

# The social construction of skills: a hospitality sector perspective

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**SUMMARY**

**This paper addresses the nature of skills in service work with specific reference to international tourism and its hospitality subsector. It explores the role of experiential factors (cultural, emotional and aesthetic) in equipping those entering work in the sector. The specific context of work in less developed countries and within migrant labour communities in Europe is considered. The paper concludes with the proposition that cultural and contextual experience is an important factor in determining the skills demands of work in hospitality.**

## Introduction

Work in services such as tourism and, specifically, hospitality has been widely characterised as 'low skills' in both the academic literature (Westwood, 2002) and the popular press. This is a reflection of aspects of work in the sector, widely reported, which focus on low levels of qualifications, low wages, high dependence on seasonal work, high labour turnover and related concerns. It is a description that is valid in the context of developed countries. However, this stereotype is challenged in the work of several writers (Baum, 1996; Burns, 1997) on the basis that this represents both a technical and western-centric perception of work and skills. These challenges are developed in analyses that consider skills in experience services (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) to include a wide-ranging 'bundle' of attributes, extending beyond traditional interpretations of such work that are focused, primarily, on technical aspects of product delivery. Such extensions include recognition of the importance of what can be

styled 'generic skills' (communication, problem solving, ICT, languages) (Baum, 2006) as well as both emotional (Hochschild, 1983) and aesthetic (Nickson, Warhurst and Witz, 2003) dimensions as features within the bundling of skills in experience services. The complexity of the workplace demands on even what might be called semi-skilled employees is increasingly recognised in the sector (Cedefop; Jonckers, 2005). The complex bundling of skills in hospitality is an affirmation of Rigby and Sanchis' (2006, p. 31) thesis that skills are socially constructed, defined as they are 'as a result of a social process, a process which has produced inequalities reflecting existing structures of power'. This paper contends that the notion that hospitality skills are derived from social and cultural experience is particularly pertinent in the context of international hospitality. This is because the sector depends for its operational and management culture upon a paradigm that is rooted firmly within western, generally American and, to a lesser extent, European traditions (Nickson and Warhurst, 2001).

This paper challenges stereotypical definitions of skills in the hospitality sector and argues that these are largely context-defined, with limited application beyond the developed economies of western Europe and North America. At a practical level, the conclusions of this analysis have implications for training in the hospitality sector of many European countries which depend heavily on migrant labour from elsewhere in Europe and beyond.

## Skills and the hospitality sector

Defining what skills actually are, an important precursor to this discussion, is no simple task. Riley et al. (2002) note that 'skill is always surrounded by controversy because perceptions of skill are highly subjective and relative. Who is or who is not skilled is inevitably an issue' (p. 143). Bradley et al. (2000) note the varying criteria that can be used to define a skill. They question whether we should consider formal qualifications held by an individual; the amount of training required for a job; or the ability of an individual to perform complex job tasks. In reality, all these criteria play a part in shaping our understanding of skills and they are further overlaid with the social construction which tradition, gender and ethnicity impose on our interpretation of what is skilled work and what is not.

On the face of it, it is arguable that there is little about work in hospitality and the skills it requires that is unique to the sector. There is, however, a studied argument (see for example Lashley and Morrison, 2000 on the nature of hospitality; Hochschild, 1983 in her discussion of emotional labour; and the contribution of Nickson, Warhurst and Witz (2003) in adding the concept of aesthetic labour to the skills bundle in the industry) that it is the context and

combination of these skills that generates unique attributes. The context of hospitality, diverse in several respects, is particularly interesting from a human resource perspective. Hospitality is generally characterised by a dominant presence of small businesses, alongside which recent years have seen the growth of larger, multinational operators. Geographically, the sector is widely dispersed, an industry located in most communities, and adapted in its facilities and services to reflect location, climate and market focus. Hospitality businesses are also frequently temporal in their trading behaviours, seasonal but also variable within each day and week. These features impinge on the roles that people in developed countries play in delivering products and services in hospitality. They contribute to human resource features that Keep and Mayhew (1999, p. 8-9) summarise as:

- tendency to low wages, except where skills shortages act to counter this;
- prevalence of unsocial hours and family-unfriendly shift patterns;
- rare incidence of equal opportunities policies and male domination of higher level, better paid work;
- poor or non-existent career structures;
- informal recruitment practices;
- failure to adopt formalised 'good practice' models of human resource management and development;
- lack of any significant trade union presence;
- high levels of labour turnover;
- difficulties in recruitment and retention.

