
Social Skills Required for Exercising the Role of Host: A Qualitative Study

Rasmus Nissen, Copenhagen Business Academy, Copenhagen, Denmark

Dorthe Simonsen, University College Lillebælt, Odense, Denmark

Henrik Vejlgard, Copenhagen Business Academy, Copenhagen, Denmark

Abstract

Using Carol King's model of hospitality as its theoretical point of departure, this study aims to examine which social skills are required for exercising the role of host in a professional hospitality context, and how these skills may be applied. Based on qualitative interviews with hotel and restaurant employees, the study identifies three overall social skills. The first is the ability to communicate presence non-verbally. The second is the ability to proactively engage in conversation. The third is the ability to listen actively. These skills are closely related and they are practiced in a number of ways by the employees. The study adds important insights to our knowledge about what is required to be a good host in terms of relevant social skills and how these might be practiced, and it can thus be an important contribution to educational programs within service and hospitality management.

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Introduction

The skills of staff working in the hospitality industry has been a major topic in hospitality research (Gulubovskaya, Robinson & Solnet, 2017). Research in this area has focused on skilled labour and unskilled labour (Partington, 2017; Riley, 2011; Solomon, 2018), but also on the types of skills that are required in the hospitality industry (Bharwani & Jauhari, 2013). A point is that the skills required in the hospitality industry are not only skills that can be acquired through education and on-the-job training (i.e. job skills), but also skills to be found in the intersection between personal skills, abilities, and personality such as emotional

intelligence (Goleman, 1996). In this study, the term social skills will be used as a common denominator for these types of skills.

Distinguishing between job skills and social skills is a feature of King’s hospitality model (King, 1995), a model which explains hospitality as the outcome of employee (host) and guest interaction. Focusing on the host, job skills are the set of skills that are required to deliver a service offering, in any type of service context. In a hotel, it can be about checking guests in; in a restaurant, it can be about serving food to guests. Job skills are skills that are required to deliver a service in a professional way with a service quality that reflects the service concept. However, as has been pointed out by Kandampully, Kim, Keating and Matila (2014), “service provision has a particularly high proportion of employee-customer interaction that requires an emotional offering, which, in turn, mandates genuinely caring attitudes, emotional connections to guests, warmth, and generosity” (p. 289). Put differently, hospitality staff may make emotional connections with guests. Making such emotional connections with guests, so this paper argues, requires staff with social skills, indeed, some specific social skills. In her article, however, King (1995) does not specify or elaborate on what is meant by social skills. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine *which* social skills are required in order for hospitality employees to exercise their role as hosts, and to provide examples on *how* these skills may be practiced.

Methodology

This paper is part of a comprehensive study of what hosting means in a Danish hospitality context. In this section, it will be explained how data has been collected and analysed. As part of examining *which* social skills are required for exercising the role of host, and *how* these social skills might be applied in practice, a number of qualitative interviews were carried out (Kvale, 1997; Alvesson, 2011).

In order to be included as informant in the study, the employee had to be working full-time and have frequent guest interaction. Informants were found using the authors’ professional network. A total number of 15 semi-structured interviews were carried out between April 2019 and December 2019 and had an average length of 51 minutes. Nine informants worked in a hotel, either as a front-office manager or as a receptionist. The remaining six informants worked in a restaurant, most frequently as restaurant manager, but in some cases also as a waiter. Table 1 provides an overview of the informants:

Table 1. Overview of informants

Interviewee #	Type of company	Function
1	Hotel	Front office manager
2	Hotel	Receptionist
3	Hotel	Front office manager
4	Hotel	Receptionist
5	Hotel	Front office manager
6	Hotel	Receptionist
7	Hotel	Front office manager
8	Hotel	Front office manager
9	Hotel	Receptionist
10	Restaurant	Restaurant manager
11	Restaurant	Waiter
12	Restaurant	Waiter
13	Restaurant	Restaurant manager
14	Restaurant	Restaurant manager
15	Restaurant	Restaurant manager

An interview guide was used as we wanted to cover some specific themes during the interviews. However, in practice, the conversations did not follow the interview guide strictly, as we wanted the informants to speak openly about which social skills they use and how they use them as being hosts. The interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed.

