

“Essential competencies for a hospitality management career: the role of hospitality management education”.

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ABSTRACT

The significance of hospitality management education has been recognised globally. Hospitality management education provides considerably, skilled human resources. Popular tourism destination countries like Greece for example, developed hospitality management education systems in order to come up to the expectations of tourism and hospitality industry. The responsibility of developing tourism and hospitality management human resources lies within the hospitality organisations and within the education system of the country.

In order to achieve the objective of the provision of skilled and competent human resources, the role of formal education is significant. The responsibility and value of hospitality management education in Greece, is of crucial importance in the means of provision of proper human resources.

According to the diverse nature of the hospitality industry, it is not easy to precisely define what skills and competencies a hospitality management graduate may need. Essential competencies in the hospitality industry are practically different from those in the educational institutions. What competencies employees consider to be optional has been asked along with a number of management groups and the answer has changed over time.

This paper will discuss the essential competencies provided by the formal hospitality management education in Greece for a profession in hospitality and tourism industry according to the graduates' perceptions. Moreover, recommendations from the respondents should be indication for appropriate modifications in the programs of study and the introduction of more suitable teaching methods.

Keywords: human resources development, education, competencies

INTRODUCTION

The importance of hospitality and tourism management education has been recognized globally. Many years now, hospitality and tourism education plus formal education provide significantly, skilled human resources. In popular tourism destination countries like Greece for example, hospitality and tourism education systems have been developed, in order to come up to the expectations of tourism and hospitality industry. The responsibility of developing tourism and hospitality management human resources lies within the hospitality organizations and within the education system of the country (Christou, 1999).

In order to achieve the objective of the provision of skilled and competent human resources, the role of formal education is significant. The responsibility and value of hospitality management education in Greece, is of crucial importance in the means of provision of proper human resources (Christou, 1999). This is enforced with the fact that the satisfaction of tourists' needs depends largely on the human resources available skills (Baum, 1995).

According to Mariger and Miller (1999), in the environment of contemporary global business, the majority of tourism business requires human resources to be educated. Moreover, Partlow and Gregorie (1994) argue that due to the complexity of the tourism industry in relation to continuous tourism management needs, it is imperative that industry executives develop their knowledge skills. The development of value-adding skills of human resources contributes to the success of the tourism or hospitality business (Baum, 1995).

To facilitate a clear view of the nature of tourism and hospitality management education and training, it is important to distinguish the differences between the education and training. Baum (1995) states that, universities provide education and educational system of a country while training is generally provided by the industry. Furthermore, education has been defined as a field of multidisciplinary study, which brings the perspectives of many disciplines, especially those found in the social sciences, to bear on particular areas of application and practice in hospitality and tourism industry (Riegel, 1995). John Dewey, the American philosopher, has defined education as follows:

“It is that recognition or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience” (Dewey, 1916, cited in Baum, 1995, p.185).

Wexley and Latham (1991, p.3) argued that “training and development refers to a planned effort by an organization to facilitate the learning of job-related behaviour on the part of its employees”. The concept of training includes all formal learning actions, which may perhaps, or not lead to qualifications and possibly will be obtained at any time in a working line of business.

COMPETENCIES BASED CURRICULUM DEBATE

According to the diverse nature of the hospitality industry, it is not easy to precisely define what skills and competencies a hospitality management graduate may need (Gamble and Messenger, 1990). Tas (1988) asserts that graduates should have a multi-skills base, which allows them to be creative, flexible and adaptable.

The issue of how to design optional programs stayed unsolved in the 1970s and 1980s. Since the 1970s, some trade experts have criticized hotel and restaurant education as being out of touch with the needs of industry (Casado, 1992). A number of four-year hospitality programs began to respond to the demand for increased professional skills by focusing on the particular needs of the hospitality industry (Goodman and Sprague, 1991).

In addition to the above issue, the need for redesigning the hospitality curriculum has been established by many researchers (Umbreit, 1992; Clark and Arbel, 1993; Pavesic, 1993; Gamble, Lockwood and Messenger, 1994; Breiter and Clements, 1996) as well. While, Lewis (1993) examined the need to readdress curricula by expressing the concern that present programs will not continue to exist if they will not be re-evaluated by taking into consideration the changing managerial and social needs.

In providing a useful typology, Cooper and Lockwood (1994) put in plain words three ways in which the study of tourism has developed as an academic subject. Primarily, it was through specific training related to the travel sector, by courses in the business area, and subsequently by the study of tourism, which was approached in conjunction with traditional subjects such as geography, sociology and linguistics. Echtner (1995) insists that the development of tourism education is challenging due to the segmented nature of the subject, being both inter and multi-disciplinary adding to conflict and miscomprehension.

