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RESEARCH NOTE

AN ANALYSIS OF EVENT MANAGERS' PROBLEM-SOLVING PROPENSITY: APPLYING THE PROBLEM-SOLVING INVENTORY (PSI) TO THE FIELD OF EVENT MANAGEMENT

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The field of event management encompasses the conceptualization of a festival or event, a determination of the intended target market, coordination of systems, policies, and procedures needed to plan and support the event, and the eventual administration of a proposed event. This broad scope of functional duties surrounding event planning requires that an event manger have at his or her disposal a diverse repertoire of problem-solving abilities. Using Heppner's Problem-Solving Inventory (PSI) the researchers determined that the sampled group of event professionals from the International Special Events Society (ISEP) exhibited high levels of problem-solving self-confidence, high approach behavior, and high levels of personal control in their role as event managers.

Key words: Event management; Event professionals; Problem-solving skills; Hospitality education

Introduction

The event industry is touted to be a very fast paced business that requires an event manager to be highly skilled in the systems, practices, and procedures that surround the formulation and conduct of a scheduled event. However, the variety in settings, event types, range of vendors needed to service the event, and issues surrounding host site facilities and services require that an event manager be highly adept at problem solving from conception to postevent.

From an educator's perspective it is fundamentally important to profile and understand these skills so as to properly prepare their students for a management career in event planning. Therefore, the core assumption of the reported study is that a successful event manager must possess a unique set of problem-solving skills in an effort to be effective in this high "touch" and high "volume" industry. However, the problem, to date, is that there is a paucity of research delineating the problem-solving skills that an event manager must have in order to be effective in the field of event management.

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The crux of this study focuses on profiling the problem-solving characteristics as utilized by current event managers who are active members of the International Special Events Society (ISEP). In particular, this article reports the findings of an exploratory study that measured the perceptions of problem-solving preferences among a sample of certified event managers. Similar to other sectors of applied management practice, problem solving for event managers may be theoretically grounded within the dimensions associated with a temporary business model, because each produced event is uniquely designed. The phenomenon of special events management and how event leaders must continuously make decisions based upon knowledge, skill, and intuition are the constructs of why events operations are a unique field of study within the hospitality industry. Therefore, the determination of the fundamental problem-solving characteristics employed by the event manager is needed to understand how they communicate, disseminate information, and implement operational strategies within these unique environments. The article concludes with suggestions for educators based on the findings of the study.

Literature Review: A Focus on Proposed Event Management Competencies

A focus on problem solving for the training and educating of special event managers is a concept worth exploring, assuming that doing so improves an individual's ability to assess and adjust within to workplace situations. This point serves as the premise for research conducted by Barrows (1985) and Barrows and Tamblyn (1980). According to these authors problem-based learning emphasizes problem-solving outcomes and recommended instructional strategies, such as authentic cases, simulations, modeling, and coaching to support problem-solving behavior (Barrows, 1985; Barrows & Tamblyn, 1980). Experiential or real-world problem-based learning has long been recognized as a powerful tool in education (Daly, 2001; Papamacros, 2002). Summaries of the educational benefits of conducting real business activities include the development of creative and critical thinking skills, practical experience to assist in career development, integration of different elements of

coursework, better interpersonal skills, as well as improved self-confidence (Moscardo & Norris, 2004).

The central point of education is to teach people to think, to use their rational powers, to become better problem solvers (Gagne, 1980). Educators have identified problem solving as a life skill and not only an isolated learning outcome. The challenge, however, is that rote memorization does not always transfer to unique situations outside of the original context. Therefore, if learners are not exposed to problem-solving situations they often have difficulty functioning in professional contexts.

Jonasson (2002) noted that "The discrepancy between what learners need in complex, problem-solving experiences and what formal education institutions provides represents a unique challenge for the educator." Jonasson claims, "we do not understand the breadth of problem-solving activities well enough to engage and support learners in them." This observation, however, does not indicate that problem-solving activities cannot be taught within an educational setting.