The debate about skills issues in hospitality is informed by wider, generic consideration about skills in the context of changing employment, technology and vocational education, within both developed and less developed economies. The major gap in understanding, which this paper seeks to address, is the extent to which work which is perceived to be 'low skills' in the western, developed context, can be described in this way in other contexts because of differing experiential, cultural, communications, linguistic and relationship assumptions which underpin such work in less developed countries. The hospitality sector, in its international and globalised form, is dominated by a strongly western operational and cultural focus (Dunning and McQueen, 1982; Nickson and Warhurst, 2001) so that there is what might be called 'cultural and experiential proximity' between the way in which businesses operate in western developed countries and the experience of the majority of workers who, traditionally, have delivered products and services to guests within them. Employees, in this sense, have shared experience in both delivering and receiving services, they have 'stood in the shoes' of the guests they are serving. By contrast, there are significant cultural and experiential gaps between, on the one hand, in similar international hospitality operations in less

developed or westernised countries and, on the other, the employees who deliver their products and services to guests. These employees are less likely to have 'stood in the shoes' of their guests and do not have the shared experience of both consumer and server. In other words, where exposure to this internationalised model of the experience economy as consumer is not widespread among those working in the industry, there is the potential for a skills gap in the delivery of services and experiences to international consumers. The background significant number of the recent cohorts of migrant workers to western Europe, many of whom initially find work in hospitality operations, is such that they may well be culturally removed from the industrial sector in which they work (Baum, 2006).

In a general sense, hospitality work (and thus the skills that it demands) is characterised by diversity in both horizontal and vertical terms. In a horizontal sense, the sector includes a very wide range of jobs across several key production and service areas. Research into such work generally concentrates on areas that provide, primarily, food service and, to a lesser extent, accommodation and airline service. Coverage of this discussion is well served by Guerrier et al. (1998) and others. Research into wider areas of hospitality work, particularly those that have emerged with the expansion of services and functions in the area (front desk, leisure, entertainment, reservation call centres) is much more poorly represented. It is fair to say that, although there is long-standing debate as to whether the industry is 'unique' (Lashley and Morrison, 2000), there is little doubt that there is little that is unique about the technical and, indeed, wider skills that are employed. Most of the skills that are employed within the sector also have relevance and application in other sectors of the economy. Those employed in areas where there is considerable skills overlap with tourism and hospitality, such as the areas listed above, may well see themselves in terms of their generic skills area rather than as part of this discrete labour market.

The characteristics and the organisation of the industry are subject to ongoing restructuring and evolutionary change. There are major labour market and skills implications of such change as businesses reshape the range of services they offer (Hjalager and Baum, 1998) or respond to fashion and trend imperatives in the consumer marketplace. Vertical diversity in tourism and hospitality work is represented by a more traditional classification that ranges from unskilled through semi-skilled and skilled to supervisory and management. This 'traditional' perspective of work and, therefore, skills is partly described by Riley (1996, p. 18) in terms that suggest that the proportionate breakdown of the workforce at unskilled and semiskilled levels is 64 % of the total with skilled work constituting a further 22 % of the total. Azzaro's (2005) figures for Malaysia, while not based on directly comparable data, suggest that non-managerial positions in tourism break down into unskilled (19 %) and

skilled/semi-skilled (42 %). These figures hint at some difference in perceptions of skills within the sector between developed and less developed economies.

These simplifications mask major business organisational diversity in the industry, reflecting the size, location and ownership of businesses. The actual job and skills content of work in the sector is predicated upon these factors so that common job titles (e.g. restaurant manager, *sous-chef*, tour guide) almost certainly mask a very different range of responsibilities, tasks and skills within jobs in different contexts.