Tas (1988) investigated the management competencies essential for graduate trainees in the hotel industry according to the views of the general managers of top American hotels. Tas (1988) defines competencies as activities and skills, which are essential in order to perform the duties of a specific position. Tas' (1988) study is considered as groundbreaking (Eaton and Christou, 1997) and pioneering (Baum, 1991) examinations of hospitality management competencies.

Baum (1990) went over again Tas's study in Britain and Christou and Eaton (2000) carried out the same research in Greece in 1996 examining the European dimension regarding the industry expectations of education for hotel management competencies. These findings come to insist on the appraisal of Kay and Russette (2000) in U.S.A where their results were identical as the above analysis.

Essential competencies in the hospitality industry are practically different from those in the educational institutions. What competencies employees consider to be optional has been asked along with a number of management groups and the answer has changed over time. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, investigators' outcomes appeared to centre more on technical matters than the answers found in the studies of the late 1980s and after (Tas, LaBrecque and Clayton, 1996).

For example, Sapienza (1978) observed that courses associated to hotel operations, hotel law and security techniques are essential. Tas (1983), believes the important competencies in hospitality industry are:

- Managing the guest problems with understanding and sensitivity;
- Maintaining professional and ethical standards in the work environment;
- Demonstrating poise and a professional appearance;
- Communicating electively both in writing and orally;
- Developing positive customer relations; and
- Striving to achieve the positive working relationships with employees.

Tas (1988), furthermore, stresses that important competencies for hotel-manager trainees are:

- Human relations skills;
- Professional ethical standards;
- Diplomacy;
- Elective oral and written communication skills.

Moreover, researchers until 1990 such as Hersey and Blanchard (1988) as well as Van Dyke and Strick (1990) include technical, human, and conceptual and demonstration of organization skills, people skills, and leadership as important competencies.

Moreover, Baum's (1990) study on the hotel managers' expectations on graduate entrants to the industry in the U.K identified the following most important competencies:

- Management of guest problems with understanding and sensitivity;
- Effective communication in both written and oral form;
- Achievement of positive working relationships with employees;
- Professional appearance and poise;
- Development of positive customer relations;
- Motivations of employees to achieve desired performance;

Particularly Sandwith (1993) expanded the Katz's three dimensions model and expounded the competency-domain model with the five elements to include:

- Conceptual-creative, which known as the cognitive;
- Leadership, that is the ability to turn ideas into productive action;
- Interpersonal, referred to those skills for elective interaction with others;
- Administrative, regarding personnel and financial management of the business; and
- Technical, concerning the knowledge and skills essential to producing the product or service.

Lewis (1993) put a greater emphasis on conceptual skills too. Although quite a lot of authors tend to believe leadership as a human skill, it is considered that a basic skill in leadership, which leadership is a person's ability to generate a vision for the future. O'Halloran (1992), Umbreit (1992), Williams and Hunter (1991) furthermore have recognized leadership as a core element of managerial success.

Human relation skill is an additional vital interior competency, which is supported by many authors. According to Doyle (1992), interpersonal competency and teamwork ranked most highly along with elective communication when recruiters make selection decisions. Supervisory personnel claimed that they needed additional professional development training in many human resource skills (Williams and Hunter, 1991). Knutson and Patton (1992) found that students believed themselves not competent in human relations skills such as employee management and guest interaction.

Okeiyi, Finley and Postel (1994) in their study of the importance of food and beverage competencies expected of hospitality management graduates as perceived by hospitality practitioners, educators, and students, indicated that human-relations and managerial skills were once again counted essential for students graduating from hospitality-management programs.

Baum and Nickson (1998: 79) argue “that hospitality students require a real and in-depth understanding of the industry and HRM issues within it from a theoretical and conceptual point of view before they are given operational and prescriptive models of how to operate within that environment”. Moreover, Baum and Nickson (1998: 79) suggest for “a stronger pedagogical basis to the learning experience with which students are confronted in the human resource management area of the hospitality-tourism curriculum”.

Research undertaken by Enz, Renaghan, and Geller (1993) for the School of Hotel Administration at Cornell University, USA in 1993 discovered that the curriculum should amalgamate the visualization of the faculty with that of the students and of the industry. According to the same survey, the programme should focus on seven key themes:

- Strategic orientation or the capability to see the big picture;
- Communications ability;
- Management style, principally working as teams;
- Leadership skills such as the ability to persuade, motivate and encourage;
- Analytical ability and sufficient mastery of technical skills and industry concepts to couple knowledge with excellence in implementation;
- Ethical awareness; and
- International scope.

