

Desired skills and competences in event management – do they have marketing focus?

The most commonly used ways of networking for business activities can occur through organised events. Event management now has become an integral part of business and corporate culture too. This article introduces the key findings of research focusing on the requested skills and competences identified by SMEs' employees, event management experts and educational experts based on quantitative method. Due to key findings the author makes recommendations for developing curricula in order to enhance the dominantly requested skills and competences in secondary and tertiary education.

Keywords: SMEs, marketing competences, event management, skill-based education

OVERVIEW OF THE EXAMINED FIELD

Special characteristics of SMEs' marketing activities

It is evident and examined properly by experts that SMEs have special characteristics that differentiate them from conventional marketing in large corporate (Carson 1990: 11). That is why it has a relevance to assess unique marketing approach of small and medium-size enterprises, which influences by the inherent characteristics and behaviours of the entrepreneur or owner-manager and size and stage of development of the enterprise. Barriers can be appeared in limited resources (e.g. finance, time, marketing knowledge), lack of specialist expertise (owner-managers tend to be generalists rather than specialists) and limited role in the marketplace.

Due to the limited resources, SMEs' marketing is usually random and informal as owner-managers make most decisions on their own; react to current opportunities and circumstances and deciding according to personal and business priorities at any given point in time (Scase and Goffee 1980: 83). On the basis of features mentioned above, SME marketing is likely to be haphazard, informal, freed from control, unstructured, spontaneous, responsive, built upon and conforming to industry norms (Gilmore et al 2001: 6).

The most commonly used ways of networking for business activities can occur through trade events, personal contacts, in liaison with marketing intermediaries and as part of the SME owner managers' social endeavours. The characteristics of SME networking show similarity to SMEs' marketing characteristics.

Owner-managers must go outside the businesses' physical boundaries with the intention to do business and this business is marketing-led activity. Thus, SME owner-managers are doing marketing through their natural and inherent networking activity, which is based on people-orientated activities, often discreet, interactive, interchangeable, integrated and habitual (Gilmore et al 2001: 7). The way in which marketing by networking

is conducted is usually influenced over by industry patterns through regular or irregular meeting occasions and industry activities. The periodicity and topic can change depending on the nature of the markets in which the firm operates.

Event management in SMEs

The number of people involved in organizing an event depends upon the size and scale of the event and the company. While organizing a regular manager meeting in an SME may require only few people, organizing a huge event like new product launching road show by a medium size enterprise may require being involved several dozen people.

Companies depending on their size and financial position request trained staff in the skills and competencies associated with event management. Some of these organizations are those, whose business is that of events management, but many are not operating in this sector, and for this latter group the motivation is train up their own staff to provide in-house capacity to set up and run events for themselves (Mondok 2012: 128).

The recent growth of staff meetings, team building events, press events, incentive leisure trips or conferences as an industry around the world means that the management of such occasions can no longer be ad hoc, since they have a significant impact on their communities, society and company. Event management now has become an integral part of business and corporate culture too, be it a seminar, incentive travel or a corporate conference.

It is clear that event activity is now a more common feature of organizational life than hitherto, particularly for SME's – as these enterprises are usually small enough to have own event department or constant contract with a professional event organizer –, and that suitable training programmes for staff to provide operational support for setting up and running events are hard to find. It is thought that this may be attributable to the absence of work that has been

undertaken into the competencies required at this level.

The task of event organisation is usually passed to administrative workers like secretaries, administrators or lower manager positions, like junior managers. Certainly employees in such positions have no special skills for managing events; they employ their core competences enhanced by secondary or tertiary education.

Link between event management and marketing

When planning an event, the mechanical things must be done, but event marketing is critical in ensuring the event's success. Event marketing needs to be creative, centralised, focused and leveraged to enhance the success of organized event (Tassiopoulos and Damster 2005: 253).

Event marketing is the function of event management that keeping touch with customers, read their needs and motivations, develop products that meet their needs and build a communication programme which expresses event's purpose and objectives' (Hall 1992, as quoted by Watt 1998: 61). It is the process of employing the marketing mix to attain organisational goals through creative value for clients and customers. The organisation must adopt a marketing orientation that stresses the building of mutually beneficial relationships and the maintenance of competitive advantages (Getz 1997: 250).

