

## CONTEMPORARY TRENDS IN HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN TRAVEL AGENCIES

*Ivana Marinović Matović<sup>1</sup>; Jelena Vemić Đurković<sup>2</sup>*

### Abstract

*Travel agencies have an extraordinary influence on the development of tourism, as a global socioeconomic phenomenon, and on the promotion of tourist movements of all types and forms. Contemporary travel agency business is facing profound changes due to technological environment challenges, and transformation of human resources in the service sector. Observed changes can be attributed, among other things, to the influence of current trends in travel and tourism sector, the use of Internet and the development of information and communication technologies. Research paper deals with emerging trends in travel and tourism sector, and their implications for human resources' competencies in travel agencies. This paper analyzes the role and importance of human resources in contemporary tourism, the process of travel agency human resource management, education and training, selection and employment. The aim of this research is to identify main problems of Serbian travel agency human resources management, with reference to qualifications and training required for each working position.*

**Key Words:** *tourism, travel agencies, human resources, education, selection, competencies*

**JEL classification:** *L83, M12, M53, M54, Z32*

### Introduction

The contemporary agency business in tourism sector is ever-changing. This trend could be, among other things, a result of contemporary tendencies in the market, increased internet usage, and the development of IC technologies. Changes in tourism market, which have emerged as a result

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<sup>1</sup> Ivana Marinović Matović, Branch manager, Addiko Bank AD Belgrade, Bulevar Mihajla Pupina 6, 11070 Belgrade, +381 60 863 4004, ivana.m.matovic@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Jelena Vemić Đurković, Associate Professor, Educons University, Vojvide Putnika bb, Sremska Kamenica, +381 64 160 8205, djurkovic.jelena@yahoo.com

of information and technology revolution, are a phenomenon studied by numerous researchers after 2002. Detailed analysis of available scientific literature has shown that changes in agency business are most often analyzed from three aspects. These aspects include the activities of travel agencies that have *undergone* profound *changes*. They include the emergence of new forms of tourism brokerage, new forms of employment and work engagement, innovation of management and work processes organization (Decelle, 2004). The main challenges that tourist companies are faced with daily are: how to attract and keep good-quality employees; how to continuously improve their skills and update their knowledge, which quickly becomes out of date; how to have motivated and satisfied employees, which is what clients' satisfaction depends on. The challenges become even more complex when it is the question of competent managerial staff capable of creating and implementing efficient strategies for managing human resources, and who also must be attracted to and kept in the company (Vemić Djurkovic et al., 2018).

In the Republic of Serbia there is a lack of research on the travel agency topic. Despite their extraordinary influence on the development of tourism, as well as the promotion of tourist movements of all types and forms, the *attention paid* to specific *phenomena* of travel agencies is very marginal (Vukonić et al., 2015). Services provided by tourist intermediaries, especially those operating in the domestic market, are emerging as an issue that needs more professional and scientific attention. This paper deals with the possible implications of contemporary trends in tourism on human resources in travel agencies. The research objective is the description of changes in the structure and competencies of human resources in travel agencies, with a focus on knowledge and skill requirements for each job position.

### **Global environment impact on travel agency business**

The entire tourism sector, and especially travel agencies, operate in a very complex, dynamic and uncertain environment, due to the impact of technological innovations, demand changes, unfair competition, distribution system changes, and a general trend of reducing (or even completely eliminating) commission funding (Quintana et al., 2016). The rise of globalization and international tourism, led to the rise of technology and virtual reality, which have become an integral part of travel. With the advancement of technology, the needs of tourists have increased, as well as the technological offer in the tourist destination (Marinović Matović &

Simić, 2018). In today's global environment, the path from service provider to service user in tourism sector is shortening. However, when it comes to more complex travel arrangements, the path can be very long and complex, containing a whole network of service providers and intermediaries. As every link in the distribution chain is interdependent, it is essential that they work closely together and have smooth communication (Čavlek et al., 2011).

