

# **Skill needs in the French hotel and catering industry: a prospective analysis based on a comparative approach**

Sylvie-Anne Mériot

*Centre for Research on Education, Training and Employment (Céreq), France*

*The hotel and catering industry is the core activity in tourism. In order to analyse the skill needs arising in this industry, avoiding the pitfalls of using either an over-general approach neglecting the specificities of the jobs involved or an over-detailed approach neglecting the contextual information, I adopted a sociological method called ETED<sup>(3)</sup>. The American advance in the rational analysis of work in this field also provides us with an opportunity of taking a prospective look at employment.*

*In France, where the tradition of self-run hotel and catering firms is still strong, the numbers of salaried jobs available, especially those involving management skills, can be expected to increase in the near future. For more basic jobs, however, segmented managerial practices are tending to develop, generating mainly odd jobs for students and low-skilled employment for a needy labour force, and only a few positions with real career prospects.*

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In many countries, tourism is regarded as a means of developing wealth and creating employment, especially when traditional activities are on the decline. It is expected to contribute significantly to increasing GDP but identifying skill needs, especially prospectively, causes major problems due to the absence of any consensual definitions in tourism. Do tourism activities necessarily include air, rail and other modes of transport, including car rental activities? Do travel agencies work more for foreign visitors than for local inhabitants? And who are the main customers of recreation and entertainment facilities such as casinos?

The core activity in tourism is the hotel and catering industry, which includes both business and leisure tourism, as well as the everyday business and leisure activities of local inhabitants. This accounts for the specific focus in this paper.

In line with the Cedefop recommendations for the building of societal frameworks (Box 1), we need to analyse closely the employment and skill requirements in this field. The method used here was designed to avoid the pitfalls of using either an over-general approach, neglecting the specificities of the jobs involved, or an over-detailed approach consisting, for example, of

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<sup>(3)</sup> ETED – *Emploi-type étudié dans sa dynamique* (typical employment studied via its dynamic aspects).

defining the highly specialised qualifications assumed to be emerging without giving an overall picture. Taking an inter-organisational approach, comparisons were made between France and the US to develop a prospective picture based on the situation in a developed country where work rationalisation is already fairly advanced, especially in this activity.

*Box 1: Cedefop recommendations (abstracts)*

‘The challenge of globalisation emphasises the building of societal frameworks which focus on new forms of inter-organisation cooperation and alliances between enterprises and knowledge producers. In this view, the neo-liberal solution must give way to the promotion of learning by people, firms and regions and to creating appropriate learning environments’ (Descy and Tessaring, 2001, p. 23).

‘One aim, therefore, should be to develop at least those framework competences that seem likely to prove durable and to provide the best basis for subsequent further training’ (ibid., p. 27).

The approach to employment adopted here is in line with the principles of the ETED method (Mandon, 1998). The ‘typical employment’ units correspond to statistical facts, and the skills they require are often obtained by taking a two-year course certified by a diploma. Each ‘typical employment’ is described and analysed in terms of the competences mobilised (Mériot, 1998; Mériot, 2002b). This enables didacticians and teachers to design relevant training programmes and it can promote social dialogue about training, not only in terms of disciplinary fields but also in terms of highly specific actions, learning conditions and vocational objectives, which are the three prerequisites of a competence based programme.

After giving an overall definition of the field and identifying the range of occupations involved, I propose to adopt an analytical dynamic approach to the managerial practices used and to suggest some lines on which training policies could be based. Skill needs will be the main focus of this paper, however. The above quotations (Box 1) suggest the need for a simple method of identifying skills needs, using a comparative approach.

## **1. Overall aspects of the hotel and catering industry**

In France, restaurants and cafés are the industry’s main employers, providing 48 % of the jobs in the field, while hotels and accommodation of other kinds account for only 22 % of the jobs. The number of hotel and catering jobs is generally underestimated owing to the large number of canteens run by private and especially public operators: canteens actually account for 30 %

of the jobs <sup>(4)</sup>. France is the European leader in canteens, but this field, known as ‘institutional food services’, is not very visible in statistical breakdowns since it is generally classified not along with the hotel and catering sector, but in the same category as hospital, school, prison, military and other employment. Nevertheless, when the new VAT policy is applied, the predominance of canteens may decrease while the other kinds of restaurant activities such as fast food establishment are liable to increase sharply. In the US, restaurants and cafés have already generated more than 74 % of the employment in this sector, while hotels and accommodation of other kinds account for 16 %, and canteens only 10 % <sup>(5)</sup>.

