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Soft Skills Imperatives for Human Resource Development in Tourism Industry

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Abstract

Objective: The study is focussed on analyzing the soft skills training effectiveness on post graduate tourism professionals at a University in Punjab.

Method and statistical analysis: A pre and post test descriptive research design was employed to evaluate the four month training efficacy on the graduates' ability to develop soft skills necessary for professional success. The graduates were administered a self assessment questionnaire on 8 essential soft skills by an industry experienced soft skills trainer pre and post the training. A Paired-Samples *t*-testwith Cohn's *d* was used for analysing the data.

Findings:Results indicated that the training module significantly improved soft skills of the graduates. On an open-ended question studentsgave insightful perspectives on improving soft skills delivery mechanism that can be adopted by academia to make graduatesemployable.

Application/Improvements:Tourism is founded on the capability of its human resources to create brand value for a destination through customer satisfaction. The training and development of effective Human Resources for tourism industry commences with professional education. Soft Skills arecornerstones of a tourism professional, forming the relationship-building, interpersonal skills that assist to provide a memorable experience to the consumer.

Keywords: SoftSkills Training, Communication and Interpersonal Skills

Introduction

Tourism refers to the activities of visiting or travelling to a destination that exceeds fifty miles from the residence for no more than a year due to recreational purposes or fulfilling other non-formal agendas(Melanie, 2009). According to the World Travel Organization, the word ‘tour’ also refers to activities related to touring services. Activities of tourism have become a popular interest worldwide with the tourism industry becoming one of the main sources of foreign exchange, in effect generating high income for a country.

India has always lived by the mantra of ‘Atithi Devo Bhavah’. The travel and tourism industry contributed a total of 208.9 billion U.S. dollars to GDP in India in 2016 – this accounted for approximately 9.6 percent of India’s total GDP. India had the second highest total tourism GDP contribution in Asia- Pacific, behind China in 2016. India's contribution was more than double that of Thailand which had the third largest travel and tourism contribution. The industry also has a substantial effect on employment in India. In 2016, the sector directly provided more than 25.4 million jobs. (Statistica, 2018)

Tourist inflow could definitely increase further if the negative propaganda of fraud, cheating, burglary and molestation aspects of our behaviour that scare tourists off are curbed and they are assured of their safety. The challenges for tourism destinations are attitude and the motivational process of attitude change, reflected in communication and individual behaviour (Kelman, 1958). The answer to these grievances is soft skills. People in the tourism and hospitality industry are primary and most lasting interface with the tourist. The need of the hour is for professionals in travel and tourism industry to fine hone their soft skills to communicate a more positive image of the destination to rest of the world.

Tourism organizations seek human resources with skills to create a sustainable advantage by leveraging customer satisfaction and delight. Life skills make development of soft skills possible, much required to deal with challenges of work life (Papachrisis et al., 2005). Bolton (1986) in ‘*People Skills*’, says 80% individuals who do not succeed at work, is not because of a lack of technical skills but due to their inability to manage interpersonal relations. Today’s challenging work situation means new graduates not only need academic knowledge; but also require gaining ‘soft skills’ which increase their prospects of employment (Fallows and Steven, 2000).

Review of Literature

According to the Department of Tourism, Leisure, Hotel and Sport Management, United Kingdom, in 2015, “The workplace demands skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, maintaining professional and ethical standards, and leadership”. A Survey result found “55% employees lacked customer handling skills, 53% lacked organization skills, 51% lacked oral communication skills and 44% lacked teamwork skills.”

Higher Education Institutions (HEI) need to strengthen the education and training programs at the educational level to provide industry ready professionals who can make valuable addition to the business bottom line by their capability in using soft skills (Serby, 2003). Soft skills have become obligatory as they assist to leverage competitive markets, latest technology, globalization, diverse human resources and consequently differentiate best from the rest (Vijayalakshmi, 2016).

Soft skills then are the career building blocks and can be defined as interpersonal, human, people or behavioural skills necessary for applying technical knowledge in the workplace (Rainsbury et al., 2002). Soft skills acquirement is accepted to form positive interactions interpersonal relations, managing emotions and feelings, taking initiative and thinking critically and creatively while working in the service industry (Ilangko, 2013). These skills assist a person in working with others, retaining an optimistic outlook under stress conditions, effectively solving personal or occupational crisis and communicating positively in interpersonal situations (Brauns, 2013). In fact, hard skills may obtain an interview but soft skills are necessary for keeping the job (Aworanti, 2012).

‘Soft skills’ are defined by the personal attributes and competencies that enhance an individual's interactions, job performance and career prospects (Amanda, 2014). They are often used to describe the acquired skills that characterize relationships with other people, are about how to approach life and work making a person unique. These are personal and interpersonal skills needed to complement professional skills and expertise and eventually become an essential part of an individual’s personality (Khasanzyanova, 2017). Thus, soft skills can be termed as “how you use it” (Hunt, 2007). Soft skills are a requisite in all occupations, not like the specific discipline skills of a line of work (Robinson, 2006).

