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Authors	Gelacio-Macedo, Katty Antonela; Orozco-Sibille, Fiorella Amelia; Cordova-Buiza, Franklin; Medina-Viruel, Miguel Jesús
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LABOUR SKILLS AND CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN THE HOTEL SECTOR IN PERU: INSIGHTS FROM FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES

Katty Antonela GELACIO-MACEDO ¹, Fiorella Amelia OROZCO-SIBILLE ¹,
Franklin CORDOVA-BUIZA ^{2*}, Miguel Jesús MEDINA-VIRUEL ³

¹ Universidad Peruana de Ciencias Aplicadas, Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Lima, Peru; u201615891@upc.edu.pe (K.A.G.M.); fiorella.orozco@upc.pe (F.A.O.S.)

² Universidad Privada del Norte, Research, Innovation and Sustainability Department, Lima, Peru; franklin.cordova@upn.edu.pe (F.C.B.)

³ University of Cordoba, Department of Applied Economics, Faculty of Labour Sciences, Córdoba, Spain; Andalusian Institute for Research and Innovation in Tourism, Spain; mjmedina@uco.es (M.J.M.V.)

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Abstract: This study explores the job competencies required of front-line employees in four-star hotels in Lima, Peru, situating these skills within the cultural dynamics of hospitality work. In global tourism contexts, hotel service involves not only operational efficiency, but also the fulfilment of social expectations, emotional management and the demonstration of culturally appropriate behaviours. Through a qualitative approach, based on in-depth interviews with human resource managers, the research analyses the knowledge, skills, attitudes and experiences that define effective performance in hotel operations. The results show that employees must possess not only technical knowledge, but also key interpersonal competencies such as advanced English proficiency, teamwork, autonomy, leadership and adaptability. Likewise, knowledge associated with the use of hotel technologies, management systems, customer service and conflict resolution are identified as relevant. These competencies are not only functional, but also represent expressions of internalised cultural values, such as empathy, charisma and service-mindedness, which shape the symbolic relationships between employees and guests. The research shows that structural changes following the pandemic have reshaped job profiles, requiring greater versatility, role rotation and flexible planning. These transformations reinforce the need for culturally sensitive competencies, able to adjust to global institutional standards and local interaction practices. In this sense, the training of workers acquires a double dimension: technical and symbolic, where service not only satisfies functional needs, but also cultural expectations deeply rooted in the tourist experience. In conclusion, this study contributes to cultural studies applied to tourism by showing that labour competencies in the urban hotel sector not only respond to organisational demands, but also act as vehicles of cultural significance. The work of contact employees becomes a form of symbolic mediation that transmits values, norms and aesthetics of local service in internationalised contexts. The findings offer strategic orientations for human talent management and open up lines of future research on the crossover between labour competencies and cultural representations in the tourism industry.

Keywords: professional competence, job skills, attitudes, professional background, hotel industry, tourism, people management

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INTRODUCTION

Human capital management in organizations has not always focused on the competencies of their employees or their development. During the first industrial revolution, the demand for low-skilled labor to perform simple tasks predominated (Ruetzler et al., 2014). However, after World War II, employees began to be seen not only as mere production resources but as human beings with potential (Becker & Bish, 2021). Over time, human factor management has undergone several transformations, moving from an operational approach focused on executing tasks to a more strategic role. In this context, the competency-based approach has become a path to competitiveness (Jung & Yoon, 2016; Zegarra-Alva et al., 2024). Thus, the evolution of management, together with globalization and changes in the business environment, has led organizations to focus on the search for and development of an increasingly competent human resource (Gutiérrez-Aguilar et al., 2023; Rivero & Dabos, 2017; Mamani-Ildefonso et al., 2023).

The hotel sector is a key component for developing tourism activity, as it satisfies one of the most fundamental needs: accommodation. Over time, this sector has not been oblivious to the evolution in human talent management (Alberca & Parte, 2013). Given that it requires highly competent professionals and organizations that foster the development of labor skills through training, learning, and experiences (Cotos-Gamarra et al., 2023; Stangl et al., 2024;), it is essential in an area where customer experience is closely related to their degree of satisfaction. This satisfaction, in turn, impacts the customer's return to the destination and their economic contribution (Charaja & Mamani, 2013). Furthermore, in hotel environments shaped by international tourism, frontline competencies also carry

* Corresponding author

cultural meaning. The way workers greet, communicate, and manage emotions reflects local norms of hospitality and service, contributing to the symbolic construction of guest experiences.

