Inter- and Intrapersonal Skills of International Hospitality Professionals

Réka Somlai[1]

Abstract: The study focuses on extroversion personality trait and inter- and intrapersonal skills among Front Desk Agents in the hospitality industry in Hungary and Spain. The first aim of the study is to examine participants' extroversion level. The second aim is to research what the soft skills are that Front Desk Agents find important to possess to be a successful employee. International comparison is important in both focus points. Findings are based on the results of an online survey. Participants are Hungarian and Spanish Front Desk Agents from various types of accommodations. The results suggest that both, Hungarian and Spanish participants consider themselves extroverted, on a fairly high level. Both Hungarians and Spanish participants find communication, problem solving, conflict resolution, stress management and empathy very important to be successful. They use similar skills at their everyday work like communication and customer orientation. Hungarians more often use practical skills like problem solving, Spaniards rather use skills that are related to creating a good atmosphere, such as friendliness and positive attitude. Both groups would teach communication, problem solving, empathy and customer orientation at tourism courses. Hungarians would add stress management, independency and conflict resolution; Spaniards also mention flexibility and patience. The results of this study can be used as a base for trainings for front desk agents at the hospitality industry and could be useful information for designing and organizing university courses.

Keywords: extraversion; interpersonal soft skills; front desk agents; tourism

JEL classification: Z32

[1] PhD Candidate, Szent István University, 2100 Gödöllő, Práter Károly u. 1, Hungary, reka.somlai.work@gmail.com

Medosebne in intrapersonalne spretnosti mednarodnih gostinskih strokovnjakov

Povzetek: Članek se osredotoča na ekstrovertiranost kot osebnostno lastnost ter medosebne in intrapersonalne spretnosti med turistisčnimi agenti - recepcionerji v gostinstvu na Madžarskem in v Španiji. Prvi cilj študije je preveriti stopnjo ekstrovertiranosti udeležencev. Drugi cilj je raziskati, kakšne so mehke spretnosti, ki so za recepcionerje pomembne, da so lahko uspešni kot zaposleni. Mednarodna primerjava je pomembna pri obeh žariščih. Ugotovitve temeljijo na rezultatih spletne ankete. Udeleženci so madžarski in španski zastopniki iz različnih vrst namestitve. Rezultati kažejo, da se madžarski in španski udeleženci na precej visoki ravni štejejo za ekstrovertirane. Tako pri madžarskih kot španskih udeležencih so za uspeh

zelo pomembni komuniciranje, reševanje problemov, reševanje konfliktov, obvladovanje stresa in empatija. Pri vsakdanjem delu uporabljajo podobne veščine, kot so komuniciranje in naravnanost na stranke. Madžari pogosteje uporabljajo praktične spretnosti, kot je reševanje problemov, Španci pa raje uporabljajo veščine, ki so povezane z ustvarjanjem dobrega vzdušja, kot sta prijaznost in pozitiven odnos. Obe skupini bi se na turističnih tečajih učili komuniciranja, reševanja problemov, empatije in usmerjenosti k strankam. Madžari bi dodali obvladovanje stresa, neodvisnost in reševanje konfliktov; Španci omenjajo tudi prožnost in potrpežljivost. Rezultati te študije se lahko uporabijo kot podlaga za usposabljanje agentov v recepcijah v gostinstvu in so lahko koristne informacije za oblikovanje in organiziranje univerzitetnih predmetov.

Ključne besede: ekstravertiranost; medosebne mehke veščine; receptorji; turizem

JEL klasifikacija: Z32

1 Introduction

Hospitality is one of the most customer-oriented sectors, therefore it is very important to be aware of what the skills are that professionals already possess and use at their everyday job to be successful. It is also important to know which skills need more attention for learning and developing in their profession. Other studies implicate that professional skills alone are not sufficient to be a successful employee. Present research is inspired to study the inter- and intrapersonal skills and some personality traits (extroversion, introversion) of Front Desk Agents in the hospitality industry, comparing Hungarian and Spanish samples by using questionnaires as method. There are two main focus points of the research. The first one is to find out whether the Front Desk Agents are more extroverted persons as stereotypes would suggest. In the questionnaire Front Desk Agents rate various statements regarding their own extroversion. The second focus point is to find out which soft skills are important to be a successful front desk agent, what skills they use in daily work, and what skills should be taught and practiced during the college or university studies. Spanish and Hungarian samples were chosen because of personal experiences as the author has lived and worked in both countries. In the continuation these questions will be studied and compared with another research.

