Technical competencies of restaurant managers in Pretoria: Employees' and managers' perceptions

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Abstract

The restaurant sector is a highly competitive industry, and factors affecting restaurant performance such as management competencies need to be explored. In order to determine the skills and knowledge needed to be a successful manager, management competencies should be addressed. Employees' and managers' perceptions of which management competencies are important could differ. The aim of this paper is to describe the perceptions of employees and managers of Pretoria restaurants with respect to technical competencies. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data from 47 restaurants in Pretoria. A six-point Likert scale was used to determine the perceptions regarding technical skills. A total of 49 restaurant managers and 131 employees completed the questionnaire. Employees perceived food preparation skills as the most important technical competency to possess in the restaurant sector, while managers identified the knowledge of operating kitchen equipment as an always-important technical competency.

Key words: Technical competency, hospitality industry, managers, employees, management competencies

Introduction

The restaurant industry generates millions of jobs for South Africans and billions of Rands in economic contributions, which in turn benefit large segments of society, and national, provincial and local governments. The literature shows that almost 90% of the South African labour force is employed in service industries, many of them working in the various hospitality sectors including restaurants (Maumbe, 2012; Voon, De Jager, Chitra, Kueh & Jussem, 2013).

The restaurant sector is one of the key contributors to the service sector in terms of generating income in many African countries. Factors affecting restaurant performance, such as management competencies, therefore need to be explored (Voon *et al.*, 2013). Management competencies are needed to address the knowledge, skills and abilities required by successful managers and leaders in the hospitality industry (Koenigsfeld, Youn, Perdue & Woods, 2012).

It is estimated that management competencies are responsible for 70% of small business failures. These competencies include lack of knowledge, poor administrative skills, communication, motivation, interpersonal skills and tactical skills. Human capital is undeniably a hospitality organisation's most valuable resource and has the potential to provide one of the most sustainable competitive advantages in the market place. It is therefore crucial that managers, who are responsible for directing and shaping the organisation, constantly improve their competencies by further training in their field of operation (Singh, 2008).

The hospitality industry is experiencing major environmental and market changes such as increasing levels of competition, rising costs accompanied by falling margins due to the inability to raise prices, inability to raise the necessary capital, and changing customer and employee attitudes (Suh, West & Shin, 2012). Successful managers must possess the appropriate competencies to adapt to these and other unforeseen environmental demands and a dynamic operating environment (Suh *et al.*, 2012).

Literature review

Challenges in the restaurant industry

Jauhari and Manaktola (2009) describe the perceptions of the hospitality industry among people outside the industry as a glamorous and comfortable working environment. A study conducted by Mkono (2010) found that the relationship that restaurant managers and workers have with their jobs in general is best described as a love–hate or an indecisive relationship. Success in the restaurant business requires much hard work and perseverance; entry-level jobs are typically at a low level, and it may take a number of years before a graduate recruit can get to middle-management level.

Pizam and Shani (2009) state that the working conditions of the hospitality industry are not suitable for all personality types; training unsuitable employees to be hospitable is therefore destined to fail. Emotional labour can be defined as the management of human feeling during social interaction in the service labour process in service work. Employees need to manage their emotions as well as those of customers in ways that are conducive to the demands of the customer and regardless of the nature of the demand. Their ability to perform emotional work, whether in the form of enthusiasm, politeness or remaining calm under pressure, is perceived as a vital contribution to customer satisfaction and a competitive advantage (Bailly & Lene, 2013).

The restaurant sector faces manpower shortages in terms of employee quantity and quality, and struggles to attract talent due to perceptions of being a poor paymaster with hard tasks. It also offers limited opportunities for progression, training and promotion (Bharwani & Butt, 2012; Watson, 2008). Due to high employee turn-over, the industry experiences increases in the costs of hiring and training new employees. This also presents difficulties in building a brand culture, as new employees take time to adapt to brand practices (Jauhari & Manaktola, 2009).

Restaurants experience a higher employee turnover rate than other service industry businesses due to employees often not receiving the training they need, lack of adequate compensation, and long and unsocial hours that impact on work–life balance (Jagels, 2007; Bharwani & Butt, 2012). The hospitality industry is facing problems in attracting and retaining skilled and knowledgeable workers due to low salaries, rigid job traits, poor talent management and the conventional top-down operational style (Ahmad & Zainol, 2011, Fjelstul & Tesone, 2008; Jauhari & Manaktola, 2009; Watson, 2008).

