Soft Skill Competency Development to Enhance Competitiveness of Thai Incentive Travel Industry

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Abstract

Incentive travel has been recognized as a vitally important sector of Thailand's tourism and hospitality industry due to its demand for luxurious and additional recreational activities. With such recognition, Thailand needs to improve the productivity and quality of human capital to generate higher sales per employee compared to those of neighboring countries in the Asia-Pacific region. To remain competitive in the long run, the Thai incentive travel businesses are now applying the competency-based approach as part of the operations plan in training and developing their personnel. In this study, the researcher used the *Language of Work or LOW* model and work tasks by positions to collect interview data from 127 key stakeholders 10 the industrial experts. The finding revealed that the stakeholders or incentive travel operation planners rely on their soft skill competencies rather than technical skill competencies to perform their jobs up to the expected level. The results of the study pointed to the focus of competency-based training and development, particularly on soft skill competencies for high performance of personnel in incentive tourism.

Keywords: Incentive travel, training and development, soft skill competency, Language of Work--LOW model, Thai tourism

1. Introduction

Thailand has heavily relied on tourism for economic growth and development in gaining revenue and creating employment. Meeting, Incentive Travel, Convention and Exhibition (MICE) contribute well to the country's revenue. According to Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (2017), the country welcomed close to 1.1 million international MICE visitors, generating approximately 88.5 billion baht in revenue. The study on global incentive travel by Society for Incentive Travel Excellence (2018) indicated that incentive travel has become a fast growing sector of MICE with high spending per person, distributed amongst the destination. In 2017, there were 271,793 international incentive travel visitors in Thailand, generating revenue of 16,696 billion baht. Despite such a substantial revenue, Thailand has not been ranked the first place of Asia's MICE destination. Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (2017) reported India, Indonesia, Turkey and China with a high positive growth in the MICE segment in 2016-2020. Since Thailand has aimed at leading in incentive travel destinations in Asia, it is important that the concerned public and private sectors are urged to increase their competitiveness in the industry through work standards and productivity. As reported in Table 1, the figures from various sources in 2010-2018 show that Thailand has faced productivity limitations partially due to quality of human capital.

Table 1: Comparative MICE Productivity between Thailand and its Pacific Rim
Neighboring Countries

Country	Sales per Employee (USD)	PPP Sales per Employee (USD)	Thailand Efficiency Ratio	UNDP Human Development Rank	Average PISA Score
Singapore	340,631	469,048.89	18.08	9	551.7
Australia	135,533	115,338.58	4.45	3	502.3
New Zealand	114,590	111,496.07	4.30	16	505.7
Japan	108,873	89,166.99	3.44	19	528.7
South Korea	20,549	33,577.07	1.29	22	519.0
Malaysia	15,191	29,865.51	1.15	57	440.0
Thailand	12,551	25,942.92	1.00	83	415.0
China	12,698	22,983.38	0.89	86	514.3
Indonesia	8,084	14,300.60	0.55	116	395.3
India	4,926	11,337.22	0.44	130	-
Philippines	4,601	9,229.61	0.36	113	-

Sources: Barnes Report (2010), Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development,
(2015), United Nations Development Programme (2018)

It was noted that the cost of living varied in the countries and sales per employee were converted into purchasing power parity for comparison. Thailand's performance was in the midrange in terms of productivity compared to that of South Korea, Malaysia and China. However, should the country aim to be a high performing destination in the incentive travel sector, it has to benchmark with the leading destinations in the region. Reported figures in Table 1 indicate that Thailand's productivity was rather far behind Singapore and Japan. This could have stemmed from personnel's productivity and efficiency of incentive travel personnel being ranked 83rd out of 189 countries in human development by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2018), followed by the below-average score of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and rather low performance on mathematics, science and reading reported by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2015). In this regard, Thailand urgently needs to look into its human resource development. The researcher therefore would like to investigate competencies needed for incentive travel personnel to perform up to the expected standard level of performance, and based on the obtained findings, propose practical competency-based training and development guidelines for the key positions in incentive tourism. The following sections will discuss theoretical concepts related to the incentive travel industry for the study on the most needed competency-based training and development.