1.1 Cultural differences

To compare different cultures is a complex task. All of them have their own believes, habits, rituals, and many more specific actions. The 6-dimensional model of Hofstede is an objective way to compare different cultures and countries (Hofstede, 2008). The final model studied 76 countries with questionnaires that is based on the 6 dimensions. Hungary and Spain are both among the examined countries, therefore there is an objective way to compare them (Figure 1).
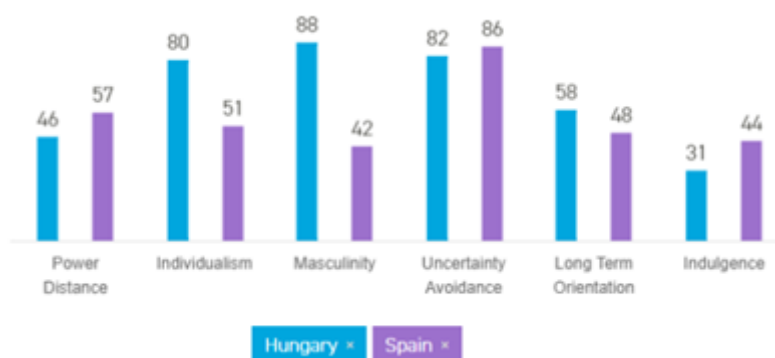

Figure 1: The comparison of Hungary and Spain along the 6 dimensions
Source: Hofstede Insights, 2019a.

The power distance dimension is an indicator of how people in a culture handle the inequality in the sense of hierarchy. Countries with higher scores can deal with a strong leadership hierarchy; countries with lower scores aim to have more flexible and less hierarchical leadership. Hungary scored low, they tend to be more independent, aim for equal rights and accessible superiors. Communication style is direct and proactive. Spain has a higher score on the scale, therefore they have a more hierarchical society, where people accept the leaders´ autocratic orders and the hierarchy itself (Hofstede Insights, 2019b).

The Individualism dimension indicates the mindset towards cooperation or working independently for individual goals. High scoring countries tend to care more about their own business, while in low scoring countries people are more loyal to their groups, and teamwork comes naturally (Hofstede Insights, 2019b). Hungary scored much higher than Spain which means that people concentrate more on themselves and their family´s needs than Spanish people. Spain's score is lower than that of the most European countries, but compared to other countries and different cultures, it is higher.

The Masculinity dimension is about the society´s competitiveness. High scores are called masculine societies, where the achievement is always about fighting for their goals ambitiously. Lower scores are called feminine societies, where people are less competitive, relationships are very important (Hofstede Insights, 2019b). Hungary scored high on this dimension as well, therefore for them success and achievements are important. Spain has much lower score, which means they rather build relationships and take care of each other.

Uncertainty Avoidance Index shows how the society handles uncertain situations, and on what level they need regulations, rules. High score indicates a very strict and rigid system of rules, lower scores are more flexible and open-minded to new ideas (Hofstede Insights, 2019b). Hungary´s high score means that people need rules to avoid uncertainty. They tend to work hard; precision and punctuality is very important. Spain also have a high score; they tend to like to have rules but at the same time they are obligated to avoid them which rises their stress level. In both countries' confrontation is preferably avoided, which also can be a stress factor.

