

Role of Soft Skills in Enhancing the Employability in Tourism and Hospitality Sector in India

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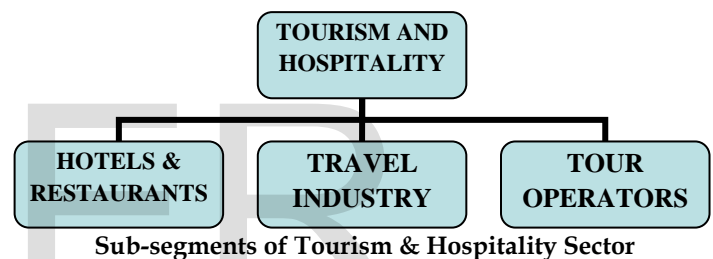
Abstract – Tourism and hospitality sector is one of the most progressive and fastest growing industries globally. It generates growth, prospers the hosts and also offers immense potential for employment in various functions. One out of eleven jobs belongs to tourism and hospitality around the world. As it is a “skill based” industry, at times qualifications are not given the utmost importance. However, there is a rise in number of educational courses and programs by many educational institutions for the last few years. It is one industry where an array of likeable activities can be opted as a career choice. For example, travelling, browsing about packaged tours, food touring and even cooking at home apart from the regular stream jobs. But as every profession does, this industry also demands for a specific set of skills in aspirants. Professionals in this sector come across challenging operations, varied consumer choices and most importantly diverse cross cultural backgrounds which make this industry not very easy to work with. Therefore, it becomes essential to know those skills that make this industry a perfect choice for a satisfactory growth both for employees and organizations.

Key Words: Hospitality, Tourism, Skills, Cross Culture, Potential.

1 INTRODUCTION

Tourism and hospitality is a vibrant industry that has seen tremendous growth in the last few years. It offers employment opportunities in verticals like Accommodation, Transportation, Attractions, Food and Beverage services, Entertainment, Conferences and Conventions, Art and Culture, Recreational Services etc. It can provide opportunity to work as Tour Operator, Travel Counselor, Event Planner, Restaurant Manager, Bar Tender, Chef, Marketing Manager, HR Manager, Finance Manager, and an Official in Tourism Department. Veterans are emerging as Entrepreneurs providing specialized services in consulting and also are moving to the Academic vertical of this sector.

Tourism and Hospitality sector is the only industry that can have a direct impact on Socio-economic development of a country. It plays an important role in International Commerce and also bags a remarkable share of country's foreign exchange. It is a highly competitive, prospering and multidimensional industry. The manpower working in this sector not only needs to master the service skills but also “specific” industry oriented skills to keep abreast with latest trends and challenges in the present time. Soft skills are the answer to those specific qualities that make the most significant impact on performance of these sectors. To define, soft skills are set of those “non-technical” and “professional abilities” that lay the foundation of excellent customer service. It involves communication, interpersonal and customer service skills along with personal qualities such as responsibility. Integrity, problem solving attitude, working well in a team are additional factors that make a big difference in the performance of Tourism and Hospitality sector professionals. Soft skills are a permutation of interpersonal people skills, social skills, communication skills, character traits, attitudes, career attributes and emotional intelligence quotient among others. Sometimes, it also refers to the character traits and interpersonal skills that distinguish a person's relationships with other people.



The Indian Context

As one of the key drivers of growth in Service Sector, Tourism and Hospitality sector attracted around US\$ 12 billion of FDI (DPIIT) between April 2000 and December 2018. The reason behind this whopping figure is the potential of India as a favorable Tourism destination. Indian history, culture, heritage, natural beauty, rich flora and fauna along with an ethnicity attract a huge number of visitors to India every year. Indian Government through its apex department is determined to make India as a Global Tourism Hub.

Tourism and hospitality sector has grown as the largest potential employer and source of Foreign Exchange. It employed around 42 million people which accounts for 8% of total employment opportunities in India in the year 2017. Additionally there is a rise in the number of International Hotel chains which is expected to cover 50% of Tourism and Hospitality Sector in India by 2022. According to the latest reports published in March 2019 on Tourism and Hospitality in India, there are few reasons that will favor the overall growth of this sector. Soaring demand in specialized areas like Medical Tourism is expected to touch a US\$ 9 million mark. A diverse portfolio Tourism products like Wellness Tourism, Religious Tourism, Village Tourism, MICE, Sports and Films. Not to leave, the land of 25 Bio Geographic zones, 30 World Heritage Sites with developing International circuits and Infrastructure.

