Acquiring process of hospitality competence for employees in the small and medium-sized accommodation industry

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Abstract

In this study, the acquiring process of hospitality competence for employees in the accommodation industry was examined by focusing on hospitality competence, which is important for the development of service industries. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to 7 young employees working in the small and medium-sized accommodation industry. The interview data were analyzed by a Modified Grounded Theory Approach (M-GTA) and 36 concepts, 15 subcategories and 4 categories, which were constituted in a model for acquiring process of hospitality competence, were generated. The results revealed that the acquiring process of employees' hospitality competence was influenced by their interactions with co-workers and customers, and also facilitated by their new role outside the main task, while learning proceeds mainly through work. In other words, it was shown that, as well as interaction with others, including co-workers and customers, new role outside the main task were important factors in the acquisition process of hospitality competence.

Keywords

hospitality competence, acquiring process, employees, small and medium-sized accommodation industry, M-GTA

1. Introduction

The number of service industry workers in developed countries is increasing year by year, accounting for more than 70 % of the total number of workers in major countries, according to data of the National Institute of Social Security and Population Studies [National Institute of Population and Social Security Research Japan, 2022; 2023]. In recent years, the proportion of workers in the service industry in major countries has been 81 % (2019) in the UK, 79 % (2021) in Canada, 79 % (2021) in the USA, 78 % (2020) in France, 73 % (2020) in Japan, 71 % (2020) in Germany, and 70 % (2020) in Italy. While the services industry has expanded in this way, individual values, such as lifestyles and ways of working, have changed along with changes in society, such as globalization, information technology, falling birthrates and an ageing population. People have come to value the experiences gained from the purchase and provision of services more than they value the purchase and consumption of services.

Against the backdrop of this global trend, two International Organization for Standardization of services were established in 2021: ISO 23592 (Service excellence: Principles and model) and ISO/TS 24082 (Service excellence: Designing excellent service to achieve outstanding customer experiences) [International Organization for Standardization, 2021a; 2021b]. These two ISOs are organizational models and service design standards that focus on customer engagement and co-creation to deliver services that provide each customer with an outstanding experience and positive emotions such as delight and excitement (Customer Delight). Solnet et al. [2019] points to the importance of hospitality based on kindness, sincerity, welcome and respect that occurs during person-to-person interactions as factors that positively influence customer memories.

Thus, hospitality competence of front-line customer-facing employees becomes essential to create Customer Delight in the service experience. However, as hospitality is a tacit knowledge relying on individuals, it is difficult to develop this competence. Although the two ISOs mentioned above indicate that customer-employee relations are important for service, there is no mention of developing hospitality competence to create Customer Delight. Currently, the service market is growing in size and competition is intensifying; the development of hospitality competence to create Customer Delight is essential for the future development of the service industry.

In order to effectively develop hospitality competence, it is necessary to properly understand the process by which employees acquire such competence. Among service industries, employees in the accommodation industry spend more time in contact with customers than in other industries and are required to demonstrate hospitality competence in a variety of tasks. In other words, the process of acquiring hospitality competence among employees in the accommodation industry is considered to contain elements common to other service industries. Therefore, this study aims to elucidate the process of acquiring hospitality competence among employees in the accommodation industry.

2. Research literature

The hospitality industry, the accommodation industry, is a labour-intensive industry and much research has been conducted on employee training and development. For example, Costen and Salazar [2011] studied the effects of training and other development opportunities. They conducted a survey of employees working in four luxury hotels in Southeast USA regarding opportunities to develop new skills and competencies. Analysis of the survey results revealed that employees who took advantage of training opportunities were more satisfied

with their jobs and more likely to stay with the company due to increased loyalty. The study considers that the opportunity to participate in training enables employees to acquire the knowledge, skills and competencies needed to carry out their jobs, increasing their confidence in their service capabilities and job satisfaction. Based on these results, the study suggested the importance of continuing to invest in employee education and ensure training opportunities for employees, even if the organization progresses into a financially difficult situation.

