

## A Study of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Skills Necessary for Convention Hotel Employees in Thailand<sup>\*</sup>

### การศึกษาทักษะการเรียนรู้ในศตวรรษที่ 21 ที่สำคัญสำหรับพนักงานโรงแรม จัดประชุมในประเทศไทย

Busarin Wongwiwattana (บุษริน วงศ์วิวัฒนา)<sup>\*\*</sup>

Chokechai Suwetwattanakul (โชคชัย สุเวชวัฒนกุล)<sup>\*\*\*</sup>

#### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to generate guideline of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills appropriate for convention hotel employees. The performance of convention hotel employees is unique and very sensitive; their performance is related to guest satisfaction, which is related to hotel satisfaction. This significance would lead to an overall hotel performance and ultimately the outcome. Therefore, it is important to recognize the significance and importance of the skills of convention hotel employees. Moreover, to achieve success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills are much more essential to employees of hotels than it was. The researcher applies a qualitative research method with a focus group discussion technique in order to obtain appropriate data from all concerned. The results of the study shown that there are seven 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills, which are suitable and directly relate to convention hotel employee performance. These could be generated as: creativity and innovation skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills, communication and collaboration skills, media and information technology skills, social and cross-cultural skills, social responsibility skills and lastly self-directing and flexible working skills. With all these learning skills could assist

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บทความเป็นส่วนหนึ่งของวิทยานิพนธ์ในหลักสูตรปรัชญาดุษฎีบัณฑิต คณะกรรมการจัดการการท่องเที่ยว สถาบันบัณฑิตพัฒนบริหารศาสตร์

\*\* Ph.D. Student in Integrated Tourism Management Program, Graduate School of Tourism Management, National Institute of Development Administration, Email: busarin24@hotmail.com

นักศึกษาหลักสูตรปรัชญาดุษฎีบัณฑิต (การจัดการการท่องเที่ยวแบบบูรณาการ) คณะกรรมการจัดการการท่องเที่ยว สถาบันบัณฑิตพัฒนบริหารศาสตร์, อีเมล: busarin24@hotmail.com

\*\*\* Asst. Prof. Dr., Graduate School of Tourism Management, National Institute of Development Administration Thailand, Email: dr.choke@yahoo.com

ผู้ช่วยศาสตราจารย์ ดร. คณะกรรมการจัดการการท่องเที่ยว สถาบันบัณฑิตพัฒนบริหารศาสตร์, อีเมล: dr.choke@yahoo.com

convention hotel employees to be more efficient and adaptable in order to satisfy all convention hotel guests and business itself.

**Keywords:** 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Skills, Convention Hotel Employee, Human Resource Performance

## Introduction

Business meetings are one of the most significant sources of revenue in the world due to the special characteristics of business itself. There are many beneficiaries from business meetings in terms of employment, economic concerns, technology development, logistics and communication, social and cross-cultural awareness and so on. A report by Global Business Travel Association or GBTA (Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau or TCEB, 2011) mentioned that business meetings will be the only business with a growth rate of 4.1% per year while other businesses will slightly go down. This is supported by another report of the World Travel and Tourism Council (2015) which indicated that business travelers; include business meetings, could generate an employment opportunities with 102 creations or 8.7% growth per year. Thailand has realized the significance of business meetings. Business meetings are not only having an impact on revenue, but also generate a lot of indirect impact to the whole country. This led to a further study by TCEB (2015) which found that among the four important sectors of Business meetings (Meetings, Incentive, Convention and Exhibition business or MICE business), Convention business generated the most in both the number of visitors, 287,886 and revenue per head, 92,874THB in the year 2014. This is relate to predictions by the International Congress and Convention Association or ICCA (2014) that most business meeting travels will take place in Asia and Pacific countries, also an in-depth study found that Bangkok (Thailand) is the 4<sup>th</sup> most popular MICE place in the world.

Furthermore, convention hotels are the favorite places for MICE businesses, this was supported by the summary of ICCA (2014) that from 1963-2012, most meetings were held in hotels (a 44.2% share or 12,409 times). The essential reason is that hotels can facilitate the requirements of guests with meeting halls, accommodations, meeting facilities, food and beverages, logistic systems, etc. Even though business is thriving to generate many benefits, there is a competitive environment in the tourism and hospitality industries. Convention hotels are also cashing in on this dynamic industry and keep trying to find alternative solutions in which the human resource of business is the key issue. Human resource is the key factor for

business to be successful or to fail, due to the specific characteristics of service businesses themselves.

