Entry level skills for the event management profession: Implications for curriculum development

by Donna Fletcher, Julie Dunn, and Rosemary Prince

Abstract

The rapid growth of the event industry has resulted in a world-wide demand for education and training programs in event management. While the professional associations in event management have provided providing quality training and credentialing for their members, the 140 colleges and universities preparing students for entry level positions in the event management field have not yet identified critical entry level skills. This study asked practicing event managers to rate 91 skills in terms of importance to entry level employees in event management. Skills rated most important were personal skills, then social skills, with knowledge skills rated as least important.

Entry level skills for the event management profession: Implications for curriculum development

The event industry officially began sometime in the mid-1970's, with the exact date and event varying widely depending on whom one asks (Schmader & Jackson, 1997). Today, the tourism and event industry is one of the world's largest and fastest growing industries. (Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council, 2005). The numbers and types of events increase daily, ranging from sport and recreation events to professional meetings, conventions, fairs, festivals, expositions, fund raising, corporate, community, marketing, and entertainment events.

The current event industry professionals are a diverse group of people, most of whom developed and emerged as event professionals over time and through experience as the event industry itself evolved. Surveying 100 event organizations representing both events and sponsors, Schmader and Jackson (1997) reported that most event industry professionals are college educated, many with advanced degrees that vary widely from sport management to journalism, criminology, and anthropology, with a recent trend toward business management, marketing, personnel, and public relations.

This rapid growth of the event industry has resulted in a world-wide demand for education and training programs in event management (Getz, 2002; Mules, 2004).

Professional associations in the field of event management have led the way in defining the field of event planning and in providing quality training and credentialing for their members (Silvers, Bowdin, O'Toole, & Nelson, 2006). The International Special Events Society (ISES) offers a Certified Special Events Professional (CSEP) designation (ISES, 2007). This certification is based on a point system, with points awarded for special event industry experience, leadership and education, and requiring a minimum of three years of documented successful experience as an event management professional (ISES, 2007). The International Festival and Events Association (IFEA) offers a Certified Festival

and Event Executive (CFEE) program which requires five years of paid, full time festival or event related industry experience, completion of IFEA seminars, publications and presentations, and case studies (IFEA, 2007). The Meeting Professionals International (MPI) offers an elite Certification in Meeting Management (CMM) to professionals who successfully complete extensive educational programs, pass extensive examinations, and have ten or more years of successful event industry experience (MPI, 2007). The Convention Industry Council offers a Certified Meeting Professional Program (CMP) which requires three years experience to apply, and which uses a point system based on managing meetings, membership, education, professional contributions, and a comprehensive examination (CIC, 2007). And the International Association Assembly Managers (IAAM) offers a Certified Facilities Executive (CFE), also using a point system based on experience in the field, participation in the profession, an examination, and an oral interview (IAAM, 2007).

These and other professional organizations have developed core competencies, standards, or skill sets that form the basis for their training programs and their certification examinations. The Convention Industry Council, representing 32 industry related associations, has developed a knowledge base categorized into 5 domain areas, 49 tasks and 230 knowledge topics. The five domains identify major content areas which are covered on their CMP certification examination. These areas include: Strategic Event Planning Process, Financial and Contract Management, Facilities and Services, Logistics, and Program (CIC, 2007). For public assembly facility managers, an IAAM task force recently developed core competencies grouped into seven core competency areas: legal issues, facility marketing/sales and promotions, financial aspects, event services/facility operations, leadership, human resource/personnel administration, and advertising and public relations (Silvers, et. al., 2006). These core competencies formed the basis for Graham & Ward's (2004) textbook and for curriculum development at the masters degree level (IAAM, 2007).

