

Event Management Skills, LINK20. January 2008. Higher Education Academy/HLST, p.5-7.

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Introduction

So, how do we counter the criticism of the Taxpayer's Alliance that events related courses could be described as 'non-courses'? Sometimes it feels like we are caught in the middle of what industry wants and what gives our courses academic credibility i.e. the ongoing vocational (professional) vs academic argument. Does it have to be this way? The aim of this article is to stimulate debate amongst the events community and to highlight some of the current developments in both Higher Education and 'industry' (i.e. Sector Skills) that might be relevant to us. To add to the discussion we bring in some initial findings from research that we are undertaking with event organisations as to which skills they think are the most important for managers of events.

Event 'industry'

Our research has been inspired in part by the recent Leitch Review of Skills and the Governments' response (www.niace.org.uk/news/Docs/World-Class-Skills.pdf). This review identified that in order to remain competitive in the global market, it is essential that more adults have a Higher Education qualification (such as a degree or Level 4 NVQs etc). It also identified that these qualifications must better address the needs of industry and in order to achieve this, it is essential that universities and employers work together. One way of us doing this is to work more closely with the Sector Skills Council for the Hospitality, Leisure, Travel and Tourism industries who also represent the Events industry i.e. People 1st (www.people1st.co.uk). In a first step towards closer alliance, the Association for Events Management Education (AEME www.aeme.org) was commissioned to produce the report, *Identifying and analysing existing research undertaken in the events industry: a literature review for People1st* (2006).

Such communication has resulted in a greater recognition for events as part of the work of People 1st but this needs to be an ongoing dialogue. Their Sector Skills Agreement (SSA) Research (2006) has limited content that will assist us in our search for the ideal event academic practitioner. One reason for this is the lack of a SIC code for events and therefore collected data. However what we can take from this research is that one of the barriers to the future performance of the sector (as a whole) was identified as "the lack of managers with a full profile of management skills. This was seen as a 'significant problem' by businesses surveyed (p. 4).

The SSA Research also states that it is difficult to generalise about the level of qualification required but they do identify that for conference and event organisers employers are asking for events management degrees (i.e. NVQ Level 4) (p.77). In the South West report it is acknowledged that "The growth sector-specific subject in higher education appears to be Event Management. Nationally, there has been an increase in students of more than 70 percent over three years. As yet, it is unclear whether there is sufficient employer

demand for event management graduates.” One aspect that has resulted from this work has been the production of the UK Skills Passport (www.theskillspassport.com) where a number of event-specific generic job descriptions have been produced that offer some advice for us when developing courses and advising students.

Higher Education

At the same time as People 1st developing guidelines for event skills, the Higher Education community has been asking itself the same questions i.e. what should be the benchmark for an honours graduate with an award title that includes events? It has been opportune for us that the QAA Subject benchmarks have been under review and that AEME has been able to play a part in getting Events recognised as a distinct subject area alongside, Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism. Like these other areas there has been quite a debate between the ‘management’ schools of thought and those of ‘studies’. It is hoped that the final benchmark will achieve a merging of the two (see <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/review06.asp> for the draft benchmarks). It has been proposed that the four main areas that would distinguish event graduates would be their ability to:

- analyse and evaluate the concepts and defining characteristics of events as an area of academic and applied study;
- demonstrate a range of professional event planning and management knowledge and skills;
- recognise and value the centrality of the attendee and/or client and meet and respond to their needs and expectations;
- utilise, and understand the impact of, rationales, sources and assumptions embedded in policy, planning and delivery mechanisms in an events context.

