

Communication Skills and Success for Hospitality TVET Graduates Post Pandemic: A Review

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Abstract

This review focuses on the communication skills of TVET hospitality graduates in the post-pandemic era. This review paper examines the importance and method of communication skills in the hospitality industry to comprehend their roles in order to understand current demands from employers in the workplace. By examining the literature, this paper seeks to expand the existing knowledge of communication skills for the hotel industry in Malaysia. The hospitality industry has faced various crises over the past decade, including economic downturns, terrorist attacks, and natural disasters, but the scale and magnitude of the COVID-19 crisis have been unparalleled. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has almost recovered, communication skills in the hospitality industry have become increasingly important in the wake of the pandemic to survive. For that reason, a study has been conducted to delve into the specific communication skills that are highly valued by employers in the current context. By understanding these skills, TVET hospitality graduates aspiring to work in the hospitality industry can better prepare themselves to meet the demands of the post-pandemic era. This review has extensively utilised the secondary sources of data collected from recent studies by researchers from academic journals, articles, and websites, with the time frame of the current studies ranging from 2019 to 2023. A qualitative technique, namely a content analysis, has been employed to analyse the collected articles. The search results indicate that the hospitality industry has experienced significant transformations due to the pandemic. As a result, communication skills have become indispensable for job searching, collaboration, effective customer service, conflict resolution, leadership, professional growth, and continuous learning. The authors offer insights and a summary of the supported literature on communication skills needed in the hospitality industry during the post-pandemic period, along with future research suggestions in this field.

Keywords: Communication Skills, Employability Skills, TVET Hospitality Graduates, Hospitality Industry, Post-Pandemic

Introduction

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic, which was first detected in December 2019 and declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020, has had far-reaching effects on various sectors (World Health Organization, 2020). While the health crisis has appeared to be receding, its impact has continued to be felt by businesses and individuals, including new graduates. The uncertain future created by the pandemic has contributed to an increase in unemployment in Malaysia. As evidenced by labour-force statistics, a significant number of individuals have remained unemployed as of January 2023 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023). The issue of employability among university graduates had already been significant in Malaysia before the pandemic, but it worsened in the aftermath of COVID-19.

Unemployment occurs when individuals possess necessary skills and willingness to work but struggle to find suitable employment (Mian et al., 2022). Meanwhile, prolonged unemployment can lead to various psychological challenges for graduates (Peterie et al., 2019). There are several global factors contributing to unemployment, such as an oversupply of graduates due to the growth of public and private universities D'Silva (2020), economic conditions, labour-market dynamics, and emerging global issues (Lebeta, 2021). Additionally, a mismatch between graduate aspirations, job requirements, and available opportunities plays a role (Huu et al., 2022). Furthermore, the lack of employability skills among graduates is also a crucial factor, as emphasised by (Nasreen et al., 2022; Nadarajah, 2021; Halili et al., 2021; Al Asefer, 2021). It has been reported that Malaysian employers have revealed that many graduates are still unprepared for the workforce, such as lacking English proficiency, communication skills, or difficulty in exercising critical-thinking skills (NST Education, 2019). Communication skills, including proficiency in the English language, are often highlighted as a specific area of weakness, which can negatively impact job interviews and professional positions.

The marketability rate of graduates serves as an important performance indicator for higher learning institutions, signifying their commitments to developing human capital (Cheng et al., 2022). According to data from the Ministry of Higher Education, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) graduates are preferred by employers over university graduates. Community-college graduates have led the marketability rate in the labour market with a rate of 96.8%, followed closely by polytechnic graduates at 96.2%. In the service field, TVET graduates have had a marketability rate of 88.7%, which has shown a slight increase after experiencing a significant decline in the previous year.

While TVET graduates are highly demanded, they are not immune to the issue of lacking employability skills, as highlighted by previous research. Industry input has indicated that TVET graduates often lack soft skills, such as teamwork, adaptability, leadership, critical thinking, and communication skills (Ministry of Higher Education, 2020). Olowoyo et al (2020) have also asserted that many employers have expressed concerns about the quality of communication skills demonstrated by newly qualified TVET college graduates because these skills are indeed crucially significant, particularly in industries like hospitality. This sentiment has been echoed by Ramamurthy et al (2021), who have emphasised the importance of

communication skills for the TVET graduates, as the ability to effectively communicate technical information as a highly sought-after skill. Similarly, Bassah and Noor (2023) have also highlighted that many studies have found that Malaysian TVET graduates have problems communicating effectively and lack self-confidence. Hence, addressing the issue of employability skills among the TVET graduates is crucial to enhance their marketability and overall success in the labour market. Efforts should be made to develop and improve soft skills, including effective communication, to ensure that the TVET graduates possess the necessary competencies sought after by the employers.

