

Employee Competence in the Hospitality Industry: A Study of Hotels in Eastern Uganda

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Abstract

this study investigated the influence of employee competence on service quality in hotel establishments in Eastern Uganda, specifically Jinja Nile Resort, Wash and Wills Hotel, and Mbale Resort. Employing a cross-sectional quantitative research design, data were collected from 134 respondents, including hotel staff and guests. The findings reveal a significant positive relationship between employee competence and service quality ($r=0.617$, $p<0.001$). Regression analysis confirmed that employee competence is a significant predictor of service quality ($\beta=0.617$, $p<0.001$). The results underscore the importance of multidimensional competencies—knowledge, skills, adaptability, and experience in delivering superior hospitality services. The study emphasizes the strategic value of human capital development in enhancing organizational performance and customer satisfaction in Uganda's growing hospitality sector.

Keywords: Employee competence, Service quality, Hospitality industry, Uganda, Hotel management

1. Introduction

Employee competence has increasingly emerged as a critical strategic resource for hospitality organizations seeking sustainable competitive advantage. In highly competitive and customer-centric environments, hotels depend heavily on competent employees to create superior customer experiences that are difficult for competitors to imitate. Unlike tangible products, hospitality services are produced and consumed simultaneously, making employees the principal medium through which service quality is created and evaluated (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). Therefore, employee competence is a key determinant of organizational performance, customer satisfaction, and business sustainability.

2. Back ground to the study

According to Wijayanto and Riani (2021), competence encompasses a combination of knowledge, skills, abilities, personal attributes, and behavioral capabilities that enable employees to perform responsibilities effectively. In hospitality management, competence extends beyond technical proficiency to include communication, teamwork, adaptability, emotional intelligence, problem-solving, and continuous learning critical for responding to changing guest expectations and managing service failures (Kusluvan et al., 2010; Lee & Kim, 2023). Recent technological advancements and the COVID-19 pandemic have further emphasized digital literacy, flexibility, and resilience among hotel staff (Brotherton, 2024).

Human capital remains a foundational element of service excellence, with empirical evidence suggesting that investment in employee development enhances customer satisfaction, retention, and financial performance (Baum, 2018; Lee & Kim, 2023). Despite this, limited empirical research exists within the Ugandan hotel sector regarding how employee competence influences service quality. This study aims to bridge this gap by exploring the multidimensional nature of employee competence and its impact on service delivery in selected hotels in Eastern Uganda.

3. Theoretical Framework

This research is anchored on the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1988) and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (Vroom, 1964). The SERVQUAL model posits that service quality is evaluated based on five dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibility. Since these dimensions are primarily delivered through employee interactions, competent staff are vital for delivering high service quality. Herzberg's theory suggests that opportunities for achievement, recognition, and growth motivate employees to improve their competencies, thereby enhancing service delivery (Herzberg, 1966). Together, these theories underpin the hypothesis that employee competence significantly influences service quality.

4. Literature Review

Employee competence is a multidimensional construct comprising technical skills, behavioral attributes, cognitive abilities, and adaptive capabilities (Wijayanto & Riani, 2021). Competent employees are confident, responsive, and capable of resolving customer issues efficiently, which directly impacts service quality (Kusluvan et al., 2010). Studies outside Uganda, such as Githinji (2015) and Kang'ethe (2015), support the positive relationship between employee competence and service outcomes, demonstrating that training and development initiatives improve customer satisfaction and organizational performance.

In the hospitality context, service quality is largely defined during employee-customer interactions, necessitating employee professionalism, communication skills, and adaptability (Tse & Yu, 2002). The SERVQUAL dimensions reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibility are widely adopted to measure service quality, with competent employees better equipped to deliver these dimensions consistently (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Recent research underscores the increased importance of digital literacy and adaptability, especially in the aftermath of COVID-19 (Brotherton, 2024).

Despite these insights, empirical data specific to Ugandan hotels remains scarce. Existing studies have predominantly focused on customer satisfaction, motivation, and tourism development (Otengei & Nyeko, 2020), with limited emphasis on how employee competence influences service quality. This study sought to fill this research gap by examining the role of multidimensional employee competence in influencing service delivery.

5. Methodology

A cross-sectional quantitative research design was adopted to investigate the relationship between employee competence and service quality. The study was conducted in three hotels in Eastern Uganda: Jinja Nile Resort, Wash and Wills Hotel, and Mbale Resort. The target population included 206 respondents comprising hotel employees, supervisors, managers, and guests. Using Krejcie and Morgan's

(1970) sampling table, a sample size of 134 respondents was determined through purposive and simple random sampling techniques.

Data collection employed a structured questionnaire with Likert-scale items measuring employee competence (knowledge, skills, adaptability, experience, exposure) and service quality (reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, tangibility). Validity was established through expert review, while reliability was confirmed with Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding 0.70 for all constructs. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and simple linear regression using SPSS version 21.

6. Result

The demographic profile indicated a balanced gender distribution among respondents, with 59% males and 41% females. Most respondents held a bachelor's degree (59%). Overall, respondents rated employee competence highly, with particular emphasis on practical skills, adaptability, and experience, which recorded higher mean scores than theoretical knowledge.

The Pearson correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between employee competence and service quality ($r=0.617$, $p<0.001$). Regression analysis further confirmed that employee competence significantly predicts service quality ($\beta=0.617$, $p<0.001$), accounting for 60.8% of the variance ($R^2=0.608$). These findings support the hypothesis that employee competence influences service delivery in Ugandan hotels.

7. Discussion

The study demonstrates that employee competence significantly predicts service quality within the hotel sector in Eastern Uganda. The strong positive correlation indicates that better-trained, adaptable, and experienced employees are more capable of delivering high-quality customer experiences. This aligns with the SERVQUAL framework, emphasizing that employee professionalism directly impacts dimensions such as reliability and empathy (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

Notably, practical competencies, especially adaptability and work experience, exert a greater influence on service quality than theoretical knowledge, consistent with findings from other sectors (Githinji, 2015). Continuous professional development and strategic human resource investments are essential for cultivating a motivated, skilled workforce capable of responding effectively to the evolving demands of hospitality service environments (Albrecht, 2017).

Furthermore, developing multidimensional competencies including behavioral, technical, and adaptive skills is critical for maintaining competitive advantage and ensuring high customer satisfaction. As the hospitality industry continues to evolve, especially in developing regions like Uganda, fostering such competencies remains vital for organizational resilience and growth.

8. Conclusion

This research confirms that employee competence significantly influences service quality in hotels in Eastern Uganda. Developing multidimensional competencies through targeted training, recruitment, and ongoing professional development enhances organizational performance and customer satisfaction. The findings contribute to the limited empirical literature in the Ugandan hospitality sector and offer practical insights for industry stakeholders aiming to improve service delivery through strategic human resource management.

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