Riley is useful in his application of the weak-strong internal labour market model to illustrate the relationship that his workforce structure has to several externalities including educational requirements, points of entry into the workforce, workplace pay differentials and level of trade union membership. This analysis has important ramifications for the status of tourism and hospitality work and the perceived attractiveness of the sector both for employment and educational/training opportunity. As we have seen, Keep and Mayhew (1999) note that the characteristics of hospitality work tend to confirm Riley's weak internal labour market attribution.

The skills profile of the sector, in turn, is influenced by the labour market that is available to it, both in direct terms and via educational and training establishments. The weak internal labour market characteristics in themselves impose downward pressures on the skills expectations that employers have of their staff and this, in turn, influences the nature and level of training which the educational system delivers. There is an evident cycle of down-skilling, in part in response to the actual demands of work in the sector or of consumer expectations of what it can deliver, but also as a result of the perceptions of potential employees and the expectations that employers have of them.

As we have already suggested, much hospitality work is widely characterised, in both the popular press and in academic sources, as dominated by a low skills profile. Shaw and Williams (1994) note that such work is often characterised, rather brutally and, possibly, unfairly as work that is undertaken by the 'uneducated, unmotivated, untrained, unskilled and unproductive' (p. 142), voices echoed by Westwood (2002) when he talks of service work as offering 'a low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no-future job' (p. 3). Bradley et al. (2000) also apply this epithet to the wider service or new economy in questioning assumptions about a skills revolution in Britain, noting that 'jobs commonly retain a low-skill character, especially in the fastest-growing sectors' (p. 129).

However, Burns (1997) questions the basis for categorising tourism employment into 'skilled' and 'unskilled' categories, arguing the postmodernist case that this separation is something of a social construct. This construct is rooted in, firstly, manpower planning paradigms for the manufacturing sec-

tor and, secondly, in the traditional power of trade unions to control entry into the workplace through lengthy apprenticeships. Burns bases this argument on a useful consideration of the definition of skills in tourism and hospitality, noting that:

'... the different sectors that comprise hospitality-as-industry take different approaches to their human resources, and that some of these differences... are due to whether or not the employees have a history of being 'organised' (either in terms of trade unions or staff associations with formalised communication procedures)' (p. 240).

This strong internal labour market analysis leads Burns to argue that skills within 'organised' sectors such as airlines and hotel companies with clearly defined staff relationship structures are recognised and valued. By contrast, catering and fast food 'operate within a business culture where labour is seen in terms of costs which must be kept at the lowest possible level' (p. 240) and where skills, therefore, are not valued or developed. Burns' definition of the sector's skills seeks to go beyond the purely technical capabilities that those using 'unskilled' or 'low skills' descriptors assume. This can be linked to Ritzer's (2004) drama analogy for the service workplace in the sense that working in such an environment requires more than an ability to operate at a technical level. Emotional demands are made of employees to constantly be in a positive, joyful and even playful mood. An ability to cope with such demands must be recognised as a real skill.

This case is also argued by Poon (1993) who notes that new employees in tourism:

'Must be trained to be loyal, flexible, tolerant, amiable and responsible ... at every successful hospitality establishment, it is the employees that stand out ... Technology cannot substitute for welcoming employees' (p. 262).

Burns' emphasis on 'emotional demands' as an additional dimension of skills in the sector has been developed by Hochschild (1983) who introduced the concept of emotional work within the services economy, based on a study of airline cabin crew. Hochschild argues that service employees are required to manage their emotions for the benefit of customers and are, in part, paid to do this. Likewise, Seymour considers the contribution of what she calls 'emotional labour' makes to work in fast food and traditional areas of service work and concludes that both areas demand considerable emotional elements in addition to overt technical skills.