Human resource skills

Suh *et al.,* (2012) emphasise the importance of human resource skills as a critical competency for hospitality managers. According to Ko (2012), competent employees and managers who are satisfied with their jobs are more likely to treat customers respectfully. Zopiatis (2010) argues that communication, customer concerns and leadership surface as three of the most important management competencies in the restaurant business, and that the competencies of professionalism, the ability to motivate others, and verbal and writing skills require the immediate attention of industry stakeholders.

It is important for restaurant managers to have strong and audacious leadership and management competencies in order to effectively operate the overall establishment and motivate employees to be productive. The intention of this research is to investigate perceptions of the management competencies of restaurant managers and employees in order to discover any discrepancies in their perceptions of management competencies.

Leadership is a behavioural process of influencing individuals towards set goals, and providing direction, guidance and instruction to build and improve the skills and performance of employees. It also supports employees in taking career growth opportunities (Campion, Fink, Ruggeberg, Carr, Phillips & Odman*,* 2011; Asree, Zain & Razalli, 2010).

Management competencies

Koenigsfeld, Youn, Perdue and Woods (2011, 2012) studied the concepts of management competencies and found that they could be used to address trends, challenges and developments in the service industry, including restaurants, and that they are needed to address the knowledge, skills and abilities required by successful managers and leaders in all sectors of the hospitality industry. Some organisations look at competencies as a benchmark for measuring the skills that an individual has, compared with the skills that the individual needs for a particular job.

Competencies could be used to distinguish between more effective and less effective employees' performance, based on the assumption that competencies facilitate the identification of the skills that an employee needs to be effective in a certain position. A well-designed and utilised set of competencies brings numerous benefits to its users, for example, systematic use of competency assessment facilitates succession planning, training and development, recruitment and selection, and performance appraisals (Cardy & Selvarajan, 2006; Koenigsfeld *et al.*, 2012).

Rao and Palo (2009) and Koenigsfeld *et al.* (2012) agree that competencies form the main foundation and basis for addressing certain major issues in the organisation such as the development of job descriptions, helping with the recruitment of managers, training and career development. Managers require competencies for managing themselves, and competencies thus offer opportunities for self-assessment, getting feedback on performance, managing other people and tasks, and influencing the manager's responsibility in setting objectives, planning, taking decisions and organising work in the organisation. However, management competencies are seen as a snapshot in time and must be updated over time to incorporate new roles and trends in the hospitality industry (Koenigsfeld *et al.*, 2011).

Porter (2005) and Cardy and Selvarajan (2006) conclude that competencies are important in an organisation because they can guide the direction of the organisation; they are measurable; they can be learned, developed and improved; and they also distinguish and differentiate the organisation from others and constitute a key to competitive advantage.

Furthermore, in order for an organisation to succeed in its mission and goals, the managerial competencies should match the strategic intent. Lastly, competencies help to integrate management practices throughout the organisation.

Management competencies could be of value to both the organisation and the individual, as they can help in building a competency domain model. Organisations can identify the competencies of managers based on the model in order to design training and development programmes geared toward specific organisational and managerial needs. Individuals may make plans or decisions regarding their career, professional development and/or continuing education based on competency levels across the domains (Porter, 2005).

Campion *et al.* (2011), Cardy and Selvarajan (2006) and Martina, Hana and Jiri (2012) state that competencies can be clustered according to related knowledge, skills, abilities and characteristics that affect a major part of an employee's job and correlate with performance that will lead to achieving a competitive advantage.

A competency dimension gathers the individual skills and abilities that correlate with the competencies needed to successfully perform the task in accordance with the organisational missions, vision and strategies (Campion *et al.,* 2011). The management competencies were categorised according to dimensions/domains in order to help identity management competency skills that are specific to the hospitality industry (Koenigsfeld *et al.,* 2012).

Millar, Mao and Moreo (2010) and Porter (2005) believe that the Competency Domain Model developed by Sandwith (1993) is the most reliable and influential competency model in today's business environment, as it divides competencies into five domains: leadership domain, conceptual domain, interpersonal domain, administrative domain and technical domain. The competency model is a descriptive tool for categorising, identifying and summarising management competencies that are relevant to achieving a particular task effectively in an organisation. The Competency Domain Model is often used in the hospitality industry for exploring competencies, and several researchers have developed their own models based on Sandwith's competency model (Kalargyrou & Woods, 2011; Millar *et al*., 2010).

Technical domain

The technical domain entails the technical skills of a specific kind of activity, particularly involving methods, processes, procedures or techniques. It involves specialised knowledge of a topic and knowing how to apply it on the job, analytical ability within that specialty, and facility in using the tools and techniques of a particular discipline. Some technical competencies are common to all managers irrespective of the restaurant (Cizel, Anafarta & Sarvan, 2007).

