

Advancing Guest Expectations and Service Delivery Excellence: The Role of the Service Delivery Quotient (SDQ) in Hospitality

Abstract

In an evolving hospitality landscape characterised by rising guest expectations and digital transformation, traditional service excellence models are no longer sufficient. This paper introduces the Service Delivery Quotient (SDQ), a multidimensional framework aligning employee competencies with guest expectations through ethical, human-centred service. This is a conceptual paper that develops and proposes the SDQ framework in response to contemporary needs in achieving excellence in hospitality service delivery. No empirical data is presented; instead, this work provides a theoretical model and practical scenarios as groundwork for future empirical testing. Building on Intelligence Quotients (IQ, EQ, PQ, AQ), SDQ integrates cognitive, emotional, social, and resilience capabilities. Grounded in Service-Dominant Logic, Ethical Leadership, Ubuntu, and Stakeholder Theory, SDQ shifts focus from transactional service to value co-creation. Applications in recruitment, training, and performance management are explored, positioning SDQ as both a diagnostic and a developmental tool. The model contributes to sustainable hospitality management by promoting trust, empathy, and resilience as core drivers of guest satisfaction and competitive advantage.

Keywords: Service Delivery Quotient (SDQ), Guest-centricity, Hospitality, Ethically Driven Innovation, Intelligence Quotients (IQ, EQ, PQ, AQ)

Introduction

The hospitality industry has emerged as a crucial pillar in global economic development (Kansakar, Munir & Shabani, 2019), especially in developing countries (Anser et al, 2020), and is increasingly shaped by competitive pressures, digital transformation, and shifting guest expectations (Zhu, Wang and Cheng, 2021). As services become more commodified and guest experiences more influential, organisations must strive to meet operational standards and humanise service encounters. This is especially true in a technology-mediated post-COVID

context (Zhu, Wang and Cheng, 2021) where empathy, trust, and resilience are central to guest loyalty and satisfaction.

Often existing models of service excellence, such as the Excellence Model developed by the European Foundation for Quality Management, propose practical tools for organisations to follow a path of excellence that determines areas for improvement with tangible solutions (Uyar & Öğretmenoğlu, 2019) rather than the deeper behavioural, cognitive, and emotional dimensions that shape how service delivery excellence is perceived and experienced. Against this backdrop, the Service Delivery Quotient (SDQ) concept is introduced as a means of reconciling employee service behaviour with guest expectations, ensuring alignment in values, competencies, and outcomes. While the SDQ is presented as an intelligence quotient that is transferable across sectors, in this paper, it relates to promoting service delivery excellence in the hospitality sector.

Established models like SERVQUAL¹ (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988) measure the quality of service through gap analysis between expectations and perceptions, whereas SDQ focuses on the human capabilities that create these service experiences. Rather than measuring what went wrong, SDQ develops what can go right by enhancing the intelligence quotients that drive service excellence.

Distinct from SERVQUAL's gap analysis approach, the SDQ emphasises proactive development of employee intelligence quotients to drive service excellence. Further empirical comparison between SDQ and SERVQUAL, particularly regarding outcomes for guest satisfaction and service improvement, could clarify the SDQ's unique contributions and practical advantages.

This paper is based on a structured literature review that draws on academic journals, seminal work, authoritative websites, and institutional reports published between 2019 and 2025. Sources were identified through keyword searches on Google Scholar, using terms such as Service Delivery Quotient (SDQ), Guest-centricity, Hospitality, Ethically Driven Innovation, and Intelligence Quotients (IQ, EQ, PQ, AQ). The inclusion criteria were based on relevance

¹ This foundational paper built upon their earlier conceptual work from 1985, where they first identified the gaps model of service quality. The SERVQUAL instrument measures service quality across five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy.

to the relationship between intelligence quotients and service delivery excellence in the hospitality sector, recency, and credibility of the publication. The review adopted a thematic synthesis approach to highlight gaps, trends, and implications for ethically driven innovation in the hospitality sector.

This review adhered to a structured protocol: sources were selected via Google Scholar using the following keywords between 2019 and 2025: ‘Service Delivery Quotient’, ‘Guest-centricity’, ‘Ethically Driven Innovation’, ‘Intelligence quotients IQ, EQ, PQ, AQ.’ Inclusion criteria consisted of relevance to hospitality service delivery excellence, publication recency, and recognised authoritativeness (journal articles, institutional/industry reports). Thematic synthesis was employed to categorise recurring concepts and identify gaps in empirical validation. As a conceptual study, the methodology relies on systematic literature review and theoretical synthesis rather than primary data collection. The SDQ model is advanced as an original framework for subsequent validation through empirical methods in future research.