Úbeda-García et al. [2014] identify the impact of strategic orientation on training policies for human resources development, which is important for hotels. A questionnaire survey was conducted with the managers of 112 hotels in the Valencia region of Spain, focusing on the hotel's strategy, human resources development strategy, and training outcomes. The results of the survey showed that, for hotels with a differentiated strategy, a training policy focused on human capital development can lead to improved performance through its impact on competence development, customer satisfaction, etc. At the same time, the study also presents the importance of long-term planning and training evaluation in human capital-oriented training. These results suggest that company strategies also influence human capital development strategies, which in turn involve service quality, customer satisfaction and business performance.

Thus, human resource development research in the accommodation industry has mainly focused on the macro perspective - the effectiveness and strategic nature of human resource development [Chiang et al., 2005; Taylor, 2019]. As a result, most studies have been conducted from the management perspective, and few studies have been conducted on the process of acquiring hospitality competence from the employees' perspective. In addition, most of human resource development research in the accommodation industry is focused on the large-scale accommodation industry. However, as Buhalis and Main [1998] point out, the majority of the accommodation industry worldwide is small to medium scale. For example, 98 % of the accommodation industry in Japan is small to medium scale [Organization for Small & Medium Enterprises and Regional Innovation, Japan, 2017]. Due to their small size, the hospitality of each and every employee is more important in the customer's accommodation experience. The acquisition of employees' varied competencies in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is contextualized in their daily practices, so the relationship between work and the acquisition process is not clear [Short and Gray, 2017]. Therefore, if the acquisition process of hospitality competences of employees in small and medium-sized accommodation enterprises could be clarified, it would lead to the development of human resource development in the accommodation industry.

3. Research methods
3.1 Survey methodology
Semi-structured interviews were conducted between June

and September 2023 with 7 young employees of small and medium-sized hotels and inns in Ishikawa Prefecture, Japan. All survey participants were young employees working in front-line customer relations in the accommodation industry; the attributes of the 7 respondents are presented in Table 1. Each interview was conducted within each accommodation establishment and the interview time per person ranged from 63 to 76 minutes (average 69 minutes). The interviews were recorded on an IC recorder with the subject's consent.

Table 1: List of surveyed persons

	Gender	Ages	Years of employment
A	Female	Late 20s	3 years
B	Female	Early 30s	6 years
C	Female	Early 20s	4 years
D	Female	Late 20s	6 years
E	Male	Late 20s	4 years
F	Female	Early 30s	6 years
G	Female	Early 20s	3 years

In order to clarify the process of acquiring hospitality competence, the interview items were mainly five points regarding hospitality-related work experiences from the time when they started working as employees to the present: (1) overview of work from the beginning to the present, (2) initial hospitality work-related experiences, (3) changes from the early years to the present, (4) experiences that have influenced hospitality behaviour and thinking, and (5) aspirations and goals for the future.

3.2 Method of analysis
Analysis of the interview data was conducted using the Modified Grounded Theory Approach (hereafter referred to as M-GTA).M-GTA is a method of analysis developed by Kinoshita [1999] using the characteristics of the original version of the Grounded Theory Approach [Glaser and Strauss, 1967], it is an analytical method that has been systematized to make it easier to put into practice. It is suitable for research that is concerned with social interactions in which people interact directly with each other and where the phenomenon under study has a processual character [Kinoshita, 2003; 2020]. In the data analysis, the analysis aimed to identify the processes through which accommodation employees with limited work experience acquire hospitality competence in a variety of tasks, dealing with daily visiting customers and receiving support from other employees and the organization.

First, the interview data were transcribed, and one specific example was used for the section related to the purpose of the analysis, and explanatory concepts were generated that could explain other similar specific examples. During the generation of concepts, an analysis worksheet was created for each concept, in which the concept name, definition, rational concrete example, and theoretical notes were written. When looking

for similar concrete examples and adding them to the analysis worksheet, the concept names and definitions were modified as appropriate, taking care not to make the interpretation arbitrary by comparing the concrete examples of the counter-examples and similar examples. Once no new concepts or interpretations were created from the data and the concept names and definitions could be determined, theoretical saturation of the concepts was determined. The relationships between the generated concepts were examined, categories consisting of several concepts were generated and sub-categories were generated where necessary; after determining ideological saturation in the analysis of the 6th survey participant, theoretical saturation was confirmed from the results of the 7th survey participant to ensure the reliability of the analysis results.

