

# Developing Hospitality Management Core Competencies Framework

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**Abstract:** Developing a unique set of Core Competencies should be of primary concern to any business operating in the hospitality industry. This paper presents a framework for competency development, which is based on the views of both educators and industry professionals. By integrating knowledge from a variety of contexts and countries around the world, a set of generic core competencies has been derived via a systematic classification process. Specifically, forty competency statements have been posited taking the form of questions given to both educators and industry professionals. Subsequently, the responses have been analysed and, using taxonomy, a framework of seven core competency categories has been developed. The competency categories involve aspects of Human Resource Management (HRM); Professional Image; Operational Knowledge; Leadership; Communication; Information Management; and People Relationship Management. Specific competency items include essential capabilities for the hospitality industry such as: communicating effectively with clients and customers, identifying and solving problems, making decisions under pressure or in a crisis situation, and understanding the factors that influence the profitability of the hospitality enterprise. The proposed framework is meant to serve as a basis for developing a set of core competencies suitable for creating a sustainable competitive advantage for the hospitality industry. Further, the framework would be useful to educators, professionals and graduate students as a guide for cultivating a set of key competencies for success in the hospitality sector.

**Keywords:** hospitality management, strategy, core competencies, sustainable competitive advantage, education

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## 1. Introduction

Developing a set of unique core competencies would be key to creating a sustainable competitive advantage and thereby reach success in the hospitality industry. This is necessary especially in today's challenging times for the hospitality industry. As a result of COVID-19 and the ongoing restrictions to international mobility, the Travel & Tourism sector suffered losses (WTTC 2021) of almost USD 4.5 trillion, with its global contribution to GDP declining by 49.1% compared to 2019 to reach only USD 4.7 trillion in 2020; relative to a 3.7% GDP decline of the global economy. Domestic visitor spending decreased by 45%, whilst international visitor spending fell by an unprecedented 69.4%. In 2020, 62 million jobs were lost, representing an 18.5% decrease, having a negative effect particularly on SMEs of the industry (IMF2021).

Despite the negative effects from Covid 19, an opportunity emerges for education and HR development. The current situation with such a highly volatile business environment could also be viewed as a catalyst for innovation and competency development. Definitely, the hospitality industry and especially the hotel business is going through major changes nowadays. Some companies such as Airbnb adapted to these changes by developing a new set of competencies and thereby manage to survive and prosper even during the terrible pandemic. Therefore, identifying such key competencies would be crucial for designing effective educational programs and success in the new landscape that is evolving in the hospitality industry.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Competencies in general

In an attempt to define the concept of competence, Nath and Raheja (2001) proposed that competencies look at attitudes, skills and knowledge of a person through observable and measurable behaviours and outcomes. The U.S. Department of Education (2001) defined competencies as a bundle of skills, abilities, and knowledge that can be used as currency out in the workforce. "A competency suggests both the possession of knowledge and the behavioural capacity to act appropriately. To develop competencies, you must be both introduced to knowledge and have the opportunity to practice your skills" (Quinn et al, 2003). Sisson and Adams (2013) suggested that competencies are the activities, related knowledge, attitudes, and skills that directly affect performance and can be measured against specific standards.

Gamble et al (1994) highlight the changing emphasis of European management skills from traditional craft skills to management skills, the outcome being a more business-oriented hospitality manager as a team facilitator rather than someone with traditional skills. Guerrier and Lockwood (1990) explore managerial competencies and argue that there is a need for specific research into the knowledge and competencies which hospitality employees require in order to be effective in their work. This exploration of important managerial competencies is provided by O'Driscoll et al (1991) and Hay (1990). Tas (1988) identifies the most important competencies for hotel general manager trainees and relates these competencies to curriculum design in order to determine appropriate training and educational programs for schools of hotel and restaurant administration.

Job competencies are activities and skills judged essential to perform the duties of specific positions. Successful managers use leadership skills to facilitate work, influence co-workers and coach others, as well as for solving problems, negotiating contracts and other matters (Tas et al, 1996). Hotel managers may, of course, use their abilities in any of the domains simultaneously or sequentially in solving problems. Meaningful education and training programs to develop management competencies should consequently include opportunities for new managers to develop and practice a broad range of problem solving-skills.