This paper is structured as follows: the conceptual background, including a literature review of established quotients; the theoretical framework underpinning the SDQ; the SDQ model and its dimensions; practical applications of the SDQ in hospitality management; and a conclusion with brief recommendations for further study.

Conceptual Background: Understanding Intelligence Quotients

The Service Delivery Quotient is conceptually anchored in the legacy of four foundational quotients (the Intelligence Quotient (IQ), Emotional Quotient (EQ), Political Quotient (PQ) and Adversity Quotient (AQ)) widely used across psychology, business, and leadership development. Understanding these quotients and their relevance to service work is essential in framing the SDQ as an integrative diagnostic tool.

Intelligence Quotient (IQ)

According to Gadye (2021), the Intelligence Quotient (IQ) is adapted from the Binet-Simon Scale, which was introduced by Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon in 1905² as a diagnostic measure of children’s intellectual abilities, in the hospitality sector, employee IQ may translate

² Binet, A., & Simon, T. (1905). Méthodes nouvelles pour le diagnostic du niveau intellectuel des anormaux. *L'Année Psychologique*, 12, 191–244.

to problem-solving skills, cognitive processing, attention to detail, and the ability to learn technical systems. Practically, in hospitality organisations, employee IQ may involve the efficient learning of complex booking systems, meticulous multitasking, and rapid problem-solving, which are critical components in roles that require multitasking and service efficiency.

Emotional Quotient (EQ)

Popularised by Daniel Goleman (1995), EQ encompasses self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and relationship management. Goleman (1995) defined EQ as the ability to perceive, understand and manage one's own and others' emotions. EQ is indispensable in hospitality, where service employees must respond daily to emotional cues, manage interpersonal conflict, and deliver emotionally resonant guest experiences. Service employee with high EQ can read guest emotional cues, de-escalate complaints, capable of building loyalty, and tend to collaborate effectively under pressure.

Political Quotient (PQ)

The concept PQ, coined by Groschlo in 2009, refers to the ability to decipher where power lies within an organisation and the ability to successfully navigate its complexities. Reffo and Wark (2014) add that PQ is “the leadership capacity to interact strategically in a world where government, business and wider society share power to shape the future in a global economy”. Further, and in contemporary literature, Postma (2020) reflects on PQ as the intelligence associated with navigating power dynamics, social influence, and organisational culture. In hospitality contexts, this translates into understanding the brand ethos, maintaining compliance with policies, and exhibiting diplomacy when engaging with diverse guests and stakeholders. Furthermore, high PQ may be prevalent when an employee or team can effectively navigate power structures, understand stakeholder ideologies, increase success, reduce stress and foster better relationships with guests (Dargahi & Ehteshami, 2019)

Adversity Quotient (AQ)

Stoltz (1997) introduced the concept of Adversity Quotient (AQ) as an indicator of an individual's capacity to cope with challenges. AQ primarily reflects a person's level of resilience, that is, how effectively they respond to and recover from adversity. According to Saxena and Rathore (2024), AQ identifies individuals who can exceed their limitations, persist through difficulty, and navigate life's setbacks without being derailed. For hospitality workers,

AQ may manifest as the ability to stay calm under pressure, recover from difficult interactions, and adapt to rapidly changing environments, such as peak periods or crisis events.

Now, in a world where IQ, EQ, PQ and AQ alone are not adequate to navigate the complexities of the hospitality sector, a new type of service delivery excellence capability is required. The four quotients discussed earlier intersect to inform the SDQ, which captures a multidimensional view of service excellence rooted in cognitive agility, emotional attunement, power dynamics, and resilience.

Theoretical Framework

The development of the Service Delivery Quotient (SDQ) is anchored in a multidisciplinary theoretical foundation that supports its relevance in contemporary hospitality environments. This section outlines the key theoretical perspectives that inform and legitimise the SDQ model. Each selected theory provides a distinct yet complementary lens for understanding how service excellence is not merely a function of technical competence but a co-created, ethically guided, and socially embedded process.

