

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS IN MANAGING A CONFERENCE CENTRE IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper was to identify the key success factors (KSFs) in managing a conference centre. South Africa has experienced a significant increase in international tourist arrivals as well as an increase in domestic travel. One of the reasons for the increase is because of business travel of which the so-called MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions) sector is an important component. In order for the country to reap the benefits specifically of conference tourism, literature showed that quality management is of paramount importance. Identifying the KSFs will assist conference managers to focus on the most important aspects of managing a conference centre. In order to achieve this, 170 questionnaires were distributed via e-mail or were handed out personally to the membership of a conference venues database. Some 100 questionnaires were received back. Responses to the questionnaire were subjected to a factor analysis in order to identify the key success factors in managing a conference centre. Six factors were identified that showed some similarities to similar research conducted in other sectors of the tourism industry, although differing somewhat. The six factors were activities and layout, marketing, operational aspects, planning, design and evaluation and human resources. The value of this research is twofold; firstly this research has never been undertaken in the conference sector in South Africa and secondly, the research confirmed two key success factors found in similar studies conducted in the tourism industry namely, well-trained human resources, and layout and accessibility of facilities. This research thus has implications for the curricula of tertiary institutions offering event and conference tourism. The results also showed that well-trained staff are important, as are the lay-out of facilities for the latter should be based on needs of conference organisers and attendees. Hence, for South Africa fully to benefit from a growing market, these KSFs can contribute to a high quality conference experience.

Key words: Key success factors; KSFs; Conference centre; Strategic management; Factor analysis.

INTRODUCTION

According to Swarbrooke & Horner (2001:62), the most important factor when organising a conference is the location, together with the correct variety of facilities and services provided at the location. Craven and Golabowski (2001:92) state that when developing a conference centre, one should take into account certain important considerations that form part of the conference product, namely: availability of transport, accessibility of the location, nearby area attractions and restaurants for attendees, other activities in the city, together with sufficient

accommodation for attendees. Shone (1998:115) indicates five core management functions in conference centres that should be managed effectively, namely: conference operations, hospitality and facility management, marketing and sales, personnel and training, finance and control. These are just some of the considerations that conference centre managers are faced with as they strive to manage conference centres successfully and still remain competitive. However, according to Phillips and Moutinho (1999:1), this is not an easy task as managers are faced with the challenge of adapting to changes in the business environment such as technological changes, changes in the market place, and growing competition. Saayman (2001:83) states that tourism is part of an extremely competitive environment because of the increase in terms of products, destinations and tourists that have high expectations regarding quality of service. In order to manage a business effectively and efficiently, De Witt (2006:4) believes that one has to be pro-active in identifying the key success factors for a specific sector of the tourism industry.

Therefore, the aim of this article will be to identify the key success factors in managing a conference centre. In order to achieve this, the article is structured as follows: the introduction, followed by a literature review, the method of research, the results of the research and finally, conclusions are drawn and recommendations made.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The key success factors (KSFs) are those managerial aspects that will affect the ability of conference centre managers to prosper in the market place (Van der Westhuizen, 2003:14). Thompson and Strickland (1999:96) state that KSFs are so important that all owner-managers must pay close attention to them as they are prerequisites for success within an industry or sector. These aspects include particular strategic elements, product attributes, resources, competencies, competitive capabilities and business outcomes that could spell the difference between profit and loss.

In recent years, the conference industry in South Africa has gained momentum. With its favourable exchange rate, accommodation and world-class conference infrastructure, the country is becoming an increasingly popular choice for business and conference travel (Costa, 2005:8). In terms of the number of meetings scheduled between 2005 and 2016, South Africa ranks the eighteenth most popular meeting country in the world (Costa, 2006:60). This shows that South Africa still has room for improvement, and in order to compete more aggressively, good management skills are paramount.