Boyatzis (1982) defines competency as "an underlying characteristic of a person in that it may be a motive, trait, skill, aspect of one's self-image or social role, or a body of knowledge which he or she uses". That definition tends to focus on the qualities required for effective performance rather than on individual performance (Miller 1998). Competencies are a combination of observable and applied knowledge, skills and behaviours that create a competitive advantage for an organization. They focus on how an employee creates value and what is actually accomplished (Jauhari & Misra 2004). Tas (1988) defines competence as the performance of duties based on one's ability to accomplish specific job-related tasks and assume the role connected to the position.

Of special importance is the study of Kay and Russette (2000) found that a number of essential competencies fall under all five of Sandwith's (Sandwith 1993) Competency Domains (i.e. leadership, interpersonal, conceptual – creative, administrative and technical). Leadership and interpersonal skills are essential competencies essential to more than one functional area and management level.

The complex nature and diversity of managerial work confirms there are many variations of the meaning of the word "competency" in the managerial literature (Wallace & Hunt 1996; Miller 1998; Hoffmann 1999). Competency generally refers to the knowledge, skills, performance abilities and motives required to perform a job effectively and efficiently (Perdue, Woods & Ninemeier 2001; Quinn et al, 2003). Other supporters of that view (Barrow 1991; Marginson 1993) also contend that many generic competencies such as problem solving and critical thinking are context-bound as they depend on the individual situation and circumstances surrounding the application of these skills (Wallace & Hunt 1996). Others refer to an individual's underlying characteristics, such as any underlying characteristics leading to successful performance (Karpin 1995). Woodruffe's view of the myriad of definitions of competency may have merit. He argues that competency appears to be an umbrella term to cover almost anything that might directly affect job performance (Woodruffe 1993). As Miller (1998), suggested while disagreement remains as to what constitutes a competence, it is generally agreed that a universal definition which could apply to all situations is difficult to specify due to the inherent nature of the concept.

A major problem that exists in the hospitality industry, and the lodging and foodservice sectors in particular, is high employee turnover (Birdir 2002; Ghiseli, La Lopa, & Bai 2001). Operations managers, human resource professionals, and hospitality educators strive to reduce turnover numbers by identifying valid job competencies in future managers, improving hiring practices, and recruiting from educational programs known for producing future hospitality managers with strong industry potential (Enz 2004; Milman & Ricci 2004). There is a general suspicion that entry-level employees are not adequately being prepared for hospitality management positions through formal educational programs. As a result, employee turnover could occur when new hires are not able to respond to the demanding needs of the industry.

Therefore, clarifying job competency expectations that practising hospitality managers have for college and university graduates could be useful for hospitality professionals and hospitality educators. The relationship of educational factors to potential industry success remains an important and understudied area of the hospitality literature (Dittman 1997; Hsu et al, 1992). In lodging and foodservice operations, the general manager is ultimately responsible for the operation of the hospitality establishment and the supervision of employee

(Walker 2004). These managers, as well as other functional managers, are the appropriate individuals to assist in the identification of such job competencies. Competency development studies should therefore rely on the needs of the industry and the possibilities that the educational system provides. Further, it would be interesting to see the relationship between competencies development and career success which is explored in the subsequent section.

## **2.2 Developing competencies in the hotel industry**

Since the first college-level program in hospitality management was established at Cornell University in the 1920s, educators have sought industry leaders' advice and feedback regarding the essential competencies that graduates needed for career success (Kay & Russette 2000). The question of which competencies employees need in order to be effective has been asked by different management groups, and the answers seem to have changed over time from technical skills to personal characteristics (Tas, LaBrecque, & Clayton 1996). Some experts have attempted to identify the skills needed by hospitality managers.

The kind of abilities, knowledge, or competencies managers need to be effective has been asked among different management groups over the past 20 years. The answer appears to have changed over time from technical abilities to personnel-management characteristics (Tas et al, 1996). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, researchers found that managers need to concentrate more on technical matters. Studies of the late 80s and early 90s found that education was also important.