Human resource management is a key factor for service quality of hotel employee performance, which leads to business success. Holjevac (2003) did a study on a vision of tourism and the hotel industry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and found that human resource is the one factor that affects business performance. He also mentioned that the human resources of hotels could determine the service quality of the hotel; hence, hotels should examine their own human resources in order to serve their guests well. Thelin and Boluk (2012) who stated that the effectiveness of hotel employees' performance could lead hotels to success within the competitive environment shared this idea. Kim et al., (2011) also observed that human resources are significant to the hotel business as human resources are the heart of the business. In particular, those that are involved with guest services such as those in the front office, Food and Beverage employees, sales & catering executives and so on. Kim et al., (2011) further mentioned that there are seven competencies of these positions which are practical competency, adaptability to working environment competency, ability to make progress in work competency, interpersonal skills, active participation in social gatherings competency, flexibility of time management competency and foreign language and work-related learning skills.

With above ideas were supported by many researchers (Baum, 2015; Nimchit and Chantuk, 2016) that human resource management in hotel employee could enhance their performance effectiveness along with hotel business profitability at the end. Baum, 2015 also mentions that this human resource management in hotel employee needs to be improving regularly according to the dynamic of hotel business environment. Under this 21<sup>st</sup> century which things are changes, technology is a needed, and people should be more flexible and dynamic; therefore, some specific learning skills of this 21st are essentially. This leads to an interested in the study of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills necessary for convention hotel employees.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to understand the significance of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills to those people works in tourism and hospitality industries, especially, those employees who need to taking care guest directly. This research intends to study on employee in convention hotel business under Thailand context only.

### **Literature Review and Related Studies**

#### **Concept of 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning skill**

Developing 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skill is a concept to improve the education system in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by using high technology in a dynamic environment. 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skill encompasses a process of knowledge delivery, it involves knowledge management and interpretation of a knowledge base. There are many definitions of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skill provided by many academics. For instance, Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning or P21 (2008) stated that 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skill means the skills necessary for students to survive in an economic environment, while Perreault, 2004 (cited in Mitchell et al., 2010) indicated that 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skill involves qualities or individual attributes that differ from others in terms of skills and experience.

Moreover, 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skill is also defined as a learning skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is skill, knowledge, and the ability of people to learn for their own development under limited resources. Education Testing Service or ETS (2007) mentioned that 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skill is the ability of a person to get knowledge and be able to adapt that knowledge with limited resources for the most usefulness. This definition was supported by Mitchell (2010) that it is the learning skill of people that helps them to work and live in the present, such as a skill in collaboration, communication, analytic thinking, job responsibility, social and cross-culture, social responsibility and so on. Therefore, it could be said that 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skill is an essential attribute of the learning skill of people who use and apply those learning skills with maximum profitability in a dynamic environment.

The advantages of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills are wide use and are competitive, especially, in term of business context. Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning or P21 (2008) classified those skills into the following three main components: 1). Core subjects and 21<sup>st</sup> century themes, 2). 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills, and 3). A support system. The skills that raise the most concern in the education-system of the 21<sup>st</sup> century consist of learning and innovation skills, information, media, and technology skills and life and career skills. Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning or P21 (2008) still pointed out the significance of learning skills on both students and the education system that could assist people to be success. Students with 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skill would be able to apply their learning skills to real situations of work and life accordingly. This could be summaries into three types of learning skills as follows:

1<sup>st</sup> learning skill: Learning and Innovation Skills - these are learning skills that prepare students to be ready for their future careers and living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century era. There are some essential learning skills to help students to develop their learning and innovation skill. Kay and Greenhill (2011) indicated that this is the skill of creative thinking enabling the student to develop positive thinking, inventive thinking, and lifelong learning. The idea of learning and innovation skill was developed from various learning skills i.e. thinking creatively, working creatively with others, implementing innovations, reasoning effectively, using systematic thinking, judgment and decision making, problems solving, communicating clearly and collaborating with others.

2<sup>nd</sup> learning skill: Information, Media and Technology Skills – is the ability to use information technology properly. This includes the accessibility of data and information, the updating of tools and technology, and the efficiency of students using them correctly (Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, 2008). There are many information, media and technology learning skills in terms of information literacy, use and management of information, creating media products, and applying technology effectively. This learning skill is supported by many studies such as ETS (2007) which stated that presently information communication technology skill is necessary for students to learn and adapt this skill to their future careers.

