

# **In Favor of Hospitality-Management Education**

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## **Abstract**

Despite the almost one-hundred-year history of hospitality-management education; the hundreds of well-established two-year, four-year, and graduate programs worldwide; and the hundreds of thousands of graduates those programs have prepared for careers in the industry, hospitality-management education's merit and place in higher education are still questioned at times, to the dismay of hospitality educators the world over. This article delineates several features of hospitality management that make these programs valuable and unique and provides compelling arguments in its favor. The arguments include: 1) courses tailored to the hospitality industry, the world's largest industry; 2) focus on small-business management as well as corporate enterprises; 3) emphasis on services and service management, not manufacturing; 4) programs and coursework focused on people management, which it at the core of the hospitality businesses; 5) unique focus on the specific issues of food and beverage management, the largest component of the hospitality industry; and 6) transferability of graduates' knowledge and skill sets, which are in high demand among other service industries. While business programs focus on the fundamentals of management and production, hospitality- management programs prepare graduates who are aware of general management principles and are particularly well-versed in managing the guest experience and employees in a service environment.

## **Introduction**

Despite its almost one-hundred-year history, hospitality management education is regularly questioned about its merit and place in higher education. Questions such as: "Isn't it just common sense?" "Do you really need a degree to learn how to serve people and check them in?" and "Couldn't you just take some business courses?" are still heard regularly. They are puzzling to all of us who are enthusiastic about the hospitality industry and who are committed to hospitality-management education. Every time we are confronted with these questions, we are taken aback and struggle to find the right answers.

We struggle because these comments call into question the value of hospitality- management education and our roles as educators. They imply that hospitality programs lack intellectual rigor, are irrelevant to successful careers in the hospitality industry, and are redundant or watered-down versions of business-school programs. As firm believers in the value of hospitality-management education, we think that the most important reasons

that hospitality- management education is criticized so often is that those who criticize or question are not fully aware of the content of the programs, do not clearly see their relevance, and do not appreciate the unique skill sets our graduates bring to the hospitality industry of tomorrow.

Given that criticisms persist, it is necessary that those in hospitality-management education, regardless of whether they are faculty members, administrators, or students, have a firm and ready grasp of effective arguments to educate the doubters and naysayers. One might argue that this should be common sense and that everyone should have these arguments at his/her fingertips. The reality is that we do not. We stumble when asked about the value of hospitality-management education and have a tough time trying to persuade others why our programs should not be folded into the business schools and be a minor at best. Our struggle to respond with persuasive and clear arguments provides all the more ammunition for those who doubt its contributions.

The purpose of this piece is not to provide a diatribe against those who doubt or criticize hospitality-management education, or even suggest that everything we do is fine. Hospitality- management education certainly has its own struggles, as does every field of study. This article takes the highroad, shares our enthusiasm for the hospitality industry, and provides some persuasive arguments in support of hospitality-management education as a valid and rigorous academic field of study that prepares solid future leaders for the hospitality industry and other service contexts.

### **Why the Criticism?**

Prior to detailing arguments in support of hospitality-management education, we will first address some of the possible reasons that this academic field may be subject to question and criticism and that it is sometimes perceived as no more than a “workforce training program.” One obvious reason for the criticism is that everyone eats in restaurants, sleeps in hotels, and plays in water parks and on golf courses. Everyone is exposed to the industry daily, yet very few people see where stocks are traded, chocolate bars are made, and computers are assembled. Such exposure to the hospitality industry makes everyone an “expert,” or at least causes everyone to have an opinion about service encounters. What most people see is a labor force that is largely employed in entry-level jobs, and granted those positions do not require a college degree. Lay people may thus equate hospitality-management education with educating individuals to perform entry-level work. They may not look beneath the surface and see the higher-level managerial components involved in operating hospitality enterprises and managing and motivating those entry-level workers.

A large majority of managers in the hospitality industry is directly involved in supervising employees and interacting with guests, more so than in other industries. Very few of us have met the manager of the widget factory in our home town, yet everyone has met and interacted with the manager at the local Red Lobster, Dairy Queen, or Hampton Inn. Employee supervision and customer interaction are often perceived as “just common sense.” If you get along with people, you will be able to get along with employees and customers. Individuals may not perceive the knowledge and skills acquired in a formal classroom environment as a necessary requirement for managing others. These skills may be perceived as best acquired through hands-on, real-world experience. Real-world experience is certainly a valuable component of management education, but hospitality-management education provides future managers with a solid additional layer of knowledge that makes them better managers.

Another reason for the criticism might be that the hospitality industry caters to basic consumer needs—food and accommodation. These are needs that individuals provide for themselves and their families in their own daily lives. They may, therefore, wonder why one would need a college degree to provide food and accommodation to others, and the same argument, “just common sense,” crops back up. People can cook their own food and make their own beds.

