

Role of Soft Skills in Tourism Industry in Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

The tourism sector is one of the most promising parts of the kingdom's diversification efforts, and its Vision 2030 envisages the tourism sector to be a major contributor to job creation, given the government's aim of increasing the number of jobs in the tourism sector by almost 50 percent to 1.5 million by 2020. Many employers today are finding that recent graduates of Saudi Arabia are unprepared to succeed in the workforce because they lack foundational "soft skills." While technical skills are often industry-specific, soft skills such as professional communication, employers value critical thinking, collaboration, and time management across sectors. Soft skills should be given priority as these play an important role in the tourism sector as these competencies are of indispensable nature. Education institutes need to play a pivotal role in imparting them along with an education to manage tourist destination. This paper is a conceptual paper. It is based on the personal experiences of the authors and the opinions of other subject experts. Data has been collected from various sources like articles, newspapers, websites, reports, journals etc. Research proves that soft skills are essential skills for any of the individuals to excel in the upcoming sectors in Saudi Arabia. In order to achieve 2030 Vision, soft skills can act as a powerful tool in the hands of young aspirants.

Keywords-- Tourism, Soft Skills, Communication, Education, Employment

I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is witnessing a continuous increase. The industry has surpassed the growth of the economy worldwide (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2017). Based on this, tourism sector has become one of the important and crucial industries to study and explore. "Tourism comprises the activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes." (UNWTO, 2014), It can be seen as "an umbrella concept" as it involves subjects like sociology, psychology, geography and economics etc. (Lundberg et al. 1995). Tourism has become one of the prime factors of income for many countries and the related services should be maintained and developed by well equipped workforce on regular basis to provide memorable experiences to the tourists. The motto to excel in Tourism industry is "Welcome a visitor, send back a

friend". This industry is a service dominating industry and service revolves around customers and their satisfaction.

With its varied geography and young population, The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia shows huge potential for tourism and entertainment in the region which is blessed with many rich assets. Its geographic, cultural, social, demographic and economic advantages have enabled it to take a leading position in the world. However, despite high local demand and levels of consumer spending, the tourism sector has not been a strong performer in the local economy yet, offering sizeable growth opportunities for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), foreign investments and public-private partnership projects. Saudi Vision 2030, a strategic blueprint that maps out a future for Saudi Arabia, plans to reduce their dependency on oil by diversifying the economy towards service sectors like education, entertainment and tourism. The plan is to create new jobs and attract foreign investors to the tourism industry through its mission to "diversify and enrich entertainment experiences around the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia". By the year 2020, KSA aims to attract 1.5m tourists and the focal point of government strategy is to strengthen the economy (<https://www.arabianbusiness.com/saudi-arabia-aims-attract-1-5m-tourists-by-2020-634057.html>). Mecca enjoys competitive advantage for religious tourism but Vision 2030 announced non-religiously tourism also. E-Visas will be issued to foreign visitors who will come to attend concerts, Saudi culture and sporting events. Saudi Arabia's diverse terrain offers a wide variety of scenery, while its captivating history, rich culture and significance for Islam could make it an attractive tourist destination in the future if the tourism visa program is expanded. There are registered archaeological sites, as well as several UNESCO World Heritage sites across the Kingdom. Rise in tourism will bring a decline in the unemployment levels of the Kingdom from 12.8 to 7 percent and female participation in is expected to increase from the current level of 17.8 percent to 30 percent by 2030. Jobs in the sector mostly require people with high variety of soft skills and expertise in handling a tourist, which is the heart and foundation of tourism. The visitors should be given a warm welcome and a memorable experience by well trained and qualified workforce as tourism sells experiences. City and Guilds Group survey in partnership with Change board (2017) "Building the talent pipeline in

Saudi Arabia”, revealed that the skills most difficult to find right now are job-specific skills (65%); leadership skills (62%); soft skills (35%); strategic insight and planning (29%); communication skills (24%); IT skills (18%); and customer service skills (12%). And this is the biggest challenge. In order to achieve Vision 2030, necessary actions must be taken to enrich the future and present workforce with the desired skills so that objectives of Vision 2030 can be achieved.