As travel and tourism is a field associated more about working with people, interacting with tourists from around the globe, a lucrative careerintourism industry will require to master the

qualities of empathy, time management, problem-solving, communication, team-work, planning and coordination, multi-tasking, positive attitude and working under pressure (Wesley et al., 2017). Developing these skills enable students to face real working conditions with ease and expertise. It allows them to portray proficiency and enhance their personality to benefit this industry. Hence, it is essential for students to understand the significance of building these skills.

The objective of the study is focussed on analyzing the soft skills training effectiveness of post graduate tourism professionals at a University in Punjab. Stemming from the research objective the following hypothesis was framed for the study:

H_a : There is a significant effect of training on the soft skills capability of post graduate tourism graduates.

H_o : There is no effect of training on the soft skills capability of post graduate tourism graduates.

Research Methodology

A pre and post training descriptive research design was employed to evaluate the efficacy of four month training on the tourism graduates' ability to develop soft skills necessary for professional success. The entire group of 42 post-graduates were administered a self assessment questionnaire consisting of closed-ended questions on 8 essential soft skills (pre-test) by an industry experienced soft skills trainer, before the training, to self assess their confidence level of skills ability on a 5 point scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means "Not confident at all" and 5 means "Very Confident." An open-ended question on suggestions to improve the soft skills training curriculum and delivery mechanism was added in the post training questionnaire. The graduates were trained for 10 hours on each module incorporating presentations, role plays, live demonstrations and activities, videos, case studies, expert talk etc. targeted to inculcate the following skills: Emotional Intelligence, Customer Handling Skills, Professionalism, Planning & Organizing Skills, Communication & Interpersonal Skills, Teamwork Skills, Leadership Skills and Critical Thinking & Problem Solving Skills. After completion of each module a test in the form of an activity was taken to measure the outcome of the module. At the end of the training the students were provided the same questionnaire with instructions to self evaluate their skills (post test). The questionnaires were coded and analysed to measure the effectiveness of the soft skills training through mean, standard deviation, paired sample *t*-test and the effect size measured to Cohn's *d*.

Analysis and Interpretation

The graduates' confidence in soft skills ability pre-test mean [Mean(b)] and post-test [Mean(a)] were analyzed. Depicted in Table 1 are the mean scores as Emotional Intelligence ($M_b=3.83$, $M_a=4.07$), Customer Handling Skills ($M_b=3.64$, $M_a=4.10$), Professionalism ($M_b=3.40$, $M_a=4.29$), Planning & Organizing Skills ($M_b=3.98$, $M_a=4.21$), Communication & Interpersonal Skills ($M_b=3.26$, $M_a=4.02$), Teamwork Skills ($M_b=3.57$, $M_a=4.24$), Leadership Skills ($M_b=3.40$, $M_a=4.19$) and Critical Thinking & Problem Solving Skills ($M_b=3.33$, $M_a=4.12$). Figure 1 also shows the pre training and post training mean scores for each skill.

Findings indicated an increase in mean scores after the four month soft skills training for all the skills. Significant mean difference was found for Customer Handling Skills ($p=.003<.05$), Professionalism ($p=.000<.05$), Communication & Interpersonal Skills ($p=.000<.05$), Teamwork Skills ($p=.000<.05$), Leadership Skills ($p=.000<.05$) and Critical Thinking & Problem Solving Skills ($p=.000<.05$) as depicted in Table 2.

The research hypothesis tested using the Paired Sample *t*-test is accepted for all these skills except for Emotional Intelligence ($p=.124>.05$) and Planning & Organizing Skills ($p=.086>.05$) indicating significant learning of soft skills due to the training. Emotional Intelligence is an attribute and being an inherent quality, up-skilling may take a longer time and an inner motive to work on improving it. For Planning & Organizing Skills graduates had already rated it higher in the pre training indicating adeptness in the skill.

However, comparing mean scores or simply accepting the alternate hypothesis does not depict how important the effect is, the skills improvement was ascertained using the effect size test with Cohn's *d* value. Based on Table 2 the effect size is larger than typical for Communication & Interpersonal Skills ($d=0.85$), medium for Professionalism ($d=0.73$), Teamwork Skills ($d=0.72$), Leadership Skills ($d=0.67$), Critical Thinking & Problem Solving Skills ($d=0.62$) and small for Customer Handling Skills ($d=0.48$), Emotional Intelligence ($d=0.24$) and Planning & Organizing Skills ($d=0.27$). Results revealed that graduates had improved and upgraded soft skills because of the training. They became better groomed and highly professional showing more confidence in communication and interpersonal skills.

