



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**ENGLISH LANGUAGE COMMUNICATION TRAINING NEEDS OF
FRONT OFFICE ASSISTANTS OF HOTELS IN KUALA LUMPUR**

CHAN MEI YUIT

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By

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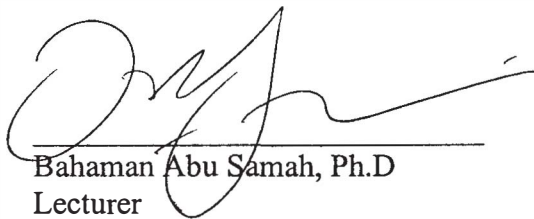
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September 1998

Supervisor: Bahaman Abu Samah, Ph.D.

Faculty: Educational Studies

In this study, English language communication training needs of Front Office Assistants are identified and described. Eight hotels of four and five-star rating in Kuala Lumpur took part in the survey, from which a total of 44 Front Office Assistants and 26 managers responded.

The main aim of the research was to determine to what extent an English language communication training need exists among the Front Office Assistants, and which areas of job-based communicative activities deserve emphasis in a training programme. Also, further details of the needs of the Front Office Assistants were



obtained by exploring the difference in perceptions between the Front Office Assistants and their managers regarding the needs of the Front Office Assistants.

Data were collected via a needs assessment questionnaire, which required information amongst others, a rating by the respondents of the proficiency level of Front Office Assistants on 35 communicative activities, and the relevance of these activities to the job of Front Office Assistant.

The result was a description of English language communication needs of the Front Office Assistants, comprising a numerical representation of the overall degree of need for such training, the degree of training need for each communicative activity, the ranking order of the communicative activities according to training importance, and comparison between the perceptions of the two respondent groups as regards the proficiency level of the Front Office Assistants, the relevance of the communicative activities to the job of Front Office Assistants, and the training importance of the communicative activities.

The overall findings show that an English language communication training need exists for Front Office Assistants and that the managers felt the Front Office Assistants needed training in more of the communicative activities than the Front Office Assistants did themselves.

It is recommended that hotels look into the viability of providing English language communication training to this group of their employees, using the findings of this research as a starting point in the process of designing the training programme.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi sebahagian daripada syarat keperluan ijazah Master Sains.

**KEPERLUAN LATIHAN BERKOMUNIKASI DALAM BAHASA INGGERIS
DI KALANGAN PENOLONG PENYAMBU TETAMU HOTEL-HOTEL DI
KUALA LUMPUR**

Oleh

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Dalam kajian ini, keperluan latihan berkomunikasi dalam Bahasa Inggeris untuk Penolong Penyambut Tetamu dikenalpasti dan diolahkan. Lapan buah hotel yang bertaraf empat bintang dan lima bintang di Kuala Lumpur mengambil bahagian, dari mana sejumlah 44 orang Penolong Penyambut Tetamu dan 26 orang pengurus mereka telah menjawab borang soalselidik.

Tujuan utama kajian ini adalah mengenalpasti sejauh manakah keperluan latihan berkomunikasi dalam Bahasa Inggeris wujud di kalangan Penolong Penyambut Tetamu, dan aktiviti komunikasi yang berkaitan dengan kerja Penolong Penyambut Tetamu yang manakah perlu di tekankan dalam program latihan.



Juga, butir-butir lanjut mengenai keperluan-keperluan latihan ini didapati dengan meneliti perbezaan persepsi di antara Penolong Penyambut Tetamu dengan pengurus-pengurus mereka terhadap keperluan-keperluan latihan ini.

Data dikumpul melalui borang soal-selidik keperluan latihan yang antara lainnya bertujuan mendapatkan maklumat tentang tahap kemahiran Penolong Penyambut Tetamu dalam menjalankan 35 aktiviti-aktiviti komunikasi yang di senaraikan, serta sejauh manakah aktiviti-aktiviti komunikasi tersebut berkait dengan kerja Penolong Penyambut Tetamu.

Hasil kajian adalah satu pengolahan keperluan-keperluan latihan berkomunikasi dalam Bahasa Inggeris di kalangan Penolong Penyambut Tetamu, yang mengandungi suatu ukuran bernombor darjah keperluan latihan keseluruhan, tahap keperluan latihan untuk setiap aktiviti komunikasi, senarai aktiviti-aktiviti komunikasi mengikut kepentingan latihan, dan perbandingan antara persepsi kedua-dua kumpulan Penolong Penyambut Tetamu dan pengurus terhadap tahap kemahiran berkomunikasi dalam Bahasa Inggeris di kalangan Penolong Penyambut Tetamu, tahap perkaitan diantara kerja dan aktiviti-aktiviti komunikasi, dan kepentingan latihan aktiviti-aktiviti komunikasi.

