SOFT SKILLS FOR THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY: PERSPECTIVES OF INDUSTRY RECRUITERS

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science
In
Hospitality Management

By
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2020
SIGNATURE PAGE

PROJECT: SOFT SKILLS FOR THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY: PERSPECTIVES OF INDUSTRY RECRUITERS

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DATE SUBMITTED: Fall 2020

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my project committee for all their guidance and encouragement throughout this culminating project and my MSHM education. Thank you, Dr. Margie Ferree Jones, for keeping me on track, motivated and telling me like it is. I appreciate you always reminding me of the big picture and a little bit each day goes a long way! Thank you, Dr. Kwok and Dr. Min, for your collaborative efforts and input.

I would like to express the sincerest gratitude to my family and friends who have been there with me throughout this journey, providing motivation and support during this endeavor. Thank you, Krystle, and Kevan Jr. for your understanding, when I wanted to be present and in attendance but needed to study instead.

A special thank you to Ann Lara for assisting me in solicitation of respondents for this project. Your assistance was key to the success of this project before it even began. The utmost appreciation to the respondents of this project, who donated their time to interview with me and provided honest answers and feedback to my questions. Without your participation this project would not have been able to come to fruition.

Last but not least, I would like to thank California State Polytechnic University-Pomona and The Collins College of Hospitality Management for providing opportunities to grow in my education and experiences I will take with me everywhere I go.
ABSTRACT

Hospitality industry recruiters visit hospitality programs in search of candidates who can demonstrate technical acumen in service management and data analytics; however, it is reported that employers are prioritizing candidates who can demonstrate proficiency with soft skills. Soft skills include non-technical aspects that are essential when working with a guest or as part of a team — collaboration, communication, time management, adaptability and flexibility, and critical thinking. A series of semi-structured, in-depth interviews were completed with hospitality recruiters from various segments within the industry. Hospitality recruiters were asked first to prioritize which soft skills were key in selecting entry-level management candidates and then elaborate on how those skills were assessed. Recruiters were also asked to share how their assessment of a candidate’s soft skills affected their hiring decisions. Findings revealed that hospitality recruiters prioritize communication, leadership and team-oriented during the hiring process. Proficiency in written, verbal and nonverbal communication was considered non-negotiable in hiring decisions. Candidates’ leadership potential was predicted given their ability to share lessons learned when previously leading a group, while teamwork was predicted with situational or open-ended questions relying on candidates’ intentions as an indicator of their future behavior.

Perhaps somewhat surprising, given the context of the hospitality industry, were findings that kindness, composure and being proactive were less important than demonstrating passion, proper grooming and self-drive. Implications from this study suggest candidates need to devote significant time and effort to practice answering behavioral, situational and open-ended questions and to develop answers with specific examples. Hospitality curriculums should afford students opportunities to make oral presentations with an emphasis on platform skills. Written assignments should target problem solving as well as communicating effectively with industry professionals. Group projects are key in leadership and teamwork development.

Keywords: soft skills, emotional intelligence, hospitality industry, recruiting, hiring decisions, employability
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INTRODUCTION

In today’s ever-changing work environment, soft skills are no longer considered desired skills that are an added bonus if someone possesses them but rather required skills that one must have to even be considered for entry-level management opportunities. To be an effective leader requires navigating relational interactions to garner followers’ support, attention and cooperation. This cannot be achieved without the leader possessing some soft skills traits (Ibrahim, R., 2017). Many employers today would even suggest soft skills have a higher relevance and are more important than process-specific hard skills (Bolli, T., 2015). Attaalla (2017) explains desired skills are changing from a mainly technical basis to skills that are more personal. Additionally, competencies associated with emotions and aesthetics are increasingly desired. “Soft skills are no longer an enhancement to your candidacy because they are now core to your candidacy, and the path to the future of work” (Graham, 2020). Professionals entrusted with the task to mobilize the future leaders of the hospitality industry must have a clear understanding of the soft skills required for success within their organization. Recruiters hold the keys to assess various potential candidates and play a vital role to ultimately hire the best fit for the given opportunity.

Although, possession of soft skills is important in various economic entities, the hospitality industry requires a different skill set from other industries such as manufacturing, tech, medicine or engineering. The hospitality industry is heterogenous in nature, making it challenging for an organization to standardize quality of service. The product itself is service, it’s provided by people and no two people are alike. Perishability of the industry means today’s service cannot be saved and stored for tomorrow. Service is inseparable from the consumer exposed to the service at that point. Lastly, service is
intangible, making it more difficult to measure and meet guests’ expectations (Kátay, Á., 2015). “The extended time employees spend with guests allows them to become more deeply acquainted with them, a factor which does not exist in many other service sectors. The hospitality industry is one that relies heavily upon quality human interactions, there is a vital need to truly understand and comprehend the customers” (Pizam, A., 2009). Understanding personalities and preferences of guests has become an increased focal point. Thus, to possess soft skills and the emotional intelligence to use those skills has become an increased area of importance for sustained success and a competitive advantage.

While tangible attributes like visually appealing facilities and ambiance play a role in guest satisfaction. Intangible factors like empathetic and competent staff are equally if not greater predictors of guest satisfaction (Marković, S., 2013). Understanding and delivering on the intangibles goes beyond mastering hard skills and the technical aspects of the job. For intangibles to be highlighted, certain soft skills are necessary. Employees’ interpersonal skills, courtesy, competence, ability to deliver the promised service and their willingness and skillfulness to solve guests’ complaints are highly considered by guests when analyzing satisfaction (Marković, S., 2013).

Working in the hospitality industry, employees are often required to perform and demonstrate certain behaviors regardless of their real feelings. The result of concealing one’s real feelings creates an environment of emotional labor. Employees have to act with expressive responsibility, avoid unmeant gestures and manage “face” and “voice” appropriately when “on-stage” (Golubovskaya, M., 2017). Considered a type of social science, emotional intelligence is described as when a person can recognize not just their
own feelings and emotions but also the feelings and emotions of others. Then use that
information gained from deciphering those feelings and emotions to guide one’s thinking
and actions (Tan, J., 2019). Both soft skills and emotional intelligence are associated with
interpersonal and intrapersonal factors and relationships. Evaluation of one’s emotional
intelligence may show if one possesses desired soft skills for success.

The objective of the study was to gain insights into the hospitality recruiting
process. Soft skill proficiency is essential for success in the hospitality industry, the
intention is to assist students with knowledge, and development of the most desired soft
skills for industry success. Knowledge of the most current soft skills desired is important
to remain relevant in today’s work environment. Dhiman (2012) explains the hospitality
industry is one that is ever-changing and thus the skills developed by those entering the
work force, must also change. This study answers the following questions: 1) Which soft
skills do hospitality recruiters consider most important for entry-level management
positions? 2) How are soft skills assessed throughout the recruiting process? 3) How does
the assessment of a candidate’s soft skills affect hiring decisions? Findings will be shared
with students, recent graduates, industry professionals and academic institutions so they
may aid in preparing the future hospitality work force with the most desired skills. Majid
(2019) concludes that one of the best ways to create a work force with the soft skills
desired by the industry is to create a shared responsibility between employers and
academic institutions.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Hard Skills

Hard skills differ from soft skills in many ways. Hard skills are those attached to the role of a specific job, such as knowing how to check someone into a reservation, using the phone systems or driving a manual transmission. Hard skills are technical, tangible and easily measurable competencies (Stewart, C., 2016). “At the initial stage of employment, emphasis should be placed on whether or not new employees are achieving competency and fulfilling their job’s technical responsibilities.” (Lee, P., 2016). Hard skills are considered required on a need-to-know basis (Laker, D., 2011). Hard skills are acquired from one’s knowledge, and developed through practice and aptitude (Bolli, T., 2015). Bolli (2015) further explains hard skills are easily measured by assessing process-specific skills. One can perform the basic functions of their job with just knowledge of required hard skills, but one needs complimentary soft skills that relate to the technical tasks. To excel in service-related positions hard skills rely upon soft skills for enhancement (Matteson, M., 2016). While hard skills are skills a person must know and are able to do to complete a task successfully. Soft skills on the other hand, are those related to how a person must behave to complete a task successfully (Lou, N. M. 2019).

