

CRITICAL MANAGERIAL SKILLS IN THE ACCOMMODATION SECTOR: THE VOICE OF THE INDUSTRY

W. Wessels*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6954-4597>

E. du Plessis*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9314-9127>

E. Slabbert*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4311-6962>

*School of Tourism Management & Tourism Research in Economics, Environs and Society
North-West University
Potchefstroom, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Dynamic labour structures within the tourism industry require employees to be adept and prepared for industry demands to deliver quality products. In South Africa, the role of tertiary institutions is to equip future tourism employees with these abilities; however, employers feel that graduates cannot fulfil industry's demand, which creates challenges for students and tertiary institutions. As such, this research aimed to determine the managerial skills required by the accommodation sector in South Africa.

The study's findings reflect industry role players' viewpoints regarding new graduates and their employability and may be utilised to improve current tourism management qualifications at tertiary education institutions.

Keywords: tourism industry, accommodation sector, tertiary education, management skills

INTRODUCTION

The accommodation sector is an essential component of the tourism industry and the most significant part of the industry. This sector contributes greatly to the South African economy and employs 75 978 including tourism employees working in hotels, and bed and breakfast accommodation (65%), guesthouses and guest farms (10%) and caravan parks and camping sites (3%) (Slabbert and Saayman 2003, 3; STATS SA 2009, 4). Given the size and growth of this sector, the importance of appointing the right employees cannot be underestimated.

Employees, especially managers, play an important role in the development, management and transformation of the accommodation sector (Lillicrap and Cousins 2006, 2). However,

Jeou-Shyan et al. (2011, 1045) indicate that maintaining consistent quality service due to a lack of well-trained managers remains a challenge. Accommodation managers require training to understand the tourist, be innovative in delivering quality service, provide various services to guests and should have adequate product and business knowledge, all of which contributes to travel decisions and future intentions of tourists to return to the same destination or product (O'Neill and Charters 2000, 114).

Therefore, accommodation managers should develop specific skills that will lead to productivity and guest satisfaction, greatly influenced by the labour market's education (Baum 2002, 344). The tourism industry is not only about a product; it is about the effective mix of a product, service and experience, which requires unique education and training programmes. Managers must understand how to present this mix to potential and current target markets, emphasizing that higher learning institutions offer programs incorporating management theory elements (Wessels, Du Plessis, and Slabbert 2017, 2).

The importance of higher tourism education is acknowledged worldwide, and tertiary institutions play a key role in developing skilled managers (Saayman 2006, 12). Tertiary education qualifications increase employment and personal income value for potential employees compared to peers with less schooling (Thrane 2010, 549) and tourism organisations must ensure that the current skills taught keep up with ever-changing technology and globalisation trends affecting the industry (Dwyer et al. 2009, 66). Ultimately, educated tourism employees are better positioned to deliver valuable guest experiences, leading to rebuying the tourism product and directly contributing to industry sustainability (Dale and Robinson 2001, 33; Ziegler, Dearden, and Rollins 2012, 693).

Vocational tourism degree and diploma programmes in South Africa are vital, as these too contribute to business success and economic growth (Richie 2003, 5). However, employers still believe that graduates fall short of the necessary managerial skills (Jacob, Huui, and Ing 2006, 6). Thus, this study aims to determine the industry's opinion on the management skills needed in the accommodation sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism education finds its origins in Europe, where vocational schools were developed to teach individuals skills, including managerial skills, needed to succeed in the tourism industry (Morgan 2004, 94). Universities soon followed suit and developed tourism departments at tertiary education level (Craig-Smith and Ding 2007, 51). These departments aim to produce industry competent employees who can meet the current and future needs of the industry (Baum and Szivas 2008, 783; Van der Merwe 1999, 12; Wong 2008, 23). Baum (2002, 358) asserts

that education programmes role is to ensure that appropriate managerial skills are developed, and Harkison, Poulston, and Ginny Kim (2011, 389) add that programmes should therefore consist of both theory and practical industry experience to ensure that tourism management employees are well-equipped for the task. Since 1994, South Africa's tertiary education system consists of twenty-three higher education institutions that offer Tourism and Hospitality Management qualifications. Some incorporate internships or student work experience as part of the qualification to allow students to practically incorporate the taught skills.

