Analysis on Core Competences and Digital Literacy Needs Required by Hotel Employees in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few years, the hotel industry has been disrupted by technological revolution and the COVID-19 pandemic. As many past best practices become obsolete and many new practices emerge, it is essential for hospitality schools and educators to re-examine the core competencies required by hotel employees in the digital age. This working paper presents the idea, methodology and the expected findings of an ongoing project that aims to outline all core competencies and digital literacy needs required by hotel employees in the digital age. Unlike previous studies, this project applies and conducts the LEGO Serious Play workshops with hotel management graduates who are working in the hotel field. Although this project is not completed yet, the findings shall provide useful references for academic institutions to reform their curriculum in an effort to nurture competent talent which can support the strategic human resource needs of the hotel industry.

KEYWORDS

- competencies
- curriculum reform
- digital literacy
- digital transformation
- human resources management

RESEARCH RATIONALE

Like other business sectors, the emergence of digital technologies have revolutionized the operation and management of hotels (Iranmanesh, Ghobakhloo, Nilashi, Tseng, Yadegaridehkordi, & Leung, 2022). To resolve the labor shortage problem, self-service technologies and particularly service robots have been increasingly displacing low-skilled workers to perform routine tasks (Wu & Huo, 2023). To bolster consumers' trust in the booking process and enable them to make informed decisions grounded in first-hand experiences, many international hotel chains like Shangri-La Hotels & Resorts now incorporate virtual reality and immersive tours into booking systems (Bilgihan & Ricci, 2024).

As stressed by different governments and professional organizations (e.g., European Commission, the HKSAR government), digital literacy is a vital competence as technologies have profound implication on the future of work. While enriching students' digital literacy is indispensable, to the best of the authors' knowledge, no extant study has attempted to outline/identify the digital literacy needs required by the hotel industry in the digital age. Which types of digital skillsets and knowledge should hospitality institutions and educators be offered in order to enhance their students' overall digital literacy and competitiveness? Answer to this question remains unclear at the moment of this writing.

Besides technological revolution, the outbreak of global pandemic also induced an additional disruption that led many hoteliers to reform their business practices. Japutra and Situmorang's (2021) case study reveals that many hotels in Indonesia established new sanitation protocols and provided upskill training for employees amid the crisis in order to achieve multi-tasking. Lai and Wong's (2021) study empirically proves that some formerly used crisis management practices like price reduction were only useful in the initial stage of the pandemic. Considering the significant changes in hotel operation and business environment, the core competencies of future hotel managers required by the hotel industry are expected to be transformed. Indeed, many prior studies (e.g., Dolasinski & Reynolds, 2019; Suh, West, & Shin, 2012) demonstrate that the priorities of skills and knowledge required by the industry have evolved over time.

Considering the urgency and significance of this issue, the twofold objectives of this project are: (1) to identify all core competencies required by hotel employees in the digital age; and (2) to identify all digital literacy needs (i.e., skillsets, knowledge) required by hotel employees in the digital age.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Method

To achieve the aforementioned objectives, we adopted and conducted LEGO Serious Play workshop with hotel management graduates (of a public university in Hong Kong) who were working in the hotel sectors at the time of interview. As noted in Kristiansen and Rasmussen (2014), LEGO Serious Play (LSP) is a facilitated hands-on working method initially developed for corporate strategizing within the LEGO group. This approach draws on a constructivist philosophy and asserts that meaningful learning involves the process of constructing models and sharing ideas of resulting models. Other than business training and team building, academics have been increasingly embracing this approach for teaching and research. For instance, Simon, Neuhofer and Egger (2020) successfully utilized LSP to elicit hospitality frontline employees' ideas about how to facilitate the functioning of a human-robot team.

Participants

During June - July 2024, the authors of this project sent invitation emails to all hotel management students who were graduated in the past five years and invited them to join the LSP workshop. Twelve graduates accepted the invitation, and participated in LSP workshop under the lead author's moderation during June - July 2024. Among those twelve participants, eight of them have been working in the hotel industry for three years or above after graduation. Half of them work in front of the house like front office (n=3) and food & beverage (n=3). Another half of them work in marketing (n=3), revenue (n=1), human resources (n=1) and reservation (n=1) divisions.

Data Collection – Part I

In the beginning phase of each LSP workshop, participants were firstly asked to get familiar with the set of LEGO bricks (with 234 pieces) assigned to them. To support participants in picking up the building and presentation skills, the lead author conducted two warm-up activities (i.e., building a tower using bricks with dedicated color; building a model to reflect their personal characteristics). After building one model, participants were asked to orally present their developed models as a reflection of their opinions/thoughts.

In the main part of each LSP workshop, participants were firstly asked to build a model to show all core competencies of entry-level employees required at their corresponding departments. After building the models, participants were

asked to introduce their models and highlight the competencies embedded in their models. The lead author recorded the illustrations given by the participants, and asked for further clarifications if needed. Figure 1 shows the model built by participant A who was working in the marketing department of a luxury hotel with notes marked by the moderator. Figure 2 shows another model built by participant D who was working in the front office department of another luxury hotel with notes marked by the moderator.

Figure 1. LEGO model created by participant A working in marketing

- Red shirt
  = passionate

- Body language
  = dare to challenge

- Yellow bridge
  = willing to take risk

- Ladder
  = ambitious

- Transparent blue
  = ample knowledge

- Green L-shaped brick
  = open-minded

Data Collection – Part II

After completing part I, participants were asked to outline all digital literacy needs required by current hotel employees. The moderator did not provide any definition of digital literacy to participants in order to minimize researcher bias and priming effect. Participants can freely express their opinions. All conversations were recorded with participants' informed consent. Afterwards, the conversations were transcribed verbatim for further analysis.

Figure 2.   LEGO model created by participant D working in front office

- Smiley face
  = positive mindset

- Open arms
  = networking skills

- Black rotor
  = adapt to change

- Flower on the head
  = stay composed under stress

- Mixed-color tower
  = appreciate cultural diversity

- Yellow tower
  = goal-oriented

EXPECTED FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Since this project is an ongoing (but not a completed) one and the data collection and analysis were not completed yet, we unfortunately could not present the findings in this working paper. But still, the contributions of the project findings are expected to be considerable. On the one hand, the findings would contribute some new knowledge to the stream of research about hospitality education, human resources management, and leadership development. On the other hand, the findings would provide administrators of hospitality management programs with useful information for optimizing their curriculum and advancing their students' employability.

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