

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT IN DIFFERENT TYPES OF TRAVEL AGENCIES IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Training and Development plays a critical role in developing professionalism in the business of tourism and travel agency operations. However, past research reveals that training is being largely carried out in a haphazard and uncoordinated manner among travel agencies. This study has been carried out to explore the training and development initiatives in different types of travel agencies across India. The study was conducted on 450 employees from 50 travel agencies across India. A structured questionnaire on the Role of Training and Existing Policies was administered. The results show that there is a significant difference among the agencies on Training Environment, Training Benefits, Role of Training and Commitment to Training. Also, the results indicate while the employees of the travel agencies understand the Training Benefits, there is a significant gap in the Existing Training Policies, Commitment to Training, Training Practices, Role of Training, Employee Outlook to Training and Training Environment from what it should be. It is an area of concern since the quality of trained manpower is one of the key factors contributing to the service quality in the travel and tourism industry.

Keywords : Training Environment, Employee Training Outlook, Training Benefits, Training Practices, Role of Training, Commitment to Training

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BACKGROUND

In today's global and highly competitive environment travel and tourism industry is facing rapidly changing expectations from travellers. To cater to their demand new offers and services are emerging in tourism, and the need for adequately qualified staff has become critical (Roberts, 1999; Kusluvan et al, 2010). Tourism is one of the biggest global industries that is not only growing exponentially but also improving as per the constant changes in tourism trends and consumer preferences. In fact, the tourism industry is a fast changing industry, challenged by globalization, a growing demand for customer orientation, increasing international competition, volatile markets in an insecure environment, changing customer demands towards individualization and significant potential in various market segments (Chand & Chauhan, 2003). In such a scenario, competition among global players of tourism-related service industries is unavoidable. The global village concept has increased the expectation of people from all spheres. To succeed in a competitive market, the organization must keep up with the pace of change and adapt to new conditions brought by change. Only those organizations that are capable of creating a competitive edge can continue their achievement. The apt way to reach such competitive edge in field is through human resource development (HRD). HRD is fast becoming a new competitive factor for the tourism industry (Ashraf & Mathur, 2003). Human resource development must be dynamic and directed strategically in order to adjust to the perceived opportunities and threats in the environment (Bécherel, 2001).

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). However, human resource is the most crucial and difficult resource to tackle. It is training, education and development of HRD that provide the needed stimuli to initiate an impulse of change in the organizational apparatus and lead to improve efficiency, productivity and administrative performance (Ashraf & Mathur, 2003). This calls for an organized approach for developing the most critical resource of the travel organizations. So far there is hardly any evidence that any kind of HRD approach is being followed by travel agencies. Even the travel agency literature is silent in this context (Chand & Chauhan, 2003). But lack of proper training is one of the main spheres of concern in the travel and tourism industry (Kusluvan et al, 2010). Some studies have been conducted to highlight the significance of HR practices in hotel companies. For example, both Lucas (1995, 1996) and Price (1994) find personnel specialists to be more in evidence in the hotel and catering sector than elsewhere. Harrington & Kendall (2004) observed that hotels are taking HR practices more seriously. They are adopting modern HR techniques to train and develop their employees. 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 & Chauhan, 2003).

Several human resource problems exist in tourism:

- Low wages, high demand for staff flexibility, little training provision, high staff turnover, skill shortages
- Qualifications from the tourism sector are much appreciated by other sectors and qualifications from other sectors are useful for tourism
- Many qualified employees leave the sector and many trained tourism school graduates do not enter the sector, leading to a sheer waste of resources and skills
- Forecasting which skills will be needed in future under conditions of sector volatility and vulnerability
- Multi-skilling, newly emerging and hybrid occupations reflect the trends for new types of services and growing demand for flexibility
- Sub-optimal state of tourism education and training and the associated skills shortages.

