

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOFT SKILLS IN TOURISM INDUSTRY IN MELAKA MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study aims to identify the need of generic skills in the tourism industry in Melaka. The subjects consist of 70 front liners, male (N=29) and female (N= 41) who work at recreational and hotel sectors in Melaka. Subjects responded to the Social Inventory for Melaka Tourism Sector (Inventori Kemahiran Sosial Pekerja Pelancongan Melaka). The inventory has a fairly high reliability of 0.85 – 0.88, hence suggesting its pragmatic utility. Findings of the study show that Melaka tourism front liners views the importance of generic skills as follows; ethiques and knowledge (Min= 4.3, SD: .70), personality (Min= 3.9, SD: .68), attire (Min= 3.6, SD: .37) and language (Min= 3.6, SD: .49).

Keywords: generic skills, tourism, hotel industry, research.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism refers to the activities of visiting or travelling to a destination that exceeds fifty miles from the residence for no more than a year due to recreational purposes or fulfilling other non-formal agendas. According to the World Travel Organisation, namely one of the UN agencies, the word 'tour' also refers to activities related to touring services. Tourism has become a popular worldwide interest (Melanie, 2009).

Given that tourism is well-liked, it can be seen as a main source of income of a country. Tourists services should be continuously maintained and upgraded from time to time. In Melaka, the purpose of developing this sector is seen as reasonable as it coincides with the recognition granted by the UNESCO as a World Heritage since 7 Julai 2008. The acknowledgement by the world body has uplifted the country and the people of Melaka in particular to bear the responsibility in maintaining Melaka's unique cultural heritage, art and historical places.

Tourism in Melaka

Melaka has great potential to enhance the country's economy. The numbers of tourists entering Melaka increases every year. An average increase of almost 20% of tourists visit Melaka annually was revealed between the year 1999 to 2006. They spend an average of 1.77 nights per person. In the period of a year, as many as 70.3% domestic tourists came to Melaka; and the foreign tourists comprised 29.7%. In the year 2007, 6.0 million tourists came to Melaka, compared to 5.1 million tourists in 2006. This records an increase of 18.1% with 1.87 average of overnight stay. Nevertheless, in terms of tourism of the foreign market, Singapore continues to lead the tourism industry at 19.0%, followed by China (17.0%), Indonesia (9.4%), Hong Kong (4.4%) and Saudi Arabia (4.3%) (Melaka State official portal, 2008).

The arrival of tourists helps Melaka to boost its tourism industry from eleven perspectives, namely; 1) History, 2) Culture, 3) Recreation, 4) Economic input, 5) Shopping activities, 6) Convention, 7) Health, 8) Education, 9) Food, 10) Melaka as Second Home Programme, and 11) Youth Tourism. These eleven activities continue to attract tourists as can be seen from the various developments taking place in Melaka.

Cable cars, new attraction proposed in the form of travelling using cable cars. Although Melaka has verbally agreed with this project, studies and surveys are aggressively being carried out to ensure the success of this project. Preliminary responses from the tourism industry suggest that attraction as such would be able to attract more visitors to visit Melaka. The success of cable cars to attract tourists has already been proven by Genting Highlands and Langkawi. Cable cars on Mount Raya in Langkawi, for instance, gather crowds where long queues are expected at the cable car rides. Although the global economic crisis in early 2009 threatens previous development achievements of the Melaka state economy especially in the manufacturing sector, the demand for tourism manages to sustain its growth. The acknowledgement of Melaka as a World Heritage by UNESCO world body raises more potential revenues towards the development of Melaka tourism industry. Within the UK, for instance, the value of tourism in 1998 was over £61,000 million and supported approximately 1.7 million jobs. Expenditure on tourism is also expected to grow by 44 per cent between 1997 and 2003 (StarUK, 1999). These growth around the world indeed supported by the enhancement of generic skills mastered by tourism personnel and operator.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The booming of the tourism industry in Melaka promises to Melaka to be a top and competitive tourist attraction. This sector will be able to contribute to the economy of Melaka and reduce its dependence on other economic sectors such as agriculture and manufacturing. Conducting research on the tourism, therefore, can be used to identify specific generic skills (as outlined) by frontliners of the tourism industry.