3<sup>rd</sup> learning skill: Life and Career Skills – is the ability to evaluate, self-direct and to live in an ever-changing environment. This also includes the ability to adapt themselves to others, to be flexibility and mange goals within the time limit. Moreover, students in this 21<sup>st</sup> century need to be able to work independently, using their own initiative and self-direction in order to succeed. However, another learning skill of life and career is the ability to be responsible for their own work and to the local society. Leadership ability is also needed for their emotional quotient.

All of the above learning skills for students in 21<sup>st</sup> century will become more and more significant to both students and all others concerned. This leads to an interested in the development of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills to students and their study performances. Another reason that these skills are needed is that the world is changing, business is becoming more competitive, hence, all students need to be ready and to prepare themselves before entering the real world. Some research has indicated that 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills could help not only students, but also business owners too. Kaufman (2013) and Caruana and Mcpherson (2015) agreed that these learning skills could promote adaptability and productivity of employees' work which affects the company. Therefore, it could be said that 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills are necessary to everyone.

### Convention Hotel employees and their significance

Business travelling is one of the most interesting markets where many hospitality businesses are needed, due to the special travelling patterns and total spending per head. Nowadays, business travelers have varied traveling patterns, one type of significance is the MICE travelers. MICE travelers are tourists who travel for business in a variety of patterns, for meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions respectively. MICE travelers have an important role in the tourism and hospitality businesses, especially, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where the world become globalize with dynamic environments. Therefore, tourists who travel for business purposes are the ones who generate lots of revenue to businesses both directly and indirectly. It could be said that MICE travelers generate large amounts of revenue to hospitality business concerns such as hotels, meeting rooms, transportation and so on. They also generated income to hospitality businesses such as shopping malls when they travel with their spouse and even some nursery businesses when they come with family.

According to a report of the Global Business Travel Association or GBTA (Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau or TCEB, 2011) business meetings will be the only business with a growth rate of 4.1% per year. Supporting the report by the World Travel and Tourism Council (2015) it was stated that business travelers, which include business meeting travelers, generate a great amount of employment with 102 employment opportunities created or an 8.7% growth per year. Thailand realized the growth rate of MICE travelers leads to development so the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau or TCEB was establishes in order to take care of MICE business specifically in Thailand. In the report of the TCEB it stated that among MICE travelers, the sub-group of convention travelers is the largest sector, with the number of visitors reaching 287,886 and with a revenue per head of 92,874THB in the year 2014 (TCEB, 2015). This brings to an attention to convention travelers and related businesses, where convention hotels have a large volume of the market share for those convention travelers. Moreover, the International Congress and Convention Association or ICCA (2014) has agreed with the report that most of the convention business took placed in hotels with meeting facilities, which was 44.2% between the years 2008-2012.

Furthermore, many studies were found that show that the most success in hospitality businesses came from employee performance. This in harmony with Thelin and Boluk (2012) who indicated that the human resource component is a key factor in business performance. They studied the case of Swedish hotels and found that the implementation and development of human resources systems and procedures were the key to the success of the hotel businesses. Another study by Horng and Lin (2013) mentioned that there are specific

qualifications for employees in the hotel industry in Bangkok which related to the study of Thelin and Boduk (2012) in terms of language skills, emotional quotient and so on. There are also some studies by Limpanawetsakul et al., (2016) and Wigraisakda and Siriwong (2016) regarding the essentialness of employees in the hospitality industry, like hotel and exhibition businesses where the human resources of the business are significant and workforces need to be developed in the field of competency. Finally, the soft skills of the employees could lead to successful outcomes for the business. These similar to the study of Mitchel et al., 2010 that hotel employees are the soft skill of the business especially in this 21<sup>st</sup> century where business is much more competitive. Mitchel et al., (2010) further mentioned that soft skills are a necessary tool for the workforce in this 21<sup>st</sup> century in order to be successful.

### **Research Methodology**

The qualitative research used for this paper to address the aim of this study. To describe 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills, the qualitative research design provided an in-depth understanding of the purpose of the study (Veal, 2006). The researcher decided to arrange a focus group discussion with all key informants who related to convention hotel business. The selection of key informants came from those involved with evaluating the performance of convention hotel employees from both sides of host and guest.