Katz (1974) argued that technical, human, and conceptual skills are required by all managers. The extent to which a manager needed each skill related to the level of managerial responsibility. Mariampolski, Sears, and Vaden (1980) recommended that restaurant management program should emphasize technical and human skills. Research conducted by Buergermeister (1983), and Tas (1988) identified competencies needed by entry-level hospitality managers. Buergermeister (1983), declared that providing quality service and demonstrating ethical and professional behavior were important competencies for entry-level foodservice managers. Buergermeister (1983) asserted that the most critical competencies for all beginning managers were effectively supervising and communicating with personnel, maintaining effective communication with clients, customers, and community, realizing profit as an important goal, and treating customers as a top priority. In a pioneering study Tas (1988) identified important competencies essential for management success from a hotel industry perspective including managing guest problems, professional and ethical standards, professional appearance and poise, effective oral and writing communication, positive customer relations and positive working relationships.

Nearly forty years ago, Tas (1983) found that a selected group of hotel executives in Nevada generally regarded courses in food and beverage purchasing, housekeeping, human relations, food production, front office operations, hotel law, and security techniques to be valuable. In 1980, a study published by Mariampolski et al related that important entry-level technical skills considered essential for a restaurant manager's success included food production, purchasing, and report preparation. Human relations skills rated as important in that study pertained to staffing and employee relations.

Knight and Salter (1985) surveyed hospitality educators and foodservice trainers to investigate traits that a good manager should possess. The results revealed that good hospitality managers should have excellent communication skills. Downey and Veau (1988) suggested that the characteristics required by hospitality graduates included technical skills, analytical skills particularly related to finance, marketing, law, and interpersonal skills (Lefever 1989). Jonker and Jonker (1990) indicated that potential hospitality managers must have good oral skills, computer skills, technical skills, and guest relations.

Rutherford (1987) examined the importance of different job responsibilities for hotel chief engineers in 1987 and found that communication, organization, leadership, and training were more important than technical skills. The study of required competencies in the hospitality industry, particularly in the hotel industry, was dynamic during the 1990s (Chung 2000). Hsu, Gilmore, and Walsh (1992) stated that the essential competencies required to prepare graduates for a successful career in the hospitality industry included customer satisfaction, supervision of personnel, communication skills, ethical and professional standards in work, decision-making, and positive working relationships. According to Dana (1992), maintaining effective communication with personnel and service quality were essential competencies for managers. Hansson (2001) suggested creativity as a quality

necessary for hotel operations and management. A survey of industry, alumni, faculty and students conducted by Enz, (2004) determined what they considered as the factors needed to succeed in the industry. They found the top skills identified by the respondents as being necessary to success were leadership, ability to identify a problem, and organizing and writing skills. Harrison (1996) declared that interpersonal skills were ranked as the highest domain of workplace competencies for middle-management employees.

Tait, Richins, and Hanlon (1993) studied managers and decision-makers within three sectors: tourism, sport and recreation. Their results confirmed that communication ability and interpersonal skills were rated as the most important competencies by all three sectors. Karpin (1995) found substantial gaps between the skill range and education of Australian managers and those deemed necessary to accommodate future management needs. The Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA) (Cairney et al, 1998) also found that employers require graduates with transferable skills, including strong written and oral communication skills, interpersonal skills, teamwork, and problem-solving skills.

The tourism and hospitality literature emphasize a need for “global”, “entrepreneurial” skills and “vision” to enable managers to meet 21st century challenges (Su, Miller & Shanklin 1997). Others reveal that tourism and hospitality management education should focus on leadership skills to equip future managers for the demands of an ever-changing business environment (Kay & Russette 2000).