The meetings and conventions sector has great potential to increase a country or region's employment, income and foreign exchange as it caters for the high-quality, high-cost and therefore high-yield, end of the market (Rogers, 2003:23). In the past, South Africa did not benefit greatly from conference tourism due to a lack of adequate conference facilities. According to Dirk Elzinga, managing director of the Cape Town International Convention Centre, Africa has been excluded from the international convention market due to a lack of resources and appropriate venues (Lebuso, 2001:10). The reason for the lack of appropriate conference venues in South Africa may be because the conference industry is still very young, and being a young industry implies that little research has been done to provide a base of information on trends in the industry, as well as the size and value of the conference industry. For this reason, many governments have not recognised the value of the conference sector as a

contributor to national economies and are therefore unwilling to invest in the development of conference-related infrastructure (Rogers, 2003:14). Furthermore, the development as well as management of conference centres in the 21st century is not an easy task since technological and social changes are taking place at a rapid pace (Rogers, 2003:258). The implication therefore is that conference venues are often poorly designed. The reason for this, according to Rogers (2003:258), is a lack of the management team to consider the full implications of design decisions (Shone, 1998:66). Designing the conference centre in a way that meets the needs of the client is a key issue for it to be successful, according to Swarbrooke and Horner (2001:92). The fact that conference centres are poorly planned also makes it difficult to manage them effectively.

The South African industry can improve its position by paying more attention to recruiting and training of employees as this issue is often neglected (Hinkin & Tracey, 2003:27). According to Rogers (2003:194), it is important for employees to have good interpersonal skills, as they will deal with a wide range of people. Shone (1998:163) believes that good management and organisational skills are also extremely important aspects in order for any conference venue to be successful and sustainable in the future. Van der Merwe (1999:42), however, argues that managers are often not equipped with these skills, and identified the following shortcomings:

- Management lack experience in how to run a conference centre.
- Management skills and managerial knowledge are lacking.
- Management lack knowledge regarding tourism trends.
- Management have limited knowledge regarding opportunities in the business environment.
- Management do not perform certain planning functions, such as financial and marketing planning.

Clearly, there is a lack of management knowledge and skills in the tourism industry (Saayman, 2001:226). This could be due to the lack of applied research within the conference industry. An industry can only be successful if it understands certain management aspects of the industry. For this reason, the quantity and quality of research in the industry must improve (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2001:227).

With regard to similar research conducted, two studies were found, one by Van der Westhuizen (2003) on KSFs in the guesthouse sector and a second by De Witt (2006), on KSFs for Wedding Tourism establishments. De Witt (2006:89-91) indicated the following KSFs for managing wedding tourism:

- Application of business ethics;
- analysing the internal and external business environment;
- developing and operating budget (financial control);
- positioning of wedding tourism venues;
- presentation of the venue;
- high levels of hygiene; and
- well-trained staff.

Van der Westhuizen (2003:209), in a study conducted in the guesthouse sector, revealed the following KSFs:

- The owner-manager is key;
- location of the venue – accessibility and facilitation;
- well-trained employees;
- high levels of hygiene; and
- meeting guest needs.

Therefore, the similarities of the two studies are location and accessibility of the venue (even though these are not necessarily something that owners have control over), hygiene factors and well-trained staff. These studies support the notion that KSFs for the different sectors of the tourism industry will differ, and support the opinion that this type of research is needed if the Tourism industry wishes to remain competitive.

According to Analoui and Karami (2003:88), it is important for conference centre managers to be aware of what the key success factors are when managing a conference centre, as these are skills or abilities that could be used by a conference centre in order to create a competitive advantage for itself in the industry.

METHOD OF RESEARCH

The literature review indicated a few studies relating to KSFs in the tourism industry, but none in the conference sector itself. Research projects by De Witt (2006) and Van der Westhuizen (2003) focussing on KSFs were used to compile the questionnaire for this study and include aspects such as strategic management, financial management, marketing management, human resource management and management of operational aspects. Work done by Hinkin and Tracey (2003:27); Crouch and Louviere (2004:118); Donald (2002:43); Rogers (2003:172); Swarbrooke and Horner (2001:92); and Shone (1998:115) that dealt with managerial aspects in tourism were also consulted.

The questionnaire consisted of two sections: Section A of the questionnaire was designed to derive general information from the study population in order for the researcher to gain insight into the different responses to certain items. Section B of the questionnaire was designed to determine the importance of key factors and includes aspects of strategic management, financial management, marketing management, human resource management and management of operational aspects. Seventy (70) aspects were listed in section B of the questionnaire using a 4 point Likert scale where 1 = not important and 4 = very important.

