



## Is it art or science? Chef's competencies for success

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### ABSTRACT

One of the most challenging professions in the hospitality industry, comprised of both scientific mastery and artistic innovation, is the Chef. It is imperative that these positions are occupied by individuals who possess the appropriate set of skills allowing them to perform with equal success in both culinary, as well as managerial competence. Thus, this research sets out to investigate, from “the Chef’s” perspective, competencies required for a successful career in the field as well as the level to which these competencies have been developed (acquired) on-the-job. A self-administered questionnaire consisting of 27 competency items was administered to Chef professionals working in Cyprus. The findings revealed that technical (culinary-specific) competencies were considered as most important, followed by leadership-management competencies. In contrast, conceptual (creative-adaptive) competencies were ranked low by the respondents. In addition, numerous significant differences were revealed based on demographics and other industry-related factors.

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### 1. Introduction

The quest for the ‘ideal’ employee has driven academic scholars to explore the essential competencies, knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs), required for a successful career in the hospitality industry (Tas, 1988; Baum, 1990; Knutson and Schmidgall, 2001; Agut and Grau, 2002; Christou, 2002; Kay and Moncarz, 2004; Raybould and Wilkins, 2005; Jauhari, 2006). The stream of research on successful management competencies has encompassed numerous competency frameworks and methodological techniques from which arrays of perspectives, mostly amongst hospitality managers, have been documented. While these foundational hospitality competency models can provide some broad insights as to the requirements needed for management success in the industry in general, job-specific KSAs require additional investigations into respective job classifications, such as that of the Chef.

It has been over a decade since Robert Wood, 1997 seminal opus “Working in Hotel and Catering” highlighted the fact that academic research into competencies needed for the profession of “Chef” was relatively unexplored, and despite the explosion of the celebrity Chef phenomenon, the KSAs required for success still remain relatively unknown (Birdir and Pearson, 2000; Kay and Moncarz, 2004). Indicative of this, is the fact that a thorough search on popular electronic databases (e.g. Emerald, ProQuest, etc.) of keywords, such as Chefs and competencies produced only one

study; that of Birdir and Pearson (2000) which encompassed both the science of management and the art of the culinary (gastronomy). Subsequently, many believe that the vocational characteristics which have become synonymous with the profession, have discouraged academic scholars from investigating its ‘uniqueness’, particularly the scientific aspect of identifying the required competencies for leading and managing culinary operations.

The Cyprus Chefs’ Association (CCA) – the study’s co-sponsor – seeing the need for such a scientific study, has called for an investigation in order to identify Chefs’ perceptions of the competencies necessary for a successful career in the industry, as well as the level to which these competencies have been developed within the working environment. The observation, that additional competency-related research in the area of food service operations has been identified and affirmed by Birdir and Pearson (2000) and Kay and Moncarz (2004). Thus, the purpose of this study is to contribute to the existing body of knowledge comprising the current foundational hospitality KSAs by investigating the complexities surrounding the Chef’s profession. Such research has practical implications for both academia and industry stakeholders, as well as providing a font of information for culinary students as they pursue their successful career paths.

### 2. Review of the literature

The topic of competencies and the development of relevant models for the hospitality industry gained attention during the 1980s. Espousing the belief that employees are the most valuable assets, scholars have explored the requirements needed to perform

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successfully in a hospitality organization. These requirements include, among others, the words competencies, characteristics, capabilities, attributes, capacity, skills, abilities, behaviors and recently talents (Katz, 1955; Boyatzis, 1982; Tas, 1988; Dingle, 1995; Perdue et al., 2001a,b). In simple terms, and for the purposes of this study, competencies are defined as the personal qualities and talents needed to do a pre-described job effectively and efficiently according to established quantifiable organizational standards able to meet specific goals.

Despite the plethora of competency-related studies investigating the hospitality industry, there appears to be an inconsistency as to the methodologies utilized, the competencies under consideration and the actual competencies revealed as most and least important (see for example, Okeiyi et al., 1994; Tas et al., 1996; Birdir and Pearson, 2000; Kay and Russette, 2000; Perdue et al., 2001a,b; Chung-Herrera et al., 2003). The majority of these studies examined only the perceived level of importance attributed to particular competencies, without measuring actual competency levels, and the degree to which these have been developed in the working environment, either through training or experientially. Notably, scholars were not able to develop a statistically rigorous competency model able to reflect the uniqueness of the hospitality professions and thus provide industry stakeholders with the tools needed for enhancing the effectiveness of their human resources development practices.

