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Information and Communications Technology Skills Required by Event Managers

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In its report on the global meetings industry, the World Tourism Organisation (2014) points out that the Asia Pacific region is one of the fastest developing regions in the world, with some countries and cities already leading in business tourism. The potential of this industry to bring economic benefits is recognised and as a result many destinations are transforming themselves to gain competitive advantage.

Australia’s high value business events sector ‘augments economic activity well beyond directly measurable metrics’ (Deloitte, 2014, p. i), bringing the following direct economic benefits in 2012:

* + One in five dollars spent by international visitors in Australia is spent by an international visitor attending some form of business event.
  + International business events delegates spend, on average, 21% more than other international visitors over the course of their trip – and 77% more per day.
  + Days by international business events delegates have grown at twice the pace of overall visitation over the last four years, while expenditure has grown nearly five times faster.

A more recent report titled *The Value of Business Events to Australia* indicates that business events brought $23.1 billion in total economic contribution in the financial year 2013–2014 and created 179,357 direct jobs (Business Events Council of Australia, 2015).

The Canton Fair is the biggest in China, generating billions of dollars in transaction volume (US$ billion) and filling hotel rooms to capacity twice a year. The success of this exhibition is vitally important for both the Chinese export industry and the tourism sector.

The world of business events (otherwise known as MICE – incorporating meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions) is evolving rapidly. This is occurring in three key areas: the use of social media and apps; live video conferencing; and virtual 3D events. Hybrid events are those that include a traditional audience as well as a virtual audience. This is increasingly common with the advance of technology. Virtual trade fairs have the capacity to generate sales to a virtual audience as well as streamline the experience of the visitor to the exhibition site, turning ‘see’ transactions to ‘sell’ transactions. Associations and other organisations organising conferences now have the opportunity to broadcast to a wider audience as well as record, edit and sell content post event, thus ‘monetising’ the content post event for a significant return on investment.

The World Tourism Organisation global report on the meetings industry highlights the changes to formats and concepts:

*Hybrid and online meetings are here to stay (inexpensive, larger audiences, linked with social media strategies, longer event life than traditional ones, easy tracking, friendly to new generations and providing a new revenue channel). More online events however means less attendees flying into a destination. The economic power shift to the East (Global Trade Report: since 2000 global trade has doubled, Asia to World doubled but Asia to Asia tripled) and economic cycles are pushing companies and associations to expand and invest more in Asia and less in traditional western countries. The world is changing. The industry better be ready!* (World Tourism Organisation, 2014, p. 17).

In a white paper on future trends impacting the exhibitions industry written for the International Association of Exhibitions and Events, Friedman (2014) points out that new media will allow current episodic exhibitions and events (generally annual) to be replaced by year-round communities:

*The competitive need for year-round, exhibition-related communities is driven by social media and its 24/7 competitive interaction with target audiences vs. a fixed-date trade show and its narrow interaction with its target audience. For a show to participate in this 24/7 social media interaction, show organizers need to understand social media marketing and develop an appropriate strategy for engaging its specific target market community. Developing an appropriate strategy for each social media community based upon that community’s unique features and characteristics is critical to a show’s social media marketing success. Implementing a social media marketing program requires the right technology, skilled personnel, consultants, vendors and an appropriate “content” strategy. “Content” is king in social media marketing. Generating and “curating” content are new skills and capabilities that show organizers will need to understand, and add, into their ongoing show management processes. Content curation is the act of discovering, gathering, and presenting digital content that surrounds specific subject matter. Adding these new skills will also have an impact on the show production budget.* (pp. 7-8)*.*

Data capture capability will also enhance marketing strategies, targeting audiences more accurately and providing them with more relevant information.

The key cities of Sydney, Singapore, Hong Kong and Guangzhou were the focus for the study. All four cities compete for international events and recognise their economic and tourism impacts.

