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SOFT SKILLS NEEDED FOR THE TOURISM INDUSTRY (THE CASE OF BULGARIA)

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Abstract

Over the decades the tourism and hospitality industry has become one of the fastest-growing economic sectors in the world and it not only opens millions of job positions but also requires a lot of new approaches in educational training and practice. Within the wide range of services, there is often a lack of closer relations between the skills needed and the competences acquired by tourism students and specialists. Whereas some hard skills are traditionally taught at the educational institutions, other skills, called soft skills, often remain beyond the educators' aims. This paper relates soft skills to the educational background of the prospective specialist in the field of tourism and aims at identifying the soft skills of 'critical' and of 'considerable' importance based on the opinions of three groups of respondents in Bulgaria.

Keywords

Soft Skills – Tourism – Business – Hospitality – Professional Education

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Introduction

In the global world of competitiveness among organizations, their ability to react quickly and flexibly to the new trends and the changing requirements and demands of the labor market has become an increasingly tangible advantage. Businesses are faced with the need to find and hire those workers who meet their production profile in the best possible way. In order for the companies to maintain a continuous dialogue with current and potential clients, to know in detail as well as to anticipate the needs of their business partners, the companies additionally have to create new products and technologies, to implement innovative and creative solutions.

Along these lines, as co-sponsors emerge a number of funding programs of the European Commission, the Government of United Kingdom, 2018 and the ECEA programs, focusing on the territory of Europe, paired with other programs such as Australian Research Council, 2016 and US Department of Commerce, 2018, beyond the EU domain, that support training, entrepreneurship, business and cooperation. The main goal is the introduction of innovative approaches to work organization and of state-of-the-art practices to promote investments in human capital to the effect that the adaptability and competitiveness of the labour force can be increased internationally, the latter being a top priority in the modern business world.

The achievement of these tasks lies mostly with the *hidden assets* of the enterprise among which the human capital and the accumulated company knowledge are often mentioned as the most important factors. The businesses have to optimize the costs of activities related to human resource management due to the reduced budgets in the context of the economic crisis in recent years¹. At the same time, considering the paramount importance of employees' qualifications for business success, companies are looking for new approaches to discovering, developing, stimulating, and retaining their highly qualified employees. This approach holds true for both the manufacturing industry and the sphere of services, including *tourism*.

In their study *Tourism Education*, Daniel, Costa, Pita, & Costa² raise the question: "What about entrepreneurial skills?" and ponder on the topic what skills should be trained in tourism education, allowing for the economic role of tourism that continues to count as one of the most important sectors on a world-wide scale (According to the UNWTO's long-term forecast report *Tourism Towards 2030* will continue to grow annually and by 2030 its growth will amount to 1.8 billion, compared to the previous year (UNWTO, 2011). This can be interpreted in several directions: firstly, in terms of the increased number of trips that will supposedly be international travels; secondly, in terms of the increased number of opportunities for new labor force; and thirdly, in terms of the increased contact between peoples and cultures. As a consequence, tourism education and training will develop along this new path and will rely on increasingly new parameters, and will go beyond traditional training standards and apply new forms of learning on a large scale (e.g. e-Learning³,

¹ P. Parvanov, *Legal Opportunities for Making Bulgarian Tourism a Socially Oriented Industry. The Social Economy in Constrained Resources - Theory and Practice* 2017. 84 - 116.

² A. D. Daniel; R. A. Costa; M. Pita & C. Costa, "Tourism Education: What about entrepreneurial skills?", *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, num 30 (2017): 65.

³ T. Kiryakova-Dineva; M. Levunlieva & V. Kyurova, "IPHRAS as an e-learning platform for idiomatic competence", *Electronic Journal of e-Learning*, *Electronic Journal of e-Learning (EJEL)*, num 2 (2017): 137-143.

Blended Learning⁴ and other forms of knowledge transfer). In view of the development of new and alternative forms of tourism, it is also expected that on the one hand new methods and courses will be introduced, taking into account the achievements of new technologies, and on the other – that these methods and courses will be developed in such a way as to meet the expectations of learners. Last but not least, the relationship between trainers and employers needs to be taken into consideration, provided that many specialists point out to significant deficiencies in the direction of required and acquired level of tourism graduates' skills (e.g. Melo⁵; Sisson & Adams⁶).