According to Alvesson (2011), interpretation is the cornerstone of analyzing qualitative interviews. Inspired by Kvale (1997), interview data can be analysed using a strategy called meaning categorization. Meaning categorization involves that interview transcriptions are coded with the purpose of reducing and structuring lengthy text material into more analyzable parts. Inspired by Larkin et al (2006), the authors conducted a line-by-line analysis of each transcript. This process consisted of three steps: In step one, transcripts were read as a way of getting a preliminary impression of each interview. Initial reflections were noted in the margins while reading. Secondly, step two consisted of a comparison between transcripts with the purpose of identifying and labeling themes based on what each informant had been saying (Larkin et al., 2006). Finally, in step three main themes identified were written into an empty document, and key quotes from each interview were transferred to the document. The outcome was a document consisting of main themes with a number of interview quotes to support each theme. This enables us to bring interview quotes into the analysis. This is a way of giving voice to the informants and to empirically support the arguments being presented (Kvale, 1997).

Analysis

Analysing the transcripts resulted in the identification of a number of social skills. In this section, the social skills will be presented and, by including interview citations, it will be demonstrated how the informants practice these social skills in their daily jobs as hosts.

In King's hospitality model, organizational support is seen as one component affecting hospitality. Here, organizational support, among other things, includes the service delivery system. In this sense, the service delivery system and how this system is organized can be understood as an overall framework in which the employee can apply his/her social skills as host. The fact that the service delivery system creates a context for exercising the role as host is supported by several of the informants, for instance, a front office manager in one hotel:

The reception desk is a leftover from a time where there was a clear distance between guest and employee. Today, desks are thrown away, so there is no longer a clear distance between us. Instead, there is a dialogue and understanding of whether the guest has plenty of time or is in a hurry (Informant #7).

In another hotel, the service delivery system is also mentioned as a factor influencing the ways in which the employees can exercise being hosts. Here, however, focus is on how two normally separated job functions have been merged into one, as the employee in this hotel is receptionist and bartender at the same time:

Ok, I checked you in three hours ago, and I can actually remember what we talked about during check-in. So when you order a beer later in the evening, we already have a relation started, and we can talk in a different way compared to if we had not already met (Informant #3).

The quote illustrates how the ability to establish an emotional relation is key, when exercising the role of host. At the same time, the two quotes confirm another important characteristic of hosting, which is that hosting is an interactive process involving both host and guest (this is also a key aspect of King's model (King, 1995)). Very often the guest participates in the service delivery, which enables the employee to carry out the role as host. In this sense, hosting emerges in the interplay between guest and host.

Be able to communicate presence non-verbally

The first social skill to be highlighted is one that is emphasized by most of the informants. That is the ability to communicate presence non-verbally. One front office manager explains this skill in the following way:

It is the way we behave, we are friendly and accommodating and we see the guest when he approaches the reception. That we don't just stand and look into a screen, but that we welcome them as we would do in our own homes (Informant #5).

As the quote illustrates, directing attention to the guest is important when one has the role of a host. A way of making the guest feel welcome is to establish eye contact. A restaurant manager puts it this way:

Look people into the eyes and say "I am here" (Informant #10).

This describes a very important characteristic of hosting, which is that the host needs to behave in a way that signals to the guest, that he/she is the most important person in the world in that specific moment. Very often, this might be a difficult task, as the guest is typically not the only guest present. This is also evident in King's hospitality model (King, 1995), as she emphasizes "Other guests" as another component affecting hospitality. This entails that one of the most important skills when exercising being a host is the ability to be personally engaged when meeting the guest. As a host, you have to meet the guest with authenticity and openness. Another restaurant manager describes it in this way:

Hosting is when you are really there for the guests, and that they can feel that it is sincere (Informant #13).

Elaborating further on what makes a host appear authentic, most informants emphasize smiling as a decisive skill. One receptionist puts it like this:

We need to be smiling, be happy and appear accommodating. We need to signal that we are interested in the guest (Informant #6).

Smiling can be referred to as gestures (facial expressions), and can be seen as non-verbal communication and as a part of our body language. Smiling is a way of signaling openness, curiosity and courtesy towards other people (Knapp et al., 2013). That being said, it makes sense that a genuine smile is a key when trying to establish an emotional relation to a guest. The following quote taken from a restaurant manager illustrates that point:

We always walk around with a smile on our faces because it affects other people (Informant #15).

Be able to pro-actively engage in conversation

The previous quotes all point to another interesting aspect of hosting, as all informants emphasize how hosting is something that emerges in the meeting between a host and a guest. Consequently, communication in the broadest sense (i.e. spoken words as well as body language) is of course important, as two human beings standing in front of each other cannot "not communicate" (Andersen & Jørnø, 2013). This fact leads us to the second social skill to be highlighted, which is the ability to engage in conversation. Several of the informants emphasize dialogue as key when being host. Here are some examples:

We are happy to see our guests sit in the lounge, and we ask them if we can offer them a cup of coffee... you and the guest are at the same eye level and you take two extra minutes during check-in and ask them what they are doing in the area (Informant #8).