Placing French institutional food services in the same category as the hotel and catering industry accounts for nearly one million jobs. More than one-third of the restaurants are traditional-style and only one-quarter are fast food restaurants or cafés. Serving traditional-style meals to customers tends to be associated with the idea of traditional employment, but this does not give any definite idea about the place where the cooking is organised: on the spot or by external food production firms. As in many other service-based sectors, the staff employed are becoming less qualified, since most restaurants are tending to reduce their prices to attract the less affluent customers.

If we include institutional food services such as canteens in the hotel and catering sector in the US, the total number of jobs in that sector is nearly 10 million (although there are only about seven times more inhabitants). Only half of the restaurants give table service, which is less commonly provided than in France because of the growing numbers of limited-service eating places and take away shops. Only one-tenth of all the companies with more than 100 full-time employees provide eating facilities for their staff, who have to find cheap, fast ways of getting their daily lunch themselves.

The US has 2.6 times fewer hotels and 1.5 times more restaurants than France. The hotel trade is much less developed than the catering industry and generates fewer employment opportunities. However, on average, Americans take one out of every five meals outside their homes, which is nearly twice as often as the French.

Another important feature of employment in this sector is the fact that in France, 25 % of the hotel and catering staff are self-employed, compared with less than 5 % in the US. Catering is still perceived as an opportunity available to people of all ages which does not require much capital investment or many qualifications. Anyone can open a restaurant, and in the US, only some of the States require those working in the trade to take a basic training course in hygiene. But, in both countries, the development of hotel and restaurant chains is gradually increasing the amount of wage-earning jobs available, which may come to reduce the prospects of those setting up their own business.

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<sup>(4)</sup> Business survey by the National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies among hotels and restaurants, 1998; survey among canteens by Gira-Sic, 1997.

<sup>(5)</sup> The survey among restaurants and hotels by Bureau of Labor statistics, US Department of Labor, 1997; the survey among canteens by the National Restaurant Association, 1998.

## **2. Range of occupations and the initial positions held**

The French hotel and catering industry is characterised by a high turnover and a workforce that is largely young and unskilled. In this respect, it tends to follow the American model: one third of the population of the US has worked in a restaurant at one time or another. The workforce at operational level is exposed to direct communication with customers and thus recruited mainly on the basis of a behavioural assessment.

In the hotel industry, the majority of the jobs involve cleaning, which can either be carried out by the staff or outsourced to specialised companies. Jobs involving personal services such as receptionists and night janitors are less numerous. Deluxe hotels also employ porters, doormen and bell-boys. Some members of the staff might manage to be promoted to supervisory or managerial posts, but the high-level jobs are increasingly reserved for those with specialised diplomas in business, accounting, management, company strategy and so on. The career prospects of operating personnel are therefore often limited, especially in reception-desk functions, making the hotel industry above all a means of entering the labour market before making a change of profession.

Catering is also a two-tiered industry. Cooks, despite their subordinate role, often have real scope for advancement. It is true that cooking is still largely the work of skilled personnel with diplomas and experience, unlike waiters and the initial hotel positions, which are often occupied by very young members of staff (under 25 years of age), who are not specialised and who are employed on a part-time basis.

For a long time, Americans viewed the hotel industry as an essentially non-specialised sector of activity associated with the cleaning and personal services, while food services were classified as part of retail food. Since 1997, hotel and catering activities have been included in the same services sector, under the heading of accommodation and food services. This change is more indicative of a concern for harmonising international statistics sources than linking up the two activity fields and their common competences. Nonetheless, the way the workforce is managed in hotel and catering activities is fairly similar in the US to what goes on in France: apart from the supervisory staff, who are generally properly qualified and employed full time in the US, the only competences really recognised in that country are those involved in culinary production. American employers even tend to maintain a three-tiered system in managing their operating personnel.

Two distinct populations occupy the subordinate posts. There is a large population of students who work part-time on an hourly basis to help pay for their expensive studies, and who generally do jobs which bring them into contact with the customers. Then there is a population consisting mainly of minority groups who hold less prestigious full-time jobs doing work such as cleaning and caretaking in the hotels and dishwashing, basic cooking and baking in food-serving establishments.

Only the large hotels and gourmet restaurants engage staff with a reasonably good level of general training to work as waiters or in other service jobs, while insisting that these

employees are ‘educated but not skilled’ in the jobs they hold. They do, however, require their young cooks, whose expertise is recognised, to have a specialised diploma. The occupation of cooks is becoming more commonplace in the US. Restaurant chains in particular, whose menus are often based on a single theme, require their cooks to produce only standardised dishes for which only a few set techniques are required, and these can be quickly learned. The numbers of short-order and fast-food operators’ jobs are therefore increasing sharply and they are now equal to the numbers of jobs held by traditional cooks.