Technical skills involve the ability to use knowledge or techniques to achieve particular goals, including knowledge of equipment, work methods and work technologies. Organisations often offer on-the-job training for employees, or certain technical skills could be a prerequisite in the job requirements. The technical competencies are simply the skills and knowledge associated with the actual hospitality work (Zopiatis, 2010).

According to Porter (2005) and Cizel *et al.* (2007), the technical competencies are concrete, primarily concerned with things and the skills required by the greatest number of people in an organisation, because many must perform the technical activities of the business. Porter (2005) further outlines that the technical domain is the work that the organisation does, and involves knowledge and skills associated with work processes and methods, equipment,

machines, facilities and new technologies. It also includes monitoring, reporting and evaluating processes related to production output, quality, productivity and sales.

Bailly and Lene (2013) and Weber, Crawford, Lee & Dennison (2013) agree that technical skills are the foremost concern of employers when recruiting an employee, since they constitute the foundations of the work itself and are learned both during education and training and on the job. Technical skills are required by entry-level restaurant managers, for example, calculating food costs in a restaurant, menu development, culinary skills, food processes, serving methods and etiquette.

Problem investigated

The unfavourable characteristics of hospitality work are well recognised, including the long and unsocial hours, unclear career progression paths, low salaries, emotional labour, the physical nature of the work, stress and burnout, and autocratic management styles (Mkono, 2010; Bharwani & Butt, 2012; Jauhari, 2009; Voon *et al.*, 2013; Watson, 2008).

Managers are faced with the challenge of controlling and motivating the overall workforce to provide excellent service. According to research findings, the lack of management competencies has been mentioned as the key stumbling block to attaining the goals of providing good service and employee management (Voon *et al.*, 2013). The perceptions of restaurant managers and employees regarding technical competencies are not known and should be established.

Research objectives

The aim of this study was to identify and describe the key management competencies that are perceived to be more important from the perspectives of managers and employees, and to determine which technical competencies are the most important. This knowledge will help managers to identify which aspects of their competencies they should improve on, and employees will be happy and satisfied with their manager's overall management competencies. With this knowledge, employees and managers will be better equipped to meet customers' needs and improve their levels of satisfaction and loyalty, which could contribute to increased profitability.

Research method

This study employed a descriptive, quantitative research design as it made use of a relatively large sample of restaurant managers and employees to gather information using structured questionnaires. Quantitative research is suitable for a study of phenomena that are conceptually and theoretically well developed. A descriptive approach was used in that the study describes the phenomena. Investigations of the perceptions of the management competencies of restaurant managers were undertaken at various restaurant establishments in Pretoria.

Study population

The target population of the study was restaurant managers and employees in Pretoria. Convenience sampling was used to select casual dining restaurants in Pretoria on the basis of their willingness to participate in the study. Conradie (2012) describes the benefits of using this method as it saves time, is less resource intensive and more accessible. In order to improve the response rate so that the results of this study could be generalised, convenience sampling was utilised. Other factors that contributed to the selection of this method were the accessibility of restaurants and their willingness to participate in the study; time and financial constraints also influenced the researcher in selecting this method.

Eighty-seven restaurants were contacted by telephone and through personal visits, only 47 of which agreed to participate in the study.

The sample for the study comprised all the employees and managers of the restaurants that agreed to participate in the study. A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed to employees and managers in the sample. Only 131 employees and 49 restaurant managers completed the questionnaire. In order to increase the response rate, the researcher waited for afternoon shift employees and managers in some restaurants to form part of the study. This resulted in a response rate of 51%, which is acceptable according to research standards (Mbithi, 2011).

Measurement instrument

Questionnaires were used as the main data-gathering instrument for this study. Two main advantages of using a questionnaire as a data-collection method are that it is inexpensive and offers respondents anonymity, so that greater confidence can be expected in the accuracy of results. The disadvantage of using a questionnaire as a data-collection method is the low return rate, as respondents may take some time to answer a questionnaire (Conradie, 2012). The researcher minimised this disadvantage by personally administering the questionnaires.

Development of questionnaire

The instrument employed in this study was created after an extensive review of the literature. The questions for the present study were adapted from questionnaires used in previous studies in this field, namely Singh (2008), Conradie (2012) and Popova (2006).