Compiled from various sources

The need for skills, knowledge and vision is being felt more and more today. The amateur stage of the travel agency business is long over. Travel agencies need tourism professionals specializing in different operational and managerial functions – tour planning and itinerary designing, travel information, reservation and ticketing services, destination counseling, sales and marketing, finance and accounts, conferences and conventions, visa and travel insurance, foreign exchange services etc. Training and Development plays an important role in developing professionalism in the business of tourism and travel agency operations (Chand, 2000). According to Baum & Thompson (2007), within any economy seeking to operate competitively in the international tourism marketplace, the appropriate human resources, especially the skills, to deliver products and services of appropriate quality, are essential. The tourism sector does have a reputation for under investing in training (Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council, 2011). While giving an overview about the status of training and development in Hospitality, Roberts (1999) says that the hospitality industry has been slow to recognize the importance of effective staff training and development. In a research conducted by Chand (2000) it was found out that there was hardly evidence to show that any kind of 'HRD' approach was being followed by the travel agencies, forget about training and development initiatives. According to Batra and Chawla (1995), at present, there are no formal training programmes for the personnel in the field of activities of tourism.'

Tesone (2004) in a study on development of a sustainable tourism hospitality HRM Module points out that it is not possible to run sustainable tourism organization without a serious commitment to training programs. He also says that it is important for such organizations to provide training for careers as opposed to training just for specific jobs. Most operations managers think that training is a waste of money. It is difficult to convince them regarding the benefits to employees and the organization. Aktas et al (2001) conducted an audit of the manpower research in the hospitality sector. With the increase in competition in the hospitality sector, manpower has become an increasingly important factor. The

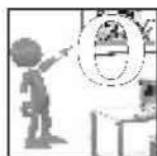
labour-intensive aspect of the tourism sector has put pressure on all entrepreneurs to act according to the needs and expectations of internal customers (personnel) and external customers (customers, suppliers). Aktas et al studies personnel policies, recruitment methods and resources, future developments and the reasons for job changes for sample hotels in the Antalya Region in Turkey. The key findings clearly indicate that the most needed qualifications looked for in personnel are: professional training, level of education, foreign languages, desire for work, and speed of learning. Most establishments were using on-the-job training as their major tool for personnel skill improvement. Historically, management development practices in the hospitality industry have been ad hoc and piecemeal, with development being typically seen as something that only occurs early on in a manager's career (Baum, 2006b; Watson, 2006).

Unfortunately, lack of proper training is one of the main spheres of concern in the travel and tourism industry. It becomes imperative to investigate the training and development initiatives for the employees. It is against this background, the present study has been taken up. Based on the above literature a structured questionnaire was developed for the employees of the travel agencies to study their perspective towards training and development.



SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study has been conducted across India, amongst fifty travel agencies which are recognized by IATA (International Air Transport Association). These agencies have a turnover more than Rs. 5 crores (as per MIDT data) and are either Indian Private or Government Agency or Multi-national Travel Agent or Online Travel Agency (OTA) in nature with more than 10 employees with respect to their strength. The employees in both sales and operations at junior, middle and senior levels have been taken for the purpose of this study. Tourism and travel have been used interchangeably, as this study is about travel agencies, and tourism industry encompasses all the players including, travel agencies, hotels, airlines, cargo companies, booking engines etc.



OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of the Study are

1. To examine the role of training and development in travel agencies
2. To examine the existing policies of training and development in travel agencies

Hypothesis

H₁ There is low emphasis on organized procedures and structured policies for conducting training and development programmes

Research Methodology

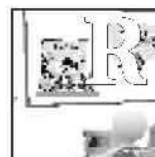
The study has been conducted across India, amongst 50 travel

agencies and a sample of 450 was taken wherein from each travel agency a sample of 09 employees was taken, with a ratio of 2:3:4, where 2 Senior-level (6.1 years and above work experience) employees, 3 Middle-level (2.1 – 6.0 years' work experience) employees and 4 Junior-level (upto 2 years' work experience) employees were taken. The employees belonged to Sales and Operations departments of the travel agencies. Stratified sampling technique was used. Table I gives the Sampling Distribution for the study.