Soft Skills

Employees are essential, “no computerized system will ever be successful without a range of skilled personnel who are involved in the process” (Yadegaridehkordi, E., 2018). Soft skills are human factors, that when used properly, assist in creating and maintaining a competitive advantage for an organization. Soft skills are associated with
behavioral aspects of performing tasks. The performance of an organization is highly dependent upon the personality traits of its employees working for them (Thakre, T.A., 2018). These skills are not just desired but also necessary in the hospitality industry (Adhvaryu, A., 2018). Bailey (2013) suggest this is nothing new, reporting skills labeled as soft have always been desired characteristics by employers, especially those of the service industry. Bailey (2013) goes on to define such skills and characteristics as “social and interpersonal skills (being able to communicate), emotional skills (empathy) and behavioral attitudes (a sense of service, involvement, initiative-taking), as well as certain physical and psychological qualities (good appearance, personality).” Bailey (2013) ideas of soft skills suggests they are linked to understanding the emotions of self and others and being able to communicate those emotions appropriately.

Compared to hard skills, soft skills are less technical and not tangible. Therefore, they are not as easily measured or defined. Several studies have provided some lists of what soft skills characteristics are. Common soft skills listed are communication, teamwork, ethics, leadership and relationship management. Employees themselves list: serving customers properly, working with diverse groups, responsibility, sociability, and self-management as the top five important soft skills (Wolf, K., 2014). Jaykumar (2019) adds important soft skills within the hospitality industry are, communication, work ethic, professionalism and self-management, interpersonal skills and customer service and critical and analytical thinking. Oral and written communication, teamwork, decision-making, problem solving/critical thinking, ethical judgment, social awareness, leadership, time and stress management, creativity and willingness to learn are considered to be soft skills (Martin, T. N., 2019). Current students have ranked themselves as prepared in key
soft skills like communication, critical thinking and teamwork but some industry professionals believe otherwise (Martin, T. N., 2019). Soft skills are sometimes referred to as generic, cognitive, and behavioral skills. The terms portable, people or transferable skills are also associated with soft skills. They include communication, teamwork, initiative, working under pressure and independently, presentation skills and social understanding (Yao, C. W., 2019).

Interactive approaches to learning and extra-curricular activities relevant to interpersonal skills can help develop soft skills. Furthermore, the opportunity to communicate with faculty and classmates from various international backgrounds helps with confidence and cultural understanding (Yao, C. W., 2019). Group work and presentations help prepare students with the skills of communication, teamwork, organization, trustworthiness and reliability. While work experience helps build confidence and development of those same skills (McMurray, S., 2016). The adaptability to change, quality service attitude, and computer and telecommunication skills are hospitality-specific competencies (Oktadiana, H., 2017). Several top ten essential hospitality subject areas according to hospitality professionals are related to soft skills, such as, leadership, preparation for employment and ethics. Ethics has been described as one of the most important work-related competencies for the hospitality industry, along with self-management and time-management (Min, H., 2016). But are all soft skills considered equal across all areas of hospitality? Min (2016) highlights one set of competencies might be indispensable in one facet of the industry but perhaps not equally as important in another segment. To gain an understanding of essential competencies for
the industry, in this case soft skills, one must investigate a broad yet common range of 
competencies that apply to the industry as a whole.

**Emotional Intelligence**

Soft skills are considered the sociological term used to describe one’s emotional 
intelligence quotient (EQ), consisting of communication, language, and friendliness, that 
make up relationships with others (Ibrahim, R., 2017). Another definition of emotional 
intelligence is “the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to 
assist thoughts, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively 
regulate emotions” (Lee, J., 2015). As previously highlighted by Baily (2013), emotional 
skills are a component of soft skills, empathy as an example. Emotional intelligence is the 
knowledge of knowing when to utilize certain soft skills. In other words, one must not 
only possess the soft skill of empathy but also the emotional intelligence of when to 
evoke that skill to generate emotions in others. Lee (2015) highlights emotional 
intelligence consists of the following four dimensions: emotional perception – the ability 
to accurately perceive, recognize, and express emotions in one’s self and others; 
emotional facilitation – the ability to generate emotions to facilitate and prioritize 
thoughts; emotional understanding – the ability to comprehend complex emotions and to 
distinguish complicated interrelationships among emotions; and emotional management – 
ability to regulate and alter emotions in self and others in a desired direction. Emotional 
intelligence is a characteristic frequently mentioned on lists of desired employability 
skills. A list that also includes several soft skills like, communication, teamwork, work 
ethic and critical thinking (Bhagra, A., 2018). Having emotional intelligence is equally 
important as possessing soft skills. The higher one’s emotional intelligence, the better
they can manage interpersonal interactions to control exchanges and encounters between guests and employee. It’s been argued, like soft skills, emotional intelligence matters twice as much as technical and analytical skills and in fact, EQ stimulates IQ (Charoensap-Kelly, P., 2016). The mixed EI model understands emotional intelligence as a blend of abilities, personality-like traits, and skills. The mixed EI model allows for personality traits to be measured (Kim, T., 2012). Kim (2012) adds the mixed EI model’s most popular measures are the Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i), Swinburne University EI Test (SUEIT), Trait EI Questionnaire (TEIQue), and Wong and Law EI Scale (WLEIS). Such tests can be used throughout the recruiting process and play a role in the decision to hire candidates with a high emotional intelligence.

**Assessment**

Unlike hard skills, which are measured by a person’s aptitude to perform a task. Soderquist (2010) explains soft skill competencies are more difficult to objectively measure and thus operate with performance expectations instead of standards. Soderquist (2010) also provides the following soft skill competencies as critical for success, interpersonal relationships, openness, trust, approachability and discipline and cohesion. By guests, soft skills are assessed by a person’s behaviors while performing a task. Behavioral attributes refer to one’s personal characteristics such as principles, attitudes, values and motives. Additionally, they involve personal skills, interpersonal skills, and organizational skills (Lou, N. M. 2019). To distinguish similar and like-skilled candidates, it’s suggested to utilize highly structured interviews. Structured interviews help offer resistance against demographic similarity effects (McCarthy, J. M. 2010).
McCarthy (2010) explains behavioral based questions ask candidates to draw from past experiences or situations that are relevant. Behavioral questions are used to measure skills such as teamwork, adaptability, leadership, integrity, composure and oral communication skills. The questions should be answered with actual events, therefore it’s harder for a candidate to respond with something untrue. Behavioral based questions make it more difficult for a candidate to generate a response they believe the interviewer wants to hear (Choi, S. L. 2014). By identifying job-related experiences, behaviors, knowledge, skills and abilities, behavioral based questions create a more rounded picture of a candidate because responses are drawn from areas outside of work like hobbies, home or other extracurricular activities (Choi, S. L. 2014). Rasipuram (2018) provides some examples of behavioral based questions: “Do you judge people on their appearance?”, “How do you handle change?”. These and similar questions ask a person to draw a response from their past experiences (Rasipuram, S. 2018). From these responses the interviewer can hopefully draw inferences to how the candidate will behave in the future.

