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Tourism in the Era of Digital Transformation

CHANGES IN TOURIST AGENCIES' OPERATIONS TOWARDS CONTEMPORARY DIGITAL TRENDS

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Abstract

The changes in tourist agencies' operations within the digital era have a completely new and positive character towards providing greater accessibility to tourists. With such changes, they retained the ways they run their business operations, but those ways also received new physiognomy. They follow altered requirements for services and the scope of spatial diversification of tourism products. Also, increased scope and quality of promotional activities for tourism products and specific travel arrangements have become an important issue. The research shows that there is improvement in different segments in tourist agencies' operation, determination of the degree of attractiveness of tourist values and assessment of the quality of delivered tourism services. This indicates that contemporary digital trends have essential character not only for travel agencies, but for tourists as well.

Key Words: *tourist agencies, operations, changes, contemporary, digital trends*
JEL classification: *L83*

Introduction

Tourist agencies' activities are in constant change because of the conditions in which they exist. Related to the constant change in the scope of tourists' demands for agencies' services, there is an evident transformation from services that were mostly related to travel to those that have evident tourist attributes on which nowadays tourist agencies

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base their business operation. The development of tourism and the changes that followed consequently brought about changes in the working operations of tourist agencies, their organizational setup and their role on tourism market. Thus, with the development of agency work and their role as travel mediators, the other functions of agencies are developed in the field of providing information, travel advising, and promotion. Besides the changes in the concept of their operation through the period of their development, travel agencies base their activities on providing services to tourists in relation to travel and tourists are provided with content of activities to enrich their experience. Tourism development is closely related to the introduction of a new quality in working operations of the agencies and a continuous development of their role as travel mediators.

It is evident that there is a change in the way of travel as well as in forms and contents of the tourist activity. In this way, tourist agencies are adapted to innovative solutions and receive an appeal of a contemporary activity that is developing intensively. The intensive development of agency work is parallel with the intensive development of tourism. In this context, it is important to note that due attention by different authors (Alvarez, Martin & Casielles 2007; Buhalis and Schertler 1999; Fesenmaier, Klein, and Buhalis et al. 2000; Sheldon, Wöber, and Fesenmaier 2000; Wang and Cheung 2004) is addressed to the role and impact of information and communication technologies in agencies' working activities during the past few decades. Zolkiewski and Littler (2004) argue that the Internet, as the most pervasive communication tool, has a particular role in accessing different information very quickly and easily.

Tourist agency' performance is changing and promoting not only from the aspect of essential content components, but also by using new theoretical and practical methods and specific technical and technological tools. A revolutionary advancement in this regard is the digital approach to travel agency's operations. The phenomenon of digitalization requires special attitude to the immediate activities undertaken by the tourist agency. The era of digital technology in tourism has revolutionary features. They have been so drastic that could be perceived as fatal, in the sense that there will be no need for a travel agency if the services can be provided and obtained on-line. However, the changes in agencies' work within the digital era have a completely new and positive character. As

Bethapudi (2013) states, travel agencies have achieved significant synergies, efficiency and cost savings by integrating their back office (e.g. accounting, commission monitoring, and personnel) and front-office (customers' history, itinerary development, ticketing and communication with suppliers) through the implementation of the information technology (IT) in their internal organization. The IT approach in different agencies' operations provide greater accessibility to tourists as a value of enhanced tourist demand. According to Ku and Fan (2009), the electronic distribution of travel information, prices, and availability has opened new channels by which people can reserve travel products.

Unlike the research within international frames, it is interesting that this issue of IT in tourist agencies' operation in Macedonia is still not explored, and there is a lack of research work in this area. The benefits of the application of IT in the field of tourism is explored by Marinoski (2003), who underlines the benefits of IT as a possibility of virtual approximation of phenomena and relationships as tourist value and tourist services from the receptive tourist areas towards tourists as agency's clients. He further explains that this at first glance can be accepted as a threat or taking over the functions of travel agencies, or bypassing them in the use of performances that are at the disposal of the intermediary. However, the process of successful implementation of IT in tourist agency' operations is evident. The digitization of travel agencies' business can be labeled as a recognizable evolutionary qualitative step.