4. Results and discussion

The M-GTA analysis of the interview data generated 36 concepts, 15 subcategories, and 4 categories regarding the acquisition of hospitality competence. The contents are presented in Table 2. Based on these results, a structured result diagram was created by examining the relationships among the categories in terms of the process of learning hospitality competence and its facilitating factors (Figure 1). The following section describes the storyline of the process of learning hospitality competence for employees based on the result diagram. In the text, categories, subcategories, and concepts are indicated by [　], 【　】, and "　", respectively.

4.1 Result diagram storyline

The result diagram in Figure 1 is explained below. For young employees in the accommodation industry, the acquiring of hospitality competence is influenced by [Interaction between employees] and [Interaction with customers], in proceeding [Acquiring on main operations] as a central way, and is enhanced by new [Role outside the main task].

For young people starting work as employees in the accommodation industry, 【1. Effects of training】 and 【2. Role of manuals】 as foundational education help them to carry out the main 【3. Diversified operations】 and to learn "Anxiety about a wide variety of tasks," but can also create the "Connections between diversified operations" necessary for hospitality practice. It gives 【4. Inner-self of employee】 a passion for their work and a desire to learn, and leads them to think objectively about 【5. Understanding the current state of hospitality competence】. In particular, 【4. Inner-self of employee】 is also influenced by both [Interaction between employees] and [Interaction with customers] to mature.

On the other hand, 【6. Effect of communication with co-workers】 by employees can create 【8. Reliance in the workplace】 and 【7. Influence】 such as "Acquiring from senior employees," and deepen the organization's 【9. Understanding of the concept of values for hospitality】.

At the same time, they can understand 【10. Significance of customer presence】 in their daily "Customer interaction and

awareness," and can also 【11. Development of relationships with customers】 and 【12. Understanding diversified hospitalities】, which in turn enables 【13. Challenge to creative hospitality】. In addition, 【12. Understanding diversified hospitalities】 also acts on 【5. Understanding current state of hospitality competence】. In addition, 【9. Understanding of the concept of values for hospitality】 affects 【13. Challenge to creative hospitality】 and 【5. Understanding current state of hospitality competence】.

When they are becoming used to their work, having 【14. Delight in new roles】 is 【15. Source of creative hospitality】, which motivates them to go on with "Trial and error to meet customer needs" and to "Struggle with intangible hospitality" and facilitates the acquisition of competences.

Thus, a process model of hospitality acquisition was generated, shown in the resulting diagram.

4.2 Results and discussion of each category

This section describes and discusses the results of each of the four categories.

4.2.1 Acquiring on main operations

This category, which is a central part of hospitality competence acquisition, generated five subcategories and 16 concepts (Table 2). This category is characterized by the maturation of 【4. Inner-self of employee】, which is necessary for hospitality competence. "Acquiring of knowledge related to added values," "Inner-self change of due to social changes," and "Motivation to learn" and internal motivations such as passion were increased through work-related training, manual learning, and work practices.

I want to provide hospitality beyond customers' expectations like my seniors, but I'm getting used to it, and sometimes little minor mistakes happen, or when it's a bit busy, I get flustered, and sometimes something is left out. I think these problems are the ones that cause the most dissatisfaction for our customers. I think we want to make sure we do the obvious things right now, that's our priority. (Survey respondent E)

As in the above comment, 【5. Understanding the current state of hospitality competence】 is not only possible by [Acquiring on main operations], but also by [Interaction with customers] and [Interaction between employees]. In the complicated operations characteristic of small and medium-sized industries, going through the process to be able to accurately determine the current state of hospitality competence without being swept away by the busy environment is an important element in the process of acquiring competence.