Colleges and Universities are becoming increasingly involved in the field of events management. Goldblatt (2004) asserts that there is an increasing need for academic credentials in the event industry, and Silvers, et. al., 2006, report that future event management professionals are increasingly seeking degrees in event management—degrees which they believe will give them a competitive edge in the job market . The United Kingdom is experiencing a proliferation of higher education courses in the field of event management (Beaven & Wright, 2006). By 1999, over 140 colleges and universities were offering events management programs (Goldblatt, 2002), and Polivka (2004) reported that by 2004, the number of institutions of higher education offering event management curricula had increased to over 200 world-wide.

However, the skill sets, competencies and standards developed

by the Event Industry professional associations have focused on the experienced professional who has been successfully employed in the event management industry for many years, actively involved in their professional organizations, regularly participated in specialized industry training, and contributed significantly to the field of event management. Developing university programs and curricula appropriate for these future entry-level event management professionals is a daunting challenge. Entry level event planners, the event manager "wanna-be's" with brand new bachelor's degrees, are many years of experience away from meeting these advanced standards, and no entry level standards are available for entry level employees in the field of event management. As noted by Stafford, (1993), identifying critical entry level skills is obviously needed for course development.

Complicating that identification of entry level skills is the fact that the event management industry crosses many educational disciplines including sports, business, hospitality, tourism, leisure, arts, communications, sociology, and public administration (Silvers, et. al. , 2006). And, as Beaven & Wright (2006) discovered when they asked employers and potential employers in event management agencies in the U.K. to list the three attributes they considered to be most important for new graduates seeking employment in their agencies, the most frequent responses given, in descending order, were commitment, management, written communication, enthusiasm/passion, coping under pressure, sector knowledge, general communication, self motivation, reliability, willing to learn, problem solving, oral communication , and flexibility. These attributes are more likely to develop and flourish as a result of relevant experiences as opposed to traditional lecture and textbook pedagogy. In fact, Beaven & Wright (2006)) reported that event managers emphasize experience, and that they want entry level employees to have considerable experience in working on, assisting, and organizing events. Fully 100% of those surveyed rated the importance of experience in assisting with and organizing events as either desirable or essential for those seeking entry level employment with their company.

The careful design of active learning experiences that fall within each student's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1930/1978) is vital. Unfortunately, placing students in the field to serve as apprentices to actual event managers who are managing actual events requires that the students have sufficient knowledge, skills, and attitudes to ensure that the student's experience—and the actual event—are both successful. Learning by trial and error, as Graham, Goldblatt & Delpy (1995, p.19) warn, is the "most dangerous and expensive form of learning."

It seems imperative, therefore, that students acquire appropriate and sufficient knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable them to enter and succeed in their initial field experiences, and that, as suggested by McDonald & McDonald (2000), enable them to examine and process their experiences through reflection and interaction.

We sought to determine which knowledge, skills and attitudes were most important and appropriate for entry level event planners, in Florida's event industry by surveying employers who might be hiring entry level event planners. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate the essential skills and competencies of entry level event management employees as expressed by experienced event management professionals.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 273 members of Florida's Festivals and Events Association (FFEA), a regional professional organization of event producers, vendors, entertainers, sponsors, and organizations that support the event industry in Florida through education, networking, dissemination of information, and the cultivation of high standards for the industry. Established in 1994, FFEA collectively represents 750 events throughout the state of Florida. Of the 415 FFEA members, the 273 members who were practicing professional event producers received e-mails from FFEA inviting them to participate in an on-line survey to rate the importance of entry level skills. The members were allowed thirty days from the date of the invitation to the date for response. FFEA members who were vendors were not invited to participate in the survey. The wording on the e-mail was:

"FFEA requests your assistance on an educational survey. Several Florida colleges and universities have asked for assistance from the Florida Festivals and Events Association (FFEA) in developing a special events curriculum or expanding their current special events program. FFEA is asking for your valuable input. Please take a moment to fill out this very simple survey ranking the importance of entry level skills needed in order to succeed in the special event industry. As always, we appreciate your willingness to share your expertise." Added were closing date/time and the link to the on-line survey.

