Reflections on the Nature of Skills in the Experience Economy: Challenging Traditional Skills Models in Hospitality

Tom Baum
University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, United Kingdom

This article addresses the nature of skills in international hospitality. Frequently characterised as ‘low skills’, it is increasingly recognised that skills bundling in services such as hospitality cannot be solely seen in terms of the technical attributes of work. Emotional and aesthetic dimensions have been added to the services skills bundle. The added dimension of Pine and Gilmore’s ‘experience economy’ suggest a further component within this bundle, namely that of experience skills. This article explores the role of experiential factors in helping to equip those entering work in the international hospitality industry. The learning demands of the sector for those brought up in a western, developed world environment are relatively small, primarily reflecting the strongly Americanised operating culture of hospitality. In addition, those working in hospitality in most developed countries have experience of the sector as both consumers and employees. By contrast, employees in international hospitality in less developed countries do not have similar benefits of experience, either though general acculturation or as consumers of hospitality services. This divergent experience profile has significant implications for the skills demands of hospitality work and leads to the proposition that experience is an important factor in determining the skills demands of hospitality work. This, in turn, leads to this article’s proposal that Experiential Intelligence (ExQ) is an indicator of this difference in terms of workplace skills.

Western, developed societies, according to Pine and Gilmore (1999), have evolved through industrial, service and knowledge economies to what they describe as an environment where premium is placed upon consumer experience, whether through brand label clothes, a new automobile, in a Disney resort or on a Caribbean cruise liner:

Experiences are a fourth economic offering, as distinct from services as services are from goods, but one that until now has gone largely unrecognised. They’ve always been around, but consumers, businesses and economists lumped them into the service sector with such uneventful activities as dry cleaning, auto repair, telephone access or banking. When a person buys a service, he purchases a set of intangible activities carried out on his behalf. But when he buys an experience, he pays to spend time enjoying a series of memorable events that a company stages — as in a theatrical play — to engage him in a personal way (Pine & Gilmore, 1999, p. 2).

The experience economy, which is also well described by Bryman (2004), is one where consumers are seeking an integrated bundling of products and services

Correspondence
Tom Baum, Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management, University of Strathclyde, 94 Cathedral Street, Glasgow G4 0LG, Scotland, United Kingdom. E-mail: t.g.baum@strath.ac.uk
in a way that generates responses across a range of their intellectual, emotional and aesthetic senses. Pine and Gilmore see the experience economy primarily in terms of the impact that it has on consumer behaviour and marketing, although they do acknowledge that what they call the ‘dramatis personae’ (p. 160) are very important to the delivery of experiences and that ‘the first requirement for workers in a transformation (experience) business is that they truly care’ (p. 182). Bryman goes a step further and considers the nature of work and service delivery in his Disneyfied environment and identifies features of the skills that are required to meet the needs of experience consumers. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the skills sought within the experience economy, into which hospitality clearly falls, differ significantly from those demanded by more traditional industrial environments. This article seeks to explore aspects of skills within the context of the experience economy, interpreted in a way that is developed and extended from that introduced by Pine and Gilmore. This exploration leads to the proposal of the concept of Experiential Intelligence (ExQ) as a factor in the effective delivery of service within hospitality and discussion of how cultural and economic context impacts on the extent to which appropriate ExQ-related skills are found within those working in the sector. Specifically, consideration is given as to whether relative ExQ levels differ among hospitality workers from developed and less developed countries.

Work in services such as hospitality has been widely characterised as ‘low skills’ in both the academic literature (Shaw & Williams, 1994; Westwood, 2002; Wood, 1997) and the popular press. This stereotype is challenged in the context of hospitality in the work of a number of writers (Baum, 1996, 1997, 2002, 2005; Nickson, Baum, Losekoot, Morrison, & Frochot, 2002) on the basis that this represents both a technical and western-centric perception of work and skills. These challenges are developed in analyses that consider skills in hospitality to include a wide-ranging ‘bundle’ of attributes, extending beyond interpretations of hospitality work that are focused, primarily, on technical aspects of product delivery. Such extensions include recognition of the importance of what can be styled ‘generic skills’ (communication, problem solving, ICT, languages) within hospitality work (Baum, 2006) as well as both emotional (Hochschild, 1983) and aesthetic (Nickson, Warhurst, & Witz, 2003; Warhurst, Nickson, Witz, & Cullen, 2000) dimensions as features within the bundling of hospitality skills.

