Tourism Professional Profile: Theme Park Managers

by
Robert M. O'Halloran
and
Christopher Siew L. Wong

Theme park managers are a unique group of tourism managers. Their perspectives on effective tourism management skills and abilities differ from some public sector tourism managers. The authors present the results of a study focusing on theme park managers and compare these results with those of other tourism manager groups.

Career programs like tourism management differ widely and lack the standardization that characterizes many traditional fields of study.[1] The development of tourism occupations has tended to occur on a relatively ad hoc basis.[2] Professional tourism managers refer to people in those occupations followed by individuals, normally after a long period of formal education or training, which are based on a well defined area of knowledge.[3] The education and experiences of managers in tourism differ greatly and no consistent background or education program exists.

Some tourism managers have great technical knowledge of specific disciplines, but little education or training to administer or manage a tourism operation. Coordination in tourism education has been provided formally through various course validating and examining bodies, and informally through contacts between academics, but even in the academic arena developments have lead in different directions.[4]

Tourism, as a focus and not a discipline, draws from arts, sciences, humanities, and business backgrounds. A framework for tourism education developed in 1981 noted the various approaches that exist, detailing department and/or discipline and specific tourism courses that might be offered. Sixteen different areas were noted: sociology, economics, psychology, anthropology, political science, geography, ecology, agriculture, parks and recreation, urban regional planning, marketing, law, business, transportation, hotel

FIU Hospitality Review, Volume 12, Number 1, 1994

and restaurant management, and education.[5] In 1988, another study listed colleges and schools that have tourism programs at the university level and their locations as arts/sciences, business, education, health, physical education and recreation, hotel/travel, natural resources/forestry/agriculture/home economics, public affairs, and professional studies.[6]

This study is part of an effort to identify the skills and abilities needed by successful tourism managers. Using the results of studies examining tourism managers, a profile of successful skills and abilities and backgrounds of successful tourism managers can be developed. The study assesses the backgrounds and perceptions of successful tourism managers on important skills and abilities needed by tourism managers.

The focus in the literature on theme parks is on the development of new parks and new competitors entering the industry, and the increasing relationships drawn between the theme park industry and museums. These topics have implications for theme park managers and the skills they will need to manage these facilities in the future. However, little has been written concerning theme park managers specifically, but more broadly focusing on attraction and event management. Theme park managers must perceive and recognize their parks to be tourism attractions, promote and market the attraction publicly, provide on site management and staffing, and be recognized as a tourism attraction by the visitor.[7]

Some Formal Program Exists

The added pressure upon managers to secure a profit or operational surplus has increased the need to develop a professional approach toward theme park management.[8] In the theme park industry some formal training programs already exist. The Theme Park Management Institute in Orlando, Florida, for example, has three objectives for training managers: better management skills, an enhanced reputation, and a stronger financial base.[9] A review of the curriculum at the institute indicates coverage of all aspects of management over a two-week training period. Some topics listed were attendance trends, guest demands, management of waiting times, establishment of park carrying capacities, scheduling techniques, emergency management, target marketing, pricing, entertainment, food service and merchandising, business strategy, and promotional packing.[10]

The institute is the educational arm of the International Association of Theme Parks and Attractions. Clearly this is a very ambitious curriculum for training and development within the theme park industry. The theme park industry and its members have recognized the importance of training and education in all economic times and specifically that when a recession comes in, education is more important than ever.[11] However, the cost of the training sessions ($10,000) may be prohibitive to many theme park managers.

FIU Hospitality Review, Volume 12, Number 1, 1994

Similar industry association based training models can be found in different segments of the hospitality and tourism industry. Some of these comparable programs are through the Educational Institute of the American Hotel and Motel Association, the Educational Foundation of the National Restaurant Association, and the educational arms of the National Tour Association, the American Society of Travel Agents, and the Club Managers Association of America.