Based on goal-setting theory, situational based questions rely on the assumption that what a person says they intend to do, predicts their actual behavior. Interviews utilizing situational based questions have emerged as one of the most popular interview formats (Ingold, P. V. 2015). Situational based questions are hypothetical dilemmas that commonly occur for a given position. The candidate is asked to explain what they would do when faced with a particular situation. Situational based questions help identify the candidates’ skills in teamwork, adaptability, leadership, judgment, integrity, analytical skills, and composure (McCarthy, J. M. 2010). Kluemper (2015) adds, situational based
questions are found to help identify skills such as leadership, persuasiveness, thoroughness, and oral communication. With situational based questions, it’s expected hypothetically, the candidate will handle the given situation the way they answered in the interview. Although, a candidate may respond in a way that does not reflect their true behavior (Choi, S. L. 2014). Situational questions help capture a persons’ intentions; the action they would most likely take in a given situation is predicted by asking a question about a situation that is similar to one that would take place on the job (Oostrom, J. K. 2016). Oostrom (2016) further explains, in most cases, the hypothetical situation presented during the interview is new to the interviewee, thus forcing them to state their intentions. Additionally, the interviewee is forced to form specific ideas about what they would do in the situation that is presented. Kluemper (2015) presents the following as examples for situational based questions: 1) “Imagine you were working with a fellow worker whom you knew greatly disliked performing a particular job task. You were in a situation where you needed this task completed, and this employee was the only one available to assist you. What would you do to motivate the employee to perform this task?”. 2) “Imagine being in a situation with both a co-worker and a client in which the client is being unreasonable. Your co-worker appears frustrated and begins to make comments that may be construed as sarcastic and offensive. How do you handle this situation?”. 3) “Suppose you are working on an important report and become increasingly uncertain whether or not you will complete the project by the stated deadline set for you by your supervisor. How would you deal with this situation?”. Open-ended questions allow the interviewee to respond with anything from a list of items, to lengthy narratives about a topic or inquiry (Weller, S. C. 2018). Summarizing
responses is a noted challenge. This is attributed to open-ended questions allowing interviewees to contribute as much detailed information as they desire and an opportunity for interviewers to ask probing questions (Turner, D. W. 2010). Open-ended questions produce more broad responses but allow the interviewee to respond in their own words (Baer, R. D. 2014). However, the goal is to obtain the most relevant information, themes and ideas. Open-ended questions are used in combination with behavioral, situational and other questions or alone (Weller, S. C. 2018). Examples of open-ended questions are, “why are you interested in this position?”, “why did you leave your previous position?”, or “what do you consider your biggest strengths and weaknesses?” (“21 Tough Open-Ended Questions (and How to Answer Them),” 2019).

**Decision to Hire**

Employability is the fundamental knowledge, skills and attitudes that employees must have to be successful in their field (Yang, H., 2015). Four factors that make up employability are basic knowledge, skills and attitudes, application and presentation of knowledge, and context of employment (Kim, J., 2011). To be successful in the hospitality industry, one must have a capacity of innovation, master flexible working methods and adapt to sudden changes in the work environment (Wang, Y., 2013). According to Ali (2017), important skills for success in the hospitality industry include communication, self-management, critical thinking, interpersonal skills, teamwork, leadership, strategic positioning and industry knowledge. The skills to navigate the range of emotions that come with the instability of the industry become vitally important. In an environment where so many factors are dependent upon people’s emotions, success lies with those who can utilize the proper softs skills and at the right time. Using the Factors
Influencing Hospitality Recruiters’ Hiring Decisions (FIHRHD) model, the main criteria considered by recruiters is student characteristics (Kwok, L., 2011). Intellectual skills, extra – curricular activities, job pursuit intention, and person-fit are mentioned as student characteristics within the FIHRHD model. The student characteristics above are personal behaviors, influenced by one’s proficiency in soft skills like communication, critical thinking, work ethic, teamwork, and leadership (Kwok, L., 2011).
METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

In order to conduct research on human subjects, the researcher gained an expedited approval from the Cal Poly Pomona IRB prior to beginning the study. Approval consisted of completion of CITI training. Provided purpose of the study was to 1) determine which soft skills hospitality recruiters consider most important for entry-level management positions to meet the needs of the industry, 2) reveal how such soft skills are assessed throughout the recruiting process, and 3) understand the role such soft skills play in the hiring decision. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, the researcher had the opportunity to gain a comprehensive understanding of which soft skills hospitality recruiters evaluate during the recruiting process, how they assess soft skills, and what affect the assessment of a candidate’s soft skills has on hiring decisions. A semi-structured interview approach allowed respondents to provide more details and the researcher opportunities to ask follow-up questions to gain further clarification.

As a phenomenological study the researcher attained an understanding of hospitality recruiters’ perceptions, perspectives and understandings regarding soft skills desired when considering entry-level management candidates. Steps included identifying relevant statements, grouping statements into "meaning units", seeking divergent perspectives, and constructing a composite (Leedy 2010, p.255). The subject group for this study included sixteen total individuals, who self-identify as recruiters for hospitality firms throughout several segments of the hospitality industry. In order to gain an understanding of essential competencies for the industry, in this case soft skills, one must investigate a broad yet common range of competencies that apply to the industry as a
whole (Min, H., 2016). Respondents represented two of the largest hospitality segments, lodging and food and beverage. Additional segments included transportation, event management and property management. The list of respondents included professionals who participated in recent Hospitality EXPOs, co-hosted by the Collins College of Hospitality Management and the Cal Poly Pomona Career Center. The CPP Hospitality EXPO puts recruiters face to face with students seeking management opportunities in the hospitality industry. Hospitality firms that participate in the CPP Hospitality EXPO identify themselves as seeking entry-level management positions. This includes internship to job placement and manager-in-training programs. As an added plus, participants of the CPP Hospitality EXPO foster an ongoing relationship between Cal Poly Pomona and industry professional. The respondents were not compensated for participation but will receive a copy of the study’s findings. Respondents selected have knowledge of soft skills needed for success in the hospitality industry. Additionally, they understand how soft skills are assessed throughout the recruiting process and how a candidate’s proficiency of soft skills affects recruiters’ hiring decisions. Subject recruitment was done via email solicitation, with a total of three solicitation emails sent.

All interviews were conducted between October and November 2020. Each telephone or video conference interview lasted between 30-50 minutes and were recorded and/or notated in detail by the researcher. To prepare respondents, the interview protocol contained a brief description of the differences between hard skills and soft skills. Questions were asked regarding the respondents’ time spent recruiting, tools used for recruiting, essential soft skills desired, how soft skills are assessed, and the role soft skills play in hiring decisions. Several questions solicited follow up questions and further
clarification, requiring respondents to list soft skills, means of assessments and the relation of the two in hiring decisions. Data collection was qualitative, following techniques of a phenomenology study. Methods included searching for meaningful concepts that reflect various aspects of an experience. Followed by integrating those concepts into a seemingly typical experience (Leedy 2010, p.258). The phenomenon in this study was hiring for desired soft skills that lead to success in the hospitality industry and the relationship between how it is typically perceived by recruiters in the hospitality industry.