To the requirements of emotional labour in hospitality can be added the skills demands of what Nickson, Warhurst and Witz (2003) describe as aesthetic labour, the skills required to look, sound and behave in a manner that

is compatible with the requirements of the job and with the expectations of your customers. In many cases, aesthetic labour involves staff demonstrating the ability to respond to fashion and trend imperatives in the consumer marketplace in a way that is socially exclusive of many groups and cultures within society. Aesthetic labour is about appearance but can also be underpinned by cultural cache, the ability of front-line staff to understand and engage culturally with their customers on terms dictated by the latter. Thus, service staff in some contexts (airlines, luxury hotels, style bars and nightclubs) need to be able to engage in an informed manner with their guests or clients about politics, music, sport and almost any other imaginable topic, often from an international perspective. This requirement presupposes a certain level of prior education and cultural exposure as well as a commitment to remain up-to-date in these areas.

## Hospitality work and the notion of social distance

Burns, above, rightly argues that the low skills perspective of the area under discussion is context-specific and is drawn from a western-centric view of tourism and hospitality work. He cites the inappropriateness of these assumptions when applied to environments such as the Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka and the Cook Islands. Likewise, Baum (1996) questions the validity of claims that hospitality is a work area of universally low skills. Much of the discussion about the universality of skills has focused on management competences and Lubatkin et al. (1997), among others, have developed a reasoned argument that, at levels of administrative responsibility, there is more in common to the work undertaken by managers in developed and less developed countries than there is to separate them. However, little comparable work has focused on front-line work in the service sector and, indeed, Farashahi and Molz (2004) argue for the recognition of divergence in the organisational cultures of firms of all kinds operating in developed and less developed countries. Baum's argument is based on the cultural assumptions that lie behind such employment in westernised, international tourism and hospitality work whereby technical skills are defined in terms of a relatively seamless progression from domestic and consumer life into the workplace. In less developed countries, such assumptions cannot be made as employees join tourism and hospitality businesses without western acculturation, without knowledge of the implements and ingredients of western cookery and service, for example. Learning at a technical level, therefore is considerably more demanding than it might be in western communities. Social and inter-personal skills also demand considerably more by way of prior learning, whether this pertains to language skills (English is a widespread prerequisite for work in this sector in many countries) or wider

cultural communications. On the basis of this argument, Baum contends that work that may be deemed unskilled in Australasia, Europe and the USA requires significant investment in terms of education and training elsewhere and cannot, therefore, be universally described as 'low skilled'. This issue is one that is beginning to assume significance in western Europe as a combination of service sector labour shortages and growing migration from new accession countries of the European Union and elsewhere means that traditional skills assumptions about those entering training and work in the area may have less validity than in the past.

To understand the context of hospitality skills in a less developed world context, it is useful to reflect on the nature of the relationship between those working in the sector and their customers in terms of their background and exposure to the international industry paradigm. Baum (2006) considers this in terms of the 'social distance' that exists between the two stakeholders in a tourism transaction. Baum notes that the sector, in developed countries, has become one of mass participation with increasing trends towards the creation of a workforce which mirrors its consumer market in its breadth of experience. The growth of seasonal, part-time and temporary working opportunities in most sectors of the industry means that, for many young people, positions in tourism-related companies represent an early exposure to the world of employment. At the same time, these same employees are, frequently, relatively seasoned consumers in their own right and have participated in both domestic and international travel to a considerable extent. In addition, their wider socialisation as children and young adults has been within a cultural paradigm that has much in common with many aspects of international tourism and hospitality in terms of the tools, products and rules of etiquette that are common to both the home and the industry environment. Thus, in developed countries, we have a significant proportion of employees who are versed and experienced in the needs of their customers, and the gap between the two groups does not have the importance that it might have had in the past.

One of the driving forces behind this change process has, of course, been economic in that overall prosperity in developed countries combined with a general reduction in the real-term cost of participating in tourism and hospitality means that consumer participation is much more affordable. But the democratisation of both consumer participation and work is not exclusively an economic phenomenon in developed countries. As we have seen, the nature of work has changed from its predominantly technical basis to include a range of, arguably, sophisticated generic skills, covering areas such as communications, languages and information technology as well as emotional and aesthetic labour inputs. As a result, the sector seeks to attract employees who are able to deliver on the emotional and aesthetic labour requirements of work and so they are brought into much closer proximity with their customers. For



some employers, their need is to recruit what Nickson, Warhurst and Witz (2003) call 'style' workers, people who physically and emotionally match their work surroundings and are able to identify with the products and services they are selling and fully empathise with the expectations and buying objectives of their customers. Guerrier et al. (1998) refer to this process in the Singaporean context where service workers are highly brand conscious in their choice of workplace, so that:

'The modern young Singaporean is disinclined to work in service unless the image of the product accords with her own sense of fashion. Working in Gucci means that the product becomes part of her own accessory range' (Guerrier et al., 1998, p. 34).

