

Behavioral Skills Trainings in Travel Agencies

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Current Scenario of Training in the Travel and Tourism Industry

Commonly associated with 'fun', tourism is a major industry in its own right. It is probably unmatched in terms of the diversity of the sectors it embraces such as hotels, travel agencies, airlines, attractions, restaurants, shops, resorts, conventions and so on. In fact, it is this very diversity of sectors that underscores the intrinsic uniqueness of the industry – the multi–component nature of the visitor experience. It also means that memorable experiences are all the harder to bring about. Developing tourism as an industry is thus critical, and an effective and far–reaching industrial strategy is required.

The tourism industry has mushroomed phenomenally in the last few decades and has become an important factor in the economy of many nations. It has emerged as the world's largest export industry and has become a unique instrument for economic development as well as for promoting social integration and international understanding. Over the years, its importance as a major source of contribution to the improving of balance of payment and for creation of new business opportunities, employment generation, ecological conservation and regeneration as well as for percolation of economic benefits to the weaker sections of the society has been increasing tremendously. Today, the travel industry is becoming more and more competitive. The amateur stage of the travel agency business is long over. Over the last two decades, the travel companies have transformed their pattern and structure to meet tough challenges in the international tourism market. So, in this volatile business environment, only that travel agency will succeed that will change to meet the competitive threats and opportunities to match the needs of a new travel market, and will bring flexibility, creativity, innovation, determination and professionalism into its operations.

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. Therefore, a company's recruitment policy may not be only to focus on functional expertise but on attitudes and approaches that fit their corporate goals and culture. Unfortunately, the employee turnover is very high in the tourism industry – especially in travel agencies and tour operation business.

The industry is being challenged by 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. Today, several problems exist in tourism sector including:

- *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 (customer orientation etc) 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.*

The situation today is that just like the industry itself still does not have a clear and adequate operational framework, the training is largely carried out in a haphazard and uncoordinated manner. There are even concerns about the sub-optimal state of tourism education and training and the associated skills shortages. Many of the students who graduate from tourism colleges are ill-equipped to comprehend the dynamics of globalization and its subsequent effects on the industry.

This is despite the fact that improving the skills and knowledge of the workforce can assist destination competitiveness and help to establish and maintain a viable industry. Numerous institutions have sprung up purporting to offer courses at various levels in travel, tourism, catering, hotel and institutional management. However, most of them lack basic training facilities and not meet acceptable standards. They spew out graduates whose knowledge is questionable as there is no centralized examination or certification. In the face of such expansion, questions have often been raised about the level, scope and quality of tourism training and education in the country. There is therefore a need to come up with a uniform curriculum that

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is not only acceptable to all the industry participants, but which is also competitive both locally and internationally.

Therefore, both quality and quantity tourism requires trained personnel to man the various positions in the industry. The need for skills, knowledge and vision is being felt more and more today. With new offers and services emerging in tourism and an increasing emphasis on quality, the need for adequately qualified staff becomes even more critical. Thus, training and development plays an important role in developing professionalism in the business of tourism and travel agency operations. However, one of the impediments is the hostility of top management towards training, considering it to be a waste of time. This hostility to training may be based on the experience that training is not producing the desired results. However, with such hostility, the results cannot be achieved, and so it becomes a vicious cycle. In some cases they tolerate training not because they think it is a useful activity but because historically it is being given some place and budget, and in some cases it may be seen as backward if they do not have this function in the organization. Then training loses its real value and is carried out as ritual as even in some cases as a necessary evil.

There are several studies related to general training and development on international level but very few have been found related to tourism. Bambrough (1996) says that if the amount of training and development or learning increases, then we can infer that more money and time will be spent in this area. Goldstein & Ford (2002) have pointed out that organizations are facing a very competitive environment both domestically and internationally. Technology is revolutionizing both organizations and training systems themselves. It is a time when organizations are moving from an industrial society to a knowledge society. In this environment, there is an increasing concern about how to utilize training systems to develop a continuous learning philosophy. Trainers are grappling with how to work with teams, how to develop leaders, how to respect diversity, and how to alleviate individual skill gaps. Effective training stems from a learning atmosphere systematically designed to produce changes in the working place. Buckley & Caple (1990) have emphasized the role of training in an organization's success. According to them, training should play an important part in assisting an organization to achieve its corporate objectives. Unfortunately, the status of the training department and the level of its resourcing do not always reflect this belief.