On the other hand, the digital framework enables occurrences and relationships that do not have a sufficient reputation through GIS systems to receive full affirmation. Changes in the work process have been raised to a higher level in the sphere of promotional activities. This facilitates easier access to the general promotion, the promotion of specific components, the dominance of tourism products and specific travel arrangements. The research shows that there is improvement in the sphere of payment, determination of the degree of attractiveness of the values and assessment of provided tourism services.

Since there is a lack of academic research that investigates the implementation of IT in travel agencies' operations in the Republic of Macedonia, we found that it is necessary to conduct research that will contribute to enriched exploration in this field. This research also provides practical information for travel agencies about the commitment

of employees in the use of IT from two aspects: as a mandatory obligation related to their working position, and as employees' ability and willingness to follow the contemporary trends related to IT implementation in everyday working operations. The purpose of our research is to determine how travel agencies implement IT in their working operations and the level of IT knowledge of employees, in the case of Lake Ohrid Region.

The role of tourist agencies in tourism development and the use of the information technology

Historically, the development of tourist agencies is connected to socio-economic development but within the specific tourism market conditions. Since tourism development is closely related to the technical and technological innovative development as well, rapid IT development enables an increase in tourism because of its contribution to diversification of tourism as a contemporary and rapidly developed phenomena. The modern conditions that arise in all social spheres, and in this context within tourist mediation, significantly contributed to the increase in the number of participants in tourist activities. Thus, tourism is transforming in the field with the availability of information, which makes its establishment a massive social phenomenon (Marinoski, 2003).

Tourist agencies with their information structure have influence the character of the selective forms of tourism activity. The availability of information helps travel agency to systematize different types of travel products and facilitates the inclusion of individual requirements of the clients within their differentiation, for which the increase in tourism activity leads to increased tourism turnover. The increased turnover is realized by all subjects in the tourist activity which enables the travel agency to reduce the price of its services. The agency itself, with the increase in the number of tourists and services, makes higher turnover, which also contributes to the reduction in the price of its part of the services. The reduction of the prices of services is also reflected in tourism, which is a significant return impact. Thus IT emerges as a contemporary development factor. In turn, it stimulates information research even more in the discovery of the opportunities for increase of tourism activity through new instruments and information methodologies. The facilitated approach to information has a paradigmatic character in the promotion of tourism relations. Through the improved interest in the

process of use of the agency' services, the more intensive development of tourism as a whole and certain segments come to force.

Through the use of modern information systems, tourist agencies stimulate tourists to decide to participate in tourist activity, not only with the reduction of prices, but also with informational and promotional activities that should provide them with an insight into the tourist offer, and with different activities' content.

The scientific and technological development, and social and economic relations that take place are a basis for the development of tourist agencies. Under the influence of the increasing volume of demand by tourists as users of the services and the more advanced forms of tourist offer, there is a change in the operations of travel agencies. The development of travel agencies is related to the market conditions in tourism industry, as these specific economic entities appear on the tourist market to mediate between those offering services and those seeking services (Nestoroska, 2006).

Tourist agencies in the modern information society have very good conditions to establish easier communication links not only with the direct providers and users of the services, but also with the stakeholders in tourism development. Modern IT enables improved accessibility to stakeholders, both horizontally and vertically. Because of the influence that travel agencies have due to the diverse demand by the clients on the one hand, and service providers on the other hand, they often have to adjust their operations to different changes that occur on tourism travel market.

As travel mediators between the service providers and the clients they usually organize and combine services into tourist products i.e. tour arrangements for which the use of IT helps travel agencies to create them. The use of IT allows the travel agency to develop the relationships in the new role that it has on the tourism market. IT enables tourist agency to get information much more easily and to establish business relations not only with carriers and caterers but also with other segments of the tourist offer. On the other hand, with the help of IT, the agencies are able to control the tourist demand and expand the range of tourist services. This progressive change is due to the advanced systems of social importance that are particularly important.

Information technology in function of quality and reputation of the travel agency

The improvement of the quality of travel agencies' services by using IT is a result of the continuously increased competition that occurs on tourism market. Namely, the inclusion of a larger number of tourists who use the information services of travel agencies implies more sophisticated demands of the broad heterogeneous tourist clientele. Fulfillment of the required conditions implies taking care of the quality. The improvement of the quality of services, which is the result of the availability of information, also appears as an imperative in conditions of increased competitiveness in the performance of travel agencies on tourism market.