Career opportunities in India are also growing in various organizations like Travel agencies, Hotels, Restaurants, Airlines, Transport operators, Entertainment, Tour Operators etc. Apart from these there are career opportunities in Foreign Banks and dealers in foreign exchange that give enormous opportunities for professionals. However, soft skills are not given much importance in Indian Education system. (Rimington, 1999). Thus, it is a compulsion for the companies to invest and train their employees in soft skills in order to groom their employees to present themselves in better manner and improve their overall performance.

Need and importance of the Study in the present scenario:

The information mentioned above confirms the fact that Tourism and Hospitality Sector can be an industry with enormous opportunities for career. It is a great industry to be part of, yet offering plenty of options to choose from the skills, needs and wants. It offers platform at international levels to work with best of the Hotels, Cruises, Airlines, Restaurants, Museums, and Bio-Parks etc. It certainly involves a different level of skill, energy, personality and perspective.

Like every profession, this field also requires technical skills in terms of Knowledge, ideas, clarity of concepts. Where it differs is the additional requirement of lingual abilities, organized and brave minds. Confidence, creativity and communication are other core requirements of Tourism and Hospitality professionals. The success in any job depends on the skills that the workforce possesses and being a “Customer centric” industry, the upper hand is with the people who are offered these services.

Creativity, communication, and ability to serve people with delight are the essence of this industry. These skills are known as the “SOFT SKILLS” which are additionally required to excel in this service oriented industry. Whether it is Travel Agent, Front Office Manager, Chef or a Bell Boy, one needs to have a clear understanding of the “PEOPLE SKILLS” or Soft Skills. A short sighted goal of merely earning a livelihood might not lay importance on these qualities. But, if one wishes to see himself as a successful Hotel Owner or Top Management member in any of the Hospitality organizations, Soft skills must be a part of everyday work life.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To find the current soft skills required in Tourism and Hospitality Sector
2. To identify the challenges faced by Tourism and Hospitality Sector organizations with reference to soft skills
3. To recommend and suggest to improve the current skills in workforce of these organizations

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study intends to understand the current need, importance, challenges affecting the skill gap in terms of soft skills in Tourism and Hospitality sector.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Secondary Data are the major sources of information for the study and it is conclusive in nature and involves no primary research.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A number of studies have been documented highlighting the importance of Soft skills, Breiter and Clements (2006) found that Leadership competency is the most important aspect in Hospitality Management. Spencer and Spencer (2003) emphasized that high quality of performance can only be achieved when technical knowledge is backed by the non-technical abilities or personal qualities. Buhler and Ganzel (2001) identified soft skills enables in better performance by leading to adapt to challenges in workplace. Brown (2003) mentioned about creativity and interpersonal skills as soft skills. According to Moyer(2005), knowledge and skills comprise visible soft skills competency.

Curtis and McKenzie (2005) suggested eight primary business soft skills that include personal attributes, loyalty, honesty, commitment, personal presentation, integrity, enthusiasm, reliability and positive self-esteem. Also Siriwaiprapan (2000) found five common domains of soft skills - organizational competency, social competency, cognitive competency, self-competency and job competency. Wood and Payne (1998) mentioned communication, flexibility, achievement, organization leadership, planning skills, team work and relationship building and organizing skills as core soft skills needed by employees.

Okumus and Yagci (2005) argue that the lack of qualified staff in hotels and restaurants has been due to limited exposure to practical training, structured and improper curricula and limited opportunities. Chung, Raybould and Wilkins (2005), presented a view that workers in hotel industry do not have sufficient knowledge about the soft skills because their college and universities do not correspond to such needs.

Another study by British Council mentions that Tourism and Hospitality industry sources talent at junior, middle and senior levels

Tourism and Hospitality Sector	Junior level	Middle level	Senior level
Hotels	Graduates, diploma holders and 12th pass	Graduates, diploma holders	Mostly graduates and post graduates
Restaurants	12th Standard pass or below, diploma holders	Diploma holders, graduates	Mostly post graduates and graduates
Travel agents	Diploma	Diploma	Mostly

and Tourist Operators	holders and 12th pass	holders, graduates	graduates
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The report includes perspective of employees of all levels and the employers. Soft skills are preferred by all the participants in Tourism and Hospitality sector. Perhaps it stresses on the importance to such a significant point that the criticality needs to be fulfilled by Certifications in soft skills for this industry.