Event marketing is always undertaken in the context of fulfilling the event's mandate goals. The more comprehensive its goals, the more challenging marketing events become. In summary, event marketing involves: customer care, selling, influencing trends and attitudes, creating experiences, research, segmentation to appropriate areas, targeting, and entry strategy, explaining which level or group to challenge first and marketing mix (4Ps) (Tassiopoulos and Damster 2005: 253).

RESEARCH RESULTS

Survey on core competences in the field of events in small and medium sized enter-

prises and organizations was conducted in the scope of an EU Leonardo da Vinci Partnership project called COMPEVENT (establishing competencies required by SMEs in the events management sector). The aim of the project is to identify the most important competencies required by organizations, particularly SMEs, to organize and assist in management of events. The project was initiated in 2010 for a 2-year project period.

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Research methodology

Secondary research

Secondary research was conducted to establish what had been published by national and international-level organisations and institutions in relation to the required skills and competencies of event management. In order to make a consensus on different schemes and frameworks, skills and competences were set to three distinctive groups: (i) technical skills, (ii) communication skills and (iii) personal skills. The secondary research's foundation were the following publications: Labour Market Review of the Events Industry conducted by People 1st, DISCO - Dictionary of Skills and Competencies, TUNING Educational Structures in Europe, Reflex Project (The Flexible Professional in the Knowledge Society), European Life Long Learning Framework and national competence frameworks for event management training and education in the project countries. The result of this research was

used to develop the structure and content of the primary research (SMEs' questionnaire and quantitative research based on academics and event management experts).

Primary research was concluded in three types of organisations: SMEs who are involved in doing event organisation but not event management specialists, event management experts who doing their business on this market and educational institutions which offer event management programmes (the three types of organisations will be referred to as sectors). The rationale behind this decision was to attempt to establish priorities, or otherwise, common across the three sectors. In other words, disparity between the judgements is supposed to be on the skills mix between the professional event management enterprises and SMEs that have limited experience of managing event activities in house but doing regularly, and those educational institutions teaching events management programmes.

Questionnaire and dataset of SME survey

In order to achieve the objectives of the programme, the research identified the most relevant skills and competencies in organising events in three groups. The method used to meet the main objectives of the study was a survey based on a structured questionnaire.

The sample consisted of 500 German, 854 French and 350 Hungarian private and public organisations registered in the database of the work placement offices of the institutions and regional Chambers of Commerce and Manufacture. The sample comprised an existing database of organisations and firms which had employed students from EBC Hochschule Hamburg, Institut Supérieur de la Communication de la Presse et l'Audiovisuel (ISCPA) GROUPE IGS and College of Szolnok. However, in the questionnaire, the organisations were asked to provide information regarding their economic sector and size that is the number of employees. The response ratio was really low in all countries, as 23 questionnaires were completed until the end of

January 2011 in Germany; therefore decision was made to extend the timescale until mid-March. By this time 42 surveys were completed in Germany, 33 in France and 21 in Hungary (Mondok 2012: 133).

The questionnaire was created by SurveyMonkey online marketing research tool and the link of the document was distributed via email. Experience had shown that the administration of questionnaire by SurveyMonkey result only a significantly low response rate although the completion period was extended. Besides that there was no report of any comprehension problems by the respondents and test period was also lack of misunderstanding.

In order to achieve the same ratio of answers as number of SMEs in the three different countries, data was weighted by the following formula: 4,09 : 2,98 : 1 = France : Germany : Hungary. The ratio was calculated on the basis of SBA Fact Sheet published by EU due to 2004 and 2005 data.

The questionnaire had two distinct parts. The first had a number of questions that covered a description of the general characteristics of each organisation and an overall evaluation of the method of organizing events. The second part was structured through a list of questions which examined the generic competences of the staff in response to organizing events. Evaluation of first part is not in focus in this article.