We now need to move this discussion away from a developed world context and take a look at the situation in less developed countries which are also more recent participants in the development of the international hospitality industry and where consumer participation is not at the same level. Here, the social distance between customers and guests is considerable, similar to how it was in the earlier days of commercial exchange in what are now the countries of the developed world. There are evident economic barriers to consumptive participation by those who work in the sector in the poorer countries of Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. However, as we have already indicated, social distance is not an exclusively economic phenomenon and, in many parts of the developing world, takes on cultural and political dimensions as well. The manner in which international tourism and hospitality is presented and its operating culture is predominantly western-centric and is far more remote from the everyday lives of people living in India, Tanzania or Cuba than it is from residents of Australia, Canada or the Netherlands. It is this combination of divergence (economic, cultural, political, experiential) which creates the high level of social distance between customers and its workforce in developing countries. This social distance, in turn, helps us to identify the differing skills demands that exist with regard to such work in less developed country environments when compared to that of contexts where greater cultural and experience proximity exists between employees and customers.

Our discussion to this point has been primarily based upon conceptual analysis. Empirical analysis beyond the anecdotal on this particular topic is hard to identify. One study, which addresses this theme is that reported by Baum et al. (2006). Their detailed empirical study of hospitality front office work across seven jurisdictions in four continents (Brazil, China, Egypt, Ireland, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan and Malaysia) in both the developed and less developed world, was designed to profile hotel front office staff in terms of their backgrounds, training profiles, working experience and perceptions of skills and skills development. The findings point to significant differences in the career and training

profiles of workers in this area of hospitality. The main conclusions of this study are worth summarising here:

- employees bring very different education and training profiles into a largely common (technical) workplace – reflective of economic, labour market but also cultural factors. Employees in less developed countries are more likely to have completed a formal programme of technical skills training in preparation for their work than their counterparts in developed countries.
- front office work shows clear gender differences across different cultural contexts, with a much higher proportion of male employees in less developed countries.
- employees bring very different skills profiles into the work area in areas such as languages beyond their mother tongue – those in less developed countries exhibit a rather wider range of such skills than their counterparts in developed countries.
- employment stability varies greatly according to context – length of service within a particular hotel and in a specific job ranges from short-term to fairly lengthy with a clear association between length of employment and the economic development of the country – labour turnover is far higher in developed countries.
- career ambitions vary across contexts, from a firm commitment to front office work and the hotel sector in general to rather looser commitment to the work area. Workers in more developed countries appear to have a much lower sense of career commitment to the industry.
- there is considerable divergence among respondents regarding the importance of specific aspects of front office work, and they vary across contexts. Employees in less developed countries place a greater emphasis on traditional technical skills than on the wider bundling of skills expected in more developed locations.
- there are evident variations in notions of job status, perceived position with a skills hierarchy, careers and career opportunities, vocational commitment and skills development in the workplace between employees in less developed and developed countries.

The findings of this study point, tentatively, to affirmation of the argument developed in this paper, that the demands of hospitality work vary according to economic and development context. It is suggested, from this research, that to work in international hospitality businesses, employees in developing countries need to bring a higher level of specific training as well as general educational attributes into the workplace in order to undertake the demands of the job. There is a clear need to extend this research to other areas of work in the hospitality sector, particularly those normally associated with low skills descriptions such as the food and beverage service.