The above orientations were confirmed by Ross (1992) as well, mainly in terms of management evaluation of accomplishment, autonomy, discipline and high work ethics. Furthermore, Umbreit (1992) has described the six most interesting content areas for hospitality curricula that are the human resources management, service marketing, leadership, financial analysis, interpersonal skills and Total Quality Management.

Results of the survey suggest that the hospitality educators in the future may have to consider ways of enriching the students' potential to manage guest problems with understanding and sensitivity. Thus, as Goodman and Sprague (1991) suggest, hospitality management students need to receive basic knowledge in business principles, a liberal-arts education for general development and a semi-technical knowledge in addition to an application of business principles through the hospitality establishments.

It could also be examined if it is necessary to introduce more sophisticated forms of teaching like ‘laboratory sessions’ allowing students to study the connection linking theoretical concepts and the real world (Bell and Weitman, 1995). Fitzgerald and Cullen (1991) suggest the business group experience provides an external laboratory to put into practice and experience the dynamics of management.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper is a study on the subject area of hospitality management education in Greece. Its main purpose was to examine the perceptions of graduates regarding the knowledge obtained towards the essential competencies required by the industry.

In order to investigate the perceptions of graduates regarding hospitality management education, questions were developed regarding the knowledge obtained towards the essential competencies required by the industry related to the literature review. The chosen graduates were those of years 1998-2002. Due to time and cost limitations, e-mail contact method was chosen whereby the graduates’ who registered during 1998-2002 was 352, while 262 of those have email address. So, the questionnaire sent by attachment and 77 of those returned (29, 39% response).

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Due to the fact that the graduates were working in various companies nationwide and the time frame and access to them was difficult, in order to receive the largest representative sample, the method that was employed to obtain the primary data was the questionnaire survey. Although it is acknowledged that interviews with the graduates might allow a more in-depth collection of information as far as the nature of the hospitality management education is concerned, due to the fact that the period between June and September is the high season for the hotel industry in Greece, this was a limiting factor for accepting an interview.

In addition, because of confidential reasons, it was impossible to have the whole graduates' database. Therefore, the main source for contacting the graduates was the graduates association of Higher Technological Educational Institutions in Greece.

Moreover, from a practical point of view, this survey is amongst the first attempt to offer information about hospitality management in Greece, according to graduates' perceptions. As a result, it was very difficult to find data and sources in order to confirm or to contrast previous studies.

PRESENTATION OF THE CASE STUDY FINDINGS

The purpose of this paper was to examine respondents' perception regarding hospitality management competencies delivered by the establishments. The questions were designed so as to uncover respondents views concerning to what extent their studies helped them to improve their theoretical knowledge and skills.

Most of the respondents (62.34%) were females while 37.36% of them were males. The sample reflects the fact that the majority of the students that choose to study hospitality management education are females, since males mainly choose the traditional schools, such as engineering, math and other polytechnic schools. The above finding results from the dynamic entrance in the sector by women (Pavesic, 1993).

Most of the respondents graduated in 2000 (27.27%), while in 1999, 25.97% respondents graduated. In 2001, 19.48% respondents graduated, whereas in 2002 and 1998 we have the smallest percentages of respondents graduates which were 14.29% and 12.99%.

The majority of the respondents were from the H.T.E.I of Athens (33.77%), 16.88% were from the H.T.E.I of Larisa, 15.58% from the H.T.E.I of Thessaloniki, 14.29% from the H.T.E.I of Patra, 10.39% from the H.T.E.I Heraklion, 6.49% from the H.T.E.I Igoumenitsa and 2.60% from the H.T.E.I Amfisa. It is worth noting that the H.T.E.I of Athens and Larissa are the two largest institutes and that's the reason for having the highest number of respondents. On the other hand, H.T.E.I of Amfisa and Igoumenitsa, have the smallest number of graduates, because those two institutions were founded very recently, resulting in limited number of graduates up to now.

a) Theoretical knowledge development

As far as the theoretical knowledge, the respondents had to give answers for five theoretical topics (Figure 1). Regarding Business Administration, Human Resource Management Information Technologies Finance and Accounting respondents were not satisfied enough, and that is because vast majority of their answers regarding to the above four theoretical topics were to 'a lesser extent' or 'not at all'. However, as far as the Marketing concerned, respondents were more satisfied having answered mostly 'a lot' or to 'a large extent' satisfied regarding Marketing topic.