II. SOFT SKILLS AND ITS IMPORTANCE

Education is a continuous process of overall development of personality and skills of an individual. It has a huge impact on one's adaptability and adjustability with the changing business environment. Higher education should be in harmony with the requirements of big and small enterprises which are looking for “ready to be employed” graduates. The individuals with right skill set and knowledge can only benefit from the integration with globalization of economy, the other individual who lack the skills and knowledge will be left behind. Many researchers emphasize the importance of soft skills that employers value, rather than focusing heavily on intellectual skills [Dench, 1997; Hunt & Baruch, 2003; Nabi, 2003]. Employers are no more interested with individuals who have only specific skills and lack the other significant skills, particularly the soft skills. Skilful employees are considered as an asset that are acquired and valued throughout the lifetime of the organization. The graduates must understand and use their skills and knowledge effectively at the workplace. Knowledge and skills keep changing as per the technology, environment and market demand change; inevitably the employee is also required to adapt the changes in skills and knowledge. The need of the hour is to impart education and knowledge involving hard skills and soft skills to climb up organizational ladder. Such initiative can lead to a maximum development of potentialities and discover the best in the young society donors. And these fully equipped future leaders can help in achieving vision 2030.

This is a *conceptual paper* emphasizing on the role of soft skills in the tourism industry of Saudi Arabia. Skill is an ability of an individual to use one's knowledge effectively in performance. Individuals should have a skill to express their thoughts and feelings in the most acceptable and desirable manner. This makes you confident and different from others. Skill Development means developing yourself and your skill sets to add value to the self, organization, society and nation. There are two main types of skills that employers look for: hard skills and soft skills. Hard-skills enable an individual to get a good job in the market but are not enough for the growth and progress in the corporate world. Soft-skills enable to get success; satisfaction and survival in the job as it improves

emotional intelligence, commitment, stability, interactions and performance. If you want a job, have hard skills, if you want a career, have soft skills. Hard skills are visible like your degree, typing speed etc. whereas soft skills are those skills that are required to make you employable. They are also known as “people skills”. Important soft skills required by the education seekers to excel at the workplace are mentioned below. According to Jammal (2015), in his publication naming “Student Leadership and appropriate activities” following skills were highlighted:

Communication skills: Communication is an art of exchanging information, ideas and 70% of our time in receiving and sending messages and information. One should enrol in activities that will require them to make speeches or presentations or communicate with the general public. Therefore, speaking and writing clearly are essential keys to success.

Leadership skills: Leadership is an important skill for all. If we start preparing teaching our children to be mentally strong and stable from their childhood, then this will help them to become strong personalities while growing up. One easy way to teach leadership is to regularly organize curricular and extracurricular activities

Problem handling skills: Difference of opinion leads to conflict. Little conflict is a healthy sign of growth as it generates competition and creative thinking. But it must be resolved timely otherwise it creates distrust among the members. Basic skills required to handle problems are effective listening, communication, self-discipline, critical and innovative and a sense of personal responsibility. For a strong and healthy relational bond, conflict resolution is a must otherwise if mismanaged; it can cause great harm to a relationship.

Money management and Negotiation skills: Managing money is an important skill for the young society donors. Being able to manage money, on a personal level as well as on a business or corporate level, is important to be leaders someday. High-powered positions almost always have some sort of financial or budgeting aspect to the job. Money Management helps them make good decisions on how to spend and save so that they learn the value of money.

Time management: Time is money. Time is a more precious and valuable resource than real estate, gold, oil, or gasoline).

III. TOURISM AND SOFT SKILLS

In context of tourism and hospitality sector, this skill is extremely important. According to the Department of Tourism, Leisure, Hotel and Sport Management in 2015, “The hospitality workplace demands skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, maintaining professional and ethical standards, and leadership”. In contrast to hard skills or technical skills required for employment, employers value soft skills across sectors. An analysis by the career-networking site LinkedIn found that the ability to communicate is most

predictive of LinkedIn members getting hired, followed by “organization, capacity for teamwork, punctuality, critical thinking, social savvy, creativity, and adaptability.” In short, soft skills pay off.

There are also specific skill needs defined by labour category. Managers are expected to possess the following skills and competences: computer skills, business and strategic planning, strategic alliances, management skills, management through visions and values, yield management, product development, innovation, human resource management, Destination management, project management, management skills to cope with globalization influences, change management, marketing and sales skills (EC, 2001, p. 26).

IV. ROLE OF EDUCATION INSTITUTES IN IMPARTING SOFT SKILLS

There's a strong need for collaboration between business and education. Educational institutions have a responsibility to ensure that the required competencies are mastered by students (Moncarz & Kay, 2005). Previous studies have shown that there are differences between educators and industry professionals in what constitute the important competencies (e.g., Sigala & Baum 2003). On the one hand, when teachers know which soft skills they should be emphasizing, they are not able to make simple, effective changes as they lack flexibility, resources, and support to bridge the soft skills gap on their own and require help from credible partners. On the other hand, there is a lack of awareness on the skills employers are looking for their businesses to excel. Unfortunately, the current approach of waiting to bridge an employee's skills gap “on the job” is too expensive. To create a reliable talent pipeline, businesses have to work hand-in-hand with education institutes to fill this gap. Ultimately, the goal is to match program outcomes with industry needs and simultaneously to provide a higher education without falling into the trap of the tyranny of relevance (Lashley, 2004).

