

Enhancing Employability Skills and Competencies in Hospitality Sector: A Soft Skill Approach

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ABSTRACT

Hospitality sector is one of the broadest domains of industries which gives emphasis to mostly on customer satisfaction and provides luxury services. Hospitality sectors involve a large number of staff who avail themselves 24/7 to carry forward the requirements of their guests and to ensure that the customers do not have any complaints. Hence, it becomes quintessential that the employers of hospitality sectors choose the right staff that would not compromise on customers' satisfaction. Keeping in mind the customers' constraints as the crucial element for their growth the employers make certain that they receive positive feedback. After all the customers' feedback is an essential boost to the rise of such sectors. For this reason the fresh graduates who would step into the world of hospitality must be able to understand the depth of the competencies required to fulfil the criteria. Apart from technical skills or general hospitality management education graduates in hospitality must be apt with a wide range of generic skills which would make them employable in such sectors. This paper discusses the essential skills and abilities graduates must acquire to impart the best of services and customer satisfaction. The paper mainly focuses on three important skills like the ability to relate with people through communication skills, managing problems and issues with proper understanding and sensitivity and contributing professional and ethical standards in the work environment.

KEYWORDS: *Hospitality sectors, Soft skills, Competencies, Communication skills, Managing problems, Ethics Standards.*

Introduction

Several countries world-wide are facing the problems of unemployment. India too is not behind the hazards of the employment crisis. While education knows no bounds in India, employment in various sectors at the same time is at risk. At this expository point, if one can think of one sector which has a history of providing employment to the educated unemployed graduates is the hospitality industry. "The size scale and rapid growth of the travel and tourism sector requires impactful and scalable solutions to this youth employment crisis. Hospitality is a broad sector where each and every employee has to face a challenging task to perform unflinching good job and also excel in doing so. This challenging task is intricately associated to an employee's competence to improve his work. It is the duty and responsibility of the managers of the hospitality organisations to guide and lend a hand to the staff to help progress their performance by not only training them technically and

professionally but also augment their soft skills. It is not difficult to accumulate technical skills by the graduates as the hospitality management institutions take care of the technical aspect imparted to the graduates. Kusluvan writes "in order to develop students employability skills, most, if not all, tourism and hospitality management course in higher education integrate student work experience (SWE) into their course design and programs" (Kusluvan, 2003, p.135). The SWE program includes placements in industries, internships, supervisory experience in work or in industry and many more of such kind. These programs provide exposures to the graduates to industries where they can earn practical knowledge of the essential skills required. Likewise, professional skills too are easy to acquire as, soon after graduates get a way in to the hospitality industry they are trained by the experts. But soft skills are situational and individual specific. Hence, graduates must be trained to obtain definite skills as required by the hospitality industry.

Seal believes soft skills are the most important criteria in hospitality sector and are required in every aspect of it. He writes "in the front office the manner in which you greet a guest as soon as they arrive, how you help them with the initial formalities- all comprise the basic tenets of soft skills which have to be mastered" (Seal, 2016, p.78).

Brotherton quote Shay and Tracey from their work in 1997 and writes that "the most desirable attributes for expatriate managers were people skills and adaptability, flexibility and tolerance, followed by emotional maturity, industry experience, and self-confidence" (Brotherton, 2016, p.186).

Renolds is of the view that "Many employers with whom the MJI interacts had made clear that the biggest barrier that they saw to successful hiring of central city residents was not formal or technical knowledge but the soft skills related to personality, attitude and behaviour." (Renolds, 2002, p.197)

Munjal and Bhushan write "the percentage of hotel management candidates who are directly employable for a hospitality job after college is quite low at 6-18%, according to the National Employability Report for Hotel Management Graduates released by employability solutions firm Aspiring Minds. The report is based on a sample of more than 3000 hotel management students from over 120 hotel management colleges across multiple Indian states that underwent 2 hour Hospitality Employability Test, India's only competency- based assessment instrument for the hospitality industry" (Munjal and Bhusan, 2017, p.35). It was found that "candidates scored very low in fundamental skills, logical ability, and soft skills like self-management, quality orientation, managerial skills, etc." (p.35). Hence it becomes extremely important to train graduates with a high level of soft skills so that they will be able to manage things in a better and in an easier way.

Nickson states that "the skills that matter to employers in customer facing staff in tourism and hospitality are generally then soft including aesthetic skills, rather than hard technical skills, which will often be trained in when people join the organisation" (Nickson, 2007, p.94).