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered organizational changes in all sectors, leading to a new rethink in human talent management (Hao et al., 2020). Hotels, like other businesses, were forced to implement innovative processes and demand new competencies from their workforce, such as adaptation to change, innovation, communication, and leadership (Huang et al., 2021; 2021, Ticona-Huanca et al., 2023). Within a hotel workforce, frontline employees are critical, as they interact directly with guests and face a significant emotional burden due to the nature of their work (Karatepe & Uludag, 2008). This burden is intensified in situations of pressure or conflict, being precisely in these moments where job competencies are crucial for the collaborator to be able to react quickly and assertively (Cerezo et al., 2018).

Various theories have been written in the scientific literature on work competencies and their types, such as transversal competencies that focus on adaptation throughout life, and developing their learning in the workplace in a better way (La Torre-Torres et al., 2022; Pineda & Fusté, 2023). Communicative competencies, focused on the organizational climate of the company to strengthen group relations and are manifested through individual characteristics and qualities acquired in the environment to be able to communicate efficiently (Elche et al., 2020) and digital competencies that influence the generation of knowledge through the use of technological tools (García & García, 2020; Kinczel et al., 2025).

In this regard, the International Labor Organization states that competence is an effective ability to successfully carry out a fully identified work activity (Sonnenberg et al., 2014). Along these lines, Duque et al. (2017), states that labor competencies are a set of factors that are associated with success in people's performance, which means having all the necessary tools to carry out a job, including knowledge, skills and attitudes. For this research, reference is made to the definition by Martínez (2013), who points out that work competencies allow people to perform their tasks with high performance through knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences so that we can specify that these are acquired through observation, learning, work experience and the practice that the employee has in the workplace.

Flores & Vargas (2019) define knowledge as the understanding of a set of specific responsibilities for a job, (Stangl et al., 2024) points out that it is the conscious and intentional act of learning about the object. This means knowing a language other than one's native language and facilitating communication with people from different backgrounds (Zhong & Pan, 2022). Another example is the handling of hotel systems which allows time-saving and efficient recording of work (Agina et al., 2024). On the other hand, skills are learned through vocational training or on-the-job experience (Bisson et al., 2024), among the most important of which are teamwork (Gonzales, 2024), leadership, applied in some hotel companies under a transformational and transactional approach as it allows for the evaluation of professional performance (Alves et al., 2012) and internal communication, which is applied in most hotels because it has a positive influence (Cordova-Buiza et al., 2022; Al-Azab & Al-Romeedy, 2024).

Attitudes are manifested in the behavior of individuals and are a process subject to change, whether positive or negative (Hu et al., 2020; Mamani-Ildefonso et al., 2023). That said, the service sector is looking for employees who have a positive attitude, are friendly, and can help with any guest needs (Bisson et al., 2024; Hochschild (1983). Finally, work experiences are formed through internships where they are linked to other professionals (Cain et al., 2024). In the hotel sector, employers look for people with experience to be able to perform the required job position, with an estimated time of 6 months to 1 year, as this will help the employee to adapt to their new job (Garazi, 2020).

The scientific literature presents various background information on job competencies in the hotel sector, with a special focus on managerial positions. According to Elbayoumi et al. (2021), in situations of uncertainty, job competencies enable employees not only to assume responsibilities but also to make effective decisions that can make a difference in organizational performance. In addition, it is essential to consider the key competencies that employees with the most contact with guests should possess. These competencies include not only service orientation but also interpersonal skills, the ability to work in teams, creativity, and innovation (Efsthadiades et al., 2021). Despite the importance of these skills, many companies in the hospitality sector still face the challenge that their employees have not fully developed these competencies. This lack of development negatively impacts the quality perceived by customers and limits staff career growth opportunities (Stoyanova et al., 2020; Engelsberger et al., 2023).

