



‘ROLE OF ACADEMIA IN HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM INDUSTRY: A PERCEPTION STUDY OF HR MANAGERS OF TRAVEL AGENCIES IN PUNE’

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Abstract

Travel and Tourism is one of the largest foreign exchange earners, providing employment directly and indirectly to millions of people worldwide through many service areas. The burgeoning tourism industry has given rise to huge requirement of well trained employees in the various service sectors of tourism industry. Travel agencies play a key role in the development of tourism industry as they act as intermediaries between the travel suppliers and travelers and contribute towards the promotion and development of a destination.

This paper focuses on the perception of travel agencies of Pune towards academia using an Importance - Performance Analysis (IPA). Primary data is collected through questionnaires filled mainly from the managers and proprietors of travel agencies of Pune.

The findings indicate that there is a strong need to attract the talented pool towards undertaking tourism education and choosing tourism as a career. Since there is a need to develop the required human resources as per the changing technology and dynamic changes in the international tourism market, the academia and travel industry should come together and develop industry-institute participation for giving training, guest lectures, creating awareness, helping in research activities and placements.

Key Words: *Perception, Travel agencies, Importance-Performance Analysis, Recruitment, Training, Awareness.*

As per the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) report 2016, tourism accounted for 9.8 % of world’s GDP and 9.6% of total employment in 2015.

Introduction

As per the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) report 2016, tourism accounted for 9.8 % of world’s GDP and 9.6% of total employment in 2015. On lines of the global trend tourism industry in India is on an upsurge at the moment. As per WTTC 2016 report for India, travel & tourism sector contribution to GDP was INR8, 309.4billion (6.3% of GDP) which supported around 37 Million jobs in 2015.

The tourism industry comprises of various subsectors like hotels, travel agencies, airlines, car rentals, cruise companies, etc. Capitalising on the opportunities for this Travel & Tourism growth will, of course, require destinations and regional authorities, particularly those in emerging markets, to create favourable business climates for investment in the infrastructure and human resource support necessary to facilitate a successful and sustainable tourism sector. Tourism is a people centric service industry requiring highly personalized services with human touch. The tourism industry needs educated, well-trained, bright energetic, multi-lingual and entrepreneurial skill to manage the tourism business (Rebecca, 1998).Therefore, the tourism industry relies heavily on vocational training programs to develop its human resources (Bécherel, 2001).

The tourism industry is faced with various challenges in the field of human resources; one of the crucial issues in this regard is the quality of manpower. The industry is vitally faced with the demand for qualified quality personnel (Khan, 2008). The quality and efficiency of services is the primary concern of tourism industry. In order to achieve this, each of the components of tourism industry requires trained /skilled manpower (Chand and Chauhan, 2003). The need to develop the required human resources in various segments of the tourism industry has become imperative as a consequence of the rapid growth in tourism, rapidly changing technology and dynamic changes in the international tourism market (Raj, 2008).

In general, education is very important for the hospitality and tourism industry because it provides support for undergraduates to be more knowledgeable and more experienced in the field (Cho and Kang, 2005; Kang *et al.*, 2005). Many universities in the world are striving to increase the number of hospitality and tourism programs to provide the labor market with trained and qualified human resources (Kim *et al.*, 2008). The reasons behind this interest are related to the growth of the tourism sector. Also, Du (2003) noted that demand and supply in the tourism hospitality program are limited and poor faculty, facilities, and career motivations limit the number of students in this field.



Many of the Asian institutes are known to have large number of classes, same method of teaching environment, and insufficient facilities. There are various industry-related factors like lack of good institutions, non-availability of external experts, difficulty in designing behavioral trainings and getting the precise training content that act as impediments to the top management in conducting trainings for the employees.

Tourism education is still at a nascent stage in India. Unlike the mushrooming hotel management institutes in every nook and corner of major cities of India there are very few institutes and universities which offer tourism education. These tourism institutes offer full time diploma; post graduate diploma; master programmes for tourism while some offer certificate courses in tourism. To meet the demand of the ever increasing number of tourists there is a need of specialized trained and skilled manpower in almost all the sectors of the tourism industry. The few tourism institutes existing in the country are not able to impart the requisite skills and knowledge needed by the students to be work ready to face the industry. There are huge career prospects available in the tourism industry where students after finishing their tourism education can work in travel agencies; travel portals; travel desks at hotels, software companies, and multinational companies; as information officers in government tourist offices; airlines or become entrepreneurs.