Long Term Orientation thinking implies that people tend to change their traditions and react to changes more flexibly when it comes to innovation. They rather think in longer terms and see the bigger picture, while short term-oriented countries keep traditional ways and they are not willing to change those (Hofstede Insights, 2019b). Hungary has a pragmatic approach which makes people more open for innovations and they think long term. Spanish culture is more normative, which will make them live in the moment and think less of the future; they also prefer quick solutions.

The Indulgence index shows the tolerance or control of expressing desires and impulses. In countries with high scores, people tend to keep their needs and impulses under control, while lower scores countries support the wellbeing of people (Hofstede Insights, 2019b). Both Spain and Hungary scored low. People tend to be critical and pessimistic.

1.2 Stereotypes

The subjective way of comparing cultures is creating stereotypes. They can be exact as they are based on perceptions, but because of this very same reason, most of the times they are unrealistic. They contain internal or external, positive or negative characteristics that are significant about the group (Smith and Mackie, 2015). There are various types of stereotypes: national, ethnical, gender, cultural, religion based or occupational. National characters are well examined. These studies go behind the stereotypes and concentrate on the bases of these stereotypes to emphasize whether they are valid or not (Hunyadi, 1995). McGarthy and his research group found that the stereotypes have three different functions, this is the reason they can subsist. Stereotypes can give explanations to certain behaviour we do not understand well. They can also save some energy and time, so there is no need to get to know a culture deeply. Finally, the stereotypes can be part of a cultural belief and most people see them as common knowledge (McGarty et al., 2002). Even though, these functions can be prejudicial, because as a consequence of the stereotypes, the perception is narrower, therefore it is hard to recognize other characteristics or behaviours that are different from the stereotype (Hunyadi, 2001). For this reason, those studies that examine the realistic characters of nations are very important to decrease the harmful effects of stereotypical perception. Matera (2005) found that stereotypes can change over years.

He and his colleagues compared former studies to the newest ones and discovered that the famous "fun loving" attitude of Spanish people is becoming more sophisticated. Besides this attitude, participants also mentioned more characteristics when describing Spaniards, like open minded or happy (Matera, et al., 2005). In another study, Latin Americans described Spaniards much more positively than Spanish participants themselves. Latin respondents found them nice with a happy attitude, hardworking, friendly and smart. Negative traits have relatively low scores, except the "drunk" trait (Hunyadi, 2001). Hungarian character studies found that other nations around the country find Hungarians smart, hardworking, friendly and less patriotic (Enescoa et al., 2005).

1.3 Extroversion-Introversion

Most people have a stereotype about Front Desk Agents in the hospitality industry. They seem to be very social, easy-going and extroverted people. Based on this theory, a research found that hotel employees have a significant level of extroversion (Makomere and Korir, 2017). Extroversion-introversion is a personality trait. Extroverted people have the need to be in a social environment more often than introverted people. They enjoy when there are many people around them, seek situations when they can interact with people. They are usually talkative and energetic in social situations. They rather work in a team, than alone and take initiative in situations as they can react faster. They also tend to place themselves in the centre of attention, therefore there is also a possibility that conversations don't go too deep and they have a hard time to concentrate on others (Carver and Scheier, 2014). Extroverted employees in the hotel industry tend to be more satisfied and feel more competent with guests. Therefore, the easy-going attitude makes them enjoy their job, as the social environment gives them positive feelings (Grobelna, 2015). Employee satisfaction also effects hotel image. Extroverted employees positively affect the hotel image, but there is no correlation between extroverted employees and guest loyalty (Jani and Han, 2014). Another study found that extroverted employees are not only more satisfied, but because of their attitude they can be very successful and high performing (Razali et al., 2017).