Along the same lines, a study by Agina et al. (2024) highlights that hotel employees are fundamental elements in the provision of service. The competencies they possess not only influence their daily performance but also significantly affect the perception of the quality of the service offered. Investing in staff training and skills development not only improves customer satisfaction but also contributes to the long-term sustainability and success of hotel organizations in an increasingly competitive environment. Thus, the general objective of this research is to determine the job competencies that front-line staff in 4-star hotels in Lima need in order to carry out their functions efficiently. To this end, the specific objectives were established: (1) to identify the knowledge that front-line staff in 4-star hotels in San Isidro need to develop in order to perform their functions efficiently, (2) to describe the skills that front-line staff in 4-star hotels in San Isidro need to develop in order to perform their functions efficiently, (3) identify the attitudes that front-line staff of 4-star hotels in San Isidro need to develop in order to perform their duties efficiently, (4) describe the experiences that front-line staff of 4-star hotels in San Isidro need to develop in order to perform their duties efficiently.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research has a qualitative approach and is descriptive, as it describes and interprets the work competencies that front-line hotel staff need to develop to perform their work efficiently. For this purpose, in-depth interviews were carried out, which allowed for a content analysis of events and activities that cannot be directly observed (Korstjens & Moser,

2018), thus facilitating data collection for an exhaustive analysis of the information obtained. In addition, the study presents a non-probabilistic design, which allows for a detailed exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and opinions about changing contexts, such as the restructuring of job profiles following circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021). This approach allows us to understand, from the perspective of HR managers, the competencies that front-line Front Office, Housekeeping, and Food & Beverage staff in a four-star hotel need to develop to perform their work efficiently in the aftermath of the recent health crisis.

The study focuses on managers or human resources managers of four-star hotels located in the district of San Isidro in Lima, Peru. This geographical area is home to the main financial center, which is why it is the second district with the second highest number of four-star hotels. The sample size was determined by purposive sampling, which implies that, in a qualitative study, the quality of the informants is a priority, without following a strict rule on sample size; it all depends on the context of the research (Arrogante, 2022). For this study, six human resources managers with experience between 8 and 12 years were interviewed in order to collect information on the job competencies of frontline staff in the operational areas: Front Office, Housekeeping, and Food and Beverage.

The in-depth interviews were conducted using a 20-question guide, developed from four categories: knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experience, which emerged from the theoretical analysis. It is important to note that the guide was subjected to expert judgment, including a specialist in human resources and organizational culture, as well as an expert in qualitative methodology. Each interview was conducted in approximately 40 minutes through video calls using the Zoom platform. For the analysis and data collection, the data must maintain the external and internal validity of the study (Hernán et al., 2021). Therefore, a content analysis was conducted based on the transcripts.

The information was classified and coded according to the previously identified categories: knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experience. To organize the information more effectively, NVivo software was used. The six interviewees agreed voluntarily and gave their consent to be recorded; subsequently, the interviews were transcribed.

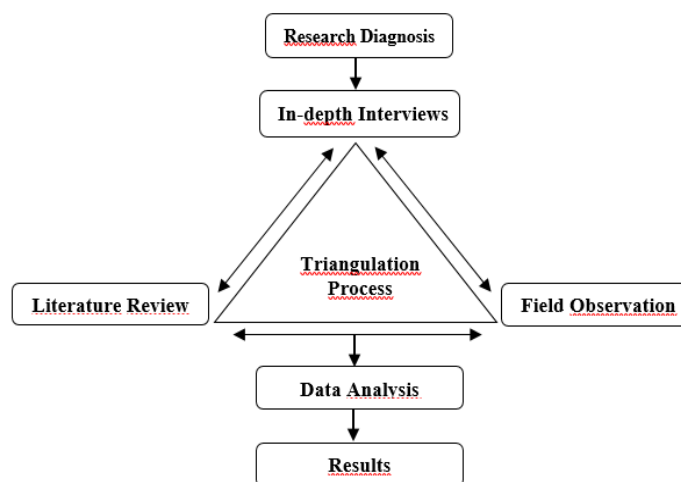


Figure 1. Qualitative analysis process

RESULTS

This section presents the findings from the analysis of the qualitative information from the six interviews. It should be emphasized that this research has made it possible to ascertain the work competencies that front-line staff in the areas of front office operations, housekeeping, and food, and beverage in 4-star hotels in San Isidro require to carry out their work efficiently. In terms of knowledge, interviewees stated that front-line employees in the operational areas: Housekeeping, Food and Beverage, and Front Office should have an advanced level of English language skills, as the city of Lima focuses on a corporate guest segment that mostly comes from the United States.