The base of agency business is offering a set of services (tourist arrangements) at a sale price that is lower than a sum of individual services price (if purchased individually). The organizing role of travel agencies, where they act as conceptual creators and initiators of travel, emphasizes their entrepreneurial spirit (Čavlek et al., 2011). The original model of travel agency fee-based business, which has been the primary source of revenue for decades, was discontinued in the early 2000s, when airlines announced the abolition of agency fees (Zerrow commission model) to reduce costs (Zhang et al., 2009). Agencies then had to come up with new financing models in the short term. This was the challenge, according to which, in the US market alone, in the five years (2000-2005), the number of travel agencies dropped from just over 30,000 to just over 21,000 (Amadeus, 2007). The challenge became how to charge extra for the service, i.e. to find a buyer who is willing to pay for something that he or she can pay less through the internet, or to provide additional value to the service so that it is worth the money paid. At the same time the internet penetrated into homes around the world, so the number of customers who needed the help of a travel agency was decreasing every day. Agencies had to discover the values, knowledge and skills that would provide them with further work.

An increasing number of tourists, whether or not they have experience in shopping online, started turning to professional assistance for organizing more complicated tours, business and incentive trips. A large number of travel agencies have shown in practice that customers who find the internet offer want to consult, check details and make payments at the agency. It is also not uncommon for experienced travel agents to find a more convenient or comfortable travel option than the client has found alone (Bogdanovych et al., 2006). Another reason why travel agencies will certainly not lose their market role is the fact that clients seek security and protection. Previous research has shown that the share of organized trips in the total number of trips is proportional to the distance of destination (Čavlek et al., 2011), which means that a large percentage of tourists who choose to travel

to distant destinations use the services of travel agencies. Contemporary tourism is no longer a simple combination of transportation and accommodation, tourists' needs are becoming more complex, customers are becoming more experienced, and so the tasks of travel agencies are moving towards a much wider range of services, with the necessary specialization and focus on narrower target groups.

### **Use of technology in modern travel agency**

The Fourth Industrial Revolution has an impact on all aspects of life, from the automation of daily housework to climate change (World Economic Forum, 2016). The beginnings of automation in tourism sector are related to the emergence of Central reservation systems (CRS) in the 1970s and Global distribution systems (GDS) in the 1980s (Ivanov et al., 2017). A completely new world has begun to open up to travel agencies, offering unlimited opportunities to access, use and sell information, in real time. Central reservation systems have become an indispensable sales channel for all providers in the tourism industry operating in the global market. GDS, through a communications network, connects providers and sellers, travel agencies and airlines. These systems have allowed access to the database of any organization (airline, hotel, railway, tour operator or other carrier) from a single source (GDS terminal), and at the same time allowed making reservations of the selected product. Commission has been charged for transactions, on behalf of the provider. Some authors argue that Global distribution system has all the characteristics of a stockbroker (Djelić, 2004).

Some travel agencies take a proactive approach to technology, while in some, the adjustment process flows in stages. According to Lin & Li (2005), the initial step in this process is the implementation of the website. The shift to the next level involves some investment in infrastructure and employee education. The third level of implementation involves networking with suppliers, while the highest, fourth level involves automating entire workflows and moving to contemporary business models (Lin & Lee, 2005). The constant evolution of technology and increasing customer expectations have led to the emergence of new trends in tourism demand (Dwyer, 2013). Two of the most recent trends that have shaped the last five years of travel agency business are instant search and personalization (PhocusWire, 2015). Travelers have less and less time to wait for a response, and are increasingly turning to sites that have a shorter response time. On the other hand, travelers expect a personalized offer that

is in line with their needs, habits and tastes. In technical terms, these two trends are not easy to reconcile. The increasing amount of data in electronic databases, also known as Big Data, is not in favor of increasing the speed of query (PhocusWire, 2015).

Information technology, the Internet and social networks are changing the tourism industry in the Republic of Serbia today. Thanks to new technologies, tourism is seeing incredible growth today, and this area of tourism is eager for expert staff (Crnjanski, 2016). With new channels and communication, and faster business operations, the required hours of work to perform certain operations are reducing, which also has the impact on reducing certain operating costs. Organizing, selling and calculating a tourist trip, with traditional manual operations, used to require 316 hours of work, while the same process takes 88.3 hours with information technology (Spasić & Pavlović, 2012).