Competences were measured on Likert-scale and assessment of responds was based on ranking method (answers were weighted by regular classroom grades (five in case of 'very important', four in case of 'important', etc.) to get the total score of a certain skill for ranking). If equivalent scores happened, that skill was ranked to higher position which had more answer to evaluate it more important.

Quantitative research based on event management experts

Based on the SME questionnaire a quantitative research was conducted on panel of event management experts using a modified

Delphi-method. The Delphi Method seeks to aggregate opinions from a diverse set of experts, and can be done without having to bring everyone together for a physical meeting. Because the responses of the participants are anonymous, individual experts don't have to worry about repercussions for their opinions. As Delphi-method comprises both qualitative and quantitative tools, we used a modified technique limited to quantitative research. The same list of skills and competences and Likert-scale was used for measuring to discover the opinion of expert panel which was establishing for SME questionnaire to keep the possibility of comparison of results. 187 experts were involved in the survey, all of them doing their business in event management in Austria.

Quantitative research based on academics
Questionnaires were distributed to 38 educational specialists (institution directors and programme leaders) at the 2011 Businet conference. Businet is a network of European higher education institutions which getting to be more international by accepting membership of non-European countries as well. By using the same limited Delphi-method for assessment of education experts' view, the coherence of methodology was establish.

When considering the results it must be acknowledged that they come mainly from European countries with stronger economies. Despite the skewed sample there is no reason to conclude that the results would not be replicated in other parts of Europe because they are not economically driven. Extensive anecdotal evidence to support this conclusion was gathered from delegates at the Businet Conference (representing 22 EU countries), which supports the conclusions that were reached by the research.

Key findings of the research

Comparison between SMEs employees and event experts

SMEs and event experts agreed that 'organizational and planning skills' was the first

important competence. However, the second most important competence for SMEs' employees was the 'ability to work autonomously' which did not appear within the ten most required competences considered by event management companies. It could even be a reflection of the linear organisational structure which is common in SMEs, where employees have direct supervising but wide range of work. Event management experts also consider extremely important to be able to work well under pressure and have a good stamina as event organisation is a stressful activity and needed to manage more issues at the same time, so they usually organise work in groups of people. The second most important competence of the event experts was 'ability to work in a team' which if we follow the logic of the previous comment, reflects the more specialist event environment per se. Common competences within the top ten of both sector types included: 'organisational and planning skills', 'problem solving', 'ability to work in a team', 'flexibility', 'customer orientation', 'verbal communication' and 'ability to multi-task'. In addition, SMEs rated 'ability to work autonomously', 'interpersonal skills and friendliness', and 'creativity' in the top ten competences, again as a reflection of the SME working environment. In comparison, the event experts rated 'foreign languages', 'work well under pressure and stamina' and 'sales and negotiation skills' within the top ten competences. These differences probably can be attributed to event management being the prime focus of these specialist organisations.

Comparison between SMEs and educational experts

The educational experts and SMEs agreed that the most important competence was 'organisational and planning skills', however, for the SMEs 'ability to work under autonomously' was the second most important competence and for the educational experts, 'problem solving' came second. The findings showed that the top ten competences included eight common ones,

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namely: 'organisational and planning skills', 'problem solving', 'ability to work in team', 'ability to multi-task', 'flexibility', 'interpersonal skills and friendliness', 'customer orientation' and 'verbal communication'; other competencies within the top ten list for SMEs included 'creativity and ability to work autonomously'; whereas educational experts considered 'work well under pressure and good stamina' and 'presentation skills' to be important. Of the skills common to both sectors, there were no extreme differences in the ratings.

Comparison between educational and event management experts

The two sectors agreed that the most important competence was 'organisational and planning skills' ranking 1st. Of the top ten rankings, there were eight competences common to both sectors: 'organisational and planning skills', 'work well under pressure and stamina', 'ability to work in a team', 'customer orientation', 'flexibility', 'presentation skills', 'problem solving', 'verbal communication' and 'ability to multi-task'. For events experts, 'foreign languages' ranked to fourth, and 'sales and negotiation skills' 9th – reason could be owing to the nature of the business and having to make a profit. Customer orientation also considered much more important by event management expert than academics which shows that marketing orientation has crucial role in

Table 1: Comparison between SMEs employees and event experts related to Top 10 skills and competences.

