
The Development of Hospitality Potentiality of Service Staffs in Small Hotel Business: A Study in PDR Border Province

Suree Khemthong*

School of Management Science
Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, Pakkret, Nonthaburi, Thailand

**Corresponding Author*

Anothai Ngamvichaikit

School of Management Science
Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, Pakkret, Nonthaburi, Thailand

Fax: +6625048132

ABSTRACT

According to regional integration in Asia, Small hotel industry in border region has increased dramatically especially in Loei province at PDR border. This study focused on the potential development of service staff members in the small hotel business. To create proper training courses and manuals for hospitality, especially for small-sized hotel business to better understand service standard principles in the hotel were provided. The findings indicate that service participants value improvement in service quality related skills, communication, teamwork. Also, the industry-government cooperation to develop service potential for small hotel staffs was recommended.

Keywords: Small-sized hotel, hospitality training program, border region

INTRODUCTION

Globalization forces the World connected. The borders of nation become fading away from the effect of regional integration. Similar to other continents over the globe, Asia joined ASEAN Economic Cooperation in year 2015, which led to the adaptation toward regional integration of 10 countries including Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Brunei, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar (Burma) and Vietnam. Thailand can gain benefit from larger market potential but small sized business faces limited opportunity from their lack of internationalized perspective. Small sized business or SMEs which were owned by domestic entrepreneurs must increase their competitive advantage to survive and grow their business under this circumstance. Government policy was launched to support and develop small and medium sized enterprises for country economic sustainability with develop small business staffs to become ready with the economic integration.

Thailand tourism industry was established to become Thailand main business sector since the third national economic and social development plan (1972-1976). Thailand ranked in 34th travel and tourism competitiveness in the world, after Malaysia in 26th (World Economic Forum, 2017) regardless the better geographical location and higher travel resources of the country. The strong support drives tourism industry growth continuously. Small sized hotel

industry is expected to be highly growing sector among all Thai SMEs. Hotel business must prepare for changes effected by the free trade marketing or the ASEAN community, including Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). From a survey about hotel business with a sample of 9865 enterprises, 81.3 percent of the participants are small-sized and are the majority in every region of Thailand (National Statistical Office Ministry of Information and Communication Technology, 2012).

In the past, hotel business in border region was marginal stake of country tourism income according to limited access from tourists with the distance from major transportation of Thailand capital. Recently the impact from regional integration effects on the tourism flourishing in border area like northern, north-eastern, eastern and southern parts of Thailand. In addition, outbound and inbound travellers are highly growing from neighbouring country connection. Border tourism has been construed to accompany with higher economic trade and flow across border. The human capital support is needed in earlier stage to set up the proper tourism business direction (Sofield, 2006). Hotel enterprises have taken notice of the potential of the current circumstances, and their entrepreneurs have requested the government to support them against the increased competition in the region by helping improve the quality of the service in their establishments.

Although the Tourism opportunity for the border of North Eastern region is raised according to AEC focusing on economic corridor between neighbouring countries and especially Loei province is one of fascinating site of Thai and Laos culture blend. Small hotels in Loei province where the border area is adjacent to the Lao People's Democratic Republic or Lao PDR is recognized as continual trade growth (OSMEP, 2015), the need of staff development becomes primacy to compete with regional tourism completion. Thus, the purposes of this research were to study the development of service staffs in small hotel business, and to propose the development guideline to uplift personal standard. The competitive area with neighbouring countries was selected by focusing on hotels at cross border of Thailand as research case study. The study of the readiness of Loei communities and the community preparation with tourism activities (Phon-ngam, 2014) found that the managerial and language skill were important to standardize the tourism destination toward international tourists in order to provide variety of tourism products with high service quality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section recent literature regarding the Human potential definition and concepts of small-sized hotel business is reviewed. Previous research on Human Development in the Hospitality Industry is outlined. Finally, a conceptual model that was developed from the literature and was subsequently used in this study is then presented.