## Conclusions and implications

The argument that access to skills is derived from social and cultural experience is one that has practical implications for both vocational educators and employers. The real challenge for international hospitality businesses which employ workers from countries where social and cultural experience levels are at some variance from the industry operating culture is to help their employees bridge this gap. This is no mean challenge and is one that probably cannot be achieved through conventional training processes. In the international hospitality industry today, this is an issue that confronts companies delivering such services in less developed countries and requires action in terms of employee recruitment and training as well as in the programmes that are offered for the sector within the vocational education system. Traditional vocational training programmes, designed to prepare young people for work in the hospitality sector, are generally designed on the basis of a range of cultural expectations that providers make with respect to their students and trainees. In the changing and multicultural societies of many western European countries today, such assumptions may no longer be valid and educational providers may need to reconsider some of the fundamental assumptions upon which their programmes were designed (Devine et al, 2006). As one example of response, training and cultural awareness initiatives by Fáilte Ireland in the Irish Republic (Fáilte Ireland, 2005) are designed to complement the evident technical skills that migrant employees bring to the workplace and to compensate for their frequent shortcomings in emotional and experiential terms.

In practical terms, therefore, this study recommends that training programmes for hospitality work need to take full cognisance of the educational and cultural background of those entering training, relative to the work expectations of employers in the international hospitality industry. This is true of programmes offered in developing countries but also in developed countries in Europe, North America and elsewhere where hospitality education programmes attract a substantial number of applicants from migrant communities. Such programmes need to recognise the differing needs of such entrants in terms of:

- the duration of learning in order to recognise the additional time that students from non-traditional, migrant community backgrounds may require to develop technical, cultural and language skills;
- enhanced language skills development within programmes;
- approaches to service skills training;
- career development and educational development models.

The discussion in this paper, if the underlying thesis is accepted, also raises an extensive agenda for further research, not least the need to explore em-

pirically whether there is variability in the nature of work and skills in hospitality as a result of the development context. If the presence of social and cultural experience skills can be demonstrated empirically in international hospitality, it may be possible to develop scales that explore and measure such gaps, thus, perhaps, permitting development of training that could help to close them. There is a further and potentially intriguing theme for research into the possible impact on hospitality employees, with relatively divergent social and cultural experience profiles, that may result when they join international organisations. They may then be expected to close such gaps through training and exposure to different cultures and, as a result, be forced to act 'out of culture' and 'beyond personal experience'. Hochschild (1983) focuses on the harm that the demands of emotional labour impose on flight attendants and there may be a case that expecting employees to bridge the experiential and cultural divide could have similar, negative consequences. Alternatively, is Bolton and Boyd's (2003) case that emotion workers manage such demands and 'synthesise different types of emotion work dependent on situational demands' (p. 289) an alternative response model that has value in the context of our discussion here? Therefore, can Korczynski's (2003) 'communities of coping', acting as an antidote to the pressures of emotional labour, have some value as a strategy for workers faced with the pressures of divergent social and cultural experience profiles in international hospitality? This, too, represents an area worthy of further exploration.

This discussion has focused on the concept of social and cultural experience profiles as an indicator of contrast between developed and less developed country environments, arguing that the extent of proximity and exposure to Americanised models of international hospitality influences the learning skills demands for those entering work in the sector. This paper further argues that a similar notion has validity within the societies of developed economies in that the cultural diversity born of recent migration into hospitality work in many western European countries may have skills training implications in experiential and cultural terms. There is a case to explore whether expectations of proximate social and cultural experience profiles in work such as international hospitality also act in a way that is socially exclusive within westernised, developed countries. Nickson et al. (2002), in their study of service work in Glasgow, note that employers' aesthetic labour demands were clearly socially exclusive and that these demands acted to the detriment of sections of the economic and social underclass in the city. Similar exploration of international hospitality work in terms of the implicit experiential skills that it demands within major cities in Europe and North America is an agenda worthy of exploration but is one that has not been addressed here.

Social and cultural experience as a component within the delivery of hospitality skills is proposed here as a concept for debate and to guide thinking

in this important academic and practitioner field. Without further research into this currently neglected area, its value as a concept is difficult to ascertain. There is also a pressing and recognised need to address the nature of hospitality skills deficiencies in less developed countries (Kaplan, 2004). This paper is offered as a contribution to furthering understanding of the nature of this extremely complex skills bundle within the sector, in the hope that it can assist in meeting this need.

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