As organizations face stronger global competition, business leaders recognize that employee learning and skills development is more important than ever to grow and sustain a competitive advantage. According to its *2005 State of the Industry Report*, the American Society for Training & Development (ASTD) reports that U.S. organizations are investing more in employee learning, and technology continues to play a major role in delivering learning to the workforce. The increase in expenditure is accompanied by better accounting and governance of learning investments. Thorne & Machray (2000) found out that many companies have given training and development a higher priority in recent years as they came to realize that this is a fundamental part of managing the change to make the organization more effective. Training is regarded more as an investment that brings rewards than as an overhead that has little or no bearing on organizational performance according to them. Christopher & Smith (2005) state that training is supposed to do the following

- Develop employees' skills, abilities and performance and thus improve product quality and quantity (whether the product be goods or services) on individuals, group and organization levels.
- Help fill present and future workforce needs and create a more flexible workforce through such programmes as multi-skilling and management development.
- Maintain a high performance as possible, as economically as possible, when people move to new jobs through recruitment, transfer or promotion.

Training is the process by which people are taught skills and given necessary knowledge or attitude to enable them to carry out their responsibilities to the required standard according to Cushway (2004). His research findings pointed that whereas training is concerned with equipping staff to carry out their responsibilities to the required standard in their present job, development is concerned with giving individuals the necessary knowledge, skills and experience to enable them to take greater and more demanding roles and responsibilities. Armstrong (1991) states that training should not be regarded simply as an act of faith but that it 'must be supported by a positive and realistic philosophy of how training contributes to organizational success'.

In 2004, an international workshop '*Trends and skill needs in the tourism sector*' was organized which highlighted latest trends and skill needs in the hotel, catering and tourism sector in an international perspective. Speakers and participants from 13 countries (Europe, North America and Africa) took part in this event. Discussion about the role of qualifications in the tourism sector touched the problem of human

resource waste caused by high appreciation from other sectors and employers' failure to attract qualified personnel to the sector. Taking into account the need for qualifications from other sectors, the participants agreed that transversal and hybrid qualifications might be useful and could lead to new occupational profiles. Furthermore, it is vitally important for the sector to be able to attract the labour force trained specifically for work in tourism. The problem was noted that some employers deliberately look for unqualified labour for the sake of paying less. The question, however, remains whether such a policy would lead to higher profits and longer-term competitiveness. Another important question remains: how can the skill gaps in the tourism sector be overcome under the condition of insecure and often seasonal employment and relatively low pay? It was noted that training and development played a crucial role in this respect.

Travel Technology consultant Paul Richer says that the travel industry is relying more and more on technology to deliver its services cost effectively. Yet, technology will never replace the human face of the travel agent - it can certainly help agents work more effectively. The travel agent's role will only become important in the future, and the need of the hour is to develop a competent tourism workforce by nurturing a pool of creative, capable and internationally – oriented managers, along with the development of a comprehensive skills and attitudinal training programme. By encouraging automation and re-engineering of work processes which can improve efficiency, more people can be enticed to join the industry, and thus alleviate the shortage of manpower in the industry.

The goal of sustainability oriented tourism development requires a number of human resources development (HRD) strategies aimed at the tourism industry personnel, host community and the tourists, and underpinned by concepts and practices of sustainability. Sustainability based 'work culture', 'professional ethics' and operational practices are basic to sustainability in tourism. Indian tourism, despite its immense potential, has seen tardy development, and shortcomings in the HRD domain have been one of the reasons for this below par performance. Jithendran & Braun (2000) suggest a comprehensive and strategic approach to HRD, catering to the training and education needs of Indian tourism at various levels for the major target groups. Their research paper also identifies the pressing issues confronting HRD in Indian tourism and potential strategies to address them within the context of sustainability. While giving an overview about the status of training and development in Hospitality, Roberts (1999) says that the hospitality industry has not been slow to recognize the importance of effective staff training and development, with a significant increase in investment.