This paper aims to:

1. To recognize some aspects of communication skills as outlined by the “frontline worker”
2. To identify the values outlined by “frontline worker”

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Tourism frontliners provide the first impression in which the general perception would be formulated by tourists. Indeed, in such services or interactions, qualities such as professionalism, integrity, punctuality and politeness are indicators to indicate the satisfaction. Accordingly, the data for tourism such as in this study is necessary empirically in the quest for better quality services. If there are weaknesses or deficiencies in the ubiquitous aspect, intervention programs can be prepared. The intervention programs may be designed specifically to upgrade generic skills of the frontliners. Having frontliners with good generic skills is all about building good tourists relationships. Every traveler will have their own tale to share with their friends whom in return will be the best advertisers for Melaka. Hence, issues in this study are:

1. Does good communication skills contribute to the development of the tourism sector?
2. What are the main aspects of communication skills that are important for the development of the tourism sector?

Generic skills

The Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education has categorized seven (7) elements of generic skills to be integrated and implemented in the curricular the public universities. One of the main elements of generic skills are good communication skills. Communication is one of the important factors that needs to be considered in order to improve performance in an organisation or in an individual (MacCarthy, B.L. &

Wilson, J.R. (2001). Communication skills can be generally categorized as the oral, written and body language skills (Fatimawati *et al*, 2005; Jackson, 1999; Shamsudin Abd. Rahman, 1997). If frontliners are able to master these skills and leave a good impression, then the government may unfold further steps to further boost the tourism industry.

Several of the features examined in this study are:

1. Proficiency in languages such as English and other foreign languages
2. Oral skills, written and body language
3. Dress and attire
4. Appearance
5. Manner of communication
6. Knowledge pertaining to Malay culture and common courtesy
7. General knowledge and professional ethic
8. Proficiency in formal and informal protocol
9. Skills of delivery or relaying information to tourists
10. Study of work ethics, such as honesty, willingness to help without conditions *et cetera*

Generic skills, by definition, are those that surely hold across manifold situations, even unknown ones. It however is the idea of skills, even generic skills, is a *cul-de-sac*. In other words, mastering for an unknown future has to be a learning understood neither in terms of knowledge or skills but of human qualities and dispositions.

Nelson Report (Nelson, 2002a) listed a large set of attributes and skills for employability identified from the research process. Desirable attributes (non skill-based behaviours) included "loyalty", "commonsense" and "sense of humour". Eight 'key skills' were identified as Communication skills, Teamwork skills, Problem solving skills, Initiative and enterprise skills, Planning and organising skills, Self-management skills, Learning skills and Technology skills.

Generic skills are the general skills, qualities, knowledge, abilities and traits that a person should possess to succeed in one's studies and career. Such skills enable a person to function and contribute effectively in solving problems, communicating effectively, thinking critically and creatively, and acting as effective team members at work. Generic skills are also known in other foreign universities as core skills, essential skills, employability skills, transferable skills and trans-disciplinary'. Such skills, once acquired, are transferable to other areas of one's social, academic and professional life, (Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 2005, p.1).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This exploratory study focusses on the “frontline workers” of the tourism industry in Melaka. 70 people have been chosen using cluster sampling. These samples are chosen from Ayer Keroh Melaka and its surroundings. One set of instrument was given to each sample and reponses were recorded via SPSS software.

Findings

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used for the study. The Statistical Package of the Social Science (SPSS version 15.0) was used to analyze and interpret raw data. The data obtained were compiled, summarized and displayed in a form that is easily understood. Demographics of this study were analyzed using numbers and percentages.