Literature provides immense work on soft skills in hospitality sector and concludes that apart from technical skills soft skills are a must. This paper discusses three important sets of soft skills which would help graduates of hospitality management and education get employable in hospitality sectors.

Employability Skills

So what are soft skills? “Soft skills is a term which refers to personality traits, social graces, facility with language, personal habits, friendliness and optimism that mark people to varying degrees” (Alex, 2009, p.3). Hence, soft skills are the abilities which define the personality of individuals. In 21st century however educated individuals may be but if they lack skills and abilities to present their views before the employers or fail to put a mark of difference in the employers mind then they exist nowhere. The skills and abilities which promote employability are termed employability skills in simple words. Employability skills are those skills necessary for getting, keeping and being successful in a job. They are the skills and attitudes that enable employees to get along with their colleagues to make right decisions, solve problems, develop respect and ultimately become strong ambassadors for the organisation” (<https://www.skillsyouneed.com/general/employability-skills.html>). These skill sets stand in contrast to hard skills as hard skills are easily taught and achieved, soft skills are intangible and require severe training as these deal with more with emotions and behaviours.

The hospitality sector includes a good range of career options and provides ample opportunities for fresh graduates who would like to see their future in the world of outstanding jobs and tasks in hospitality. The services vary from front desk to cooking, from lodging to transportation, from hosting to event management and other additional services. When it covers such a wide domain of services, it's obvious that the staff assigned to lead each domain have to be dynamic and appealing. In addition, strong communication skills, enthusiasm, management, integrity, ethics, commitment, teamwork, being organised are other essential qualities. This paper discusses three major aspects of soft skills which graduates must inculcate as they step into the world of hospitality sector.

Communication Skills

Communication skills are the most important and the most necessary skills required in hospitality sector. As a large number of people are involved in the industry which deals with customers' satisfaction hospitality staff have to spend most of the time in communicating and interacting with many people mostly their guests, their staff and third parties. Managers, front desk executives, supplier, hotel staff and many more have to perform their job which mainly includes give and take of information. As the front desk executives are the most important link between the organisation and the customer, the most important step depends on developing and implementing effective communication with all. Also, the hosts have to be very dynamic in communication as their prime job is to provide customers' satisfaction. As soon as they find complaints of the guests the hosts must be prepared to resolve them quickly or convince them to make the guests feel at home. Cooking, presentation, garnishing and serving food to the hosts also require proper way of communication keeping in mind the requirements of the guests. Hence, graduates are required to inculcate good communication skills in hospitality sectors.

In the words of Wood and Brotherton “the changing labour market has imposed new needs as employers in the hospitality industry and other sectors increasingly give priority to social communication, technological and other usable and practical skills when recruiting employees. Greater emphasis is increasingly given to skills for employment, a key challenge being that although many of these skills can be learned

in school, interpersonal skills need to be practised in the field” (Wood and Brotherton, 2008, p. 154). Hence graduates must polish themselves well to improve their communication skills so as to directly connect with a large number of mass.

Interestingly, communication skills can be reciprocated in three ways mainly oral communication, written communication which are included under verbal communication and body language which falls under nonverbal communication. While communicating using all the three techniques graduates must believe that they need to be understood and in an effective way or else their efforts to make themselves clear would not be achieved.

1. Oral communication

Oral communication is imparted through speech. “Oral communication is the process of verbally transmitting information and ideas from one individual or group to another”. In hospitality sector oral communication carries utmost importance as most of the customers, co-workers, clients and other parties are directly interacted through speech and face to face. Hence, graduates must learn to be tactful and specific mainly while using words especially with guests as the guests may not provide ample time or ears to listen to the explanation that graduates may have to offer.

2. Written Communication

Apart from oral communication skills graduates joining jobs in hospitality sectors must also be apt in written communication skills. Written communication skills are basically encountered through letters, emails, messages, memos, reports and many more. Customers would like to browse in to the details as provide by the websites of the hotels or tourists sites. The content written by experts in the website promotes their hotels and services. Hence graduates seeking a good position in hospitality sector must have a good flair in writing and computer skills. As a part of daily schedule the new comers may have to communicate with their seniors or co-workers many a times but not always the speech technique clarifies their thought. Hence graduates must be apt in using emails and especially be tactful in choosing the right kind of words and use them professionally so as to avoid any miscommunications. Sen believes a profession can be of any kind ranging from finance to consumer goods, from banking to pharmaceutical or hospitality and tourism sectors “it is absolutely vital that one is proficient in the use of good communication skills, be it oral or written” (Sen, 2007, p.70)

3. Body Language

Body language is one of the most important aspects in hospitality sector as much of the communication is highly dependent on gestures, facial expressions and postures. The right usage of body language gets easily noticed and admired. The right body language welcomes dependency by the visitors and they remember one among many staffs who had actually impressed them. A bright smile, a welcoming tone, an active listener, a fast reciprocator, problem solver are clearly the signs of outstanding body language.

