

## Evaluating Training Programme Effectiveness for Soft Skills Development

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### Abstract

*Availability of a large pool of qualified human resources in the service industry has confronted many with tough competition in job acquisition and sustainability at the workplace. The training and development of effective manpower for tourism and hospitality industry commences with professional education. Soft skills are cornerstones of a tourism and hospitality professional in forming the relationship-building, interpersonal skills that assist to provide a memorable experience to the consumer. The study is focussed on analyzing the effectiveness of a soft skills training programme on post graduate tourism professionals at a University in Punjab. A pre and post test descriptive research design was employed to evaluate the four month training efficacy on the graduates' ability to develop soft skills necessary for professional success. The graduates were administered a self assessment questionnaire on 8 essential soft skills by an industry experienced soft skills trainer pre and post the training. A Paired-Samples t-test with Cohn's d was used for analysing the data. Results indicated that the training module significantly improved soft skills of the graduates. On an open-ended question students gave insightful perspectives on improving soft skills delivery mechanism that can be adopted by academia to make graduates employable.*

**Keywords:** *Soft Skills Training, Communication and Interpersonal Skills, Tourism Professional*

## Introduction

Student expertise in hard skills is the technical knowledge which determines the academic qualification of job aspirants. Changing educational trends categorically emphasise proficiency of soft skills capability highly demanded in the service industry. To get an edge over others pursuing a professional degree requires adding value to the hard skills, by enhancing soft skills, a prerequisite for job acquisition in the labour market (Wats & Wats, 2009). A perfect blend of hard and soft skills enables a candidate to demonstrate true potential for job employment. It is often seen in the tourism sector that recruiters willing invest in a student with average academic knowledge if they perceive the recruit to have industry appropriate soft skills.

Tourism is founded on the capability of its human resources to create brand value for a destination through customer satisfaction. Tourism refers to activities of visiting or travelling to a destination that exceeds fifty miles from the residence for no more than a year due to recreational purposes or fulfilling other non-formal agendas (Melanie, 2009). According to the World Travel Organization, the word 'tour' also refers to activities related to touring services. Activities of tourism have become a popular interest worldwide with the tourism industry becoming one of the main sources of foreign exchange, in effect generating high income for a country. India has always lived by the mantra of 'Atithi Devo Bhavah'. The travel and tourism industry contributed a total of 208.9 billion U.S. dollars to GDP in India in 2016 – approximately 9.6 percent of India's total GDP, after China in the Asia-Pacific Region. The industry also has a substantial effect on employment in India directly providing more than 25.4 million jobs. (Statistica, 2018)

Tourist inflow could definitely increase further if the negative propaganda of fraud, cheating, burglary and molestation aspects are restrained as these scare tourists off and they are actually assured of their safety. The challenges for tourism destinations are the motivational process of attitude change, reflected in communication and individual behaviour (Kelman, 1958). The answer to these grievances is soft skills. People primarily and most lastingly interface with the tourists to provide services. The need of the hour is for professionals in travel and tourism industry to fine hone their soft skills so as to communicate a more positive image of the destination to rest of the world (Emenheiser, et. al., 1998).

Although the tourism and hospitality industry are not unaffected by digital transformations yet the industry may never be "depersonalised" (Bagggio & Klobas, 2011). Human resources will always decide the success of the organization. Tourism organizations seek human resources

with skills to create a sustainable advantage by leveraging customer satisfaction and delight. Life skills make development of soft skills possible, much required to deal with challenges of work life (Papachrisis et al., 2005). Bolton (1986) in '*People Skills*', says 80% individuals who do not succeed at work, is not because of a lack of technical skills but due to their inability to manage interpersonal relations. Today's challenging work situation means new graduates not only need academic knowledge; but also require gaining 'soft skills' which increase their prospects of employment (Fallows and Steven, 2000).

### **Review of Literature**

According to the Department of Tourism, Leisure, Hotel and Sport Management, United Kingdom, in 2015, "The workplace demands skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, maintaining professional and ethical standards, and leadership". A Survey result found "55% employees lacked customer handling skills, 53% lacked organization skills, 51% lacked oral communication skills and 44% lacked teamwork skills." Hassan et al. (2009) elaborate importance of soft skills in Melaka tourism (Malaysia) as ethics and knowledge, personality, attire and English language skills. The significance of problem solving, teamwork, leadership, communication in foreign languages, intercultural competence has been highlighted for tourism specialists (Zehrer, et. al., 2014).