2.1 Definition of Potential

The previous definition clarified that the current ability or power of an individual is not necessarily their true potential. It is necessary to improve and encourage people to get them

closer to their potential. Lohaus and Kleinmann (2002, p. 157) defined the term “potential” as the entire power or ability of an individual who succeeds at their given task. This is also used to determine the highest capacity or the maximum power of an individual. According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1982 cited in Kalra, 1997), the term “potential” means “capable of coming into being or action”. Sonnentag and Frese (2002) defined “potential” as the ability of an individual in physical, mental, and intellectual aspects. Additionally, “potential” can also be referred to knowledge, intelligence, health, level of education, and other qualities that are beneficial in workplaces. From these prior studies, “potential” can be defined as an individual’s readiness or likeliness to reach and utilize their potential and “potential development” is improving the capabilities of an individual to work effectively.

2.2 Concepts of Small-sized Hotel Business

The popularity of small hotels for travel experience is emerging with long tails of internet suppliers (Longhi and Rochhia, 2015). Agoda.com and booking.com were mentioned as the most booking OTAs in Thailand which account for 31% of all reservation (Grant Thornton, 2016). Small hotels in upcountry mostly belong to family owned business. Employees lack of participation which lead to employee motivation (Stavrinoudis and Livadioti, 2010). The government need to focus on small business of hospitality according to their contribution to domestic income and the equity of economic distribution. Small hotels in Europe generate urban economy (Gasparino, Bellini, Del Corpo, & Malizia, 2009).

Most countries determine the size of the hotel business (small, medium, large) by the number of rooms in their establishments. Service quality in both resorts and hotels uses the same standards and measurement techniques, regardless of size or type of lodging service. Other lodging services that are considered small-sized enterprises are Inns, Bed and Breakfast, Guesthouses, Pensions, and Homestay (Timothy & Teye, 2009). Each of these services are different variations of hotels. *Inns* are small-sized hotels with less than 100 rooms per establishment. *B&B* (Bed and Breakfast) are relatively small lodging businesses with around 20 rooms per establishment. The qualifications of a B&B are dependent on policies in the respective country. *Guest House* are small lodging enterprises that are popular among Backpackers and have around 20-30 rooms. *Pensions* are similar to guest houses with around 10-20 rooms per establishment. Homestays are lodging establishments with 4 rooms.

Small sized hotel in the meaning of The Thai Office of SMEs Promotion (OSMEP) is the hotel which provides less than 80 rooms with less than or equal to 50 service providers and possesses fixed asset less than 50 million baht. Most resorts and hotels in Thailand are considered small businesses with 50-200 rooms, having service quality ranging from 3-5 stars with many guest facilities such as restaurants, souvenir stores, laundry service, and fitness centers. Small-sized hotels are able to offer high-quality service because of their small investment cost and ability to flexibly adapt to the market situation. All small hotels cater informal environments compared to hotels and other more conventional lodging facilities (Kontogeorgopoulos, Churyen, & Duangsaeng, 2015).

For this study, a small-sized hotel is defined as a hotel business, resort, or guest house with less than 150 rooms and quality service of the hotel rated three stars or less. (Steadmon and Kasavana, 1988)

2.3 Human Development in the Hospitality Industry

Responding to rising demands for alternative platforms of tourism among international tourists and an emerging regional middle class with incremental travelling expense, many local communities in Thailand have initiated the small hotel businesses on their own, however the most important challenges in small hotel industry is to meet the international standard requirement in services as found in other ASEAN study (Lahap, O'Mahony, & Dalrymple, 2014). Generally, hotel industry tend to be labor intensified practices and service quality related directly to human development process (Nolan, 2002). The value of human development in the hospitality industry is closely associated with the positive outcomes it generates for the organization. Increased productivity is the most tangible positive outcome associated with human resource development (Belias et al., 2017). Huttasin, Mommaas, and Knippenberg (2015) studied by using Porter Diamond model and suggest to enhance the competitiveness of the tourism business in North Eastern area of Thailand by both macro-level of government support and micro-level of skilled labor improvement. The value chain of tourism should be uplifted toward standard level.