Travel agencies tend to guard their place on tourist market in order to try to keep their reputation. Once the reputation is lost, gaining it again proves to be very difficult, which affects not only on the revenue of the travel agency, but also of the other stakeholders as business partners of the agency. The improvement of the quality of services stems from competitiveness in this respect. Therefore, tourist agencies protect their reputation by improving the constant quality of services, and promotion of the products on the market is a result of the involvement and commitment of the information society. The improvement of the quality of the services as a necessity in the work of tourist agencies is based on the use of IT, as well.

Due to their orientation to the improvement of the quality of services, travel agencies provide and include new contents in their offer, by the implementation of modern IT. Thus, travel agencies contribute to the discovery of new tourist destinations. As business operators which use IT, they are an important factor of tourist destinations development within national and international frames that are not very much promoted on the tourist market, or are still undiscovered for tourist demand and supply. Through different IT tools, travel agencies are in position to valorize attractions for tourism, thus activating those new attractions as tourist attractions that have potentials to be part of tourist offer of a region or country. According to Tsang, Lai & Law (2010), tourist agencies not only serve as a channel to promote information for new destination, but enable visualization of travel products and services through video clips and graphical images. Thus, the development of tourism on different spatial levels contributes to the valorization of

potential tourist attractions which become an active segment of tourist market offer. In this process, travel agencies not only include new spatial areas as elements of tourist attractions, but they also valorize and activate some of the economic and non-economic activities for tourism purposes. In this way, the tourist offer is enriched with interesting content. As a result of implementation of the modern processes in the use of information and technology systems, the confidence in travel agency is growing. The use of IT helps the travel agency to develop the relationships between the participants on the tourist market and to define the new role that it has on the market. Modern IT enables an improved and efficient functioning of different organizational systems.

The interior arrangement of the business premises is also an important component in the work of travel agencies, because it is the area where the direct contact with the tourists and clients is usually established. The aesthetic arrangement of the business premises has an important role because it has an attractive effect on agency's clients and it draws its attention. The arrangement is part of the comfort of the travel agency. The arrangement contains the aesthetics and decoration that has a tourist promotional significance. The use of video presentations complements the content offer with audio and visual impressions.

The equipment of travel agency in the business premises where a direct contact with agency's clients is more frequent should also be in the function of as much communication as possible. In that direction, it needs to have modern infrastructure, and the most important thing is to provide IT tools for those employees that will help them to use the Internet. The participation of electronic technology and automatics in tourist agency operations today is almost mandatory. The application is present both in the work of travel agencies, and in the work process of tour operators. Computer systems are used for concluding contracts with business partners as service providers. In such a way, computer systems provide expediency and reliability in the work of travel agencies.

IT knowledge of travel agencies' employees- the case of Ohrid Lake region

Information technologies and human resources have a noticeable place in travel agencies' working processes (Marinoski, 2003). In this regard, the employment process should be followed. The modernization of the

working process and the use of information, technical and technological tools enables employment of staff in travel agencies that, in addition to their knowledge for the tourist activity, will be able to use these tools in an appropriate way.

Nestoroska (1999) argues that some activities in the working operations of travel agencies cannot be performed without the direct participation of the employees. A very good example is with the tourist guiding service which means that travel agencies are an opportunity for employing staff or engaging tour guides regardless of the increasing application of modern information technology in their work. However, even tour guiding cannot be full and of high quality unless tour guides do not use different IT tools. Examples include pointing and guidance information systems that help the travel guide to lead its group professionally.

Technical culture implies that, in current employment conditions, it is usually connected with appropriate level of IT knowledge. The ratio of employees to such technical means is of crucial importance in the development of travel agencies. This means that tourist employees should use such appliances for their work and maintain them timely and appropriately.

Taking into account the place and role of travel agencies on tourism market, the conducted research covers the travel agencies in the Ohrid Lake tourist region in order to determine the IT knowledge of the employees who are on operational and managerial level. We selected this region for two reasons: it is a region that is the most developed tourist region of Macedonia, and because the number of tourist agencies has increased to 49. (Annex 1). We decided on this empirical research because this issue has not been enough researched to obtain knowledge about the structure of the employees in the travel agencies in this region.