1.4 Soft skills in the hospitality industry

Soft skills and hard skills are both important in any work environment. The term hard skill refers to the professional knowledge which is determined in each sector and position. Soft skills are personal and interpersonal skills that are used in human interactions (Katz, 1974). Studies suggest that on top of professional skill, soft skills are very important to be successful at work. Spencer and Spencer identified 20 competencies that are important to be successful, but they only emphasize three hard skills out of the 20. Other competencies were all soft skills, both interpersonal and intrapersonal (Spencer and Spencer, 1993). Other studies specify five main competencies to be important for success. These are conflict resolution, collaborating problem solving, communication, goal setting and performance management and planning (Stevens and Campion, 1994). Robles identified ten soft skills needed in today's workplace: integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethic (Robles, 2012). Hospitality is a fast-paced work environment, therefore there are some skills that are specifically crucial to possess: customer-oriented attitude, communication, and the ability to build and maintain good relationships (Mayo and Thomas-Haysbert, 2005). A job in the hospitality industry can be stressful (confirmed by other studies), therefore stress management is also important (Pearlin and Schooler, 1978). Emotional intelligence is also an accentual competency as high emotional intelligence predicts better coping with stress. Emotional intelligence is a very complex competency, even contains impulse control and stress management. Employees who have high level in these components, have significantly better coping mechanisms (Bar-On and Parker, 2000). Kim (2010) found that a high level of emotional intelligence predicts coping skills as well. They also examined any correspondents between the personality traits and coping, but there is no significant relation with extroversion and coping (Kim and Agrusa, 2010).

2   Methods

Participants are Spanish and Hungarian Front Desk Agents who work in the hospitality industry. The sample contains in total 146 professionals, 82 Hungarians (51 women, 31 men) and 64 Spaniards (39 women, 25 men). The average age is between 27 and 35 years in both groups. The participants work in different types of accommodations: 4-5-star hotels (HU: 43, ES: 21), hostels (HU: 22, ES: 28), 2-3 star hotels (HU: 14, ES:8) and apartments (HU: 3, ES: 7). Most Hungarian participants have 1 to 5 years' experience, most Spanish respondents have worked between 5 to 10 years. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, only some personal questions were asked (age, type of accommodation they work at, length of employment). Participants were informed properly about the usage of their data.

Data was collected over the course of 8 months, an online survey was sent out in Hungarian and Spanish professionals on various platforms (social media, professional forums, direct emails to the accommodations in various cities, using the accommodation list of the largest hospitality website, Booking.com). The respond rate is low, as over 400 establishments were contacted. However, it is still significant enough sample for drawing representative conclusions. The survey contains text questions and scales (5-point Likert scale) about the soft skills that Front Desk Agents use at their day job, skills they think are important at their job, and skills they would consider teaching for tourism studies. Also, there are questions regarding their own extroversion personality traits. The survey was conducted in Google Forms, collecting all data automatically. Scale questions are analysed as percentages of the number of responds for each ranking. The answers of text questions are collected and categorized, then prioritized by the number of responds.

The focus points of the study:
1. Extroversion-introversion personality trait:
    -   Front desk agents consider themselves extroverted or introverted
2. Soft skills:
    -   Which soft skills are important to be a successful front desk agent?
    -   What are the skills they use?
    -   What skills should be taught and practiced during daily at work college or university studies?

The international difference is also very important. The study examines whether there are any similarities or differences between Hungarian and Spanish participants regarding their skills, opinions and personality traits.

3   Results

3.1 Extroversion-introversion personality trait

The personality trait is measured on a 1 to 5 Likert scale. Participants chose the rating on the scale according to the level of agreement with the statements of the most common characteristics of the extroverted personality type (Carver and Scheier, 2014). On the scale, 1 stands for the lowest level, 5 stands for the highest level of agreement. The 13 statements are phrased as positive description of the extroverted characteristics. The answers were collected on each scale and each statement, then determined the percentage of the answers on every one of them. In order to be able to compare the data, the average percentage is calculated on each scale (Figure 2). 36 and 34 percent chose rating 4 on the scale, which states for "Agree", This indicates that most Front Desk respondents think they are rather extroverted. Analysing each statement gives more detailed results. In the Hungarian group, more than 40% of the respondents chose rating 4 in case of several statements, which means, these are the characteristics that most people think describes them well. The statements are "I like to get to know foreign people", "A social environment empowers me", "I react to happenings around me quite quickly", "I consider myself as a person who starts a conversation with guests easily", "I find it easy to pick up small talk with anyone". There are also some statements with lower respond rates, which means, these are characteristics that most respondents think are less like them: "I like to be in the centre of attention", "I like it when there are a lot of guests around", "I rather take initiative than observe". In the Spanish group, the highest percentages were the following statements: "A social environment empowers me", "I am an easy-going