Table I: Sampling Distribution

	Each Agency	Total Agencies	Total Employee
Senior Level Employees	2	50	100
Middle Level Employees	3	50	150
Junior Level Employees	4	50	200
Total Sample	09	50	450

Tool used: A questionnaire was developed and standardized titled "Training and Development for Employees of Travel Agencies." Section I of the questionnaire contained the Employee Demographic Characteristics; Section II consisted of 27 Statements on Likert Scale from 1 to 5 (ranging from Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Can't Say – Agree – Strongly Disagree). The questionnaire was administered personally to the employees. All the responses were found to be complete in all respects and hence used for analysis. Data collected for the study was analysed using SPSS.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

66% of the employees were from Indian companies, 18% were from Multinational (MNC) travel agencies, 10% were from Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) and 6% are from

Table II: Agency Demographics

Agency Type	Frequency
Government	27
Indian	297
MNC	81
OTA	45
Total	450

Factor analysis with principal component extraction was applied with varimax rotation to understand the factor loadings across the components. Cronbach's alpha was obtained to test the reliability of the data. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) was done for the sampling adequacy and Bartlett's sphericity test was conducted. Using the Rotated Matrix Component Table, the following Factor Loadings were derived (Table III).

Table III: Factor Loadings for Employee Training and Development in Different Types of Travel Agencies

	Training Environment	F1
V1	My organization has organized procedures for conducting training programmes for employees.	0.84
V2	My Organization encourages employees to identify training needs themselves.	0.84
V3	I am kept regularly informed of all changes in business practices, policies and systems that affect my role and work.	0.5
V4	Senior managers in my company are used as Resource persons for in-house training programmes.	0.39
	Employee Training Outlook	F2
V5	I should be able to apply my learning in the day to day work through training.	0.88

V5	I should be able to apply my learning in the day to day work through training.	0.88
V6	For me, training is a break from monotony.	0.85
V7	Training is a time for relaxation for me.	0.82
V8	I would like to attend those trainings which help in adding to my knowledge and skills.	0.85
Training Benefit		F3
V9	Training is responsible for developing technical skills of employees in my organization.	0.64
V10	Training is responsible for developing behavioural skills of employees in my organization.	0.64
V11	Training has improved my quality of work.	0.84
V12	Training has improved my work-life.	0.84
V13	Training helps in improving the organizational culture in my organization.	0.82
V14	Training helps in building positive perception about my organization.	0.82
V15	Training helps in optimum utilization of human resources in my organization.	0.44
V16	Training assists in increasing employee productivity in my organization.	0.44
Role of Training		F4
V17	It is due to training that I have the skills I need to do my job.	0.85
V18	My management ensures that my training meets my needs for my current job.	0.81
V19	Training helps me keep myself abreast with the latest happenings in the industry.	0.79
Training Practices		F5
V20	I am aware of available training and development activities in my Organization.	0.75
V21	There is a systematic training plan in my organization.	0.59
V22	I am frequently sent for trainings by the management of my organization.	0.64
V23	I get an opportunity to network with other colleagues during training.	0.74
V24	My Company is committed to improving the skills of current employees for improving their performance.	0.65
Commitment to Training		F6
V25	I get the training I need to do my job well.	0.81
V26	I am given a real opportunity to improve my skills by the management of this Company.	0.53
V27	My Company invests in employees through training and development.	0.91

Total Variance Explained in the above for the 6 factors is 68.68% (Cumulative). The KMO and Bartlett's Test of sampling adequacy is .729, which is greater than 0.5 for a satisfactory factor analysis to proceed. From the 27 statements the following 6 dimensions were derived: Training Environment, Employee Training Outlook, Training Benefits, Role of Training, Training Practices and Commitment to Training. The Cronbach's α value is 0.709, which exceeded the minimum standard of .7, suggesting and confirming about the reliability of the measures. *Training Environment* refers to the prevalent setting in which the emphasis is on the learning and acquisition of skills or competencies. *Employee Training Outlook* refers to the employees' point of view towards training, and how they perceive the function of training and development in their respective organizations. *Training Benefits* state the employees' perceived gains through training. *Role of Training* refers to the part played by training in an organization. This discusses the criticality of the function of training. *Training Practices* talk about the prevalent training operations and procedures in the organization. *Commitment to Training* is related to the attention and support provided by the organization to the employees for their training and development.