Tourism managers and their qualifications were also recently the focus of a European study. Skills identified as important for tourism managers were team leadership, strong technical and financial skills, training, and guest and staff relations. Flexibility and an appreciation for multi-cultural approaches to business were also considered important. In specific functional areas, marketing and sales were identified as increasingly important in today's competitive environment.[12] It was also noted in the study that the lack of training in the industry is one reason why the tourism industry has had difficulty in attracting graduates from higher education with qualifications in business and management studies.[13]

Data collected from groups previously studied indicated diverse educational backgrounds. Convention and visitor bureau directors listed 11 different academic majors in college; state tourism directors listed 17 majors, ski area operators listed 26 different majors, and national park managers listed 15 majors.[14] The educational backgrounds of convention and visitor bureau directors focused on business and management skills; state tourism directors were more diverse, but communication related skills could be the theme of study. Ski area operators were the least similar in educational backgrounds, with operators listing concentrations from accounting to English to fine arts to hotel and restaurant management. National park superintendents had the most similar backgrounds focusing on natural resources and the sciences.[15]

Previous career positions in tourism for these groups relied heavily on human relations and communication skills for state tourism directors and convention and visitor bureau directors, while ski area operators tended to need experience in technical skill positions at ski resorts prior to becoming operators. Ski area operators listed 73 different positions prior to becoming ski area operators. National park managers listed only positions within the structure of the National Park Service as their five previous jobs.[16]

The key skills indicated by these tourism manager groups were leadership, employee relations, marketing public relations, and organizational skills, while key management resources were people, time, money and information.[17] Research on tourism managers has helped to confirm theories that tourism management education lacks a formal infrastructure, which, in turn, has lead to a continuing poor industry image and disillusioned tourism students and would-be managers.

FIU Hospitality Review, Volume 12, Number 1, 1994

All Theme Park Managers Are Contacted

A total of 107 questionnaires were mailed to all the theme park managers in the United States listed in *The AAA Guide to North America's Theme Parks*;[18] 44, or 41.12 percent of the questionnaires, were returned. Although the parks vary in size and theme, most provide rides, attractions, and food services. The theme parks, by region, included Northeast, 9; Mid-Atlantic, 15; Southeast, 20, Great Lakes and Central, 19; South Central, 17; Rocky Mountain and Southwest, 7; and Pacific West, 20.

Results of the study were examined with the use of simple statistical measures including raw scores, frequency, mean scores, and standard deviations. The studied examined the manager perceptions of the key knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to be a successful theme park manager. These data were collected using a five-point rating scale (least to most important). Additionally, demographic and career path data were collected. In some cases certain items on the questionnaires were returned unanswered; consequently, blank replies were omitted from the calculation to enhance the accuracy of study.

Thirty-two or 72.7 percent of the respondents are older than 36 years of age. This fact coincides with tourism experience, given the fact that the same number of respondents also indicated having worked for more than 11 years in the tourism industry.

The age distribution of theme park managers was skewed toward more experienced individuals, and the majority of the respondents were male, earning in excess of $45,000 per year. This further strengthens the notion, as indicated by the results of past profile studies, that the upper levels of tourism management are heavily male dominated.

Most Respondents Are Experienced

Of the 44 respondents, 32 or 72.7 percent indicated work experience of more than 11 years in the tourism industry. Another six or 13.6 percent indicated having between 5-8 years of tourism related experience, while the remaining six returns were equally shared by respondents indicating between 1-4 and 8-11 years experience.

Not unlike the earlier studies done on some other groups of tourism managers, previous employment of theme park managers covered a wide spectrum of occupations ranging from naval aviator to guidance counselor. Table 1 illustrates these positions.

The variation in work experience suggests a weak association between career planning and career paths of the respondents. Previous employment responses for theme park managers are most similar to those of ski area operators in that they represent a wide breath of experience with little focus specifically on a goal of becoming a theme park manager.