Table 1: Distribution by Gender

Ethnic	Number	Percentage
Male	29	41.4
Female	41	58.6
Total	70	100

Table 1 shows the distribution of subjects based on gender. 29 of the respondents are males and 41 of them are females of different ages.

Table 2: Distribution by Race

Ethnic	N	Percentage
Malay	67	95.7
Chinese	2	2.9
Indian	1	1.4
Total	70	100

Table 2 shows the distribution of subjects based on race. From the 70 respondents, 67 people are of Malay, 2 are Chinese, and one is an Indian.

Table 3 : Distribution by Organisation

Institution	N	Percentage
Hotel Sector	58	82.9
Recreation Sector	12	17.1
Total	70	100

Table 3 shows the distribution of subjects based on organization. Of the 70 subjects, 58 people works in the hospitality sector and the remaining 12 people work in recreational field.

Table 4: Analysis of Respondents Based on Language Component

Language	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly Agree
Speaks Malay fluently	2 (2.9%)	1 (1.4%)	2(2.9%)	7(2.0%)	58(82.9%)
Speaks English fluently	2 (2.9%)	7 (10.%)	29(41%)	22(31%)	10(14.3%)
Speaks other languages fluently	42 (60%)	15(21.%)	6 (8.6%)	1 (1.4%)	6 (8.6%)
Writes in English excellently	3(4.3%)	7(10%)	29(41%)	21(30%)	10(14.3%)
Writes in Malay excellently	2(2.9%)	1(1.4%)	0	10(14.3%)	57(81%)

Table 4 shows the distribution of respondents based on the language component. Item for the ability to speak in Malay fluently total at 58 (82%) stating strongly agree, 7 (2.0%) agree, 2 (2.9%) not sure, 1 (1.4%) disagree and 2 (2.9%) stated strongly disagree. Item for the ability to speak in English recorded as 10 (14.3%) stating strongly agree, 22 (31%) agree, 29 (41%) not sure, 7 (10%) disagree and 2 (2.9%) stating strongly disagree. For item on writing ability in English, as many as 10 (14.3%) stated strongly agree, 21 (30%) agree, 29 (41%) not sure, 7 (10%) disagree and 3 (4.3%) strongly disagree. The item of ability to write in Malay showed that as many as 57 (81%) stating strongly agree, 10 (14%) agree, 1 (1.4%) disagree and 2 (2.4%) strongly disagree. Basically, most of the subjects agree that they must write and speak fluently in Malay and that they also need to master the English language.

Table 5: Analysis of Respondents Based on Attire

Attire	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly Agree
Work attire has to be immaculate	1 (1.4%)	1 (1.4%)	1(1.4%)	24(34%)	43(61%)
Work attire consist formal office attire	6 (8.6%)	10(14%)	10(14%)	20(28%)	24(34%)
Tourists like smart frontliners	6(8.6%)	0	2(2.9%)	5(7.1%)	57(82%)
Tourists like frontliners with uniforms	2(2.9%)	2(2.9%)	14(20%)	16(23%)	36(51%)
Ensure that one look smart in the eyes of others	5(7.1%)	1(1.4%)	0	19(27%)	45(64%)

Table 5 shows the distribution of respondents based on the working attire. The findings showed a total of 43 (61%) who strongly agree, 24 (34%) agree, 1 (1.4%) not sure, 1 (1.4%) disagree and 1 (1.4%) strongly disagree on item stating working attire has to be immaculate. Item for wearing shirt and slacks during work recorded about 24 (34%) who strongly agree, 20 (28%) agree, 10 (14%) not sure, 10 (14%) disagree and 6 (8.6%) strongly disagree. For item stated that tourists like frontliners with an immaculate look, about 57 (82%) showed strongly agree, 5 (7.1%) agree, 2 (2.9%) not sure, and 6 (8.6%) disagree. Item stated that tourists like frontliners with uniforms recorded 36 (51%) who strongly agree, 16 (23%) agree, 14 (20%) not sure, 2 (2.9%) disagree and 2 (2.9%) strongly disagree. Item of "ensure that one look immaculate in the eyes of others" showed that 45 (64%) strongly agree, 19 (27%) agree, 1 (1.4%) disagree and 5 (7.1%) strongly disagree. Basically, most of the subjects agreed that they should be well dressed and have the skills to interact with the tourists themselves. They also stated that the management must supply frontliners with appropriate attire so that they will look neat at all times.