All countries' SMEs employees	Event management experts
1. Organisational and planning skills	1. Organisational and planning skills and work well under pressure and stamina
2. Ability to work autonomously	2. Ability to work in a team
3. Problem solving (improvisation)	3. Flexibility
4. Ability to work in a team	4. Foreign languages
5. Interpersonal skills and friendliness	5. Customer orientation
6. Flexibility	6. Problem solving (improvisation)
7. Customer orientation	7. Presentation skills
8. Creativity	8. Verbal communication
9. Verbal communication	9. Sales and negotiation skills
10. Ability to multi-task	10. Ability to multi-task

Source: Author's collection

Table 2: Comparison between SMEs employees and educational experts related to Top 10 skills and competences.

All countries' SMEs employees	Educational experts
1. Organisational and planning skills	1. Organisational and planning skills
2. Ability to work autonomously	2. Problem solving (improvisation)
3. Problem solving (improvisation)	3. Ability to work in a team
4. Ability to work in a team	4. Work well under pressure and stamina
5. Interpersonal skills and friendliness	5. Verbal communication
6. Flexibility	6. Ability to multi-task
7. Customer orientation	7. Interpersonal skills and friendliness
8. Creativity	8. Presentation skills
9. Verbal communication	9. Flexibility
10. Ability to multi-task	10. Customer orientation

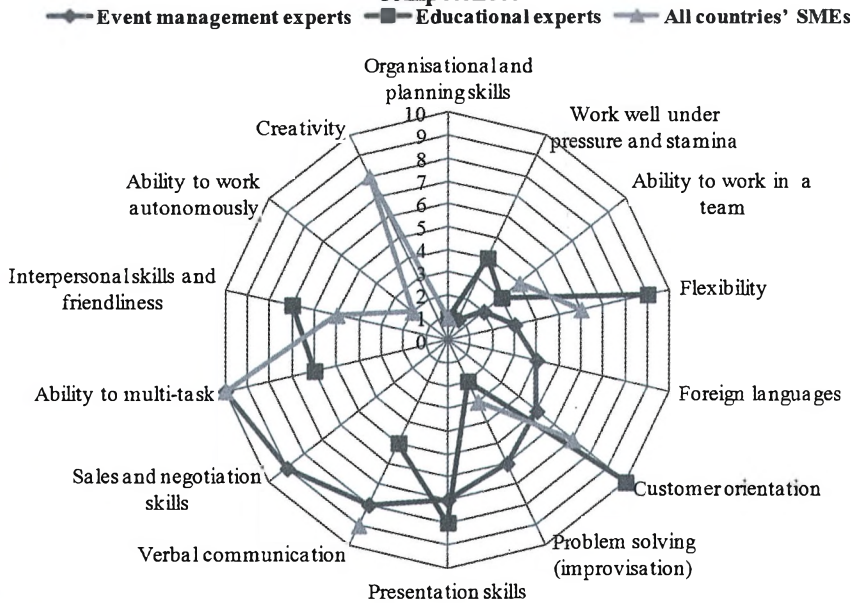
Source: Author's collection

Table 3: Comparison between event management and educational experts related to Top 10 skills and competences.

Event management experts	Educational experts
1. Organisational and planning skills and work well under pressure and stamina	1. Organisational and planning skills
2. Ability to work in a team	2. Problem solving (improvisation)
3. Flexibility	3. Ability to work in a team
4. Foreign languages	4. Work well under pressure and stamina
5. Customer orientation	5. Verbal communication
6. Problem solving (improvisation)	6. Ability to multi-task
7. Presentation skills	7. Interpersonal skills and friendliness
8. Verbal communication	8. Presentation skills
9. Sales and negotiation skills	9. Flexibility
10. Ability to multi-task	10. Customer orientation

Source: made by the author

Figure 1 Sector's comparison related to Top 10 skills and competences



making business. Whereas for educational experts, the 'ability to multi-task', and 'interpersonal skills and friendliness' were considered more important.