Travel agencies play a key role in the development of tourism industry as they act as intermediaries between the travel suppliers and travelers and contribute towards the promotion and development of a destination. It is in the travel agencies, where the training interventions are conspicuous by their absence. The faculty is poorly trained in the day to day practicalities and changing technology happening in the travel agencies. This paper attempts to find out the outlook of travel agencies towards academia using an Importance - Performance Analysis (IPA).

To meet the demands of travel and tourism industry the tourism institutes should work in coordination with the tourism industry to churn out skilled professionals

Literature Review

Many researchers have commented on the huge gap in the demand and supply of skilled and educated employees required to work as professionals in the tourism industry. The industry is majorly of the view that the tourism institutes do not meet their kind of requirement of employees. To serve the needs of tourism industry there is a need to give practical exposure to the students

Earlier studies have looked at travel agencies in isolation and have inferred from the result that the industry is lagging in terms of professionalism (Chand and Chauhan, 2003). Traditionally, the role of travel agencies was recognized as selling airline tickets, and hotel bookings, however recently their role has been transferred as main travel service supplier or travel expert and counselor (Bitner and Booms 1982). Because of development in information technology and internet, tourists can now plan their holiday and make their own travel itineraries through accessing information online.

For their own survival in this fierce competition for survival some travel agents provide value added information as well as superior customer service as a way to maintain a customer base and entice new customers (Lawton and Page 1997). Travel agents can also influence destination choice as well as itinerary choice based on personal experience (i.e., FAM trips) and customer feedback (i.e., testimonials). Furthermore, travel agents also play a role for tourists that the internet based companies cannot when the tourist is in situ, particularly in the event of a crisis, in that they can be a familiar voice on the end of the phone when needed. Travel agents have contributed to the development of many destinations. According to Lovelock (2008), the success of a destination depends on the positive support of travel agents.

In a travel agency the people are the ones who create the end tourism product by combining the different elements of tourism and sell it at a price to the tourist. Travel agents act as intermediaries between the travel suppliers and the tourists. Tourism is a human experience. Travel agents sell dreams to tourists. They create the tourist experiences be it good or bad for the tourists and therefore, determine the quality of the product offered to the tourist. They help in creating the positive brand image of a destination and thus help in the development of tourism industry. The travel agent influences the client's satisfaction and contributes to the success of any hospitality business, tourist attraction, or destination.

The travel agent has to be knowledgeable of the tourism product, foreign language, the documentation formalities for travelling abroad i.e. passport, visa, health certificates, travel insurance, etc as well as possess good customer service and selling skills. They have to be properly trained at the tourism institutes itself to garner these skills. Managerial efficiencies and effectiveness are the need of the hour in today's tourism to cater to the needs of the experienced, well travelled, enriched and business tourist communities (Sofique, 2014).



After extensive review of literature, it was found that the tourism industry is faced with various challenges:

- Quality of manpower.
- Shortage of trained/skilled manpower.
- Qualified employees.
- Lack of trained faculty
- Few Tourism institutes

Objectives

After reviewing the previous studies on the issue of tourism education, research gap was identified where studies have seldom examined the outlook of travel agencies towards academic institutes that provide such training. The present study will attempt to present the perspective. The research was undertaken with a view to analyse and understand the perceptions of travel agencies towards the tourism institutes so as to help in giving right candidates for the right job to travel agencies. The following objective was framed with this view.

- To study the perception of travel agencies towards academia.

Research Methodology:

1) Methods of Data Collection:

The study was conducted on the basis of a large number of information sources including a mix of primary and secondary sources.

Primary Data: A quantitative approach was used in this research. Primary sources comprised of data collected through structured questionnaires from HR managers, Proprietors, and Directors of IATA approved travel agencies of Pune city.

Secondary Data: The study involved desk research on the travel industry in Pune and a major review of literature relating to HRD practices in the tourism industry in general. Secondary data was collected from books, research journals, websites, magazines, newspapers, publications of international organizations like UNWTO, WTTC, UFTAA and government approved publications and reports.

2) Scope of the study: The study restricts itself to the travel agencies in Pune city. The segment of the study consists of only IATA approved travel agencies which are 62 in numbers.

3) Sample Design

Purposive sampling was used for this research. Total number of 50 questionnaires was distributed of which 30 filled questionnaires were received. Only 30 questionnaire responses were examined for analysis. The rate of response is almost 60%.