The basic step in formulating the questions was to identify the required competencies. Each question then focused on a different competency domain, which was broken down into skills. The questionnaire consisted of 46 questions, which were structured using a six-point Likert scale. The questions were aimed at measuring the respondents' (employees' and managers') perceptions of which skills from the competency domains reviewed in the literature were deemed more important than others. The competency domains measured were the leadership, management, conceptual, intrapersonal, interpersonal, technical and administrative competency domains. The responses ranged from 1. Not important (NI), to 2. Sometimes important (SI), 3. Important (I), 4. Very important (VI), 5. Extremely important (EI) and 6. Always important (AI). In this paper, only the leadership domain questions are discussed. A six-point Likert scale was used because it provides a variation of scores, thus tending to be more reliable. It is also useful in measuring the degree of importance, as all the competencies are essential for a restaurant manager to have, and it eliminates the uncertainty of the middle value (Conradie, 2012).

A pilot study was conducted using a convenience sample of four managers and 14 employees from two restaurants that were not included in the final study sample. The feedback from the pilot study assisted the researcher in identifying and correcting errors in the sequencing of questions and the language used.

Ethical issues

Ethical permission was obtained from the Tshwane University of Technology Faculty of Management Sciences. All ethical issues were considered, and informed consent and confidentiality were addressed.

Data analysis

The data were cleaned and coded using Microsoft Excel© 2010. STATA V12 statistical software was used to process the data from the questionnaire. The responses to the research questions were gathered and presented using descriptive statistical percentages for frequencies.

According to Conradie (2012), descriptive statistics are used when the major purpose of the data analysis is to present, compare and summarise the main features of the information that has been collected.

Reliability and validity

Cronbach's alpha was used to test internal consistency. In this study, the test score for each competency domain was 0.60 or higher. Yahya and Elsayed (2012) point out that a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.60 is acceptable.

The instrument used in this study was developed based on a detailed analysis of empirical literature, review by academic experts and adaptation from other similar studies. To increase the validity, construct validity was used, and the instrument in this study was adapted from related studies by Singh (2008), Conradie (2012) and Popova (2006 that measured the skills and competencies of managers in the hospitality industry. Their instruments were adapted to suit the purpose and aims of this study, and additional competencies were included in the questionnaires on the basis of the literature review. Construct validity measures the extent to which the items in a scale or domain measure the same construct and can be evaluated by the use of factor analysis (Cizel *et al.*, 2007). Factor analysis was performed in this study.

Limitations of the method design followed

Convenience sampling was employed instead of random sampling, which could affect the reliability of the study as the population might not be representative. The study was conducted in the Pretoria region, therefore the conclusions could not be generalised to all restaurants in Gauteng province.

Results

As previously discussed, a six-point Likert scale was used which ranked skills from not important (NI), to sometimes important (SI), important (I), very important (VI), extremely important (EI) or always important (AI). The aim was to determine the perceptions of restaurant managers and employees with respect to the degree of importance of these competency skills and to gain an understanding of how they rated certain skills over others. The results from the technical competency dimensions are presented, analysed and discussed below.

The technical competencies are simply the skills and knowledge associated with the actual hospitality work (Zopiatis, 2010). The employees and managers were requested to measure the degree of importance they assign to technical skills in their work environment.

Table 1: Frequency percentages of technical competency skills

Technical competency	Position	NI %	SI %	I %	VI %	EI %	AI %	Total %
Food preparation skills	M	0.3	8.5	2.0	28.6	36.7	24.5	100
	E	0.0	1.5	5.3	9.9	31.3	52.0	100
Menu planning skills	M	2.0	2.0	2.0	18.4	36.7	38.9	100
	E	0.8	0.8	7.6	16.8	29.7	44.3	100
Food presentation skills	M	0.0	0.0	8.2	16.3	28.6	46.9	100
	E	0.0	0.8	4.6	13.1	31.3	50.4	100
Knowledge on food products	M	0.0	0.0	4.7	18.4	36.7	40.2	100
	E	0.0	0.8	4.7	13.0	37.4	44.3	100
Knowledge in serving procedures	M	0.0	0.0	4.1	10.2	46.9	38.8	100
	E	0.8	0.8	3.1	12.1	35.9	47.3	100
Knowledge in operating kitchen equipment	M	0.0	0.0	0.0	11.5	27.5	61.0	100
	E	0.0	0.0	0.0	22.5	28.5	49.0	100
Ability to control food wastage	M	0.0	0.0	6.2	12.2	30.6	51.0	100
	E	0.0	0.8	5.3	15.3	28.2	50.4	100

Note: M = Managers; E = Employees

As shown in Table 1, managers perceived the knowledge of operating equipment as always important (61.0%), followed by the ability to control food wastage (51.0%). Employees' perceptions differed from those of managers: they listed food preparation skill as always important (52.0%). Perhaps this perception was influenced by the fact that employees are constantly engaged with food preparation to a far greater extent than managers. Zopiatis (2010) reveals that technical (culinary-specific) competencies such as knowledge of food products, food preparation and presentation are considered as most important in the restaurant sector. This shows that culinary skills are considered to be prerequisite entry competencies prior to employment as a manager or an employee. Food preparation and quality are the key determinants of customer satisfaction and loyalty (Voon *et al.*2013)

Fifty-one per cent (51.0%) of managers felt that the ability to control food wastage was always important, compared to 50.4% of employees. Ekaterini (2011) states that every member of an organisation is responsible for eliminating unnecessary waste.