Higher Education Institutions (HEI) need to strengthen the education and training programs at the educational level to provide industry ready professionals who can make valuable addition to the business bottom line by their capability in using soft skills (Serby, 2003). Soft skills have become obligatory as they assist to leverage competitive markets, latest technology, globalization, diverse human resources and consequently differentiate best from the rest (Vijayalakshmi, 2016).

Soft skills then are the career building blocks and can be defined as interpersonal, human, people or behavioural skills necessary for applying technical knowledge in the workplace (Rainsbury et al., 2002). Soft skills acquirement is accepted to form positive interactions interpersonal relations, managing emotions and feelings, taking initiative and thinking critically and creatively while working in the service industry (Ilangko, 2013). These skills assist a person in working with others, retaining an optimistic outlook under stress conditions, effectively solving personal or occupational crisis and communicating positively in

interpersonal situations (Brauns, 2013). In fact, hard skills may obtain an interview but soft skills are necessary for keeping the job (Aworanti, 2012).

‘Soft skills’ are defined by the personal attributes and competencies that enhance an individual's interactions, job performance and career prospects (Amanda, 2014). They are often used to describe the acquired skills that characterize relationships with other people, are about how to approach life and work making a person unique. These are personal and interpersonal skills needed to complement professional skills and expertise and eventually become an essential part of an individual's personality (Khasanzyanova, 2017). Thus, soft skills can be termed as “how you use it” (Hunt, 2007). Soft skills are a requisite in all occupations, not like the specific discipline skills of a line of work (Robinson, 2006).

Tourism being a service-intensive industry is dependent on quality professionals to provide perfect service to its customers (Kaufman and Ricci, 2014). The tourists from around the globe entail human interaction and a lucrative career in tourism and hospitality industry requires mastering qualities of empathy, time management, problem-solving, communication, teamwork, planning and coordination, multi-tasking, positive attitude and working under pressure (Wesley et al., 2017). The nature of tourism service being an intangible product, a lot of interaction between guests and employees during service emphasize the significance of intellectual communication, planning and organization and intercultural skills (Kwok, et. al., 2012). Developing these skills enable students to successfully encounter actual working situations with ease and expertise. It would allow them to exhibit proficiency and enhance their personality to benefit the service industry. Hence, it is most essential for graduates to understand the importance of building these skills.

The objective of the study is focussed on analyzing the soft skills training effectiveness of post graduate tourism professionals at a University in Punjab. Stemming from the research objective the following hypothesis was framed for the study:

H<sub>a</sub>: There is a significant effect of training on the soft skills capability of post graduate tourism graduates.

### **Research Methodology**

A pre and post training descriptive research design was employed to evaluate the efficacy of four month training on the tourism graduates' ability to develop soft skills necessary for professional success. The entire group of 42 post-graduates were administered a self assessment questionnaire consisting of closed-ended questions on 8 essential soft skills (pre-

test) by an industry experienced soft skills trainer, before the training, to self assess their confidence level of skills ability on a 5 point scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means “Not confident at all” and 5 means “Very Confident.” An open-ended question on suggestions to improve the soft skills training curriculum and delivery mechanism was added in the post training questionnaire. The graduates were trained for 10 hours on each module incorporating presentations, role plays, live demonstrations and activities, videos, case studies, expert talk etc. targeted to inculcate the following skills: Emotional Intelligence, Customer Handling Skills, Professionalism, Planning & Organizing Skills, Communication & Interpersonal Skills, Teamwork Skills, Leadership Skills and Critical Thinking & Problem Solving Skills. After completion of each module a test in the form of an activity was taken to measure the outcome of the module. At the end of the training the students were provided the same questionnaire with instructions to self evaluate their skills (post test). The questionnaires were coded and analysed to measure the effectiveness of the soft skills training through mean, standard deviation, paired sample *t*-test and the effect size measured to Cohn’s *d*.