**Data Analysis**

Using Leedy (2010) and Dacin (2010) as general strategies guides for analyzing qualitative data. With the use of word processor, the researcher started with transcribing interview recordings and notes into three scripts. The three scripts were separated by segment, lodging, food and beverage and other industries. Other industries included event management, transportation and property management. The researcher then performed four step coding, creating categories based on this study’s research questions and the last interview question. “In regard to the soft skills you have mentioned, which do you consider to be the 3 most important or critical for an entry level manager?” Crawford (2012) explains editing style data analysis requires the researcher to form data-developed categories from the text. Categories were used to recognize text in order to clearly understand data. An axial coding process was applied. Leedy (2010) explains axial coding selects one of the established categories as the core category and others are identified as categories that revolve around the core category or “axis” in some way.
Additionally, the revolving categories can be “strategies people use to manage or carry out the core category” and “consequences of those strategies”. Utilizing this concept, desired soft skills was considered as the core category. Assessment of soft skills during the recruiting process, are strategies people use to manage or carry out the core category. The affect assessment of soft skills has on the hiring decision, are consequences of the core and secondary category. Each of the nine-step process is described and detailed in Table 1.

Table 1 Nine-Step Data Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Procedure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1: Transcription</td>
<td>With the use of word processor, the researcher transcribed recorded and notated interviews into 3 scripts. Scripts were separated into segments, lodging, food and beverage and other industries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2: Read scripts</td>
<td>Transcribed scripts and recordings were reviewed twice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3: Coding: R1 - Which soft skills do hospitality recruiters consider most important for entry-level management positions?</td>
<td>The scripts were analyzed for data specific to research question one. The researcher highlighted soft skills respondents of this study consider important for entry-level management positions in the hospitality industry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4: Coding: R2 - How are soft skills assessed during the recruiting process?</td>
<td>The scripts were analyzed for data specific to research question two. The researcher highlighted different ways soft skills are assessed by respondents of this study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 5: Coding: R3 - How does the assessment of a candidate’s soft skills affect hiring decisions?</td>
<td>The scripts were analyzed for data specific to research question three. The researcher highlighted different ways respondents of this study believe soft skills affect hiring decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 6: Coding: Q10 - In regard to the soft skills you have mentioned, which do you consider to be the 3 most important or critical for an entry level manager</td>
<td>The scripts were analyzed for data specific to interview question ten. The researcher highlighted soft skills respondents of this study consider to be the three most critical soft skills for an entry-level manager.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 7: Transfer of data</td>
<td>Highlighted data from scripts was transferred to tables and images specific to steps three through six. This enabled a straightforward comparison and analysis of findings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step</td>
<td>Procedure</td>
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<tr>
<td>------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 8: Development of trends and themes</td>
<td>The researcher analyzed data to find trends and themes amongst steps three through 6 and/or different hospitality segments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 9: Interpretation of findings</td>
<td>Findings were interpreted and discussed, using relevant theories to this research when applicable and necessary.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The sample for this study included a total of sixteen hospitality professionals responsible for recruiting within their firms. Respondents represented various segments within the hospitality industry. Included were: six from lodging industry firms, five from food and beverage industry firms and five from other hospitality industry firms. Other hospitality industry firms included events, transportation and luxury property management. Job titles by industry are listed in table 2. Among the respondents, eleven were women 68.75%. Twelve respondents, 75% held management or senior level positions. Twelve respondents reported more than 85% of their work hours are spent recruiting. It was expressed by several respondents, as a result of Covid-19, recruiting for management positions on all levels has declined significantly or stopped.

“As a result of the pandemic, we have slimmed down our management structure and slowly bringing back those who have been furloughed or laid off.”

Respondent O1

In addition to college career fairs respondents reported using platforms such as Indeed, Hcareers, Craigslist and LinkedIn for recruiting. While Handshake is a popular tool to attract college students. Word of mouth, government agencies, campus and internal job boards are also commonly used for recruitment.

Table 3 Respondent Title and Industry Segment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Industry Segment</th>
<th>Respondent ID</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Director of Human Resources</td>
<td>Lodging - Luxury</td>
<td>L1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of Human Resources</td>
<td>Lodging – Upper Upscale</td>
<td>L2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sr. Manager West Region</td>
<td>Lodging – Mid to Luxury</td>
<td>L3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruiting Coordinator</td>
<td>Lodging - Upscale</td>
<td>L4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President – Hotel Operations</td>
<td>Lodging - Lifestyle</td>
<td>L5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Manager</td>
<td>Lodging - Midscale</td>
<td>L6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sr. Talent Manager</td>
<td>F&amp;B – Full Service</td>
<td>F1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruiting Manager</td>
<td>F&amp;B - Specialty</td>
<td>F2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruiting Manager</td>
<td>F&amp;B – Fast Casual</td>
<td>F3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>F&amp;B - Family</td>
<td>F4</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Findings are reported in direct quotes related to this study’s three research questions: (1) which soft skills do hospitality recruiters consider most important for entry-level management positions, (2) how are soft skills assessed during the recruiting process, (3) how does the assessment of a candidate’s soft skills affect hiring decisions? Many of the soft skills reported in this study as essential for success in the hospitality industry are in line with those reported in existing literature. Communication, leadership and team-orientation are frequently mentioned as the most desired soft skills for success. In addition to those were adaptability and flexibility, passion and emotional intelligence. The assessment methods revealed by respondents also echoed those of existing literature. A common method was observing behaviors doing the interview process. Structured interviews were frequently used, consisting of behavioral based, situational based and open-ended questions. Respondent quotes add an in-depth understanding, detail and frame of reference.

**R1: Desired Soft Skills for Industry Success**

1. Communication

“Communication being number one, especially in our line of work, if someone can't really formulate a sentence properly, it probably won't work.” O3
“Communication is a good one. Can the individual communicate their experiences to the recruiter, can they detail their experiences in a way that’s informative and answers the questions?” O1

“Communication skills is absolutely number one. You can say verbal is one and written is another, or you can say communication skills all as one.” L5

“But also, from a safety component at any level that we hire for, there has to be a certain level of communication skill. Our environment in food and beverage can be a hazardous space if we're not careful or don't understand one another.” F2

“If somebody is very withdrawn, they don't like to make eye contact, they don't like to communicate. Then customer service is not the job for them. And there's nothing wrong with that because every job is not for each individual. So, if that's something that you want, you need to start working on it.” F3

The biggest discrepancy that we see from hires, across the board is a lack of communication in some aspect, but it's a lack of knowledge of how to use what people use in a business setting. Things very basic, like Outlook, email etiquette. Communication, but it's specifically communications in a business setting. It's, all around being too harsh or being too soft via email, not being as professional via email. It's, you know, being able to identify that email messaging and communications happen, sound, and look different than verbal in-person?” L3

Being able to effectively communicate is key in the hospitality industry. A day’s work is filled with having to endure face to face interactions not only with guests and customers, but also employees within various departments. Utilizing the correct set of soft skills, like communicating verbally and non-verbally to manage self and others’ emotions can help lead to success in an emotional heavy work environment, such as those in the hospitality industry (Prentice, C., 2019). Reviewing the results of this study, communication is considered the most important soft skill desired for entry-level management positions in the hospitality industry. This supports the findings of McMurray (2016), where communication was consistently listed as a top soft skill desired of college graduates seeking leadership positions. Communication is also one of
the top five skills lacking from college graduates, yet many ranked themselves prepared in communication (McMurray, S. D. 2016).