Questionnaires were sent to all venues included in the study population between March and June 2006. The study population consisted of a database of 170 conference venues that was compiled from two directories, namely: *Direct Access Conference Handbook* (See South Africa, 2004), and *The African Conference Directory* (See South Africa, 2007). Questionnaires were sent via e-mail to the venues included in the database. Only 30 questionnaires were received back via e-mail. As the response was low, the Tourism INDABA Exhibition held in May 2006 in Durban, South Africa was attended where questionnaires were personally handed out to 80 respondents of which 70 were received back. In total, 100 questionnaires were received back indicating a 59% response rate. Data was statistically

analysed by means of the Statistica programme (StatSoft, 2004). The programme was firstly used to conduct a rotated factor analysis (Verimax Raw) that was used to identify relevant key success factors, and secondly, Spearman Rank Order Correlations were calculated between factors.

RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

All 70 variables as found in Section B of the questionnaire, which includes aspects of strategic management, financial management, marketing management, human resource management and management of operational aspects were subjected to factor analysis to identify the key success factors in managing a conference centre. Because of high correlations between some of the variables and low commonalities between some variables, only 34 variables were used in the extraction of the factors in table 1.

Six factors were identified from the factor analysis as indicated in table 1, explaining 64% of the variance. The final commonalities were relatively high. All commonalities were higher than 0.5 and these are also indicated in table 1.

TABLE 1: FACTOR ANALYSIS

Variable	Factor 1 Activities and layout	Factor 2 Marketing	Factor 3 Core operational aspects	Factor 4 Planning	Factor 5 Design and evaluation	Factor 6 Well trained employees
Sufficient foyer	0.462849					
Exhibition space	0.420367					
Security	0.519304					
Office for organiser	0.674047					
Financial services	0.789455					
Tours/Airline desks	0.814990					
Pre/post touring	0.821734					
Spouse/ Children programmes	0.830935					
Luggage storage	0.725073					
Market research		0.530038				
Product life- cycle		0.756940				
Price strategy		0.756325				
Sales		0.580839				

Promotion						
Sufficient lighting			0.720509			
Air-conditioning			0.733738			
Working order			0.724468			
Cleanliness			0.712338			
Welcoming			0.826245			
Mission statement				0.737147		
Business philosophy				0.747340		
Code of ethics				0.620101		
Business strategies				0.657083		
Business plan				0.753830		
Capital budget				0.619982		
Financial control				0.540661		
Break-even analysis				0.573830		
Attractive features					0.553801	
Telephone services					0.601440	
Complaint handling					0.851854	
Verbal feedback					0.718944	
Questionnaire					0.659719	
Recruitment						0.732165
Training						0.803669
Performance appraisal						0.598411

Table 2 indicates the mean and standard deviation of these factors. According to table 2, all factors are important rating from important to an extent to very important. The factors can be rated according to a four point Likert scale used in the questionnaire namely: 1 = not important, 2 = important to an extent, 3 = important, 4 = very important. Factor 3 (operational aspects), factor 4 (planning), and factor 6 (human resource management), are regarded as being very important. Factor 2 (marketing) and factor 5 (design and evaluation) are regarded as being important. Factor 1 (activities and layout) is regarded as being not as important as other factors.

TABLE 2: MEAN AND STANDARD DEVIATION OF FACTORS

Factor	N	Mean	Median	Standard deviation
Activities and layout	100	2.689861	2.555556	0.720834
Marketing	100	3.425833	3.500000	0.532198
Core operational aspects	100	3.828000	4.000000	0.311426
Planning	100	3.557321	3.625000	0.463656
Design and evaluation	100	3.467000	3.600000	0.502128
Human resource management	100	3.673333	4.000000	0.441861

The factors extracted from the factor analysis will now be explained.

Factor 1: Activities and layout

According to Shone (1998:69), the layout of a conference centre should be designed to facilitate networking as this forms part of the objectives of any conference. Therefore, Factor 1 revealed the importance of aspects such as providing a foyer large enough to accommodate a great number of people during registration while providing exhibition space. Other aspects of importance include the provision of financial services, tours and airline desks, pre- and post-conference touring opportunities, and spouse and children programmes (Shone, 1998:107; Shone & Parry, 2004:186; Tassiopoulos, 2000:283). These aspects need to be considered in order to satisfy a variety of needs and enhance the attractiveness of the venue. Providing these activities at a conference centre might distinguish it from others as being a more desirable location for a conference (Tassiopoulos, 2000:378). This factor had the lowest mean value (2.6).