FIU Hospitality Review, Volume 12, Number 1, 1994

Table 1
Previous Employment

a/c maintenance manager	accountant
advertising manager	assistant broker
assistant manager	assistant general manager
assistant personnel manager	assistant office manager
assistant controller	bartender
bookkeeper	ceo/president
controller	director of food services
director of marketing	director of revenue
food stand manager	food manager
front gate manager	general manager
grounds supervisor	group sales manager
guidance counselor	hostess
hotel general manager	lifeguard
lifeguard supervisor	marketing manager
national sales	naval aviator
news anchor person	operations manager
operations supervisor	park director
project manager	promotions manager
proprietor, advertising agency	public affairs assistant
public speaking instructor	real estate office manager
recreation supervisor	recreation director
research analyst	ride dept manager
ride operator	sales representative
seasonal supervisor	secretary
ski area manager	special events manager
system analyst	teacher
vice president	

Whatever the structure, the management team must carry out the following functions: organization, coordination, financial control, marketing and public relations, and evaluation and research.[19] theme park managers were asked to rate the importance of these and a variety of other management skills and activities necessary for successful theme park management. The rankings were based on a scale of 1 (very important) to 5 (least important). (See Table 2).

The rankings are indicative of the perceived importance of both marketing and general management skills to theme park managers. With the exception of technical and research skills, the rankings were relatively close, ranging from 1.02 to 1.77. In addition, the low standard deviations imply a high level of agreement on the importance of these skills among respondents.

FIU Hospitality Review, Volume 12, Number 1, 1994

Table 2
Importance of Management Skills

	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Leadership	1.02	0.15
Employee relations	1.18	0.44
Marketing	1.36	0.57
Organizational	1.36	0.48
Public relations	1.39	0.57
Training	1.55	0.66
Operational	1.64	0.71
Staffing/evaluation	1.70	0.73
Development planning	1.70	0.64
Forecasting	1.70	0.76
Strategic planning	1.77	0.70
Technical	2.20	0.70
Research	2.45	0.81

In addition to managerial skills and activities, the respondents also rated a list of management resources according to their importance to successful theme park management. (See Table 3).

The low standard deviations indicated by these ratings reflect a high level of consensus among respondents. The four resources rated most critical were people, money, time, and information.

It is, however, noteworthy that while information is rated the fourth most important resource, research as a managerial skill was poorly rated. This suggests that the information necessary for effective planning and control is perceived as a commodity obtainable without actual research work.

Table 3
Importance of Management Resources

	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
People	1.02	0.20
Money	1.25	0.48
Time	1.36	0.48
Information	1.52	0.62
Facilities	1.70	0.69
Equipment	1.80	0.62
Procedures	1.86	0.73
Inventory	2.00	0.71
Energy	2.02	0.84

FIU Hospitality Review, Volume 12, Number 1, 1994

Table 4
Importance of Education and Previous Experience

	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Previous experience	1.66	0.82
College education	1.91	1.14
Continuing education	2.20	0.93
Graduate education	2.96	1.11

Most Managers Have Degrees

Similar to earlier profile studies of other tourism managers, 28 or 65.1 percent of the theme park managers surveyed indicated having obtained at least a bachelor's degree. Additionally, 9 or 20.9 percent indicated having completed postgraduate studies at the masters level. Of the remaining 24 percent of the respondents, 2 or 4.7 percent indicated having obtained an associate degree and the remainder indicated having completed at least high school.

While an overwhelming number of the theme park managers surveyed completed higher levels of education, the areas of emphasis indicated by the respondents were varied, as follows: accounting, anthropology, business finance, business administration, business science, communications, computer science, education administration, electrical engineering, engineering, geography, guidance and counseling, history economics, human resource management, international business, management, marketing, music education, oceanography, physics, psychology, recreation resource management, social science education, and sociology.

This reflects limited association with tourism-oriented disciplines, though some majors are very logical for some types of theme parks. For example, the concentration in oceanography reflects the educational background of an individual working at an aquatic park. With the exception of recreation resource management, few of the other academic majors could be considered a focused preparation for theme park management. Exposure to subjects such as sociology and anthropology could enable tourism managers to appreciate a wider spectrum of relationships to tourism, and a concentration on business and management skills enables managers to make the best decisions possible.

Having determined respondents' educational levels and preferences, theme park managers were also asked to rate their perceived importance of education and previous experience to better theme park management. (See Table 4).