The importance of general management knowledge and skills was identified in studies conducted by Okeiyi's team (1994), Ashley et al (1995) and Breiter and Clements (1996). Okeiyi's team (1994) conducted a study to determine the importance of food and beverage competencies expected of hospitality management graduates from the point of view of practitioners, educators, and students. In this study, human relations and managerial skills were rated as more important than technical skills. Ashley et al (1995) asserted that the top 10 areas of general management knowledge included: people skills; creative-thinking ability; financial skills; written and oral communication skills; developing service orientation; total quality management; listening skills; problem-identification and problem-solving skills; customer-feedback skills and individual and system-wide computer skills. The study also identified four competencies covering creative thinking and problem solving, communication, adapting to change, and teamwork as crucial for an effective program. Breiter and Clements (1996) investigated the perceptions of hotel and restaurant managers toward the importance of managerial skills related to success in management. The results indicated that leadership, managerial communication, and employee relations were the most important skills required by hospitality managers.

In the mid-1990s, Tas and his colleagues studied the important competencies for property management managers. Researchers grouped managerial competencies into five areas: conceptual-creative (the cognitive skills), leadership (the ability to turn ideas into productive action), interpersonal (skills for effective interaction with other), administrative (personnel and financial management of the business, and technical (knowledge and skills essential to producing the product service). The highest-rated competency statements fell into the interpersonal, leadership and conceptual-creative areas (Tas et al, 1996).

Chung (2000) conducted a similar study in Korea. He divided competencies into six dimensions and investigated their contribution to the career success of alumni graduated from universities offering hotel management programs and who have or had working experience in Korea. The findings revealed general management skills as having the same importance as technical skills. All competency dimensions including “management employees and job”, “management analysis techniques”, “innovation”, “adaptation to environmental changes and procurement knowledge”, “problem identification and communication” and “operational techniques and knowledge” related to career success in the hotel industry in Korea. The competencies covering directing and supervising the work of others, enhancing socialization and interpersonal relationship with employees, selecting and assigning personnel, taking a chance of more job enlargement, and maintaining professional appearance and poise were the most influential competency attributes to career success. The results also indicated gender, years of employment, educational levels, age, functional areas, and position were significant in discriminating between several competencies.

Kay and Russette (2000) conducted a study to determine the specific competencies required within food and beverage, front desk, sales division, and entry and middle management levels. Eighteen competencies were important for all six combinations of functional area and management level. They grouped those 18 competencies into four domains: leadership, interpersonal, technical and creative. The results revealed that

“leadership” competencies were paramount to all managerial functions. They further subdivided the “leadership” domain into customer-centered, role-modelling, ethical, and trust. The competencies related to the “customer-centered” domain were dominant over the other three competency domains. In this study, for the first time, “working knowledge of product-service” and “adapting creatively to change” were rated as essential competencies for all managers.

In Taiwan, it was a phenomenon to study competencies required for people serving in the hospitality industry. Wang (2001) conducted a study to determine the professional competencies needed for the front-house employees of the food and beverage department. The results revealed that language skills, and professional appearance and poise were two basic prerequisite qualities. Wang (2001) administered a survey to realize the competencies required for chain restaurant managers. She found that 46 competencies were evaluated as “most essential”, and there were 27 competencies rated “quite important” for managers. Additionally, crisis management was identified as the most important component of managers’ activities, and the most desirable competency required for prospective managers was marketing management skills.

Tesone and Ricci (2005) conducted a study with senior hiring executives who represent various sectors of the hospitality and tourism industry in Orlando, Florida. This study revealed that hospitality managers hire primarily for attitude and secondarily for specific knowledge and skills. In addition, the hiring executives prefer interpersonal interactive abilities over productivity and concrete work processing skills. The practitioner participants in the study noted knowledge, skills, and attitudinal qualities that indicate worker success in the industry. More specifically, dominant skills and abilities were noted in the areas of teamwork, communications (listening skills, verbal and writing skills, and empathy with others) and guest/customer services. Other job-related requirements were found in general knowledge, professional image, comprehension of performance standards, and realistic job/career expectations.

Jauhari (2006) conducted a study to examine the link between industry competency requirements and the current provisions for hospitality management education in India. He identified the need for collaborative development between the educational providers and industry, especially in relation to the ongoing development of managers in the workplace. In addition, the study revealed that a gap exists in terms of ensuring that the needs of industry are met by the ongoing skills development of the workforce.