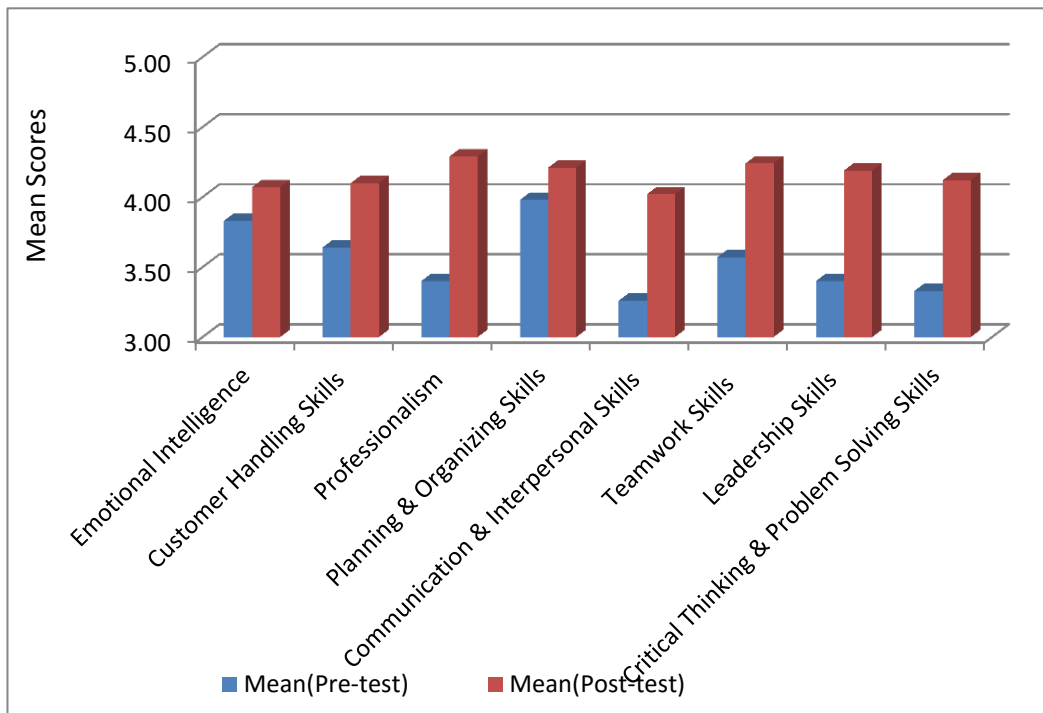
### Analysis and Interpretation

The graduates’ confidence in soft skills ability pre-test mean [Mean<sub>(b)</sub>] and post-test [Mean<sub>(a)</sub>] were analyzed. Depicted in Table 1 are the mean scores as Emotional Intelligence ( $M_b=3.83$ ,  $M_a=4.07$ ), Customer Handling Skills ( $M_b=3.64$ ,  $M_a=4.10$ ), Professionalism ( $M_b=3.40$ ,  $M_a=4.29$ ), Planning & Organizing Skills ( $M_b=3.98$ ,  $M_a=4.21$ ), Communication & Interpersonal Skills ( $M_b=3.26$ ,  $M_a=4.02$ ), Teamwork Skills ( $M_b=3.57$ ,  $M_a=4.24$ ), Leadership Skills ( $M_b=3.40$ ,  $M_a=4.19$ ) and Critical Thinking & Problem Solving Skills ( $M_b=3.33$ ,  $M_a=4.12$ ). Figure 1 also shows the pre training and post training mean scores for each skill depicted through bar diagrams.

Table 1: Descriptive Analysis of Soft Skills Before and After Training

Std. Deviation	Mean <sub>(b)</sub>	Soft Skills	Mean <sub>(a)</sub>	Std. Deviation
.73	3.83	Emotional Intelligence	4.07	.81
.79	3.64	Customer Handling Skills	4.10	.73
1.01	3.40	Professionalism	4.29	.55
.75	3.98	Planning & Organizing Skills	4.21	.81
1.13	3.26	Communication & Interpersonal Skills	4.02	.68
.94	3.57	Teamwork Skills	4.24	.73
1.01	3.40	Leadership Skills	4.19	.77
.98	3.33	Critical Thinking & Problem Solving Skills	4.12	.83

Fig 1: Pre training and Post Training Mean Scores for Soft Skills



Findings indicated an increase in mean scores after the four month soft skills training for all the skills. Significant mean difference was found for Customer Handling Skills ( $p= .003<.05$ ), Professionalism ( $p= .000<.05$ ), Communication & Interpersonal Skills ( $p= .000<.05$ ), Teamwork Skills ( $p= .000<.05$ ), Leadership Skills ( $p= .000<.05$ ) and Critical Thinking & Problem Solving Skills ( $p = .000<.05$ ) as depicted in Table 2. The research hypothesis tested using the Paired Sample  $t$ -test is accepted for all these skills indicating significant learning of soft skills due to the training.