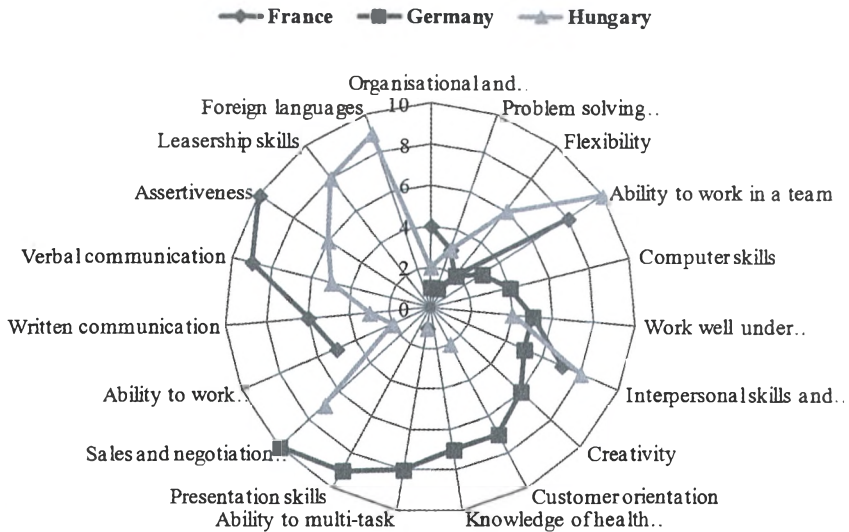
Sectors' comparison

All sectors agreed that 'organisational and planning skills' were the most important competence. Common within the top ten rankings across all three sectors were: 'organisational and planning skills', 'flexibility', 'problem solving', 'ability to work in a team', 'customer orientation' and 'verbal communication'. Events experts were the only sector to rate foreign languages (4th) - this may require further research as to why this is important in this sector but not so much with the other sectors. Probably the Austrian members of expert panel operate their company internationally rather than domestic focus. Rank of 'sales and negotiation skills' to the ninth place may reflect the business orientation of this sector. As every single event is different, conditions may vary in number of participant, venue or catering demand, event

managers need to make contract with their costumers on a mutual beneficial negotiation. SMEs were the only sector to rate 'ability to work autonomously' and 'creativity' skills in their top ten, these being rated 2nd and 8th respectively. All top ten rankings from the educational experts were found in either one or both of the other two sectors. SMEs and educational experts both considered the 'interpersonal skills and friendliness' in the top ten competences, whereas this did not appear in the events experts' top ten ratings. Likewise, whereas events experts and educational experts considered 'presentation skills' in the top ten competences, this did not feature in the SMEs' top ten. SMEs and events experts did not have any common competences that were not included in the educational experts top ten rankings.

For the Austrian event management expert panel of this project, who gave feedback on the final result, it was very surprising that competencies linked with special topics like "security", "technical skills" and "legislation", do not appear

Figure 2
Cross-country comparison related to Top 10 skills and competences



in the top ten ranking. Why are these competencies ranked so low if they are essential? Maybe because the priorities in the field of event management are different in different countries or maybe because the special competencies are outsourced – consequently the organisations do not consider those competencies to be important inside their company.

Cross-country comparison between SMEs' responds

As the project aim was establishing a pan-European list of competencies required by event organization within SMEs, cross-country dissimilarities were not in focus. Despite this circumstance it is informative to compare the SMEs employees' responds from the three project countries to discover the divergences. Due to the previous analysis of results France shows the most diverging picture: being able to complete multi-task was ranked to 1st, whilst 'organisation and planning skills' just to the fourth. Hungary is more similar to France than to Germany,

even the countries had common roots in the past and some administrative systems based on similar logic (e.g. accounting).

Germany was the only country to rank 'computer skills', 'creativity', 'knowledge of health & safety, insurance and other issues' and 'presentation skills'. German respondents did not feel crucial to rate more important 'ability to work autonomously', 'written communication', 'verbal communication', 'assertiveness', even the two other countries these skills and competences were in Top 10.