It is not only the transfer of knowledge and skills that often comes into focus but also the need for bidirectional knowledge sharing is increasingly drawn attention to, whereby a critical need for intervention has been attested in order to create more effective relationships between the science of tourism and other sciences, such as new technologies, innovations, medicine and human health, ecology and natural resources, ethnology, religion and minorities. In this vein, the people who will be hired in long-term tourism services will be qualified workforce and, respectively, they will need to have a broader range of professional skills and competences in order to meet the requirements of the global labour market.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the context of newly established training competences by investigating them from the perspective of the tourism industry, on the one hand and from the perspective of the need to integrate new skills, in particular *soft skills*, on the other hand. A number of leading scholars and practitioners from the hospitality industry recognize some weak traits in tourism science:

- it is supposed to have a low uptake of research findings, arising from the fact that the tourism industry is spatially diffuse and at the same time highly fragmentary in terms ownership and structure, product and service offerings, as well as characterised by a highly changeable labour force (Bulgaria as indicated for the year 2014 and up now⁷; Shaw & Williams⁸);
- tourism science research comes under severe and persistent criticisms in relation to communication challenges (cf. Topler, 2017⁹; Bitter, Kolupanova, I., & Zhidkova¹⁰):
 - o one such challenge derives from the nature of the research being carried out, cf. Xiao and Smith¹¹, specifically tourism research multidisciplinary has both advantages and disadvantages, due to the fact that some of its disciplines make significant contributions to the conceptual framework and understanding whereas others contribute more to instrumental, political and process uses;

⁴ N. Tsankov; V. Gyuvyiska & M. Levunlieva, "Education for sustainable development", *Strategies for Policy in Science and Education* (2018): 231-245.

⁵ A. Melo, *Required and Acquired Level Of Graduates' Skills In Hospitality Management*. 2017.

⁶ L. G. Sisson & A. R. Adams, "Essential Hospitality Management Competencies: The Importance of Soft Skills", *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Education*, Vol: 25 num 3 (2013): 131-145.

⁷ OECD *Tourism Trends and Policies*, 2014.

⁸ A. M. Williams & G. Shaw, "Future play: tourism, recreation and land use – a Foresight review", *Land Use Policy*, Vol: 12 num 9 (2009): 326-335.

⁹ J. P. Topler, "Communication Skills in the Tourism Sector: The Speech Culture of Tour Guides", *Tourism Culture & Communication*, Vol: 17 num 3 (2017): 217.

¹⁰ N. Bitter; I. Kolupanova & I. Zhidkova, "Communicative competence and psychological aspects when interacting with client in tourism", *Research Result. Pedagogics and psychology of Education series*, num 1 Vol: 2 (2015):

¹¹ H. Xiao & S. L. Smith, "The use of Tourism knowledge", *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol: 34 num 2 (2007): 315.

- another communication challenge comes from language use, as it often happens that when academics and tourism entrepreneurs attempt to communicate and cooperate they seem to speak different languages - an academic one and a commercial one.

There is yet another language - the language used between clients and organizations and it is exactly this language that necessitates the development of soft skills and this is the reason why we chose to focus our paper on the need for the development of a new set of soft skills, in particular soft skills for dialogue between practitioners and tourism industry representatives.

Problem definition

Except for being trained in specialized skills, hospitality industry staff also receives training in the skills of being ethical, flexible, tolerant, amiable and responsible, also known as soft skills. As a result of great misunderstanding, the soft skills required in hospitality settings have often been underestimated and even classified as low skills (Lundberg and Mossberg¹², Burns¹³). On the contrary, other studies emphasize on the idea that soft skills should be paired with traditional technical skills to trace out the whole set of skills necessary for the tourism sector and crucially that soft skills are the most important set of skills sought after by tourism entrepreneurs¹⁴. Soft skills prove to be of crucial importance for tourism, travel and hospitality employees in dealing with critical service situations and according to Watson and McCracken¹⁵; Moser¹⁶ this also holds true for management positions. Summing it up, it can be seen that the value of soft skills for tourism needs to be recognized and appropriate training methods for soft skills have to be developed.