Communication skills in the 21st century are crucially important and intricately linked with the speaking and listening abilities inherent in language literacy (Ichsan et al., 2020). Communication skills have been extensively studied in relation to the hospitality industry, with various studies shedding light on their significance (Loreto, 2019). For instance, Tankovic (2022) has conducted a study aiming to comprehend and conceptualise the multidimensional nature of communication skills in the modern tourism workplace. According to Tankovic et al (2022), there are five dimensions of communication skills, which are written, oral, listening, digital, and non-verbal communication skills.

Similarly, Bassah et al (2023) have conducted a study to determine employability skills required by the industry, as perceived by industry experts. The findings have highlighted that social and communication skills, technological literacy, teamwork, and leadership are the essential employability skills for TVET graduates in the hospitality industry. Furthermore, Tankovic (2021) has also explored the importance and perception of soft skills and communication skills in the tourism and hospitality sector from the perspectives of both tourists and future tourism professionals. The results have indicated that both groups have recognised the significance of communication and soft skills in the industry. The previous studies have highlighted the different dimensions of communication skills, their importance for employability, and the awareness of their significance among industry stakeholders and future professionals. This review paper aims to examine the importance of communication skills in the hotel industry, particularly in the post-pandemic era, to understand current demands from employers. By examining the literature, this paper seeks to expand the existing knowledge of communication skills for the hotel industry in Malaysia. Several literature reviews are available in the domain of communication skills (e.g., Jamaludin, 2019; Ramamurthy, 2021; Tankovic et al., 2021; Jassim & Dzakiria 2019; Sonnenschein & Ferguson, 2020; Latif, 2021; Rusmiyanto, 2023; Filiz, 2020; Parasnis et al., 2022). However, in the aftermath of the pandemic, the hospitality industry has undergone significant changes, requiring adaptability and strong communication skills from hotel professionals (Magalhães et al., 2022).

This paper delves into the specific communication skills that are highly valued by employers in the current context. By understanding the different types of communication skills, TVET hospitality graduates aspiring to work in the hotel industry can better prepare themselves to meet the demands of the post-pandemic era. The review discusses the various aspects of communication skills, including written, oral, listening, digital, and non-verbal communications. It also considers the various methods of communication skills to improve employees' communication skills in the hospitality industry, which have become increasingly important in the wake of the pandemic. Overall, this review paper contributes to the existing

literature by expanding the understanding of the importance of communication skills in the hospitality industry, with a particular focus given on the current employer demands in the post-pandemic era. It also serves as a valuable resource for the hospitality TVET graduates to enhance their communication skills and adapt to the evolving needs of the hospitality industry in Malaysia.

Methodology

This review paper focuses on the importance of communication skills for the TVET graduates in the post-pandemic hotel industry, specifically exploring their roles in professional success. To achieve the study's objectives, multiple secondary-data sources have been collected from online search engines and academic databases spanning from 2019 to 2023. The search has encompassed renowned open-access journals and platforms, such as Wiley Online, Emerald, Google Scholar, Taylors and Francis Online, Elsevier, and Springer Link. To identify the relevant articles, specific keywords have been employed, including 'important of communication skills', 'communication skills in hospitality industry', 'hospitality communication skills in post-pandemic', 'hotel communication skills', 'TVET employability skills', and 'graduates employability skills'. Supportive keywords, such as 'hospitality TVET graduates' communication in post-pandemic era', 'roles of communication skills in hospitality industry', 'communication methods of hospitality industry during the pandemic', 'TVET graduate employment', and 'unemployment among TVET graduates' have also been used to ensure accurate article information. From the search, 115 articles have been initially obtained, and after scrutiny, 93 articles have been deemed suitable for the review. Relevant sections, such as topics, abstracts, keywords, introductions, results, and discussions, have been meticulously analysed to extract pertinent information associated to the study's scope. For the data analysis, the qualitative technique of the content analysis has been employed to interpret and synthesise the collected articles, facilitating the derivation of meaningful insights from the findings.