The main objective of management education is to provide industry with high caliber graduates equipped with the most relevant management competencies (Christou 2002). A review of the literature indicates that generic and transferable skills including leadership, communication, critical thinking and human resource management are essential to career success (Gustin 2001). Also, Gustin (2001) found in the USA that encouraging and teaching critical thinking skills resulted in students being better prepared to meet the demands of a complex business environment. Also, in Australia, Moscardo (1997) claimed that developing problem-solving skills, creative and flexible-thinking competencies are critical in building management competencies for hospitality management students.

Consolidating the findings of the above studies, a framework of key competencies for the hospitality industry is proposed in the next section. The framework includes forty competency items which capture aspects of human resource management, leadership, information technology, interpersonal communication, human relations, and operational knowledge.

### **3. Findings**

#### **3.1 Developing a hospitality management competency framework**

As shown in the literature review the hospitality industry requires a multitude of competencies that are essential for prosperity and success. These competencies need to be consolidated in a comprehensive framework. Such a framework would then be useful to educators as well as to industry professionals for cultivating the right environment for developing such competencies.

**Table 1:** Competency items

Survey Competencies	References
Acting in an ethical manner HRM	Kay and Russette, 2000; Chung et al 2003
Maintaining professional appearance and poise	Tesone and Ricci, 2005
Directing and supervising the work of others	Hsu et al 1992; Dana, 1992; Chung, 2000
Defining and setting up quality standards for employees.	Ashley et al 1995; Chung, 2000; Chung et al 2003
Communicating effectively with other employees	Dana, 1992; Ashley et al 1995; Chung, 2000
Communicating effectively with clients and customers	Ashley et al 1995; Chung, 2000
Managing guest problems with understanding and sensitivity	Tas, 1988; Baum, 1990; Kay and Russette, 2000
Forecasting future trends	Chung, 2000
Developing positive customer relations	Jonker and Jonker, 1990; Kay and Russette, 2000
Making decisions under pressure or in crisis situation	Wang, 2001; Chung et al 2003
Using financial analysis techniques	Downey and De Veau, 1988; Ashley et al 1995; Chung, 2000
Analyzing factors that influence the controllability of profits	Buergermeister, 1983; Tas 1988; Baum, 1990; Ashley et al 1995; Chung, 2000
Identifying and defining problems of operation	Baum, 1990; Enz et al 1993; Ashley et al 1995; Chung, 2000
Working knowledge of product-service	Kay and Russette, 2000
Adapting to changing circumstances	Ashley et al 1995; Chung, 2000; Kay and Russette, 2000
Identifying and defining problems of guest relations	Ashley et al 1995; Chung, 2000
Recognizing and solving customer problems	Ashley et al 1995; Kay and Russette, 2000
Enhancing socialization and interpersonal relationships with employees	Downey and De Veau, 1988;
Developing Innovative ways to work	Ashley et al 1995; Chung, 2000
Selecting and assigning personnel	Chung, 2000
Taking a chance of more job enlargement	Chung, 2000
Building model and creative thinking	Hansson, 2001; Ashley et al 1995; Chung, 2000
Communicates effectively both in writing and orally	Tas, 1988; Tas et al 1996; Tesone and Ricci, 2005
Interacts smoothly with wide variety of people	Tas, 1988; Okeiyi et al 1994; Tas et al 1996; Kay and Russette, 2000
Follows hygiene and safety regulations to ensure compliance by organization	Tas, 1988; Baum, 1991;
Motivating employees to achieve desired performance	Tas, 1988; Baum, 1991
Maintains professional and ethical standards in the work environment	Tas, 1988; Baum, 1991
Using past and current information to predict future departmental revenues and expenses	Tas, 1988; Baum, 1991
Analyzing weekly, monthly, and annual financial and statistical reports	Tas, 1988; Baum, 1991
Appraising employee performance	Tas, 1988; Baum, 1991
Effectively manages life-threatening situations (e.g., fire, bomb threat, serious illness)	Tas, 1988; Baum, 1991
Using front-office (computer) equipment effectively	Tas, 1988
Working as a member of a team	Tesone and Ricci, 2005
Anticipating guest wants and needs to provide service	Chung et al 2003; Tesone and Ricci, 2005
Knowing the realities involved in this type of work	Tesone and Ricci, 2005
Knowing the basic terminology used in the industry	Tesone and Ricci, 2005
Managing time to ensure productivity	Chung et al 2003
Providing employees access to information	Chung et al 2003
Staying informed about industry practices and new developments	Chung et al 2003
Promoting respect and appreciation for diversity and individual differences	Chung et al 2003

Based on the most prominent studies selected from the literature forty competency items are proposed as shown on table 1. Further, the identified competency items are classified in several categories as shown in figure 1.