4) Data Analysis:

Data is analysed by using SPSS software and Importance Performance Analysis (IPA), method to know the perceptions of HR managers and proprietors/directors of travel agencies in Pune.

Analysis of Research

The questionnaires were mailed and also sent personally to around 50 travel agencies. Due to season time, only 30 travel agencies responded after continuous follow up. The respondents were the HR managers, directors, or proprietors of IATA approved travel agencies having experience and involved in the tourism industry for more than five years.

The research adopted a quantitative approach. By using SPSS software and Importance Performance Analysis (IPA), data was used to know the perceptions of travel agencies towards tourism institutes.

Findings of the Study:

Out of the 30 respondents 17 are male and 13 are female. 17 respondents are HR managers, 7 are Proprietors, 5 are Directors, and 1 is Assistant Manager.

Table 1 indicates the respondent's rating for the importance of tourism institutes in tourism industry. The most highly rated benefit was tourism education is beneficial for managing a tourism business. All other attributes were also rated as beneficial by the respondents.



Table 1: Benefits of Tourism Institutes to Travel Agencies

Benefits	Mean	SD
Tourism education is beneficial for managing a tourism business	4.30	.794
Tourism institutes help in developing talent	3.93	.583
The curriculum of tourism programme fulfils the tourism industry needs	3.30	.877
Tourism institutes provide the right candidate to travel agencies	3.53	.860
Identifying the right person for the right job which will reduce attrition	3.87	.681
Tourism institutes impart the requisite skills and knowledge needed to work in travel agency	3.70	.794
Industry-Institute Partnership / Interaction Cell in tourism institutes ensure that institutes produce employable talent	3.97	.615

Table 2: Importance Performance Analysis Grid

S. No.	Particulars	Importance	Performance
1	An important source of recruitment for travel agencies	4.37	4.30
2	Recruitment of Employees through campus interviews	3.33	3.47
3	Tie-up / Partnership with tourism institutes for placements	3.97	4.23
4	Travel agencies are an important medium for giving practical exposure to tourism students	3.07	2.10
5	Tie-ups with leading travel agencies for faculty development programmes	3.03	3.00
6	Industrial Training / Summer Training / Internships for students in travel agencies	4.07	2.30
7	Industrial training for faculty to keep them updated with the changing industry trends	4.53	4.43
8	Faculty to give training on soft skills and customer service skills to employees of travel agencies	3.77	3.17
9	Inculcate preferred industrial competencies and skills	4.50	2.03
10	Industry experts / leaders as active members in the Board of Studies for curriculum development	4.20	1.87
11	Identify preferred course components needed in tourism industry	4.37	2.87
12	The core of the curriculum to be designed at par with the latest trends and development	4.53	3.07
13	Introduce more applicable case studies, situation handling, research, role plays, live projects and project based assignments	4.20	2.80
14	Have right balance between practice and theory	4.43	2.40
15	More focus on development of soft skills, communication, leadership, interpersonal and customer service skills, grooming and presentation skills	4.70	2.30
16	Inculcate moral values and professional ethics	4.43	2.33
17	Curriculum to be updated regularly once in every three years	4.60	4.63
18	Innovative teaching styles to be explored	4.57	4.53
19	Deliver quality education based on more practical inputs	4.87	4.90
220	Regular interaction with industry for guest speakers, seminars, workshops on sharing the latest trends in tourism operations and development	4.67	2.93
21	Introduce virtual classrooms and e-learning	4.20	2.07
22	Industry and field visits by faculty and students	4.90	2.63
23	Visits of faculty to industry for study and discussions or delivering lectures on subjects of mutual interest	4.80	2.70
24	Visiting faculty from industry	3.40	3.33
25	Impart the requisite skills and knowledge needed to work in travel agency	3.33	3.33
26	Teaching learning process should focus on engaging the students to learn through research	3.77	2.37
27	Promote participation of industry personnel in high quality research and student projects	3.97	3.97
28	Develop Projects for industry to address their needs	4.47	4.53
29	Travel agencies should be actively involved as members / experts / guides for research and consultancy projects in tourism institutes	4.17	2.67
30	Projects / dissertation work in industry under joint guidance of the faculty and experts from the industry	4.70	4.30

Importance Performance Analysis

Attribute importance is generally regarded as a person's general assessment of the significance of an attribute for a product. Many studies have attempted to analyse customer satisfaction in terms of both expectations that relate to certain important attributes and judgments of the attribute performance (Jogdand & Sawant, 2012).