Saayman and Geldenhuys (2003, 85) indicate that the development of the National Qualification Framework (NQF) has given South Africa a competitive advantage in the tertiary education arena however, employers still doubt higher education institutions because they are uncertain of the skills developed within the programmes (Wong 2008, 23). Employers' doubts may be ascribed to the government and private sector disagreeing about elements that comprise the tourism industry and given that most university courses are offered over a three-year period, it is challenging for education establishments to cover all the aspects within this time frame (Mayaka, and Akama 2007, 299). The diploma disease, a movement among students who migrate between various countries and tertiary education institutions to attain multiple qualifications, thereby not specialising in a specific field, adds to employers' concerns regarding tertiary education qualifications (Naidoo 2006, 326).

Universities, especially those offering tourism qualifications, thus face challenges directly impacting the accommodation sector regarding content that is taught and as a result, curricula must be adapted to keep up with changes in industry knowledge (Iatagan, Dinu, and Stoica 2010, 5141). Jennings, Scantlebury, and Wolfe (2009, 195) and Lamb et al. (2012, 5) are of the opinion that the upsurge in Generation Y students (born between 1980 and 1994, also known as the internet generation) greatly impacts this trend as these individuals prefer practical teaching methods to curb boredom.

Ayres (2006, 20) notes that having a formal qualification is a requirement for many tourism and hospitality employees however, employers also need managers who are proactive and able to solve problems creatively and swiftly (Zehrer and Mössenlechner 2009, 267). Organisational success in accommodation establishments therefore depends significantly on the manager's competency, and managerial training has to focus on improving an individual's leadership and management skills (Machado, Zambrano, and Montes de Oca 2015, 209). According to Thekiso (2011, 1), since well-trained and educated employees are necessary, tertiary education institutions have to concentrate on producing quality, skilled management, trained to fulfil industry needs. As such, employers tend to recruit managerial candidates who are able to significantly increase organisational productivity without requiring additional

internal training opportunities (Barthorpe and Hall 2000, 165; Mulder, Weigel, and Collins 2007, 69).

Accommodation managers have a specific role to play in developing tourism establishments, which also requires skills e.g., being enterprising and recognising competitive advantage opportunities to the benefit of their employer (George 2007, 173). An array of studies outlines the skills necessary for those in tourism management positions. However, within the context of application, the importance of selected skills and the perfect mix of skills are unclear, especially in the case of the accommodation sector.

According to Bagri, Babu, and Kukreti (2010, 287), tourists' development, awareness, experiences and advancement in the accommodation sector demand specific managerial skills. Skills invaluable to the tourism industry include: *customer service skills*, which enable managers to provide adequate services to guests (Allen 2004); *financial skills*, which allow managers to develop and manage budgets effectively (Lamminmaki 2008); and *human resource skills*, which enables managers to understand where these skills fit in the organisation and, more importantly, what types of services personnel must render and then to effectively communicate tasks to employees (Tsaor and Lin 2003). Other skills identified by Johanson et al. (2010:7) include *information technology skills*, consisting of the ability to enable fast and effective operations (Ewan 2012); Connolly and McGing (2006) also name *problem management skills*, which allows managers to resolve any guest's or employee's problems. Lastly, George (2013) emphasised *marketing skills* as essential for managers since effective marketing leads to lasting customer relations.

Considering all these aspects, unity between tertiary education institutions and the accommodation sector can ensure a powerful workforce (Hernandez-March, Del Peso, and Leguey 2009, 2). A study conducted by Peacock and Ladkin (2002) furthermore highlights micro- and macro-level advantages that will be emphasised as a result: on the macro-level, human resources will be improved, and on the micro-level, businesses will benefit from a well-trained employees (Peacock and Ladkin 2002, 394). Despite regular amendments to the tertiary qualifications on offer, there is still a gap between the offerings by tertiary education institutions and industry demand. Discrepancies between the level of education, the specific educational institution, the impact of practical training, the willingness to employ graduates and managerial training received at educational institutions of higher learning still arise and should be addressed to ensure industry success.

METHODOLOGY

An exploratory research design was utilised for this study (Pallant 2010). The target population

for this study included tourism business managers employed at a Tourism Grading Council of South Africa (TGCSA) graded accommodation establishment in South Africa. A simple random sampling technique was used, since a list of respondents could be obtained from the TGCSA website, arranged in provincial order, followed by alphabetical order to ease selection.