4.2.2 Interaction between employees

This category generated four subcategories and nine concepts (Table 2). In "Acquiring from senior employees," as in

Table 2: Generated categories, subcategories, concepts, and definitions

| Category	Subcategory	Concept name	Definition
Acquiring on main operations	1. Effects of training	Understanding direction of decision making through new employee training	Understanding the direction of the organization's actions and decision making.
		Acquiring work supporting hospitalities	Acquiring the basic series of operations in accomodation industry.
		Opportunity to recognize growth	Interact with others through a variety of training sessions and objectively grasp the current state of acquiring
	2. Role of manuals	Role as educational platform	Manuals guide business decisions and provide psychological support.
		Expectation for development with manuals	Struggle to recognize customer needs that are not in manual.
	3. Diversified operations	Anxiety about a wide variety of tasks	Anxiety about performing a variety of tasks in small and medium-sized accomodation businesses.
		Discoveries in job rotation	Discovering the true meaning of hospitality from various departments and operations in the accomodation industry.
		Connections between diversified operations	Creating important connections for cross-departmental collaboration and support.
	4. Inner-self of employee	Passion with work for people	Hope and passion for working carefully with people in the accomodation industry.
		Motivation to learn	Continued motivation and desire to learn.
		Acquiring of knowledge related to added values	Want to acquire various knowledge that customers feel added value.
		Inner-self change of due to social changes	Considering customer response in light of unstable social changes.
	5. Understanding current state of hospitality competence	Struggle with intangible hospitality	Concerning no clear answer to hospitality.
		Self-understanding of hospitality	Having self-understanding and beliefs about hospitality.
		Understanding organizational culture	Be aware of and empathize with the organizational culture that influences the organization's hospitality.
		Responsiveness and confidence	Confidence grows as you feel the responsiveness to hospitality.
Interaction between employees	6. Effect of communication with co-workers	Building relationships both inside and outside organization	Building workplace relationships beyond formal and informal.