In this research we implemented different research methods and techniques depending on the data we wanted to gain for obtaining as objective and accurate information as possible. Methods of critical analysis, description, and comparative analysis we applied, and theoretical and empirical research was conducted through collection of data, cabinet and field research, processing of primary and secondary data, analysis and interpretation of gained results from conducted interviews, for which we selected a comprehensive and representative

interviewees that are on the operational level and higher level of management.

Secondary data analysis, and literature review was conducted prior to the interview that supported this research. We conducted guiding interview and discussion with the interviewees. We chose to conduct the interviews with the employees in those travel agencies that actually perform on the market, i.e. active travel agencies. The list of agencies that we gained for Ohrid Lake region is extracted from the Register for all registered travel agencies in the Republic of Macedonia published by the Ministry of Economy-Sector for tourism and hospitality for the period 2011-2015. The interview data in this research was as follows in table 1.

Table 1: *Interviewee data*

Interviewee characteristics	Average or prevail
Age: between 22-56 years	34 years
Gender: 30 female (62%) 19 male (38%)	Female
Time for interviewing: 20-35 min	27 min

The interview was conducted within the period February-March 2018 for the purpose of this paper. Female interviewees prevail in the employment structure with the ratio of 62% to 38%. The questions were designed to identify the IT knowledge of employees in travel agencies, both on operational and managerial level. The questions were divided into two groups of interviewees: employees on operational and on managerial level. Such division was made because we tailored the question to gain information about the implementation of IT on different levels of working operations. The questions were created and interview was guided to meet the research aims. The structure of the interview incorporated the following segments:
- Introduction with the interviewee with the aim of our research and the importance of their IT knowledge for the working operations
- Interviewee data (presented in summary in Table 1)
- Description of the employee's work position with questions related to: sales, air ticketing, advisory, promotion, organization, managerial position with the duties, and implementation of IT in their working operation, as well as their level of knowledge of IT. They were asked to explain the difficulties that they face in

implementing IT in their work. The intention was to diagnose the needs of employees to improve their IT knowledge (if needed).

After the completion of the interview, the qualitative data analysis followed in order to summarize the gained information related to the issue of IT knowledge of employees on different working positions.

Findings and discussion

Knowledge improvement of the employees in travel agencies is an important factor in the performance of the working operations on different levels of job positions. In this context, IT knowledge has a special place. Therefore, the maintenance and development of the knowledge can be performed through various possible forms:
  - permanent IT training;
  - attending specialized courses;
  - organizing lectures and discussions about the work of travel agencies and the use of IT;
  - creating opportunities to improve job skills within travel agencies through job recruiting;
  - enabling employees to follow professional magazines, books, newsletters and other printed materials in the field of IT and publishing magazines and other printed forms that treat professional issues of tourist agency and IT.

The findings upon the gathered data from the conducted interview show the following:
  - the average age of the employees is 34 years, which is an indicator of a relatively young employment age structure, which again is an indicator of a higher possibilities to apply IT more easily during the working operations;
  - from the aspect of gender structure, female population prevails with 62%. This can be explained somewhat by the fact that the work is not physically demanding, creative, a job that requires resourcefulness and contact, which are features that are particularly appealing to women;
  - although the travel agencies are characterized by a relatively small size in organizational structure (an average number of employees ranges between 2-5) that is in accordance with their scope of work, yet they have division of work (according to which we organized the

structure of questions for those who work on sales, air ticketing, advisory, promotion, organization, and those on managerial position;

- because of the small size of the agencies, most of the employees work on several tasks simultaneously, i.e. there is no strict division of job duties (as we divided them for the interview);
- all of the interviewees answered that they constantly use IT in their working operations on daily basis;
- older employees of an average age between 48-56 emphasized the contribution of IT in making their work easier, although at the beginning of the implementation of IT, they had difficulties to start using it in the working operations;
- other employees of an average age between 23-47 emphasized that the use of IT in their working operations is indispensable in the realization of their everyday tasks. They stressed the advantage of IT particularly in the sphere of communication, both with tourists and business partners, promotion, sales, ticketing;
- employees on managerial position find that IT enables smooth, simultaneously facilitated, efficient and practical realization of the work activities of the travel agencies.