Data collection

A self-administered questionnaire was sent using email to each identified respondent. The questionnaires were dispersed over eight weeks, followed by follow-up emails at regular intervals to ensure that responses were received within the stipulated time frame. A total of 245 questionnaires were returned.

Sample characteristics

Every 15th establishment on the list was selected to participate in the survey to ensure a representative sample. If any preselected respondents declined the request to participate in the research, the next respondent on the list was chosen (Berndt and Petzer 2011, 175).

Data analysis

The data was captured and analysed by Survey Monkey as well as in SPSS 21.0. To determine the most important managerial skills identified by the respondents, an exploratory factor analysis and ANOVA was used (Pallant 2010, 181). Further, a t-test was used to compare the respondents' willingness to employ graduate students with specific managerial skills. After this, Spearman's rank-order analyses were used to determine the relationship between the level of education and the importance of practical and managerial skills.

RESULTS

The results discussion consists of the following five sections:

Managerial skills for accommodation managers

The exploratory factor analysis revealed nine factors (see Table 1). Customer service ranked as the most important factor, followed by problem-solving and financial management. Accommodation managers must be able to handle customers effectively and adhere to their needs. Problem-solving are essential, and respondents stated that accommodation managers must be able to identify, challenge and implement new strategies to solve everyday problems.

Table 1: Exploratory factor analysis

FACTOR	CRONBACH ALPHA (CA)	MEAN	INTER-ITEM CORRELATION
Forecasting	.935	3.59	0.593
Strategic management	.955	3.56	0.605
Human resource management	.969	3.64	0.649
Problem-solving	.961	3.85	0.754
Communication skills	.946	3.68	0.601
Information technology skills	.891	3.60	0.582
Customer services	.949	3.90	0.731
Financial management	.955	3.72	0.703
Marketing	.960	3.54	0.775

Relationship between level of education and managerial skills

The Spearman's rank-order correlations (Table 2) revealed small positive correlations between two factors (forecasting and strategic management) and the education level of respondents. This indicates that the higher qualified the respondents are, the more they are expected to have forecasting and strategic management. These are higher-order skills, demanding critical thinking and in-depth knowledge and skills. The results did not indicate any other correlations between the remaining seven factors and level of education.

Table 2: Spearman's rank-order: Level of education and managerial skills

	LEVEL OF EDUCATION	
	Correlation coefficient	Sig. (2-tailed)
Forecasting	0.134	0.033*
Strategic management	0.123	0.050*

p < 0.05

Relationship between higher education institution and managerial skills

It is evident from Table 3 that the institution where respondents studied does not influence the managerial skills of respondents. Training on this level seems to be standardised. Interesting to note is that those who had international qualifications rated problem-solving and customer service skills more important and those who had national qualifications rated customer service and financial management skills as important.

Relationship between on-the-job training and managerial skills

A direct relationship between the importance of practical training and selected managerial skills is evident. Table 4 indicates that positive correlations exist between the factors: human resource

Table 3: ANOVA: respondent's higher education establishment and skills

Factor	UNISA Traditional university 1	North-West University Traditional university 2	The University of Pretoria Traditional university 3	University of the Witwatersrand Traditional university 4	International qualification	Other	F-value	P-value
Forecasting	3.58 (± 0.71)	3.69 (± 0.59)	3.70 (± 0.76)	3.50 (± 0.60)	3.60 (± 0.67)	3.61 (± 0.67)	0.220	0.970
Strategic management	3.57 (± 0.66)	3.70 (± 0.63)	3.57 (± 0.60)	3.61 (± 0.37)	3.48 (± 0.67)	3.58 (± 0.60)	0.306	0.934
Human resource management	3.57 (± 0.65)	3.77 (± 0.63)	3.72 (± 0.54)	3.76 (± 0.38)	3.58 (± 0.78)	3.61 (± 0.59)	0.434	0.856
Problem-solving	3.74 (± 0.73)	3.88 (± 0.70)	3.87 (± 0.57)	3.84 (± 0.68)	3.90 (± 0.76)	3.80 (± 0.69)	0.449	0.845
Communication	3.70 (± 0.65)	3.81 (± 0.72)	3.56 (± 0.55)	3.70 (± 0.42)	3.65 (± 0.73)	3.69 (± 0.62)	0.292	0.940
Information technology	3.53 (± 0.64)	3.65 (± 0.52)	3.69 (± 0.63)	3.67 (± 0.52)	3.63 (± 0.87)	3.62 (± 0.65)	0.220	0.970
Customer service	3.80 (± 0.80)	3.91 (± 0.72)	3.82 (± 0.63)	3.82 (± 0.56)	3.91 (± 0.85)	3.94 (± 0.71)	0.235	0.965
Financial management	3.7 (± 0.80)	3.80 (± 0.82)	3.70 (± 0.68)	3.89 (± 0.44)	3.67 (± 0.69)	3.71 (± 0.65)	0.182	0.982
Marketing	3.52 (± 0.72)	3.61 (± 0.55)	3.55 (± 0.56)	3.67 (± 0.48)	3.60 (± 0.75)	3.57 (± 0.64)	0.330	0.921