In 2013, Singapore hosted 3.5 million business visitors, an increase of 3 per cent from the same period in 2012. These visitors spent an estimated S$5.5 billion (excluding sightseeing, entertainment and gaming expenditure). Singapore maintains a leading position in the global rankings for association conventions and meetings, ranked by the International Congress and Convention Association as 7th top city in the world and first in Asia as well as top international meeting country and city by the Union of International Associations (Singapore Tourism Board, 2015).

Sydney is in the process of building a new convention and exhibition centre at a cost of over A$1billion which is due for completion in 2016. It will meet increased demand and will deliver Australia’s largest convention and exhibition facility. A recent study (University of Technology Sydney, 2014) has shown that the average total inscope spend per conference day in NSW per international conference delegate is $694. Nations across the Asia Pacific region acknowledge these business visitors make an important economic contribution. The success of the business events sector has the additional benefit of raising the profile of the host city and country, expanding business opportunities, bringing investment and wider opportunities.

Hong Kong’s main business events venues include the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre (HKCEC) in the main business district, the AsiaWorld-Expo (AWE) near the airport and the Hong Kong International Trade and Exhibition Centre in Kowloon Bay.

Hong Kong was crowned as the Best Business City in the World at the 2012 Business Traveller Asia-Pacific Travel Awards, and named the Best City for Business Events in the CEI Industry Survey 2013 organised by the prominent MICE publication CEI Asia magazine (HKDC, 2013).

The China Foreign Trade Centre (CFTC), a government-sponsored institution, has been responsible for organising China Import and Export Fair (also known as the Canton Fair) since its establishment in 1957. It also hosts or organises various exhibitions and business conferences besides running Canton Fair. The exhibition complex covers an immense area, a total construction area of 1,100,000m2 with the indoor exhibition area of 338,000m2 and the outdoor exhibition area of 43,600 m2. In 2014 it had an impressive 60,222 standard booths, 24,751 exhibitors and 186,104 buyers (Canton Fair Online, 2014).

Event organisers bring together a wide variety of services including hotels, convention centres, travel agencies, audiovisual companies, staging contractors and the like. Marketing, registration and financial management are important functions increasingly part of an integrated software package linking all elements of event organisation. While the event organiser does not need to be a website/app developer or indeed play a hands-on role in video conferencing, it is essential that a detailed knowledge of the functionality of different applications is well understood. The aim of this study was to clarify which types of software were most highly rated in terms of their importance in defining the role of the event manager or organiser. This in turn could inform many aspects of recruitment, training and development. The findings could also provide input into the design of curriculum for the many colleges and universities offering academic programs for the industry.

In an analysis of industry perceptions of the event management curriculum in Shanghai, Zeng and Yang (2011) suggest that ‘… the future event management curriculum should be reconstructed to meet the challenges of the fast-growing MICE industry. Curricula must then be evaluated and improved on a regular basis. This constant development process would ensure that graduates of event management programs will be better trained and qualified for professional careers in the event industry’. (p. 238). A certain level of dissatisfaction with the event management curriculum is mirrored in a United Kingdom study by People 1st in which it is suggested that university courses need an increased operational (as opposed to theoretical) focus with emerging demand for ongoing professional development for industry professionals. Kerrie Nash, one of the most experienced HR professionals in the world, comments as follows:

*One of the things I think HR managers in the event world should focus on in the future is event-specific training for the paid workforce. I mean there are obviously university courses, but one of the things that I like to do is look at the unique aspects of the event and tailor training to meet this need – for example: training on how to write operational policies and procedures. Or let’s run a training session on how to read a CAD diagram or how to develop your Games-time staffing plan. I mean short, event-specific courses just don’t exist.* (Nash, 2014, p. 201)

Methods/Procedure

Arcodia and Axelson conducted an early research study using content analysis of job advertisements in 2005. In this research 1002 job advertisements were reviewed to identify event management skills and attributes sought by industry. This approach uses current and accessible data and provides a snapshot of industry priorities. The top five attributes identified in that study were motivated; flexible; positive; friendly; committed; and dedicated. The top skill requirements were organisational/planning skills; team skills, customer service skills and computer skills, with over 33 per cent of advertisements mentioning computer skills (Arcodia & Axelsen, 2005).