In addition, they highlight the organizational changes linked to the restructuring of positions, which they have incurred as a result of the pandemic, have led to the implementation of more complete positions, for which a more versatile profile is required. For the same reason that in hotels, occupancy is subject to the seasons, so employees are more mobile, i.e. if a hostess used to work only in this position, today she can also cover server positions or register room service orders, and these positions require a higher level of English than the hostess position.

[...] With the post-pandemic, what has changed, for example, is that now the positions are more complete, which means, for example, that at the front desk, a person can rotate in reception, in-room service, concierge, who can cover when there is, for example, occupation is not the same every day, there are peaks of occupation, and so what you gain, that versatility in your work. [...] (HO003).

In addition, fluency in English ensures that the front-line employee can prevent a language limitation from causing mistakes or delays when providing the service or, by performing a guest-facing function, has the opportunity to improve the customer experience and a good command of the language is decisive in this situation.

[...] Simply if you do not have the level, for example, you will not be able to recover a customer in the guest satisfaction indexes, the fact of not making a service order for example in a room service well done, will generate dissatisfaction for

example if you do not understand it then the customer despairs, it is the most normal thing or when you organize an event in the case of AYB, you have to be very quick and very attentive, you do not have to be repeating things [...] (HO001).

Another aspect linked to knowledge is the handling of technologies including the use of hotel programs such as Opera, platforms such as GXP (Guest Experience Platform), customer service, Microsoft Office programs, use of social networks, among others. This is a skill that is valuable because it helps to be faster and influences the employee's performance. However, knowledge of hotel systems is not significant as the employee learns how to use them on a day-to-day basis.

[...] Yes... well, I think that in addition to computer programs such as Excel, PowerPoint, and Word, these are systems that are taken for granted as being within the employee's domain, maybe they can handle a hotel system, such as Opera, but let's say that it is not something relevant either, you learn that on a day-to-day basis (HO 002).

A third aspect linked to knowledge is that of customer service, the managers interviewed highlighted the importance for customer-facing employees to know good customer service practices, as they must be trained to handle any type of situation. This element is directly related to English language skills, as it allows an employee to be more efficient, faster, and more agile in service because he/she understands what the customer wants or needs, and also allows the employee to recover on time, the customer satisfaction that may have been affected by a bad experience.

[...] Ujum ok ... Well, the person has to be very correct, very polite, very courteous, very honest, it has to run through their veins, something like that, in wanting to help, in wanting to serve, in wanting to work in a team, that is a little bit of the profile, isn't it? that they are trained, because in a hotel different things happen every day, and training gives security in terms of being able to make decisions. [...] (HO001).

With regard to skills, the interviewees highlighted leadership, pointing out that nowadays, leadership is needed in all positions and is no longer exclusive to those who occupy managerial positions. A facilitating leadership style predominates, which empowers its collaborators, gradually promoting their autonomy, conditioned to their capacity and motivation.

[...] The aim is to take leadership to all positions, regardless of whether you have them or not, to generate autonomy, promote initiative, and promote an environment of psychological security that allows confidence [...] (HO004).

In addition, autonomy and empowerment are promoted so that the employee can make decisions, depending on their level, with full security and confidence, either to solve a complaint or conflict or to positively impact the guest's experience.

[...] If what I think the added value to each of the collaborators is the autonomy that they manage, I am not going to criticize or call attention if the person has done something for their guest haaa eh, that implies making an attentive gesture suddenly having the opportunity to say by laaaa a courtesy, of course, having the resources that are allowed [...] (HO004).

Finally, in this category, the interviewees agreed on the importance of teamwork, as it allows for overcoming individual performance, customer satisfaction, and generating a favorable experience, involving different areas.

[...] Well... in the case of teamwork in truth mm... it is always in the daily tasks eh what we look for is that each task is not very individual. Still, in truth it has to be done, but that always there is some type of collaboration to a companion, some leader eh..., for that reason always it is looked for that it is possible to coordinate, to work in team in the daily tasks, in the extra or additional activities to the role looking that all are aligned to the objectives that we handle like company (HO002).

Concerning attitudes, interviewees referred to charisma as the essential attitude that an employee should have when attending to a guest, as a good welcome with a smile conveys confidence and comfort to the guest.

