

The Perceived Influence of Soft Skills on Customer Satisfaction in Hospitality Industries in Benin Metropolis

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This paper investigated the influence of soft skills on customer satisfaction in hospitality industries in Benin City and its environs.

Methods: The descriptive survey type of research design was adopted. The major instrument used for the primary data collection was a modified twenty one items self-designed questionnaire adopted from the lists of social, situational, communication, management and problem solving skills in the Soft Skills Assessment Worksheet of the Georgia Career Information Center. One hundred and sixty questionnaires were administered within four months to managers, employees and customers of fifteen randomly selected privately owned hotels, fast foods or eateries, bars and restaurants in the area. Data collected were analyzed with tables, pie chart and Chi- square statistics.

Results: The calculated Chi square value of 31.85 is higher than the table value of 9.488 under 4df @ $P < .05$ level of significance. This implies that, majority of the respondents are of the opinion that soft skills has a significant influence on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industries in the area.

Conclusions: Soft skills are and will continue to be useful in the professions and therefore, there is the need to expose the younger ones in our institutions of learning to soft skills to enhance their employ ability in this century.

Keywords Influence, Soft skills, Customer Satisfaction, Hospitality Industry.

INTRODUCTION

In today's competitive business environment in Nigeria like every other country in the world community, managers and employers of labour in organizations rationally wants to gain competitive advantage, strive to retain such advantage and make profit (Khan and Fasih, 2014). To accomplish these, all such employers are likely to hire, retain and promote employees who are dependable, resourceful and with good work ethics, communicate effectively, and are self-directed, willing to work, learn and have positive attitude towards others and the goals of the organization (Wats and Wats, 2009). Overtly, these and many others are among the soft skills that employees need to work independently, with others as a team and enhance performance in organizations (Ibrahim, Boerhannoeddin and Bakare, 2017).

Soft skills are character traits and interpersonal skills that characterize a person's ability to interact effectively with others and take good decisions. Such skills include the ability to communicate with prospective clients, mentor co-workers, lead a team, negotiate a contract, follow instructions and get a job done on time (Kenton, 2023). However, the numbers of soft skills so far identified in the literature are many

and varied and sometimes too, soft skills are construed differently by scholars but there is the general consensus that soft skills are personal traits used to enhance opportunities for growth, learning and employment success (Gibb, 2014). In this way, the possession of soft skills can have been likened to an asset to employees' and a prerequisite for anyone to engage in rewarding relationship with all others in virtually all aspects of life and living. Therefore, gathered information on the perceived influence of soft skills on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry is fundamental for a better understanding of the importance of soft skills in promoting career growth and performance in the work place.

In the professions, soft skills are complementary to hard skills and they have been described as abilities applicants must possess in addition to their certificates, diplomas and degrees for employment (Cimatti, 2016), especially in a volatile, unpredictable, changing and ambiguous environment (as cited in Meeks, 2017). What is more, it has been asserted that soft skills are not only essential but will be needed in the future for professional success (Brungardt, 2011). While explaining the importance of soft skills to employees Brungardt (2011) stressed that varieties of soft skills are required for professional advancement in today's era of information communication technology and globalization because employees now have less repetitive tasks and more autonomy. However, this does not mean that hard skills or the theoretical and practical skills required to be productive in the workplace are no more necessary but as Aggarwal (2008) and McNamara (2009) notes, it is the combination of hard skills with a broader set of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills that are needed for an individual to have a place and be successful in the workforce

Flowing from the above deductions, it is clear that for one to be successful in the work place soft skills are essential. Several studies have investigated soft skills using the emotional intelligence framework because of the understanding that it is the individuals with higher level of emotional intelligence that possess skills like teamwork, effective communications and social interaction (Goleman, 1998), accept work challenges and overcome obstacles, and easily solve work-related problems (Slaski and Cartwright, 2002, McNamara, 2009, Brungardt, 2011). In addition, they have been found to relate better with other employees (Kenton, 2023), recognize, understand, and manage emotions in themselves and others to achieve higher job performance (Slaski and Cartwright, 2002, Moon and Hur, 2011), which by extension include customers satisfaction.