Managing Problems

Many times, hospitality industry faces loads of obstacles which need immediate resolution. The ability to solve problems effectively is one of the most required skills graduates need to learn and practice if they really want to sustain in the industry.

Dealing with problems is not easy as many times young people take things personally if they could not solve any problem which gives rise to rise in voice of the guests. The way one deals with these challenges often determines how good a problem solver one is. Graduates must understand and perceive challenges as opportunities. When a guest is complaining regarding certain thing or is not happy with the stay they probably won't return to stay back ever. Hence, graduates must consider this challenge as an opportunity and make good use of it. Graduates must learn to ensure the guests that their problems will be resolved at the earliest and proceed to work on it. They must understand the intensity of the problem and take responsibility to settle the situation. Walker and Miller assert that "for dealing with problems involving one person, an interesting participative approach includes the worker from the beginning to the end of the problem-solving process. It is known as win-win problem solving because everybody wins. You find a solution that satisfies both of you" (Walker and Miller, 2009, p.465-466).

While it is easy to train students to handle every issue in hospitality sector with understanding and sensitivity it is however necessary to help the graduates realize and learn about emotional intelligence which will guide them throughout their career. Peter Salovey and John Mayer in the edited book '*Emotional Intelligence: Key readings on the Mayer and Salovey Model*' suggest that "the term Emotional Intelligence refers to the processes involved in the recognition, use, understanding, and management of one's own and other's emotional states to solve emotion-laden problems and to regulate behaviour" (Salovey and Mayer, 2007, p.1949). This has already been mentioned in their book in 1997 and 1990. Further the book was popularized by Daniel Goleman in his book *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can Matter more than IQ* where he concerns with emotional intelligence as "abilities such as being able to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustrations; to control impulse and delay gratification; to regulate one's moods and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; to empathize and to hope" (Goleman, 2009, p.34). Emotional intelligence therefore in hospitality sector plays a pivotal role as it involves a large number of people who communicate with each other. These people have taken the responsibility in making the customers content and happy. Hence, graduates must learn to practice and apply emotional intelligence in their work front to provide the best services to their guests. What is required is good hospitality which must manifest good memories and peaceful feelings within the guests. Visitors always tend to remember the comfort and the attention by the staff of a hotel. Relationships born with emotions will always have a permanent stay and the same goes with the visitors who are emotionally attached with. In a hotel emotions must carry umpteen value and must be positively managed. A slight deviation of improper emotional handling can lead to bad consequences. Avelzani and Esposito believe that "it would be crucial to self-reflect on one's own emotional process and recognize at least three elements: one's own desires and the action undertaken to fulfil them, the one's response to the needs of other's" (Avelzani and Esposito, 2010, p. 34). Hence graduate must develop the competency of first being emotionally matured enough to handle the emotions of others in general and their guests in particular. They must also learn to put their legs in the shoes of the guests and understand with maturity their problems and emotions and move ahead to solve them.

Maintaining Ethical Standards

Many organizations under hospitality sector mission to maintain high degree of ethical standards that include core values and morals like respectfulness, honesty, trustworthiness, loyalty, punctuality and other ethics. At present the hospitality industries are very much concerned with the growing recognition towards ethics and maintaining them in an unbiased manner. Every day in hospitality sectors there arise complex situations which affect a broad area of operations included in it. These complex situations are like such that obeying one contradicts or transgresses with another. Such situations often put into dilemmas. Young minds may find it difficult to cope with these complicated situations all of a sudden. Hence, they can at best try to learn to develop ethics in their nature first and also learn to deal with various situations at the grass root level. These situations where meeting the ends and requirements of one, conflicts with another often demand careful analysis and finally arriving at a point of judgment. In such ethical dilemmas graduates must learn to manage the situation by learning to discuss matters with their seniors and arriving at a point matching with previous experiences. Graduates must understand often they may be accused of things they might not have committed like thefts, harassment, and discrimination, on basis of age, gender, race and belief often leading to further negative consequences. In certain situations graduates must learn to inculcate ethics which teach them to be as professional as possible. Learning to do right thing at the right time and acting accordingly will help them to avoid situations which render negative circumstances. "Many hospitality organisations develop and implement a code of ethics to provide broad statements to guide ethical decision making. As such, their intention is to provide a framework for decision making rather than to specify exactly what should or should not be done in a specific situation" (Hayes and Ninemeier, 2016, p.161)