Discussion

Communication skills encompass a range of abilities that are crucial for effective interactions in various contexts (Kapur, 2020). The key types of communication skills can be divided into verbal and non-verbal communications. Verbal communication includes written communication, which refers to the ability to convey information, ideas, or thoughts effectively (McKinney, 2020). Strong written communication skills involve clarity, organisation, proper grammar and spelling, and the ability to tailor a message to the intended audience (Rajprasad et al., 2022). The second one is oral communication, which involves expressing thoughts, ideas, and information verbally (Sabbah et al., 2020). It includes skills, such as speaking clearly, articulating thoughts logically, using appropriate tone and language, and engaging listeners effectively during conversations, presentations, or meetings (Gupta, 2020). In the realm of effective communication, non-verbal communication encompasses a range of factors. According to Irungu et al (2019), non-verbal communication refers to the transmission of messages without the use of words, which includes body language, facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, and tone of voice. Additionally, Ibrahim et al (2022) have stated that the key elements of non-verbal communication include object communication, tactile communication, conemic communication, gesture communication, prosemic communication, vocal communication, and environmental communication. Recognising and effectively utilising non-verbal cues can enhance understanding, convey emotions, and

strengthen communication (Paranduk & Karisi, 2020). Therefore, comprehending and proficiently employing non-verbal cues can improve communication, enhance understanding, and foster stronger connections between individuals. Another key type of communication is digital communication, which is a significant form of communication that necessitates proficiency in utilising digital platforms, social media, email, instant messaging, video-conferencing, and other digital tools to communicate professionally and effectively in virtual environments (Hazlehurst et al., 2023). With the advent of technology, digital communication skills have become increasingly crucial. Developing and refining these communication skills are essential for success in various personal and professional settings. Strong communication skills enable individuals to express themselves clearly, comprehend others effectively, establish relationships, collaborate efficiently, and navigate diverse communication channels (Kalogiannidis, 2020). By continuously enhancing these skills, the individuals can improve their overall communication effectiveness and achieve better outcomes in their interactions (Newman & Ford, 2021).

Therefore, companies in the hospitality industry have used a variety of methods to improve employees' communication skills since they understood the importance of effective communication for business success. As stated by the Himalayan Institute of Technology (2019), effective staff communication in hotels is essential to create positive guest experiences, resolve issues promptly, evaluate feedback, and facilitate smooth operations within the establishment. Recognising the importance of successful communication skills in the current hospitality workplace, TVET hospitality graduates can proactively strive to improve and polish these skills directly and indirectly at the campus level (Basah & Noor, 2023). The TVET students must acquire not just technical and manual skills but also communication skills in order to learn quickly and perform well at work, regardless of whether they aim to build a successful career or run a profitable business (Chan, 2021). These skills not only increase the marketability of the students but also guarantee career advancement in the demands of the post-pandemic era. Likewise, employers prefer workers who possess necessary knowledge and skills (Rustamov & Mamaziyayev, 2022), which ultimately contribute to their success in the hospitality industry (Ali et al., 2021). Scholars and experts have widely agreed that communication skills are among the most important skills for employees or graduates to succeed in the workplace (Tankovic, 2022; Arnold & McClure, 2020; Sonnenschein & Ferguson, 2020; Shen et al., 2020; Jamaludin et al., 2019; Roslee & Latif, 2021; Guzzo et al., 2021; Campbell et al., 2020; Parasnis et al., 2022; Masa'deh et al., 2019). This is because communication skills are highly regarded for a myriad of reasons, all of which contribute to professional success as these skills enable an individual to secure a job, ensure the effectiveness of collaboration, guarantee clear and efficient communication, enhance customer satisfaction and conflict resolution, develop leadership and influencing skills, build professional image and career advancement, and be able to easily learn new things.

Graduates with strong communication skills have a distinct advantage when it comes to securing employment. As stated by Baird and Parayitam (2019), graduates with strong communication skills would breeze through a job interview. As a result, these graduates will be hired since businesses prefer those individuals who are fluent in their conversational skills (Doyle, 2021). These crucial skills have become even more significant when hiring for management or operational positions within the hotel industry (Kenayathulla et al., 2019). Any employers in the hospitality business would never hire someone who lacks this critical

talent (Tankovic et al., 2023). The reason behind this is because the first impression is important and long-lasting, and this information automatically elevates its importance and value (French, 2023). It is, therefore, obvious that when one is aware of one's abilities, there is a great deal of confidence in the way one delivers words and works. Whereas, employers place a great priority on strong communication skills during the employment process (Tajuddin et al., 2022). Essentially, this is typically demonstrated through clarity, conciseness, completeness, and correctness in expressing thoughts and ideas through interviews and resumes (Krishnan et al., 2019).

