



# Perceptions of technical skills required for successful management in the hospitality industry—An exploratory study using conjoint analysis



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## ABSTRACT

The growth of hospitality programs worldwide has resulted in wide variations in program structures, curricular offerings, and course content, all of which have prompted researchers to examine essential competencies and industry needs to inform programmatic restructuring. This paper explores how important various technical skill sets are perceived to be by students, faculty, and industry professionals today. Building on the extant literature, we identified seven key technical skills: Academic performance (using grade point average as a surrogate), social networking, time management, strategic planning, spreadsheet acumen, written communication, and oral communication. Drawing from a convenience sample, 98 respondents ranked the student characteristics by ranking 18 hypothetical student job candidates, each of which was represented on a card. Developed using an orthogonal array, the hypothetical student/job candidate cards were created by varying the three values of the seven characteristic variables; the ranking responses for the 18 cards were then examined using conjoint analysis. Professionals and faculty disagreed with student respondents with respect to GPA and Spreadsheet Skills, ranking them lower in importance than other characteristics. Faculty should note that even though they do not perceive expert knowledge of spreadsheet skills to be important, professionals do. Additional research is necessary to determine whether faculty should update their perception of the demand for spreadsheet skills on the current market. Faculty also perceived social networking skills to be less important than the other respondent groups did. Finally, while Oral Communication Skills were valued more highly than any other skill set, the rankings yielded a progression of perceptions such that students valued them less highly than professionals did, and professionals valued them less highly than faculty did.

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In the 1940s only nine four-year hospitality programs existed in the United States but since then that number has grown by leaps and bounds, from 45 in 1982 and 164 in 1992 (Rutherford, 1994) to more than 200 today as listed in the *I-CHRIE Guide to College Programs* (International CHRIE, 2010). This expansion has resulted in wide variations in program structures, curricular offerings, and course content, all of which have prompted researchers to examine essential competencies and industry needs to inform programmatic restructuring. Research has focused on identifying skill sets that should be taught to best prepare students for successful entry into the industry, assessing how well programs are aligning their graduation requirements with the standards demanded by future employers, and determining whether it is necessary to undertake a realignment of programs with these standards to ensure that

hospitality graduates are educated and trained to satisfy the needs and expectations of the industry.

In his seminal study, Tas (1988) listed a range of competencies that general managers of 75 U.S. hotels deemed important to the success of management trainees. Since then, hospitality researchers have continued to identify fundamental competencies and curricular needs perceived to be important by industry professionals in a variety of hospitality fields (Breiter and Clements, 1996; Christou, 2002; Chung-Herrera et al., 2003; Fjelstul, 2007; Pavesic, 1993; Reynolds, 2000; Umbreit, 1992, 1993; Wilson et al., 2000). Some of these skill sets apply across all areas of the industry and others are more discipline specific. In addition to identifying important competencies, researchers have also compared how students, educators, and industry professionals perceive such competencies in order to determine whether there is broad stakeholder agreement on the skills needed for various roles in the hospitality industry (e.g., Mayo and Thomas-Haysbert, 2005; Raybould and Wilkins, 2005; Sciarni et al., 1995).

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According to [Ninemeier \(2010\)](#), entry-level supervisors “generally use their technical skills more than any other managers” (p. 27). On-the-job technical skills range from letter writing, e-mailing, scheduling, and interacting with guests and employees to budgeting, forecasting, and strategic planning. Such technical skills in one format or another have been identified in numerous studies as important competencies desired by industry. Moreover, there is a wide range of how technical (i.e., hard skills) and soft skills are defined, often with some overlap. [Laker and Powell \(2011\)](#) defined technical skills as those skills that involve working with equipment, data, and software. Additionally, they defined soft skills as intrapersonal skills and how one handles interactions with others. [Weber et al. \(2013\)](#) describe soft skills as those related to human and interpersonal actions whereas hard skills are related to the technical and administrative aspects of operating a business. Extending this, social networking involves the ability to effectively manage web-sites and social media including Facebook, Twitter, Linked In, etc. While interacting on these sites may very well have an interpersonal component there is also technical function to administering them.