Customer satisfaction is one of the variables that have been observed to guarantee the survival of any business units and by satisfying the customer, the psycho – social effects that naturally follows will overtly or covertly leads to their retention, loyalty and attraction of new customers (Khadka and Maharjan, 2017). Besides, that the customers are satisfied with the services or products of an organization, it therefore means that the services providers themselves are effective, as it is only an effective workforce that can satisfy their customers (Zhang, 2012). For instance, at the outset of any business outfit the customers are usually the target to be considered “first” and then the profit, and it is those companies that satisfy their customers that are on the top position in a market. Thus, customer satisfaction is instrumental to an organizations success and it also plays a major role in expanding the organizations product or services market value (Khadka and Maharjan, 2017). To satisfy the customer soft skills are essential because they are tasks competencies (Cobo, 2013), used to enhance labour market outcomes (Association for Talent Development, 2012), and worker's productive abilities and customer satisfaction levels (Manta and Narges, 2013). Therefore, in any business organization, it can be argued that if the employees have soft skills like being polite, being a good listener and have empathy, sense of humor, good memory and are organized, and are able to manage work pressure, solve problems, communicate effectively and resolve conflicts when they arise, then the customers are more likely to be satisfied with the services provided in all such business environment than any other.

However, there seems to be insufficient information on the perceived influence of soft skills on customer satisfaction in hospitality industry in Benin metropolis and this is the major gap in knowledge that the study sought to fill. For the near absence of studies from the research community in the country has resulted to

the paucity of empirical data which would have helped policy makers, education planners and administrators to advocate for the inclusion of soft skills training programmes in the curricular of our institutions of learning for the benefits of all stakeholders in this century.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Soft Skills: Soft skills are clusters of personal qualities, habits, attitudes and social graces that make someone a good employee and compatible to work with (Vasanthakumari, 2019). Soft skills are also construed as personal traits and interpersonal skills that determine a person's ability to work well with others as a team. Examples of soft skills include effective communication, leadership, and teamwork; demonstrating problem solving abilities, initiative, and motivation skills; displaying honesty and strong work ethics (Kenton, 2023). While there are various components of soft skills that are in born such as confidence, friendliness and whether or not someone has a sociable nature, many others are acquired, taught or improved upon like developing effective communication, organization, and social graces. In the same way, while there are many soft skills in the literature, different soft skills are required for a specific kind of work but the unique thing is that they have been observed to play vital roles in the work place and career success. For instance, the study carried out by Seth and Seth (2013) find that 86% of employers they investigated believe that soft skills are necessary for career success in the work environment. A study conducted by McDonald's in the United Kingdom predicted over half a million people will be held back from job sectors by 2020 due to lack of soft skills (<https://www.thebalancecareers.com/list-of-soft-skills>), while Tang (2018) believe that soft skills are the cornerstone for achieving organizational success in the twenty-first century.

Customer Satisfaction: Customer satisfaction is an attitude of consistency evaluation between prior expectations and perceived service performance. Consequently, it is the positive evaluation of the product or service of an organization by the customer that is the major reason for continuous relationship (Chen and Wang, 2009). Customer satisfaction is the result of a customer's comparison of perceived quality and actual service performance (Chen, 2010; Abd-El-Salam, et al., 2013). According to Mahindra and Mahindra Survey report (n.d) one of the strategies to retain a customer for a longer period of time is to satisfy the customer and that customer satisfaction is influenced by perceived quality of product or service features (<https://www.auto.mahindra.com>), while Zeithal and Bitner (2003), study finds that satisfaction is influenced by customer's emotional responses, attribution and perception of equity.

Satisfaction is perhaps the best indicator of how likely it is that the firm's customers will make further purchases in the future. When a customer is satisfied with a product or services, he or she will increase the rate of patronage; recommend such product or services to friends, relatives and colleagues (<https://www.auto.mahindra.com>, Khadka and Maharjan, 2017), and become loyal customers (Chen and Wang, 2009). Also, several studies have shown that customer satisfaction has a positive influence on customer loyalty, service and product usage behavioural levels (Bolton, 1998, Bolton, Kannan, and Bramlett, 2000), and increase revenues (Rust and Keiningham, 1994). Customer satisfaction is an important factor that affects a firm's market capitalization and performance as firms with higher customer satisfaction level have high stock returns with lower risk (Fornell, Mithas, Morgeson, and Krishnan, 2006), and a positive correlation have been found to exist between service quality and customer satisfaction (Khan and Fasih, 2014).