As a service-centric philosophy, the Service-Dominant Logic of Vargo and Lusch (2004) provides the foundational paradigm shift needed to frame service delivery as a dynamic interaction where value is co-created by both employee and guests. Building on this, the theory of Ethical Leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2006) underscores the importance of values-based behaviour and moral judgement in shaping trust and accountability in service environments. The inclusion of the Ubuntu³ Philosophy, in the idea that "a person is a person through other people," promotes interconnectedness, shared responsibility, and communal well-being. This relational ethic aligns with caregiving values by emphasising empathy, open communication, and trust-building in professional relationships (Matahela, 2025). Lastly, Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) expands the scope of service excellence beyond guest satisfaction to include a broad range of stakeholders, including individuals or groups that influence or are influenced by an organisation.

Together, these theories provide a robust intellectual foundation for SDQ, reinforcing its holistic, ethically anchored, and people-centred approach to measuring and enhancing service delivery excellence in the hospitality sector.

³ The Ubuntu philosophy is best described by the isiZulu phrase from South Africa "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu," meaning "a person is a person through other people" (<https://courier.unesco.org/en/articles/i-am-because-you-are>)

The SDQ Model

In service-intensive industries like hospitality, service delivery excellence hinges not only on technical execution but also on the interpersonal, emotional, and ethical conduct of frontline employees. The Service Delivery Quotient (SDQ) model provides a structured framework to understand and measure how well employee competencies align with guest expectations. Owing to its values-driven approach, SDQ highlights the critical importance of synchronising core competencies with guest expectations, thereby fostering consistently high-quality and memorable service encounters. By integrating cognitive, emotional, political, and adversity-related intelligences, the model seeks to elevate individual and organisational performance and exceed guest expectations through ethical, people-centred service delivery.

Definition and Purpose

The Service Delivery Quotient (SDQ) measures how well employee competencies align with guest expectations through ethical, values-driven service delivery. It recognises that service excellence in hospitality goes beyond technical proficiency or transactional efficiency; it requires employees to demonstrate a holistic blend of cognitive, emotional, relational, and adaptive capabilities when engaging with guests. For employees, service delivery excellence means consistently applying these diverse skills with integrity and responsiveness, creating meaningful, personalised experiences. For guests, it translates into feeling genuinely valued, understood, and cared for through timely, empathetic, and professional service.

The purpose of the SDQ model is to provide the hospitality sector with a multidimensional tool to assess, develop, and enhance the human elements of service delivery. By integrating principles from emotional intelligence, political skill, adversity resilience, and cognitive capacity, the model encourages a nuanced understanding of high-impact service that balances operational effectiveness with ethical responsiveness. The SDQ guides organisations in fostering ethical conduct, sustaining guest satisfaction, and promoting a culture of continuous improvement, where service delivery excellence is reflected in both exceptional guest experiences and the well-being and engagement of employees. This holistic approach ultimately strengthens organisational reputation and competitive advantage in a demanding and evolving hospitality landscape.

