from this theory, the researchers propose the training of students by hospitality educators with the aim of cultivating the soft skills required to perform well in the hospitality industry.

- Role Modeling of the student can be done through "shadow training" by an experienced trainer/faculty with day-to-day interactions. In other words, a generic way of learning people skills through behavioural etiquette and protocol.
- The conventional way of handling various tasks in the hotel industry entails the processing of data by the help of computer-mediated technology and other related tools. However, guest/customer handling by the students requires soft skills such as communication skills, leadership skills, interpersonal skills and professional demeanor.
- There should be a balance of theory and practice (technical skills and academic curriculum) in addition to developing skills required for service industry.

- The hospitality educational institutes need to keep with the pace at which the industry is changing. The key is to focus on the transferable skills of the students for better personal development and growth.

VII. CONCLUSION

There is a lot to be desired as far as the present status of hospitality education in India is concerned in terms of training the students in key competencies. The academic curriculum of hospitality education in both government as well as private institutes needs a serious restructuring. In this regard, Jauhari (2006) cites that, "… only half the total of 180 institutions/colleges in India provide a worthwhile education which is of use to students and to those hiring students for work in hotels and restaurants." Most of the hotel companies hire students with the right kind of personality with the requisite soft skills at the entry level. The findings of this study corroborates with the soft skills required such communication skills, interpersonal & team skills, practical & problem solving skills, attitude & commitment skills, basic domain knowledge by the industry.

As the students advance to the various levels of hierarchy in the hospitality industry, the individual soft skills are of paramount importance. It is the personal qualities and abilities of the student that instills confidence in them and form the basis of motivation and behaviours needed for success. With soft skill development, communication will improve. Leadership, practical & problem solving skills, interpersonal & team building skills, and empowering others are soft skills that are used to develop a team that will deliver excellent customer service.

Although making the students learn how to manage the hospitality operations is a daunting task on the part of the hospitality educators but at the same time topmost priority needs to be given to soft skills competencies as well. In addition to vocational subjects, the students should be trained in the key soft skills in order to perform well, all of which must be attained within a span of three to four years in close coordination with the industry depending upon the nature of the programme whether it is Diploma or Degree in Hospitality Management.

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