Hospitality Industry: Any economic activity that organizes, provides and meets the needs of guests for relaxation, overnight stays, leisure, food and beverages is part of hospitality industry. Hospitality industry can be in production and services provision such as the preparation of food and drinks and providing accommodation and serving prepared food and beverages to customers (Cerovic, 2003, Ratkajec, 2008). Thus, hospitality industry is an economic activity people and organizations engage in to provides accommodation, food and beverages, and other related services for their clients or on demand. As empirical

evidence suggests hospitality industries usually employ a large number of employees, run shift duties and use products of other industries in order to satisfy their customers. Therefore, in the hospitality industry, the importance of soft skills to employees cannot be underscored, most especially when one considers the personal social nature of the activities they engage in and the different class of customers they have to relate with in the process of preparing both their food and drinks or providing services to humanity.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Study Area

The geographical coordinates of Benin City is Latitude 6.339185 and Longitude 5.617447. Benin City is the administrative headquarters of Edo State in Nigeria. The area covered by the city was originally three Local Government Areas namely Oredo, Egor and Ikpoba Okha however, in contemporary times, the city's rate of growth and spread has been rapid and it has stretched beyond settlements like Oluku in Ovia North East and Egba in Uhumwunde Local Government Areas of Edo state. This development now makes the city in terms of area to span across a large part of another two LGAs hence it is now described in general parlance and in research as the Benin metropolis. Benin City is one of the large cities in the South -South geo political zone of Nigeria with a projected population of 1.906,000 for 2023 at 3.48% growth rate (<https://www.macrotrends.net.cities>), an important industrial, historical, secular (traditional) or cultural settlement for many people and the road transportation network gate way to the Eastern and Northern parts of the Country.

Study Participants

The people who participated in the study were managers, employees and customers of fifteen randomly selected privately owned business outfits namely five star hotels, fast foods or eateries, bars and restaurants in Benin metropolis. The participants and the business outfits used for the study were randomly selected from a wide geographical area and during the course of the preliminary survey, the subjects were informed in writing the essence of the study and it is to protect the rights and interests of the subject's that the names of the selected business outfits and their exact locations are omitted in the study.

Content of the Questionnaire

A self-designed structured type of research questionnaire was used to collect the required primary data for the study. In this vein, one hundred and sixty (160) questionnaires were administered in the fifteen randomly selected hotels, fast foods or eateries, bars and restaurants within a period of four (4) months (from August to November 2023) in Benin metropolis with the help of three research assistants but only one hundred and fifty-six questionnaires were retrieved, analyzed and used for the study. The questionnaire was designed in two sections: Section A and B, section A was designed to collect the demographic characteristics of respondents while section B consisted of twenty one censored items considered necessary to serve in the hospitality business or valuable in the process of attending to customers adopted from the social, situational, communication, management and problem solving skills aspect of the Soft Skills Assessment Worksheet accredited to Georgia Career Information Center, Georgia State University (2007), and the results obtained is presented in tables and analyzed using the Chi square statistics in Tables 2 and 3.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Summary Data on Essential Soft Skills in the Hospitality Industry

SN	Soft Skills	Meaning / Interpretation	Remarks
1	Dependability	Being reliable and responsible	Consensus

2	Flexibility	Easy to accept change	Consensus
3	Persistence	Working despite unnecessary interruption	Indifferent
4	Integrity	Avoiding unethical behavior and being honest	Consensus
5	Efficiency	Using resources effectively	Indifferent
6	Competitiveness	Striving to be the best	Consensus
7	Social Perception	Being aware of the needs or feelings of others	Consensus
8	Independent Work	Working with little or no supervision	Indifferent
9	Team Work	Work in cooperation with others	Consensus
10	Assisting and caring	Providing assistance, care or services to others	Consensus
11	Performing	Interacting to entertain as you sell	Consensus
12	Instructing	Teaching, guiding, motivating others	Consensus
13	Stress management	Abilities to handle tense situations	Indifferent
14	Attention to detail	Checking items under your custody carefully	Indifferent
15	Reading and Writing	Abilities to read and write form	Consensus
16	Speaking and Listening	Abilities to speak, listen, ask questions	Consensus
17	Managing Resources	Making the best use of available resources	Indifferent
18	Decision Making	Understanding information before conclusions	Consensus
19	Planning	Develop approaches' to implement ideas	Indifferent
20	Using Knowledge	Using work related experience	Consensus

Source: Skills Assessment Worksheet: Georgia Career Information Center, Georgia State University (2007)

Table 1 shows the twenty soft skills that have been identified as essential for use in the hospitality industry. In the course of the study, the respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the list of soft skills provided. The findings show that there was the consensus of opinion on thirteen out of the twenty soft skills identified above or 13 were accepted by the majority as part of the essential soft skills employees in the hospitality industry need but were indifferent on the extent to which their assigned tasks or jobs require seven of such skills. However, this differences observed in opinion is expected because items numbers 13, 14, 17 and 19 for instance, are part of the managerial level functions in organizations. In fact, this finding affirms the results of previous studies which indicate that soft skills are complements to hard skills (Cimatti, 2016), and that there are varieties of soft skills required for professional advancement (Brungardt, 2011).