Soft skills comprise, without being limited to, the following components: personal qualities, thinking skills, and interpersonal skills. The definitions of these components can be grouped according to the *SCANS Skills and Competencies Report* from 1991¹⁷ elaborated by US Department of Labor, 1991, pp. 5-6). Within the group of *personal qualities* the following skills can be mentioned as being of greater importance: *Responsibility, Self-esteem, Sociability, Self-management* and *Integrity/Honesty, Creative thinking, Decision making, Problem solving, Knowing how to learn* and *Reasoning* and these are often conceived as skills related to the domain of *thinking skills*¹⁸.

¹² C. Lundberg & L. Mossberg, "Learning by sharing: Waiters and bartenders experiences of service encounters", *Journal of Foodservice*, Vol: 19 num 1 (2008): 48.

¹³ P. M. Burns, "Hard-skills, soft-skills: Undervaluing hospitality's 'service with a smile'", *Progress in Tourism and Hospitality Research*, Vol: 3 num 3 (1997): 240.

¹⁴ E. Christou, "Revisiting Competencies for Hospitality Management: Contemporary Views of the Stakeholders", *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Education*, Vol: 14 num 1 (2002): 25-32.

¹⁵ S. Watson & M. McCracken, "No attraction in strategic thinking: Perceptions on current and future skills needs for visitor attraction managers", *International Journal of Tourism Research*, num 4 Vol: 5 (2002): 370.

¹⁶ M. Moser, "Soft Skills als überfachliche Managementkompetenzen", *Bedeutung Von Soft Skills in Einer Sich Wandelnden Unternehmenswelt*, (2018): 3-16.

¹⁷ What Work Requires of Schools is the title of the initial SCANS report. National Technical Information Service (NTIS), Technology Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce, Springfield, VA. <https://wdr.doleta.gov/SCANS>

¹⁸ Whetzel, Deborah: The Secretary of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills. ERIC Digest, available at: <https://www.ericdigests.org/1992-5/skills.htm>, seen on 10/10/2018

The authors of the present study believe that the development of soft skills for hospitality industry in Bulgaria should encompass and focus on the development of a greater set of skills to which more attention and visibility should be given. Setting this development as an objective in both formal and non-formal tourism and hospitality education is highly necessary.

Methodology

For the purpose of establishing the soft skills needed for entrepreneurship and tourism, representatives of the Bulgarian regional Chambers of Commerce, representatives of business, representatives of the hotel and restaurant industry, as well as a case study on the learners' and educators' opinions on soft skills needed for the tourism industry on the territory of Bulgaria was conducted using two lists of questionnaires.

This broad scope was determined by the desire to probe the opinions of people with different profiles, employers as well as employees. The main reason for choosing such method lies in its adequacy in terms of the specificity of both the subjects under study and the data to be obtained. The method of respondent selection is also appropriate in terms of the field work with the interviewed people as it enabled direct contact with the respondents in the course of personal and group meetings. The survey was conducted between April and September 2018 and involved three groups of respondents: Learners, Educators and Representatives of business and Employers in the tourism industry and hospitality.

At the same time, the comprehensive survey of the issues under investigation was narrowed down to focus on respondents' opinions regarding the role and importance of soft skills in professional development and qualification in the chosen spheres in Bulgaria in recent years.

In order to determine which types of soft skills could be helpful and beneficial in working for the given organization, both in a specific and in a general way, e.g. organization of production processes, sales, staffing, customer services, efficient customer needs satisfaction, a survey was conducted based on a list of soft skills prepared by the authors.

Respondents were asked to rate each skill and competency according to its relevance to effective performance in the relevant field of tourism industry. To be quite precise, they were asked to rate the importance of the skills and competencies on a 5 point Likert scale, ranging from critically important (=5) to not very important (=1). Questions on demographic data and information concerning their educational and employment status were also added.

Competencies were grouped into three sectors, namely *core soft skills*, *specific soft skills* and *managerial soft skills*. The respondents were provided with the opportunity to add additional skills to the list, if they consider these to be of importance.

In regards of the *core skills for hospitality and tourism activity* the respondents have determined the following soft skills competences: commitment, hospitality, customer focus, flexibility, effective communication, social skills, organization, action oriented and result-oriented competencies, responsibility and reliability, teamwork, sociability and communication adaptability, interpersonal communicative competence, social responsibility, self-control, environmental consciousness.