Factor 2: Marketing

According to Laws (2002:4) and Bennet (1995:251), marketing is a core function in all types of businesses. Factor 2 revealed the importance of the following marketing activities:

- **Market research:** Marketing research should be conducted in order to gather information on the target market and to allow organisations to evaluate their current performance, identify opportunities and develop products and messages to exploit these opportunities (Horner & Swarbrooke, 1996:445).
- **Promoting the conference centre as a product tailored to its product life cycle:** Marketing strategies of the conference centre should be adapted to suit the stage of the product life cycle in which it finds itself in order to ensure that the correct strategies are used to reach objectives. There are five stages in the life cycle of products, namely: introduction, growth, maturity, saturation and decline. Each stage has its own marketing requirements (Bennet, 2000:211). The products and services of a business must therefore continually be changed or modified because a changing environment demands it (Saayman, 2001:194).
- **Developing a price strategy:** Within the tourism, leisure and hospitality sector, it is important to develop a price strategy (Jooste, 2000:215). Price is important for a conference centre, as it relates directly to the income and profitability (Jooste, 2000:213). Price may cover a variety of issues. These include conference centre hire

charges, delegate rates, hotel or guesthouse accommodation costs, provision of food and beverage, safety, and transport costs (Rogers, 2003:101). The price may be the most visible part of the product, and is an important factor in satisfying the needs of consumers (Jooste, 2000:213). Price strategies must take account of many factors, including projected future demand and any seasonal fluctuations expected; the need to maximise yield; the perishable nature of the product; the psychological impact on clients of raising or lowering prices; the activities of competitors, and the wider economic situation (Rogers, 2003:101).

- **Using sales promotion as an inducement to sell the conference centre as a product:** Promotional activities, such as sales promotion, are important in marketing the conference centre as potential clients have to be convinced of the benefits of purchasing or using the products and services of the specific conference centre (Horner & Swarbrooke, 1996:202).

Factor 3: Core operational aspects

The importance of sufficient lighting and air-conditioning in conference rooms are indicated by factor 3. Temperatures should be regulated in conference rooms in order for delegates to feel comfortable at all times (Shone, 1998:70). Temperatures that are too hot or too cold or insufficient lighting may distract conference delegates from concentrating (Saayman & Slabbert, 2001:92). Effective lighting is important as conference rooms usually depend on artificial lighting. Lighting should be sufficiently flexible for a range of conference tasks. It has to satisfy both background light requirements and the task-lighting needed for particular issues such as illuminating a speaker while yet being adjustable to permit technical presentations (Shone, 1998:70; Wolf & Wolf, 2005:89).

The importance of ensuring that conference facilities are in working order, that facilities are clean (hygienic), and of welcoming delegates in a friendly manner are also indicated by factor 3. Facilities that are clean and in good working order will create a positive image in the mind of the client and will, therefore, ensure repeat business.

A delegate reception area should be ready for use prior to the starting time. The welcoming of delegates includes a number of aspects, including having a list of delegates who are to be attending the conference, welcoming delegates on arrival, providing an information desk where delegates can have their queries resolved, having adequate signage indicating different sections of the conference centre and having space where delegates may store their luggage if they have travelled far distances (Shone, 1998:107; Shone & Parry, 2004:186; Tassiopoulos, 2000:283). This factor had the highest mean value (3.8).

Factor 4: Planning

Factor 4 revealed the importance of planning and had the third highest mean value (3.5). Aspects such as the following are included in planning:

- **Formulating a mission statement:** the mission statement forces top management to determine both where the organisation is currently, and where it wants to be in the future (Evans *et al.*, 2003:15). A mission describes the business, the products and services provided by the business, the market the business aims to satisfy, and the scheduled plans for the next three to five years (Bennet, 1995:169).