Table 2: Summary Data on the Perceived Influence of Soft Skills on Customer Satisfaction

Employees	Managers	Customers	Sub Total:%	Remarks
50	26	48	124 (79%)	Agree
8	1	3	12 (8%)	Indifferent
12	5	3	20 (13%)	Disagree
70	32	54	156 (100%)	Total

Source: Field Survey 2023.

Table 3: Chi Square Analysis of the Perceived Influence of Soft Skills on Customer Satisfaction

Status	Level of Response			Sub Total	df	X ² Cal.	X ² Crit.
	Agree	Indifferent	Disagree				
Employees	50 (55.6)	8 (5.4)	12 (9)	70	4	31.85	9.488
Managers	26 (25.4)	1 (2.4)	5 (4.1)	32			
Customers	48 (43)	3 (4)	3 (7)	54			
Total	124	12	20	156			

Significant @ P < 0.05

Results presented in Table 2 show that majority or 124 respondents which represent 79 percent agree that soft skills have a significant influence on customers levels of satisfaction with the services provided in their organizations. The Chi square analysis of this perceived influence as shown in Table 3 revealed that the calculated Chi square value is 31.38. The critical value is 9.488 under 4degrees of freedom at 0.05 level of significance and therefore significant. This means that it is the opinion of managers, employees and customers of fifteen randomly selected business units in the study area that soft skills have a significant influence on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industries and this finding is also depicted in Figure 1. The finding of this study affirms the results of previous studies which finds that 86% of employers believe that soft skills are needed for success in the work environment (Seth and Seth, 2013), and the study carried out by Khan and Fasih, 2014) which find a positive correlation between service quality which are enhanced with soft skills and customer satisfaction.

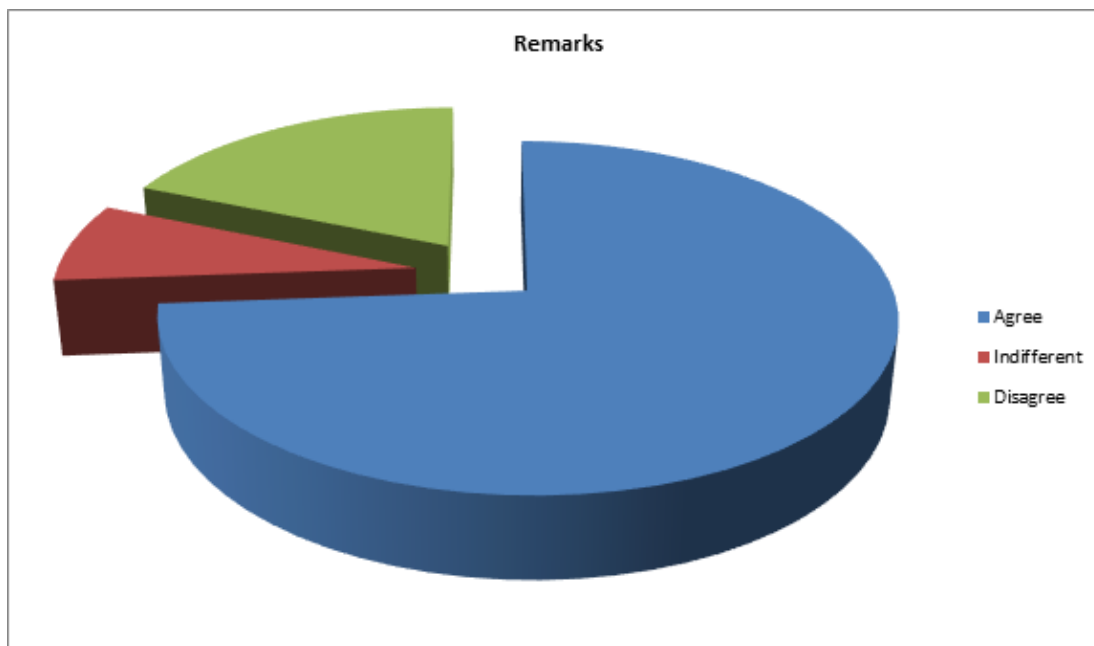


Figure 1: Pie Chart Showing Response of Respondents

CONCLUSION

The study has demonstrated that soft skills are needed in the professions and career success. One of the most essential soft skills for employees in the hospitality industry is effective communication as there is always the need for frequent interaction with customers and significant others. It is not surprising therefore, that the respondents unanimously accepted reading, writing and speaking as well as listening and asking questions as the most essential soft skills for customer relations and also for teaching, guiding and

motivating others. The findings of the study have emphasized the need for policy makers, education planners and administrators to advocate for the inclusion of soft skills training as part of the curricular activities in higher institutions of learning in the country for the benefits of the younger ones and the larger society in this century.

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