		Effects of internal communication	Internal communication helps hospitality.
	7. Influence from co-workers	Acquiring from senior employees	Acquiring hospitality while gaining reassurance from senior employees.
		Significance for mentoring juniors	Reflecting on themselves through teaching.
		Delight of being entrusted and creative hospitality	Creativity for hospitality arising from pleasure of recognition.
	8. Reliance in the workplace	Gaining a sense of security based on OJT	Learn hospitality while gaining a sense of security from seniors in the field.
		Effects of a reliable environment	Thanks to a reliable environment, I can push forward with my work.
	9. Understanding of concept of values for hospitality	Acquiring how to respond to social change	Acquiring to be proactive from a manager who can respond to any social situation.
		Deep understanding of organization in operation field	Deep understanding of hospitality guidelines from the actions of senior staff.
Interaction with customers	10. Significance of customer presence	Customer interaction and awareness	Realizing what they can learn from interacting with customers.
		Emergence of a sense of contribution	Appreciation and a sense of contribution to what they can learn from customers.
	11. Development of relationships with customers	Customer perspective obtained from reflection	Refining customer perspective through reflection on daily practice.
		Vitality arising from sharing emotions	Sharing emotions with customers induces vitality.
	12. Understanding diversified hospitalities	Spontaneous development of customer observation skills	Spontaneously observant in understanding customer needs.
		Acquiring during hospitality practices	Acquiring about diverse customer reactions through hospitality practices.
	13. Challenge to creative hospitality	Trial and error to meet customer needs	Continuing various trials and errors for value co-creation.
Role outside the main task	14. Delight in new roles	Delight of unexpected acquiring	Discovering pleasure of unexpected acquiring through work that is separate from main job.
		Exuberance for new roles	Anxious but excited about a role in a different business than customer service.
	15. Source of creative hospitality	Willingness to create hospitality	Willingness to practice diversified approaches to hospitality.
		Rewarding and self-growing	Feeling personal growth and pleasure in the results of new challenges.
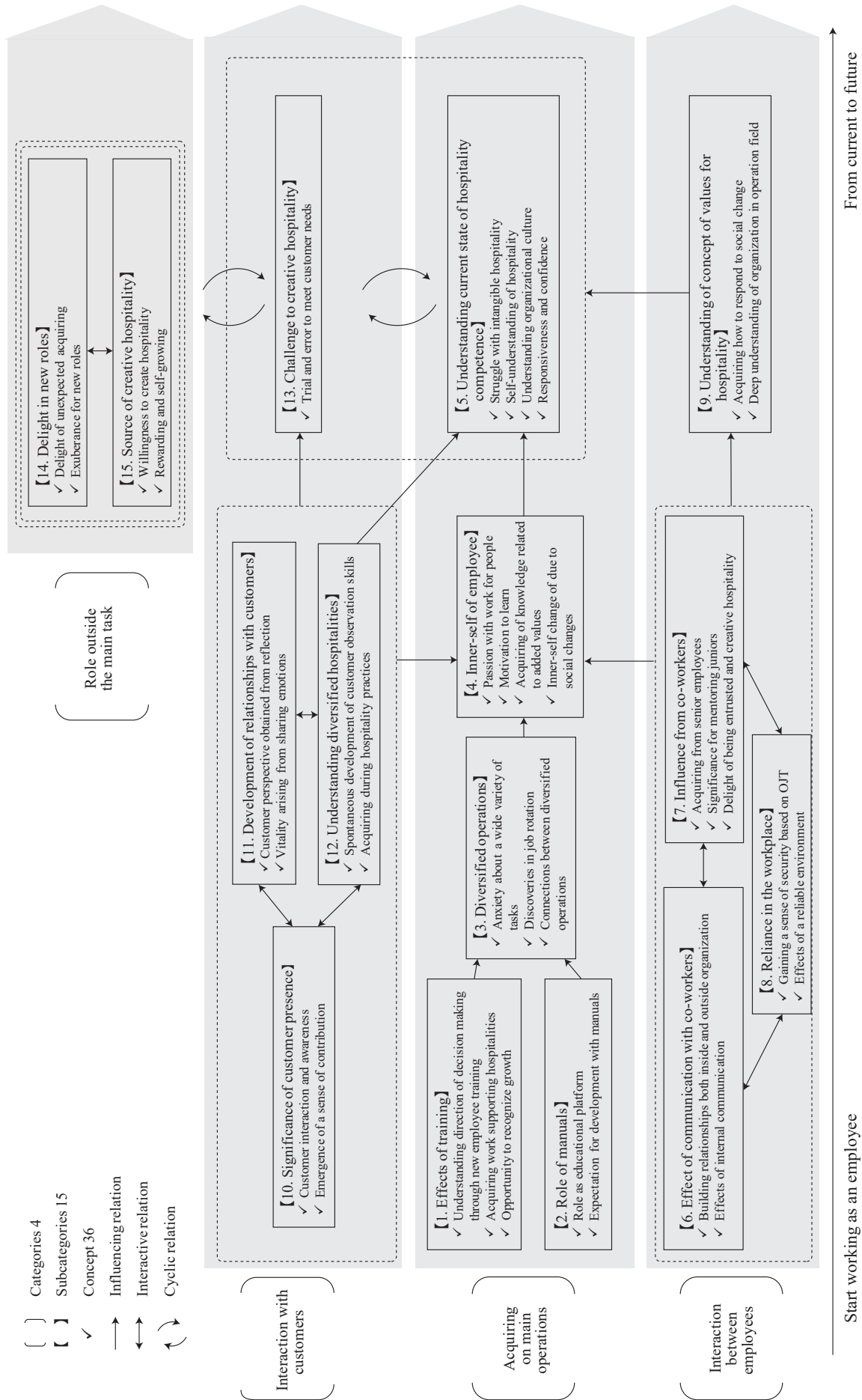
Figure 1: Acquiring process of hospitality competence for employees