2. Theoretical Framework

This part deals with incentive travel, followed by the concept of competency, and competency-based training and development.

Incentive travel is currently a highly desirable market for all tourism and hospitality business operators as well as the destination hosts due to its reputation associated with fantasy experience the host organization wants to create for participants

(Ricci & Holland, 1992). Team building activities allow top management and program earners to jointly participate in conferences, and gala dinner to commemorate the achievement of the earners, and participants (Ricci & Holland, 1992; Severt & Breiter, 2010).

Incentive travel can be defined as the managerial tool used to motivate employees or distributors to achieve an uncommon goal as well as to reward employee's achievement using an extraordinary or trophy trip experience as prize or premium (Ricci & Holland, 1992; Shinew & Backman, 1995). The reward can be granted to a particular employee as an individual or as a team to recognize their team effort (Severt & Breiter, 2010). Incentive travel usually provides trip experience that exerts exoticism and fantasy. The program usually contains a lot luxurious and high value travel components and leisure activities as well as the activities in which participants and top management of the host organization can jointly participate to reinforce the sense of achievement, camaraderie, as well as listening to the next period's vision of the top management (Ricci & Holland, 1992; Shinew & Backman, 1995; Severt & Breiter, 2010). Therefore, one can assume that incentive travel normally involves numerous high priced travel components and recreational activities. Players in incentive travel benefit from the program differently, depending on the level of their involvement and value created to the program. They range from site selection companies, destination management companies, hotels, airlines, ground transportation companies, travel wholesalers and travel retainers (Ricci & Holland, 1992; Severt & Breiter, 2010). For some of the business, such as incentive house and site selection companies, incentive travel accounts for as much as 95% of their business. Others also admit that the incentive travel market is a lucrative and high margin one (Severt & Breiter, 2010). One can conclude, therefore, that incentive travel presents a high end market for the hospitality industry due to the demand for luxurious and additional recreational activities.

As for the concept of competency, the earlier researchers, particularly Rowe (1995) and Rainsbury, Hodges, Burchell & Lay (2001) defined it as interchangeably used between the term *capability* and *competence*. It should be noted that most scholars defined the concept as an enduring and deep ability or behavior of an individual to perform a task up to certain standard required by the industry or an organization (Rainsbury, Hodges, Burchell & Lay, 2001; Duad, et al., 2010; Soderquist, et al., 2010). However, certain scholars contended that competency should identify superior performance; others argued for the sufficiency or adequacy but agreed upon a set of standards for benchmarking (Purdue, Ninemeier & Woods, 2002; Bhatawdekar & Bhatawdekar, 2012). Competency must be approached in the context in which the competency is performed (Chapman & Lovell, 2006; Holton III, Coco, Lowe & Dutsch, 2008). Competency also includes such inherent aspects as attitude, personality traits, willingness, and motivation of individuals while other competencies can be developed on the basis of both on and off the job (Purdue, Ninemeier & Woods, 2002).

Competency can be approached at the individual and organizational levels in that organizational competencies, known as a firm's competitive advantage, are accumulated from individual employee's competencies pertinent to the goal of an organization. The goal on achievement should be different from those of major competitors, that is, difficult to imitate and valuable to the organization (Holton III et al., 2008; Melaia, Abratt, &

Bicks, 2008; Soderquist et al., 2010; Kalagyrou & Woods, 2011). Organization and professional associations or certification bodies usually use competency as the basis for certification which mainly involves the assessment of skills, knowledge, attributes, ethical considerations, intellectuality of the applicants or incumbents against a certain level of standards which are needed to be verified and updated at times required by authorities concerned (Koenigsfeld, Perdue, Youn & Woods, 2011). The use of competency at work usually deals with techniques and models which need to be developed in an organization's specific context (Landon & Marrelli, 2002).

It can be concluded that term competency can refer to a set of standards in the workplace and industry context that indicates adequacy and superiority of competence of an applicant or incumbent in assuming specific positions; and the organization's competitiveness comprises knowledge and skills as well as attributes that are partially developed and partially inherent. The researcher used such a definition in the study.