While there have been some recent studies in this area, a large concentration of hospitality program competency research was conducted in the early and mid-1990s. Therefore the purpose of this study was to determine how important various technical skill sets are perceived to be by hospitality students, faculty, and industry professionals today using Conjoint Analysis. The overarching goals is to form a better understanding of industry expectations, which will in turn lead to improvements in curricular design and ultimately better prepare students for entry-level management positions in the hospitality industry. Similarly, examining the similarities and gaps between the perceptions of faculty, industry, and students competencies can lead to improved curricular design. Such an inquiry is supported by [Wickramasinghe and Perera \(2010\)](#), for example, who identified curriculum revisions as the top most identified measure taken by universities to develop skills in students during their time as undergraduate students in their respective degree programs. Moreover, [Aistrich et al. \(2006\)](#) explored gaps in marketing education with a sample of corporate planners, managers, owners, manufacturers etc. In that study, the authors were examining how far removed educators were from real world issues, which impacts the relevancy of what is being taught. As hospitality programs continue to review and revise their core competencies, the information presented in our study could serve similarly as a useful reference.

This study is an extension of our initial study ([Ruetzler et al., 2011](#)) that examined interviewing attributes using conjoint analysis. From the initial study, questions about the perceptions of professional dress and job skills were incubated. Two studies followed the initial study, this one and another examining the perceptions of professional dress during the interview process ([Ruetzler et al., 2012](#)).

## 1. Literature review

The premise of the study is to better understand the perceived importance of technical skills for hospitality management students by students, faculty, and industry. The relevant literature can be categorized into two specific areas. First is the research that identifies desirable competencies that hospitality graduates possess as they begin their careers. The majority of this research is from the perspective of industry professionals in areas such as lodging, foodservice, and club management. The second area of literature includes studies that not only identify desired competencies but also compare perceptions of the importance of those competencies on the part of students, faculty, and industry professionals, which

was also the objective of this study. Building on these two areas, then, we identified seven key technical skills.

### 1.1. Grade point average

Although grade point average (GPA) is not a technical skill, for this study we used GPA as an indicator of student performance in a degree program, which may indicate in turn a student's success in acquiring the competencies demanded on the job market. Thus, although using GPA as a selection variable in the hiring process is controversial, it can serve as a performance evaluation tool similar to a job evaluation, which is important when an applicant has a limited work history ([Baker and McGregor, 2000](#); [Kuncel et al., 2004](#); [Posner, 1981](#); [Ruetzler et al., 2011](#)).

### 1.2. Social networking

Social networking encompasses blogs, video and photo sharing sites, message boards, and other online communities ([Hanna, 2008](#); [Sieburgh and Berkus, 2007](#)). Propelled by the rocketing success of sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, this is the hottest technological trend to hit the industry and all hospitality managers will need to master social networking and related marketing skills ([Sieburgh and Berkus, 2007](#)). Not only are these skills vital in reaching customers, they can also be used to increase productivity and reduce employee turnover through developing team loyalty among employees ([Bentley, 2008](#); [Ketter and Ellis, 2010](#)). Since most research on competencies was conducted in the early 1990s, however, social media skills have not been included in the desired skill sets. Most research on social media focuses on operational applications; therefore, we considered it important to include social media use as a technical competency in this study.

### 1.3. Time management skills

Personal management skills are associated with being productive and time management is a dimension of such skills ([Chung-Herrera et al., 2003](#)). Good time management skills have been described as including effective handling of multiple demands and priorities, managing time to ensure productivity, and spending time on the most important—not necessarily the most urgent—issues ([Chung-Herrera et al., 2003](#)). Of the seven leadership competencies identified by [Chung-Herrera et al. \(2003\)](#), time management, a dimension of self-management, was the leading competency desired by senior-level hotel managers. [Raybould and Wilkins \(2005, 2006\)](#) compared hotel managers' and hospitality students' perceptions of 52 skills as reflected in rankings that were clustered under a range of generic skills titles. Under the “self-management” skill group, time management skills were ranked seventh in importance by managers and second in importance by students. This was a narrower gap than was reported for many of the other traits, indicating that the perceptions of students and the industry professionals were in fairly close agreement.

### 1.4. Strategic planning skills

In hospitality management, strategic planning is critical to staying afloat in a competitive environment, a point that applies throughout an organization to senior managers, middle managers, and frontline employees. As a result, strategic planning skills are considered a necessity in a new hire ([Okumus and Wong, 2005, 2007](#); [Okumus et al., 2008](#)). [Chung-Herrera et al. \(2003\)](#) identified strategic positioning as the competency ranked second in importance by hotel managers in their study; the dimensions by which this factor was assessed included awareness of customer needs, commitment to quality, managing stakeholders, and concern for

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