Furthermore, individuals with strong communication skills are well-positioned for effective collaboration with co-workers, bosses, and customers Tankovic (2023) and able to communicate clearly and actively listen to others, which will lead to better cooperation and teamwork (Eastley, 2022). This encourages collaboration, problem-solving, and capacity to work effectively with others (Jamaludin et al., 2019). In addition, effective communication also provides a solid foundation for developing positive relationships (Tankovic et al., 2023). Likewise, communication abilities are also important in the formation of strategic relationships (Trosine, 2023). In the hospitality sector, teamwork and collaboration are essential (Jamaludin et al., 2019). Thus, TVET graduates with strong communication skills may effectively interact with colleagues, share information, assign duties, and collaborate fluidly. This creates a more favourable working environment and increases productivity. In order to develop effective collaborations through communication, team-building activities can be practised to promote effective communication within teams and foster collaborations (Van den Hout & Davis, 2022). These activities encourage participants to communicate, cooperate, and build relationships, which ultimately contribute to better communication skills (Akaki et al., 2022).

Subsequently, strong communication skills ensure that information is conveyed easily and accurately, thereby, reduces misunderstandings and workplace errors (Arnold & McClure, 2020). This proficiency is attributed to individuals who can clearly and effectively convey messages (Nugraha et al., 2020). Additionally, employees who can explain themselves clearly, either verbally or in writing, facilitate efficient operations and decision-making (Luo et al., 2019). Hence, to ensure clear and efficient communication, most hospitality organisations have currently used an open-communication approach to create a culture that promotes open and transparent communication (Corder, 2023). There are ways to encourage open communication, which include promoting regular team meetings, town halls, and forums in which employees can freely express their ideas, concerns, and suggestions (Athina, 2022). Therefore, it is very important for TVET graduates to have competence in communication to facilitate the management of daily tasks in a much clearer and planned manner, promote effective information-sharing, make decisions, and complete tasks at work efficiently.

Similarly, outstanding communication skills enhance customer interactions (Francis et al., 2019) by enabling employees to actively listen and comprehend customer needs (Laura, 2019), communicate information clearly and effectively, and, thus, create an exceptional customer experience (Shields, 2021). This fosters higher customer loyalty and positive word-of-mouth referrals (Ngoma & Ntale, 2019). Furthermore, providing an exceptional guest experience is also increasingly crucial in the post-pandemic era (Kim & Han, 2022). This is

attributed to the evolving workplace landscape, where effective English communication skills are not only a personal asset but also facilitate interactions between diverse cultures (Kawshal & Talwar, 2022).

In the interim, graduates equipped with effective communication skills, capable of actively listening to customers, understanding their needs, and promptly addressing any issues (Al Riyami, 2021), ensure a superior and memorable customer experience, which fosters satisfaction and loyalty (Luo et al., 2019). In the tourism and hospitality sector, communication transcends mere information exchange whereby it plays a pivotal role in shaping guest experiences and fostering relationships (Tankovic et al., 2023). To enhance these skills, role-playing and simulation techniques can be employed, providing employees with opportunities to practise communication in authentic scenarios Bhatti (2021), thereby, bolster their confidence and proficiency in managing diverse situations effectively.

In any workplaces, conflict is unavoidable. Employees with great communication skills, by all means, can effectively negotiate disagreements (Luo et al., 2019). These will lead to successfully communicating problems, listening actively to the perspectives of others, and coming up with mutually beneficial solutions together (Mehta & Jha, 2019). These also add to a more harmonious workplace and better connections (Khusainova et al., 2019). It has also been found that effective communication is critical for resolving workplace issues and addressing challenges (Tajuddin et al., 2022). Graduates with great communication skills can voice their problems, actively listen to others, and collaborate to discover solutions (Sabbah et al., 2020). Hence, it is evident that strong communication skills are essential for resolving workplace problems (Campbell et al., 2020). This is because individuals who communicate well may voice their problems, actively listen to others, and collaborate to discover mutually beneficial solutions, establishing a happy working atmosphere (Ghani et al., 2022). Some common approaches to improve communication skills are training and workshops, where companies conduct necessary training and workshops to develop communication skills so that employees in the companies learn how to communicate with each other (Arnold & McClure, 2020). These can cover effective verbal and non-verbal communication, active listening, conflict resolution, and customer interaction (Colman, 2023). One of the characteristics that distinguish the hospitality industry from other service sectors is that service providers deal with customers of different nationalities, races, religions, and cultures daily (Masa'deh et al., 2019). Therefore, these service providers should know the standards of international service delivery and, more importantly, have the necessary language skills to communicate decently and professionally with customers (Masa'deh et al., 2019).