person who likes to communicate to people", "I consider myself as a person who starts a conversation with guests easily". The lowest percentage is "I like to be in the centre of attention".
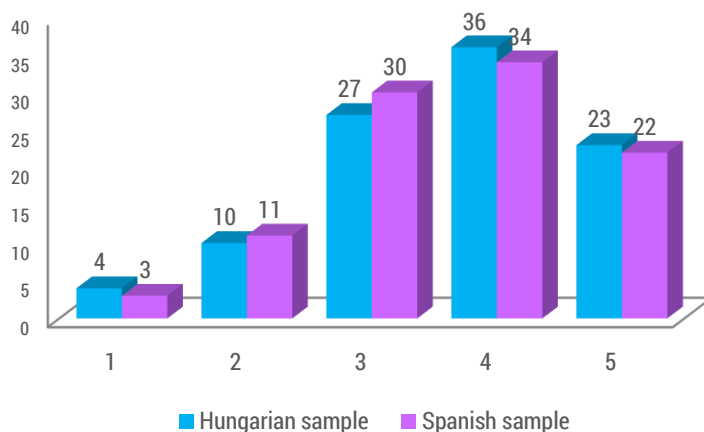
Source: own research

3.1 Soft skills

The first focus point regarding the soft skills is the opinion of Front Desk Agents about the skills what an average employee should possess in this position to be successful. Respondents choose the three most important skills from a list; the answers were ordered by popularity. Both groups think that communication and problem solving are the most important skills, and that time management is the least important skill. There are some differences in opinion regarding the importance of other skills. Figure 3 shows the top five skills that professionals consider most important. In case of the Hungarian sample, the answers and the complete sequence is: communication (66), problem solving (55), stress management (45), conflict resolution (34), empathy (14), trustworthiness (11), teamwork (10), independency (10), motivation (7), self-awareness (6), time management (6). The complete list of the Spanish answers is: communication (40), problem solving (32), empathy (24), stress management (20), conflict resolution (16), motivation (15), teamwork (13), independency (11), self-awareness (10), trustworthiness (9), time management (7). As the sequence suggests, Hungarian professionals believe that a successful employee is a person who is able to communicate well, resolves any kind of problems for the customers, has ways to control stress or high volume of work, constructively seeks for solutions in a conflicted situation and is able to see the problems from the guest's perspective. The Spanish professionals have a similar idea of the successful Front Desk employee, with some difference, that they value empathy much more than handling stress or managing conflicts.
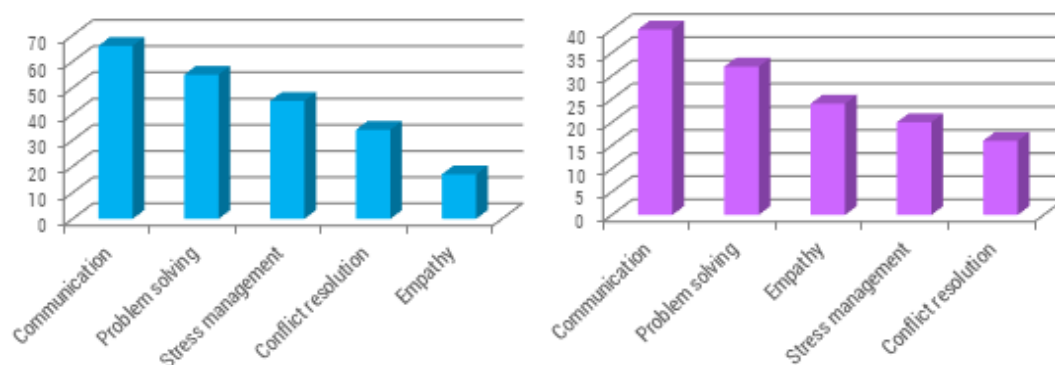