The Study

The objective of the study was to profile the problem-solving characteristics as employed by certified special event managers from the International Special Events Society (ISES). In order to profile the respondent's problem-solving characteristics, Heppner's Problem-Solving Inventory (PSI) instrument was administered to assess these respondents' perceptions of their own problem-solving behaviors and attitudes.

The PSI Instrument

The PSI has been used in medical and educational settings as well as counseling for determining an assessment of a person's style of coping or managing troubling situations (Heppner, 1978). Specifically, the PSI scores predicts cognitive, affective, and behavioral characteristics associated with problem-solving scenarios. It is important to note that this inventory is to be used only as a tool in identifying behavioral styles and should not be used exclusively as a predictor of abilities.

The PSI instrument is reported in *The Eleventh*

Mental Measurements Yearbook (Kramer & Conoley, 1992) as a reliable and valid instrument for identifying individual's perceptions of their problem-solving attitudes and behaviors. The PSI instrument has evolved over time under the application of a factor analysis approach, which has resulted in a total of 35 questions that measure the three constructs (factors) of (a) problem-solving ability (PSA), (b) approach-avoidance to situations (AA), and (c) level of personal control of the situation (PC). The estimates of test–retest reliability for the PSI range from 0.93 to 0.99 (Heppner & Peterson, 1982). The items associated with the three PSI constructs are listed in Table 1.

The possible range of any one individual's problem-solving confidence (CON) score is 11 to 66 whereby a lower score is indicative of higher levels of confidence when it comes to solving business-related situations. The possible range for an individual's approach-avoidance (AA) score is from 16 to 96 where a lower score indicates a propensity to approach a challenging situation versus deliberately avoiding confrontation. Lastly, personal control (PC) items show the level of which the individual feels that they are in control of their emotions and behaviors when solving problems. The possible range for this PSI factor is from 5 to 30 with a lower score indicating a high level of perceived control in handling situations. Each of the PSI factors were set to a 6-point Likert-type scale where 1 = Strongly Agree and 6 = Strongly Disagree.

Methodology

The Sample

The sample consisted of 297 certified special event professionals from the ISES. This mailing list provided by ISES was not randomized and therefore is representative of a cross section of their existing membership. Furthermore, those members who were selected had to have completed a recognized event management certification and be listed as active ISES members.

The collection of these certified event professionals' problem-solving attitudes and behaviors was accomplished via the administration of an email survey utilizing their ISES email addresses. Out of the 297 members that had obtained a certi-

fication in event management, approximately 25% ($n = 69$) useable responses were collected for statistical analysis. As noted in Table 2, the respondents consisted of a wide range of ages, degrees of education, and financial status.

Research Questions

The following research questions centered on determining the event managers' perceptions of their problem-solving confidence, approach-avoidance to situations, and level of personal control over event planning situations.

R1. What is the degree of problem-solving confidence (CON) as evidenced by this group of ISES event managers?

R2. What is the degree of approach-avoidance (AA) to situations as evidenced by this group of ISES event mangers?

R3. What is the degree of personal control (PC) to situations as evidenced by this group of ISES event managers?

R4. Is there any statistical evidence of differences when the respondent ratings are segmented by demographics (gender and educational attainment) relative to the three PSI factor scores?

Study Findings

This group of certified event planners was heavily represented by females (76.8%) with 69.5% holding a degree past high school of which 42% had obtained a bachelor's or graduate degree. It is interesting to note that 79.7% held the Certified Special Events Professional designation with the remainder holding certification as a Certified Meeting Professional, Certified Professional Catering Executive, or some other certificate from an allied hospitality association. The length of time spent in the industry, respondent age, and annual event revenue generate is laudable with the average being 17 years of experience, average age of approximately 43 years of age, and an annual event revenue on average being 972,423. Clearly this group of event professionals is quite seasoned in their positions as certified event managers (Table 2).

