Novelties in the Convention and Exhibition Industry's Professionals' Competencies

Jalilah Ahmad, Normala Daud, Abdul Kadir Othman, Norashikin Hussein, Muhammad Khalil Omar, Abu Hassan Ibrahim

Novelties in the Convention and Exhibition Industry's Professionals' Competencies

Jalilah Ahmad[1], Normala Daud[2], Abdul Kadir Othman[3],
Norashikin Hussein[4], Muhammad Khalil Omar[5],
Abu Hassan Ibrahim[6]
Centre for Management and Administrative Studies, Faculty of Business and Management,
Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia

ABSTRACT
Background: Recent years are seeing the massive growth of the MICE sector all over the world. Malaysia's MICE industry attracted a total of 111,298 delegates to 153 events that had generated RM1.035bil in 2016. The next agenda is high yield 'customer designed' events that tackle the senses, ones that are enduring and memorable. The ecosystem has been upgraded and ready to welcome participants with the new addition of its MICE venue; a mammoth structure said to be the largest in South-East Asia. Come year 2020, the MICE industry is expected to net RM3.9bil in tourism money. Meaningful events are gaining traction. They are generally experiences that seduces the minds and the hearts; the result of interactions between the environments, biology, relationships and culture of the participants. These can be very tricky as participants social behavior can be unconventional due to their diverse functionality, linguistics and culture. "Customer designed" events may elicit novel demands that necessitates mental and social flexibility. Objective: This study was conducted to identify gaps in the role competencies of events professionals in the convention and exhibition industry. Results: Using Lucia and Lepsinger's six-step competency model development, the study was able to draw four competency domains - communication, operational, entrepreneurship and personal characteristics. These were further tested on 97 respondents, and what had emerged were four new clusters. The preliminary model was developed from qualitative data collected via focus group interviews while quantitative data were gathered via online questionnaires. Conclusion: Results show that the observed variables can be explained largely by four clusters of competencies namely thinking, knowledge, ability and personality.
Keywords: Conventions and Exhibition, Professional Competencies, Innovative Competencies

INTRODUCTION

Earmarked as the country's income generator, the meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions (MICE) industry is projected to contribute RM3.9 billion to Gross National Income and create 16,700

jobs (Bernama, 2017). In the convention industry, Malaysia is ranked 8th in the Asia Pacific and 28th globally. The urgent challenge would therefore be to identify innovative competencies in an industry that is extremely labour intensive (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2012), that requires high mobility and flexibility, intercultural competence, malleability and cross cultural suppleness, and where special events that create excitement are getting a lot of traction (Aminudin, Wee, and Zahid, 2017). Most of the countries in South-East Asia has placed their cards on MICE. Malaysia's closest neighbour, Singapore for example, has 40% of its tourism revenues generated by its MICE (Banu, 2016). The Malaysian. Convention and Exhibitions Bureau (MyCEB), Malaysia's official Destination Marketing Organisation in relation to business events has done it fair share and had bid for and had secured 1,815 business events between 2011 to 2020 with expected economic impact of RM11.99 billion (Adilla, 2016).

Without doubt, business tourism will continue to grow. At its background, as in other industries today, is the emerging significance of the Web of Things (WoT) and internet of things (IoT) that enable objects embedded with electronics, software, sensors, actuators, and network connectivity to connect and exchange data. Advances such as these require novel competencies, those that support new levels of mobility and collaborative capability. Today, ICT competence is regarded as a 'structural backbone' for industrial clusters (Biggiero, 2016) from which companies can intelligently exploit their strengths and create opportunities; and to capture visitors' behavioral intention and experiences (Park & Park, 2016). These intense technological advancements are expected to create pressure for players to adopt technology (Dotan, Friedman, Nair, and Zolfonoon, 2016), what more with the advent of big data (Kim, Park, Sun, and Lee, 2016). The current research will provide insights on what are the competencies that industry experts perceive to be innovative and capable of weathering the tides of uncertainty and volatility confronting the convention and exhibition business.

METHODOLOGY

The six steps competency development model (Lucia and Lepsinger, 1999) has been described in detail in our previous paper (Ahmad and Daud, 2016). Here we will provide a brief description of the process. Apart from the qualitative method adopted in the development of the preliminary model, the methodology had also included a survey. Factor analysis was conducted on the data collected, some items had to be removed and new dimensions observed.   The two procedures are provided.