Like other social science concepts, competency has various elements and different scholars identified its elements differently, depending on the approach and purpose of their studies. Conventionally, scholars and practitioners contend that competency has three elements, namely *knowledge*, *skills* and *attributes* or KSA (Weber, Finley, Crawford, & Rivera Jr., 2009). These three terms are actually interconnected in that an individual with certain *attributes* tends to acquire or develop certain *skills* easier or better than those without such attributes. A higher level of certain skills pertinent to particular types of task completion should facilitate the application of *knowledge* one has and vice versa.

Within the domain of skills, the construct can broadly be divided into two types, namely *hard skill* competency and *soft skill* competency. The former refers to technical skills needed to complete certain tasks, while the latter refers to interpersonal, human, or behavioral skills needed to apply the hard skills and other knowledge specific to the task and workplace conditions (Weber, Finley, Crawford, & Rivera Jr., 2009). Hard skill competencies are relatively easier to develop and critically important for frontline employees while soft skill competencies are critically required when climbing up the managerial level (Weber, Finley, Crawford, & Rivera Jr., 2009). In the hospitality context which is highly relevant to incentive travel industry, hard skill competencies are indispensable for employees to perform their guest service function at the minimum level of performance acceptable to the guests (Testa & Sipe, 2012). To provide an impressive service and experiences for guests and keep them loyal to the company, soft skill competencies are needed in frontline employees (Testa & Sipe, 2012). This signifies both hard and soft skills required in employees at all managerial levels.

As mentioned earlier, hard skill competencies can be trained, both on and off the job basis; employers are more interested in measuring both applicants and incumbents' soft skill competencies (Baum, 2008; Testa & Sipe, 2012). Good hospitality workforce should understand and be sensitive to customers' needs while maintaining professional and ethical standards, professional appearance, and effective communication. They should also develop and maintain positive and constructive relationship with customers, trade partners, and colleagues (Jauhari, 2006). It can be seen, hence, that soft skill competencies contribute greatly to the service quality and organizational competitiveness. As certain types of competency constituents, mainly pertaining to the attribute elements, tend to be

unobservable in a short period, especially during initial employment, employees' supervisors together with human resource and training professionals are suggested to assess the gaps between the existing skills and the desired competencies on employees' career path (Chung-Herrera, 2003; Gangani, McLean & Braden, 2008).

As known, the incentive travel industry takes part in the hospitality industry where the labor market is labeled as "weak" in that there are no entry clear-cut selection criteria of candidates, multiple ports of entry, low skill specificity, weak workplace customs, pay differential variation over time, and flexible roles of responsibilities (Baum, 2008). The nature of labor market poses a high threat to small and medium firms to lose talents, and thus competitiveness to their larger competitors (Abdul Razak, Kamaruddin & Abdul Azid, 2012).

The model that identifies competencies of each employees using performance standards as the basis for development by Landon and Marrelli (2002) called Language of Work or LOW (Landon and Marrelli, 2002). The model was modified by segregating mastery levels and probing into knowledge, skills, and attributes required for a particular performance (Weber, Finley, Crawford, & Rivera Jr., 2009; Duad, Ismail & Omar, 2010). Figure 1 shows the modified Language of Work Model.