The technological innovation currently underway is the Data Management Platform (DMP). This tool is used to collect, store, classify and manage personal information about travel agency's existing and potential clients (Galetto, 2016). Their advantage is reflected in the ability to combine transaction data (previous bookings, purchases and services used) with other digitized personal information (Tourism review, 2016a). Keeping travelers' information in an electronic database could compromise client's privacy, but on the other hand, it enables agencies to create personalized offers (Cosa, 2016). Continuous development of technologies contributes to the development of travel agency business. Contemporary technologies support the implementation of sustainable tourism. They influence the reduction of costs, but also time savings for all stakeholders in tourism sector. The communication is essential in order to better apply technologies related to sustainable development. The Republic of Serbia has to focus in the future on the use of sustainable technologies because, over time, tourism will become one of the main branches of the economy, which greatly affects the economy of a given country (Marinović Matović, 2019).

### **Training and education of human resources in travel agencies**

Human resources, as an intangible asset, represent the most important among three business resources of travel agencies (financial, technological and intellectual) (Jerman & Jankovic, 2018). In travel agency business, human skills, such as creativity, communication and sales skills, dominate. The specificities of the human resources in tourism sector are reflected in

the fact that their role is crucial in every segment of the business, which means that no link in the value chain can be fully automated and function without human influence. Global trends indicate that more and more jobs, especially those related to organizing, promoting, selling and evaluating, are done electronically, and that travel agents must have the knowledge different from that from just a few years ago, related to the use of communication technologies and specialized software.

The Law on Tourism of the Republic of Serbia (Law on Tourism, 2019) stipulates that a travel agency, in each of its business premises, must have full-time employed manager. This person must speak Serbian, at least one foreign language, and have at least a university degree or higher education. In order to work with an intermediary, the manager must have at least a secondary education in tourism, economic or other social direction. Working with a tour operator requires a three year work experience in tourism and a minimum of one year working with an intermediary. Employees who are in direct contact with clients must have at least four years of secondary education and speak at least one foreign language (Law on Tourism, 2019).

### **Employment in travel agencies: Contemporary trends**

Working in tourism is becoming more mobile and resilient, with new employment modalities prioritizing flexible workforce from an external environment, with a specific task and for a fixed period of time. According to research done in the United States, since the mid-1980s one in five jobs in that country has belonged to some new work form, where workers lead a so-called "Freelance - portfolio life" (Tomka et al., 2015). In these new forms of employment, work experience, recommendations and results achieved are most appreciated, and less a college or other degree. A key aspect in the modern concept of employment is the issue of personal competences (Garavan & McGuire, 2001).

In the emerging business climate, organizations face numerous dilemmas, including those related to outsourcing, that is, delegating certain tasks to external associates who are not part of the collective and corporate culture (Medić & Koldžin, 2015). Standard forms of permanent employment and full-time work are being replaced by flexible arrangements, such as working from home, part-time project engagement, and the like. Talent management businesses builds whole circles of outsourced associates, with a specific task and with an adequate fee, while releasing unnecessary labor

and expense (Tomka et al., 2015). Although the qualitative aspects of travel agency business are changing, the employment rate is constantly increasing (Baum, 2015). Globally, this growth reaches 2.2% per year, with estimates that it will continue to grow by an average of 2,5% when it comes to direct employment in tourism and 11,7% per year when it comes to related activities (WTTC, 2019).

The priority profiles for employment in travel agencies are tourism specialists, economists and developers (Ćuruvija, 2008). However, travel agencies dominated by e-commerce are looking for creative individuals with information skills, creative writing skills, who are witty, creative and resourceful, whether they have studied tourism or not. In addition to knowledge of foreign languages and basic IT skills, those who are familiar with digital reservation systems, airline tickets (Amadeus and Galileo) and working in WordPress or other web creation programs, have the advantage of employment. Blogging, travelogue and social media marketing are increasingly being sought. When asked about desirable personality traits, employers emphasized communicativeness and a willingness to work in a team, kindness, responsibility, honesty, resourcefulness and self-initiative (Steyn & Grobler, 2014).