the following comment,

> I think I have learnt from my seniors in the past that I should not omit to listen to even the smallest words of the customers. (Survey participant F)

the hospitality is tacit knowledge, so they acquired it by watching the behavior and thinking of their seniors. The acquiring is enabled by "Building relationships both inside and outside the organization" and "Effects of a reliable environment" represented in the following comment,

> The part where you are told it's okay because it's going to be anyway, and the part where you are given a push was also important. (Survey participant A)

It was also found that active communication between employees built positive relationships and created 【8. Reliance in the workplace】. Thus, it can be assumed that young employees were able to trust their seniors and an environment was created in which hospitality could be practiced without fear of failure.

4.2.3 Interaction with customers

This category generated four subcategories and seven concepts (Table 2). "Customer interaction and awareness" led to "Spontaneous development of customer observation skills" and interacted with "Vitality arising from sharing emotions" for customers. In "Trial and error to meet customer needs" generated by the above process, the following comment was obtained,

> You don't respond to them the same, you respond to them. It's really detailed. It's different every day. What I did yesterday doesn't work for this person. You don't know until you try. At first, I feel that if you don't gradually change what you were taught to do in this way, you won't be able to improve. (Survey participant B)

The comment suggests that there is a strong interaction between employees and customers in 【13. Challenge to creative hospitality】.

4.2.4 Role outside the main task

This category generated two subcategories and four concepts (Table 2); the two subcategories 【14. Delight in new roles】 and 【15. Source of creative hospitality】 interacted.

> I've never originally designed flyers or made anything like that, but I decided to give it a go and when I did, it was rather rewarding. (Survey participant C)

As in the above comment, the "Rewarding and self-growing" seen in [Role outside the main task], which had the circular relation with 【13. Challenge to creative hospitality】 in the other

category, [Interaction with customers]. In other words, the expansion of tasks and roles given to the young employees, when they were becoming used to their job could have created new objectives and facilitated the acquisition of hospitality competence.

4.3 Key elements of hospitality competence acquisition

In 4.1, the process by which employees in the medium-sized accommodation industry acquire hospitality competence in the course of their various tasks was discussed. As a result, the following two key elements are derived.

The first element is that 【4. Inner-self of employee】 is not only influenced by [Acquiring on main operations], but also by [Interaction between employees] and [Interaction with customers]. It is suggested that hospitality competence is acquired through interaction with other people including co-workers and customers.

The second factor, 【14. Delight in new roles】 in [Role outside the main task], was found to facilitate the acquisition of hospitality competence. While practicing hospitality in their main task, the participants were given new roles outside their main task, which may have given them a new perspective on hospitality. Therefore, it can be said that the breadth of knowledge and thinking expanded, and by viewing hospitality from multiple perspectives, 【14. Delight in new roles】 became 【15. Source of creative hospitality】, which facilitated the acquisition of hospitality competence.

The above mechanisms showed that interaction with others and new roles outside the main task facilitated the acquisition of hospitality competence.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the process of acquiring hospitality skills among employees in the accommodation industry. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 7 young employees in the small and medium-sized accommodation industry, and M-GTA analysis was conducted. 36 concepts, 15 subcategories and 4 categories were generated, constituting a model for the hospitality competence acquisition process.

The hospitality competence acquisition process of employees in the accommodation industry is influenced by [Interaction between employees] and [Interaction with customers]. While [Acquiring on main operations] is the main process, it was found to be facilitated by the new [Role outside the main task]. In other words, it was shown that interaction with others as well as new roles outside the main task function as important factors in facilitating the competence acquisition process.

The theoretical implication of this study is that it demonstrated the process of hospitality competence acquisition. The importance of hospitality competence has been pointed out in the service industry, including the accommodation industry, but little has been known about the process of acquiring it. The process of acquiring hospitality competence identified in this study provides new knowledge on human resource develop-

ment research in the service industry.

Promoting human resource development within organizations based on the acquisition process of hospitality competence as indicated in this study will lead to improved quality of service. Therefore, the practical implication of this study is that it can provide a basis for the design of training and education programs in the service industry.

As a future challenge, this study did not examine the process of hospitality competence acquisition beyond the medium term, as the research participants in this study was set to young employees. Clarifying the process of hospitality competence, taken comprehensively beyond the medium term, is important for the development of the service industry with a focus on customer service. It is also necessary to extend the scope of the study beyond the accommodation industry to other parts of the service industry and to elaborate the processes of competence acquisition obtained in this study.

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