Figure 1: Modified Language of Work Model
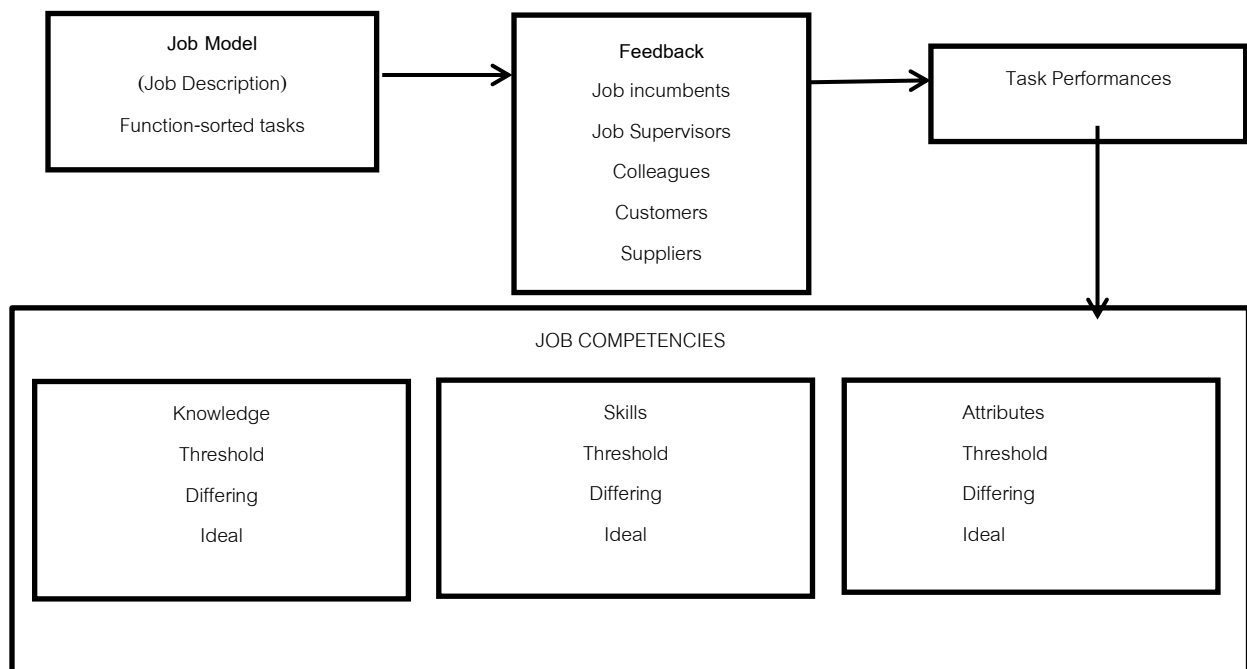
The Language of Work Model is a widely accepted competency model that helps firms and managers improve their respective department or organization's performance in a short period (Jones, 2011). As shown in Figure 1, the researcher used the modified Language of Work or LOW model as the major framework to identify the tasks selected by Thailand's Incentive and Convention Organization (TICA) and specified by operation planners in three different levels: *threshold* with the aim to screen candidates, *appraisal*

for incumbents' job, and *training needs* for entry level employees, together with training programs designed for high performers. Competency training and development focus on three elements: knowledge, skills, and attributes.

Competencies identified in various positions need to cover stakeholders or travel operation planners, the incumbents, their immediate supervisors, colleagues from other functions within the organizations, suppliers, and customers or buyers. The competency model serves as the platform for the organization and training professionals to manage the organizations' talent through the competency-based training and development.

In the modern business environment, individual employees need to have a career path that might not remain stable over time due to change in the external environment. The management and human resource and training professionals should look into specific skills, knowledge, and other personal attributes that employees have to fulfill the current and future job requirements. Competency-based training and the development approach should allow adaptation to the fast changing environment and competitiveness in the tourism and hospitality industry so that the human capital of the organization can be carefully planned, developed, and managed in line with the organizational goal and industrial forces (Chapman & Lovell, 2006).

The typical objective of training and development is to improve the ability and performance standard of employees, and in turn will increase organization's productivity and competitiveness. (Woods, 2006; Van der Wagen, 2007). To set competency-based training and development programs, the organization must begin with a job description statement by identifying activities, standards and underlying knowledge, skills, and attributes while complying with organizational strategies (Bourdreau & Ziskin, 2011; Huff-Eibl, Voyles & Brewer, 2011).

3. Research Objectives

The researcher would like to (1) investigate competencies needed for incentive travel personnel to perform up to the expected standard of all stakeholders, and (2) based on the obtained findings, propose practical competency-based training and development guidelines for the key positions in incentive tourism.

4. Methodology

4.1. Participants

The participants in the study were 127 stakeholders or incentive travel planners under Thailand's Incentive and Convention Association (TICA)--the most recognized convention and incentive travel professional association in Thailand. The participants were job incumbents, supervisors, colleagues, suppliers and customers. They were put in five groups and interviewed for 2-3 hours per group by the researcher, depending on insights each participant might want to share in the framework of Language of Work Model and tasks by positions. There were also ten industry experts to provide data of the same types via group discussion.