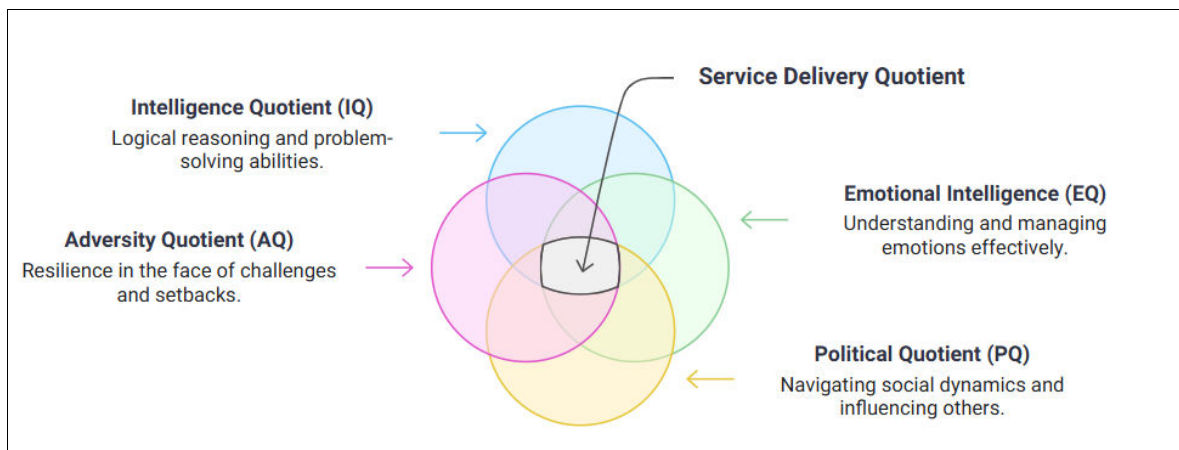


Figure 1: Four Intelligence Quotients and Their Intersection in the SDQ

Figure 1 illustrates how cognitive ability (IQ), emotional intelligence (EQ), social navigation skills (PQ), and resilience (AQ) converge at the intersection of employee competencies and guest expectations. It is important to note that the weight and practical relevance of each quotient may shift depending on the operational context. For instance, recruitment processes may prioritise resilience (AQ) and political intelligence (PQ) to identify candidates with adaptability and social acumen. At the same time, guest experience initiatives may emphasise emotional intelligence (EQ) to enhance empathy and guest satisfaction. SDQ's multidimensionality allows organisations to calibrate the relative emphasis of each quotient as appropriate for the task or setting.

The convergence point represents the SDQ, where meaningful service delivery occurs through the balanced application of all four intelligence types.

SDQ Intersection: Competencies and Expectations

The Service Delivery Quotient (SDQ) emerges at the critical intersection where employee competencies meet guest expectations. This creates a dynamic space for meaningful and effective service interactions for the sector. This will highlight employees' responsibilities and essential qualities such as courtesy, accountability, efficiency, proactive communication, and emotional intelligence as the foundation of professional conduct. These competencies ensure that employees perform their tasks reliably and engage guests with sensitivity and awareness whilst anticipating needs and responding thoughtfully. This approach reinforces that service

delivery excellence requires employees to consistently demonstrate these behaviours while adapting to diverse situations with resilience and ethical clarity.

Conversely, guests enter the service encounter with expectations including timeliness, empathy, professionalism, trust, and personalised attention. Service delivery excellence from their perspective is therefore characterised by seamless, respectful interactions that make them feel valued and understood on both practical and emotional levels. It is the experience of feeling genuinely cared for, with personalised solutions and responsiveness that exceed transactional exchanges.

The SDQ captures this overlap through ethical responsiveness, professionalism, attentive listening, and co-creation of value. The intersection where SDQ resides represents a service approach in which employees engage with guests with integrity and respect, fostering trust and upholding high standards. SDQ means employees are attentive listeners who prioritise real-time adaptation to guest needs, while co-creating and emphasising collaboration between themselves and guests to produce memorable, satisfying experiences. By focusing on this intersection, the SDQ model guides the hospitality sector toward service delivery excellence that is operationally efficient, ethically sound, and human-centred, which will ultimately enhance employee loyalty, brand reputation, and organisational success in the hospitality sector.

Applications of SDQ in Hospitality Management

The Service Delivery Quotient (SDQ) offers practical value across multiple facets of hospitality management.

a) Recruitment & Selection:

- Behavioural interviews targeting emotional intelligence and ethical reasoning
- Psychometric assessments measuring resilience and social navigation skills
- Values-alignment screening, ensuring cultural fit

By embedding SDQ principles into behavioural interviews and psychometric assessments, organisations can better identify candidates whose competencies and values align with the demands of ethical, guest-centred service.

For example, in a hypothetical recruitment scenario, a hotel front desk team selected using the SDQ dimensions could be assessed for their readiness to deliver guest-centric, empathetic, and resilient service in high-pressure situations. This illustrates the model’s practical intent and sets the foundation for pragmatic, evidence-based implementation in real-world settings.

Operationalising SDQ in practice involves the following measurement and implementation steps:

- a) For IQ: cognitive ability can be measured using standardised reasoning assessments or technical skills evaluations during hiring and performance reviews.
- b) For EQ: emotional intelligence can be assessed with scenario-based interview questions and validated EQ psychometric scales (such as the EQ-i or MSCEIT).
- c) For PQ: political intelligence may be gauged through peer feedback and self-assessment on navigating organisational dynamics, or through leadership simulation exercises.
- d) For AQ: the adversity quotient is measurable by behavioural event interviews focusing on responses to setbacks, formal resilience scale surveys, and observation during crisis simulations.

SDQ Dimension	Example Measurement Tool	Typical Use (Context)
IQ	Cognitive assessments, skill tests	Recruitment, performance review
EQ	EQ-i, MSCEIT, scenario interviews	Guest experience, training
PQ	Peer feedback, leadership exercises	Team placement, management
AQ	Resilience scales, crisis simulation	Emergency response, recruitment

Table 1. Measurement Tools and Contextual Applications for SDQ Dimensions in Hospitality

In practice, these metrics should be integrated into recruitment matrices, ongoing training evaluations, and guest feedback systems. For example, guest experience surveys may include items that specifically target perceived empathy, adaptability, and professionalism, which are mapped to the SDQ dimensions.