- **Developing a business philosophy:** The company philosophy serves as a guideline for behaviour of employees in dealings with others. It also guides the operations of the firm (Saayman, 2002:102).
- **Applying a code of ethics:** A code of ethics is an important aspect as it provides the personnel of the conference centre with a guideline in their dealings with others (Saayman, 2002:102). This guideline ensures that a professional service is rendered and that good working relationships are formed.
- **Evaluating business strategies regularly:** Organisations are influenced by forces outside their industry that may affect not only particular organisations, but also the industry as a whole (De Bruyn, 2000:145). Managers are faced with the challenge to adapt to changes in the business environment, such as globalisation, mature markets, technological changes and intense competition (Phillips & Moutinho, 1999:1; Athiyaman & Robertson, 1995:199). It is therefore important for conference centre managers to evaluate, and adapt to changes in the internal and external business environment. Managers should identify and keep track of changes in aspects of the external business environment, namely: economic factors, social factors, technological factors, competitors and political factors (Saayman, 2002:103; Swarbrooke & Horner, 2001:68). In order to adapt to changes in the external business environment, strategies should be evaluated in the management areas of marketing, finance, facilities and equipment, human resources, general management and programmes (Saayman, 2002:105; Naylor, 2004:254).
- **Developing a business plan:** The development of a business plan should precede the financial planning phase of the conference centre, for it is first necessary to identify an opportunity to sell its services and facilities. Without an existing opportunity, there will be no sales, implying that it would not be feasible to develop a conference centre (Nieman & Bennet, 2002:62).
- **Developing a capital budget:** A budget is a crucial tool in the planning and control systems of a business (Moutinho, 2000:188). A budget provides a basis for negotiating short-term resource requirements to implement strategy at the operating level (Pearce & Robinson, 1999:389). The capital budget is one of the most commonly used budgets in tourism organisations. The capital budget is concerned with the allocation of resources for investment in buildings, plants and equipment that will be used to generate future revenue (Thompson, 2001:815; Moyer *et al.*, 2001:300; Jones, 1992:352).
- **A break-even point analysis:** Break-even point analysis is a useful method for financial control. The break-even chart depicts the relationship of sales and expenses in such a way as to show at what volume revenues cover expenses. At any lesser volume, the business would suffer a loss and at any greater volume, the business would enjoy a profit (Koontz *et al.*, 1984:580; Corman & Lussier, 2001:69; Saayman, 2002:269). A business should thus calculate to where its operation breaks even, as this would indicate when a business would be able to cover its expenses and begin to make a profit (United States Small Business Administration, 2006).

Factor 5: Design and evaluation

Factor 5 revealed the importance of design and evaluation in managing a conference centre. This includes aspects such as:

- **Providing a conference venue with attractive features:** The attractiveness of a venue should be enhanced by the choice of interior décor, colour, lighting, warmth, the choice of furniture, linen, flowers, table elements, and fixtures and settings (Shone, 1998:70; Wolf & Wolf, 2005:80-92). Conference organisers are usually in favour of a pleasant location, free from distractions. In cases where there are issues of corporate image, this would be of considerable importance. This might lead to conference centre managers opting for relatively plain interiors so as not to distract delegates, while simultaneously trying to create a unique venue that can be differentiated from other venues (Shone, 1998:70).
- **Post-conference evaluation:** Deciding on a plan to handle various attendee complaints, generating verbal feedback on the success of a conference and using audited financial records and documents in the post-conference analysis are all important instruments for post-conference evaluation. Post-conference evaluation is of considerable importance, as this will indicate the aspects that need improvement as well as the aspects that are perceived as being positive (Shone, 1998:109). This, in turn, can be used in marketing strategies.

Factor 6: Well-trained employees

Factor 6 which had the second highest mean value (3.6) indicated the importance of human resource management in managing a conference centre. This factor includes aspects such as recruiting the right person for the right position, and training employees so that necessary skills effectively to perform certain tasks are acquired. The provision of the total conference product is impossible without the necessary human resources, as the product is, in many respects, both service- and labour-intensive. The quality of the conference product is largely dependent on service standards that staff can achieve (Shone, 1998:118). It is therefore necessary to employ people with adequate skills (Shone, 1998:123).