There would be 14 key informants who involved with convention hotels from various fields. The persons who attend the focus group discussion were from the following professions: convention hotel employees, human resource managers, training managers, general managers of convention hotel, convention hotel guests from government sector, convention hotel guests from private sector, tourism and hotel academics respectively. All of them are those who have a direct experience for at least 5 years in convention hotels in both parts of host and guest. Host means those who work in their field for at least five years experiences. Guest means those who consume the convention hotel business for at least five years experiences as well.

The idea of homogeneous data selected for this study in order to collect the data from all concerned. A list of semi-structured questions made related to 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills necessary for this specific business. Then, focus group discussion equipment was decided upon such as a tape recording player and paper for note taking which would be accepted by all key informants. The focus of the analysis of data is under two major themes from the definition of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills and the necessary learning skills for convention hotel employees. Then, all data will be summarized and the findings recorded in an excel

spreadsheet developed per each theme. The results will be discussed and analyzed as per the objective of the study.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

In order to answer the objective of the study on the significance of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills for convention hotel employees, there will be two sections to be concentrated as following:-

#### **1) The 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills under the context of tourism and hospitality.**

The idea of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills is becoming more and more popular among people in tourism and hospitality context due to the changes in guest behavior and a more competitive environment. All hotel businesses need to be able to survive and be competitive, hence, the idea of how to satisfy the guests are raise. This leads to the significance of employee or human resources within the business that could contribute to that satisfaction properly. Therefore, it is necessary to conceive ideas of how to develop all employee or human resources to be much more effective in order to satisfy all guests.

Initially, the idea of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skill is created in order to develop the learning skills of students and people in the educational field. However, in order to reach to the objective of this part of definition under tourism and hospitality context. It found that tourism and hospitality employees with 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills could more easily gain necessary knowledge and the ability to work with efficiency, especially, in some particular fields such as information technology and social media. Furthermore, life and career skills can also help employees to be prepared before working in a real working environment. This means the service from tourism and hospitality employees is a key factor in determining the success or the failure of the business. Especially, in the era of 21<sup>st</sup> century which things are changes rapidly; the world is becoming more connected with technology like social media and mobile applications, and people are demanding specific products and services, and all the while business is becoming much more competitive. These types of dynamic situations have posed challenges to many businesses of how to survive in this ever-changing environment.

Therefore, the idea of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skill are chosen in order to develop their employees' abilities in this field to be able to change with this environment and to deal successfully with all upcoming challenges. There are also some studies regarding specific skills in this era such as Kim et al., (2011) who studied the importance of hotel employees' competency and qualifications. Kim et al., (2011) found that there are seven areas of competency needed for hotel employee which consist of: 1) practical competency, 2)

adaptability to a working environment competency, 3) ability to make progress in work competency, 4) interpersonal skills, 5) active participation in social gatherings competency, 6) flexibility of time management competency and 7) foreign language and work-related learning skills. These skills support the study of Caruana and Mcpherson (2015) that 21<sup>st</sup> century cultural knowledge and skill are necessary to develop the soft skills in the tourism and hospitality industries. They also mentioned that to provide good service, service employees need to have a wide range of cultural knowledge and skills. Caruana and Mcpherson (2015) indicated that the new cultural knowledge and skills include: professional competency, creativity, communication, teamwork, lifelong learning, and ethical sense skills. This is also related to the study by Thelin and Boluk (2012) that hotel employees need to have some skills in order to deal with guests properly and also they further pointed out that the duty of the human resource manager or general manager is to implement a regular training program for their employees as guest behavior begins to rapidly change.

In conjunction with the above this study is intended to point out the significance of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills to people in the hospitality industry and to business and industry overall. All informants are agreeing on the significance of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills under tourism and hospitality that could be summaries it into 12 learning skills;

1.1 Creativity and innovation skill is what is used by hotel employees who have creative and inventive ideas, an initiative to use knowledge in a unique way, and skills which could produce positive changes in an organization.

1.2 Critical thinking and problem solving skill is a skill that enables one to be able to think carefully; it is the process of thinking in a step-by-step way in order to solve problems, it is the use of rational reasoning in making decisions. This ability to evaluate a situation and make decisions is of great benefit to an organization.

1.3 Communication and collaboration skill can be defined as the ability of employees in dealing with others in business (both colleagues and guests). This involves the language and communication ability of employees to do their assignments of work well. Employees also need to have the ability to work along with people in different situations in a friendly way.

1.4 Integrated leaning skill means the aptitude of employees in lifelong learning. Employees also need to be able to integrate their existing knowledge with what they are learning in order to reach their organizational goals.