Table 1

Problem-Solving Inventory (PSI) Constructs

Factor: Problem-solving confidence (CON)
  I am usually able to think up creative and effective alternatives to solve a problem.
  I have the ability to solve most problems even though initially no solution is immediately apparent.
  Many problems I face are too complex for me to solve.
  I made decisions and am happy with them later.
  When I make plans to solve a problem, I am almost certain that I can make them work.
  Given enough time and effort, I believe I can solve most problems that confront me.
  When faced with a novel situation I have confidence that I can handle problems that may arise.
  I trust my ability to solve new and difficult problems.
  After making a decision, the outcome I expected usually matches the actual outcome.
  When confronted with a problem, I am unsure of whether I can handle the situation.
  When I become aware of a problem, one of the first things I do is to try to find out exactly what the problem is.
Factor: Approach-avoidance style (AA)
  When a solution to a problem was unsuccessful, I do not examine why it didn't work.
  When I am confronted with a complex problem, I do not bother to develop a strategy to collect information so I can define
    exactly what the problem is.
  After I have solved a problem, I do no analyze what went right or what went wrong.
  After I have tried to solve a problem with a certain course of action, I take time and compare the actual outcome to what
    I thought should have happened.
  When I have a problem, I think up as many possible ways to handle it as I can until I can't come up with any more ideas.
  When confronted with a problem, I consistently examine my feelings to find out what is going on in a problem situation.
  When confronted with a problem, I tend to do the first thing that I can think of to solve it.
  When deciding on an idea or possible solution to a problem, I do not take time to consider the chances of each alternative
    being successful.
  When confronted with a problem, I stop and think about it before deciding on a next step.
  I generally go with the first good idea that comes to my mind.
  When making a decision, I weigh the consequences of each alternative and compare them against each other.
  I try to predict the overall result of carrying out a particular course of action.
  When I try to think up possible solutions to a problem, I do not come up with very many alternatives.
  I have a systematic method for comparing alternatives and making decisions.
  When confronted with a problem, I do no usually examine what sort of external things my environment may be contributing
    to my problem.
  When I am confused by a problem, one of the first things I do is survey the situation and consider all the relevant pieces
    of information.
Factor: Personal control (PC)
  When my first efforts to solve a problem fail, I become uneasy about my ability to handle the situation.
  Sometimes I do not stop and take time to deal with my problems, but just kind of muddle ahead.
  Even though I work on a problem, sometimes I feel like I am groping or wandering, and am not getting down to the real
    issue.
  I make snap judgments and later regret them.
  Sometimes I get so charged up emotionally that I am unable to consider many ways of dealing with my problems.

R1. What Is the Degree of Problem-Solving Confidence (CON) as Evidenced by This Group of ISES Event Managers?

The respondents' ratings of the CON items indicate these event professionals have a high level of self-assurance when problem solving. Relative to this scale, the lower the score the higher is the degree of the respondents "confidence" in handling the business situation. For this construct the possible range of any one individual's CON score is from 11 to 66. The findings note that the mean CON score is 18.5, thus indicating that these event professionals perceive that they must portray

strong confidence when making business decisions (Table 3).

R2. What Is the Degree of Approach-Avoidance (AA) to Situations as Evidenced by This Group of ISES Event Managers?

Those items noted in Table 1 as AA style factors show the extent to which an individual will elect to avoid or approach problem solving. The possible range of any one individual's AA score was from 16 to 96. The mean score for this construct is 38, thus implying that these event professionals either approach or avoid problem solving

Table 2
Descriptive Profile of Respondents

	Frequency[a]	Percent
Gender		
Male	16	23.2
Female	53	76.8
Education		
High school	21	30.4
Associates degree	8	11.5
Bachelor's degree	27	39.1
Master's degree	11	15.9
Doctorate degree	2	2.9
Certifications		
Certified Special Events Profes- sional (CSEP)	55	79.7
Certified Meeting Professional (CMP) & CSEP	8	11.6
Certified Professional Catering Executive (CPCE) & CSEP	1	1.4
CSEP & Other	3	4.3
	Mean	SD
Years in industry	17.4	8.0
Age of respondent	42.6	9.9
Events per year	17.4	8.0
Personal income	68,948	32,193
Annual event revenue	972,423	

[a]Demographic variables not totaling 69 represent missing values.

depending on the present contextual variables that drive them to either approach or avoid (to a greater or lesser) the situation (Table 3). Clearly this mean rating gives strong testament to the complexities and the contextual intricacies of event management and to the importance of coping, communicating, and properly handling situations that may arise during an event.