2. Leadership

“I think pre-pandemic (top three most critical soft skills) would've been effective communication, teamwork and then leadership I think in pandemic or post pandemic, we're really looking for leadership, adaptability and flexibility.” L3

“Leadership, definitely. And especially for our (leadership development) program because the program was originally built out basically to pipeline general manager level, executive level roles. So that's kind of the entry point for that. It's a fast-track. So, leadership's important.” L3

“We definitely like to get a feel of a person’s leadership style. People sometimes come to work with problems in different moods and attitudes. How would you manage your team? Are you more of a mentorship type leader? Do you lead and people just follow? Do you like to collaborate with your team?” O1

“You need to have some sort of leadership role, even if they've had a volunteer leadership role, but then they've also had work experience. So that's really important, we don't specifically hire entry level management if there has been no experience, especially if you don't have experience in the food industry. It's important because management positions are vital, if we don't have the right person in the role, it really affects the team's morale and ultimately turnover.” F3

“I would say leadership too, just because you want to make sure you trust who you have up there. So, you know if somebody has it inside of them that they want to be leader or they have leadership skills. You don't really have to necessarily be on top of somebody over small things because this person knows what needs to be done in just gets it done.” O3

By definition leadership is, employing the efforts of others to accomplish goals.

“It’s a soft skill to negotiate with others, to participate in a team environment, to provide service and resolve conflicts (Wesley, S. C. 2016).” In this study, leadership was another frequently mentioned desired soft skill for entry-level management positions in the hospitality industry. Not only is leadership essential for entry-level managers but must
continue to be developed with career growth. Oktadiana (2017) explains leadership is among the list of skills that are critical to prepare students for senior-level positions in the industry as well. It must be noted that leadership development most often comes through experience. Respondent R1 explains, newly graduated candidates have a “false perception of expectation,” they believe an entry-level management position is waiting for them on the other side. The reality is most fresh graduates are usually not expected to take up leadership roles (Majid, S. 2019). A notion supported by several respondents of this study. One respondent in particular stating,

“I think for us, you know, entry level, we're going to look at that more, promoting somebody from a key hourly spot that's made their way up. Giving them an opportunity to get into management.” F5

Even so, leadership is included as a skill and attribute graduates are expected to demonstrate for employability in the hospitality industry (Majid, S. 2019).

3. Team Oriented

“Our internal mantra is one team, one goal. For example, if the pastry team is really busy and behind in production, does the front of house team have time to go back and help?” That’s (teamwork) a big one, especially more so now with Covid (19). We are having to step into roles that are out of our comfort zones.” F2

“At (company name) it's very team oriented. You know, whatever title you have you're playing many different roles at the same time. So, it's really important to be able to work within a team.” F3

“A manager just doesn't say, well, that's not my job. They're going to bus tables if they have to, wash dishes, get behind and cook. They're pretty well rounded so they can fit in at any position if they need to take an order, they can go out on the floor and take an order.” F4

“Teamwork is very important. Most hotel companies these days refer to their employees as team members. So, if you are a team member on a team, that is your culture, and it comes across as part of the communication. If it is manager versus employee, that will also come across in your vocabulary. When you have professional sports teams, there are winning teams and losing teams. Those players don't really want to be managed on the field. They want to be coached.
They want to be led as a team. They want to be the winning team. You're only as strong as your weakest player on the team.”

One definition of teamwork is described as, work done by several associates with each doing a part but all giving personal importance for the efficiency of the whole (“Teamwork,” 2020). In hospitality, each department must contribute and work effectively together in their relationships to achieve goals (Alhelalat, J. 2015). Considering the collaborative nature of the hospitality industry, it makes sense team oriented is considered an essential soft skill for a manager to be successful. Alhelalat (2105) presents teamwork as one of the skills executives believe hospitality graduates perform more than their non-hospitality counterparts. The results of this study are in line with an analysis by McMurray (2016), in 1,000 job advertisements, teamwork ranked third most important desired soft skill of recent graduates. In a survey of 542 employers, teamwork was considered an important factor when considering hiring recent graduates (McMurray, S. D. 2016). Although teamwork can be clearly defined, one responded pointed out,

“team oriented is one of those “buzzwords” that candidates just throw out there because they know it’s necessary but have a hard time explaining their (proficiency) in it during the interview”.

Internships, team sports and co-curricular involvement are ways to help develop proficiency in teamwork and other soft skills. On the job experiences like those gained through internships help students learn an understanding of what is expected in the industry, building proficiency and confidence in skills required. Additionally, students with a good understanding of what’s expected tend to remain in the industry longer (Dhiman, M. C. 2012).
4. Additional Desired Soft Skills

“I often say that's like our, our big key skill to have here (adaptability and flexibility). If somebody acts like they're not very flexible or adaptable, I will not say that it's a deal breaker and we wouldn't hire them, but I strongly encourage them to think about what they're getting themselves into.” L4

“Kind of company-wide that has to be there, is that that person that is for lack of better phrase, emotionally intelligent, empathetic. Understand that their team members are people. Understand that you're going to have to adapt your coaching strategy to the individuals.” F2

“Some people bring a lot of passion to the table. And sometimes we have a stellar candidate on paper, but they're not quite sure why they are doing this.” O1

“So, we take a look at our values and sort of line up the candidate with what our values are. And you know, from creativity, integrity, and fun is actually one of our values, believe it or not. So, we take a look at our values and we keep that in mind when we are interviewing candidates. See if their values align with ours.” L2 (To see if they are a culture fit).

This section includes other important soft skills that were mentioned by recruiters as important to demonstrate during the hiring process. These included adaptability and flexibility, emotional intelligence and passion. A short discussion follows on what was listed previously as an important soft skill during the recruiting process but not prioritized in this study’s interviews with recruiters.

Min (2016) reveals it can be argued communication and adaptability are the two most critical soft skills for the industry. Several recruiters emphasized that candidates should demonstrate during the hiring process that they were adaptable and flexible and could perform well while they transitioned between and among multiple positions.
Recruiters look for candidates who understood that successful team members would regularly need to stop what they are doing and re-direct focus to other issues.

Emotional intelligence, considered a type of social science, can be described as when one can recognize not just their own feelings and emotions but also the feelings and emotions of others. Then use that information gained from deciphering those feelings and emotions to guide one’s thinking and actions (Tan, J., 2019). In other words, knowing how to “read people”. Having the skills to pick up on a guest’s and team members’ non-verbal communication cues to evoke certain emotions. If a guest checking into a hotel is in a hurry, emotional intelligence is being able to pick up on the signs given by the guest, they don’t necessarily have time to chat during check-in. In this study’s findings respondents explained to excel, someone must understand how to recognize the individual needs of both guests and team members. Each guest is looking for something different to satisfy their needs. Furthermore, each team member respond to different approaches to keep them engaged and motivated.