Instrument

The 91 Event Skills Assessment Survey items were generated by FFEA and the authors of this report. A master list of items was compiled consisting of competencies, skill sets, standards, and objectives previously developed by the five professional event management organizations previously mentioned and from inspection of thirty college and university event management programs which offered undergraduate or graduate level degree or certification programs and which included skill set or competency information on their web site. The resulting items were then assigned into one of six role-specific skill areas: administrative skills, marketing, communications and public relations, operations, programming, sponsorship skills, and volunteer management skills. These six skill areas were consistent with the six educational tracks used by FFEA (Eleanor Krusell, personal communication, April, 2007) and with four of Silvers, et. al., (2006) knowledge domains when the domain of risk was included into the operations domain. The skills within each of these six areas were then combined and condensed into independent skills and used as items on the survey instrument administered by Survey Monkey (2007).

The first section of the survey began by asking "If you were to hire someone, what administrative skills in event production would be most important for him/her to have?" The question remained consistent, changing only the skill areas. Possible item ratings were selections on a 5-point Likert scale from extremely important (1) to not important (5). See Tables 1 though 6 for categories, questions, and verbatim described skills.

Respondents were asked to indicate their years of experience

and current agency size by selecting categories 1-3, 4-7, 8-11, and 12 and over. Although Survey Monkey automatically records the respondent's e-mail address, the survey instrument assured the respondents of anonymity.

RESULTS:

With authorization from FFEA, the entire survey data file from Survey Monkey was downloaded and examined by the authors. Sixty nine of the 273 invited FFEA practicing professional event managers responded, for a 25.3% response rate. Survey Monkey provided all of the ratings on all of the items as well as total frequencies and percentages of ratings for each item.

Responders indicted their years of experience and agency size by selecting one of four given categories. To determine if survey ratings were related to these two variables, the categories for both variables were dummy coded and correlated with ratings on each of the 91 survey items. Among any 182 correlation coefficients computed on only purely chance determined data, the expected number significant at the .05 level of significance is nine. Finding only four significant at $p < .05$, we consider these to be chance results and conclude that we found no reliable evidence for these survey ratings being related either to years of experience or to agency size. Conveniently, therefore, the following results may be considered as representing ratings of entry level skill importance generally held by professionals in the field of event management.

Two skills judged to be least important (the last two listed in Table 4) still had an average rating of 3.4, closer to important (3.0) than to slightly important (4.0).

Significantly, all 91 skills were judged by event management professionals to be at least generally important entry level skills. This survey therefore confirms the importance of all of these skills, as previously suggested by Silvers, et. al., (2006) and Beaver & Wright, (2006). Because these results establish the expressed need for entry level skill development in event management, they have direct implications for curriculum development. To assist such curriculum development, we focused on the relative importance of these skills.

An initial examination of the distribution of ratings for each of the 91 skills revealed no descriptively problematic bimodal distributions. Accordingly, to simplify presentation and interpretation of relative importance, the mean and standard deviation of importance ratings were computed for each skill. Assuming that the underlying Likert scale represents at least an ordinal scale, the mean informatively indicates the value around which the ratings converge while the standard deviation simultaneously indicates divergence of ratings around that value, or disagreement among raters.

Table 1 contains ratings of all 20 administrative skills ordered by average or mean rating. Communication was rated as the most extremely important skill (mean 1.2) with little disagreement (the smallest standard deviation of only 0.42). Thus communication is generally accepted as the most important entry level skill. Political skill was considered only very important (mean 2.3), but the much larger standard deviation (0.96) indicates considerable disagreement, hence a skill more or less important to specific roles or jobs. Data analysis was a less valued administrative skill, but with moderate variation still judged as an important skill. The remaining quantitative data are self-explanatory, and the reader can detect patterns of interest while noting the average and variation in these ratings of importance.

We detected an interesting pattern. Skills rated most important appear more generally to be personal competencies or work habits which occur mainly in the absence of other individuals. Skills rated least important were general knowledge competencies. Skill rated between these two general categories were social competencies which require immediate interaction with other people. We therefore reviewed all 91 skills, and by consensus coded each as belonging to one of three general personal, social, or knowledge skills areas. These general categories are included in each table in order to facilitate interpretation of the results.