Let's take for example Jane who has recently joined a big hotel cum resort. Jane is popular for her ethical behaviour like honesty, loyalty and truthfulness in her job. She meets Leola in the hotel who is a veteran in hospitality sector. Both of them share the same room so Leola gets ample time to teach Jane the description of her job. She explains Jane that because she is server it is her responsibility to take orders and deliver food to guests by the pool. Leola also explains how some days can be really long and how at times she stealthily eats food. She also gives example of herself how occasionally she lifts things and keep it to herself after the guests leave and forget things, as she believes that no one is hurt if some food is eaten or items are picked. But Jane is disturbed by Leola's talk and asks her what if the guests come searching for the things again or the managers ask about the increasing food costs. At this Leola's answer is that they pretend they do not know anything. However Jane considers this to be highly unethical.

"Some of the most important ethics in the hospitality industry include integrity, trustworthiness, respect for others and accountability (<https://study.com/academy/lesson/ethics-in-the-hospitality-industry.html>) Integrity is just like an internal force which occurs to people naturally. This force compels a desire within an individual to do something which is right. Hence, when Leola steals food and picks things she is breaking laws and this suggests she lacks integrity. The visitors may not further turn up to them as they are clear regarding the integrity of the staff and the organization. O Fallon describes and identifies "(...) the behaviour of acting ethically or with

integrity is the most important thing" (O'Fallon, 2011, p. 107). Even Kirkpatrick and Locke in 1991 suggested that "moral values as honesty and integrity appear to be as important for hospitality leaders as they are for other types of leaders" (Kusluvan, 2003, p. 609). This has also been referred by Cichy, Sciarini and Patton in 1992.

Integrity drives trustworthiness among people. Mistrust can lead to circumstances when the staffs are often not considered valued for the organization. When certain staffs are recognised as people of mistrust, however hard one tries but the chances of gaining back the trust of the hotel and its supervisors becomes negligible. In the book *Organizational Behaviour for the Hospitality Industry* Berger and Brownell asserts that "If there is trust among employees, then they can work in concert to perform their respective duties and provide excellent service to guests" (Berger and Brownell, 2012, p. 84).

Respect is another ethical parameter which promotes good relations and good behaviour among everyone. This not only boosts work atmosphere but also makes the organization rich in ethical standards. *Atithi Devo Bhabaha* the pledge of Indian tourism signifies 'our guest is blessed, our Visitor is God' a manifest on how respectful the guests are and the hospitality a host bestows on the visitors is similar to the respect one does to God in India. Hence, graduates must be taught to develop respect for one another first and then promote the same while in their career. Kusluvan claims "it is crucial to be civil and to show respect for the customer. (...) Respect can be shown by basic behaviours like courtesy, personalization, friendliness, by having a positive overall attitude and not exhibiting unwanted behaviours" (Kusluvan, 2003, p. 207).

Accountability is when each and every staff takes the responsibility of their job and accepts that they are in charge of the responsibility given to them. Walker and Miller understand that "People to whom you delegate are accountable to you for the results you expect. Accountability goes automatically with the responsibility delegated; it is the other side of the coin. Delegating responsibility does not relieve you of either responsibility or accountability.. In other words when a responsibility has been given it must in any ways be carried out and deliver results.

Conclusion

People associated with hospitality management perform the most exceptional task to deliver the best of experiences to their customers. In such a competitive business field simply being competent will no longer help. Hence, apart from technical skills graduates must realise that hospitality sector is one of the excellent sectors which provide ample opportunities to the graduates to grow and earn. Apparently, graduates must also groom themselves with soft skills to give their best to their job thus standing out of the crowd. Graduates must understand that they have to keep their minds broad and open so as to learn things faster and effectively. This will help them to handle things with ease and sensibility. Maintaining ethical standards would always assist graduates of not only of hospitality sector but also of any other sector grow in prosperity.

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