Skills India Report 2019, mentions about the “Most preferred skills”. The viewpoints are taken by the employers about the skills that are most important apart from domain expertise. The employers give importance to broadly three skills viz. communication skills, adaptability and learning ability. Employers prefer hiring candidates exhibiting these skills over the candidates who possess only domain knowledge. In a growing and dynamic industry like Tourism and Hospitality it is thus essential to focus on development of these skills.

Soft skills in Tourism and Hospitality Sector - Common roles, responsibilities and respective soft skills required for employees

Table 1 – Required soft skills for Tour and Travel Agency employees

Function/ Role	Responsibilities	Soft Skills needed
Branch Manager	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Heading the management of Branch 2. Planning, organizing for the Branch functions- Packaging tours, designing itineraries 3. Managing Staff and related hiring, supervising training, performance appraisal 4. Keeping record of financial aspects of business generated 5. Relationship Management of existing and acquisition of new customers 6. Portraying a positive positioning in the tourists/customers 	Management skills- Leadership qualities, Team Building Managing resources, creativity People skills - Communication, presentation skills, ability to convince, emotional stability Relationship Building, General awareness about domestic and international players, agencies/bodies Ability to handle customers, hospitality in behavior Optimistic attitude, integrity
Operations Manager	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Functions like Ticketing, passport, travel operations 2. Invoicing, Cancellation, refund 3. Follow the rules/guidelines of the Government, Domestic and International Players like IATA/UFTA/Ministr 	Time Management Readiness to accept sudden changes - crisis management Implementation skills Hospitality service aptitude

	y of Tourism, State Tourism Development Corp.etc. 4. Excellent Service delivery	
Sales Executive	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Selling the travel/tour packages according to the client needs 2. Completing targets 3. Coordinating with operations team with smooth delivery of packages 4. Maintaining Database, records of sales, prospects 5. Maintaining relations with existing customers 6. Dealing with prospects 	Empathy, service aptitude Result oriented Team player Organized Communications skills, multi lingual abilities Readiness, initiative, service orientation
Travel Desk	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Travel Booking (international and domestic) 2. Arranging for invite letters 3. FOREX Management 4. Managing approval for travel 5. Ticket Booking 6. Hotel reservations 7. Designing travel packages 	Excellent communication skills - Telephonic conversation - People handling Email writing, letter writing - understanding of documents - courtesy and professionalism General awareness about countries, capitals and currencies Proficient using computers, internet Networking skills, flexibility, multitasking Creativity, understanding of clients requirement, responsibility and empathy
Tour Guide	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Organize tours by groups or individuals in coaches, cars or on foot 2. Following the schedules of the tour 3. Accompanying visitors, guests 4. Assisting visitors, guests with useful information 5. Responsible for a comfortable and delightful experience 6. Introducing tourists with unique concepts, attractions, specialties etc. related to any tourist place. 	Planning, organizing skills Time management Communication skills Service orientation, commitment Excellent presentation skills Crisis Management, readiness Responsibility

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Keep in contact with important officials like police, medical institutions and destination officials Ensuring the safety and convenience of the tourists 	
Driver	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Map out driving routes ahead of time to determine the most of the expedient trip Pick and drop of clients from/to the place and at the time requested Collect payments and issue receipts Assist client with handling luggage, loading and unloading of luggage Act according to traffic and weather reports to stay up to-date Ensure quality, comfort and maintenance of vehicle in terms of cleanliness, fuel, wear and tear Getting the car serviced time to time to maintain interior and exterior body of the car Abide by traffic rules, highway regulations 	<p>Time management Responsible, working with integrity, interpersonal skills Organized and professional Multitasking, emotional stability, flexibility Proactive, analytical skills Problem solving skills Organized, quality oriented Disciplined, obedient</p>

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Hire and train staff for food and beverage service operations Implements the operations at prescribed company and International standards, costs, safety etc. Customer service - interacting for the best possible delivery and experience to guests Prepare and keep up the work schedules, shipments and cleaning schedules for restaurants Dealing with customer's issues, problems, providing services according needs and wants and deal tactically with difficult customers Communicate as an intermediary between the customers and the kitchen staff for smooth operations Supervise the shifts, mostly on their feet 	<p>controlling Communication skills, presentation skills, oratory skills, result oriented Disciplined, responsible, awareness about the industry People handling skills, negotiation and convincing skills Organized, time management Problem solving skills, crisis management Leadership abilities Physical and mental strength</p>
Housekeeper	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Dusting and polishing furniture and fixtures Cleansing and sanitizing toilets, showers, bathtubs, countertops and sinks Maintaining a clean and sanitary kitchen area Making beds and changing linens, tidying up rooms Vacuuming and cleaning carpets and rugs Sweeping/vacuuming, polishing and mopping hard floors, cleaning glass surfaces Sorting, washing, loading and unloading laundry Ironing clothes and linens Keep the check on supplies related to amenities, room service, bathroom, toiletries etc. and ordering as needed Emptying trash receptacles and disposing of waste Report any necessary repairs or replacements 	<p>Meeting the client requirements by quality orientation Willingness to learn Able to adapt to different situations Reliability, honesty and integrity Good customer service skills Professionalism and service orientation High Energy levels Organizing skills, decision making skills Ability to take criticism Interpersonal skills - communication, negotiation</p>
Chef	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Functioning of overall 	<p>Leadership</p>