Travel agencies that have positioned themselves as expert consultants and who keep pace with the advancement of IT sector, point out that the decisive success factor and their greatest competitive advantage is the state-of-the-art technology (Suarez et al., 2007) that simplifies and accelerates workflows and communication with customers and suppliers. In such an environment, agents can focus on quality and increase their competitiveness more easily (Roger-Monzo et al., 2015) by applying a personalized approach to each customer. The business of travel agencies is becoming more comfortable regarding the working hours and office space. Electronic communication with clients enables agency managers to organize their work so that their employees do not have to be physically present on premises during certain business hours. Many agencies have reduced fixed and variable costs by switching to one shift, and reducing the number of employees.

These trends have many advantages over the traditional approach, as well as several disadvantages. The first disadvantage is the workforce fluctuation, which does not only represent a cost for organization, but also causes numerous operational problems. Workforce fluctuation can make it difficult to maintain a desirable level of service quality, causes high training

costs, and the negative impact on employee morale (Ćuruvija, 2008). Given that a large number of employers in the Republic of Serbia avoid paying expensive trainings, new recruits training is most often the task of more experienced colleagues. How much time and effort they will be able to devote to their young colleagues depends primarily on their goodwill and the time available. These circumstances very often have a demotivating effect on young people planning to start their careers in tourism (Gill-McLure & Firth, 2018).

### **Skills and competencies of human resources in travel agencies**

Given the rising unemployment rate in the world, tourism can be considered as one of the few economy sectors where jobs are still being created (Tourism Review, 2016b). Human resources are a key business asset, much more complex than any other. One of the main attributes of human resources is their property – knowledge, intangibility, latency which makes it difficult to determine their economic value (Vemić Djurković et al., 2013). It is evident that human resources education needs to be given a lot of attention in order to be timely aligned with the needs of the local labor market and global changes. The constant changes in the market, and the advancement of technology, require workforce open to change, flexible, proactive and adaptable. Human resources in travel agencies must have basic knowledge of economics, geography, hospitality, traffic, consumer psychology, and speak at least one foreign language. In addition to this knowledge, they are expected to have specific skills. In the first place, these are business communication and sales skills, patience for each client, and emotion control skills (nervousness, anger, etc.). Since the quality of service in tourism depends primarily on the interaction between service provider and service user, employees are expected to be caring, kind, always smiling, intuitive, empathetic and helpful (Gill-McLure & Firth, 2018).

Training and development processes take place through three different forms of education, that is, through institutional (formal education), corporate (formal and informal education of employees according to organizational needs) and individual education (personal training, lifelong learning, extension of personal competences) (European Commission, 2018). It is not uncommon for organizations to grant scholarships to employees, for continuing their studies, when they see their own interest in doing so (the need for certain qualifications prescribed by law), or when they use scholarships as a way of motivation for better results and loyalty.

For example, attending a Computer reservations and operations system course is often financed by the travel agency.

A gap in formal education and labor market needs is widening, especially in countries considered to be the world's largest tourism powers. A survey conducted in 2016 by the French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) found that the key factor in selecting candidates is their practical know-how in the field of application (Tourism Review, 2016b). Young people should enroll in faculties, but after that they should first gain practical experience, and upgrade their knowledge through non-formal education (courses, seminars, licensing, training, etc.). The continuation of studies at higher levels (specialization, master and doctoral studies), should be after several years of work within the industry.

The informal aspect of education for tourism workforce involves acquiring and innovating the knowledge and skills necessary to perform certain activities that are not covered by formal education. The system of informal education for workforce in travel agencies consists of various courses organized by educational and professional institutions, trainings organized by employers and learning that takes place daily during work. Such training includes, for example, courses for tour guides, animators and escorts, training in the use of various computer programs, improvement of communication skills, sales skills, crisis management, security procedures, first aid, and the like. It is not uncommon for institutions and non-governmental organizations to organize thematic seminars, workshops and trainings for acquiring professional skills, sharing experiences and presenting new technological solutions (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2013). Such trainings are being conducted online, in the form of webinars.