[...] We have employees who have been with us for more than 20 years and have come to have a genuine connection with the guests, we have old guests who return and seek the attention of a certain waiter, a certain waitress, if you achieve that genuine connection, generate confidence, your positive, welcoming attitude, then the guest returns not only for the services we provide but mainly for the quality of the attention and the charisma of the employees (HO005).

Interviewees also stressed that adaptability to the post-pandemic working environment is indispensable. New ways of planning have been implemented, for example, timetables, as these are subject to demand and efficiency in the operation.

[...] we have to move in other ways, for example by splitting timetables to be able to cover the operation. Learn to work with contingency, but know how to plan. They have to be more agile as there are new routines such as split schedules and 5x2 routines, i.e. they work 5 days and rest 2 to make an operational shift disappear [...] (HO004).

With regard to professional experience, all the interviewees mentioned that employees should have between six months and one year of experience in the hotel sector, not necessarily in hotels of a higher category, but in establishments of a lower category or of another classification, highlighting experience as a fundamental element to carry out their functions efficiently.

[...] Well, perhaps this will depend on the position for which they are applying, there are positions that require a little more knowledge or eh of mastery of some area, especially administrative areas, but if we are talking about operational areas, perhaps half a year, one year could be considered, and not necessarily in 4 or 5-star hotels, it could be in lower category hotels, I think that eh compensates a lot the issue of attitude, the attitude and the competencies that the person has' (HO003).

The results show that, in San Isidro's 4-star hotels, labour competencies have adapted to the post-pandemic environment, highlighting English proficiency, technology management, and good customer service practices as essential for efficient service. In addition, skills such as leadership, teamwork and adaptability are key to responding to the versatility required in operations. Finally, charisma, a vocation for service, and a minimum experience of six months complement the ideal profile, oriented towards efficiency and customer satisfaction.

DISCUSSION

The importance of English language proficiency among frontline employees is highlighted, in line with Giménez (2015) who argue that the expansion and globalisation of international tourism has led to the use of English as a lingua

franca in hotel and tourism environments, and that tourists from different countries speak English in order to be able to communicate fluently. On the other hand, according to Mincetur (2019), 72% of foreign tourists visited Lima and come mostly from the United States. In the same way, a command of English enables a person to communicate effectively in all possible situations that may arise. These studies support what interviewees have mentioned when referring to the value of language proficiency in circumstances to retain guests or handle complaints (Berry, 2024).

Regarding the management of hotel software, softwares, and other platforms, a study by Iranmanesh et al. (2022) states that efficient management of the hotel system is important for the front desk position. This is in line with the interviewees' statement that the position demands a system. However, this competence is acquired or reinforced in the performance of the position. Similarly, Berné et al. (2011), in one of their studies, point out that automation and hotel systems allow time optimization, a statement that coincides with what was stated by the interviewees.

Regarding customer service, it is vital that the hotel provides training to improve in this aspect, and, ideally, the employee knows these issues to apply them safely to have a positive impact on guest satisfaction (Garrido et al., 2024). This statement coincides with what was pointed out by the interviewees, where they emphasize the commitment of the companies to train their employees on issues related to customer service.

In terms of leadership, some hotels opt for conventional leadership that focuses on bringing authority from managers so that employees can follow established orders, to enhance capabilities and avoid conflict (Appio et al., 2022). In this line, a study by Durán & Parra (2021), points out that when leaders exercise an inflexible and directive method of supervision, the work environment is rigid, which leads to high risks. On the other hand, interviewees have pointed out that bringing leadership to the various positions gives autonomy to employees, and is not an exclusive characteristic for management positions, but also for employees in middle management, who accept a culture of leadership in a favorable way and recognize that they are part of a company that is oriented towards competitiveness (Cruz et al., 2017). In this sense, we can point out that the style that predominates from the interviews conducted is facilitative leadership which creates a collaborative, resilient, and adaptable environment for change. Considering that any situation of conflict or complaint with the guest must be resolved in a short time, staff must have the ability to provide a prompt solution within their working day (Borzillo et al., 2021). For this to happen, it is essential, according to the interviewees, to give the employee the autonomy to make decisions with confidence, without fear of being reprimanded or reprimanded.

As for teamwork, it is fundamental because it exercises leadership in the organization and generates confidence when it comes to carrying out work tasks. Therefore, most managers look for people who are committed to collaborate not only with their functions but with all members of the work team (Jung & Yoon, 2016). This statement is consistent with the above and is in line with the facilitative leadership mentioned above.