In the current research the aim was to expand the scope of the Arcodia and Axelsen (2005) study to cover the South East Asian region (mainly Australia and China) and to identify not only the number of times computer skills were mentioned in advertisements, but also to highlight those software applications or ICT technologies that were mentioned most often. In this case the focus was the business events sector.

A two-part approach was taken to this investigation, which was conducted in key cities of Sydney, Singapore, Guangzhou and Hong Kong. Employment advertisements for event managers in the conference and exhibition sectors (business events) were analysed over a four month period to identify the skill requirements as they related to the use of various types of software. The categories are illustrated in Figure 1.1. The category was not scored unless there was a specific requirement in the advertisement. For example, preparing budgets would not be scored unless software applications were mentioned by type, function or example.

Figure 1.1 Categories of ICT application

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Type | Function | Example |
| Word processing and email | Correspondence | Word, Outlook |
| Spreadsheet | Budgets  Timelines  Records | Excel |
| Desk top publishing/presentation | Advertising  Invitations  Slideshows | Powerpoint  Publisher  Photoshop |
| Project management | Timelines and resource allocation | Microsoft Project |
| Social media | Internal communications  External communications  Marketing | Facebook  Weibo |
| Web and app design | Marketing  Information | Webstudio  Web creator pro  Canvas  Snappi |
| Database | Registration  Ticketing  Venue bookings  Functions, banquet bookings | Access  Membermanager  RegOnline |
| Integrated event management systems (multiple functions) | Full life cycle: registrations, ticketing, payment, travel, event analytics.  Sales, account management, reporting. | Ungerboeck  e-touches  Xing events  EventPro  Delphi  cevent |
| CAD (drawing tools) | Room setups, event design, set design, rigging | Visio |
| Audio visual production | Vision  Music, sound production  Lighting design including LED | Avid |
| Video conferencing | Remote presentations, Podcasts  Webinars | Adobe connect |
| Virtual events/virtual media  3D worlds – simulation | Conferences, exhibitions online, virtual environment | Vfairs |
| Data/ cloud/cyber security | Spam, spyware. firewall | Bitdefender  McAfee |

In a parallel survey senior practicing event managers were interviewed for their analysis of skill requirements across the same categories. Their comments were deemed to be particularly valuable. Limitations of the research include the small sample, 136 advertisements reviewed and 28 senior event managers interviewed, mainly at GM and CEO level.

Results

In the review of job advertisements, only a stated skill requirement for a type of software was scored. General statements regarding computer literacy were not included. The aim was to identify emerging trends such as use of social media.

Table 1.1 ICT skill requirements stated in job advertisements

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Type of application | Specific role requirement |
| Word processing and email | 22% |
| Spreadsheet | 21% |
| Presentation | 23% |
| Project management | 2% |
| Social media | 3% |
| Web and app design | 0% |
| Database | 5% |
| Integrated event systems | 5% |
| CAD (drawing tools) | 4% |
| Audio visual production | 2% |
| Video conferencing | 1% |
| Virtual events/virtual media | 1% |
| 3D worlds – simulation | 0% |
| Data/ cloud/cyber security | 0% |

Fourteen senior managers were interviewed in China and fourteen in Australia. The interviews were more illuminating, indicating that digital readiness is a concern at this level. In China, managers indicated that the ability to use Word, Excel and Powerpoint were minimum requirements for roles in the industry and, if not mentioned specifically, were an assumption.

Weighted averages for the ratings assigned (not important > essential) on a five point Likert scale are shown in Figures 1.3 and 1.4 and these graphs illustrate the importance of ICT skills in many different software types.