The employees need to have appropriate level of knowledge to perform their tasks in the best possible way on different operational positions of travel agencies, as well as on managerial position. Special tasks are performed by the employees that provide tourists with services related to air ticketing, sell tour packages, excursions and other services, advise tourists on different issues related to their travel or tourist stay, promote travel agencies' products and organize different tour packages. They can specialize in specific tasks, as well. Such is the example of staff that is specialized in selling air tickets. They are obliged to have IATA license to hold this job position in the agency. The constant changes that appear in this area of work require that IT education should be a priority, because of the character of the applications and reservation systems that are used for air ticketing.

Direct contact with service providers in the field of sales, promotion and organization should be tailored to perform the intermediary activity. The perceptions of the counters and desk services and the provision of easy customer fluctuation through the business premises and avoidance of unnecessary crowds represent significant assumptions about the functionality of the business premises. In this sense, the information

equipment that is used ensures order in the sales employees' contacts with the clients by issuing ordinal numbers.

Conclusion

The tasks which travel agency have nowadays are huge and complex (either on domestic either on international market), and they need adequate organization toward successful fulfilment. The complexity in organizing different tour arrangements has influence on a serious and detailed approach to work organization of the travel agency. How it will do depends on the agency's scope of work (business), the market where it is oriented, market segments, clients, or business partners. A basic rule for every organization is that different working operations depend on whether the employees are adequate for the tasks which they have to fulfil. It is the same rule for the travel agency. But what is specific is also the IT knowledge because of the fact that nowadays the use of IT is inseparable part of all working activities. What is also very important is that employees in travel agency have to posses high professional level regardless of the work they perform.

The main objective of our research was to identify the level of IT implementation, and readiness and ability of travel agencies' employees to implement IT in their working performance. The research indicated that the employee structure in travel agencies in Ohrid Lake is very satisfactory related to age and working operations performances. As for the employees in travel agencies of Ohrid Lake region, we are free to say that they satisfy the needs of the travel agency performance related to the IT knowledge, which is supported by the research findings. The relatively young age structure of employees (34 years) is a good indicator of future possibilities to apply IT in agency operations. Since agencies are of very small size (2-5 employees) and most of the employees perform several tasks simultaneously, it is, on the other hand, positive because they use more IT to contribute to facilitate the working operations.

The modernization of the work process and the use of IT and technological tools enables employment of staff in travel agencies who, in addition to their knowledge of the tourist activity, will be able to use these resources in an appropriate way. Based on the research findings, this paper recommends future actions that will contribute to the research

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of situation of IT implementation in travel agencies by the employees in broader frameworks, regionally or nationally.

We would also like to emphasize that, conducted research was limited because it focused on determining the state of things using a relatively small sample of travel agencies in the regional context, but on the other hand, this sample is appropriately representative taking into account the level of tourism development in the region and the scope of agency's work. Therefore, we recommend that future work be oriented towards a broader scope of research that will contribute to increase the awareness of the importance of implementation of IT in travel agencies' operations.

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ANNEX 1: List of travel agencies in Ohrid Lake region[*]

1. Agency ING Polozani
2. Albtravel
3. Antonio & Bojan
4. Atlantik Tours
5. Aura Travel
6. Bale Tours
7. Balkan Net
8. Balkans Time Ohrid
9. Blue Holiday
10. Dimaks Travel
11. DMC Travel
12. Elida Tours
13. Europe tourist
14. Eurotours EHP
15. Fibula
16. First Class Struga
17. Flamutari
18. Gema Travel
19. Generaltourist
20. Generaltourist 2000
21. Globi Struga
22. Globus Travel
23. Ibegalis
24. Intertravel
25. Kompas Travel

26. Lale Tours
27. Life is Good Travel & Tours
28. Lukan
29. Macedonia Travel
30. Maxx Travel
31. Mega Tours
32. Mergimi
33. Mergimi Travel 2013
34. MTC Travel
35. Ohrid Holidays
36. Ohrid Travel
37. Pelikan Travel
38. Polet
39. Rasim Tourism
40. Relax Travel
41. Safet Tours
42. Skipona Reisen 2003
43. Tina Tours
44. Transfer Touirst
45. Venus Travel
46. Vis Poj
47. Visit Ohrid
48. Vizija
49. Wellness Holiday

- Data for the travel agencies is according to the Register for travel agencies in Republic of Macedonia published by the Ministry Of Economy-Sector for tourism and hospitality
- (http://archive.economy.gov.mk/ministerstvo/sektori_vo_ministerstvo/sektor_turizam_ugostitelstvo/3886.html)