Re-visitation of the *Meeting and Business Events Competency Standards*: An Exploratory Study

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INTRODUCTION

The meetings, expositions, events and conventions (MEEC) field is a global industry employing hundreds of thousands of people that generates significant economic, educational and social impact to attendees and communities. The occupation ‘meeting planner’ was not recognized by the US Department of Labor until the late 1980’s and until recently there were no internationally recognized standards for employment in this industry.

The need for an occupational standard was recognized by the Meeting Professionals International (MPI) Foundation wherein they put together and funded the “Body of Knowledge Task Force.” This task force was comprised of academics and industry professionals and began its work in 2009. Its 15 members were charged with developing competency standards / occupational standards for MEEC. The Meeting and Business Events Competency Standards (MBECS) were released in 2011 and include the Knowledge Skills and Abilities (KSAs) necessary to be a successful event professional. The standards are comprised of 12 major categories or functional areas (domains) with 33 skills and almost 100 sub-skills or sub-segments. Once the task force completed its work it ceased to exist. Thus, MBECS has not been reviewed or updated since its release two years ago.

The closest thing to a review or re-visitation occurred when the Convention Industry Council (CIC) decided to use MBECS as the basis for developing the questions in its new Certified Meeting Planner International Standards (CMP-IS) and corresponding examination. The CIC organized a ‘CMP-IS Focus Group’ that included 12 members, with all but one being practitioners and one academic. The focus group studied MBECS and determined exactly which of the KSAs would be incorporated into the CMP test. Ten of the 12 categories from MBECS were carried over, almost verbatim, to the CMP-IS. One of the categories not incorporated into CMP-IS is “Administration” that largely focusses on the management of an office, managing information systems and writing reports. The other category not included is “Communication” that is centered on verbal and written communication, making presentations, etc. It is not surprising these were not incorporated in the CMP exam since it would be very difficult to ‘test’ on these particular standards. However, these two categories or domains are integral to being a meeting and event professional and should be ‘woven’ throughout a job or a course of study. This served as a ‘quasi’ validation or re-visitation of MBECS.

Rationale for the Current Study

MBECS is becoming the ‘gold standard’ for all facets of MEEC. As with any occupational standards, they need to be reviewed, analyzed, validated, and updated periodically. Even though the original Body of Knowledge Task Force recommended regular review, to date this has not taken place and there are currently no plans by MPI or any industry organization to update or revise the standards. Further, while MBECS is being adopted by many entities, it must be realized that MBECS is the result of the work of a very small, albeit knowledgeable, group of individuals. While the CMP-IS Focus Group validated MBECS, they too were a small, select group. The goals of the current study are to (1) re-visit MBECS, (2) ascertain industry
awareness of the standards, (3) ascertain current relevance of each of the categories, skills and subskills, (4) determine if there are additional KSAs that should be included in MBECS and (5) determine if a larger and more comprehensive ‘re-visitation’ of MBECS is warranted. These are sequential tasks; the first must be completed before the second, second before third, etc.

**Literature Review**

An extensive review of the term “Meeting and Business Event Competency Standards” was entered into a number of electronic databases, including Google, Google Scholar, One Search and Ebsco. Numerous articles that mentioned MBECS were located, but almost all were simple descriptions of the standards or announcements regarding their release (Corporate Meetings & Incentives, 2011; Davis, 2011; Sperstad, 2012). One (Kovaleski, 2011) discussed the standards in terms of their use in a college course setting. The only one that incorporated any type of review was Cecil et al (2013) and even that one did not critically review or update MBECS. Thus, there is a need for a re-visitation and critical review of MBECS as well as publication of such a review in both industry and academic outlets. The study at hand will focus on that need.

**Method**

While there are multiple research protocols that can be used to address the questions at hand, personal one-on-one interviews was the method selected for this pilot study. This protocol was selected because semi-structured interviews aim at a discussion instead of individual responses to formal questions, produces qualitative data (preferences and beliefs) and offers an idea generation or forecasting technique where individuals share their point of view on a specific topic or problem (Business Dictionary, 2013). The use of interviews allows for review of the degree to which interviewees are aware of MBECS, provides feedback regarding the standards enables exploration of additional KSAs and provides open ended opportunities for respondent input.

A series of interviews took place during April and May of 2013 in both Dallas (TX) and Indianapolis (IN) thus generating a geographical cross section of meeting professionals. Each interview was led by a member of the research team familiar with MBECS and used a semi-structured format. This allowed interviewees the opportunity to move beyond the ‘direct question and obtain a deeper understanding of the posed questions.’

**FINDINGS**

**Demographics of Interviewees**

All the interviewees are experienced meetings and events professionals. The average interviewee has worked in the industry for 18 years. The shortest work history is 10 years and the longest 28 years (two respondents indicated the latter). They became involved in the MEEC industry through a number of paths. One third entered the industry almost by accident working as secretaries or office mangers. Twenty five percent started in MEEC while still students in college while 12.5% either worked in a hotel or travel agency. The interviewees have held
positions such as CSM for Hyatt, VP of Conferences and Special Events, Association Meeting Planner, Corporate Meeting Planner, Director of Education, etc.

Interviewees are working with a staff or team ranging from sole proprietorships up to a staff of 10. On average, they supervise 4 to 5 other professionals in their office. There are varying levels of support for professional development in the organizations for whom they work. Seventy – five percent said their organization provides support but only 13% indicated it was 100%. Three quarters of the respondents indicated ‘support’ includes paying of membership dues and reimbursement to attend industry events. The latter was, in some cases, only for local events. Interviewees are active in professional organizations such as MPI (most common response), PCMA, ISAE, ASAE and others. They are involved in these organizations for two primary reasons; education (87% of respondents) and networking (62%).