Ineson (2011) describes passion for customer service and passion for work as desired skills for management success in the hospitality industry. Respondents explain passion is important because the very demanding nature of the hospitality industry. A manager in the hospitality industry can expect long workdays and schedules that include nights, weekends, and holidays.

Perhaps a surprising result in this study is, culture fit was only mentioned once as a desired soft skill for an entry-level manager. The respondent who mentioned culture fit considered it the ultimate deciding factor in the hiring decision. Existing literature suggests culture fit is an important contributor to work performance. Ibrahim (2017)
highlights, organizations are increasingly beginning to realize the development of soft skills as important and play a role in changing organizational culture, thus resulting in higher work performance. Rahimi (2017) described organizational culture as a process by which to run a business rather than a set of tools and asserted that even a candidate with the desired soft skills could be problematic if there was not cultural fit alignment with the organization’s values. Respondent L2 explains if a candidate’s values do not align with those of the company, they are not a culture fit and that’s the ultimate deciding factor for hiring. This would suggest that perhaps certain segments of the hospitality industry prioritize culture fit more than others when seeking entry-level managers.

Communication, leadership and being team oriented were soft skills hospitality recruiters considered most important for success as an entry-level manager. Throughout the recruiting process recruiters are assessing for these soft skills in various ways. Adaptability and flexibility, emotional intelligence and passion for the industry are also very important. The uniqueness of the hospitality industry requires proficiency in a unique set of soft skills to compliment one’s hard skill proficiency.

**R2: Soft Skills Assessment**

1. **Observation**

   “In your resume, work experience should be very specific. Where you can provide details of results and any specific quantifiable experiences, that would be great too. For example, as an evening super you supervised 60 employees and occupancy rates went from 75% to 90%.” **L5**

   (Not being able to find the words to explain something) “Tells me when they're speaking to resident or when they're speaking to a customer or whatever it may be, they may not have the ability to so in a professional manner. They won’t be able to number one explain processes, number two, go over basic policies with people, if they can’t speak on things that they know about themselves already.” **O3**
“Really and truly the ability to listen, to hear and not listen to respond. Being able to listen completely and not interrupt, that’s a big thing.” O4

“Right off the bat immediately within two or three minutes of speaking to someone, you know if they have any type of communication skills. Just based off what they're saying. You know, an example, if someone just every other word says like, or, you know what I mean.” O3

“A big part of assessing any candidate in the interview is language. Top performers tend to speak more positively, they use positive language in their interviews, even if their speaking of a situation where they think they were being challenged or where they were struggling. Whereas lower performance, bottom performers, they use the negative language in their interview.” F3

Respondents revealed communication skills are most of often assessed through observation during the interview process. It begins with carefully looking over the candidates resume. Grammar and spelling errors along with sentence structure are key in determining someone’s written communication. Respondents revealed they are looking for candidates to be well spoken, communicate responses clearly and ask meaningful follow up questions. This reveals a candidate can hold a conversation. Additionally, recruiters are looking for candidates that can use the correct tone and pitch. Several respondents also reported the language used during the interview is a way of assessing oral communication. Recruiters are also looking for non-verbal cues like eye contact, body language, and facial expressions.

2. **Structured Interviews**

“We're going to do our best to gauge what we're looking for there. Typical interview process would be with myself. And then in person with the GM, probably the AGM. In a lot of stores, they'll do a panel interview with most of the management team, if not all the management team. So, I mean, I think, you know, a pretty structured interview. We’ve got a pretty structured interview guide we run through.” F5

“And you can tell by the specific questions that you ask and sometimes are open-ended questions that you ask. And it could be as open-ended as, you know. What
are your favorite activities? Where do you see yourself? Maybe two to five years from now. Where do you see yourself? What would you be wanting to do? It could be open-ended questions or specific questions.”

(Open-ended questions like) “What do they think they can do better? What do you think you can improve upon? Do their goals match with what they say that their passion is. So, you know, you're passionate about going back to school, Okay. So, have you looked into schools? When do you plan to start? What's your goal for? You know, does it all match?”

(To assess leadership) “Have they moved up in any of their positions? do they intent to? do they want to? if they don't, why not? I might ask them about when they were in school. Were you in any clubs or teams? People in those environments usually have a better sense of leadership in general. Even if they weren't, let's say they were on a team, but they weren't the captain. That doesn't mean they don't know what it is to be a leader because they saw a leader every day.”

“We use behavioral interviewing. So, we typically have questions that require the candidate to provide us some sort of example of, a time they went above and beyond, or a time when they showed initiative on a great project. Something that shows that they have that sort of skillset needed to be showcased as a leader.”

“We do have some behavior-based questions. Like what specific steps have you taken in passed management to ensure your employees have a positive experience working for you. I think sometimes just asking about some of your prior work experience and some leading questions upon that. Like why you left a job or, what you best liked about a job or maybe what you didn't like about a job, sometimes can lead you to kind of see what they're thinking and why.”

“We ask a lot of situational questions, like what happens when you have an unpleasant customer or an unhappy customer?” Or, if someone calls off for a shift, how would you handle that situation? If such occurs, how would you handle that situation? It can be a variety of questions.”

Besides observing behaviors during the interview process as a means of assessment, structured interviews were a common method used for assessing soft skills for entry-level management candidates in the hospitality industry. Structured interviews typically consist of open-ended, behavioral, and situational questions. Answers to these questions require extra thinking and elaborating from the candidate, not just a yes or no.
Structured interviews require a candidate to reveal how they would most likely react and respond in the future based on how they have done so in the past or they would hypothetically. Observation is the first method of assessment, starting with the resume and appearance. Candidates should ensure the information on their resume is up to date and free from errors. They should also make sure their appearance is up to par for the position they are applying for. Candidates need to prepare by reviewing the company and job duties to be able to communicate how their experiences make them qualified.

**R3: Soft Skills and Hiring Decisions**

“Well, what's the role? You know? If you're working in a position that doesn't require you to be an extravert and be like, very happy and bubbly. And because you're going be working, you know, in the back of the house, maybe they are shyer and quieter, but, you know, so it honestly depends on the role and on the department.” **L2**

“The assessment is not really a pass or fail. It’s really more, you know, what are somebody’s strengths, what are their areas of opportunity, kind of a guide. I guess if we do hire somebody, it's going to be a tool used to really kind of make sure that we are able to go in and work in those areas where they need to grow.” **F5**

(Adaptability) “I don’t think that's a make-or-break thing. And I think that's something you can definitely teach people, that they should draw on the resources available, they should draw on their coworkers if they need help.” **O1**

“The soft skills are the hiring decision. If someone doesn't have the communication, I'm not even going through a full phone screen with them. I'm just going to the next person. And that's only because there are so many people you can call.” **O3**

“I have to say of all the factors that I mentioned before, back and front of house. The only one that is a non-negotiable, and you have to have it is the Detail Orientation. That is, I have to say of anything that we could find on the assessment. That is the one that is a dis-qualifier, at least for us, for our environment.” **F2**

According to this study, the assessment of a candidate’s soft skills affects hiring decisions in various ways. How a recruiter assesses a candidate’s soft skills can
determine if that person is hired or not. If a candidate can convey throughout the recruiting process, they are proficient in the soft skills most desired for success they have a better chance of being hired. Respondents reported lack of certain soft skills are non-negotiable or deal breakers when making hiring decisions. Considering the importance placed on the proficiency of communication for success in the hospitality industry, it should come as no surprise lack of communication was commonly considered a soft skill that is a deal breaker in hire decisions. Having proficient in communication was considered non-negotiable in several instances. Additional soft skills mentioned as non-negotiable were detail oriented, integrity and trust and work ethic. While leadership and team oriented are two of the top soft skills considered most critical for a manager’s success in the industry, they were not frequently considered deal breakers in hiring decisions. Recruiters are mainly looking for a candidate’s potential to be a team player and possibility of them becoming a great leader with development. Respondents revealed soft skills guide the decision to hire but lack of one doesn’t always disqualify a candidate. Additionally, the importance of soft skill proficiency is often position and role specific.

