Essential Skills for the Tourism/Hospitality Sector

Sector Profile
It is important to understand the reciprocal relationship between hospitality and tourism. Tourism is acknowledged as a universal industry label; hospitality is a major subset of the tourism industry with a particular focus on hotel management and food & beverage operations. Tourism consists of many sectors including: Tourism Services, Attractions & Cultural Tourism, Food & Beverage, Accommodation, Transportation, Adventure Tourism & Recreation, travel trade and Events & Conferences. This study focuses primarily on the hospitality sectors including accommodation, food & beverage services, and resort operations. These sectors account for the majority of entry-level positions in the hospitality industry.

Tourism, on the other hand, includes all of the aforementioned categories, and is considered a growth industry in the province. British Columbia has a spectacular and diverse natural environment, is hosting special events including the 2008 World Police and Fire Games and 2010 Winter Olympics, and is developing world-class meetings and conventions areas across the province, including an expanded Vancouver Convention & Exhibition Centre. These factors, combined with increasing interest in niche offerings such as Aboriginal tourism and a growing coastal cruise industry underpin the notion of tourism as a growth industry in BC.

Required Education & Training
In the report entitled: Recruit, Retain & Train, go2 suggests that tourism is an industry with a weak internal labour market. There are no set educational requirements for employment in most occupations, and neither pay nor promotions have been linked to certification. With no clear career paths, the workforce development strategy must therefore focus heavily on recruitment and retention initiatives, not just on training tactics.

Skill Gaps & Training Needs
Interviews with representatives of the Food & Beverage (F&B) Sector identified the need for skilled employees as their most significant issue. When asked what F&B employers look for in a new employee, one Director of Training replied: “A warm body!” This sentiment is echoed throughout service industries. A recent Ipsos-Reid poll commissioned by the Victoria Times Colonist and by CHEK-TV1 confirms this finding.

For this reason, some HR departments tend to focus training on management positions, thinking that if a manager has strong skills, he or she can adequately model/mentor and train employees for junior positions. Other approaches include designating a staff trainer, for example, a senior server, to guide new employees through a structured orientation program. These orientation programs focus mainly on operations, with essential skills either implied or expected.

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When pressed to identify expected qualities of an “ideal hire”, representatives agreed that attitude and personality were key qualities. When asked what these qualities looked like, they generally agreed that problem solving, e.g. guest recovery, oral communication and working with others were the most important essential skills for F&B servers. Again, managers and staff trainers are expected to model these skills. If training manuals exist, employees are guided toward them. Specific essential skills training needs in the Food & Beverage sector included:

- Greater awareness of the findings from essential skills research projects and the place core competencies fill in job training
- Access to essential skills training at a broad level, i.e. a focus on transferable skills
- Access to education about workplace essential skills training for managers who are required to model/mentor junior staff

Essential skills demonstrable at interview stage Essential skills awareness appears higher in the Accommodation Sector than in the Food & Beverage sector. Many of the larger hotels use emerit and/or reference CTHRC occupational standards in their training process. If employees are lacking workplace essential skills, trainers and/or managers refer them to training manuals, to job descriptions and/or to workshops – not necessarily relating to essential skills, but indeed refreshing operational procedures.

As in the F&B sector, employers in the Accommodation sector look for personality, attitude and good people skills in their recruits. While emerit training defines and quantifies these terms, they are mostly assessed by an “I know it when I see it” approach. When asked what these qualities looked like, our interviewees agreed that thinking skills, oral communication and working with others were most relevant. As well, they indicated that strong reading skills were required to stay current with hotel procedures. Specific essential skills training needs in the accommodation sector included:

- Greater awareness of the findings of essential skills research projects and the place core competencies fill in job training
- Access to essential skills training, i.e. focus on transferable skills
- Access to education about essential skills training for managers who are required to model/mentor junior staff
- Essential skills demonstrable at interview stage
- Reading skills improvements

Existing Workplace Curricula & Resources

The tourism and hospitality industries have embraced the concept of transferable, foundational skills since the early days of essential skills development initiatives in Canada. Available sector-specific training resources include: emerit Skills Training for Tourism, www.emerit.ca emerit provides a wide range of tourism/hospitality resources including: national occupational standards, workbooks and trainer’s
guides, on-line training and assessment tools used for professional certification. Of particular interest to this project is the Tourism Essential Skills workbook, with related knowledge certificate tied to the industry professional certification model. This resource is absolutely in line with the needs expressed by employers in our interviews.