The international hospitality industry depends for its operational and management culture upon a paradigm that is rooted firmly within western (generally American) and, to a lesser extent, European traditions (Nickson & Warhurst, 2001). The physical notion of what constitutes an international hotel, the facilities that are included, the layout of these facilities in bedrooms and other areas, the routines that are observed and the language that is embedded in hospitality are all examples of areas where the origins of what typically constitute the operational environment in hotels can be traced back to the emergence of international chains in the 1950s and 1960s. Dunning and McQueen (1982), in their seminal study of the internationalisation process in hotels, noted the predominant influence of American companies and American organisational culture on the sector at that time. While the ownership base of the sector has expanded hugely in the intervening time span to include major European and Asian companies within the global mix of the industry, it remains true to say that the operational roots of most companies can be traced back to the influence of American pioneers such as Hilton and Marriott. This is also true with respect to the globalisation of what
might be seen as European food traditions in that these have been, substantially, commodified for international consumption through American concept restaurant chains such as TGIF, McDonalds and Pizza Hut. In the context of hospitality, these American models of service are clearly representative of Pine and Gilmore’s (1999) experience economy, requiring a level of engagement with role and guest that goes significantly beyond that encapsulated within traditional skills models of the sector.

A consequence of the strongly western operational and cultural focus of the experience economy within international hospitality is that there is what might be called ‘cultural and experiential proximity’ between operations in western developed countries and the experience of those workers who deliver products and services to guests within them. Employees, in this sense, have shared experience in both delivering and receiving services; they have ‘stood in the shoes’ of the guests they are serving. By contrast, there exist significant cultural and experiential gaps between, on the one hand, similar international hospitality operations in developing countries or locations where the predominant culture is not so westernised and, on the other, the employees who deliver their products and services to guests. These employees, by contrast, are less likely to have stood in the shoes of their guests and do not have the shared experience of both consumer and server. In other words, where exposure to this internationalised model of the experience economy as consumer is not widespread among those working in the industry, there is the potential for a skills gap in the delivery of services and experiences to international consumers. The causes of such gaps are varied and include economic, political and cultural factors; as well as those driven by the growing digital divide in technology access between people of developed and less developed countries (Cullen, 2001). This gap, also described as social distance in this article (Baum, 2006), is something which is particularly pertinent in the context of hospitality and related tourism sectors because, unlike other components of the services and experience economy, there is this dominant, perhaps culturally imperialistic, operating model in place.

This article addresses the consequences of this cultural gap within the experience economy for the execution of skills by employees in the hospitality sector. The article reviews the implications of extending notions of hospitality skills beyond their traditional technical core to include generic, emotional and aesthetic dimensions. This complex skills model is increasingly recognised as a requirement for effective work in the services sector, worldwide. This article then proposes a further elaboration of the hospitality skills bundle into an experience economy context, in order to reflect the impact of experiential and cultural exposure on the delivery of the skills that are expected of employees in international hospitality. It is argued that the notion of emotional intelligence (EQ; Bardzil & Slaski, 2003; Goleman, 1998; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Salovey & Mayer, 1990) has value in understanding aspects of this bundling, but does not fully encapsulate the breadth proposed here. Therefore, a new concept of Experiential Intelligence (ExQ) is proposed. The article concludes that there is a case to recognise the concept of ExQ as representative of experiential and culturally based skills and that this is an important element in understanding the training and development needs of hospitality workers from less developed countries whose experience and cultural backgrounds are not in close proximity to that of the hospitality sector within which they work.