Bearing in mind that most of the areas of study do not in any way indicate a career in tourism, let alone theme park management, it not unusual for previous experience to be rated the most

FIU Hospitality Review, Volume 12, Number 1, 1994

Table 5
Importance of Community Interaction

	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Economic	1.44	0.73
Social	1.93	0.75
Cultural	2.18	0.86
Environmental	2.30	0.97
Psychological	2.60	0.78
Political	2.63	1.06
Energy	2.86	1.04
Legal	3.07	0.93

important for theme park managers. Nevertheless, college education, rated second to previous experience, was also deemed to be necessary. These ratings are indicative of what Jennings referred to as the differences between functional and formal intelligence, noting that some situations for executive development are best suited for learning through experience.[20]

Parks Have Economic Impact

Respondents were also asked to rate the degree of impact theme parks have on the communities in which they are located. These ratings are displayed in Table 5.

Since many theme parks generate million of dollars of revenue for the local community, the rationale for economic impact being rated most important is clear. In addition to economic impact, theme parks were also seen as having significant influence over the social and cultural developments of the communities. To further expand on the importance of community interaction, theme park managers were also asked to rate the importance of interaction with different levels of the government.

As most regulations governing the management of theme parks are influenced by local governmental and interest groups, it is understandable that interaction with the local, state and city governments were rated higher than with the federal government, though these ratings lean toward moderate importance overall.

Theme park managers were then asked to rank the importance of five tourism infrastructure components to the success of theme park management: retailing, security, transportation, accommodation, and food and beverage. Food and beverage and retailing were ranked the two most important infrastructure components. Collectively, they represent important sources of revenue for theme parks. By comparison to some other tourism manager

FIU Hospitality Review, Volume 12, Number 1, 1994

Table 6
Importance of Government Interaction

	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
State government	1.82	0.96
City government	1.88	1.10
County government	2.07	1.05
Federal government	2.84	1.21

groups, accommodations ranks unusually low. However, with the exception of several larger theme parks such as Disneyland and Walt Disney World, most theme parks are dependent on external operators or contractors for accommodations, food and beverage, and retailing services. Security is rated to be of moderate importance, and external transportation, which is out of the control of the theme parks, is least important.

It is evident that no matter what area of the tourism field one is in, tourism is considered a business. Therefore, a solid tourism business education and coordinated work experience would help to advance the professionalism of the field. For example, theme park management internship opportunities have been developed through the Council on Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Education and a theme park in Virginia, with the intent of providing the educator with a better understanding of and experience in the theme park management area to potentially interest students in these careers.

Tourism educators now have some data for developing curricula for tourism managers in a broad spectrum of careers. Additionally, theme park managers can use these data to evaluate their own skills. Based on their personal evaluations, theme park managers can review variances between their perceptions and the results of this study and with curriculum outlined by the Theme Park Management Institute. Their own future development and continuing education efforts can be guided by these reviews.

Newer managers or managers at smaller theme parks may also want to review these skills to better enable them to plot out their own career path and the training and/or education they might need for future promotion. The bottom line is that there are many diverse management positions in the tourism industry. Though the actual position of tourism manager may vary from public to private sector, natural attraction to man-made attraction or event, the knowledge, skills, and abilities to participate as a manager in tourism are similar and can be developed into a common body of knowledge for the tourism industry.

FIU Hospitality Review, Volume 12, Number 1, 1994

Table 7
Importance of Infrastructure

	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Food & beverage	1.61	0.80
Retailing	1.93	0.91
Security	2.02	0.89
Accommodation	2.26	0.94
Transportation	2.30	1.00

Managers Should Be More Mobile

The results of the study suggest that tourism managers with a common background of experience and education should be more mobile within the tourism industry. For example, a theme park manager might well be a good candidate for other tourism management positions, e.g., state tourism offices, and convention and visitor bureau offices. Additionally, theme park managers are also sharing expertise and skills with museum managers and directors. This common need should make many theme park operators or museum specialists more mobile in this segment of the tourism business. A common background would make these moves, and, therefore, career paths, easier and more attainable.