Figure 3: The five most important soft skills a Front Desk agent needs to be good at. A) Hungarian sample B) Spanish sample

Source: own research

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Respondents also chose from a list the skills and competencies they actually use in their daily work. The list contains the same items as the list of the important skills for being a successful employee. In this case, the two groups chose different skills or competencies, however there are some similarities in their top five list. Most Hungarian participants use their problem-solving skills (62), then communication (58) and customer orientation (49) scored high as well. They find their skills of working independently (41) and being flexible (41) important, as they use them quite often too. The rest of the sequence is: preciseness (36), positive attitude (36), trustworthiness (33), building relationships (28), friendliness (28), tolerance of high workload (36), teamwork (22). Spanish professionals use their communication skills most often (43), then flexibility (36) follows. Same as the Hungarian sample, the customer orientation is the third most used skill (31). Positive attitude (30) and friendliness (28) are very close to the customer orientation, it makes sense they use them often as well. The rest of the skills of the complete list are problem solving skills (26), trustworthiness (26), tolerance of high workload (25), preciseness (19), working independently (16), teamwork (14), building relationships (10). Figure 4. shows the five most used skills in the two groups. Comparing the skills that participants find important to the skills they use in their daily work, there are some differences. Hungarians use the same skills they find important; these are communication and problem solving. They consider stress management important, which indicates, that resolving guest's problems must be a very big part of their daily work which could be demanding for them. They find empathy an important skill, probably because they it considers as one of the key skills to be customer oriented. In case of the Spanish participants it is even more likely, as they consider empathy the third most important skill, which could be behind their habit to look after the wellbeing of their customers. Stress management is a very important skill for both groups, as the customer-oriented goals of their job could be demanding in both countries. Hungarians think they resolve any kind of problems for their customers and they think they are great communicators as well which is probably necessary for problem solving and being customer oriented. Most likely they work alone regularly, as ´working independently´ is a skill they use very often, but `teamwork´ less often. Their flexibility is also an important skill to be able to fulfil the expectations of the guests who probably often have issues, the Front Desk Agents need to resolve. On the other hand, the top five skills of the Spanish professionals are mainly those that a customer-oriented employee needs to be good at for their guests to have an atmosphere where they most likely feel valued. This indicates that instead of problem solving, Spanish establishments value personal skills more, like communication, positivism and friendliness, with a flexible attitude. In summary, the Hungarian approach of customer satisfaction is more practical, the Spanish ways are more wellbeing oriented.
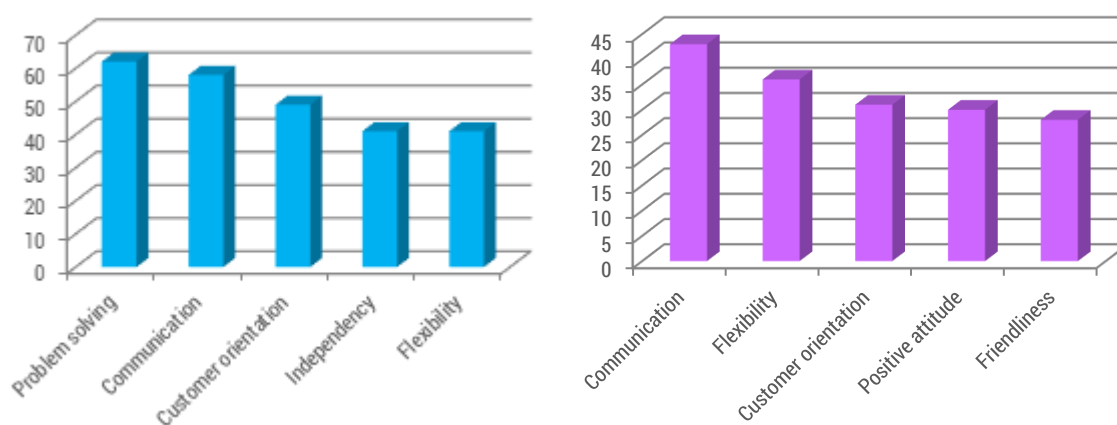