### **3. Managerial trends and qualifications prospects**

Apart from managerial positions, most of the jobs in the hotel and catering industries consist in serving food (fast food operators and waiters), cooking and housekeeping. In France, these three main jobs (cooks, waiters and housekeepers) are estimated to account for 230 000, 170 000 and 90 000 people, respectively, but the last figure is an underestimate: many hotels use outsourced workers to clean their rooms and buildings (outsourced cleaners working for industries of all kinds have been estimated to number 360 000) <sup>(6)</sup>. Another important fact is that cleaners, and especially waiters, are often employed on a part-time basis. These figures are not as meaningful as the full time employment figures (full-time work is the norm in the case of French cooks).

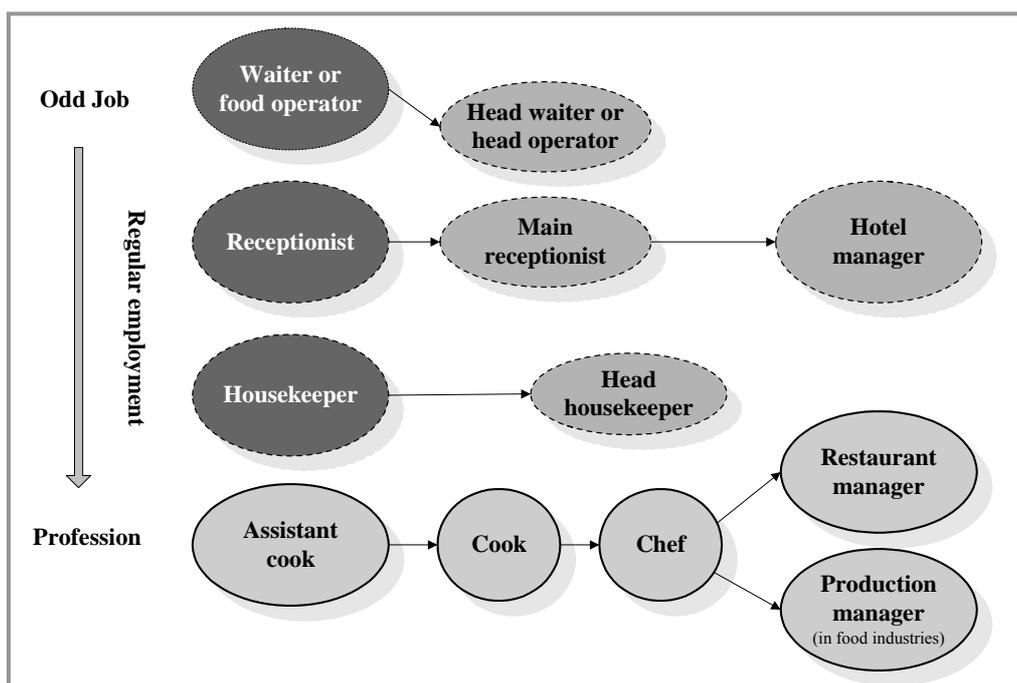
One specific of the hotel and catering industry is its use of category-based workforce management, which is particularly widespread in the US, reflecting the value attached by employers to skills. This system may increase the inequalities in terms of opportunities for promotion (Figure 1):

- (a) cooks, whose skills are recognised (they are required to have initial training or relevant work experience), are considered in human resource management practices a profession with regular opportunities for promotion;
- (b) housekeepers and cleaners, who are not specifically trained for the hotel and catering industry and often include members of unqualified minority groups, often get regular employment with little opportunity for promotion;
- (c) waiters, fast-food operators and sometimes hotel receptionists are often only doing odd jobs, which are taken by students and newcomers who will soon be leaving the hotel and catering industry.

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<sup>(6)</sup> National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) business survey 1999.

Figure 1: Typical occupations in hotel and catering industries



These managerial practices are typically American because France still has a relatively small number of wage-earning students (only 10 % of those in the 15-19 age group take jobs, as compared with 50 % in the US). But the downgrading of some jobs in the French culinary professions and the tendency for these jobs to be increasingly taken by unskilled recruits is already gaining ground, especially among large catering firms in urban areas.