**Figure 1:** The proposed hospitality management competency framework

The *HRM* competency category is comprised of “Acting in an ethical manner”, “Defining and setting up quality standards for employees”, “Selecting and assigning personnel”, “Appraising employee performance”, “Making decisions under pressure or in crisis situation” and “Anticipating guest wants and needs to provide service”. The particular items are drawn from the studies depicted on the right-hand side column of table 1. For example, “Acting in an ethical manner” as a competency is supported by the findings of Kay and Russette, 2000 and Chung et al 2003. This refers to developing a skill in responding to a number of situations where the hospitality professional does not harm in any way employees, customers or the environment. Such a competency development would promote the creation of an ethical culture which would prove to be vital for prosperity and long-term success.

The second competency category *Professional image* is comprised of “Maintaining professional appearance and poise”, “Maintains professional and ethical standards in the work environment”. Further, the third competency category *Operational Knowledge*, draws from “Working knowledge of product-service”, “Follows hygiene and safety regulations to ensure compliance by organization”, “Knowing the realities involved in this type of work”, “Knowing the basic terminology used in the industry”, “Identifying and defining problems of operation”, and “Providing employees access to information”.

The fourth competency category *Leadership* is constructed based on the items “Directing and supervising the work of others”, “Adapting to changing circumstances”, “Developing Innovative ways to work”, “Taking a chance of more job enlargement”, “Building model and creative thinking”, “Effectively manages life-threatening situations”, “Managing time to ensure productivity”, “Motivating employees to achieve desired performance” and “Staying informed about industry practices and new developments”.

The fifth competency category *Communication* draws from the item: “Communicating effectively with other employees”, “Communicating effectively with other employees”, “Managing guest problems with understanding and sensitivity”, “Developing positive customer relations”, “Communicates effectively both in writing and orally” and “Working as a member of a team”.

The sixth competency category *Information Management* is comprised of “Using financial analysis techniques”, “Analyzing factors that influence the controllability of profits”, “Using past and current information to predict future departmental revenues and expenses”, “Analyzing weekly, monthly, and annual financial and statistical reports”, “Analyzing weekly, monthly, and annual financial and statistical reports” and “Using front-office (computer) equipment effectively”.

Finally, the seventh competency category *People Relationship Management* is comprised of “Identifying and defining problems of guest relations”, “Recognizing and solving customer problems”, “Enhancing socialization

and interpersonal relationships with employees”, “Interacts smoothly with wide variety of people”, and “Promoting respect and appreciation for diversity and individual differences”.

#### **4. Conclusions and recommendations**

This paper examined the issue of competency development in the hospitality industry. Based on an extensive literature review it was shown that a multitude of competencies are necessary for success in hospitality. Specifically, forty competency items were identified based on the findings of the most prominent studies in the area. As a result, a hospitality management competency framework is proposed for developing a set of skills to improve the chances for success in the industry. The forty competency items, were organized into seven competency categories namely: Human Resource Management (HRM); Professional Image; Operational Knowledge; Leadership; Communication; Information Management; People Relationship Management.

Cultivating a set of essential core competencies would be beneficial to a variety of stakeholders in the hospitality industry. Specifically, the proposed framework would be especially beneficial to educators when designing their curricula. In the same manner, the framework would be useful to hospitality industry professionals for designing and delivering effective training programs. Further, governmental agencies related to human resource development could utilize such a framework in order to support relevant training programs. Moreover, the proposed competency categories would support a successful career development for hospitality management graduates.

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