Figure 4: The five skills, Front Desk Agent use most often at their job A) Hungarian sample, B) Spanish sample
Source: own research

The third perspective is the Front Desk Agent's opinion about the skills that students should be learning and developing during their tourism studies. In the survey there is a free text question regarding these skills, where respondents name the three most important skills. There are similar answers in both groups, Figure 5. shows the most common skills mentioned in both groups. Most of the Hungarians responded communication (34) was one of the most important skills that should be taught at the courses. The order of the most common ones is problem solving (21), stress management (20), empathy (19), customer orientation (13), conflict resolution (13), independency (11). There were

many other skills, competencies and even personality traits mentioned as well. Most of them are interpersonal (helpfulness, teamwork, politeness, humbleness), and intrapersonal (energy, patience, reactiveness, motivation, preciseness, courage, trust, self-awareness). The attitude-oriented skills were optimism, positive attitude, openness. The practical skills were professionalism, agility, adaptiveness, time management, sense of reality, tolerance for monotony, preciseness, and flexibility. The most common skills and competencies in the Spanish sample were communication (20), customer orientation (19), problem solving (9), empathy (8), flexibility (8), and patience (6). The other responses can also be categorized the same way as in case of the Hungarian sample. There were interpersonal (conflict resolution, people management, teamwork) and intrapersonal skills, competencies (stress tolerance, reactiveness, trustworthiness, motivation, self-awareness). There were skills regarding attitude (social attitude, friendliness, optimism) and practical skills (responsibility, time management, preciseness, and independency).
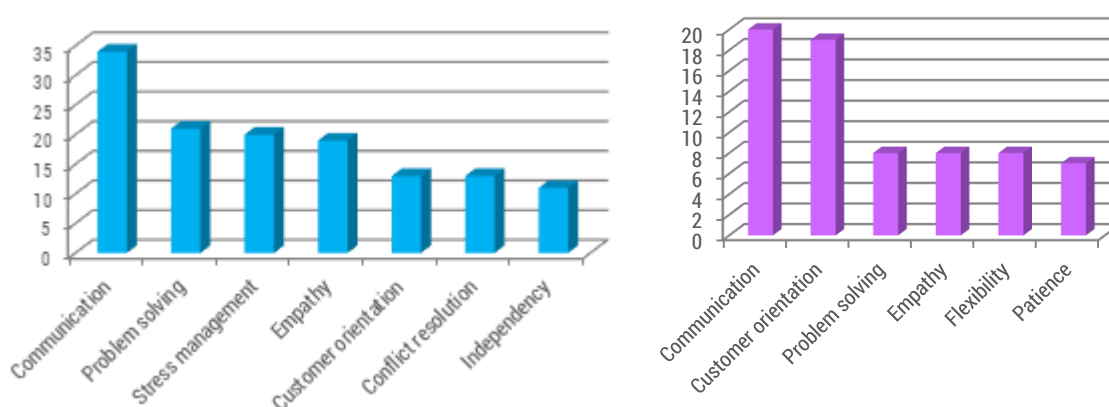

Figure 5: Most important skills tourism studies should develop A) Hungarian sample B) Spanish sample
Source: own research