Skills and the Hospitality Sector

An important precursor to this discussion — defining what skills actually are
— is no simple task. Riley et al. (2002) note that ‘skill is always surrounded by controversy because perceptions of skill are highly subjective and relative. Who is or who is not skilled is inevitably an issue’ (p. 143). Bradley et al. (2000) note the varying criteria that can be used to define a skill. They question whether we should consider formal qualifications held by an individual, the amount of training required for a job, or the ability of an individual to perform complex job tasks. In reality, all these criteria play a part in shaping our understanding of skills and they are further overlaid with the social construction which tradition, gender and ethnicity impose on our interpretation of what is skilled work and what is not. In this discussion, discussion of what is skilled or not in absolute terms is of little value. Interpretation of the nature of hospitality work is predominantly a social construct and we are more interested in how skills to deliver work in the sector are perceived than in what the actual operational tasks involve.

On the face of it, it is arguable that there is little about hospitality work and the skills it requires that is unique to the sector. There is, however, a studied argument (see for example Lashley and Morrison, 2000 on the nature of hospitality; Hochschild, 1983 and Seymour, 2000 and their discussion of emotional labour; and the contribution of Warhurst et al., 2000 in adding the concept of aesthetic labour to the skills bundle in hospitality) that it is the context and combination of these skills that does generate unique attributes. Therefore, the debate about skills issues, in the context of hospitality, is informed by wider, generic consideration about skills in the context of changing employment, technology and vocational education, within both developed and developing economies. The major gap in understanding, which this article seeks to address, is the extent to which work perceived to be ‘low skills’ in the western, developed context, can be described in this way in other contexts because of differing experiential, cultural, communications, linguistic and relationship assumptions that underpin such work in less developed countries.

Hospitality work (and thus the skills that it demands) exhibits diversity in both horizontal and vertical terms. In a horizontal sense, it includes a very wide range of jobs, the extent depending upon the definition of the sector that is employed. The traditional research focus on hospitality work concentrates on areas that provide, primarily, food and beverage (Gabriel, 1988; Mars & Nicod, 1984) and, to a lesser extent, accommodation. Coverage of this discussion is well served by reference to Wood (1997), Guerrier and Deery (1998) and others. Research into wider areas of hospitality work, particularly those that have emerged with the expansion of services and functions in the area (front desk, leisure, entertainment, reservations call centres) is much more poorly represented. Indeed, it is fair to say that although there is longstanding debate as to whether the hospitality industry is ‘unique’ (Lashley & Morrison, 2000; Mullins, 1981), there is minimal distinctiveness about the technical and, indeed, wider skills that are employed in hospitality. Most of the skills that are employed within the sector also have relevance and application in other sectors of the economy.

The characteristics and the organisation of the hospitality industry are subject to ongoing restructuring and evolutionary change. There are major labour market and skills implications of such change as businesses reshape the range of services they offer (Hjalager & Baum, 1998) or respond to fashion and trend imperatives in the consumer marketplace (Warhurst et al., 2000). Vertical diversity in hospitality work is represented by a more traditional classification that ranges from unskilled through semiskilled and skilled to supervisory and management. This ‘traditional’ perspective of work and, therefore, skills...
in hospitality is partly described by Riley (1996, p. 18) in terms that suggest that the proportionate breakdown of the workforce in hospitality at unskilled and semi-skilled levels is 64% of the total, with skilled work constituting a further 22% of the total. Azzaro’s (2005) figures for Malaysia, while not based on directly comparable data, suggest that nonmanagerial positions break down into unskilled (19%) and skilled/semiskilled (42%). These figures hint at some difference in perceptions of skills within the sector between developed and less developed economies.

These simplifications mask major business organisational diversity in hospitality, reflecting the size, location and ownership of businesses. The actual job and skills content of work in the sector is predicated upon these factors so that common job titles (e.g., restaurant manager, sous chef) almost certainly mask a very different range of responsibilities, tasks and skills within jobs in different establishments.