Each skill was also categorized into one of three skill types by mutual consensus of the authors. The social skills type category included interpersonal and human relations skills; the personal skills type category included self management and personal work habit skills; the knowledge skills type category included academic, conceptual and analytical skills. When viewed in these general categories, the rankings of specific skills in Table 1 reveal a striking pattern. Of the seven skills rated as extremely important, all but one are personal skills. Those skills rated as very important represent a mix of personal, social and knowledge skills. And all of the last four items rated as important are knowledge skills. At least with respect to administrative entry level skills, this quantitative evidence suggests that practicing professionals value personal skills most, social skills next, and knowledge skills least, consistent with the findings of Raybould & Wilkins (2005).

Table 2 describes the ratings of 16 marketing/communications/public relations skills, none of which was rated as extremely important. Again, lowered average importance ratings were associated with larger standard deviations, probably reflecting different job responsibilities of the raters, hence difference in perceived importance of these skills. Note that the top four skills are personal skills, and that the bottom five are knowledge skills.

Table 3 describes ratings of 18 operation skills. Only two skills were judged as extremely important; a social skill and a personal skill. All skills rated less important than these two skills are knowledge skills. Again, as average importance decreased, standard deviation increased reflecting increased variability in ratings.

Table 4 contains ratings of 16 programming skills none of which were judged as extremely important and most judged as only important, perhaps indicating that entry level employees in the field of event management are not expected to have sufficient programming experience. As in previous categories, mean rated importance was negatively associated with variability of the ratings. None of the specific skills described in this table reflect personal skills; some of these programming skills may involve both knowledge and social skills. Except for the first ranked knowledge skill (site layout), social skills generally were rated more important than knowledge skills.

Table 5 contains ratings of 11 sponsorship skills all of which were rated as very important. As with programming skills, these raters may not expect entry level employees to have developed adequate sponsorship skills. As in all previous categories, average importance and standard deviation were negatively correlated.

Again, no personal skills were queried, and skills that we judged to represent social skills generally out-ranked knowledge skills.

Table 6 contains ratings on 10 volunteer management skills, all of which were rated in the second very important category. Again as average importance fell, disagreement increased.

Conclusion

Event management professionals considered all of the skills included in the survey as important, though some more important than others. These results confirm and document the professionally perceived importance of these skills within the growing field of event management (Sawyer, 2005; Silvers, 2006). Development of these skills will assure that undergraduate programs in event management will meet both academic standards and industry needs (Dunne, Bennet, & Carre, 1999).

However, the relatively higher importance given to entry level personal and social skills represents a challenge to traditional university training which stresses transmission of knowledge. To practicing professionals, knowledge skills are apparently the least important skills for entry level event managers. Clearly formal training, wherever it occurs, must consider providing opportunities for, and assessment of, critical personal work habits and the ability to interact effectively with others.

One way to develop more effective personal and social skills is by including more actual experience in any program. Students report that they learn best when they apply knowledge, test theories, and learn through experience (Zeigler & Bowie, 1995), and the importance of embedding relevant experience into the curriculum was acknowledged by Yorke and Knight (2004) who reported a consistent correlation between job success and relevant experience included as part of the curriculum. Similarly, Beaven & Wright (2006) reported that all of the event managers they surveyed ranked experience in assisting with and organizing events as desirable or essential for new graduates seeking employment with them. Clearly, relevant experiences can and must be included as a vital component in any curricula designed to prepare students for initial entry into the field of event management. Another way to increase development of needed personal and social skills is to assure structured opportunity in conventional courses for development of, and objective assessment of, these important entry level skills. For example, time management can be expected and assessed in many classrooms or site experiences, as can multitasking. Similarly, if team work is required in classes, at least the opportunity for becoming an effective team player is provided. Objective assessment of that social skill is necessary, and the results should be conveyed to the learner in context of the documented need for that entry level skill in the field of event management.