#### 4. A critical look at training policies

French hotel staff training, which started off mainly in the context of the luxury hotels and was then extended, began with a large number of fields which were basically intended to satisfy a prestigious, independent hotel and catering industry. Over the past 30 years, this training system has been restructured around a few basic fields: cooking, table service and hotel management. Recently, moreover, its level has been improved to meet management requirements of hotel chains and catering companies providing services that are often standardised but relatively diversified in range, thus reaching a wider range of clientele. Culinary education is still dominated by an artistic ideal, however, in the case of both the initial types of vocational training, which begin at around the age of 15 (*CAP, certificat d'aptitudes professionnelles/vocational aptitude certificate* and *BEP, brevet d'études professionnelles/vocational studies certificate*). This idealistic picture may explain the dissatisfaction frequently felt by cooks when they actually enter the labour market and discover very different professional realities.

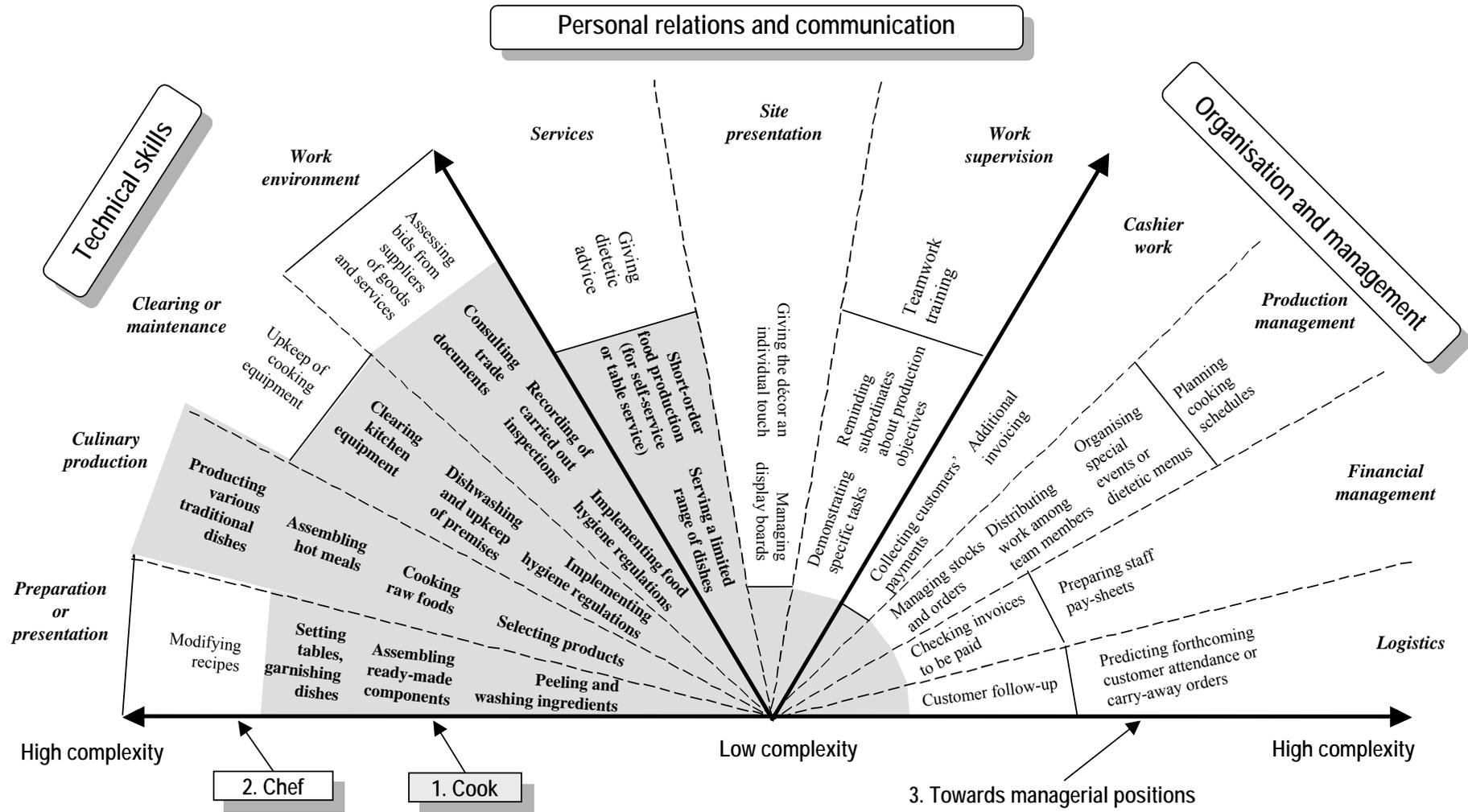
The populations of France and the US both include the same proportion of high school graduates, currently totalling 62 %. But the American educational system is more oriented than the French to higher-education diplomas. In the US hotel and catering industry, however, there is no real professional recognition for low-level operational fields such as cleaning, food service or assembly cookery (which consists of producing simple food preparations using semi-prepared products supplied by the food processing industry). Specialisation comes into play only after the first two to four years of higher education and the possibilities are therefore fairly limited: they include only the culinary arts and hotel management. These are generally recognised in terms of job status. Full-time posts are more frequently available with better career prospects and wages are more attractive. Some hotel schools subsequently propose narrower managerial fields of specialisation, distinguishing, for example, independent hotel management from that of chains, and restaurant management from that of canteens, while these options do not yet exist in France.