1.5 Information literacy skill is the ability of employees to get all additional relevant data or information from the news, television and other social media rather than just

rely on what they have learned from their organization. This information literacy needs to be accurate and adaptable to their service work.

1.6 Media literacy skill refers to the ability of employees to analyze and classify appropriate data or information. They should be able to determine if those media and information are correct and whether they should be used with colleagues and guests.

1.7 Information communication technology skill is the way employees show the information technology skill that they have. They should be able to analyze, estimate, collect and adapt it properly.

1.8 Productivity and accountability skill refers to the ability of employees to complete their work within a given time frame. It is also the ability to manage and prioritize their own work.

1.9 Social and cross-cultural skill is defined as when employees can accept the diversity of other people, understand, respect and adapt themselves with multiculturalism. This includes their emotional quotient in dealing with both colleagues and guests.

1.10 Social responsibility skill is the capability of employees in taking care of those nearby in a social context; it also includes professional ethics and the ability to keep a proper balance between business performance and morality.

1.11 Initiative and self-directing skill can be defined as the ability of employees to work with self-reliance in a dynamic environment. Hospitality employees also should have leadership skills and be able to process work effectively.

1.12 Flexible working skill refers to the adaptability of employees in various roles and environments. Employees must be flexible in their work, goals and time given to the organization.

## **2) An appropriate 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills for convention hotel employees**

With the result of twelve essential 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills under tourism and hospitality context, the next step of the fund out the appropriate 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skill in the field of convention hotel employees. All key informants should contribute to a useful discussion with their opinions regarding appropriate 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills for convention hotel employees. The agreement from all of them could generate a fruitful convention hotel business. It can be stated that most 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills are quite necessary for convention hotel employees, especially, those who interact with their guests. Moreover, key informants can also provide reasonable definitions of each learning skill under the context of convention hotels. Hence, the results of the study show that out of 12 learning skills, there are only seven relevant learning skills which include the following:

2.1 Creativity and innovation skill is what is used by hotel employees who have ingenuity and creative thinking to develop new ideas to use in their work. This can produce positive changes and success for their convention hotel.

2.2 Critical thinking and problem solving skill is a skill that will enable one to have a rational thinking and problem solving process and the ability to evaluate a situation and make decisions which lead to guest satisfaction and organizational success.

2.3 Communication and collaboration skill can be defined as the ability of convention hotel employees in terms of use of language, speech verbally and vocally and communication. The ability to deal with all concerned (both colleagues and guests). They can work along with people in different situations in a friendly way.

2.4 Media and information technology skill refers to the skill of performing media analysis, source of information analysis, and the synthesis of information. This also includes accurate media and information technology consumption and modification.

2.5 Social and cross-cultural skills is defined as when employees can accept the diversity of other people, understand and respect their human rights and be able to adapt themselves with multiculturalism. This includes their emotional quotient in dealing with both colleagues and guests.

2.6 Social responsibility skill is the capability of employees in taking care of those in the local community and throughout the world. It is the ability to keep a proper balance between business performance and professional ethics.

2.7 Self-directing and flexible working skills refers to convention hotel employees who are able to work with self-reliance in a dynamic environment. They have leadership skills and can easily adapt when under pressure or to various roles or new environments.

Moreover, the results presented point to the fact that that convention hotel employee who develop 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills will be able to improve themselves in both personal and work-related tasks. This means that benefits will bring to not only employee himself, but also to convention hotel business. The study indicates that convention hotel employees with comprehensive 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills will be able to perform their work well. This will fulfill guest expectations and produce satisfaction which will finally lead to the success of the convention hotel. Hence, these mutual benefits could produce a happy outcome to all concerned, hotel employees, guests, and also business owners.

### **Suggestions for further study**

The purpose of the study was to develop ideas for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills which are suitable for convention hotel employees who have specific requirements. Appropriate skills which can enhance the development of employee performance could be the next step of the study. This also would be an initial study of how related people like training managers or general managers of hotels could maximize their employees' performance which would improve the overall service quality and performance of the hotel.

This is just part of a research dissertation with the topic 'Development of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills to enhance convention hotel employees' performance and effectiveness in Thailand', therefore, the rest of the development guidelines will be described in the full research paper in their various aspects. However, this study was initially an idea of the development of convention hotel employees' performance in Thailand so further research could be done in different areas of the country, and with other service business units along with various other aspects of interests.

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