The foregoing responses clearly show that the interviewees are seasoned MEEC professionals. This was ‘the’ major criteria used by the research team in selecting these industry professionals to participate in the study. They supervise other MEEC professionals and garner support for professional development from their employers. They look to professional associations for education and professional development. Thus, one would expect them to be knowledgeable about MBECS and the details of the standards.

Awareness of MBECS

Given the background and experience of the respondents, the research team anticipated that they would have in depth knowledge of MBECS. The first question put forth to validate this assumption was “Are you familiar with the recent release of the Meetings and Business Events Competency Standards (MBECS)?” Shockingly only 12.5% of the respondents answered in the affirmative; fully 87% were not aware of MBECS. When asked how they knew about MBECS, its use in the CMP was the primary answer and they learned about it while renewing their CMP. Interestingly, one quarter of the respondents were aware of the ‘new’ CMP standards and exam but did not know they were based on MBECS. Further, this knowledge came from PCMA and CMP Quiz series and not from MPI even though the MPI Foundation funded the creation of MBECS.

Given the finding above that there was almost no awareness of MBECS, the interviewers on the research team modified the research strategy. Rather than attempting to drill down into the standards with their knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs), interviewees were asked to peruse the MBECS document. Reactions included a comment about ‘not seeing much regarding technology’, not seeing much about ‘exhibits and management’, not being sure how a planner can be an expert in all areas, and that the standards “can be used to find holes in your resume.” Given the respondents lack of awareness of MBECS, they were queried regarding where they get their information. While the primary sources are association magazines and newsletters, a significant portion of the respondents indicated they focus more on information coming from their local chapter than from the main offices of the associations.
Again, given the lack of awareness of MBECS, the research team changed the interview queries to ask about if and how the industry has changed. All interviewees indicated the industry had changed in the past 10 years. The biggest change is in the area of technology along with use of social media as attributed by 50% of the respondents. Over one third of the respondents mentioned the impact of the economy on the industry while 25% indicated the industry has become more competitive. There was also mention of the increase in third party along with self-employed planners (maybe as a result of companies being reluctant to hire full time planners). All of the changes mentioned by respondents would suggest the need to regularly review and update the MBECS to reflect the current state of the MEEC industry.

Opportunities and Challenges Faced by Planners

The research team also changed the focus of this exploratory study to probe about the opportunities and challenges faced by meetings and events professionals. The respondents offered a wide array of answers. Twenty five percent indicated generational issues were at the fore along with communication and writing abilities. There was also some sentiment that planners now, more than ever, need to do a bit of everything and be ‘jacks of all trades.’ Other opportunities and challenges include; industry becoming more global, younger generation not doing business the same way, companies no longer loyal to employees and doing more with less.

Responses About MBECS

A closing query asked respondents to react to the MBECS document, now that they had seen it. Most indicated they were pleased to see that MBECS exists and one third will now use it to create job descriptions, job specifications, and use it in hiring. Some will also use it to do a self-assessment and evaluate their own skill levels. There was even a comment that one respondent “could have used it when hiring a new meeting planner.” It was felt that MBECS standardizes best practices and creates high standards for the professional. There was a comment that in the title the word ‘competency’ should be changed to ‘occupational.’

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The meetings and events industry is large and employs many people. As is the case of a maturing industry or field, the US Department of Labor added the job ‘meeting planner’ to its list of occupation in the late 1980’s and just two years ago a set of competency standards was developed (MBECS). Given the existence of these standards and their use in the widely accepted CMP exam, the research team thought there would be widespread knowledge among industry professionals of MBECS. Thus, the original focus of this exploratory study was to undertake analysis to determine (1) which of the KSAs in MBECS are still relevant, (2) the strength of the relevance, (3) which are no longer relevant, (4) other KSAs that are not in the current MBECS but should be added and (5) if a larger study of the subject is warranted. However, these objectives could not be accomplished given the lack of awareness of MBECS among the industry professional interviewees.

This study did find that, after exposure to the MBECS, meeting planners saw the value of this document. While at this point the MBECS is being used for curriculum development by a
very limited set of academics, it is largely collecting dust on the MPI Website and is not being used as intended. Several approaches can be considered to resurrect this document:

1) MPI should develop a campaign to reintroduce the MBECS to its members through local chapters. The findings of this extant exploratory study emphasized the value of the local chapters to meeting planners.

2) A follow up focus group could be created to determine the usability of the MBECS. Should it become a tool for planners to measure their skills and/or should the MBECS be used by human resources managers to create job descriptions? A focus group may identify addition ways that the MBECS can be used.

3) Encourage the review and recommendation of this document by other industry organizations. MPI was most frequently referenced in this exploratory study. However, if industry organizations like the Society of Incentive Travel Executives (SITE), International Association on Exhibitions and Events (IAEE), International Special Event Society (ISES) and Professional Convention Managers Association (PCMA) etc. were to become stakeholders in the MBECS standards the reach of this document would go beyond MPI and CMP.

4) Industry associations such as those mentioned above could use MBECS to help guide and drive their educational offerings. Specific seminars, workshops and certificates could be tied to explicit MBECS competencies.

5) Create an exit exam based on the MBECS that colleges and universities could use to provide an entry level industry certification to students.

Each approach has its challenges and opportunities but in order to ensure the longevity of the MBECS it must be made known those who can use it. As the respondents in this study noted, they saw the value for the industry and that more should be done to promote the existence of MBECS and educate industry professionals on its uses and benefits. Further, MPI needs to study how to promote and publicize its resources.

Future research addressing the original tasks of this study might be done in conjunction with national and chapter meetings of industry associations. In these cases a focus group strategy rather than individual interviews would be more efficient and fruitful. Further formal study is warranted regarding the level of awareness industry has of the MBECS and how it is currently being used.

REFERENCES