Table 6: Analysis of Subjects on Personal Character

Self disposition	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly Agree
Friendliness	2 (2.9%)	1 (1.4%)	8(11.4%)	33(4.1%)	26(37%)
Patience	4(5.7%)	1(1.4%)	5(7.1%)	37(53%)	23(33%)
Impatient with fussy tourists	19(27%)	10(14 %)	15(21%)	19(27%)	7(10%)
Smiling to tourists	1(1.4%)	6(8.6%)	7(10%)	20(29%)	36(52%)
Ensuring that communication does not upset tourists	1(1.4%)	1(1.4%)	1(1.4%)	20(29%)	36(52%)

Table 6 shows the distribution of respondents based on the components of self disposition. In the item of friendliness, the result showed that 26 (37%) strongly agree, 33 (4.1%) agree 8 (11.4%) not sure, 1 (1.4%) disagree and 2 (2.9%) strongly disagree. For the item of patience towards tourists attitudes, 23 (33%) showed strongly agree, 37 (53%) agree, 5 (7.1%) not sure, 1 (1.4%) or disagree, and 4 (5.7%) strongly disagree. For items of impatient with fussy tourists, 19 (27%) respondents stated strongly disagree, 10 (14%) disagree, 15 (21%) not sure, 19 (27%) agree and 7 (10%) strongly agree. For items of smiling to tourists, 36 (52%) respondents stated strongly agree, 20 (29%) agree, 7 (10%) is not sure, 6 (8.6%) disagree and 1 (1.4%) strongly disagree. The last item is ensuring that communication does not upset tourists. Based on the findings, 36 (52%) respondents stated strongly agree, 20 (29%) agree, 1 (1.4%) not sure, 1 (1.4%) disagree and 1 (1.4%) strongly disagree. To conclude, subjects of the study agreed that the show of affection, act of smiling, ability to handle fussy tourists, and communicating effectively without upsetting tourists are vital skills that help to pain a good impression of an organisation among tourists.

Table 7: Analysis Based on Knowledge and Ethics

Knowledge and Ethics	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly Agree
Upgrade knowledge and skills	1 (1.4%)	1 (1.4%)	5(7.1%)	27(39%)	36(52%)
Honesty	1 (1.4%)	1 (1.4%)	1(1.4%)	24(34%)	43(62%)
Self-conscience	1 (1.4%)	0	2(2.9%)	19(27%)	48(69%)
Able to satisfy tourists expectations	2(2.9%)	0	5(7.1%)	21(30%)	42(60%)
Able to solve tourists problems	2(2.9%)	2(2.9%)	5(7.1%)	23(33%)	38(54%)

Table 7 shows the distribution based on knowledge and ethics components. As for the item of upgrading knowledge and skills on tourism industry, 36 (52%) respondents stated strongly agree, 27 (39%) agree, 5 (7.1%) not sure, 1 (1.4%) disagree and 1 (1.4%) strongly disagree. For items on honesty towards work, 43 (62%) respondents stated strongly agree, 24 (34%) agree, 1 (1.4%) not sure, 1 (1.4%) disagree and 1 (1.4%) strongly disagree. For items on conscience, 48 (69%) responded strongly agree, 19 (27%) agree, 2 (2.9%) not sure, and 1 (1.4%) strongly disagree. For items on satisfying tourists expectations, 42 (60%) stated strongly agree, 21 (30%) agree, 5 (7.1%) not sure and 2 (2.9%) strongly disagree. Items on solving tourists problems showed that 38 (54%) strongly agree, 23 (33%) agree, 5 (7.1%) not sure, 2 (2.9%) disagree and 2 (2.9%) strongly disagree. Basically, most of the respondents agreed that they need to improve their knowledge on tourism services, to be honest in their work, to have good self-conscience, to satisfy tourists' expectations and to be able to solve tourists' problems as fundamental skills that need to be acquired by those in the tourism service.