In Hungary 'ability to work autonomously' more relevant to event organisation as 'ability to work in team' and because 'leadership skills' was also considered to be important, employees need to organize and supervise their work individually rather in team. Outstanding result occurred in this country related to marketing focus: 'customer orientation' was ranked 2nd, 'written communication' 3rd, 'verbal communication' 5th, 'sales and negotiation skills' 7th and 'interpersonal skills and friendliness' 8th place. Hungary was the only out of three

countries which used wide range of tools to maintain marketing orientation within the company and between company and customers. The result has higher importance if we take into account that just 10% of respondents were doing their business in HORECA industry.

CONCLUSION

Points to consider understanding the curriculum

A consensus from the participants was that most of the top 10 competences are defined in the European Life Long Learning Framework as “generic” or “transferable” competences. These are subject independent and based on cross-curricular objectives, and usually relate to the better management of one’s own learning, social and interpersonal relations, and communication. They reflect the general shift of emphasis from teaching to learning.

Lots of people organise events themselves but they might not be necessarily trained: it is this gap in the market we need to address.

Whilst this project identifies the current position, it must be noted that as the event industry evolves then so will the required competences – this should be the basis of future research and the development of curricula.

How can we foster generic competences development in students’ curricula to meet the needs of today’s corporate environment?

If we take the Kolb’s learning cycle structure, which is the most established model of experiential learning, and which is divided into four parts: (1) concrete experience, followed by (2) reflection (reflective observation), the reflection is then assimilated into (3) theory (abstract conceptualisation) and these new (or reformulated) concepts are tested in (4) new situations, we can enhance the student learning experience.

SMEs told us that effective management and leadership requires:

- the capacity to think analytically without getting too involved in details,

- to make timely decisions without reacting impulsively,
- to reach team consensus without compromising results, and
- to get people to perform.

These abilities are not necessarily learned from books on marketing and management theory, but are essential to the future manager.

- Currently companies are looking to recruit graduates who have already developed key skills such as creativity, adaptability, flexibility, self-management, empathy, etc., and more importantly, who have already engaged in a reflective process with others in a team setting.
- A well-rounded manager who has developed intellectual rigour and personal and social skills is immediately operational and more productive.

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Recommendations

Based on the Compevent results, industry knowledge and sharing good practice, a list of recommendations is produced which could be adopted in order to meet today’s challenge of teaching event management while ensuring students gain experience of the range of transferable skills which have been highlighted through the research.

Whilst students require the underpinning knowledge of the event management discipline, participants who were involved in carry out and assessment of survey agreed that a more practical approach is required (experiential learning).

Considerations to inform the curriculum would include: case studies, role plays and

group work; in effect, teaching methodology, for a considerable part, needs to be practical based. On further discussion, it was clear that participants were including experiential learning to different degrees and that collaboration in this area would be hugely beneficial.

Collaboration could include a 'project week' i.e. a timetabled week to incorporate a series of events whereby students could participate in an active events project in their home or in a participant country. In addition to gaining practical competences in the events management sector, students would also benefit from academic and personal wider learning opportunities.

Collaboration could be further achieved by a participant college video conferencing a lecture to European partners and rolling out localised student workshops, the results of which would be shared with the network of colleges.

Furthermore, additional competences highlighted in the results could be achieved by establishing social credits linked to student participation in extra-curricular activities, such as participation in college events and fairs, career days, student ambassadors, etc. The students would be presented with a certificate of achievement in addition to their main area of study. Crediting voluntary experience was considered to be both a motivational factor for students and would enhance a student's career prospects.

In addition to the above, student placements would be essential if students are to gain and feel confident in the range of competences highlighted via the Compevent research.

Whilst the emphasis has been on full-time students, a series of short courses could be introduced to capture staff that are currently involved or will be involved in the event planning sector, and those who are currently unemployed and require competence training.

Feedback from students re-iterated the need to combine academic and practical

learning, suggesting 6 weeks' theory followed by 6 weeks' practical activity.

Participants strongly acknowledged the importance of creating a balance of academic and practical solutions to the gap identified in the competence requirements within the event management sector. Further research may be required to establish pan-European teaching and learning methodology.

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