To continue to improve the educational infrastructure of tourism management, tourism programs should focus on the needs of specific tourism management groups. As indicated in the research results of the European Institute of Education and Social Policy study, better needs analyses are required to identify the educational and training needed. Recommendations included factors such as promotion and advertising of tourism careers, clear definition of career paths, alternative labor sources, and better coordination with educators.[21] These recommendations relate directly to theme park management careers. The successful manager of the future will not only be a skillful businessperson, but an effective human resource manager.[22] The key to accomplishing these goals is self-analysis. The future manager must quantify his/her knowledge, skills, abilities and personal traits.[23]

This study, like the one on the European Institute of Education and Social Policy, examines the skills and abilities of tourism managers in an effort to define and recommend the curricula needed for tourism managers in general and theme park managers in particular. A successful tourism management curriculum will incorporate educational structure, industry requirements, and practical experience to produce well qualified tourism managers.

Managers need to be aware of the cultural impact of tourism as well as the economic impact. Managers must be cognizant of the need to preserve and conserve the tourism environment creat-

FIU Hospitality Review, Volume 12, Number 1, 1994

ed. To do this and appreciate this approach, a consistent tourism education approach is required. This study, and subsequent studies, have and will continue to examine the perceptions of tourism managers to provide tourism educators with data needed to develop a tourism educational infrastructure. The collection of data from different categories of tourism managers may indicate differences in management orientation and needs. These differences will need to be reflected in tourism curriculum, highlighting the necessary interaction of the private and public sectors in the tourism environment. Subsequent analyses will include a comparison of responses across tourism management groups to continue to define and upgrade tourism curriculum needs. These efforts should assist in the development of continuing education programs for theme park managers and other specific tourism management groups. Ultimately the coordination and cooperation of tourism managers and tourism educators will achieve the goal of better developing tourism management curricula.

References

[1]K. Stiegler, *The Guide to Hospitality and Tourism Education 1989-1990*, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1989).

[2]D. Airey and M. Nightingale, "Tourism Occupations, Career Profiles and Knowledge," *Annals of Tourism Research*, (1981), pp. 52-68.

[3]*Ibid.*

[4]*Ibid.*

[5]J. Jafari and J.B. Ritchie, "Toward a Framework For Tourism Education: Problems and Prospects," *Annals of Tourism Research*, (1981), pp. 13-33.

[6]D.E. Hawkins and J. D. Hunt, "Travel and Tourism Professional Education," *Hospitality and Tourism Educator*, (Spring, 1988), pp. 8-14.

[7]J. Walsh-Heron and T. Stevens, *The Management of Visitor Attractions and Events*, (Englewood-Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1980), pp. 3,9,29,45.

[8]*Ibid.*

[9]Julie Fingeresh, "Theme Park Management Institute Curricula," *Amusement Business*, (December 16, 1991), (Article accessed through University of Denver Carl System), p. 19(2).

[10]*Ibid.*

[11]*Ibid.*

[12]*Education for Careers in European Travel and Tourism: Executive Summary*, European Institute of Education and Social Policy, (London, England: American Express Foundation, 1991).

[13]*Ibid.*

[14]R.M. O'Halloran, "Ski Area Managers: A Profile," *Hospitality and Tourism Educator*, (August 1992); R.M. O'Halloran, "Tourism Management Profiles: Implications for Tourism Education," *FIU Hospitality Review*, (Spring 1992), pp. 83-91; R.M. O'Halloran, *CHRIE Conference Proceedings, "Interface,"* (July 1991), pp. 188-190.

[15]*Ibid.*

[16]*Ibid.*

[17]*Ibid.*

[18]L.S. Dumas, *The AAA Guide to North America's Theme Parks*, American Automobile Association, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1991).

FIU Hospitality Review, Volume 12, Number 1, 1994

[19]Walsh-Heron and Stevens, *op. cit.*

[20]E.E. Jennings, Supervisory and Executive Development, Management 818, College of Business Administration, Michigan State University, (Winter 1987).

[21]EIESP, *op. cit.*, 1992.

[22]Walsh-Heron and Stevens, *op. cit.*, 1990.

[23]*Ibid.*

Robert M. O'Halloran is an associate professor in the School of Hotel, Restaurant and Tourism Management at the University of Denver; **Christopher Siew L. Wong** recently completed his MBA at the University of Denver and is now employed by the Sheraton Corporation in Singapore.

FIU Hospitality Review, Volume 12, Number 1, 1994