Riley uses his weak–strong internal labour market model to illustrate the relationship that this workforce structure has to a number of externalities, including educational requirements, points of entry into the workforce, workplace pay differentials and level of trade union membership. This analysis has important ramifications for the status of hospitality and hospitality work and the perceived attractiveness of the sector for both employment and educational/training opportunity. Keep and Mayhew (1999) summarise a list of the characteristics of hospitality work that tend to confirm Riley’s weak internal labour market attribution:

- Tendency to low wages, except where skills shortages act to counter this.
- Prevalence of unsocial hours and family unfriendly shift patterns.
- Rare incidence of equal opportunities policies and male domination of higher level, better paid work.
- Poor or nonexistent career structures.
- Informal recruitment practices.
- Failure to adopt formalised ‘good practice’ models of human resource management and development.
- Lack of any significant trade union presence.
- High levels of labour turnover
- Difficulties in recruitment and retention.

As already suggested, hospitality work is widely characterised in both the popular press and in research-based academic sources as dominated by a low skills profile (Wood, 1997). Shaw and Williams (1994) note that it is often characterised, rather brutally and possibly unfairly, as work that is undertaken by the ‘uneducated, unmotivated, untrained, unskilled and unproductive’ (p. 142); voices echoed by Westwood (2002) when he talks of service work as offering ‘a low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no-future job’ (p. 3). Bradley et al. (2000) also apply this epithet to the wider service or new economy in questioning assumptions about a skills revolution in Britain, noting that ‘jobs commonly retain a low-skill character, especially in the fastest-growing sectors’ (p. 129).

However, Burns (1997) questions the basis for categorising hospitality employment into skilled and unskilled categories, arguing the postmodernist case that this separation is something of a social construct. This construct is rooted in, firstly, manpower planning paradigms for the manufacturing sector and, secondly, in the traditional power of trade unions to control entry into the workplace through lengthy apprenticeships. Burns bases this argument on a useful consideration of the definition of skills in hospitality, noting that:

... the different sectors that comprise hospitality-as-industry take different approaches to their human resources, and that some of these differences ... are due to whether or not the employees
have a history of being ‘organised’ [either in terms of trade unions or staff associations with formalised communication procedures] (p. 240).

This strong internal labour market analysis leads Burns to argue that skills within organised sectors such as airlines and hotel companies with clearly defined staff relationship structures, such as Sheraton, are recognised and valued. By contrast, catering and fast food ‘operate within a business culture where labour is seen in terms of costs which must be kept at the lowest possible level’ (p. 240) and where skills, therefore, are not valued or developed. Burns’s definition of hospitality skills seeks to go beyond the purely technical capabilities that those using unskilled or ‘low skills’ descriptors assume. This can be linked to Ritzer’s (2004) drama analogy for the service workplace in the sense that working in such an environment requires more than an ability to operate at a technical level. Emotional demands are made of employees to constantly be in a positive, joyful and even playful mood. An ability to cope with such demands must be recognised as a real skill.

This case is also argued by Poon (1993) who notes that new employees in hospitality:

Must be trained to be loyal, flexible, tolerant, amiable and responsible … at every successful hospitality establishment, it is the employees that stand out … Technology cannot substitute for welcoming employees (p. 262).

Burns’s emphasis on ‘emotional demands’ as an additional dimension of hospitality skills has been developed in the work of Seymour (2000). Her work builds upon the seminal work of Hochschild (1982) who introduced the concept of emotional work within the services economy. Hochschild argues that service employees are required to manage their emotions for the benefit of customers and are, in part, paid to do this. Likewise, Seymour considers the contribution of what she calls ‘emotional labour’ makes to work in fast food and traditional areas of service work and concludes that both areas demand considerable emotional elements in addition to overt technical skills. In skills terms, the effective delivery of emotional labour demands emotional intelligence (EQ), defined by Goleman (1998) as ‘The capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships’ (p. 317).