p < 0.05

management, problem-solving, communication, information technology, financial management. As practical training is prioritised in the accommodation sector, applied skills become more important. New managers are expected to be adept at new technology, solve problems and be able to work with other people in teams prior to employment. Therefore, these results support tertiary institutions that advocate for practical/work integrated learning as part of their programmes, especially traditional universities, where this was not previously part of the curriculum.

Table 4: Spearman's rank-order: Importance of practical skills and managerial skills

	THE IMPORTANCE OF PRACTICAL SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE NEEDED BEFORE EMPLOYMENT	
	Correlation coefficient	Sig. (2-tailed)
Human resource management	0.151	0.016
Problem-solving	0.145	0.020
Communication	0.131	0.038
Information technology	0.164	0.009
Financial management	0.135	0.031

p < 0.05

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the above results, the following recommendations can be made:

First, this study supports previous studies indicating the importance of specific managerial skills, but highlights that, for the accommodation sector, problem-solving and crisis management as well as customer service skills are mostly required by industry. It is recommended that higher education institutions focus on the development of problem-solving skills by means of case studies, role-playing and critical-thinking assignments. The graduate should understand that the customer is king and, given the personality traits of Generation Y, extra care should be taken for them to understand the importance and value of the customer. Students' skills in working with other classmates, industry role players and lecturers should be assessed throughout the year. Individual guidance might be necessary to ensure the individual understands the importance hereof.

Second, this study highlights the relationship between the level of education and selected managerial skills. The higher the level of education, the more it is assumed that the graduate is able to do forecasting and understand strategic management. Both these skills are critical in the accommodation sector, and it is thus important to implement related curricula in each year of study. Practical assignments in this regard, as well as case studies based on current market trends and research, will contribute to the development of these skills.

Third, even though the findings from this study indicated that tertiary education institutions did not influence the employability of graduates, it should be noted that not all qualifications offered are standardised, thus it is possible that these programmes possibly lack subject(s) required by the industry. It is recommended that tertiary education institutions develop a standardised first-year curriculum which focuses on developing key skills required by the industry, and then afterward specialise in one or more industry fields. In so doing, the selected skills are implemented by all higher educational institutions that offer a qualification in Tourism Management, ensuring opportunities to articulate growth, and specific industry demands/requests are recognised and dealt with.

Fourth, the results indicate that graduates who have obtained practical industry experience and gained human resource, problem-solving and financial management skills (among others) prior to graduating are preferred by the industry. As such, tertiary education institutions would do well to include practical hours (such as internship opportunities which span over a 12-month period upon completion of the first year of studies within graded establishments) and short courses as part of their qualification to expand students' practical skills scope and to obtain vocational qualifications.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to determine the opinion of managers in the accommodation

sector related to the necessary management skills required by the sector. The results of this study highlighted the managerial skills that need to be developed by higher education institutions and correlate with studies in which a gap between industry demand and tertiary supply was highlighted. A unique aspect revealed by the study is that practical skills and prior knowledge before graduation are more appealing to employers than just a tertiary qualification since it is expected that graduates must execute managerial tasks immediately after graduation with (sometimes) limited practical training.

The results of this study necessitate a review of all current Tourism Management qualifications presented at higher education institutions to ensure that the gap between the demand of the tourism industry and the supply of education institutions is minimised.

For future research, tourism product consumers can be included in the study to determine what their expectations are from accommodation managers, and comparing the results with those of this study, which will offer perspectives from a supply and demand viewpoint and possibly identify other disparities. It will also assist higher education institutions and accommodation managers to focus on skills that will support excellent customer service and thus translate into repeat clients. Ultimately, applying the identified managerial skills directly related to the accommodation sector will improve service delivery levels and contribute to graduates' employment desirability.

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