It is said that “the true education of the intellect can come only through the development of body and mind with a corresponding awakening of the soul. Man is neither mere intellect nor the gross animal body nor the heart or soul alone. A proper and harmonious combination of the body, mind and soul is required for making of the whole man” (Anis 2017).

In short, higher education institutions are called on to hone the necessary skill which involves providing vocational training, management knowledge as well as general academic education and in order to bridge up the skill gap in KSA. Higher Educational Institutions need to act as a positive catalyst and facilitate students to take a deserving place outside. Personality and Skill Development programs through interactive and participation model/approach will bring enhancement and

grooming with a positive change in life. It should include lessons through real life case studies, management games, group discussions, debates, customer handling role plays, public speaking seminars, and regular presentations. Such activities demand lot of participation by the student. Youth is a period of maximum energy and potency. The proposed approach will bring zeal and vigour to use their innovative ideas and critical thinking. They will display their team and group skills which will flourish their interpersonal skill set. They will be in a position to represent their framework. They will be enthusiastic to channelize their energy towards accomplishing their goal of getting a deserving position in the society and becoming a responsible citizen of KSA. This can improve personality and groom leadership, communication, facilitation, interpersonal, team building etc skill set of young society donors. This will make them ready to be employed for the upcoming tourism and other sector in the Kingdom.

This study contributes to the existing literature on tourism management in higher education by identifying the competencies deemed to be important for this industry. It will assist educators by analysing the bigger picture which will help promote a curricula customised to professional needs. Rapid changes in the tourism industry will demand constant research updating.

V. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Kaplan. L (2004) in the study entitled, “Skills development in tourism: South Africa's tourism-led development strategy” discussed the role of skills and its development in advancing south Africa's tourism led development strategy. Skills development had a central role to play in ensuring the effective and sustainable transformation development of tourism industry. The emphasized the role of soft skills and its development among the workforce if tourism was to reach its potential in contributing to socio economic development and for job creation and business opportunities.

There were specific skills needed for tourism sector to grow in the country. At management level, these were rather transversal skills; hence tourism managers should had an educational background in accountancy, marketing, law, economics, etc. Nevertheless, managers were expected to possess computer skills, business and strategic planning, management skills, management through visions and values, to cope up with globalisation influences, said Iina.O.S. and Tessaring.M (2005), in their publication based on the proceedings of the international workshop “Trends and Skills needs in Tourism”.

The competencies identified as essential by Kay & Russette (2000) include recognizing customer problems, showing enthusiasm, maintaining professional and ethical standards, cultivating a climate of trust, and adapting creatively to change. Other researchers emphasise the ability to cope with emotional demands (e.g., Johanson & Woods, 2008), to empathise with

customers, possess emotional intelligence (Baum, 2006), show leadership, and develop competencies associated with interpersonal, problem-solving, and self management skills (Raybould & Wilkins, 2006). Since hospitality is almost by definition an international industry, cross-cultural competencies have been identified as fundamental.

Kalargyrou.V (2005) in the dissertation entitled *Leadership Skills and Challenges in Hospitality Management Education* tried to examine the required skills that made administrators in hospitality management effective and the study concluded leadership skills followed by interpersonal, personal values, communications and strategic skills as one of the keys for becoming effective leaders of tomorrow.

Hassan, S.N et.al.(2009) in their research naming, “The importance of soft skills in Tourism Industry in Melaka Malaysia” founded communication skills among the “Frontline worker” playing an important role in forming good relations with local or foreigners. These skills should be learned and obtained as it enabled to communicate information to visitors effectively, to strengthen the relationship with tourists and could attract them to visit again and solve complex problems and build network of relationships with foreign tourists. Therefore, communication skills were essential in creating a good atmosphere in the workplace and ensuring understanding and strong links between “Frontline worker” and tourists who visit Melaka.

Communication is vital to the success of tourism business since it is only through effective communication that tourism business can flourish. Effective communication plays an overarching role in tourism” says Babu. G. (2011) in his article naming *Communication Skills for Success: Tourism Industry specific Guidelines*.

Kostic Bobanovic. M. and Grzinic.J.(2011) in their research study, “The importance of English language skills in the tourism sector: A comparative study of students/employees perceptions in Croatia” highlighted the importance of communication skills in the hospitality industry. In the business tourism practice oral communication is a bit higher than written communication, but both categories are rated high.