Regarding the extraversion personality trait, the average percentage is relatively high in both groups so as the highest and lowest scores are quite similar. National stereotypes often consider Mediterranean people more opened and friendly, than Eastern Europeans. This would indicate that according to stereotypes, Spanish participants should have been more extroverted than Hungarians. However, the results contradict this. The professional opinion about stereotypes is that most of them have some valid traits, but the conclusions are usually false, because everyone sees actions or people's behaviour. This is the reason why the results of this study contradicted the stereotype about "easy-going" Spaniards and "cold" Hungarians. On the other hand, working at the front desk is particularly known for being a fast pace environment with the need of constant human interaction. For this reason, for those, who enjoy being surrounded by other people most of their working shift, it is easier to do so, if they are more extroverted than introverted. It takes more energy for introverts to be with others, while extroverts feel energized in the same situation. Therefore, stepping out of the comfort zone for introverts often results in high levels of stress. This type of work can be stressful for different reasons for extroverts too, but it is more likely that they will be more comfortable in this job, than introverts, this could be the reason more extroverts choose it. In the Individualism dimension of Hofstede's model, Spain has a lower score than Hungary. This means, Spaniards are more collectivists and teamwork comes naturally for them, therefore connecting and building relationships can also be easier for them. They see themselves just as extroverted as Hungarians, but the difference could be this easy-going attitude which most likely was the trigger for these stereotypes. Culture has a great influence on behaviour. The same personality trait can come across very differently, depending on a local culture.

Both groups found very similar skills and competencies important to be a successful employee. These are communication, problem solving, conflict resolution, stress management and empathy. These findings correspond with former studies, as very similar competencies were emphasized in those as well. The two groups also use very similar skills at their job (communication, customer orientation) but they differ in some skills. Hungarians use more practical skills, while Spaniards rather chose skills that make the atmosphere better. This finding also connects with Hofstede´s Individualism and Masculinity dimensions. As Spaniards are more team players and relationship oriented

than Hungarians, for them it comes naturally to make more effort in personal relationships and have the "wellbeing" approach in customer care. Stress management could be different for the two nations. The nature of the job is very similar, so are the average customers they work with. But, according to their answers, the approach could be different for costumer orientation. Most likely, the expectations are different as well, therefore Hungarians use more practical skills, Spaniards chose more wellbeing-oriented skills, even though the customer orientation is important in both cases. `Stress management´ was an important skill for both groups, it seems that fulfilling expectations to make customers happy could be stressful in either countries. This theory corresponds with other studies' findings, as Front Desk jobs are very stressful, and the risk of burnout is also high. Therefore, teaching methods for stress management could be one of the most important skills employee trainings should focus on. On the other hand, this difference regarding the customer orientation could be caused by cultural differences. As other studies mention, Spanish people are usually considered to be "fun loving", while Hungarians are known to follow rules more. In theory, the national attitude could be behind the Hungarians' practical and the Spaniards' wellbeing-oriented customer service. They both behave the way they can do best. On Hofstede´s Uncertainty index both countries have a very high score, therefore they prefer to avoid confrontations even when they do not agree with something. This causes an internal pressure, raising their stress level. This is the reason why both countries' participants think that stress management is very important. Hungary has higher scores on Masculinity dimension, this makes them more controlled and competitive. Spaniards are more relationship oriented with less control on themselves, which makes conflicts even more personal, so this is the reason they could be much lauder than Hungarians.

4   Discussion and conclusion

Both Spanish and Hungarian respondents mentioned similar skills that they consider important and they use at work. Communication, problem solving, empathy and customer orientation are on the top of both lists. Stress management was important for both groups, but most Spanish respondents chose other skills to be taught. There were only a handful of suggestions for stress management. Many Hungarian respondents thought that learning to work independently is very important which corresponds to one of the skills they often use. As Hungarians' approach to customer satisfaction seems to be more practical, they would also teach very practical skills for students. Many Spanish participants would teach how to be more patient. The other responses show quite steady distribution among the categories.

Problem solving, communication, stress management, customer orientation, empathy, conflict resolution, independency and patience should all be taught at tourism courses according to the groups. These skills are very similar to what participants find important and also what they use in their job. This means, most likely an average Front Desk Agent will be successful if they possess these skills. As a result, these eight skills should be the focus points of trainings at tourism courses and employee developmental trainings as well.

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