The event management community and the event management professional organizations stand ready and willing to assist. Walker (2007) has provided an example of how an applied event management course can be designed to include a strong, relevant, experience based learning environment that provides ample opportunity for development of personal and social skills by applying the knowledge based cognitive and analytical skills.

The results of this research should assist faculty in designing, developing, or adapting curricula to better prepare students for entry level position in event management.

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Table 1. *Administrative Skills: If you were to hire someone, what administrative skills in event production would be most important for him/her to have? (n = 69)*

	Skill Type	Mean	Standard Deviation
Communicating	Personal	1.2	0.42
Attention to details	Personal	1.3	0.53
Ability to work on many projects simultaneously	Personal	1.3	0.59
Self-starter/self-initiative	Personal	1.4	0.60
Team player	Social	1.4	0.67
Time management	Personal	1.4	0.61
Creativity/innovative thinking	Personal	1.5	0.68
Ability to work with all levels	Personal	1.6	0.64
Computer knowledge	Knowledge	2.0	0.76
Budgeting	Knowledge	2.2	0.78
Goal setting/analysis	Knowledge	2.2	0.83
Community involvement/affiliations	Social	2.2	0.99
Politics	Social	2.3	0.96
Supervision/training of staff/interns	Social	2.4	0.80
Board relations	Social	2.4	1.05
Personal growth	Personal	2.5	0.83
Financial experience	Knowledge	2.6	0.84
Data analysis	Knowledge	2.6	0.75
Continuing education	Knowledge	2.7	0.86
Profit center development	Knowledge	3.0	0.93

Note: 1 = Extremely Important, 2 = Very Important, 3 = Important, 4 = Slightly Important, 5 = Not Important

Table 2. *Marketing/communications/PR: If you were to hire someone, what marketing, communication and public relation skills in event production would be most important for him/her to have? (n = 67)*

	Skill Type	Mean	Standard Deviation
Creativity	Personal	1.6	0.70
Timeline management	Personal	1.6	0.78
Presentation skills (speaking engagements/press conferences)	Personal	1.9	0.78
Ability to write/compose	Personal	2.0	0.908
Developing marketing plan	Knowledge	2.2	0.94
Ability to obtain in-kind media sponsorships	Social	2.2	0.89
Development/implementation of crisis communications	Knowledge	2.3	0.81
Coordinating production of collateral pieces	Knowledge	2.4	0.97
Ability to research, negotiate, and purchase electronic and print media	Knowledge	2.5	0.99
Media training	Knowledge	2.5	0.94
Writing and presenting grants	Knowledge	2.7	0.88
Customer evaluations/secret shopping	Knowledge	2.8	0.95
Economic surveys/impact	Knowledge	3.0	0.82
Webist development	Knowledge	3.1	1.03
Photography	Knowledge	3.2	0.85
Television/radio experience	Knowledge	3.3	

Note: 1 = Extremely Important, 2 = Very Important, 3 = Important, 4 = Slightly Important, 5 = Not Important

Table 3. *Operations Skills: If you were to hire someone, what operations skills in event production would be most important for him/her to have? (n = 63)*

	Skill Type	Mean	Standard Deviation
Ability to work with vendors, volunteers, city/county officials	Social	1.4	0.59
Timeline management	Personal	1.5	0.72
Site planning/logistics	Knowledge	1.8	0.87
Development/implementation of all operations (i.e., ticketing, staging, lighting, sound, security, traffic flow, waste management, vendors, golf carts, etc.)	Knowledge	1.8	0.87
Ability to bid, negotiate and contract food concessionaires	Knowledge	1.9	0.82
Ability to bid, negotiate and contract service vendors	Knowledge	1.9	0.84
Safety/security issues	Knowledge	2.0	0.94
Signage	Knowledge	2.2	0.95
Alcohol distribution (i.e., regulations, training, insurance	Knowledge	2.3	1.11
ADA regulations	Knowledge	2.3	0.88
Permitting processes	Knowledge	2.3	1.08
Facility use negotiations and contracts (public and private)	Knowledge	2.4	1.10
Emergency/disaster/crisis written plans	Knowledge	2.4	1.06
Risk assessment, analysis and management	Knowledge	2.5	0.99
Ticketing	Knowledge	2.5	1.09
Festival/event insurance	Knowledge	2.5	1.01
Merchandising	Knowledge	2.6	1.10
Public transportation	Knowledge	3.0	1.15