Meanwhile, communication skills are essential for positions of leadership. Leaders that can explain their visions effectively, excite others, and provide clear instructions inspire their people (Lee & Kim, 2021). Furthermore, leaders with excellent influencing abilities, which are rooted in good communication, can have a significant impact on important organisational attitudes, including organisational trust, especially during the post-pandemic period (Guzzo et al., 2021). This statement has been supported by Han (2020) who has asserted that professionalism and leadership abilities are often shown in effective communication skills. Graduates who can communicate clearly, confidently, and respectfully will display the ability

to lead and inspire others (Hasanah & Malik, 2020). Therefore, effective leadership requires excellent communication abilities. It can be achieved when the leaders within an organisation serve as role models (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020). Luo (2019) has suggested that role-modeling refers to coaches who must do more than just talk, whereby leaders must lead by example and, thus, serve as the role models for their subordinates. Scholars have suggested that people learn by emulating attitudes, values, and behaviours (Omarova & Jo, 2022; Mcleod, 2023; Kim, 2020). Hence, demonstrating clear and transparent communication is crucial for leaders in hospitality organisations because when they effectively communicate, they set an example for employees to follow and create a culture of open communication within the organisations.

Moreover, effective communication skills also contribute significantly to cultivating a professional image. Employees who can communicate confidently and professionally across various channels establish credibility and trustworthiness Martic (2023), thereby, open doors for career advancement and development (Sonnenschein & Ferguson, 2020). This importance stems from the enduring impact of first impressions (Krishnan et al., 2019). As articulated by Aziz and Kashinathan (2021), graduates exhibiting confidence in their communication abilities enhance their professional standing, signaling their suitability for respective roles. Therefore, coaching and mentoring emerge as recommended training methods, aligning with experiential learning principles (Luo et al., 2019). Besides, regular feedback and coaching sessions are also conducted to offer constructive guidance to employees Gupta & Sahu (2022), aiding them in pinpointing areas for improvement and receiving tailored support to enhance their communication prowess.

Finally, the widespread agreement among academics underscores the critical importance of communication skills for achieving success in the workplace (Nugraha et al., 2020). This significance arises from the fact that individuals with effective communication skills can readily adapt to new circumstances and learn rapidly (Nugraha et al., 2020), enabling them to seek clarification, pose questions, and actively engage in learning opportunities (Hasanah & Malik, 2020). Such adaptability proves especially valuable in today's dynamic working environments. Furthermore, exceptional communication skills are also essential for employees to navigate new regulations, procedures, and customer expectations (Shen et al., 2020). Thus, all graduates must develop and refine these abilities, particularly in the English language, to proficiently engage in professional interactions Zainuddin et al (2019), foster a positive working environment Erdoğan (2019), and advance their careers (Hunter et al., 2023). The hospitality industry has experienced significant transformations due to the pandemic. Overall, it is wise to say that communication skills are indispensable for job search, collaboration, effective communication, customer satisfaction, conflict resolution, leadership, professional growth, and ongoing learning. Hence, the graduates can enhance their professional efficacy and achieve success in their careers by honing these skills (Sonnenschein & Ferguson, 2020). Additionally, information and communication technology can also facilitate collaboration among employees and teams, enriching communication through various modern tools (Colnar et al., 2022). This encompasses smart technologies based on the infrastructure of the Internet of Things although many legacy systems are still in use (AltexSoft, 2022).

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, this review paper sheds light on the significance of communication skills for the TVET hospitality graduates during the post-pandemic period. The findings emphasise the importance of communication skills in the post-pandemic period in the hospitality sector and highlight the need for the hospitality TVET graduates to master these skills to ensure their future success. Attempts to address the issue of communication skills are vital for improving the employment prospects of the university graduates in Malaysia, thus, efforts should be made to enhance communication skills, including English-language proficiency, and equip the graduates with the necessary skills to navigate the evolving job market. This is due to the fact that hospitality employers have recognised the significance of effective communication for their business success.

Nevertheless, to improve the communication skills of the employees, the hospitality employers should use various methods based on the current trends. This is important because, by enhancing communication abilities, the employees can provide exceptional customer service, collaborate efficiently, and contribute to a positive working environment, ultimately leading to improved customer satisfaction and overall organisational success. Indeed, the mastery of communication skills can be highly beneficial for the TVET graduates seeking employment in the tourism and hospitality sector because effective communication is a crucial skill that all the hospitality employers typically require in the current job market. Moreover, by mastering communication skills, these TVET graduates can differentiate themselves in the job market, as these skills are highly sought after.

This review paper offers valuable insights for scholars and academicians, serving as a basis for future research and hypothesis development. It suggests further investigations and initiatives related to communication skills to enhance these skills in educational settings for the hospitality TVET graduates' marketability in the current job market. Overall, this review paper highlights the need for the TVET hospitality graduates to improve and master communication skills to overcome challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and thrive in the evolving hospitality landscape. With the effective communication skills, hotels can ensure the quality and satisfaction of their guests while remaining competitive in the rapidly changing environment.

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