In the opinion of the interviewed participants the following soft skills were predetermined as *specific soft skills for hospitality and tourism activity*: analytical thinking, safety, handling of complaints, customer focus, problem solving, guests safety, flexible interaction with colleagues, intercultural dialogue, adaptability, ability for digital interaction, organization and order, working under pressure, working with documents, self-development, social competencies, financial orientation.

Into the last group of soft skills – the group of the managerial soft skills, the respondents classified the following ones: decision making, employee motivation, leadership, team care, planning skills, delegation skills, strategic skills, time management, conflict management, process orientation, intercession skills¹⁹ and leadership.

Empirical study

The empirical study was carried out on two stages. For the purposes of the analysis, the list of competences proposed by Fournier & Ineson²⁰, Redman & Wilkinson²¹ and Wilks & Hemsworth²² were combined with some of abilities and skills listed under the Bulgarian National competence assessment network²³. New soft skills were added to the compiled list based from the first stage of the analysis on the experience and deductive intuitions of the authors. The competences were sub-divided into three categories: *Core soft skills*, *Specific soft skills* and *Managerial soft skills*.

On the first stage the respondents were asked to delineate the set of soft skills competences proposed by the authors by selecting the seven most important competences within each of the three categories. On the second stage the respondent were asked to assess the resulting three sets of skills in view of their importance. The obtained variables were categorized according to their mean values as: 4.50 and above is estimated as “*of critical importance*”; those between 3.50 and 4.49 were assessed as “*of considerable importance*” and these below 3.49 – as “*of moderate importance*”. Tables 1, 2 and 3 demonstrate the differentiation of competences according to their ranking. In this way the tables show the soft skills of crucial importance assessed by the three groups of respondents, i.e. *Learners*, *Educators* and *Business representatives and employers*. The following analysis sheds light on the obvious differences between the values obtained for the three groups of respondents.

Additionally, the analysis determines the perspective of the future actions to be undertaken by the educators in order to secure effective relations between the group of the *Learners* and the group of the *Business representatives and employers* and to validate the chain of soft skills needed. The authors made use of deductive analysis approach in order to assess and evaluate the importance of the three categories of soft skills in terms of their achieved mean values.

¹⁹ N. Thompson, *People Skills* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

²⁰ H. Fournier & E. Ineson, *Closing the Gap Between Education and Industry: Skills and Competencies for Food Service Internships in Switzerland* Hospitality & Industry Management, Paper presented at the International CHRIE-Conference. 2009.

²¹ T. Redman & A. Wilkinson, *Contemporary Human Resource Management*, FT (London: Prentice Hall, 2006).

²² D. Wilks & K. Hamsworth. (“Soft skills as key competencies in hospitality higher education: matching demand and supply”, *Tourism and management studies*, num 7 (2011): 136.

²³ <https://en.mycompetence.bg>

Results and discussion

The soft skills needed for tourism and hospitality industry subject to analysis and assessment within the three categories were evaluated as being of crucial importance, meaning that they were appropriately selected, on the one hand, and that it is necessary for the three groups to work effectively together with respect to their acquisition and development, on the other hand. Taken separately, it can be claimed that concerning the category of Core soft skills the group of Learners identified the following skills: hospitality, teamwork and effective communication as being “of critical importance”. The group of Educators assessed hospitality, customer focus and effective communication as “critically important” competences. Business representatives and employers rated four competences as “critically important”, namely commitment, hospitality, customer focus and effective communication. All the values for the Core competencies are presented in the following Table 1:

CORE SOFT SKILLS	Learners	Educators	Business and employers
commitment	4.05	4.48	4.73
hospitality	4.80	4.70	4.78
customer focus	4.40	4.68	4.92
effective communication	4.60	4.80	4.65
teamwork	4.78	4.00	4.36
social responsibility	3.26	4.15	3.94
environment consciousness	3.43	3.80	3.96

Table 1
Core soft skills needed for hospitality and tourism industry
Source: authors

Table 1 demonstrates that the three groups of respondents evaluated the Core soft skills as skills of great importance and that only the group of the learners ranked two of them as skills “of moderate importance”, namely the social responsibility and the environmental consciousness. Within the range of special soft skills, the learners identified three soft skills as skills “of critical importance”, namely *professional behaviour*, *ability for digital interaction* and *handling of complaints*, whereas the Educators indicated six soft skills: *professional behaviour*, *handling of complaints*, *flexible interaction with colleagues*, *guests’ safety*, *ability for digital interaction* and *intercultural dialogue*. The latter group classified only one soft skill as being of less importance than the rest and that is the ability to *work under pressure*. The representatives of the business and the employers evaluated all of the listed soft skills from the set of special competences as being of “critical importance”, as shown in Table 2:

SPECIAL SOFT SKILLS	Learners	Educators	Business and employers
guests safety	4.38	4.72	4.85
working under pressure	4.48	4.44	4.54
professional behaviour	4.81	4.88	4.82
handling of complaints	4.69	4.80	4.92
flexible interaction with colleagues	4.38	4.75	4.66
intercultural dialogue	3.52	4.69	4.64
ability for digital interaction	4.79	4.68	4.58

Table 2
Special competences of soft skills needed for hospitality and tourism industry
Source: authors

Taking into consideration that special competences depend to a great extent on the teaching goals set by the educators and are especially required by the business and employers, the received mean values for all special soft skills competences are only to be expected. In view of the mean values, estimated for the soft skills, comprising the last group of soft skills, an interesting feature can be observed: the managerial soft skills are highly ranked by the three groups. Their importance is revealed on the background of the more intensive interpersonal relationships in the domain of the tourism and hospitality industry. They are also identified as being of paramount importance because of their relevance to the nature of the tourism product and in particular to its visibility at all stages – promotion, sales, realization of services. This fact necessitates the use of managerial abilities in order to assist tourism and hospitality companies to achieve their goals in regards to quality of customer service and hospitality. The results of our survey show that the soft skills, needed for the management of the tourism product are estimated as skills of “crucial importance” as illustrated in Table 3:

<i>MANAGERIAL SOFT SKILLS</i>	Learners	Educators	Business and employers
decision making	4.55	4.39	4.63
employee motivation	4.80	4.44	4.78
team care	4.48	4.28	4.83
conflict management	4.63	4.48	4.92
time management	4.68	4.28	4.86
process orientation	3.58	4.15	4.74
leadership	4.52	3.80	4.66

Table 3

Managerial soft skills competencies needed for hospitality and tourism industry

Lower rates are given for the soft skills *process orientation* (3.58) as given by the Learners and by the Educators (4.15).

Conclusion

The assessment of the mean values, illustrated by the above tables reveals that all three selected groups of soft skills competences are identified as being of *crucial importance*. Based on the overall evaluation of skills by the Learners it can be concluded that they rank the Core soft skills as being of paramount importance, whereby hospitality, professional behaviour and employee motivation are marked as the most important soft skills with respect to the three groups of skills. Regarding the special soft skills, it can be noted that all respondents believe that the most important soft skill is *professional behaviour*, followed by the *ability for digital interaction*. Remarkably, the special soft skill *handling of complaints* is given the highest mean value by both Educators and Business representatives, and hence it falls under the category of “crucial importance”, however, this is not the case with the group of the Learners. As a competence of a lesser importance within the special competencies group, all the respondents indicate the soft skill work under pressure. Moving to the third group of soft skills and considering that managerial competencies are a prerequisite for the efficient running of each tourism enterprise, it is not surprising that the group of Business representatives and employers assess all the abilities labelled managerial soft skills as being “of crucial importance”. Due to the fact that the learners are focused on the training process as a whole and not especially focused on the acquisition of core and special soft skills, they categorize the managerial soft skills as of lower importance.

The analysis of the results obtained shows that the respondents from the groups of the Learners and of the Educators assess the “special soft skills” as the most important among the three types of soft skills. The group of Business and Employers considers that all three soft skills groups can be identified as being of “crucial importance”. Last but not least, it has to be emphasized that the estimated high mean values of the assessed soft skills testify to their importance for the three groups of respondents, as well as for the process of tourism training and employment opportunities in the tourism and hospitality industry. The analyzed soft skills could not extend to cover all the skills relevant to the practice and theory of tourism but it certainly managed to provide useful information in view of the identification of the competencies and skills that should be inseparable part from the profile of successful tourism professionals and specialists in the hospitality sphere. Certainly, real efforts to provide up-to-date training and practice in order to use the mentioned set of soft skills in a more comprehensive way are still needed. New skills and competences, not tackled in this paper, will have to be added as well, resulting from the new trends in digitization, globalization, interculturality and multiculturalism, as they are indispensable for both professional and social life at present.

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