Table 3 below list respondents’ individual feedback regarding soft skills and the decision to hire.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent ID</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondent L1</td>
<td>The person that is hired is one who will ultimately add significant value to the company as a whole.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent L2</td>
<td>If a person is a values and culture “fit” is the ultimate deciding factor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent L3</td>
<td>Weak soft skills overall will not be hired but lack of any one particular soft skill is not an ultimate disqualifier.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent ID</td>
<td>Explanation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent L4</td>
<td>Certain soft skills are a requirement for particular positions/departments. The hiring decision depends upon which soft skills are necessary for the specific position.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent L5</td>
<td>Proficiency or lack of communication, work ethic and passion, significantly affect the hiring decision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent L6</td>
<td>Lack of ambition as a deal breaker.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent F1</td>
<td>Work ethic is the only non-negotiable, automatic disqualifier. Other depend how they fit within values.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent F2</td>
<td>Being detail oriented and having good communication are non-negotiable and absolutely necessary. Leadership and other depends on role/position.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent F3</td>
<td>No one soft skill is a make or break when it’s decision time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent F4</td>
<td>Integrity/Trust and hospitable are necessary but self-knowledge and time management are not automatic disqualifiers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent F5</td>
<td>If a candidate is not humble or lacks leadership and positive attitude they will not be considered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent O1</td>
<td>Bad decision making for conflict resolution is a disqualifier. Lack of communication and Adaptability/Flexibility depends on the position.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent O2</td>
<td>Lack of communication is non-negotiable; those candidates are not considered. Problem solving and Adaptability/flexibility are not automatic disqualifiers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent O3</td>
<td>Lack of communication is a deal breaker. Leadership can be taught depending on the role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent O4</td>
<td>There are not any soft skills that make or break the hiring decision. We hire for what’s needed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent O5</td>
<td>A candidate that is Adaptable/Flexible will be heavily favored because they can do multiple roles.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONCLUSION

Implications

1. Recruiters

The ever-changing atmosphere of the industry leads to the attributes, characteristics and skills employers seek to also alter. As a result, hospitality employers have voiced the need for graduates to be more prepared for the workplace and possess greater employability and transferable skills (Dhiman, M., 2012). This study provides an updated list of the desired soft skills for entry-level managers, in hospitality currently. The findings of this study indicate many soft skills desired for an entry-level manager are consistent amongst various segments within the hospitality industry. The top desired soft skills are communication, leadership and team oriented. Regardless of segment in the hospitality industry, recruiters should review the findings of this study and modify recruiting strategies wherever applicable. A starting point to reform recruiting strategies is ensuring job descriptions, summaries and specifications include top desired soft skills in them. This may require updating sourcing material. As reported by several respondents, in addition to career fairs an abundant amount of sourcing is now done online. Especially with the Covid-19 pandemic, in person interviews have become extremely challenging.

“Typically, these days we just advertise on indeed. It's so easy. They continue to make the process of managing the interview and recruitment process quite easy. And it tends to be very effective.” L5

This study revealed common themes in desired soft skills and assessment methods, providing a guide for common and best practices. A recruiter responsible for hiring entry-level managers in various segments, such as a hotel that offers food and beverage options, can review to modify interviews according to skills and assessment methods revealed in
this study. In order to identify soft skills, structured interviews that consist of open-ended, behavioral and situational questions should be used in conjunction with strategies used to observe behaviors in the interview process. As reported by a respondent in this study, team oriented is a soft skill that is difficult to assess proficiency. The most common way respondents of this study assessed a candidate’s ability to be team oriented is through behavioral and situational questions.

“Asking them, you know, what was it like working in a team environment. Also seeing a time where they had a disagreement with a coworker or a teammate and seeing how they were able to resolve that. So again, and they say I never had any disagreements. That's not really likely. Working within a team you're going to have disagreements with people. It's just about how to resolve them and how to address them in the best way possible.” F3

With knowledge of desired soft skills for success across segments, recruiters can easily consider candidates for multiple positions at once. Regardless of the soft skills considered most important for any segment. The decision to hire should be somewhat of a team decision. Different people have different perspectives of candidates. Through the interview process candidates may provide clues to their intentions for future development and longevity with the company.

“We, sometimes we have up to five interviews for managers because the GM wants to meet everyone, especially if someone is coming in in a leadership role. Whether it be an entry level leadership role or whether it be, let's say a department head role, our GMs are very keen on meeting management position roles like they want to meet and see what their aspirations are, what are their goals? What do they want to do? Is it short lived? They want just a temporary position, or are they looking to grow with the company and they're looking to grow with the company. What are their requests, what do they want to achieve?” L2
2. Candidates

Majid (2019) also explains, several students are simply unaware of what soft skills would best benefit them for career placement and advancement to possible management roles. Having an updated list such as the one this study provided can assist. Students, recent graduates and job seekers looking for entry-level management opportunities in the hospitality industry, should review this study to understand which soft skills they will need to develop in order to be an attractive candidate. Communication is extremely important. Job seekers should prepare well before an interview. First, it’s recommended they double check their resume for grammar, spelling and sentence structure errors. Know how to make sense of work history and be able to communicate experience in a way that makes sense and “flows smoothly.”

“When I’m speaking to someone, when I'm asking for examples and things like that. Communication is just how someone's talking and how they're responding to things. And I can get that from them just by having a conversation.”

It’s recommended to research the company and position they are applying for. Part of communication is asking relevant follow up questions.

“Is the candidate well spoken, did they prepare and ask follow up questions about the company or position.”

It’s suggested to stay away from excessive use of words such as “like” and the phrase “do you know what I mean?”. Before an interview practice with someone else or in the mirror, paying attention to body language, enthusiasm, smiling and other non-verbal communication indicators. It’s recommended candidates pay close attention to the questions being asked, actively listening and not interrupting the recruiter. They must be able to draw from specific experiences in the past to answer behavioral questions. They must also be able to convey how the soft skills they possess would be utilized in particular
instances by answering situations questions and sell their soft skills proficiency by highlighting experience relevant to the position. Behavioral and situational questions are especially useful to assess a candidate leadership potential and ability to be team oriented.

“A piece of how we can capture that is kind of with our behavioral question. Asking about situations where you’ve developed someone and how did you do it or a time that your team went above and beyond with a guest experience. Explain what happened in that scenario.” F2

When requested to give a specific example for a behavioral or situational question be sure to do so. Giving generic answers such as “I always go above and beyond” may be interrupted as not listening to the question or lack of being able to convey a specific soft skill used in that situation. Respondent F2 explains, when asked to give an example of a time candidates have gone above and beyond, they often give a “correction” example.