4.2. Instrument

This research used the in-depth interview with open-ended questions based on the components in the LOW Model (Figure 1) and the job description of incentive travel operation planners (Table 2). The purpose was to obtain new information on skill competency development to enhance competitiveness of Thai incentive travel industry, as volunteered by the participants in the study. The qualitative approach was justified for the exploratory nature of the needed information (Guba & Lincoln, 1991; Neuman, 2011).

Table 2: Job Description of Incentive Travel Operation Planners

Task Areas	Tasks
Sales and Marketing	Interpretation of client's needs into project components and activities
	Relationship management with clients and suppliers
Operation	Co-planning operational plan
	Operational plan implementation
	Verification of third party's service and products
Administration	Rank and file

5. Data Collection

The researcher collected data on skill competency training and development through in-depth interview with the key-position stakeholders, namely job incumbents, supervisors, colleagues, suppliers and customers to obtain data from different angles or the nature of their interaction under study. The researcher expected to check consistency between the obtained data from the stakeholders and those of ten industry experts nominated by MICE professional associations through focus group discussion—the method earlier used by Ezzy (1999).

6. Data Collection Procedure

The researcher interviewed 127 participants in five groups, in two to three hours per group for all information each participant might want to volunteer. First, the participants were asked from their perception about the performance standard of each task for a specific position regarding the *threshold performance* or the minimum acceptable performance. Then they were asked about knowledge, skills, or attributes required for the tasks at the *standard* level. They were also asked about the difference in performance between the average and high performers, as well as their expectation of desired performance. The interview data were used as a platform to collect the same types of data from ten industry experts via focus group discussion. The data obtained from the industry experts were used to check consistency between perception of the incumbents/ stakeholders and the industry experts.

7. Data Analysis

The results from the in-depth interviews both in terms of task completion standards and the competency required for such standards, were coded, grouped, and combined into knowledge, skills and attributes-KSA. These coded data, later, were used as an interview frame for data collection with ten industrial experts comprising TICA board members and

representatives from its leading member organizations. These industry experts joined the focus group discussion of four hours on a voluntary basis. The researcher acted as a group moderator for ten experts to share their perception of competencies by tasks and positions as given earlier by 127 incentive travel planners. Consistency in two groups' perception was checked to conclude the significance of skill competencies in the basis of task-based performance by tasks and positions.

8. Findings and Discussion

The competency-based approach to human resource management and development has been adopted in this study to secure needed information on competency training and development pertinent to the Thai incentive tourism. The participants or incentive travel planners gave information in the interviews at three levels of performance: threshold, standard, and ideal. The threshold level of performance refers to the minimum acceptable level of performance of tasks included in a job description of incentive travel operation planners regarding knowledge, skills, and attributes. The standard level of performance refers to performance that differentiates high performers from average performers regarding knowledge, skills, and attributes. The ideal level of performance refers to the excellent or ideal performance of tasks regarding knowledge, skills, and attributes. These levels can help human resource managers and job supervisors to make practical decision on job promotion and succession. The findings on competency units in support of the three levels are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Competency Units of Expected Performance Levels of Thai Incentive Travel Operation Planners

Levels of Performance	Competency Components	Competency Units
Threshold	**Knowledge**	Product knowledge: characteristics, costs, availability
		Customer knowledge: their objectives, needs, business goals, key success factors, and decision process
		Market intelligence: market trends, competitive intelligence
		Knowledge about current affairs: domestic and international
		Knowledge about project: structure, characteristics, components
		Knowledge about internal working process in the organization
		Knowledge about travel program arrangement: planning, operations, logistical requirement, timing, safety and security specification and requirement, and crowd management
		Knowledge about legal issues pertinent to different MICE events
	Skills	Communication skills: concise/precise/logical
		Teamwork and team planning
		Presentation skills: clear and logical
		Basic cost and revenue
		Task coordination