Hosting is about making it personal... you might try to ask the guest: Why are you here, are you celebrating something tonight? (Informant #9).

The quotes both point to the fact that conversation is at the core when exercising the role of host. Here, engaging in conversation comes in the form of small talking with the guest. By initiating a conversation with

the guest, the host gets important knowledge about the wants and expectations of the guest. This information will make it more likely that the employee will succeed in being perceived as a good host by the guest; simply because knowing what the guest wants will make it easier for the host to deliver exactly that. In relation to engaging in conversation, many informants explain how they, through having a conversation with the guest, can make a more customised and unique hosting experience. This customisation comes in different forms. One waiter elaborates:

The thing about us knowing the guest is important. We have one guest who wants an espresso and a fresh orange juice. We just know that, and as soon as we see him, we start making it, so it is ready at the table when he arrives, and it makes him happy (Informant #12).

A hotel receptionist puts it like this:

We focus on knowing who people are, know their name... So we know that when Johnny arrives, we give him room 122, because this is where he likes to stay (Informant #6).

As the quotes illustrate, both informants try to give a personalised hosting experience, by proactively doing a “little extra” for their guests. However, an important aspect of being able to engage in conversation is also the ability to know when NOT to engage in conversation by reading the wants/needs of the guest (this is very often something that happens intuitively) in the situation. A restaurant manager explains it in the following way:

It is about reading the guest as soon as he enters the door. Is he having a laptop or a book under his arm, then we know that he is probably not here to talk (Informant #10).

Be able to listen to the guest

The ability to engage in conversation can, however, not be seen in isolation. Instead, engaging in conversation is closely related to a third social skill which is being emphasised by the informants. This is the ability to listen actively to what the guest tells you. This might seem obvious since one of the main purposes of engaging in conversation in the first place is to get information about the wants and expectations of the guest. However, the ability to listen actively is about genuinely understanding the needs of the guest, and subsequently being able to adjust your behavior according to what is required in the specific situation. In this sense, when a host listens carefully to what a guest expresses, it is a way of making the guest feel seen and heard which might lead to trust, understanding and mutual respect between two parties. Thus, listening actively is a way for a host to initiate (and maintain) an emotional relationship with the guest. Several of the informants explain the importance of listening to the wants of the guest, for instance a restaurant manager:

Well, this is the first thing we do when they enter... We guide them to a table and ask them whether they are satisfied with sitting at that table. If not, we find something else (Informant #13)

In this example, the employee listens to the wants of the guest, and subsequently tries to make a change in order to satisfy the guest. This is likely to make the guest feel heard and appreciated and an emotional relation is established. This means that the guest will probably be much more relaxed the rest of the evening and have a good hosting experience. A receptionist at a hotel explains this point in another way:

You would like to listen and be there for the guest, you're not only there to do a check-in (Informant #4)

Concluding remarks

Using Danish hotels and restaurants as empirical foundation, this paper examines which social skills are required in order to exercise the role as a host, and secondly, to provide examples on how these skills are applied in practice. In this sense, this paper builds on Carol King's hospitality model by adding empirical

insights to the social skill dimension in this model. This study has highlighted three social skills, which in practice are closely connected. The first skill is the ability to communicate presence non-verbally. By making eye-contact with the guest and by smiling, a host is able to demonstrate a genuine interest in the guest, which is a way of initiating an emotional relationship with the guest. The second social skill identified is the ability to proactively engage in conversation with the guest. By engaging in conversation the host is able to get information about the wants and expectations of the guest, which will make it possible to give the guest a more personalized hosting experience. Finally, the third social skill is the ability to listen to the guest. The ability to listen, so it is argued, will further help the host to understand the wants of the guest, which might lead to trust, understanding and mutual respect between two parts. The study adds important insights to our knowledge about what it requires to be a good host in terms of relevant social skills, and it can be an important contribution to educational programs within service and hospitality studies. Inspired by King (1995), this study has seen hospitality as an interplay between a host and a guest. However, this study has only focused on the host. Therefore, future studies might focus on the guest, more specifically how the guest experiences this interaction with hosts. When a host applies the social skills identified in this paper, how does that affect the guest emotionally?

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