As one interviewee suggested, and this was repeated in several other interviews, the industry does not require advanced specialised skills in areas such as AV production or cyber security, but it is important that event managers of the future have a better understanding of functionality.

The samples were too small to make statistical comparisons but it would seem from Figure 1.5 that senior managers consider ICT skills and knowledge to be increasingly important.

Figure 1.2 ICT skill requirements stated in job advertisements.

Figure 1.3 Weighted average importance of ICT skills – China.

Figure 1.4 Weighted average importance of ICT skills – Australia.

Figure 1.5 Comparison of Chinese and Australian respondents to questions  
regarding the importance of software types, weighted average.

Conclusions/Discussion

This study has identified and classified ICT skill requirements in job advertisements for event management roles in Australia and SE Asia. Interviews with HR departments, recruitment agents and senior managers have reinforced the suggestion that skills in the digital space are increasingly important in a competitive industry.

This was a small snapshot survey conducted in a fast changing context of rapidly evolving technologies and software solutions. What appears inescapable is the necessity for ongoing engagement with digital innovation. The event industry is adopting many new applications and solutions, particularly with the advent of live streaming video conferencing, 3D virtual exhibitions, and a multitude of options for using social media to reach and engage with audiences.

The Australian government has launched a series of digital business kits for various industry sectors designed to ‘address industry-specific gaps in digital knowledge and promote increased use of innovative digital solutions by business to market products and services, engage with clients and improve business operations’ (Your guide to getting online, 2015). These online tutorials are specific to a business context, one example being the restaurant industry (Digital Busines Kit). This type of online content is also available as the Tourism e kit, a complimentary resource aimed at tourism operators (Tourism e kit). The latter program is now complemented by formal training that can be delivered by trainers who have been accredited and licensed by the Australian Tourism Data Warehouse. A similar initiative would meet the needs of the business event industry for ongoing professional development, preparing this sector to evaluate and utilise digital solutions. Identifying talent gaps and providing financial support for skills upgrades are a recommendation of the MICE 2020 Roadmap (Singapore Tourism Board, 2014). While there appear to be a plethora of vocational qualifications and degrees in Event Management, there are few short courses. In particular, there is limited focus on this requirement for professional development in digital knowledge across the board.

In his visionary forecast for 2050 Phil Ruthven suggests that ‘decisions around the strategic value of technology will result in an expanding IT and social media footprint for most organisations, combined with increasingly creative strategies that incorporate a growing number of stakeholders – including those the business seeks to serve.’ (Ruthven, 2014, p. 93). In his view the adoption of high speed broadband services and ongoing updates in technology will transform our society. Industry sectors, including the business events sector, need to respond in the Infotronics Age and embrace the opportunities for innovation to become internationally competitive.

Key findings from the study point to increased adoption of technology solutions within the business events sector as well as specific requirements for related skills in employment advertising. However, there are barriers to adoption of digital solutions including difficult decision-making in technology choices and inadequate investment in technology infrastructure.

This study concludes with three recommendations:

* + development of digital readiness online platforms which are event industry specific, such as the Australian digital business kits that have been customised for other industries
  + development of skills and knowledge in this area using these and other platforms as part of ongoing professional development for event managers
  + development of ICT curriculum subjects for short courses and for inclusion in vocational and higher education courses in event management.

Government agencies, industry associations and universities all have a role to play in improving performance in this rapidly changing area.

Postscript

The South China Morning Post reports that for the May 2015 Canton trade fair transaction volumes fell nearly 10 per cent year on year to 172 billion yuan (HK$218 billion), or US$28 billion, the lowest total in six years (China's Canton Fair hits headwinds as trade slumps, 2015). At the same time China’s largest e-commerce company Alibaba reported that revenues had soared by 46 per cent, indicating that B2B trading is moving rapidly into the online space. This should be noted by governments building vast physical infrastructure for exhibitions and other business events. Hybrid events are the way of the future and the digital components require investment.

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