Procedure 1: The Six Step competency development model

Step 1: identify measures/criteria that define superior/effective performance. Step 2: identify the referent group as the criterion sample (in this case they were industry experts and executive members of The Malaysian Association of Convention and Exhibition Organisers and Suppliers (MACEOS). Step 3: Data collection was carried out using focus group interview. The interview was unstructured. Unstructured interviews in qualitative research involve asking relatively open-ended questions of research to participants. It is designed to draw from them constructs embedded in thinking and rationale for decision making. A brief description of the research and its aim were provided. The term 'innovative competencies' was defined as competencies which are new, novel or

unique underlying characteristics of a person that contribute to successful job or organizational performance in the Conventions and Exhibitions Industry. The question asked was "What do you think are innovative competencies of professionals in the conventions and exhibitions industry that have helped them contribute to their successful job or organizational performance?" Step 4: Themes were identified from the transcribed saturated data and a set of questionnaires was developed. Step 5: The process of validation was done through a pilot test. Step 6: A preliminary model was developed

Procedure 2: The quantitative survey method using structured questionnaire
The preliminary model was tested on the population of event professionals in member companies of MACEOS and event professionals at MYCEB. Online questionnaires using googleform were sent to all 109 members of MACEOS listed in its directory using their official emails or personal emails obtained via the internet or through phone calls. It was also sent to MYCEB's correspondence officer. Written requests were made for it to be completed and returned and for it to be distributed to all event professionals in the organisation to be completed and returned. The questionnaire had consisted of 68 items grouped under four dimensions and 21 sub-dimensions.

RESULTS
From the six steps competency development model (Lucia and Lepsinger, 1999) four dimensions had emerged: entrepreneurship, operational, communication and personal characteristics. Details can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Preliminary constructs

ENTREPRENEURIAL	OPERATIONAL	PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS	COMMUNICATIONS
Tolerance for failures Strategic alliances and network Fast and agile Intelligently opportunistic Thinking in time	Internal synergies Match making Multitasking Content developing Data analysis Event design Freight forwarding	Independent Assertive Social responsibility IT savvy Interpersonal	Speaking well and clearly Story telling Advertising capabilities Keeping in touch

These items were then tested on the designated respondents. Initial response rate was very low for procedure 2. Only 32 questionnaires were returned despite making calls and resending the forms. We then emailed the questionnaire to 150 people that we know are professionals in the industry. The final total response obtained was 97 and was tested for validity and reliability. Cronbach alpha values for all sub-dimensions had ranged between .6 and .95 and have been accepted for further analysis. Data collected then underwent factor reduction using IBM SPPS Statistics version 23.

Factors to extract were fixed at 4 while small coefficients were suppressed at absolute value below 0.5. A total of 15 items were removed leaving 53 items as shown in Table2.

Table 2: Components after factor reduction.

Items	Component			
	1	2	3	4
Tolerance 2	.716			
Tolerance 3	.667			
Strategic 1	.722			
Strategic 2	.641			
Strategic 3	.669			
Fast 1	.731			
Fast 2	.702			
Fast 3	.820			
Intelligently 1	.709			
Intelligently 2	.725			
Intelligently 3	.747			
Thinking 1	.554			
Thinking 2	.568			
Internal 1	.729			
Internal 3	.642			
Match 2			.501	
Match 3	.663			
Match 4	.651			
Multitasking 1		.561		
Multitasking 2		.698		
Multitasking 3			.536	
Content 1			.660	
Data 3			.510	
Event 1			.694	
Event 2			.728	
Event 3			.631	
Event 4			.618	
Event 5			.779	
Freight 1			.836	
Freight 2			.586	
Freight 3			.647	
Independent 1		.724		
Independent 2		.685		
Independent 3		.745		
Assertive 1		.597		
Assertive 2		.539		
Assertive 3		.503		
Social 1		.610		
IT 2		.555		
IT 3		.622		
Interpersonal 1		.701		
Interpersonal 2		.650		
Interpersonal 4		.515		
Communication 1				.657
Communication 2				.684
Communication 3				.682
Story Telling 1				.739
Story Telling 2				.667
Story Telling 3				.665
Advertising 1				.787
Advertising 2				.793
Advertising 3				.732
Keeping in touch 1		.563		
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.				
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.				