The reasons for choosing to examine those theoretical topics, was to investigate how those have been taught. According to the findings, although those topics are an essential part of the teaching material, in the case of Greece respondents stated that those subjects have not been taught sufficiently by the educators.

The above findings confirm what Christou (1999) demonstrated about the educators' lack of teaching skills and learning materials provided to the students. Despite the fact that those topics were of high significance to provide the graduate with the competencies required by the industry, the Greek educational system does not look capable enough in supplying the hospitality labour market with skilled and qualified human resources (Christou, 1999).

b) Skills development

As far as the skills concerned, respondents had to give answers for 13 practical skills topics (Figure 2).

According to the research, respondents were satisfied enough regarding the topics of 'Motivation', 'Leadership', 'Work under pressure', 'Training', 'Interviewing' and the 'Ability to promote-sell yourself' having answered mainly 'a lot' and 'to a large extent' satisfied. However, they seemed to be satisfied less regarding the skills of 'written communications', 'Dealing with guests complaints', 'critical analysis', 'problem solving', 'time-management', 'work under pressure' and 'self-discipline'.

According to respondents perceptions, the educational facilities need further developments and improvements as the skills they provide are not the ones required by the industry. . The vast majority of the respondents' answers were 'to an extent', 'to a lesser extent' and many of them 'not at all' as far as the improvements that those skills illustrated above such as 'motivation' and 'leadership'.

As mentioned previously, research showed that the respondents pointed out that the educational system was poor in terms of providing skills required by the industry. The above observation concerns also the lack of learning materials such as books and electronic equipment (Christou, 1999). Additionally, a reason reflecting to the low level of skills developed by the Greek educational system is because courses are delivered in the traditional lecture form and not in any present innovative form such as role-playing, case studies and simulations (Christou, 1999).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

RESEARCH AIM

The aim of this paper was to examine the perceptions of the graduates of hospitality management education in Greece, regarding hospitality management competencies delivered by the establishments. The questions were designed so as to uncover respondents views concerning the extent to which their studies helped them to improve their theoretical knowledge and skills.

To investigate the perceptions of graduates regarding hospitality management education, two questions were developed, related to the theoretical knowledge and skills development, aim to identify their knowledge obtained towards the essential competencies required by the industry related to the literature review.

ESSENTIAL COMPETENCIES REQUIRED BY THE INDUSTRY

The significance of the difficulties in defining what skills and competencies a hospitality management graduate may need because of the diverse nature of the hospitality industry (Gamble and Messenger, 1990) was discussed during the literature review was the. In addition, the need for redesigning the hospitality curriculum has been established by many researchers as well, such as Umbreit (1992). As a result, several researchers have investigated the management competencies for graduate trainees in the hotel industry, which are essential in order to perform the duties of a specific position.

Indispensable competencies in the hospitality industry differ from those in the educational institutions. The competencies that employees consider to be optional have been questioned along with a number of management groups and the answer has changed over time. However, plenty of essential skills and competencies have been recommended from many researchers, depending on the sample and the location that their research took place. For example, Tas (1988) in U.S.A and Baum (1990) in Britain investigated the management competencies of the general managers and Christou and Eaton carried out the same research in Greece in 1996.

As mentioned by Christou (1999), educators seemed to be inadequate in terms of teaching experience and skills, failing thus to meet the present and the future educational needs. The learning materials were also poor in terms of providing educational knowledge. Although education seems to be efficient in providing the industry with employees, it does not look capable enough to supply the hospitality labour market with skilled and qualified human resources as discussed above by Christou (1999).

In order to improve these theoretical topics, respondents have suggested that both educational materials and educators need improvements and further development. Like industry professionals, hospitality educators must also stay one step ahead of the competition if education is to keep up with the contemporary economic environment. General recommendations made by the respondents for their courses and studies such as the creation of school-based projects that required them to work in teams or to do research for industrial contacts. These findings are in agreement with the ones of Christou (1999).

Concerning the level of the essential skills required by the industry that the establishments offer, they need further development and improvements in reference to respondents' perceptions. The vast majority of the respondents' were not satisfied by their improvements in those skills. According to the respondents' perceptions, in order that educators improve the soft skills, emphasis should be given on creating forms of learning role-plays, case studies, simulations, out of class assignments, business games internships and psychodrama. Christou's (1999) research about hospitality management education in Greece, led to the same conclusion. Similar learning methods have been used in a variety number of hospitality and tourism management courses throughout the world (Okeiyi *et al*, 1994).