The issue is not that there is no truth in these criticisms. Of course, some of it is common sense, and real-life exposure is very important in developing future managers. Hospitality- management programs do not educate students to become rocket scientists, physicians, or nuclear engineers, professions that arguably require higher levels of intelligence, knowledge, and preparation. Yet, would other academic fields not pale in comparison to those, as well? It is our contention that hospitality management is a field worthy of academic pursuit because it requires specific knowledge and a unique skill set that is different from what business schools offer. However, that knowledge and skill set may not necessarily be readily apparent to lay people who see the value of a university education for future engineers, teachers, or business managers. Therefore, this article presents some commonly heard arguments in favor of hospitality- management education as well as some additional ones.

### **Commonly Heard Arguments**

There are two commonly heard and often over-used arguments in support of hospitality- management education. The first is related to the size of the hospitality industry: That it is the world’s largest industry certainly cannot be disputed. According to the National Restaurant Association (2011) the restaurant industry in the U.S. employs approximately 12.8 million individuals in about 960,000 locations, with annual sales of approximately

\$604 billion. The Bureau of Labor of Statistics (2011) estimated that the lodging industry in the U.S. employs approximately 1.9 million individuals in about 65,000 locations. According to the American Hotel and Lodging Association (2011), the U.S. lodging industry generates approximately \$134 billion in revenues annually. Purely based on the size of the industry, hospitality-management education is warranted: “We are big, and we are important.”

A second common defense is that hospitality-management education is on par with management education in business schools. Hospitality-management curricula offer courses in accounting, finance, marketing, strategy, and human-resource management, just like schools of business. There is even a layer of service and operations management added to that mix. Since schools of business garner respect, and since private industry appreciates the value of business degrees, hospitality-management programs and the degrees they grant deserve similar respect. Hospitality-management programs do not train their students only in daily hands-on hospitality- operations management. Rather, the central focus of many programs is on the enhancement of their students’ higher-level management skills, functions that require critical thinking and analytical ability.

These arguments in favor of hospitality management are valid, but they are not sufficient. Just because an industry is large does not mean that universities should devote a program of study to that area. Size alone does not necessarily translate into a sufficiently specialized skill set that warrants a field of study at the university level. Furthermore, while equating hospitality-management programs to traditional business programs may add to their credibility, validity, and even their reputations, doing so may also dilute the perceived added value of hospitality- management education. Merely comparing and equating hospitality-management programs with business programs too frequently may relegate hospitality-management programs to the status of “red-headed stepchildren” and will lead to debates about the depth of coverage.

### **Additional Arguments**

In order to educate others who are not knowledgeable about hospitality-management programs, we need to move beyond those common arguments into the realm of what makes us special. We need to delineate those aspects of our programs of study that differentiate hospitality management from traditional management programs in unique and valuable ways. Business schools are valuable, and the education they provide is excellent, yet their limitation is a lack of depth in certain specific areas of management. They do not provide the depth of content necessary in specific industry contexts, and we consider the hospitality industry to be one of those. The hospitality industry presents a number of unique challenges that

require managers and executives to have specialized skill sets that are not taught and not emphasized sufficiently in typical business schools. These form the basis for another set of arguments in favor of hospitality-management education.

The first additional argument in support of hospitality-management education is that the curriculum is tailored to this specific industry context. In all of our courses, whether they are accounting, strategic management, or human-resource management, hospitality-management examples and applications are utilized. A hospitality-specific focus in our courses allows our students to more readily apply the knowledge and skills acquired during college to their jobs upon graduation. Our students can be more easily trained in company-specific skills with a foundation in the management of hospitality enterprises that a college education provides. Having heard about OSHA and Dram Shop Liability, having calculated RevPars and food-cost percentages, and having written a strategic plan for a restaurant company help in the transition from college to industry. One could run and manage a hospitality business with a general business degree, but it would be a steeper uphill battle than with a hospitality-management degree.

A second argument in support of hospitality management is that we teach our students skills to succeed in small-business contexts, in addition to corporate environments, which is not a typical focus of business programs. A large number of companies in the hospitality industry are small businesses and entrepreneurial start-ups, which often fail because their principals are unprepared for the demands of the industry. It has been estimated that approximately one-quarter of new restaurants fail within their first year of operations (Parsa, Self, Njite, & King, 2005), primarily because there is no proper business plan, costs are excessive, and revenues come in lower than projected or just hoped for. This small-business focus educates students to be generalists who are well-versed in all managerial functions. Similarly, students need to possess skills spanning various levels in the vertical hierarchy. They need to possess awareness of and expertise in operations, be able to execute managerial functions, and be exposed to higher-level strategic thinking. Students learn about capital management strategies that are effective in privately held small enterprises that are neither appropriate nor legally feasible in public corporate contexts. This development of small business skills is not only important for hospitality-management students but also for the economy as a whole, as small businesses are increasingly seen as the engines of economic growth. Now more than ever, we need more rather than fewer small businesses in the hospitality industry since it employs a relatively large number of people.