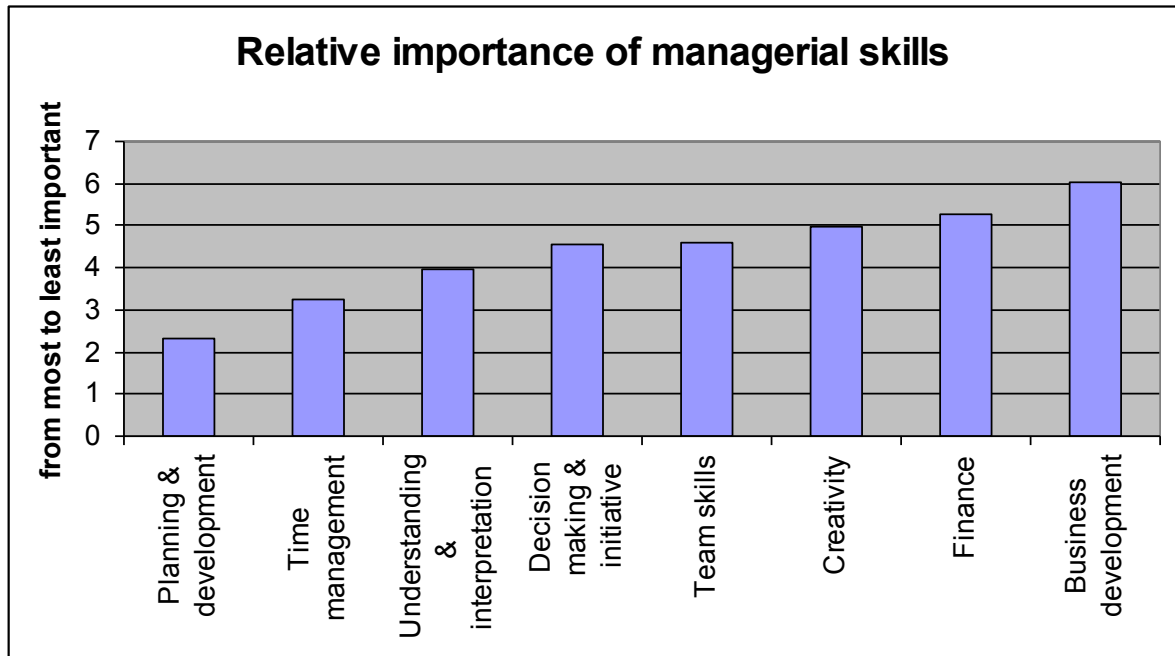
Our research

In an attempt to merge what People1st and AEME say event graduates need we have begun our own research with event organisations. So far we have contacted 400 organisations on our events database to ask them how they value certain management and operational skills more than others. These skills were identified from a mixture of job descriptions (Sector Skill), the checklist that our Placement Development Advisors use and research such as Beaven & Wright (2006). So much evidence identifies a long list of skills and expertise that we have tried to simplify these and to force organisations to choose which are more important than others, given that they are all important. A few organisations found this really difficult to do and this may have skewed some of our results but we will discover this when we contact more organisations and when we have received a higher response rate. So far we have 43 responses.

Relative importance of managerial skills

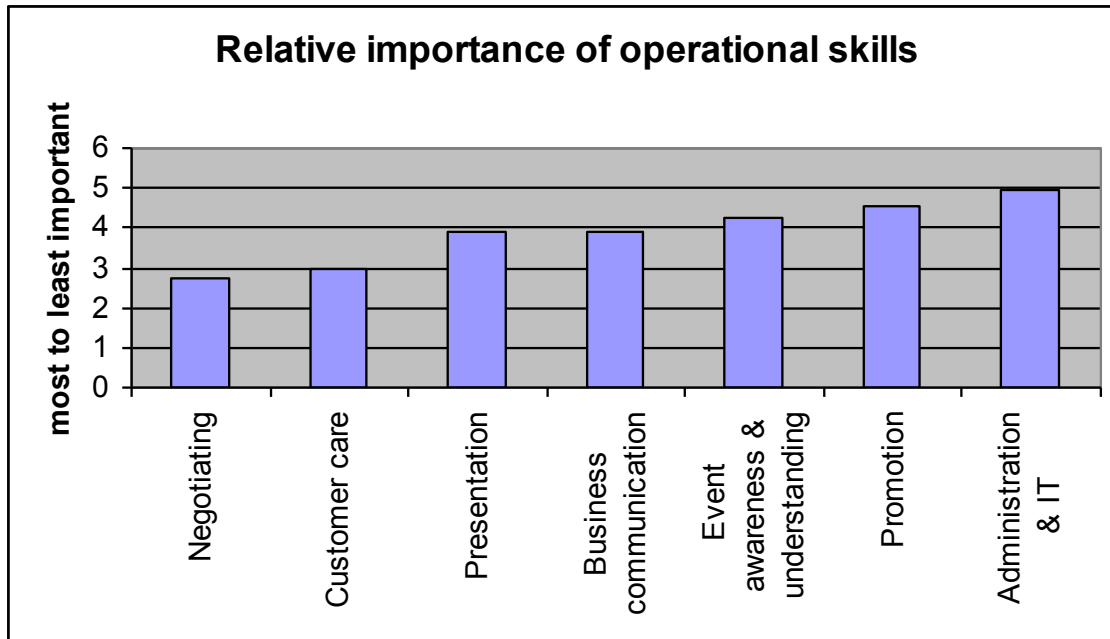
Those skills that are related more specifically to the project management tasks of events management have been highlighted as the most important i.e. being able to plan in detail and deliver things to time. Planning and

development skills were identified as, attention to detail, continuous evaluation, flexibility, analysing and improving. Time management was about multi-tasking, prioritising, meeting deadlines and organisation. As a result of the relative importance of these more functional and rational skills, creativity did not score so highly.



Relative importance of operational skills

The actual execution of managing events, the operational skills have tended to be 'softer' and the more people-oriented aspects of negotiation and customer care identified. The art of persuasion and influencing others, whether in a sales environment or in a customer relationship marketing context were seen as most important. These relate to the communication skills often used in research but goes further than just written and oral communication but understanding the language and visual literacy required to organise an event for a particular client or customer group.



We also had a section where we were trying to capture the more detailed requirements of organisations. As expected, health and safety was listed most often. Other skills that were not originally included were scheduling which relates to some of the project management skills identified under managerial but come together under this area.

Conclusion

We, as a subject group and developers of student programmes need to work collaboratively to ensure that we do not lose sight of the needs of industry (whether that is a specific sector or the events industry in general) and our academic credibility and independence. The developing work of People 1st and the growing importance of AEME will help tutors and teams in Higher Education to share information as well as enable us to retain our uniqueness. The research that we have undertaken so far indicates that industry will value more those that have the project management skills and the softer people management skills. Both of these are important to all graduates but more so for graduates of events where a holistic approach rather than a functional approach to management is important but done through people not through a computer software package. We also need to develop graduates that can research and question the study of events and the organisations that host and manage them. Not all organisations like this approach.

References

Beaven, Z. & Wright, A., 2006. Experience! Experience! Experience! Employer attitudes to arts & event management graduate employability. *International Journal of Event Management Research*, 2 (1) 17-24