Table 2 – Required soft skills for Hotel employees

Function / Role	Responsibilities	Soft Skills needed
Front Office Manager - Hotel	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Dealing with guests Arranging staff schedules, records, procedural compliances Providing professional and friendly service to the guests Create a pleasant experience for the guests Managing and training the front office staff Acting as liaison between General Manager and Staff, coordination with other departments like F&B Service, Housekeeping 	<p>Communication skills, cross cultural knowledge, respect to diversity, unbiased, rational Organizing, time management Empathy, positive and pleasant attitude, business etiquette Proactive, decision making skills Leadership skills, problem solving Interpersonal skills</p>
Food and Beverage Service Manager	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Managing overall operations of the restaurant 	<p>Planning, organizing, executing and</p>

	kitchen related operations 2. Managing and responsible in running multiple restaurants in a hotel 3. Controlling kitchen costs 4. Creating new recipes, designing menus 5. Liaising with suppliers, coordinating with purchase department 6. Schedule kitchen staff 7. Inventory Management of Kitchen stocks 8. Training junior staff 9. Timely rotation of all food products 10. Supervising specific sections of the kitchen 11. Manage customer relations 12. Quality control and safety standards implementation	Work under pressure, mental strength, planning skills Responsible Creativity Communication skills, interpersonal skills Organizing, time management Communication skills, presentation skills, commitment Multitasking, flexibility Service orientation Disciplined, awareness about industry standards
Bellboy	1. Luggage assistance to guests 2. Transportation assistance to guests 3. Greeting hotel patrons 4. Special needs assistance 5. Provide local information and advice	Physical and mental strength, responsible Ability to coordinate, organize and communicate Hospitality, orderliness and discipline Empathy Interpersonal skills
Steward	1. Maintain cleanliness of all dining utensils 2. Maintain cleanliness of Kitchen and storage areas 3. Assist with food storage, rotation and preparation 4. Maintain high standards of personal appearance 5. Approach each customer encounter with positive attitude	Organizing skills Ability to multitask Attention to details Communication skills Prioritization ability

Based on the above tables, it is evident that whether an employee is directly or indirectly related to the customers, soft skills are required at each level of tourism and hospitality sector. We can broadly categorize the essential soft skills that a prospective hospitality and tourism manager should master in:

1. Customer service - as a service industry, involves client interaction and people handling skills at both micro and macro level. Empathetic, customer centric and a responsible behavior can do wonders when combined with the domain knowledge.

2. Networking - It is said that “your network is your net worth” which can be a significant source of repeat business by means of clients, guests and customers returning to you’re the organization for the service. This skill adds a great value to one’s career in tourism and hospitality.

3. Communication - Communication is important for any industry today. It gains importance as one starts to grow higher in the organization. Dealing with people every day on various requirements, needs and functions require mastering communication skills. Speaking, writing and listening are the strong areas of communication that create a direct impact on the business. Communication should be effective enough for the people to relate with in terms of information, processes etc.

4. Flexibility - Long shifts, tedious work and multitasking are the pressure points in this sector. Professionals should be flexible enough to accept the sudden changes, shift in job roles and multitask at any given point of time.

5. Organizational skills - Proper planning of the day, following the organizational structure and sticking to the protocol despite of handling pressure and multitask can be another strong attribute needed in such organizations.

6. Language skills - Being multilingual always will have an advantage in tourism and hospitality sector. English being the global thread will cater to the international and diverse background visitors or customers. Local language on the other hand can aid in developing an intimate relationship with customers and can add to customer loyalty too.

7. Commitment - Professionals get lured to this industry dreaming to become part of international brands of hotels, restaurants, cruises, tourism organizations but soon they lose interest in the job as they lack the understanding and importance of commitment in this field. Such workers often do not reach far in their career and often end up working at entry level positions.