Conclusions

The soft skills training imparted to graduates go a long way in making the students professional for the service industry. Academia need to necessarily inculcate soft skills with

the academic skills to make the graduates suitable for the tourism industry. Some suggestions put forth by graduates to improve the delivery mechanism of soft skills are:

1. Organize an 'Employability Week' in the second semester of the Masters Programme for soft skills workshops, career advice through guest lectures, employer input on skills they look for in potential recruits, professional resume writing workshop, portfolio building tips, mock interviews and skills assessment test etc.
2. Institutions should collaborate with professional bodies such as National Tourism Organization, World Travel Organization etc. to identify industry requirement, provide professional certifications, memberships and accreditations.
3. Create a 'Career Mentoring Centre' for providing career associated services in campus, focused on career counselling, soft skills training, organizing job fairs, making available information on conferences and career fairs etc.
4. Arrange expert talks for increased industry participation, listen to alumni speakers, expert lectures from distinguished academicians, entrepreneur experiences etc.
5. Arrange internships, on-the-job training with reputed companies for quality experiential learning.

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Figure 1: Pre training and Post Training Mean Scores for Soft Skills

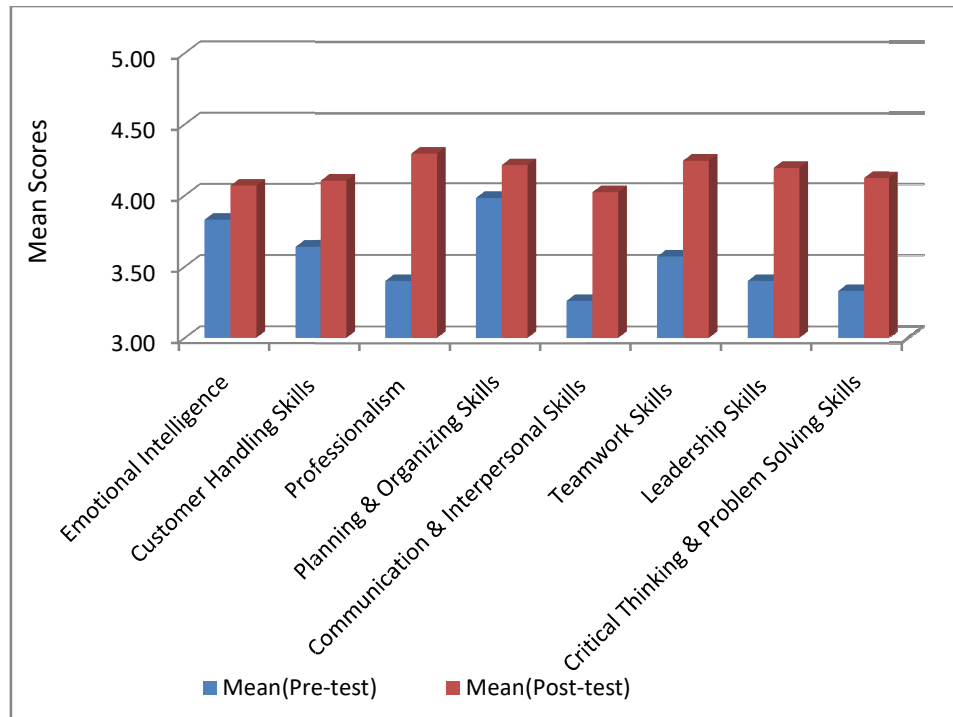


Table 1: Descriptive Analysis of Soft Skills Before and After Training

Std. Deviation	Mean(b)	Soft Skills	Mean(a)	Std. Deviation
.73	3.83	Emotional Intelligence	4.07	.81
.79	3.64	Customer Handling Skills	4.10	.73
1.01	3.40	Professionalism	4.29	.55
.75	3.98	Planning & Organizing Skills	4.21	.81
1.13	3.26	Communication & Interpersonal Skills	4.02	.68
.94	3.57	Teamwork Skills	4.24	.73
1.01	3.40	Leadership Skills	4.19	.77
.98	3.33	Critical Thinking & Problem Solving Skills	4.12	.83

Table 2: Paired Sample *t*-test with Cohn's *d* for Soft Skills

Soft Skills	Mean	Std. Deviation	df	<i>t</i>	Sig. *	Effect Size** (<i>d</i>)
Emotional Intelligence	.238	.983	41	1.570	.124	0.24
Customer Handling Skills	.452	.942	41	3.111	.003	0.48
Professionalism	.881	1.214	41	4.704	.000	0.73
Planning & Organizing Skills	.238	.878	41	1.757	.086	0.27
Communication & Interpersonal Skills	.929	1.091	41	5.517	.000	0.85
Teamwork Skills	.667	.928	41	4.654	.000	0.72
Leadership Skills	.786	1.180	41	4.316	.000	0.67
Critical Thinking & Problem Solving Skills	.786	1.260	41	4.042	.000	0.62

Significant level

*Statistical significance at ($\alpha 0.05 \geq$)

** $d \geq 1.00$; Much larger than typical

> .80; Larger or larger than typical

> .50; Medium or typical

> .20; Small or smaller than typical