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From a practical point of view, this survey is amongst the first attempts to offer information about hospitality management in Greece, according to graduates' perceptions. As a consequence, it was very difficult to find data and sources in order to confirm or to contrast previous studies.

In the Greek tourism and hospitality industry, a stronger link between the education programmes and the industry is essential (S.E.T.E., 2003). The weakness of the tourism and hospitality education in Greece is the absence of a link between the education and industry (Christou, 1999). The majority of the courses offered by both private and public establishments were created without the cooperation of the industry. The development and implementation of a specific tourism education policy, is also essential to bring tourism education closer with national tourism policies. The above recommendation has been made as well by Amoah and Baum (1997).

The development of tourism in Greece has been rapid since the 1960s. The tourism industry for Greece is the most important source of foreign exchange, the major contributor to the country's gross domestic product and the largest provider of employment (S.E.T.E., 2003). The main resource of the tourism industry is the hospitality sector (Papanikos, 2000). The provision of hospitality services is labour intensive and requires highly skilled employees. The provision of quality hospitality management education at a tertiary level is strongly linked to the development and success of the industry. However, there is a strong indication that the current hospitality and tourism education system needs revision that will lead to major adjustments and improvements (Papanikos, 2000).

It could be assumed that the provision of the hospitality management education in Greece does not fully meet the current needs of the industry. If in the future the existing system will remain in its current form, the gap between the industry's needs in qualified human resources and the efficiency of the educational system to come up to these needs will probably increase (S.E.T.E., 2003).

The forms of teaching and learning might also need to be revised. The vast majority of the courses are delivered in Greece in the traditional lecture form. New forms of learning like role-playing, case studies, simulations, games, out of class assignments and internships might need to be introduced as similarly claimed by Christou (2002). It should also be examined if it is necessary to introduce even more sophisticated forms of teaching that discussed likewise by Christou (1999), such as laboratory sessions that allow students to study the relationship between theoretical concepts and working experience that provides an external laboratory for implementing and experiencing the potential of management.

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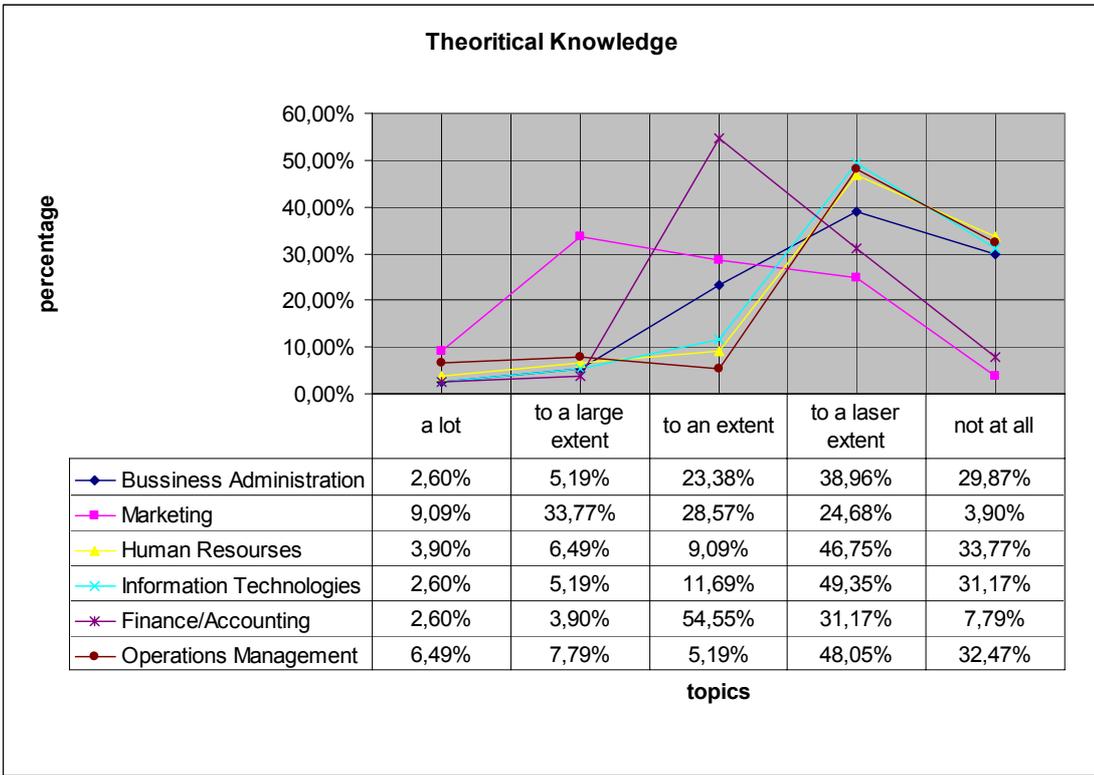