Successful hotel business is derived staff service quality, small hotel's service staffs account for more success factor for small hotel performance (Agut, Grau, & Peiro, 2003; Haiyan and Baum, 2006). Service staff competence is one important factor in marketing operation of hotel services. The service manner with smiling and genuine hospitality has been proved to be positive effect toward customer satisfaction (Andrzejewski and Mooney, 2016). The constructs consist of empathy, etiquette and reliable manners with services. To encounter with foreigners, the language competency is major development area for service frontiers (Azab and Clark, 2017). Hotel guests prefer the service staffs who can speak their language and tend to rate higher on their services. New service quality has derived from technology competence of service staff to modernize their service. The guest satisfaction is related with technology quality similar to functional quality of service staffs (Ali, Hussain, Konar, & Jeon, 2017). Interestingly service productivity and career satisfaction which have been proved to be resource for service performance are motivated from team working and entrepreneurship of service staffs (Lee, 2016). Team leadership and entrepreneurship should be worthwhile to build up among service staff competency.

2.4 A Conceptual Model of the Development of Hospitality Potentiality of Service Staffs in Small Hotel Business

Many scholars have adopted the Input-Process-Output framework in organizational behavior research (Bushnell, 1990). In the competitive hospitality sector, there is a necessary to enhance the performance of present or future employees by conducting proper training in an effective manner.

For this study, the proposed conceptual model incorporates three main parts: Input, Process, and Output, as shown in Figure 1.

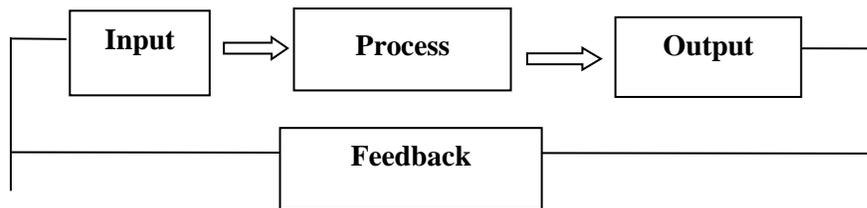


Figure 1: A Conceptual Model of the Development of Hospitality Potentiality of Service Staffs in Small Hotel Business

At the input stage, the elements that could be evaluated in terms of their potential contribution to the overall effectiveness of a training program. For this study, training materials and enterprise supporting towards hospitality potential development program, were designed as the input elements.

At the process stage, the evaluator needs to specify instructional objectives, develop design criteria, select instructional strategies, and assemble training materials. Thus, the training method was provided as the model process of this research.

For the output stage, the training results included the service staff reaction to training, knowledge and skills gained and improved performance back on the job. In addition, Outputs were also other results that are beneficial in developing other staff members as well. Staff Opinion feedbacks were compared between before and after attending the hospitality potential development training program.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodology used in the study is mixed method – both qualitative and quantitative methods in action research platform.

Aims and objectives: -

The main aim of this study focused on the development of hospitality potentiality of service staff in small-sized hotel business in Loei province. The objectives are: 1) to find out the the ASEAN community impacts of small-sized hotel business in tourism sector of Loei province; 2) to design training materials towards hospitality potential development for service staff in small-sized hotel business; and 3) to examine opinions on the development of hospitality potentiality of staff in small-sized hotel business.

This research utilized mix method in action research platform. Population in This study collected data from documentary study, semi-structured interview, participatory and non-participatory observations, group workshop and group discussion. The informants were community hotel service staffs and entrepreneurs in Loei hotels nearby Mekong riverside, the qualitative data was examined by triangulation process, and was categorized as the case study whereas the quantitative data was analyzed by descriptive statistics of SPSS frequency, mean and standard deviation.

Researchers selected the province of Loei, located in the cross-border region of Thailand-Lao PDR (Figure 2), as the representative of small hotel improvement for the following reasons.



Figure 2: Loei Province

The border region is highlighted area to develop to occupy the regional tourism growth of AEC and Loei is perceived as one of the attractive tourist sites in Thailand because the province possesses various natural and cultural highlights with close proximity to neighboring country: Lao People's Democratic Republic. Loei's Chiangkhan District provides scenic destination for tourist relaxation with a Thai-Lao cultural experience (Meekaew and Srisontisuk, 2012).