Despite the differences between these two educational systems, the structure of employment is similar in both countries. With the exception of gourmet cooking, the traditional sector is still fairly indifferent to most diplomas and on-the-job training is generally preferred. In contrast, there is great demand in the hotel and restaurant chains for higher education graduates. These chains are more widespread in the US, where they represent 27 % of the restaurants and 20 % of the hotels and employ half of the industry's employees. In France, less than 4 % of the restaurants and only 7 % of the hotels belong to chains. Restaurant activity is, therefore, still being carried out in France on quite a small scale, and most of the restaurants are SMEs. Only the canteens generally belong to very large structures, with several thousand employees each.

In both countries, those working for chains and large employers generally have stronger trade unions and better conditions of employment, with possibilities for promotion to supervisory and management posts. In France, however, apart from these advantages, working for chains which provide such run-of-the-mill services is viewed as so socially degrading and technically deskilling that these establishments often have difficulty in recruiting professional cooks.

French professionals are so attached to the image of gourmet cooking that they are more sensitive to the socially prestigious nature of the services provided than to the objective working conditions involved. In fact, the technical contents of their jobs often mean that comparable skills are required of cooks and chefs, whether they are working in restaurants or canteens (Figure 2). In a trade that counts on its traditional skills and the personal commitment of its individual members, the move to work in canteens and hotel or restaurant chains tends to be perceived as a 'comfortable' decision, but one that cannot be reversed. The French educational system often describes the culinary industry as a prestigious, creative, artistic activity rather than an efficient commercial activity serving a broad public. On the other side of the Atlantic, working in this sector is simply viewed as a passing event in the context of a constant process of occupational mobility.

Figure 2: From cook to chef: activities and skill requirements



## 5. Conclusion

For the last 35 years, France and the US have been carrying out competence transfer in the hotel and catering industry. France has been exporting its gastronomic expertise and receiving in return, not without some resistance, hotel and catering chains from which it has learned new management methods and a new approach to serving large numbers. Nowadays, the chains are improving their foothold in both countries. The main area where growth is expected to occur in France is in the fast-food outlets, at the very time when these are slowing down in the US in favour of restaurants providing moderately priced table service.

France, where the tradition of self-run enterprises still predominates in the hotel and catering industry, will probably see an increase in the numbers of wage-earning jobs available, especially those involving supervisory, management and marketing skills. As far as the more basic jobs are concerned, segmented managerial practices are tending to develop, generating odd jobs for students, low-skilled employment for a needy labour force and only a few positions with real prospects for career advancement. The American advance in this area thus gives us an opportunity of taking a prospective look at employment, while recognising France's seniority in the constitution of the various occupations and hotel management training.

But can we expect to change the quality of employment and managerial practices simply by improving training programmes? Or can we dream about achieving a better social dialogue in a field still dominated by SMEs? Nowadays, the work available in the main part of the tourism sector, the hotel and catering industry, is mainly for complete beginners who want to discover this sector without having any long-term expectations. Even skill shortages may be difficult to solve by providing stable employment to those who have already decided to leave this field after their first professional experience. In view of this situation, might it not be possible for vocational training to take the shortness of this initial period of professional experience into account, by giving students a broader general knowledge of fields other than tourism? This could help to prepare them for their future employment (in administration, business and sales, information technology, etc.). Especially in the food sector, why do we still train large numbers of students for one or two years to become waiters or receptionists, knowing that they will not have access to these jobs any longer after the age of 30 or 35?

Analytical and operational approaches using tools such as the framework proposed here can often help to trigger a consensual social dialogue about training programmes and policies between the actors in vocational training and employment. In the context of new lifelong learning expectations, this should make it possible for workers who wish to evolve to discover what they have learned from past experience and what their future opportunities for promotion may be, as well as pinpointing their further training requirements and planning their own pathways.

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