One way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test if the employees from various travel agencies vary in their perceptions. Table IV shows the results of the ANOVA with Agency Type, and it indicates that out of seven factors, four are found to be statistically significant, namely: *Training Environment* ($p=.048$), *Training Benefits* ($p=.000$), *Role of Training* ($p=.021$) and *Commitment to Training* ($p=.015$). It implies that there is a significant difference in the perception of the employees working in different types of agencies (Indian, MNCs, OTAs and Government) towards the Training Environment, Training Benefits, Role of Training and Commitment to Training. The table of means (Table V) shows above average scores on Employee Training Outlook, Training Benefits, Role of Training and Commitment to Training for employees of Government agencies. This implies that in Government agencies employees prefer to attend to those trainings which help in adding to their knowledge and skills, and those whose learning they are able to apply to their day-to-day working. Employees also understand the importance of training and how it is responsible in developing their technical and behavioural skills. They acknowledge that training helps in improving their quality of work, work-life, organizational culture, building a positive perception about their organization, in optimum utilization of human resources and in increasing their productivity. They also feel that it is due to training that they have the skills required to do their job, and they keep abreast with the latest happenings in the industry. Employees in the Government agencies feel that they get the training they require and that their organization is committed to providing training to them. The average scores on Training Environment and Training Practices indicate that in Government agencies, employees feel that their organization does not have completely defined training procedures and they are not highly encouraged to identify training needs. They also feel that they should be more regularly informed about the work-related changes happening around them.

In both Indian travel agencies and MNCs, mean scores are high for Training Benefits, indicating that the employees strongly believe that training is responsible to developing their skills, improving quality of life and organizational culture, building a positive perception about their organization and increasing their productivity. The mean scores for Training Environment, Employee Training Outlook, Role of Training and Commitment to Training indicate lack of clearly defined training procedures. Employees of both Indian travel agencies and MNCs are not able to fully apply the learning through training, and their organizations perhaps are not able to send them for trainings for skills enhancement as much as they would ideally like. In Indian travel agencies, the mean scores are low with respect to Training Practices, which implies that there is less awareness among employees for the training and development activities in their organization and training is not very systematically carried out. In MNC travel agencies, mean scores are average for Training Practices, indicating a mediocrity with respect to their awareness levels for the prevalent training and development activities in their organization.

Table IV: Analysis of Variance on various factors of Role and Existing Policies of Training and Development according to Agency Type

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Sig/NS
Training Environment	Between Groups	4.471	3	1.490	2.649	.048	Sig
	Within Groups	250.909	446	.563			
	Total	255.380	449				
Employee Training Outlook	Between Groups	3.431	3	1.144	2.229	.084	NS
	Within Groups	228.800	446	.513			
	Total	232.231	449				
Training Benefits	Between Groups	13.127	3	4.376	11.949	.000	Sig
	Within Groups	163.318	446	.366			
	Total	176.444	449				
Role of Training	Between Groups	9.823	3	3.274	3.270	.021	Sig
	Within Groups	446.677	446	1.002			
	Total	456.500	449				
Training Practices	Between Groups	.479	3	.160	.410	.746	NS
	Within Groups	173.379	446	.389			
	Total	173.858	449				
Commitment to Training	Between Groups	4.573	3	1.524	3.550	.015	Sig
	Within Groups	191.491	446	.429			
	Total	196.064	449				
Role and Existing T&D Policies	Between Groups	.479	3	.160	.674	.568	NS
	Within Groups	105.541	446	.237			
	Total	106.020	449				

In OTAs, the mean scores are low with respect to Training Environment and Training Practices (Table V). This implies that the employees in the OTAs are not too convinced about having organized procedures in their organization. They also feel that they are not given information about the latest happenings in the industry. They lack awareness about the training and development plan and activities of their organization, whereby they are not sure about the commitment levels of their company in improving the skills for performance enhancement. In OTAs, the mean scores are above average with respect to Employee Training Outlook,

Table V: Mean Values on Agency Type of Employees for various factors of Role and Existing Training and Development Policies

Agency Type		Government	Indian	MNC	OTA	Total
Training Environment	Mean	3.18	3.09	3.03	2.77	3.06
	N	27	297	81	45	450
Employee Training Outlook	Mean	3.81	3.49	3.46	3.64	3.52
	N	27	297	81	45	450
Training Benefits	Mean	3.62	4.18	4.04	3.77	4.08
	N	27	297	81	45	450
Role of Training	Mean	3.74	3.4	3.56	3.84	3.5
	N	27	297	81	45	450
Training Practices	Mean	3.03	2.96	3.03	2.93	2.98
	N	27	297	81	45	450
Commitment to Training	Mean	3.51	3.29	3.17	3.51	3.3
	N	27	297	81	45	450
Role and Existing T&D Policies	Mean	3.37	3.27	3.27	3.35	3.28
	N	27	297	81	45	450