When it comes to special tourism education, inclusive tourism or special requirements processing, training is most often done at destinations that meet the infrastructure requirements. For example, in line with the trend of involving more and more people with disabilities in tourist offers, some destinations have begun to specialize in receiving, accommodating and conducting activities for these types of tourist groups, and are becoming recognized as a place of education for travel agents and professionals from all over the world (Tecu et al., 2019). The most common examples of informal education and training in travel agency business in the Republic of Serbia are related to the education of future airline ticket vendors. Amadeus School Center, a licensed educational center, runs regular

training cycles of one or more days, for agents actively using the system in daily work (Amadeus, 2020). Travelport Belgrade organizes trainings for the use of the Galileo reservation system and IATA courses. Authorized training center conducts courses in classrooms or through distance learning. The courses are intended for beginners and agents who already use other reservation systems (Travelport, 2020).

In addition to the aforementioned trainings and licenses for the sale of airline tickets, the preparation cycle for travel agency should include training for the use of reservation systems for hotels, tickets and rental cars, insurance policies and the like, which can be learned in courses. Such courses are organized by Travel Magazine school of tourism (Travel magazine, 2020). YUTA Development and Education Center "YUTA REC", through its specialized training programs, trains agency executives and agents who want to innovate and broaden their knowledge, train the unemployed, students, and high school students. Candidates who complete the course and receive the Certificate, can be involved in a project called YUTA Job Exchange (YUTA, 2020). In addition to the aforementioned general educational programs, YUTA also organizes specialist courses for travel guides and escorts, destination representatives, animators, bookkeeping and finance activities. Tourism is considered to be a kind of "school of life", in which everyone, both those who organize and realize trips, and those who enjoy these trips, gain life experiences. In order to obtain the best possible preparation and realization of tourism programs, adequately educated workforce is needed, educated in the field of hospitality, transport, culture, sports and recreation, and that all is informal education. Travel agencies can play a key role in preserving the natural and cultural values of destinations, acting as educators to those who live in it and to those who visit it. They very often inform, educate and control tourists, but also the local population who must be aware of the expectations, needs and requirements of guests who come from culturally diverse backgrounds.

### **Conclusion**

Recognizing and implementing good business practices in human resources is very important, if not crucial, for travel agency business. Human resources play a decisive role in providing quality service and achieving customer satisfaction, which gives the agency itself a long-term advantage over its competitors. In travel agency business, customers and employees are directed to cooperate with each other when performing the

service. The success of their interaction largely depends on the ability of travel agency employees to provide adequate service. Good business results come from satisfied and loyal customers, which is a consequence of the quality of service. At the same time, good service is the result of a service process that depends first and foremost on the satisfaction and productivity of frontline employees, but also on the motivation, knowledge and skills of both them and their managers.

As it becomes more and more difficult to find efficient, talented and professional staff, and travel agency business faces increasing competition, the strategic role of HRM process is gaining importance. According to the World Tourism and Travel Council, Travel & Tourism is predicted to support 420,659,000 jobs, 11.7% of total employment by 2029 (WTTC, 2019). This data indicate that travel agency business will continue to play a crucial role, which is why the demand for skilled staff will grow in this sector. Contemporary travel agency business requires a well-trained, adaptable workforce, so that daily education of employees and managers is essential for business development.

The strategy for human resources development in tourism is not focused only on short-term programs and strategies regarding the concept of lifelong education. Additional trainings can be conducted in the form of courses, seminars and lectures. However, for the long-term development of tourism, medium- and long-term programs for increasing the quality of education are of much greater importance. The medium- and long-term development implies structural changes in the field of formal and informal education that must be aligned with market needs. The education system must be linked to the labor market, on the basis of which modifications and adjustments must be made continuously. Without a developed education system, it is not possible to improve the workforce quality in tourism. In order to harmonize the knowledge and capabilities of the existing and future workforce in tourism of the Republic of Serbia, with the market needs, it is necessary to promote lifelong education. In the Republic of Serbia, a small number of adults understand the importance of continuing education, and there is a low level of employee motivation to improve qualifications, while on the other hand, travel agencies are not sufficiently motivated to invest long-term in human resources development.

Managers in travel agency business should take responsibility for training their employees according to a predefined educational plans. In order for educational plans to be adequate, managers must determine what skills and

knowledge the employees lack that affect the quality of services provided. Particular attention should be paid to managerial and sales skills, communication and complaint handling skills, as well as language skills. In order to motivate employees to participate in training, management should also rethink the existing organizational culture. Management must motivate employees, by personal example, to improve their own knowledge and skills, not only for financial gain, but also for personal and professional development.

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