### 2.1. Competency frameworks

Numerous theoretical frameworks were utilized by scholars in their attempt to further investigate this topic. Sandwith (1993) seminal work, the competency domain model, an extension of Katz' (1955) three-category managerial competency model, took the center stage in numerous hospitality related studies (Okeiyi et al., 1994; Tas et al., 1996; Kay and Russette, 2000). The model separates competencies into five distinctive domains: conceptual-creative, leadership, interpersonal, administrative and technical. Sandwith (1993, pp. 46–50) provides the following definitions for the five competency categories:

<i>Conceptual-creative:</i>	Cognitive skills associated with comprehending important elements of the job and creative thought.
<i>Leadership:</i>	Ability to turn ideas into productive action.
<i>Interpersonal:</i>	Skills for effective interaction with others.
<i>Administrative:</i>	Personnel and financial aspects of organizational life.
<i>Technical:</i>	Knowledge and skills associated with the actual work.

Meanwhile, Umbreit (1992) proposed six major competency areas essential for hospitality graduates; leadership, human resource management, marketing, financial analysis, total quality management and communication skills. Sparrow and Hiltrop (1994) suggested that competencies fall into three categories, behavioral, managerial, and core, Nordhaug (1998) proposed a different three-level classification comprised of task-specific, firm-specific, and industry-specific, while Agut et al. (2003) examined managerial competencies within two distinct categories; technical and generic. The same authors separated the generic managerial competencies into three distinctive categories; job performance efficacy, self control and social relationships and proactive behavior (Agut et al., 2003, p. 286). Finally, Dimmock et al. (2003) utilized the Competing Values Framework (CVF) propounded by Quinn et al. (2003), in exploring the perceptions of tourism and hospitality students' competency development.

### 2.2. Competency studies and hospitality professions

In early competency studies, Mariampolski et al. (1980) suggested that technical and human skills are more important to entry-level foodservice managers compared to conceptual skills, while Buergermeister (1983) argued that while technical skills are important, human relations and conceptual management skills are essential for hospitality managers upon graduation. Tas (1988) developed a set of competencies essential for hospitality management trainees based on the perceptions of 75 hotel managers working in the United States. From the original list of 70 competencies, 36 were included in a quantitative questionnaire addressed to hotel managers. According to their composite mean of importance, competencies were separated into three categories; essential, of considerable importance and of moderate importance. Managing guest problems with understanding and sensitivity, maintaining professional and ethical standards in the work environment, professional appearance and poise, effective communications, the development of positive customer relations and the development of a positive working relation were considered as essential, and thus most important, by the study's participants (p. 42). Tas' work instigated numerous other studies (Okeiyi et al., 1994; Tas et al., 1996; Kay and Russette, 2000); all of which aimed to clarify competencies needed for success in the hospitality industry.

Siu (1998) study explored the managerial competencies essential for middle managers working in Hong Kong's hotel industry with the utilization of an eleven competency cluster model which included leadership, communication, team building, team membership, results orientation, personal drive, planning, efficiency, commercial concern, decision making and customer concern (p. 259). Communication, customer concerns and leadership surfaced as three of the most important competencies. Moreover, Raybould and Wilkins (2005), adopting the generic skills framework, which includes traits relevant to the nine skill areas of oral communication, written communication, problem solving, conceptual and analytical, information management, teamwork and leadership, interpersonal, adaptability and learning, and self-management, suggested that hospitality managers in Australia attribute more importance to interpersonal, problem solving, and self-management traits.

Kay and Moncarz (2004) investigated the knowledge perceived as important for success in the managerial level of the hospitality industry with the actual competencies leading to success. The authors identified a gap between the two, suggesting that while the study's respondents attribute more importance to human resources management issues, findings indicate that financial management competencies are a stronger indicator of career success. The study reaffirms similar findings by Chung-Herrera et al. (2003), of the increased importance attributed to generic management competencies such as marketing and financial management.

### 2.3. Competencies and Chefs

Only a handful of studies have investigated competencies relevant to food and beverage professions in general, and Chefs' competencies in particular. Okeiyi et al. (1994), with a partial utilization of Tas' (1988) framework, investigated the importance of food and beverage related competencies by interviewing all stakeholders involved; namely industry professionals, educators and students. The study revealed a strong agreement between the three stakeholders with regard to the attributed level of importance of 35 competencies. Human relations, cost controls, leadership skills and supervision, verbal, non-verbal and written communication and customer relations were revealed as the most

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