The interpretation of the IPA is graphically presented on a grid divided into four quadrants. Fig.1 illustrates the IPA grid. The Y axis reports the customer's perceived importance of selected attributes, and the X-axis shows the products (or service) performance in relation to these attributes. The four identifiable quadrants are: Concentrate Here, Keep up the Good Work, Low Priority and Possibly Overkill.

Quadrant I: Attributes are perceived to be very important, but performance levels are fairly low. This sends a message that improvement efforts should be concentrated here. The attributes no. 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 20, 21, 22, 23 and 29 come under this quadrant.

Quadrant II: Attributes are perceived to be very important to respondents, and at the same time, the institutes seem to have high levels of performance of these activities. The message here is to keep up the good work. The attributes no. 1, 7, 17, 18, 19, 28 and 30 come under this quadrant.

Quadrant III: Attributes are with low importance and low performance. Although performance levels may be low in this cell, institutes should not be overly concerned since the attribute in this cell is not perceived to be very important. Limited resources should be expended on this low priority cell. The attributes no. 4, 5 and 26 come under this quadrant.

Quadrant IV: This cell contains attributes of low importance, but relatively high performance. Respondents are satisfied with the performance of the institutes, but the institutes should consider present effort on the attributes of this cell as being over utilized. The attributes no. 2, 3, 8, 24, 25 and 27 come under this category.