For this study, the research process to accomplish the research aims was conducted in three phases, as follows.

The first phase was Documentary and current status research to design the training course, including:

a) Relevant study hotel related documentary research and current tourism demand analysis to gain the current tourism situation in Loei Province;

b) Survey the need for potential development in hotel staff members by interviewing 43 entrepreneurs of small-sized hotels in order to design the training course, including training handbooks and materials;

c) Training design to a according to the interviews and align with hotel staff demand and produce training media; training handbook and visual media with 5 topics of 1) Communication and Cooperation with Customers, 2) Hospitality management or Providing Service with Goodwill, 3) Being a Leader in work groups and Entrepreneurship for Team Development, 4) Using Information Technology for Hotel Management, and 5) Foreign Languages skill; and

d) Expert meeting to review and comment upon the content and media to prepare complete training course deliverables.

For *the second phase*, the training delivery was involved as follows:

a) Provide Questionnaires to evaluate the knowledge and skill of participants before and after the training;

b) Evaluate pre-training knowledge and skill;

c) Training course to develop their potential in hospitality among forty-three service staffs in 43 small-sized hotels. There are twice of training times, each lasting two days along with prepared five topics.

In the last phase, conclusion and evaluation were provided as follows:

a) Evaluate post-training knowledge and skill with triangulation process. The post-training knowledge and skill with participants were evaluated by using the questionnaire. Also, the focus group meeting was provided to discuss with hotel entrepreneurs towards potential development in employees after receiving hospitality training course; and

b) Conclude the findings.

RESULTS

This section consisted of three parts: 1) the situation of tourism and small hotel enterprises in PDR Border Province, 2) the finding of service staff's development need, and 3) the finding of evaluating knowledge and skill of staff members in small-sized hotels before and after training, as follows:

4.1 The Situation of Tourism and Small Hotel Industry in PDR Border Province

Revenue from tourism business in Loei province has increased continuously since 2011 with average annually income 2,210 million baht and 11.2% growth rate. In Year 2016, Loei gained travel income up to 4,333 million baht from both domestic and foreign tourists (Loei Report, 2017). The consistent growth in tourism business emerge the increasing service employment in overall tourism supply chain such as hotel, restaurant, souvenir and transportation.

There are many hotels, resorts homestays and guesthouses in Loei province. The competition of lodging become high and intensive. The main customers are Thai tourists, business travellers and government employees. International guests still be far lower; however, the group is potential segment but need the standardized service from hotel industry. However, the current operation is under family owned business with insufficient human development. All staffs apply on-the-job training by themselves with their colleges and the turnover rate of staffs is high. Regardless highly growing tourism business, the service quality from service staffs still be deficient.

The readiness to AEC still be problematic according to the deficit of language skill in the hotel service staffs. The number of foreigners are quite low, whereas the practice is needed. Small-sized hotels in Loei province have not been well prepared with international standard to meet up with the AEC.

4.2 Service Staffs Development Need

The findings of potential development need revealed that hotel entrepreneurs confirm that staff members have moderate levels of potential in many hospitality and service related skills. The following are some noticeably important skills and are ordered from most desired to least desired:

1) Communication and Cooperation with Customers;

- 2) Hospitality Management or Providing Service with Goodwill;
- 3) Being a Leader in work groups and Entrepreneurship for Team Development;
- 4) Using Information Technology for Hotel Management; and
- 5) Foreign Languages skill.

From the above findings of the need for potential development in small hotel enterprises, the five topics for training sessions have been arranged as follows.

- **Topic 1: Hospitality Management** is composed of other sub topics such as the concept of hospitality service, service characteristics, purpose of providing service with hospitality and its role in improving service quality, and developing providing service with goodwill in hotel staff members.
- **Topic 2: Information Technology for Hotel Management** included property management system, online distribution system, customer management system, revenue management system and inventory management system.
- **Topic 3: Communication and Cooperation with Customers** consisted of important issues related with communication and cooperation, communication and cooperation types, problem solving guidelines and front service operation related with communication and cooperation.
- **Topic 4: Leadership and Entrepreneurship for Team Development** included entrepreneurship concept, entrepreneurship force, leadership, decision making and problem solving, cooperate culture and team work.
- **Topic 5: Language Skill** consisted of situation simulation for practicing about room reservation, complaint handling and price checking.