The results of the analysis show that the observed variables can be explained largely by four new clusters of competencies namely thinking, knowledge, ability and personality. The thinking competency is made up of three domains: holistic thinking, relational and flexible thinking while the knowledge competency consists of two domains: event design and freight forwarding. 'Ability' consists of communication competence and advertising competence while personality consists of resourcefulness, independent, assertive and IT savvy. The novel competencies matrix for event professionals in the convention and exhibition industry is provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The novel competencies matrix for event professionals in the convention and exhibition industry
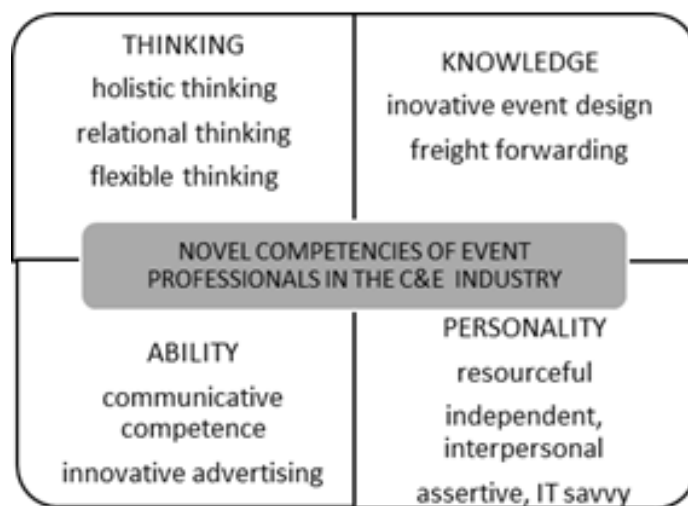
DISCUSSION

Holistic thinking individuals has the propensity to evaluate events and objects in the context in which they are presented (Apanovich, Bezdenezhnykh, Sams, Jääskeläinen, and Alexandrov, 2017) and are therefore in a better position to understand things and activities around them in a more global manner by attending to the environment as a whole and the relationships that lie within (Choi, 2016). Akin to systems thinking, it allows dialectical logic to be seen as interactions between situation and agents' dispositions thus allowing for free flow of creative ideas (Beck, Oeberst, Cress, and Nestler, 2017). Holistic thinking has been operationalized as the ability to think-in-time and the ability to create synergies. Sample items are 'ability to evaluate past experiences for future planning' and 'ability to sense that present experiences have future consequence'.

Close to holistic thinking is the idea of relational thinking which is related to the 'new mobility paradigm' that views people as being highly mobile, that regions are not fixed, and they stretch across space thus allowing social contents and relations to be networked across borders. Events professional with such thinking will be able to bring together webs and networks of stories across regional boundaries and identities. Relational thinking is operationalized as intelligently opportunistic and the ability to match-make event to visitors from across the globe. Sample items include 'receptive of other world views' and 'ability to connect people to events'.

Flexible thinking is the ability to create a flow of ideas while changing direction or correcting information (Passig and Eden, 2003). It is a key competency that is necessary for learning in technology-enhanced environments (Barak & Levenberg, 2016), it involves the willingness to change one's mind (Bensley et al., 2016), to view a problem from different perspectives, to search for different methods to deal with them (Georgsdottir, Lubart, and Getz, 2003) and to establish the value that one's current conclusions should be subject to reevaluation (Birdsall, 2003). Dimensions include being fast and agile and the ability to build strategic alliances and network. Items in this domain include 'the ability to generate personal transformation' and 'accurately access differences in behavior, attitude and values'. The knowledge domain consists of innovative event design and freight forwarding. Sample items are 'ability to create mental images' and 'ability to source for data'. Freight forwarding knowledge consists of 'knowledge of prevailing legal requirements' and 'strategically position exhibits and materials'.

Innovative ability consists of communicative and advertising competencies Defined by Bachman and Palmer (1996) as the ability to create and interpret discourse. Communicative competence is the capability to establish and maintain necessary contacts with other people, or as a system of internal resources required to create effective communication in a defined range of situations of interpersonal interaction. Sample items include 'ability to help others make sense of ambiguity and uncertainty, and 'ability to emotionally engage participants'. The last quadrant relates to personality competencies. It is made up assertiveness, autonomous, IT Savvy and the ability to exercise environmental stewardship.

CONCLUSION

The novel competencies discussed in this paper signifies the importance of design thinking and flexibility in the designated industry. We welcome future research to test the validity of the questionnaire which can be made available upon request. Suggestion is hereby made to interested stakeholders especially universities offering event management programmes to take heed of the innovative competencies identified and to incorporate them into their curriculum. For industry players, they may be made a part of the training module. Researchers may also be interested to find how these competencies affect outcomes or what determines their development.

Corresponding Author
Jalilah Ahmad, Centre for Management and Administrative Studies, Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Selangor. 42300 Bandar Puncak Alam, Selangor, Malaysia. Email: Jalilah309@salam.uitm.edu.my.

References

Adilla, F. (2016). Malaysia ups game in MICE industry. New Straits Times.

Ahmad, J., & Daud, N. (2016). Determining Innovative Tourism Event Professional Competency for Conventions and Exhibitions Industry: A Preliminary Study. Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences, 219, 69-75.