Note: 1 = Extremely Important, 2 = Very Important, 3 = Important, 4 = Slightly Important, 5 = Not Important

Table 4. *Programming Skills: If you were to hire someone, what programming skills in event production would be most important for him/her to have? (n = 62)*

	Skill Type	Mean	Standard Deviation
Site layout	Knowledge	1.7	0.80
Ability to work with promoters/producers/entertainers	Social	2.2	0.96
Ability to find, negotiate and contract entertainers	Social	2.3	0.98
Programming entertainers	Social	2.3	0.96
Ability to work with operations on staging, lighting, sound, tickets, etc.	Social	2.4	0.97
Creation/implementation/management of children's areas	Knowledge	2.6	0.97
Soliciting/jurying/placing/servicing artists	Social	2.6	0.99
Obtaining/working with judges	Social	2.9	1.08
Selecting/managing parade entries	Knowledge	2.9	1.23
Experience in entertainment industry	Knowledge	2.9	1.04
Amusement ride solicitation/management	Knowledge	3.1	1.18
Art patron award programs	Knowledge	3.1	1.07
Creation/implementation/management of sport related events (inc. water events)	Knowledge	3.1	1.14
Creation/implementation/management of health related activities	Knowledge	3.3	1.09
Creation/implementation/management of animal areas	Knowledge	3.4	1.13
Creation/implementation/management of horticulture components	Knowledge	3.4	1.11

Note: 1 = Extremely Important, 2 = Very Important, 3 = Important, 4 = Slightly Important, 5 = Not Important

Table 5. *Sponsorship Skills: If you were to hire someone, what sponsorship skills in event production would be most important for him/her to have? (n = 62)*

	Skill Type	Mean	Standard Deviation
Servicing sponsors/sponsor relations.	Social	1.6	0.76
Appreciating sponsors	Social	1.6	0.76
Selling sponsorships	Social	1.7	0.896
Packaging sponsorships	Knowledge	1.8	0.856
Activating sponsorships	Social	1.8	0.89
In-kind sponsorships (budget relieving)	Knowledge	1.8	0.89
Partnering sponsors	Social	1.8	0.88
Pricing sponsorship	Knowledge	1.9	0.92
Sponsorship trends	Knowledge	1.9	0.87
After action packets	Knowledge	2.0	1.03
Knowledge of ROI	Knowledge	2.1	1.08

Note: 1 = Extremely Important, 2 = Very Important, 3 = Important, 4 = Slightly Important, 5 = Not Important

Table 6. *Volunteer Management Skills: If you were to hire someone, what volunteer management skills in event production would be most important for him/her to have? (n = 59)*

	Skill Type	Mean	Standard Deviation
Securing volunteers	Social	1.8	0.81
Volunteer management	Social	1.8	0.81
Volunteer recruitment	Social	1.9	0.83
Servicing volunteers	Social	2.0	0.81
Volunteer training	Social	2.0	0.87
Creation of a volunteer program	Knowledge	2.1	0.97
Tracking volunteer hours	Knowledge	2.4	1.01
Reporting volunteer hours	Knowledge	2.5	1.02
Volunteer programs for seniors	Knowledge	2.5	1.02
Volunteer programs for teens	Knowledge	2.5	1.07

Note: 1 = Extremely Important, 2 = Very Important, 3 = Important, 4 = Slightly Important, 5 = Not Important

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