A third argument is that the hospitality industry largely sells service experiences, rather than goods and products. Education in this area requires

a specialized understanding of the unique challenges of marketing, managing, and evaluating services. One of those challenges relates to their intangibility, since consumers of the hospitality product are largely buying an experience. A second challenge is the perishability of the services being provided. Hotel room nights cannot be inventoried; therefore, yield management principles are part of hospitality- management curricula. A final differentiating factor is a focus on the interpersonal nature of the hospitality business. Traditional products are manufactured in an environment far removed from the consumer, and there is usually no contact between those producing the product and the consumer. In the hospitality industry, however, the service experience is created jointly by the service provider and the consumer. Specialized education in the management of these complex personal interactions and an increased awareness of the essence of this process is of the utmost importance if our graduates are to be successful. Services are not widgets, and hospitality is not manufacturing. Traditional management strategies need to be modified significantly in hospitality-service contexts, one more reason why hospitality-management education is essential and valid.

A fourth argument in favor of hospitality-management education is that it places a large emphasis on the management of people. The industry is very labor intensive, and line employees are central to the service-delivery process in hospitality enterprises. Many front-line service employees represent the boundary between the organization and its consumers, and line employees are of strategic importance in the hospitality industry. Unfortunately, the hospitality industry is confronted with several human-resource management challenges that may compromise that service quality: 1) the industry struggles with attracting and retaining highly qualified employees; 2) supervising line-level employees who are the face of the company represents a challenge because a single manager is often responsible for a large number of employees; 3) managers may be limited to a degree in their ability to motivate employees through compensation and benefits given narrow profit margins; and 4) opportunities for advancement are limited because of the bottom-heavy nature of the workforce. Given these challenges and constraints, hospitality managers need to be well-versed in organizational behavior, leadership, and human-resource management. In particular, they need to develop skills and techniques such as teambuilding, developing cohesive workgroups, and creating fun work environments that are less financially taxing on organizations yet arguably more difficult to execute. Soft skills are by no means easy skills, and hospitality management programs certainly emphasize these specialized skills.

A fifth argument is that hospitality management programs emphasize food and beverage management, not a focus at all of traditional business programs. Americans spend almost one-half of every food dollar on

meals away from home, making this an increasingly lucrative industry. Several aspects of food and beverage management are particularly important. Knowledge of food safety is vital to the successful management of foodservice establishments. An outbreak of foodborne illness is a bankruptcy waiting to happen. The U.S. food safety code, which stipulates the knowledge and practices necessary to prepare and serve safe food, is continually updated to incorporate new information. Food health and safety content is not merely “learning about germs,” but rather a scientific field. Knowledge of nutrition and construction of menu items that adhere to dietary guidelines are becoming increasingly important. The nutritional content of restaurant meals becomes more important in direct relation to the number of meals eaten outside of the home. The amount of food consumed away from home, the national obesity epidemic, and food safety make it imperative for managers to be able to produce healthy and appealing menu items. While some of these issues are addressed in nutrition programs, hospitality-management programs bring them into the realm of management and profit-making.

A sixth, and final, argument in support of hospitality-management education is that it also prepares students for careers beyond the traditional hospitality context. Whereas a large majority of students opt for careers in hotels and restaurants, other service industries, such as retail, real estate and property management, and financial services, are increasingly attracted to hospitality- management graduates. One notable example that is gaining prominence rapidly is assisted- living and retirement communities, which are becoming increasingly popular and more financially lucrative. Such organizations seek out hospitality-management graduates because their service orientation, specialized knowledge and management skills are easily transferrable to this business context. Their prevalence will only continue to grow as more of the Baby Boomers transition into retirement and take their wealth and service needs and desires with them. The fact that other industries are looking to our graduates in their need to grow future management talent provides further validation for hospitality-management programs.

## **Conclusion**

As stated earlier, the goal of this paper was to take the highroad and to delineate some persuasive arguments in support of hospitality-management education. Our arguments are by no means exhaustive, but rather illustrative of why hospitality-management education is valid and important. They are largely born out of our own passion for the hospitality industry and hospitality education, but also out of frustration with the continued lack of recognition this field of study receives.

One might argue that all of these arguments are common sense, and perhaps they are. One might even argue that there are many more important arguments in favor of hospitality- management education that were not mentioned here, and we agree. Yet, when pressed, many of us never make it beyond one or two commonly heard arguments in favor of hospitality- management education and tend to become defensive, which is exactly what we need to avoid.

Our fundamental point that we should focus on when communicating with others is that our programs are unique and that we are proud of them. While standard business programs focus on the fundamentals of management, hospitality programs prepare well-rounded graduates who have been educated in general management principles but who are particularly well-versed in managing the guest experience and employees in hospitality and service environments.

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