Dapatan kajian pada keseluruhannya menunjukkan wujudnya keperluan latihan berkomunikasi dalam Bahasa Inggeris di kalangan Penolong Penyambut Tetamu.



Juga, kumpulan pengurus berpendapat bahawa darjah keperluan latihan sebegini adalah lebih tinggi berbanding dengan pendapat kumpulan Penolong Penyambut Tetamu.

Adalah disyorkan bahawa hotel-hotel memberi pertimbangan yang wajar dalam memberikan latihan berkomunikasi dalam Bahasa Inggeris kepada kumpulan pekerja ini, serta menggunakan hasil dapatan kajian ini sebagai titik tolak dalam proses menyediakan program latihan tersebut.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The hotel industry is one of the most labour intensive of industries around. While industries such as manufacturing or banking could to a certain extent replace people through automation and technology, it is difficult if not impossible to do the same for the hotel business because the hospitality business is a “...people business, and people cannot so easily be replaced by computers and machines” (Petrowitsch, 1995). In fact, hospitality needs “the personal touch of people to people”, and in good economic times, a staff shortage is inevitable. Even in not so good times, such as at present in Malaysia, shortage of skilled manpower in this industry has remained a challenge to hoteliers (Mohd. Zainal Abidin, 1998).

For hotels that were unable to overcome the staff shortage, one of the solutions taken was to hire untrained foreign labour. Though this measure solved to a certain extent shortage in the area of untrained labour, skilled workers were still difficult to obtain and even retain.



On what can be done by hotels to retain their skilled workers, ideas seem to converge on providing a comprehensive and ongoing training, besides good working conditions and competitive salaries.

Petrowitsch (1995), of OPUS Executive Search, noted that hotels in Asia, unfortunately tend not to spend much on training and human resource development. The common excuse given is the high turnover of staff, where employers are not keen on training staff who may move on to other hotels. However, if this goes on, more hotel workers will go off to other hotels or even other industries, and the vicious cycle will never end. According to Petrowitsch, training and staff development promote staff satisfaction, which in turn may enhance retention.

Foley (1997) sees employees as hotels' 'human capital', which is defined as the health, education and skills of the workforce. This workforce is rated by its literacy rates, the mental and physical health of the workers, etc. According to Foley, retention of 'human capital' depends on worker training, as manual labour is less important than brainpower. He also quoted that 93% of hotel employees and supervisors would be more likely to stay in their current positions if they were involved in a long term training programme, and 63% would be more likely to leave if they were not offered training. Training should be seen as a 'Human Capital Investment' that will lead to satisfied customers, repeat customers and finally profit.

Who Needs Training Most

In a research conducted by the Educational Institute of American Hotels and Motels Association in 1996, several interesting findings were reported. It was found that:

- Overall, line level employees were most in need of training, compared to supervisory and management employees. However, by market segment, the luxury and first-class hotels cited supervisors as those most needing training.
- Training could most improve the front office department, followed by the food/beverage service and housekeeping departments. 44% cited the front office department as the ‘first priority’ to receive training.
- Overall, *guest service/relations training* was most frequently cited as the training topic that would be most beneficial to their employees, followed by leadership/supervision and sales/marketing training.
- Although training is conducted in the majority of the hotels, the effectiveness of the training overall was rated 3.5, on a scale ranging from 1 (ineffective) to 5 (very effective), showing there is still room for improvement.

These findings show that competence in human relations/guest relations is considered the most important competency area that requires training. This is not surprising as the hotel industry is a service industry, where effective and efficient relationship building and communication is needed for quality service. The finding that the front office department is ‘top priority’ to be trained is also not surprising, as

the core business of hotels is to provide room accommodation, where the first contact of guests would be at the front desk.

Although this survey was conducted in the U.S, it is logical to infer that such relationship building and communication skills training is just as important to hotels outside of the U.S, for example Malaysia. For many hotels in Malaysia, the fact that guest relations services are mainly provided in the English language which is a 'second language' in Malaysia compounds the challenges of training in this area.

On the finding that the effectiveness of the training provided by the hotels surveyed was rated 3.5 (from 0 to 5, with 0 point being least effective), questions could be raised as regards any stage of the planning and implementation of the training. Most of all, effectiveness of training or the lack of it more often than not depends on whether the training fully meets the needs of the trainees and/or organisation.

The Hotel Industry in Malaysia and English Language

Among the industries in Malaysia, the hotel industry is unique in its use of English language on a large scale, involving almost all levels of staff who have direct contact with customers. In the hospitality industry whose clientele is local as well as international, English language communication skills are greatly valued and regarded as essential job-relevant skills for front line employees.