Charisma is a positive attitude and this generates a motivated work environment, therefore, the profile of an employee must have a vocation for service and be charismatic when serving a guest, since good service results in a happy return of the guest to his or her destination (Agina et al., 2025). This is consistent with what the collaborators indicated when referring to the impact of charisma on guest satisfaction.

Likewise, according to the interviewees, most employees in the hotel sector have to have the ability to adapt to the work environment, for example, in the reception area the shifts are rotating, so the employee has to adapt to the schedule that will be provided or if sometimes they need to stay more hours (Balkin & Werner, 2023).

Finally, interviewees have referred to the value of experience as part of job competence and that this is estimated in a range of 6 months to 1 year for first line positions in the areas of housekeeping, front office and food and beverage. They have also mentioned that when the employee does not have the mentioned experience, then attitude is taken into account. In this sense, hotel employees must have experience when applying for the different areas; however, there may be employees with less experience, but they have the commitment to identify with the company and the desire to learn; therefore, it is valued that they have the initiative to learn in depth their functions (Chen et al., 2023).

Among the limitations of this study, the scarcity of research articles from Latin America or realities similar to those of Peru that specifically address labor competencies in the accommodation sector stands out. This lack of relevant literature makes it difficult to contextualize the findings within a broader theoretical framework. In addition, there was significant difficulty in gaining access to managers or those responsible for the Human Resources areas in the accommodation companies, which limited the number of interviews and, therefore, the diversity of perspectives in data collection.

It is therefore recommended that future research should include a larger and more representative sample, covering different types of hotel establishments and different geographical locations. This would provide a more complete picture of the labor skills needed in the sector. It would also be valuable to consider quantitative approaches to complement the qualitative findings, as well as longitudinal studies to observe the evolution of these competences over time and in response to changes in the work environment. These competencies not only enhance service efficiency but also represent cultural scripts that frame how hospitality is perceived and delivered in urban tourism settings.

CONCLUSION

The general objective of this research was to determine the job competencies that front-line staff in four-star hotels in Lima need to perform their duties efficiently. Throughout the study, the most recurrent competencies were identified, among which English language proficiency at an advanced level for all positions stands out.

This is due to the fact that, following the restructuring of the areas and considering the current demand, the job profiles are more horizontal and cover new tasks. In this sense, English proficiency facilitates more agile communication and allows employees to regain customer satisfaction. In terms of skills, the most frequently mentioned are leadership

and autonomy. This ability is related to the degree of self-confidence of the operations employee. Moreover, leadership is no longer a quality exclusive to those in managerial roles. The results of this research indicate that organizations are particularly interested in developing leadership at all levels in order to foster autonomous decision-making and to handle difficult situations in a proactive, efficient, and timely manner.

On the other hand, adaptability to the job was identified as a relevant attitude. The post-pandemic has generated changes in work planning, requiring greater agility and implementation of new forms of operation. In this context, time planning has evolved, adopting modalities such as 5x2, where five days are worked in a row and two are rested, which eliminates a traditional operational shift. Finally, professional experience in the hotel sector is essential.

For front-line positions in the operational areas, a minimum of six months of experience is required, without the need to have worked in higher-category establishments. However, when the applicant lacks this experience, attitude becomes a particularly important factor. This research makes a significant contribution to both the hotel sector and the scientific literature by identifying and analyzing the essential job competencies for front-line staff in four-star hotels. The findings fill gaps in the literature by providing an up-to-date overview of the skills, attitudes, and knowledge needed in a post-pandemic context. Furthermore, these contributions are useful for human resources departments by allowing the optimization of selection, training, and professional development processes, promoting a more strategic talent management, aligned with current market demands and the well-being of employees.

With a view to future lines of research, it is recommended that the scope of the analysis be broadened to other job profiles in the sector, such as managers and directors, to explore how competencies vary according to hierarchical position. It would also be relevant to conduct comparative studies between different hotel categories or regions, which would allow for the identification of general trends and specific adaptations. Such explorations could strengthen the sector's capacity to respond to global challenges and contribute to the sustainable development of the hotel industry. This study highlights how labour competencies in hospitality also function as vehicles for expressing cultural values and professional identity in the context of international tourism.

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