R3. What Is the Degree of Personal Control (PC) to Situations as Evidenced by This Group of ISES Event Managers?

The items classified as PC factors (Table 1) show the level of which the individual perceives that they are in control of their emotions and behaviors when solving problems. The possible range for the CON score is from 5 to 30. A lower score is indicative of a heightened ability on the construct in question, which in this case means that these respondents perceived that they did not always perceive that they were in control of the situation (mean = 12.6) (Table 3). This general re-

sponse profile by these event professionals, once again, implies that the planning and conduct of an event is quite complex and wrought with management and communication challenges that require coping skills that may or may not be within the professionals' repertoire without additional training.

R4. Is There Any Statistical Difference When the Respondent Ratings Are Segmented by Gender and Educational Attainment Relative to the Three PSI Constructs?

For the purposes of this research study, the comparison of PSI scores was reflected upon by a comparison of mean score as well as using the chi-square nonparametric procedure. The primary purpose was to determine the presence of significant differences concerning gender and educational attainment upon the respondents' AA score, CON score, and PC score (Table 4). For the chi-square procedure there was no evidence of statistical differences on each of the three PSI constructs, thus indicating strong respondent agreement on these constructs. However, there was one exception in that the comparison of the mean scores did indicate that educational attainment did influence the respondents' perception of their personal control of event planning situations. The word of caution in interpreting this statistical significance is that the number of responses ($n = 69$) is low, which severely limits interpretation and therefore generalization back to the general population of meeting planners.

Study Implications

Historically the PSI has been applied as an investigative tool to ascertain an individual's problem-solving and coping abilities, which to this end the conduct of this current study is no different.

Table 3
PSI Scores

	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Approach-avoidance (AA)	21	55	38.0	8.6
Personal control (PC)	5	23	12.6	4.8
Problem solving confidence (CON)	11	53	18.5	6.5

Table 4
Mean Difference: PC, AA, CON

	PC		AA		CON	
	Mean	Sig.	Mean	Sig.	Mean	Sig.
Gender		0.458		0.916		0.625
Male	11.8		37.8		17.8	
Female	12.8		38.0		18.7	
Education attainment		0.016		0.478		0.318
High school	10.2		37.5		19.2	
Associates	10.5		35.1		19.7	
Bachelors	14.5		40.2		19.0	
Masters	13.2		35.6		14.6	
Doctorate	15.5		37.5		20.5	

The findings of this study have shown that certified event specialists have a strong sense of problem-solving confidence; however, they prefer to avoid problem solving if possible depending upon the complexity or severity of the context. In general, the PSI findings imply that an event manager master a range of composite skills pertaining to Approach-Avoidance, Personal Control, and Problem Confidence abilities (Table 3). However, there are limitations to this study as noted below, which provide an element of caution in devising an educational or training program that focuses on these competencies/aptitudes. Still, once these specific competencies are validated then the development of educational or training systems, policies, or procedures can be designed in order to assist the event manager in coping with a given situation. In essence, the determination of what these specific cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills are necessary for the creation of standards for training and educating event managers that will, in turn, advance the professionalism of this industry.

Study Limitations

Limitations of the study are few, but significant. The number of participants, although the highest certified in the field of special events, is only a partial representation of those certified and performing special event management as an occupation. More participants and possibly other certified professionals from other aspects of the event industry should be included into future research to get a more representative understanding of the cognitive and behavioral aptitudes. For instance, certified catering professionals with the designation of CPCE (Certified Professional Catering Executive) from the National Association of Catering Executives would be another similar group to be compared. In addition, festival and event planners, conference and convention planners, and meeting planners would all have unarguable similarities of skill sets that could further add validity to the study. Therefore, a broader, and more representative, sampling of the members of these professional associations would add strength to the use of the PSI as a predictor of successful special event planning.

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