“If a service failure happened and you fixed it is not going above and beyond. That’s a guest having an expectation and the mark was missed. Instead give an example where the guest had an expectation, and the mark was exceeded”. F2

If job experiences are limited, it’s recommended to take part in clubs, volunteer work, team sports or other co-curriculum to help become team orientated and gain exposure to leadership. Get familiar with leadership styles and know which best describes yours. An understanding and proficiency of desired soft skills is not enough. One must understand the way they convey proficiency of those soft skills throughout the recruiting process.

Although many desired soft skills and assessment methods were the same across segments. There were some differences amongst segments. In luxury and upscale lodging, the decision to hire is about fit.

“The person that is hired is one who will ultimately add significant value to the company as a whole.” L1

“If a person is a values and culture “fit” is the ultimate deciding factor.” L2
It’s recommended for candidates seeking employment for the luxury or upscale sub-segment in particular to get familiar with the organization’s values, mission and vision, to find ways their experience is in line with the organization’s culture. Lifestyle and midscale hotels are looking for some with a passion for the industry when making hiring decision.

“Work ethic and passion, significantly affect the hiring decision,” in addition to proficiency in communication.” \textbf{L5}

“Lack of ambition as a deal breaker.” \textbf{L6}

Subtle differences regarding how certain soft skills affect the decision to hire also exist in food and beverage and its sub-segments. For a specialty outlet being detailed oriented is most important and being able to lead may be less of a focal point.

“Being detail oriented and having good communication are non-negotiable and absolutely necessary. Leadership and other depends on role/position.” \textbf{F2}

“The environment of a full-service restaurants requires great work ethic, positivity and leadership is extremely important.” \textbf{F5}

3. Academic Professionals

This study provides an updated list of current critical soft skills for industry success as a reference for academic professionals. It is important for hospitality management program curriculum to reflect development of the most critical soft skills for success in the industry. A focus on opportunities for students to practice communication should be at the forefront. Activities and projects such as oral presentations can help develop students communicate with others and gain confidence. Equal importance should be placed on the delivery of the message and the content of the presentation itself. The language candidates use to describe their proficiency is equally as important as the soft skill itself.

“If they're statements are 100%, you know, them benefiting versus leveraging their team? And perhaps, you know, if, if I ask for an achievement and you say,
oh, you know, I was able to increase sales by 15% in my first six months. And it's because I went out and I built relationships in my community and I did this and I did that, that's fine and well, but sounds like a rookie mistake to me. It sounds like if you had leveraged your team and gotten them on board, you could have not only potentially done it faster, but it could have been more effective, right?”

Reading text out loud and being required to elaborate on it in order to receive participation points, is a way students can practice becoming well spoken, pitch, tone and delivery. Group projects are a way for students to gain experience working in a team. It forces them to work with others that they may otherwise not. Additionally, “a benefit of teamwork is that it allows for the further development of interpersonal, leadership, and communication skills.” Furthermore, when used in an academic setting, students learn delegation, work schedules and critique of self and others’ strengths and weaknesses (Wesley, S. C. 2016). The academic setting should provide opportunities for students to gain experience with the soft skills that will lead them to success. Additionally, opportunities to practice those skills should be afforded within the academic setting. (Wesley, S. C. 2016) summarizes, leadership training in undergraduate curriculum positively influences leadership qualities in students. Activities and coursework that is discipline specific, internships and experiential learning positively influences leadership engagement. An understanding of how desired soft skills are assessed should be included as part of curriculum. As with developing and practicing soft skills, the same should be considered for common assessment methods. Students with proficiency and desired soft skills may miss out on an employment opportunity because they have not had enough practice to convey proficiency in such skills in a meaningful way.

In summary, there are several similarities in soft skills considered essential for entry-level managers across all segments of the hospitality industry. The most frequent
desired soft skills are communication, leadership and being team oriented. Adaptability and flexibility, emotional intelligence and passion also are described as essential for all segments. Although, there were subtle differences found between segments and amongst sub-segments. For example, the specialty food and beverage segment prioritized being detail oriented while a manager in a full-service restaurant needs to display more leadership qualities. Assessment of soft skills was most often done through observation during the interview, which actually starts with a candidate’s application and resume. In addition to observations, structured interviews were used to assess soft a candidate’s soft skills. Structured interviews consist of open-ended, behavioral and situational questions, that require the candidate to draw from past experiences or think hypothetically about future instances. Communication, the most important soft skill reported in this study, was often considered an absolutely necessary soft skill to be hired, respondent reported many others are not. Recruiters would like to have a candidate with proficiency in all soft skills, but they know that is extremely rare. What they are ultimately looking for is the candidate who can show the most potential to get to that point.

**Limitations and Future Research**

One limitation of this study is the selected sample. The solicited respondents were participants of Cal Poly Pomona Collins College Hospitality Career Fair. Hospitality recruiters that were not part of this career fair were not solicited. As a result, most respondents represented only the greater Los Angeles, California or Western regions. This makes the results of the study less generalizable. Gathering informants from a greater geological area would improve the study’s generalization. While various segments of the hospitality industry were represented, the majority of interviews included
representatives from lodging and food and beverage segments. Due to the current Covid-19 pandemic, many of the informants reported recruiting for entry-level management positions has slowed dramatically. As a result, those informants had to draw from pre-pandemic information.

Future research should add to the current findings of this study. One area to do so is expanding the geographic area of informant solicitation. With a larger pool of respondents, future research can add more distinction between sub-segments. The lodging industry could include luxury, upscale, select service, extended stay etc. Food and beverage could be distinguished between fine dining, casual, fast casual or fast food etc. The other industries segment could include additional events and club management, cruise operators, convention and visitors’ bureaus and airline etc. A case study may be done to follow one segment or company’s hiring procedures and how they relate to customer satisfaction, employee satisfaction and retention.

The focus of this study is centered around entry-level management. Future research could include line level employees. A longitudinal study can be done to investigate how subjects’ soft skills change from entry line level team member to developing the skills for leadership roles.

**Concluding Statement**

It has been documented, earning a degree does not automatically lead to job placement, it also does not automatically guarantee a satisfactory level of employability skills for a given position (Ineson, E. M., 2011). In some cases, the knowledge gained by the institution does not match the skill set graduates are expected to possess when entering into the workforce of the industry (Jaykumar, P., 2019). Students themselves are
also partly to blame. “University and high school students attached more weight to
cognitive competencies than to behavioral competencies, reflecting their slight lack of
understanding of the industry” (Lou, N. M. 2019). Having an updated list such as the one
this study provided can assist. Martin (2019) summarizes five skills employers believed
college graduates lack are, professionalism/work ethic, relationship building/soft skills,
business acumen, written communications, and critical thinking/problem-solving with
leadership being number six and teamwork being number eight. The majority of the list
provided by Martin (2019) are mentioned in this study.

The best way to create cohesiveness is communication between the student,
faculty and industry leaders. This helps prepare possible employees with the soft skills
desired by industry professionals that make hiring decisions (Wesley, S. C., 2017). For
industry success there must be dialogue between industry professionals, education
providers, government policy makers and potential employees. It takes a collaborative
effort amongst those parties to develop solutions that work (Beesley, L. G., 2013).
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