Mayer and Salovey (1997) interpret this, in practice, to mean that EQ is a measure of the degree to which individuals vary in their ability to perceive, understand and regulate their own emotions and those of others, and in their ability to integrate these with their own thoughts and actions. As a result, ‘individuals with higher than average EQ display strong self-awareness and high levels of interpersonal skills. They are more empathic, adaptable, able to cope with pressure ... than low scorers’ (Bardzil & Slaski, 2003, p. 99).

To the requirements of emotional labour and emotional intelligence in hospitality can be added the skills demands of what Warhurst et al. (2000) and Nickson et al. (2003) describe as aesthetic labour — the skills required to look, sound and behave in a manner that is compatible with the requirements of the job and with the expectations of your customers. In many cases, aesthetic labour involves staff demonstrating the ability to respond to fashion and trend imperatives in the consumer marketplace in a way that is socially exclusive of many groups and cultures within society. Aesthetic labour is about appearance, but can also be underpinned by cultural cache, the ability of front-line staff to understand and engage culturally with their customers on terms dictated by the latter. Thus, service staff in some hospitality contexts (luxury hotels, style bars and nightclubs) need to be able to make informed conversation with their guests or clients about politics, music, sport
and almost any other imaginable topic, often from an international perspective. This requirement presupposes a certain level of prior education and cultural exposure as well as a commitment to remain up-to-date in these areas.

**Hospitality Work and the Notion of Social Distance**

Burns rightly argues that the low skills perspective of hospitality is context-specific and is drawn from a western-centric view of tourism and hospitality work. He cites the inappropriateness of these assumptions when applied to environments such as the Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka and the Cook Islands. Likewise, Baum (1996) questions the validity of claims that hospitality is a work area of universally low skills. Much of the discussion about the universality of skills has focused on management competencies and Lubatkin et al. (1997), among others, has developed a reasoned argument that, at levels of administrative responsibility, there is more in common to the work undertaken by managers in developed and developing countries than there is to separate them. However, little comparable work has focused on frontline work in the service sector and, indeed, Farashahi and Molz (2004) argue for the recognition of divergence in the organisational cultures of firms of all kinds operating in developed and less developed countries. Baum’s argument is based on the cultural assumptions that lie behind such employment in westernised, international hospitality work whereby technical skills are defined in terms of a relatively seamless progression from domestic and consumer life into the hospitality workplace. In the developing world, such assumptions cannot be made as employees join hospitality and hospitality businesses without western acculturation, without knowledge of the implements and ingredients of western cookery, for example. Learning at a technical level, therefore, is considerably more demanding than it might be in western communities. Social and interpersonal skills also demand considerably more by way of prior learning, whether this pertains to language skills (English is a widespread prerequisite for hospitality and hospitality work in many countries) or wider cultural communications. On the basis of this argument, Baum contends that work that may be deemed unskilled in Australasia, Europe and the United States requires significant investment in terms of education and training elsewhere and cannot, therefore, be universally described as low skilled. This issue is one that is beginning to assume significance in Western Europe as a combination of service sector labour shortages and growing migration from countries of Eastern Europe and elsewhere means that traditional skills assumptions in hospitality can no longer be taken for granted.

In order to understand the context of hospitality skills in a less developed world context, it is useful to reflect on the nature of the relationship between those working in the sector and their customers in terms of their background and exposure to the international hospitality paradigm. Baum (1995, 2006) considers this in terms of the ‘social distance’ that exists between the two stakeholders in a hospitality transaction. Baum argues that hospitality in developed countries has become a mass participation sector with increasing trends towards the creation of a workforce that mirrors its consumer market in its breadth of experience. The growth of seasonal, part-time and temporary working opportunities in most sectors of the industry means that, for many young people, positions in hospitality-related companies represent an early exposure to the world of employment. At the same time, these same employees are often relatively seasoned hospitality consumers in their own right and have participated in both domestic and international travel to
a considerable extent. In addition, their wider socialisation as children and young adults has been within a cultural paradigm that has much in common with many aspects of international hospitality in terms of the tools, products and rules of etiquette that are common to both the home and the hospitality environment. Thus, in developed countries, we have hospitality employees who are versed and experienced in the needs that their customers have, and the gap between the two groups does not have the importance that it might have had in the past.