Employees interact and work directly with customers, and the way employees interact and present food to customers plays a crucial role in customer satisfaction. It is interesting to note that all the technical skills listed in Table 1 have a response rate ranging from 0.0% to 2.0% under not important. Suh *et al.* (2012) state that knowledge of product-service and

culinary skills are the essential competencies in the hospitality industry. This asserts the fact that skills in the technical domain are primary skills for both managers and employees, who should have previous employment in the restaurant business.

The results of this study disagree with the findings of Suh *et al.* (2012) that food and beverage management skills and other hospitality-related technical skills received lower importance ratings in the manager group. In this study, both managers and employees rated all the technical skills highly (Table 1).

Table 2: Comparison of perceived importance of management competencies

Competency domains Managers N=49 Employees N=131	Frequency (%)
Leadership	
Managers	20.4
Employees	12.9
Management	
Managers	18.4
Employees	18
Conceptual	
Managers	16.4
Employees	9.9
Interpersonal	
Managers	14.3
Employees	19.8
Intrapersonal	
Managers	10.2
Employees	12.2
Administrative	
Managers	4.1
Employees	5.1
Technical	
Managers	16.3
Employees	21.9

Table 2 shows that the highest percentage of managers (20.4%) identified leadership competency as the most important competency, followed by management competency (18.4%). This concurs with Firdauz, Sapri and Mohammad (2015), who state that organisations and managers will have difficulties if they lack leadership and management competencies. Koenigsfeld *et al.* (2011) documented the leadership domain as the most important and frequently used competency cluster. The results of this study agree with the findings of Koenigsfeld *et al.* (2012) that leadership competencies are most important for managers to learn and be able to use. The results confirm the belief that managers focus more on leadership issues, while employees view technical competencies as the most important, followed by interpersonal competencies. The results of this study show that managers and employees have different perspectives on the importance of certain management competencies in the restaurant sector. This supports the findings of Singh (2008) that employees' views on management competencies are important, but should be distinguished from the views of managers, as they have different responsibilities, work experience and participation in managerial tasks. It's worth noting that neither employees nor managers value administrative competency highly; only 4.1% of managers and 5.1% of employees considered administrative competency to be important. Gentry, Harris, Baker & Leslie (2008) documented that managers focus less on administrative duties, which seem to be growing less important due to technology that has facilitated processes that were once paper-based.

The responses of employees are supported by the study findings by Mkono (2010) that the hospitality industry needs to employ better individuals with appropriate personalities and interpersonal relations, and skills in both managerial and non-managerial positions. Based on these results and other research findings, managers should strike a balance between managing soft skills and hard skills. Mkono (2010) points out that the hospitality industry involves a high degree of interaction with customers from different backgrounds and that it requires above-average skills in interpersonal relations to succeed.

The results are supported by the findings of Testa and Sipe (2012) and Wadongo, Kambona and Odhuno (2011) that technical skills are important to people working in an area that is vital for customer satisfaction; that managers do not need hands-on technical expertise, but instead must have the skills to use information for decision-making; and that the impacts of these decisions should be viewed conceptually for the whole organisation.

The results of the present study with respect to management competencies are consistent with previous studies (Jauhari 2006; Koenigsfeld *et al.*, 2011, 2012), which found that leadership competency skills always top the list of essential competencies needed to succeed in the hospitality industry.

Conclusions

In the Pretoria restaurant sector, there are discrepancies between the perceptions of restaurant managers and employees and the level of importance that managers attach to the competencies. The three essential competency domains that restaurant managers utilise and deem important are leadership, management and conceptual competencies, while employees regard the technical, interpersonal and management competency domains as useful and important for the restaurant manager to have.

Managerial implications and recommendations

As the hospitality industry is labour focused and people oriented, the concept of competency management should be properly applied. If managers and employees are fully competent to perform their tasks, their job satisfaction will increase, resulting in positive outcomes for the restaurant.

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