
THE TALENT TREE AND THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY: EMPOWERING YOUNG PEOPLE

Lilia Infelise, William Sinclair ARTES

Project key features

Background

Some key features characterise the present scenario:

- A drop in birth rates in many developed economies;
- Increased recruitment of young people from third countries;
- Overspecialisation of young people in narrow fields: lack of adaptability.
- Asymmetry between skills/abilities offered by young applicants and those required by industry.

Current high levels of unemployment were suspected of being caused in part by systemic obstacles in understanding between the spheres of education/training and that of industry (in this case, hospitality). Macroeconomic forces were not the sole determinants.

Project Outline

Commissioned by the regional government of Lombardy for the hospitality sector, the project aims to:

1. examine and contribute to changes in the dynamics which currently govern the process leading from education and professional training, through job application and recruitment to orientation and on-the-job training;
2. provide individuals with an adequate set of skills, fundamental for a quick and effective access to the job market and create solid foundation for life-long learning;
3. develop new learning strategies and innovative school/University curricula to ensure a competence-based and cost-effective vocational education and training system.

Though regional in focus, the project has sought an international outlook, in search of best practice Europe-wide.

The project, scheduled to last two years, is articulated into three main phases: research, modelling and experimental.

The first phase of the project has been concerned with canvassing the opinion and experience of a wide cross-section of stakeholders, actual or potential, with a view to identifying the major trends in the modern hospitality industry, the needs of the industry and to what extent they are being catered for.

Key issues emerging:

- Fundamental economic and technical changes in the industry are having a profound impact on the internal human resources policies of companies, especially young recruitment;
- Companies are finding their basic requirements/expectations of young recruits are not being met;
- Critical gaps in the process which leads young people from school/technical training to an effective insertion in the labour market are acknowledged by industry and educators alike.

A wide overview of the literature concerning competences has been undertaken.

The present phase of the project is concerned with developing a provisional working model of training and professional induction which takes account of the requirements, in terms of competence, that our target industry has expressed as well as the broader interests of the job applicants themselves as they begin to navigate a complex and rapidly changing professional landscape.

The next phase, that of experimentation, will be concerned with testing, adapting and improving our provisional model for a year-long period. 120 students, 48 teachers and trainers, 12 university-level professional trainers and 12 human resources managers from the industry will be involved. These latter will be providing insights into industry experience of mentoring, coaching and tutoring in relation to new recruits.

Project preliminary results

The search for a coherent approach

The last quarter century has undoubtedly seen profound changes in the workforce profile required by the developed economies. The generalised 'need' for more adaptable, multi-skilled, employees whose abilities which might previously have been associated with management have descended further down the chain of command has been understood and categorized in a vast number of different ways, changing rapidly over time. A bewildering plethora of differing presentations of the 'need' has resulted from those who work in the field of human resources and has been expressed in an equal number of analytical, or quasi - analytical, models of 'competence', 'core-skills' (and various other descriptors), for educators and employers alike to puzzle over. Indeed, as academics, educators, professional trainers, human resources managers, trade ministers, education ministers, regional governments, supra-national administrations, employers groups and the like vie for the last word on the issue, whilst necessarily reflecting their own cultural, political or economic interests in doing so, they all agree on one thing: the field of 'competence' lacks a coherent approach. Another point of agreement is the need to find one; a lazy scepticism concerning the field in general is not an option.

The language /terminology issue

One of the principle difficulties with the concept of 'competence' or 'a competence' has always been finding a satisfactory definition. An orthodoxy is still elusive. Even when restricted to its specialist professional context, a variety of radically different understandings of the term itself presents itself, ranging from something more or less synonymous with 'qualification', on the one hand, to 'performance' on the other. The problem is born largely of the fact that whilst the word exists in most European languages, its meaning is by no means uniform. For example, in English, it did not even exist as a countable noun before this field of study took provisional shape in the 1980s. The result is that even within a single text the word may assume a variety of different applications and ambiguity frequently results. That said, we have been able to discern a certain conceptual convergence amongst a large enough number of high profile commentators and for our purposes the word 'competence', as an uncountable noun, shall mean 'readiness to perform' and 'a competence' (countable) shall mean 'a skill'.

Strengths and weaknesses: holistic vs atomised approaches

Broadly speaking, models using what has been termed competence-based logic appear to be of two basic types. Early models, such as the 'core skills model' concentrated on listing the essential skills or competences that were necessitated by the change to a service/information economy. There are three main problems with this approach. First is the danger of tackling inter-dependent facets of competence as separate issues as if one may be of value without the other – this has been called 'atomisation'. Second is the arbitrary nature of the lists themselves, as 'numeracy' is listed alongside vague terms such as 'communication skills'. Also terms such as 'motivation' which have more to do with psychology are found in the same category. The third - connected - difficulty is that of finding any consensus as regards terminology since a single concept may be expressed in a thousand ways. The very existence of a publication entitled "500,000 professional competences" speaks for itself. Later 'holistic' models such as 'the job competence model' which attempt to describe the underlying dynamics of competence per se and thereby 'embed' core skills are seen by many – and by ourselves - as a useful reaction to these problems. They represent an attempt at an integrated definition of professional competence in an intelligible form which may be incorporated meaningfully into the learning process. The 'core skills', in a sense, flow from them and do not have to be treated separately. We favour this approach because our research has demonstrated it to resonate more closely with employers' own ideas concerning 'competence' as it relates to the requirements of the hospitality sector, demanding as it does a 'rounded', rather than box-ticking, approach to work.

The distrust between educators and employers

A key theme that has emerged from the research phase of our project has been one of mutual distrust between educators and employers. At the risk of oversimplification, it could be said that educators feel imposed upon by employers' demands which reflect short term commercial interests rather than those of the student. Employers, on the other hand, feel ill-served by an education system which is out of touch with, at times even uninterested in, the needs of industry. This is not to say that both spheres are not self-critical. Far from it: the sharpest arrows fired at those educationalists who publish papers on 'competence' issue from the bows of other academics who accuse them of attempting to create and institutionalise a pseudo- science. Many employers, perhaps frustrated by the overcomplicating tendency of some models which have emerged, have been quick to agree. On the advice of leaders in the hospitality sector itself as well as those involved in training and education, our overriding concern has therefore been to keep it simple; this has been a complicated process! However we believe that we have arrived at an intelligible model from which coherent educational and training strategies may be derived.

The skill incubator: Construction of a working model along holistic lines

Against this somewhat complex background, for the purposes of the project Skill Incubator, we do not claim to have produced a radical reinterpretation of the field in general but rather a conceptual tool, readily comprehensible both to educators/trainers and to the hospitality industry. In doing so, we have drawn upon the work of those who have produced models of competence which, we believe, are best suited to the core aim of the project.

The model may be seen as a reactor from which all relevant areas of competence may be derived.

[The article will provide a detailed description of the competence model].

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Authors

Mrs. Lilia Infelise, Mr. William Sinclair
ARTES – Applied Research into Training and Education Systems
Via Castiglione, 80 – 40124 Bologna (Italy)
artes@artes-research.com