Aminudin, N., Wee, H., & Zahid, N. A. A. (2017). Do Age and Gender Influence Motivation and Satisfaction Among Special Event Volunteers? Balancing Development and Sustainability in Tourism Destinations (pp. 157-167): Springer.

Apanovich, V., Bezdenezhnykh, B., Sams, M., Jääskeläinen, I., & Alexandrov, Y. (2017). Event-related potentials during individual, cooperative, and competitive task performance differ in subjects with analytic vs. holistic thinking. International Journal of Psychophysiology.

Banu, A. (2016). MICE–"Future for Business Tourism". Int. J. Adv. Multidiscip. Res, 3(2), 63-66.

Barak, M., & Levenberg, A. (2016). Flexible thinking in learning: An individual differences measure for learning in technology-enhanced environments. Computers & Education, 99, 39-52.

Beck, I., Oeberst, A., Cress, U., & Nestler, S. (2017). Cultural interpretations of global information? Hindsight bias after reading Wikipedia articles across cultures. Applied Cognitive Psychology, 31(3), 315-325.

Bensley, D. A., Rainey, C., Murtagh, M. P., Flinn, J. A., Maschiocchi, C., Bernhardt, P. C., & Kuehne, S. (2016). Closing the assessment loop on critical thinking: The challenges of multidimensional testing and low test-taking motivation. Thinking Skills and Creativity, 21, 158-168.

Bernama. (2017). Malaysia to have largest MICE venue in South-East Asia. Star Online. Retrieved from https://www.thestar.com.my/business/business-news/2017/09/26/malaysia-to-have-largest-mice-venue-in-south-east-asia/

Biggiero, L. (2016). Relational Methodologies and Epistemology in Economics and Management Sciences: IGI Global.

Birdsall, S. S. (2003). Learning to see landscape through a flexible lens. Journal of Geography, 102(1), 29-34.

Boyatzis, R. E. (1982). The competent manager: A model for effective performance: John Wiley & Sons.

Choi, B.-J. (2016). The Influence of Cultural Thinking Style On Consumer Cognitive Complexity Underlying Wine Purchase Decisions. Journal of Applied Business Research (JABR), 32(4), 1257-1272.

Del Baldo, M. (2016). Formal Cooperation for Developing Sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility Among Tourism SMEs in Italy: Insights, Limits and Potentialities of the Network Contract Key Initiatives in Corporate Social Responsibility (pp. 103-129): Springer.

Dotan, Y., Friedman, L. N., Nair, M., & Zolfonoon, R. (2016). Generation of alerts in an event management system based upon risk: Google Patents.

EPU. (2015). Eleventh Malaysia Plan 2016-2020, Strategy Paper 18: Transforming Services Sector. Retrieved from http://rmk11.epu.gov.my/book/eng/Elevent-Malaysia-Plan/index.html

Getz, D., & Page, S. J. (2016). Progress and prospects for event tourism research. Tourism Management, 52, 593-631.

Gilsing, V., Cloodt, M., & Roijakkers, N. (2016). From Birth through Transition to Maturation: The Evolution of Technology-Based Alliance Networks. Journal of Product Innovation Management, 33(2), 181-200.

Goeldner, C. R., & Ritchie, J. B. (2012). Tourism: principles, practices, philosophies: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

Kim, S., Park, S., Sun, M.-R., & Lee, J.-H. (2016). A Study of Smart Beacon-based Meeting, Incentive Trip, Convention, Exhibition and Event (MICE) Services Using Big Data. Procedia Computer Science, 91, 761-768.

Loukis, E., Janssen, M., Dawes, S., & Zheng, L. (2016). Evolving ICT and governance in organizational networks-Conceptual and theoretical foundations. Electronic Markets, 26(1), 7-14.

Lucia, A. D., & Lepsinger, R. (1999). Art & Science of Competency Models: Jossey-Bass San Francisco.

Messum, D., Wilkes, L., Peters, K., & Jackson, D. (2017). Content analysis of vacancy advertisements for employability skills: Challenges and opportunities for informing curriculum development. Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability, 7(1), 72-86.

Park, K., & Park, S. (2016). Topic Trend of Event Management Research. Event Management, 20(1), 109-115.

Passig, D., & Eden, S. (2003). Cognitive intervention through virtual environments among deaf and hard-of-hearing children. European journal of special needs education, 18(2), 173-182.

UFI. (2016). Global Exhibition Barometer, 15th edition (July 2015). Retrieved from ttp://www.ufi.org/Medias/pdf/thetradefairsector/surveys/ufi_global_exhibition_barometer_july_2015.pdf