However, many employers were not familiar with these tools. Skills Education and Training for Immigrants, www.itsessential.ca.

The CTHRC partnered with Canadian Language Benchmarks to develop “a methodology for benchmarking the language skills of select tourism sector occupations, based on essential skills profiles and national occupational standards. Outcomes of this project included a raised awareness within the tourism sector about the importance of language proficiency requirements inherent in numerous occupations. This is a key factor in the hospitality sector, with an increasing percentage of workers in many businesses being newcomers to Canada.

Essential Skills for Aboriginal Peoples (www.towes.com). Through the Aboriginal Human Resource Development Agreement (AHRDA) essential skills training is regarded as an alternative to academic credentials. For this reason, many AHRDAs, such as the First Nation’s Employment Services (FNES), encourage clients to write the Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES) to determine the level of their essential skills, specifically reading, document use and numeracy. TOWES can be used to match the client’s skill level with appropriate occupations and training. Training opportunities are limited by the number of institutions willing to accept the TOWES results in lieu of other standardized testing. This information is relevant as more First Nations communities begin to include Aboriginal tourism/hospitality initiatives in their economic plans.

**Essential Skills for People with Disabilities**

This full-time program is designed to introduce students with cognitive disabilities to employment opportunities in the hospitality industry. CACE offers basic skill training while establishing customer relation skills and effective employee behaviours necessary for entry-level workers. Employment options for workers with cognitive disabilities include positions within: housekeeping, guest services, and in banquet & convention services. Much of the CACE curriculum was designed using emerit’s national occupational standards and HRSDC essential skills profiles.

**CTHRC Ready-to-Work Program for Tourism Employers**

Ready-to-Work is a national skills development program designed to assist people with transitions in the workforce. The program offers a mix of classroom and on-the-job training designed to provide participants with the skills, knowledge, attitudes, and experience required for long term, stable employment in tourism. Under the brand Discover Tourism, the program helps individuals assess their skills, knowledge and attitudes. It aims to assist these new career entrants with networking and in determining the sub-sector they might wish to specialize in. There is currently no such program available in British Columbia.
**CTHRC Essential Skills for Newcomers Program**

In the upcoming months, the CTHRC will be working closely with provincial partners to help employers in the tourism industry get acquainted with the process of recruiting and retaining temporary foreign workers. To do so, the CTHRC will be disseminating labour market information and promoting the sharing of good practices among employers and stakeholders.

**Recommendations**

There are a number of relevant tools and resources currently and readily available to directly address the needs expressed by employers in our phase one assessment project. However, most employers are unaware that these programs exist and it they are aware of their existence, how they relate to their business. It is vital that this information is disseminated to the people that need it. Therefore, the project team strongly suggests a strategy be developed to assist BC post-secondary institutions in connecting with key organizations such as the CTHRC and go2 to more effectively serve the essentials skills needs of BC employers.

BC’s hospitality sectors require short, entry and mid-level hospitality courses with national standards and tourism essential skills embedded. These will be widely-used, affordable initiatives for industry workers who wish to access entry-level hospitality training. Tied into recognized national certification, these should count for credits towards diploma and/or degree programs.

Employers also need training in employee retention strategies and appreciation for motivational initiatives. These motivational strategies will assist businesses in retaining staff long enough for employers see financial returns on essential skills training in their employees.

**Research Methodology**

The purpose of this project is to provide an overview of current resources available in the hospitality sector (note definitions below) and to identify skill gaps and potential training interventions that could be applied on a provincial scale. The following five steps were undertaken:

i. The project coordinator researched available resources and studies relating to tourism/hospitality workplace essential skills needs.

ii. VCC initiated an environmental scan including structured interviews. See Environmental Scan for details.

iii. Interviews were conducted with go2, the provincial resource for people in tourism, and with the Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council (CTRHC), the federal resource for people in tourism. Attention was placed on existing tourism/hospitality-related essential skills resources and programs.

iv. Focus groups and meetings were held at COTR in Cranbrook to assess initial research and findings developed by VCC, and to identify particular issues from a rural and small town perspective. Interviews were held with tourism and hospitality employers.
v. Focus groups and meetings were held at TRU in Kamloops to assess initial findings from VCC and COTR and to identify particular issues from a regional interior midsize community perspective. Interviews were held with tourism and hospitality employers.

This report was prepared by Vancouver Community College working with TRU, the College of the Rockies, and LinkBC. For more information and to read the full report, please contact Terry Hood at terry@linkbc.ca.