While making the training handbook, many experts in related fields were consulted to discuss and criticize the manual to improve the handbook. Finally, the training handbook for five topics were produced and delivered toward target service staffs.

4.3 Evaluating knowledge and skill of staff members in small-sized hotels before and after training

1) Pre-training evaluation

The results of pre-training evaluation found that participants rated themselves to have moderate knowledge and skill in every dimension except hospitality management which was rated in high level. The language skill was the lowest rate among other dimensions.

2) Post-training evaluation

The results of post-training evaluation found that participants rated themselves to benefit from training in high level for all topics except hospitality management which was rated in the highest level.

3) Pre and post-training comparison

The comparison between pre and post-training evaluation defined that participants assessed themselves to increase their knowledge and skill in all 5 dimensions from moderate level before training to high level after training except hospitality management which increased from high level before training to the highest level after training.

4) Triangulation with hotel entrepreneurs

After obtaining the results, hotel entrepreneurs provided their opinions from their observation that their service employees were enthusiastic to learn and apply further from their jobs, for instance,

- Service Skill Improvement: Service staffs developed their communication and personality with high level of relationship whereas service managers understand the core concept of service business.

- Service Management: Service staffs apply information technology toward their hotel management and marketing communication. The online marketing program was initiated from participants who attended the training.

- Team Development: Service staffs prepare more for their service competence and enhance college service with team cooperation aligned with hospitality management concept.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The action research was conducted to investigate the baseline of development need and develop training content and media for increasing service staff potential of small hotel. To identify developmental competency needs in small hotel staffs, the 5 dimensions; hospitality management, information technology management for hotel business, communication and cooperation with customers, leadership and entrepreneurship for team development as well as language skill, were generated and developed further to design training course. The training aligned with the need of service staffs and hotel owners was delivered in 2 times x 2 days. The researchers obtained the pre and post training evaluation to assess the effectiveness of the development model with 5 dimensions. To follow up the result with owners, the participants returned to their work and become generate higher productivity after the research.

The findings demonstrate the needs of small hotel business to develop their people potential in various dimensions. Border tourism faced rising international tourism which becomes more complicated and competitive with culture diversity, the field of communication in language skill and customer handling skill was evaluated as critical part of the small hotel industry in which English is not a native language and owners have limited resource to support skill development. The demand of service and information technology skills also becomes critical with the challenge of delivering customer satisfaction in digital era regardless any hotel size (Prayag and Hosany, 2015). Additionally small enterprises need to overcome their marginal brand awareness with raising service extensity and productivity (Pikkemaat and Zehrer, 2016). The notation of leadership skill is rated to the small hotel staff's needs in all level, not only the top managers (Jeou-Shyan, Hsuan, Chih-Hsing, Lin, & Chang-Yen, 2011; Shum, Gatling, & Shoemaker, 2018), despite the fact that small hotels are all family owned business and majority of decisions belong to family members (Peters and Buhalis, 2004). Whenever the operational problem arises, the leadership of staffs become primacy to facilitate the hotel workflow.

The studies of small enterprises are abundant in the manufacturing industry, while studies for developing small business in the service industry, particularly relating to border tourism, are scant, despite the fact that small hospitality enterprises are generally recognized to contribute to economy development in Asian developing countries. Entrepreneurs of small hotel enterprises provide to raising national income and employment, the human competency development in

border tourism can boost productivity, commercialising innovative products and creating new markets.

This research aimed to shed the light to invite government and tourism authority to support the human capital development in order to grow border tourism in Thailand. The academic framework can be utilized for small hotel development in other developing countries. It is also important to prioritize the support for small hotel business in the territory in order to achieve equitable economic development. Further quantitative research is encouraged for the purpose of the development of small hotel business and explore in other important sector such as tour agent or spa to gain the convergence of divergence of service staff development among particular business identity.

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