One of the driving forces behind this change process has, of course, been economic in that overall prosperity in developed countries combined with a general reduction in the real-term cost of participating in hospitality means that consumer participation is much more affordable. But the democratisation of both consumer participation and work in hospitality is not exclusively an economic phenomenon in developed countries. The nature of work has changed from its predominantly technical basis to include a range of, arguably, sophisticated generic skills covering areas such as communications, languages and information technology as well as emotional and aesthetic labour inputs. As a result, hospitality is able to attract employees, perhaps only in the short-term, who are able to deliver on the emotional and aesthetic labour requirements of work and, as a result, they are brought into much closer proximity with their customers. For some employers, their need is to recruit what Nickson et al. (2003) call ‘style’ workers; people who physically and emotionally match their work surroundings and are able to identify with the products and services they are selling and fully empathise with the expectations and buying objectives of their customers. Guerrier, Baum, Jones, and Roper (1998) refer to this process in the Singaporean context where retail and hospitality workers are highly brand conscious in their choice of workplace, so that:

The modern young Singaporean is disinclined to work in service unless the image of the product accords with her own sense of fashion. Working in Gucci means that the product becomes part of her own accessory range (Guerrier et al., 1998, p. 34).

Therefore, it is evident that democratisation of participation in both consumption and work has become widespread in developed countries, creating what might be called narrow or nonexistent social distance between the workers and customers in hospitality. As a result, there is a total interchangeability of roles between customers and employees who can literally move from one side of the counter to the other without any sense of being out of position. The Ritz Carlton’s motto that ‘we are Ladies and Gentlemen serving Ladies and Gentlemen’ is a well-known case in point. In another sense, airline magnate, Niki Lauda set a standard of ‘democratic’ symbolism in the 1990s when his then-airline, Lauda Air, redesigned their cabin staff uniforms to match the normal attire of their business customers — including jeans — to ‘create an environment that is casual but polite, and leads to a more personal contact with customers’ (Churchill, 1994, p. 68).

We now need to move this discussion away from a developed world context and take a look at the situation in poorer, less developed countries, which are also more recent participants in the development of international hospitality. Here, the social distance between customers and guests is considerable, as it was in the early days of commercial hospitality in what are now the countries of the developed world. There are evident economic barriers to participation in hospitality for those who work in the sector in the poorer countries of Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. However, as we have already indicated, social distance is not an exclusively economic phenomenon.
and, in many parts of the developing world, also takes on cultural and political dimensions. The manner in which international hospitality is presented and its operating culture is predominantly western-centric and is far more remote from the everyday lives of people living in India, Tanzania or Cuba than it is from residents of Australia, Canada or the Netherlands. It is this combination of divergence (economic, cultural, political, experiential) which creates the high level of social distance between hospitality’s customers and its workforce in developing countries. This social distance, in turn, helps us to identify the differing skills demands that exist with regard to hospitality work in less developed country environments, when compared to that of contexts where greater cultural and experience proximity exists between employees and customers.