Table 8: Mean Analysis Based on Social Skills Component

Personal character	Mean	SD
Language	3.60	.49
Attire	3.36	.37
Personality	3.96	.68
Knowledge and ethics	4.34	.70

Table 8 shows the mean analysis based on components that must be obtained by a "front liner". The result shows that item of knowledge and ethics has a mean of 4.34 (SD: .70), personality = 3.96 (SD: .68), attire = 3.60 (SD: .37) and language mean = 3.60 (SD: .49).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Most of the respondents are comfortable with conversing with tourists using Bahasa Melayu. Less than half of them can communicate in English. For a start, these workers need to brush up their English as well as to learn a few other major international languages. Multilingual workers are needed to cater for various foreign nationalities that visit

Melaka. Even though, about 70 % of tourists are Malaysians while the rest are from other countries (Melaka State official portal 2008); promotion in various international language is sorely needed in order to expand the tourism sector internationally. Thus, an influx of visitors in big numbers without well-trained and experienced tourist guides may give a negative image to Melaka as well as to Malaysia.

Other aspect that need to be looked into seriously is professionalism of these frontline workers as mentioned by Bath, *et.al* (2004) in which human qualities and dispositions are not to be neglected. One of these qualities and disposition is based on appearance. The findings indicate that, majority of the respondents agreed that attires which are immaculate, formal and smart looking has a big impact on their line of work. Attire and appearance play important roles as mentioned by respondents that tourists like smart frontliners and those who wear uniforms. Thus, 91% of respondents strive to look decent and professional-looking. Another quality is personal character of these workers. Respondents believe that good personality is really essential for this sector. Among other factor such as, friendliness, patience, and emphatic communication are virtues that go a long way in pampering tourists to stay longer and spend more. Thirdly, most respondents agreed that continuous learning and acquiring new knowledge and skills leads to better customer service. Work ethics such as honesty, self-conscience and competency in serving tourists are the foundation of excellence in tourism.

This exploratory research on social skills (which consist of language fluency, attire worn, personality, knowledge and ethics) gives an empirical data on knowledge, skills, and personality of workers in tourism sector. This hard fact is essential in assessing strengths and weaknesses of tourism workers. Based on these findings, the relevant authorities of Melaka may have some ideas on how to improve the quality of service rendered to tourists.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The influx of tourists from foreign countries help to improve the local economy of Melaka. This can be seen with the increasing number of visitors on the weekends where the road are congested in several key areas of the Melaka township. This situation illustrates that the effects of historical places and tourism in Melaka have managed to attract the tourists. Hotels are fully-booked by tourists especially during festive season. Recreational center also attract tourists who seek to rest and get away from the hustle and bustle of daily life. Hence, communication

skills among the “Frontline worker” play an important role in forming good relations with local or foreigners (Berlo, 1960). Thus, these skills should be learned and obtained. Some of the benefits of obtaining the communication skills are as follows:

- a) able to communicate information to visitors effectively.
- b) able to identify an individual’s attitudes closely.
- c) able to strengthen the relationship with tourists and can attract them to visit again.
- d) able to solve complex problems and
- e) able to build network of relationships with foreign tourists.

Therefore, communication skills is essential in creating a good atmosphere in the workplace and ensuring understanding and strong links between “Frontline worker” and tourists who visit Melaka.

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