- **Recruiting the right person for the right position:** The aim of recruitment is to attract qualified job candidates (Gómez-Mejía *et al.*, 2004:163). Qualified applicants should be attracted as applicants that are unqualified for the job are a costly waste of time and do not add to the value of the conference centre (Nieman & Bennet, 2002:261). Researchers like Rogers (2003:194) and Swarbrooke and Horner (2001:115) have identified a range of tasks completed in the conference industry to establish the skills that are required. These include the following:
 - Interpersonal skills;
 - communication skills;
 - attention to detail;
 - the ability to work under pressure; and
 - analytical skills.
- **Train employees:** Through training, individuals acquire the necessary skills and competencies effectively to perform certain activities (Saayman, 2002:223). Effective training is to the benefit of the whole conference centre. Training reduces tension, staff turnover and cost, and improves the product, service and customer count (Miller *et al.*, 2002:225).

Spearman rank order correlations were also calculated between factors. Table 3 indicates these correlations. When interpreting the Spearman rank order correlations, it is necessary to know at what sizes correlations will indicate an important relation. Steyn (2005) gives the following guidelines:

Small effect: $r = 0.1$

Medium effect: $r = 0.3$

Large effect: $r = 0.5$

A strong correlation (large effect: $r = 0.5$) is indicated between the following aspects:

TABLE 3: SPEARMAN RANK ORDER CORRELATIONS BETWEEN FACTORS

	Activities and layout	Marketing	Operational aspects	Planning	Design and evaluation	Human resource
Activities and layout		0.338275	0.262640	0.239088	0.587748	0.282258
Marketing	0.338275		0.193571	0.529065	0.320165	0.311114
Operational aspects	0.262640	0.193571		0.258752	0.502867	0.365820
Planning	0.239088	0.529065	0.258752		0.436657	0.482332
Design and evaluation	0.587748	0.320165	0.502867	0.436657		0.523891
Human resource	0.282259	0.311114	0.365820	0.482332	0.523891	

Based on the results shown in table 3, it is clear that the factors show a positive relationship that can be rated as medium to high. The related method of extracting factors generally shows better results when there are higher correlations between factors. Those factors with a high correlation include:

- Activities and layout and design evaluation;
- Marketing and planning;
- Operational aspects and design and evaluation; and
- Design and evaluation and activities and layout as well as operational aspects and human resources.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of this article was to identify the key success factors in managing a conference centre. The reason for this is that South Africa has to improve its position globally as a conference destination and venue if it wishes to benefit fully from this important industry sector. Currently, it is rated as the eighteenth most popular meeting and convention destination. Added to this is the fact that the South African Tourism industry is a young industry, and only limited research has been completed. However, the literature review showed that even though little research has been done in this regard, different sectors appear to require different key success factors.

This research, and especially the questionnaire, was based on the work done by Van der Westhuizen (2003) and De Witt (2006). The main results show the following key success factors namely:

- Providing a variety of activities and a good layout of facilities;
- performing effective marketing;
- having operational aspects e.g. proper lighting, air conditioning and high level of hygiene in place;
- conducting proper planning;
- providing an attractive venue (design) and conducting a post-conference evaluation; and
- employing well-trained employees.

When compared to the research by Van der Westhuizen (2003) and De Witt (2006), this project showed a few similarities, namely, well-trained employees and the layout and accessibility of facilities. This research also confirms that KSFs are industry or product specific. Interesting is the fact that, based on the mean values, the most important factors were the core operational aspects of human resource management and of planning. The implication of this is that the curricula of those institutions responsible for the training of managers for the meeting and convention sector have to be adapted since results of this research shows that these managers requires a level of specialisation. It is therefore recommended that the development of the curriculum for meetings and convention management should be further researched. Hence, an analysis of the most important success factors highlights the importance of employing the right staff (managers) to manage a convention centre. Specialisation should empower staff, and specifically managers, to be more effective, thus contributing to a higher level of competitiveness.

South Africa still has some way to go in order to become one of the top conference venues and therefore this type of research is vital. This research also demonstrates that more research needs to be conducted, primarily to better understand the different sectors. Thereafter, a demand side survey should be conducted. The demand side survey could identify the needs of national and international conference organisers and indicate how the conference sector needs to adapt, if necessary, to satisfy those needs.

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