Kapera. I (2012) had identified strategic planning as one of the basic functions of tourism and recreation in Poland. The study conducted by him had highlighted the importance of planning skills at central, regional and local level of the countries, provinces and municipalities. Planning skills bring appropriate management which often helps to avoid errors for the development of the economy.

Suh. E. et.al (2012) conducted a research to identify core competencies that were important to the success of future managers in the hospitality industry. A total of 296 usable questionnaires were collected from hospitality managers and students in the Southeastern United States and factor analysis generated six dimensions of core competencies: hospitality skills,

interpersonal skills, supervisory skills, food and beverage, management skills, leadership, and communication skills.

Melvin R. Weber (2013) carried an exploratory analysis of Soft Skill Competencies Needed for the Hospitality Industry. The purpose of this project was to have human resource professionals rate the importance of soft skill competencies found in literature and to determine the relative importance of the seven categories of soft skill competencies. The study combined new data with existing data to complete an exploratory factor analysis. This exploratory study found a five-component tool that had similarities to other models found in the literature review but also had unique differences to the prior research.

Al-Tokhais.A.A(2016) in his thesis entitled, “The relationship between communication effectiveness and multicultural employees job outcomes” examined the relationship between effective communication and multicultural employees’ job outcomes in Saudi hospitality and tourism organizations. The findings of the survey type study suggested more efforts were required by HR to encourage positive attitude among the employees to promote effective communication skills.

City and Guilds Group survey in partnership with Change board (2017) “Building the talent pipeline in Saudi Arabia”, revealed that the skills most difficult to find right now are job-specific skills (65%); leadership skills (62%); soft skills (35%); strategic insight and planning (29%); communication skills (24%); IT skills (18%); and customer service skills (12%).

VI. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The study has been designed to determine the role of soft skills in tourism in Saudi Arabia and integration of soft skills in to the education system.

VII. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

To understand the role of soft skills in tourism sector in Saudi Arabia

VIII. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper is a conceptual paper. It is based on the personal experiences of the authors and the opinions of other subject experts. Data has been collected from various sources like articles, newspapers, websites, reports, journals etc.

IX. FINDINGS

As in previous research in other countries, the findings suggest that tourism employers tend to see personal qualities and interpersonal competencies as very relevant for the field, while technical competencies are seen generally as somehow less important. It should be noted that in surveys of employers in general, personal

qualities and competencies such as tourist handling, communication, discipline, and punctuality work ethic have been considered as most highly valued (Redman & Wilkinson, 2006).

1. Research proves that soft skills are essential skills for any of the individuals to excel in the upcoming sectors in Saudi Arabia. These are the skills that will make young students ready to be employed. Unfortunately, these are in scarcity and necessary steps should be taken by the education bodies to impart such skills among the students like communication, planning problem solving, leadership etc.
2. Communication skills are very important. Tourism sells memorable experience. Effective communication skills will be a great help to understand people around and sending messages for better understanding. This will strengthen the relationship with tourists and could attract them to visit again.
3. Hospitality skills, Interpersonal skills, Supervisory skills, Management skills, and Leadership can act as ones core competency.
4. Positive attitude is everything.
5. Knowledge of marketing, accounts, finance and law is important.
6. Skills development had a central role to play in ensuring the effective and sustainable transformation development of tourism industry.
7. Planning skills bring appropriate management which often helps to avoid errors for the development of the economy.
8. Findings also revealed that business professional soft skills do have a high positive impact on company service delivery.

A balance must be struck between applied and theoretical approaches, between technical competencies and an academic curriculum in addition to developing a complex of competencies relevant for service work. In this resides a potential point of tension involving the question of proportionate mix. Arriving at an optimal approach requires a mix of expertise entailing contributions from non-academics with relevant industrial experience on the one hand, and on the other, from academics having the theoretical specialties requisite to a higher education.

X. CONCLUSION

The study brings to light the Vision 2030 of Saudi Arabia. It has highlighted the upcoming sectors of Tourism and Education. In order to achieve 2030 Visions, soft skills can act as a powerful tool in the hands of young aspirants. Soft skills should be given priority as these play an important role in the tourism sector and these competencies are of indispensable nature. Education institutes need to play a pivotal role in imparting them along with an education to manage tourist destination. They should acquire adequate knowledge of economics,

management and other sciences in addition to vocational subjects so that these skills can be displayed effectively at workplace. Also it should be noted that tourism management which is multidisciplinary in nature, is increasingly becoming an academic subject. . A strong shift in the approach is important towards teaching from close ended approach of lecture through teacher to high level of participation by students through interactive approach. This will give aspirants a platform to use their hidden skills, knowledge and competencies and they will become groomed and polished personalities to serve the needs of the country.

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