This approach ensures that new hires possess not only technical skills but also the emotional intelligence, accountability, and interpersonal aptitude necessary to thrive in dynamic service environments, ultimately enhancing the consistency and quality of service delivery.

b) Training & Development:

- Targeted modules for emotional regulation and ethical decision-making
- Scenario-based learning for crisis management and difficult conversations
- Cross-cultural competency programs enhancing political intelligence

In the training and development space, SDQ can provide a framework for designing targeted learning modules that enhance emotional regulation, ethical decision-making, and resilience. These programmes prepare employees to navigate challenging encounters whilst upholding integrity and maintaining composure, especially during peak periods or crises. In the long term, this will contribute to sustained service excellence and positive guest experiences.

c) Performance Management:

- Guest feedback integration, measuring SDQ dimensions
- 360-degree assessments, including colleague and supervisor evaluations
- Personal development planning focused on quotient enhancement

By incorporating SDQ metrics in guest feedback loops, the sector can likely benefit from capturing nuanced insights into how well service interactions meet the emotional and relational needs of guests. By integrating these measures into satisfaction surveys and online reviews, managers will be able to identify strengths and areas for improvement beyond standard transactional evaluations and instead drive continuous improvement in service quality.

d) Organisational Culture:

- Leadership modelling of SDQ principles
- Recognition programs celebrating ethical service delivery
- Team-building activities strengthening collaborative value creation

Ultimately, the SDQ model provides a foundation for cultivating a hospitality culture rooted in empathy, professionalism, and ethical responsiveness. By prioritising service delivery

excellence, SDQ shapes a workplace environment that fosters sustained guest expectations, satisfaction, and employee engagement.

Key limitations of this study include the conceptual nature of the SDQ framework and reliance on secondary literature. The lack of primary empirical testing presents a gap in validating the SDQ's effectiveness in real hospitality settings. Additionally, measurement of SDQ-related outcomes (guest satisfaction, employee behaviours) may be susceptible to subjective bias due to self-reporting or perception-based methods. Cross-cultural applicability and long-term impacts remain unexplored, warranting further research.

Conclusion

The Service Delivery Quotient (SDQ) offers a human-centred, ethical, and multidimensional framework that redefines excellence in hospitality service. Moving beyond technical skills, SDQ integrates cognitive (IQ), emotional (EQ), social or political (PQ), and resilience (AQ) competencies to provide a holistic approach that meets both guest expectations and organisational goals. In summary, the SDQ represents a significant advancement for hospitality management, offering a comprehensive, values-driven framework that promotes sustainable, meaningful service excellence in today's evolving industry.

For Practitioners, SDQ provides actionable frameworks for recruitment, training, and performance management that directly impact guest satisfaction and employee engagement. For Researchers, SDQ opens new avenues for empirical validation, cross-cultural studies, and longitudinal research on the effectiveness of service delivery. For Educators, SDQ offers a comprehensive pedagogical tool for teaching service excellence, integrating psychology, ethics, and hospitality management.

Based on these insights into the potential of the SDQ model for enhancing guest service delivery in the hospitality industry, the following recommendations are advanced to support its adoption, operationalisation, and validation.

Key Recommendations:

- Pilot SDQ assessments within real-world hospitality recruitment processes, accompanied by empirical data collection.

- Develop and implement SDQ-based training modules for frontline staff, measuring pre-/post-intervention effects on guest satisfaction and employee resilience.
- Integrate SDQ metrics into existing guest feedback systems, developing protocols for quantitative and qualitative analysis.
- Conduct cross-cultural and longitudinal empirical studies to evaluate the SDQ's robustness, validity, and impact over time.
- Examine the relationship between SDQ dimensions and specific guest outcomes (e.g., loyalty, repeat business).

These steps will substantially enhance the evidence base and operational validity of the SDQ in diverse hospitality environments. Additionally, future research should focus on:

- a) Empirical validation of SDQ in diverse hospitality contexts.
- b) Cross-sector comparative studies to assess SDQ's adaptability.
- c) Longitudinal designs evaluating the sustained impact of SDQ-driven interventions.
- d) Investigating organisational culture's mediating role in SDQ implementation.