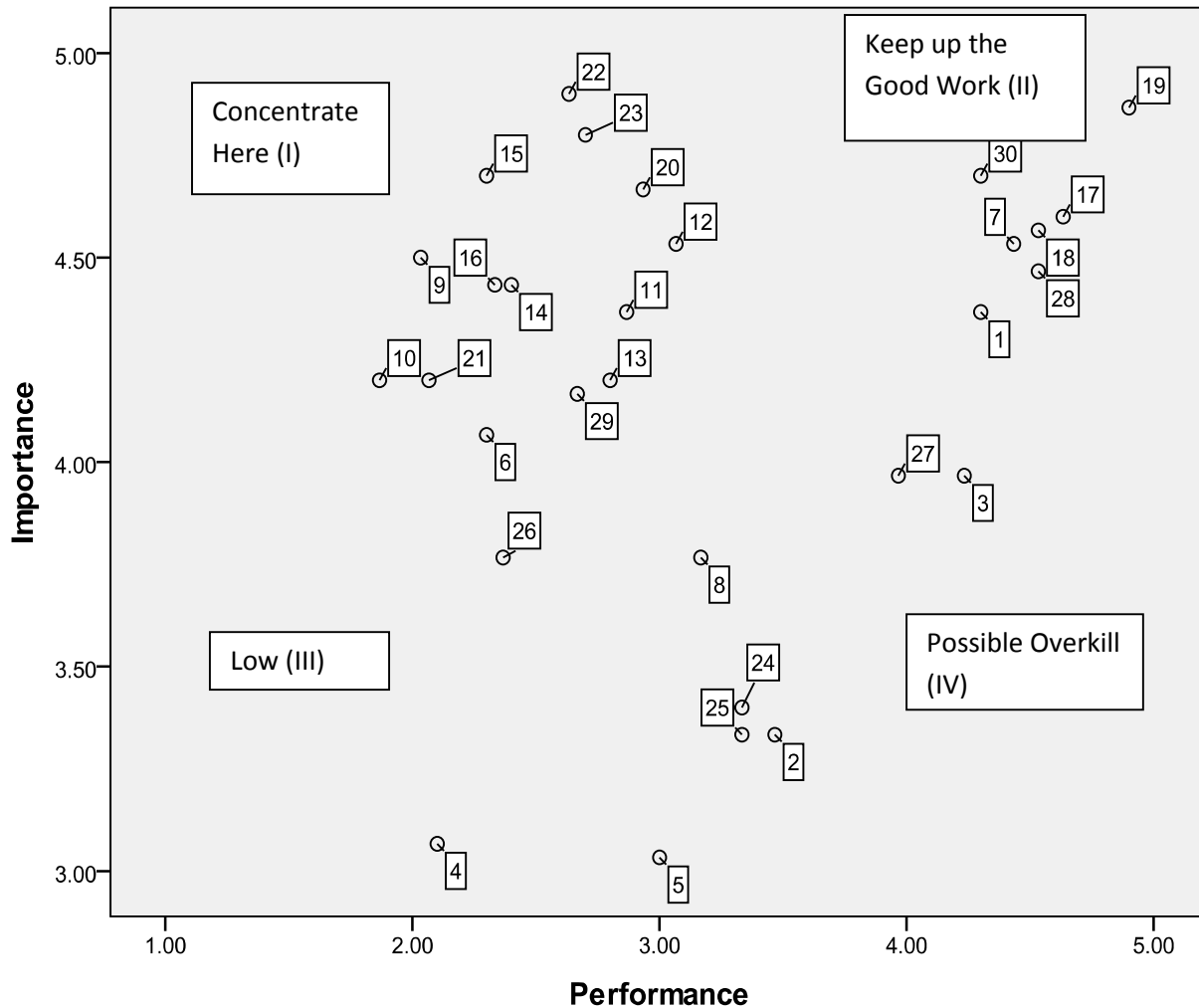


Fig 1: Importance Performance Analysis Grid



Conclusion

From figure 1, we can conclude that tourism institutes are definitely an important source of recruitment for travel agencies. Importance Performance Analysis grid shows that over 46.66 % activities performed were within ‘Concentrate Here’, while only 23.33 % activities were found in ‘Keep up the Good Work’.

This shows that even though the attributes are perceived to be very important, but performance levels are fairly low. There are three attributes which are in ‘Low Priority Quadrant’ i.e. travel agencies are an important medium for giving practical exposure to tourism students; tie-ups with leading travel agencies for faculty development programmes ; teaching –learning process should focus on engaging the students to learn through research. This suggests that travel agencies are not keen to provide practical exposure to students and faculty and do not understand the importance of learning through research.

Tourism institutes need to concentrate on activities such as to inculcating preferred industrial competencies and skills; Industry experts as active members in the curriculum development; identifying preferred course components needed in tourism industry; introduce more case studies, situation handling, role plays, live projects; more focus on soft skills, communication, leadership, interpersonal, customer service and presentation skills with emphasis on moral values and professional ethics as these attributes falls into the ‘Concentrate Here quadrant’.

Recommendations

The tourism industry is in a consumer-led brand focused era, the educational institutes should prepare the students to take up the challenges of fast changing consumer attitudes and behaviours. The aim of the tourism institutes should not just be simply to survive in the market, but also to be an important career providing institute in changing times.

The Board of Studies should have presence of professional and experienced experts from the industry so as to have their valuable inputs for designing curriculum. Curriculums should be designed at par with the changing needs, understanding the new generation of consumers, and technology of the tourism industry. Practical based subject knowledge is gaining wider acceptance and tourism institutes should focus on giving quality practical exposure to meet the needs of the industry. To enhance the overall personality of the students, the personality development programmes should include learning soft skills, communication skills, image management, grooming, interview techniques and presentation skills. Students to be trained in moral values and professional ethics.

Traditional methods of teaching through lectures should be replaced with modern and given more realistic approach as students find everything on Google nowadays. Teaching methodology should consist of more case-studies, simulations, situation-handling, research, and live–projects, etc. At the institute level students should be given more empowerment and project based assignments to provide holistic learning. The academic delivery should be such that it creates interest in the students. There should be right balance between theory and practice. Teaching learning process should focus on engaging the students to learn through research so that the tourism education is demand based, and which in turn would benefit the stakeholders of this industry. Virtual classrooms and e-learning should be incorporated.

To impart quality tourism education, it is imperative to have dedicated and quality faculty. Tourism institutes should have tie-ups with well known travel agencies for faculty development programmes and have exposure and understanding of the changing trends in the industry. Also faculty exchange programs with leading universities of the world can be a fruitful and enriching experience for faculty. Travel agencies should help the tourism institutes in upgrading the knowledge and skill level of the faculty members by training them on to the latest trends of the industry as this will keep them updated with the knowledge on what is happening currently in the industry. But unfortunately many do not show interest. Industry and institutes should have a strong relationship in terms of imparting knowledge and skill to the students.

To have enthusiastic and quality students choosing tourism as a career, travel agencies and tourism institutes should create awareness in the society about the opportunities available in tourism industry. Seminars, guest lectures, presentations in schools about tourism industry and its career prospects at present, so that students understand the nature of the profession and all other aspects related to it.

Industry-academia partnership is the way forward for tourism education to ensure that the tourism institutes produce employable talent. Tourism professionals both industry and academia need to come forward and work with the government to resolve the issue of shortage of qualified employees at the earliest and understand the crucial role employees play in the success of an organization.



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