Levels of Performance	Competency Components	Competency Units
		English proficiency
		Computer literacy
		Correspondence, and rank and file appropriate for functional areas and information recipients
		Project management skills: according to the agreement, and timeline
	Attributes	Acumen
		Integrity
		Optimism toward problems and obstacles
		Observance and detail oriented
		Service mind
		Change adaptation
		Personality: trust commanding, leadership
		Good memory about work related issues
		Intercultural awareness
		Assertiveness with politeness
		Pride in working organization
		Avoid price cutting
		Work experience in Incentive Travel Business
Standard	Knowledge	Knowledge about adaptation, mixing, matching project components to create phenomenal experience
		Knowledge about the working process of other departments
	Skills	Strategic questioning
		Negotiation: systematic, fair, responsive
		Problem solving: unplanned situation
		Planning skills: anticipative of potential problems
		Presentation skills through CAD
	Attributes	Neatness and meticulousness
		Goal-oriented attitude
		Dependability
Ideal	Knowledge	Knowledge about other MICE events and their success factors
	Skills	Communication: tactical with social acumen
		Conflict management: systematic, integrative
		Communication skills: charismatic and persuasive
		Conflict management to create best practice for the project
	Attributes	None

Table 3 shows that the travel incentive stakeholders and the industry experts agreed on the three levels of performance and the significance of soft skill competencies across the levels. At the minimum acceptable or threshold level, incentive travel operation planners are expected to have the product knowledge of their organizations, prospective customers, market trend, domestic and international current affairs, projects, travel program arrangement and related legal issues. Transferable skills are needed, such as skills in communication, cost calculation, teamwork and project management. Attributes focus on acumen and optimism in performing one's job.

The three elements--knowledge, skills and attributes are emphasized by Weber, Finley, Crawford, & Rivera Jr. (2009). Of these elements, skills and attributes are usually ascribed as taking time to develop while knowledge takes shorter time through formal training programs or on the job basis (Duad, Ismail et al., 2010; Bhatawdekar and Bhatawdekar, 2012). Therefore, when establishing and implementing guidelines for competency-based training and development, the organization should take these points into consideration.

To create confidence and competence of employees, human resource and training professionals can incorporate *soft skill competencies* into the initial training (Weber, Crawford, Lee & Dennison, 2013). *As reported in this present study, the participants signified soft skill competencies at the three levels of performance.* Human resource management therefore needs to integrate human and communication skills into the training and development programs. The threshold performance level can be designed to develop knowledge in new and existing staff either on or off the job basis. Therefore, orientation programs, on-the-job training, mentoring systems and formal training programs for incentive travel operation planners should require the knowledge element in the training content. As the employees begin to develop further, more soft skills competencies can be trained via mentoring and development (Weber, Crawford, Lee & Dennison, 2013). In order to select personnel for promotion and succession, decision-makers need to consider skills and attributes at the ideal level of performance. Efficient training and development programs can help incentive travel operation planners in training to improve their soft skill competencies which can lead to increased profitability of the organization (Weber, Crawford, Lee & Dennison, 2013).

As for the standard level of performance, professional trainers should include options, such as demonstration, brainstorming, role playing, behavioral modeling, coaching/ mentoring, case study, business game, group discussion, and questioning techniques (Woods, 2006; Van der Wagen, 2007). Travel incentive tourism organizations can keep records of their employees' knowledge, skills and attributes using the competency framework in Table 3 as a full guideline. Human resource and training professionals together with employees' supervisors need to identify current and future competency gaps of their employees so that the training and development programs can be designed appropriately (Chung- Herrera, 2003; Gangani, McLean & Braden, 2008). Employees, themselves, cannot fully maximize their potential competencies without facilitation and support from the management concerned. To create and deliver competency-based training and development to success, the human resource unit needs time for planning, communication, implementation and assessment for personnel under training.

9. Conclusion

Even though the Thai incentive travel industry has performed quite well in welcoming domestic and international travelers with support from regulating bodies of the hospitality sector. The neighboring countries in the Pacific Rim certainly want to excel as a leading destination for incentive travel in Asia. It takes full attention from human resource training and development units to make the goal possible. This study reports the findings that identify the set of soft skill competencies that underlie three levels of

performance: threshold, standard and ideal. Of the three components of competency, knowledge is the easiest part to impart to employees, and skills and attributes take more time to attain the expected levels. As shown in this study, competency-based training and development undoubtedly account for success in human capital development for operations of incentive travel businesses as well as other tourism-related programs in the country's overall service industry.

10. The Author

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