However, a marginal improvement in skills learning is shown for Emotional Intelligence ( $p= .124>.05$ ) and Planning & Organizing Skills ( $p= .086>.05$ ) predicting the hypothesis is rejected for both the skills. Emotional Intelligence is an attribute and being an inherent quality, up-skilling may require a longer time frame and an inner motive to work on improving it. Planning and Organizing Skills was rated by the graduates on the higher side in the pre training questionnaire indicating adeptness in the skill.

Table 2: Paired Sample  $t$ -test with Cohn’s  $d$  for Soft Skills

Soft Skills	Mean	Std. Deviation	df	$t$	Sig. *	Effect Size** ( $d$ )
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Emotional Intelligence	.238	.983	41	1.570	.124	0.24
Customer Handling Skills	.452	.942	41	3.111	.003	0.48
Professionalism	.881	1.214	41	4.704	.000	0.73
Planning & Organizing Skills	.238	.878	41	1.757	.086	0.27
Communication & Interpersonal Skills	.929	1.091	41	5.517	.000	0.85
Teamwork Skills	.667	.928	41	4.654	.000	0.72
Leadership Skills	.786	1.180	41	4.316	.000	0.67
Critical Thinking & Problem Solving Skills	.786	1.260	41	4.042	.000	0.62

Significant level

\*Statistical significance at ( $\alpha 0.05 \geq$ )

\*\* $d \geq 1.00$ ; Much larger than typical

> .80; Larger or larger than typical

> .50; Medium or typical

> .20; Small or smaller than typical

However, comparing mean scores or simply accepting the alternate hypothesis does not depict how important the effect is, the skills enhancement was ascertained using the effect size test with Cohn's  $d$  value. Based on Table 2 the effect size is larger than typical for Communication & Interpersonal Skills ( $d=0.85$ ), medium for Professionalism ( $d=0.73$ ), Teamwork Skills ( $d=0.72$ ), Leadership Skills ( $d=0.67$ ), Critical Thinking & Problem Solving Skills ( $d=0.62$ ) and small for Customer Handling Skills ( $d=0.48$ ), Emotional Intelligence ( $d=0.24$ ) and Planning & Organizing Skills ( $d=0.27$ ). Results revealed that graduates had improved and upgraded soft skills because of the training. They became better groomed and highly professional showing more confidence in communication and interpersonal skills.

## Conclusions

The soft skills training imparted to graduates go a long way in making students professionally valuable for the service industry. Academia necessarily needs to inculcate soft skills with academic skills to make the graduates suitable for the tourism industry. The training programme infused enthusiasm in the students to also imbibe time management skills, working with resilience under pressure, initiative and responsibility, making them self-aware about setting and achieving goals. Some suggestions put forth by graduates to improve the delivery mechanism of soft skills are:

1. Organize an 'Employability Week' in the second semester of the Masters Programme for soft skills workshops, career advice through guest lectures, employer input on skills they look

for in potential recruits, professional resume writing workshop, portfolio building tips, mock interviews and skills assessment test etc.

2. Institutions should collaborate with professional bodies such as National Tourism Organization, World Travel Organization etc. to identify soft skills industry requirement, provide professional certifications, memberships and accreditations.

3. Create a 'Career Mentoring Centre' for providing career associated services in campus, focused on career counselling, soft skills training, organizing job fairs, making available information on conferences and career fairs etc.

4. Arrange expert talks for increased industry participation, listen to alumni speakers, expert lectures from distinguished academicians, entrepreneur experiences etc.

5. Arrange internships, on-the-job training with reputed companies for quality experiential learning.

The training effectiveness assists to conclude that academic institutions should incorporate soft skills training as part of programme curriculum to make graduates job-ready.

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