Figure 1 Theoretical knowledge development

skills

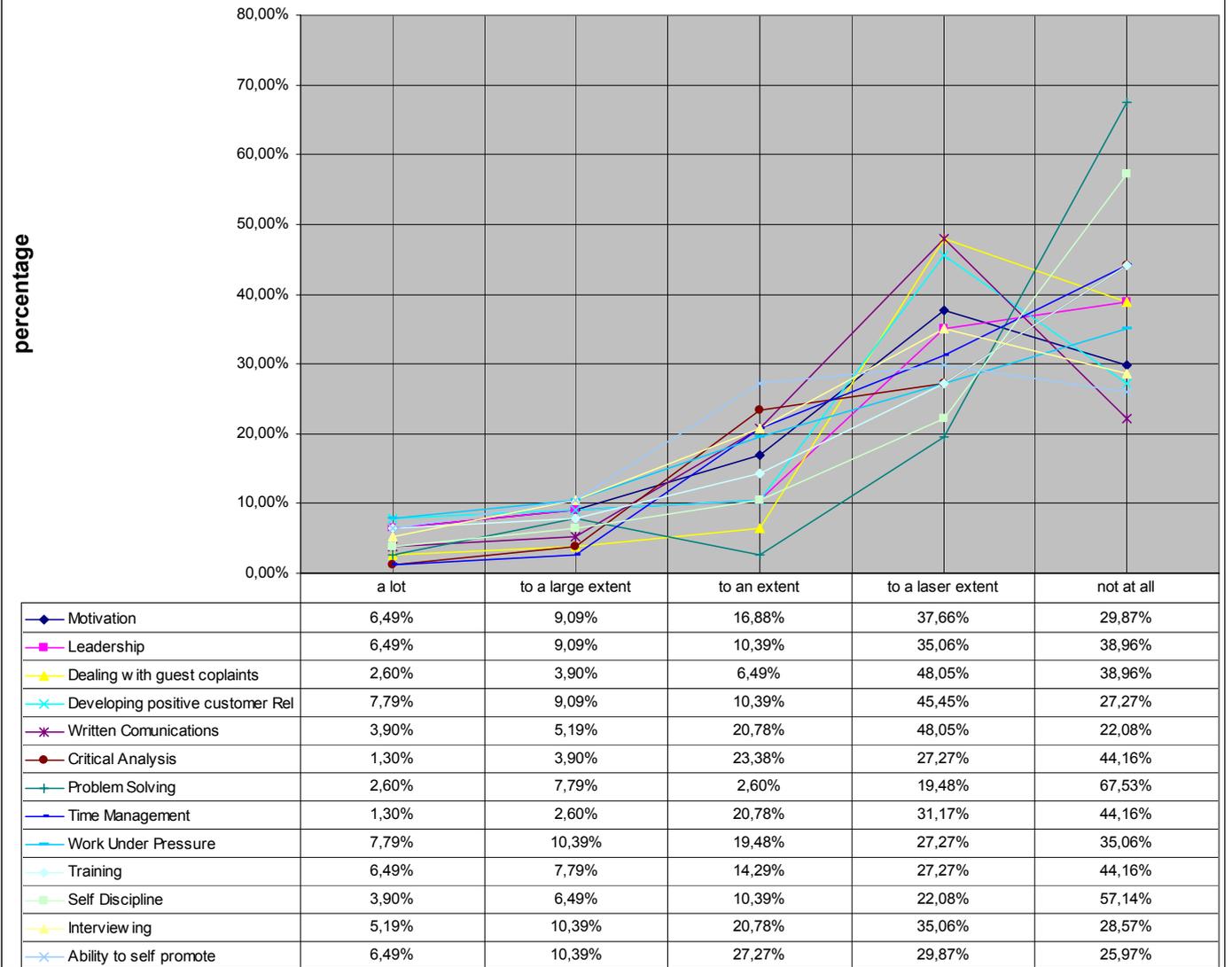


Figure 2 Skills development