As a conceptual paper, this work invites future researchers and practitioners to empirically test the SDQ framework in operational hospitality contexts. Suggested directions include developing instruments for each quotient, piloting the framework with hospitality teams, and quantitatively examining relationships with guest and employee outcomes.

For academics and practitioners, SDQ operationalisation can be strengthened by:

- Defining clear metrics and validated instruments for each quotient.
- Adapting weightings for quotients by context and desired outcomes, e.g., recruitment, training, and guest experience.
- Piloting SDQ-driven interventions and collecting multi-source data (employee, guest, peer, managerial), with ongoing analysis for refinement.
- Reporting on implementation outcomes in peer-reviewed studies to build empirical evidence and transferable practice guides.

The hospitality industry's future competitiveness depends on humanising service delivery. SDQ provides the framework to measure, develop, and sustain the human capabilities that

create memorable guest experiences while fostering an ethical and resilient organisational culture.

References

- Anser, M. K., Yousaf, Z., Usman, M., & Yousaf, S. (2020). Towards Strategic Business Performance of the Hospitality Sector: Nexus of ICT, E-Marketing and Organizational Readiness. *Sustainability*, 12(4), 1346. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12041346>
- Binet, A. (1905). Methodes nouvelles pour le diagnostic du niveau intellectuel des anormaux.
- Brown, M. E., & Treviño, L. K. (2006). Ethical leadership: A review and future directions. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 17(6), 595–606.
- Dargahi, H., & Ehteshami, F. (2019). The relationship between managers' political intelligence and employees' political behavior: a case study in Tehran University of Medical Sciences. *Journal of Advances in Social Science and Humanities*, 5(1), 531–538. <https://doi.org/10.15520/JASSH51390>
- Denhardt, R. B., & Denhardt, J. V. (2000). The new public service: Serving rather than steering. *Public Administration Review*, 60(6), 549–559.
- Gadye, L. (2021). The past and future of the IQ test. Retrieved from BrainFacts.org. Accessed on 30 May 2025. <https://www.brainfacts.org/thinking-sensing-and-behaving/thinking-and-awareness/2021/the-past-and-future-of-the-iq-test-060721>
- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional Intelligence: Why it Can Matter More Than IQ*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Groseclose, T. (2009). Political Quotient and Political Intelligence. *Management Today*, n.p.
- Kansakar, P., Munir, A., & Shabani, N. (2019). Technology in the hospitality industry: Prospects and challenges. *IEEE Consumer Electronics Magazine*, 8(3), 60-65.
- Lusch, Robert & Vargo, Stephen. (2006). Service-Dominant Logic: Reactions, Reflections and Refinements. *Marketing Theory*. 6. 281. 10.1177/1470593106066781.
- Matahela, V. E. (2025). Ubuntu philosophy as a transformative pedagogical approach for advancing planetary health in nursing education in the Anthropocene era. *Teaching and Learning in Nursing*, 20(2), 164–173. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.teln.2025.01.011>
- Mbigi, L. (2005). *The Spirit of African Leadership*. Knowres Publishing.
- Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V. A., & Berry, L. L. (1988). SERVQUAL: A multiple-item scale for measuring consumer perceptions of service quality. *Journal of Retailing*, 64(1), 12-40.
- Postma, N. (2020). *If you don't do politics, politics will do you...: A guide to navigating office politics effectively and ethically*. KR Publishing.
- Reffo, G., & Wark, V. (2014). *Leadership PQ: How political intelligence sets successful leaders apart*. Kogan Page.

- Saxena S, Rathore B. (2024). Adversity Quotient as Determining Factor of Mental Health and Professional Quality of Life Among Healthcare Professionals: A Systematic Review. *Annals of Neurosciences*. 2024;32(1):58-65. doi:10.1177/09727531241231055
- Stoltz, P. G. (1997). *Adversity Quotient: Turning Obstacles into Opportunities*. Wiley.
- Uyar, A.& Öğretmenoğlu, M. (2019). The Relationship Between EFQM Excellence Model and Organizational Commitment: A Case Study on Tourism Faculties in Turkey. *International Social Sciences Studies Journal*, 5(30): 505-517.
- Zhu, Jingjie & Wang, Ying & Cheng, Mingming. (2021). *Digital Transformation in the Hospitality Industry*. Boston Hospitality Review. Boston University School of Hospitality Administration.