In an industry where guest relations/customer service is provided in the medium of English language, competence in using English language for communication is a pre-requisite for doing a good job as well as for promotion. In a survey conducted on the use of English in the Malaysian commercial sector (Chan and Goh, 1993), it was found that 70.3% of respondents said that English proficiency was taken into consideration for promotion decisions. It may be inferred that this will be even truer for the service industries such as hotels.

The challenges of training of essential customer service and communication skills for hotels in Malaysia are compounded by the fact that the English language, although widely spoken as a second language in the country, has not enjoyed the level of proficiency on par with the national language among the majority of the Malaysian workforce. In a report published in a Malaysian daily commenting on the poor results of Fifth Form students in the 1998 English SPM examination, the Director –General of Education was reported to have said that the “majority of Malaysian students leave the school system with a poor grasp of English despite having been exposed to the language for 11 years” (Simrit, 1998). This situation, if proven true, will certainly wield its effect on industries that require competence in the use of English among their staff, where employers will have to compete with each other to get their share from the shrinking pool of English language competent workforce.

One solution to the above problem is by providing training in English language communication skills to employees. Hotels in Malaysia do see the need to provide English language communication training as a means to upgrade the skills of their employees as well as to provide an opportunity for personal development. A preliminary interview with several Human Resource managers of hotels in Kuala Lumpur revealed that English language communication skills are especially important in the Front Office and Food and Beverage departments. It was generally agreed by most hotels that the ground staff (referred to as rank and file in some hotels) are the ones most greatly in need of the knowledge of English language. For those workers having frequent contact with customers, effective use of English language communication skills (as opposed to mere basic knowledge of the language) is needed, most usually interwoven with customer service and relationship building skills.

Problem Statement

Although English language communication skills training is provided by some of the hotels surveyed, whether the communication skills taught in these training programmes are those that would address the needs of the employees involved is uncertain. This is in part due to the unique nature of the situation in Malaysia, where the position of English language is a second language and where the standard seems to be declining among its potential workforce. This means that a

ready made training package adopted straight from countries like the U.S for example, may not address the needs of the workers and hotels in Malaysia.

This research aims to find out the English language communication training needs of a group of staff of participating hotels in Kuala Lumpur, with a view to providing the hotel industry with useful information for developing an English language communication training programme for this group of employees. The subjects for this research are Front Office Assistants (FOAs), which include Senior Front Office Assistants. They are a group of staff in the Front Office Department of hotels, and are of the clerical level. This group of subjects has been identified to have frequent dealings with customers, which means English language communication skills are frequently needed on the job.

The subjects are identifiable through their position in the organisational hierarchy; they are front line clerical staff reporting to the Front Office manager. Besides the Front Office manager, the Assistant Front Office managers and Duty managers also supervise the FOAs. A more detailed description of the duties of the FOAs is discussed in Chapter III.

Research Objective

The objective of this research is to identify the English language communication training needs of Front Office Assistants (FOAs) of hotels in Kuala Lumpur. Specifically, this research aims to

- i. determine the relevance of each specified communicative activity to the work of FOAs, as perceived by the FOAs and their managers.
- ii. determine the English language communication proficiency level of the FOAs for each communicative activity as perceived by the FOAs and their managers.
- iii. derive the ranking order of the English language communicative activities according to training importance for FOAs as perceived by the FOAs and their managers.
- iv. explore the difference in perception between the FOAs and the managers as regards the relevance of the communicative activities to the job of FOA, the proficiency level of the FOAs in carrying out the communicative activities and the ranking of the communicative activities according to their training importance.
- v. determine the degree of need for English language communication training for FOAs in each communicative activity, as perceived by the FOAs and their managers.
- vi. determine the overall degree of need for English language communication training for FOAs, as perceived by the FOAs and their managers.

The population of hotels is limited to hotels located in Kuala Lumpur rated 4 stars and above, and therefore does not include midmarket and budget hotels. The instrument for data collection is a questionnaire, which is filled out by the FOAs and their managers.

Significance

This research will benefit the participating hotels as well as the population of 4-star and 5-star hotels in Kuala Lumpur, which may use the described training needs for designing appropriate English language communication training programmes for Front Office Assistants.

For the hotels where English language communication training has been or is being provided, this study may be used to evaluate how much these programmes differ in terms of their focus on skills and content from the results of the research.

For the hotel industry, the results of this research may serve as a reference for future undertakings of training needs analysis of English language communication skills for Front Office Assistants.

For the discipline of Human Resource Development, this research may serve as a contribution to the literature on Training Needs Analysis pertaining to English language communication skills.