The Concept of Experiential Intelligence (ExQ) in Hospitality Work

Social distance, therefore, relates to the extent to which a combination of cultural and participatory exposure permits those working in the hospitality sector proximity to their guests. In other words, when there is close proximity the additional levels of learning and skills development required in order to meet the requirements of the job are relatively small and much hospitality work in this context can rightly be described as low skilled. However, where social distance is wider and where those working in hospitality do not have such cultural or participatory exposure to hospitality, then the additional levels of learning and skills development required are likely to be far greater. The bundle of additional learning and skills development required will vary from context to context but could include languages; more general communication skills; etiquette; culinary and beverage culture; use and application of equipment, facilities and technology and a range of other tangible and nontangible areas. What they amount to is the addition of a significant skills bundle to that normally associated with work in areas of hospitality — such as front office, food and beverage service and housekeeping. Understanding the social and cultural context of hospitality work in terms of the social distance that exists between those in receipt of the service and those who are providing it means that skills need to be evaluated in their totality and not purely in terms of their core technical demands. The addition of emotional and aesthetic dimensions to the hospitality skills bundle is widely accepted. In the context of Pine and Gilmore’s experience economy, this discussion argues for the inclusion of an additional dimension — that of culturally and participation-induced experience skills — as essential if workers are to function effectively in international hospitality. The experience economy is not solely about the experiences demanded by consumers. It is, equally, about the type of experiences, cultural and sector specific (in this case, hospitality-related) that employees bring into the workplace. Schmitt (1999), in discussing the skills needed for effective marketing in the experience economy, argues that companies need to hire employees who are ‘knowledgeable and experienced’ in the environment within which they will be operating. People, with this skills profile, bring value drawn from these experiences; they have culturally and experientially induced abilities or intelligence that those without similar experience cannot aspire to. In terms of a heterogeneous experience environment that is represented by international hospitality, direct engagement as a consumer is probably the most effective source of the requisite experiences that will give employees such intelligence.

It is therefore proposed that Experiential Intelligence (ExQ) represents the capability set that allows the service
provider to empathise and identify with the expectations and requirements of their customers, based on a shared cultural and experience profile, or, put another way, to be able to place themselves, experientially and emotionally, in the shoes of their customers. ExQ, in this context, should not be seen as an absolute measure of a hospitality employee’s ability to place themselves in the shoes of their customers. Nor, obviously, should it be seen as an innate capability as it is clearly environmentally determined. ExQ is, substantially, a relative concept and one that is underpinned by the context of the interaction between guest and hospitality worker. Substantially, as a result of the operating and cultural nature of the international hospitality industry, levels of ExQ are likely to much higher among employees from developed countries than will be the case among their counterparts from less developed countries.

**Conclusions**

The concept of Experiential Intelligence is one that has implications in both theoretical and practical senses. In practical terms, the real challenge for international hospitality businesses that employ workers from countries where ExQ levels are relatively low is to help their employees bridge this gap. This is no mean challenge and is one that probably cannot be achieved through conventional classroom delivery. In the international hospitality industry today, this is an issue that confronts companies delivering such services in less developed countries and requires action in terms of employee recruitment and training as well as in the programs that are offered for the sector within the vocational education system. It is also an issue of relevance to parts of the developed world that increasingly depend on migrant labour from less developed and transition economy countries to staff their hospitality businesses.

In more conceptual terms, acceptance of the notion that ExQ among hospitality employees from less developed countries is likely to be lower, raises questions with respect to the applicability of the concepts of both empowerment and organisational citizenship behaviour across all economic, social and cultural contexts. Ability and willingness to take aboard empowered responsibility and to adopt organisational citizenship behaviour in hospitality depends on levels of understanding of guest needs, drawn from ‘wearing their shoes’ that is implicit in higher levels of ExQ. Proponents of both concepts (for example, Lashley, 1997; Turnipseed, 2003) do not appear to recognise the impact of contextual diversity upon their applicability beyond developed, westernised environments.

The discussion in this article, if the underlying thesis is accepted, raises an extensive agenda for further research, not least the need to explore empirically whether there is variability in the nature of work and skills in hospitality as a result of the development context. Some work designed to address this issue is ongoing (Baum, 2005). If the presence of ExQ gaps can be demonstrated empirically in international hospitality, it may be possible to develop scales that explore and measure such gaps. There is a further and potentially intriguing theme for research in the possible impact on hospitality employees, which may result when they join international organisations with relatively low ExQs.

ExQ is proposed here as a concept for debate and to guide thinking in an important academic and practitioner field. Without this further research into what is currently a neglected area, its validity as a concept will be difficult to prove or to reject. At the same time, there is pressing need to address the nature of hospitality skills deficiencies in less developed countries (Kaplan, 2004). Therefore, this article is offered as a contribution to furthering understanding of
the nature of the complex skills bundle within the sector in the hope that it can assist in meeting this need.

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