8. Can-do attitude - “Crisis management” is another aspect of tourism and hospitality as sudden situations arise in workplace every day. Professionals should be ready to take up any role and should “go an extra mile” in the service delivery.

9. Cultural awareness - Various nationalities and cultural backgrounds requires the skill of being culturally aware. Typically customers don’t always share the same values, belief systems and perceptions, so it’s important to break free from cultural barriers and help customers feel comfortable and at home with their surroundings. This can be crucial towards a higher customer satisfaction and repeat business.

Challenges - Skill Development in Tourism and Hospitality Sector

Tourism and Hospitality sectors demand a unique mix of skills. Hard skills or technical domain are not good enough to survive in this competitive industry. Professionals in this sector need practical training along with classroom sessions. However, there exists a big skill gap in this industry that is evident from a few statistics given below:

Statistics regarding lack of Soft Skills in Hospitality and Tourism Industry:

- It is found 55% of the professionals lack customer handling skills, 53% lack organization skills, 51% lack oral communication skills, and 44% lack teamwork skills.
- The worst staff issues for hospitality businesses are – skill shortages (69%), recruitment (51%) and retention (36%).
- Employee turnover in the hospitality industry hit an incredible 72.9% in 2016.
- 39% of front of house employees leave within their first 90 days of employment.
- 42% of back of house employees leave within their first 90 days of employment.
- 35% of managers leave within their first year of employment.

Reasons for these alarming figures can be:

Ignorance towards behavioral skills - Colleges and institutes providing Tourism and Hospitality education focus more on theoretical knowledge and learners gain little experience on the operational processes. Internships period too is not enough to gain exposure in all the major departments. In contrast, the job market lays more stress on practical knowledge of the functions and operations. Apart from the conceptual knowledge on operations, roles, functions etc., soft skills including Communication, Team work, Interpersonal skills – problem solving, negotiation, empathy and decision making skills should be the areas to be focused upon to achieve overall skill development. Soft skills and domain skills complement each other. Organizations lack a balance of both of these required skills.

Spoken English - This is the biggest barrier for progressive growth in terms of skills. It is essential to be comfortable with this global mode of communication. Organizations must realize this can give a competitive edge in the markets. Fluency in English makes the budget category, domestic employees and local players to cater the cross cultural customers efficiently.

Suggestions to improve soft skills in Tourism and Hospitality Sector

A structured program enhancing the behavioral skills and self-directed learning it is noticed that employees perform better in terms of technological use, service delivery and aligned performance with the standard of the organization when they exercise the soft skills. It is through the training and development that organizations may reach to the mark they intend to in terms of performance, retention and prosperity of workforce.

Local language can be a tool - It cannot be denied that the International Brands of Hotel chains reckon on English proficiency for employment yet there is a scope of developing skills of locals to introduce them to the concept of hospitality, service orientation and behavior. India has great potential in terms of talent and **if local languages are the medium of**

instructions, initial battle of orienting the professionals can be won. Unorganized sector mostly depends on the local talent and therefore organizations should give importance to the local language because guests or tourists may be a foreigner, Indian national from different state or even a regional or local.

Focusing towards a balance of professional and behavioral skill development- Nurturing, guide and empower the employees to work with autonomy, a degree of decision making and taking responsibilities. Ethics, perseverance, competency development, retention of employees through better employee culture, benefits, rewards and recognition can bring remarkable changes in the behavior of employees. It is high time organizations start on to an efficient knowledge and talent management system to achieve their vision in the long run.

CONCLUSION

From the study, it can be concluded that tourism and hospitality sector is experiencing a strong gap in the skill requirement. Quality of service, performance of organizations, growth in terms of career and attrition are a few challenges that are increasing due to the lack of the people skills in employees. A sector that can change the socio economic conditions of a country like India needs to focus more on the non-technical abilities in order to establish itself firmly in upcoming years. Although there has been a significant rise in providers of Tourism and hospitality education, yet this sector struggles to be a promising career choice for youth.

Organizations, education providers in this industry should prioritize their investment more on the skill development of their workforce rather than expanding their operations as to work and survive in a globally competitive industry it is not easy to attain the customer satisfaction by merely conceptual and domain expertise. Communication, commitment, cultural awareness, multitasking, flexibility and service orientation should be instilled in the minds and hearts of employees as customers remember the experience which decides their satisfaction, brand value and loyalty towards the organization. Soft skills thus play an important role in an employee's career, organizational growth and overall performance of the industry.

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