Training Benefits, Role of Training and Commitment to Training, indicating that they are able to apply the learning of the training and are keen to attend trainings for improving their knowledge and skills. They feel that training is useful for improving their work life, productivity and developing their skills, while improving organizational culture and building positive perception about the organization. They also feel that their organization is committed to improving their skills by providing training opportunities. There is no statistical

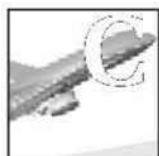
difference with three factors, namely: *Employee Training Outlook* ($p=.084$), *Training Practices* ($p=.746$) and *Role and Existing T & D Policies* ($p=.568$). This implies that these factors do not contribute significantly to the overall employee perception towards training, across all kinds of travel organizations, irrespective of the Agency Type.

One Sample t-Test was applied to compare the means with the test value of 4. This test value indicates robust practices. The results indicate that there is a significant gap in the prevalent *Training Environment* ($p=.000$), existing *Employee Training Outlook* ($p=.000$), *Training Benefits* ($p=.003$), *extant Role of Training* ($p=.000$), existing *Training Practices* ($p=.000$) and *Commitment to Training* ($p=.000$) from what it should be. There is a high level of significant difference between the overall perception of employees towards actual *Role of Training* and *Existing T&D Policies* ($p=.000$) (Table VI) of the travel agencies and what it should be. Employees feel that focus seems to be lacking in their respective travel agencies with respect to the Training Environment, Employee Training Outlook, Training Benefits, Role of Training, Training Practices and Commitment to Training.

Table VI: One Sample t-Test

	Test Value = 4			
	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Training Environment	26.44	449	.000	-.940
Employee Training Outlook	14.02	449	.000	-.475
Training Benefits	3.00	449	.003	.088
Role of Training	10.51	449	.000	-.500
Training Practices	34.69	449	.000	-1.017
Commitment to Training	22.18	449	.000	-.691
Role and Existing T&D Policies	31.14	449	.000	-.713

Based on the above scores and results, the hypothesis, *There is low emphasis on organized procedures and structured policies for conducting training and development programmes for employees is thus accepted.*



CONCLUSION

This study indicates that by and large, travel agency employees across the country have a similar perception regarding the various aspects of training and development in their organization. They feel that overall there is low emphasis on the organized procedures and structured policies in their respective organizations. This is an area of concern since travel agencies need to have a robust training strategy in place, as it is their business requirement: MNC travel agencies have pressures from their home country to invest in their people and take initiatives to develop their skills. They are supposed to be the driving force for streamlining people practices in an otherwise unorganized industry. OTAs have taken over from the brick-and-mortar companies and employees of these organizations need to be highly tech-savvy and skilled. With over seventy per cent of travellers across the world booking their trips online, the online travel market has become extremely competitive. And this makes it imperative to not only find the right talent but also to be able to retain them to ensure that top quality service to every customer, increasing their chances of securing repeat business. Government organizations in India are facing a transition phase in the current globalization environment. To survive and excel in the new economy, the HRD climate is a matter of serious concern in Indian public sector organizations, and hence they need to have a high focus on people development. Indian companies

on the other hand, are largely SMEs where training and learning faces a lot of barriers, looking at organizational constraints such as lack of time or limited financial resources, as well as negative attitudes towards employee training and its importance for business survival. But SMEs need to invest in innovation to face fierce national and international competition and achieve an above-average return, and this is only possible through a consistent human resource development initiative.

At a time when organizations are moving from an industrial society to a knowledge society and are facing stronger global competition, business leaders need to recognize that employee learning and skills development is more important than ever to grow and sustain a competitive advantage. With the kind of service industry travel and tourism is, it is imperative for the travel organizations to adopt consistent training practices and most importantly make the employees more sensitive towards critical role training plays in the organizations, particularly because the travel agency is a critical player in tourism, both in terms of employment potential and its role in the tourism distribution chain. An important intermediary that links the vendors to the end-customers, the travel agency is also the most important and lowest cost channel of distribution for airlines, despite the changing role due to change in technology. It thus becomes imperative for the travel agencies to focus on developing their human resources, so that they are able to survive the competition and consolidate their position in the industry.

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