Pareek (2005) refers to hostility towards training by managers and top management. He says that in some cases, the work organization managers in general and top management in particular consider training as a waste of time and may have a hostile attitude towards it. In such cases, the effectiveness of training will be doubtful. Hostility to training may be based on the experience that training is not producing the desired results. However, with such hostility, the results cannot be achieved, and so it becomes a vicious cycle. Instead of looking at the causes of lack of effectiveness of training the managers may not only be indifferent but also hostile to training. In some cases they tolerate training not because they think it is a useful activity but because historically it is being given some place and budget, and in some cases it may be seen as backward if they do not have this function in the organization. Then training loses its real value and is carried out as ritual as even in some case as a necessary evil. With such indifference and hostile attitude towards training those in-charge concerned with training become helpless. Unless the top managers see training as a useful function and support it training cannot function effectively.

In a study conducted on human resource development in tourism, Mathur (2003) very clearly stated that the main aim and philosophy of HRD is to develop people enabling capacities by developing an environment which provides some amount of initiative, trust, openness, risk and commitment to work not just for the needs of tomorrow but even for those of the days after. It assumes that the organization will take care of their basic needs through a series of welfare measures and higher order needs through appropriate management styles and systems. HRD aims to reduce the consciousness gap between managers, supervisors and the masses of people, by training and development of workers because the success of any development programme depends upon a number of variables of which training is an important factor. Training, education and development of HRD provide the needed stimuli to initiate an impulse of change in the organizational apparatus and lead to improved efficiency, productivity and administrative performance. Today, the travel industry is becoming more and more competitive. The amateur stage of the travel agency business is long over. Over the last two decades, the travel companies have transformed their pattern and structure to meet tough challenges in the international tourism market. So, in this volatile business environment, only that travel agency will succeed that will change to meet the competitive threats and

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Training has always played an important and integral part in furthering many kinds of human learning and development. But its importance is being recognized only now. “Training today for retaining tomorrow” is the catchword. Companies, organizations and government are beginning to appreciate the value of adequate, consistent and long-term investment in this function. However, this is yet to be practiced consciously by the travel industry.

Organizations are made up of people and it is through their endeavors, whether they are the Chief Executive or the most junior member of staff, that the organization achieves its objectives and is successful. Training and development can contribute to the success of the both the organization and the employees as is evident in the box below.

Boost by Training and Development

For the Employees	For the Organization
Improves their performance in their job and achieve their individual objectives	Improves performance of the company as a whole which increases productivity
Achieves promotion and thus follow a chosen career path – Enhancement of career prospects	Reduces cost
Acquires professional or further educational qualifications by acquiring skills, knowledge and attitudes	Increases range of competencies of employees whereby enables the organization to have a flexible workforce
Improves quality of work and reduce waste and errors	Reduces wastage, fewer accidents and mishaps
Achieves intrinsic job satisfaction (performing a task well and from being able to exercise a new repertoire of skills) and extrinsic job satisfaction (extra earnings accrued through improved job performance)	Less absenteeism, lower labour turnover
Delivers quality service to customers	Greater customer satisfaction

In order to survive and to operate effectively, all travel organizations must adapt and respond in a timely and flexible way to technical, economic and social changes. This requirement has become imperative as we approach the twenty-first century and it implies that there are particular individual, group, organizational and institutional attitudes and perspectives needed by the nation’s manpower. Training is one of the processes by which such needs can be realized.

Relevance of Behavioral Trainings in tourism

There are two broad categories of trainings namely, Technical trainings and Behavioral trainings. Specifically related to the travel and tourism industry, the technical trainings cover the product-related aspects of the job and are related to reservation systems, fares, ticketing, itinerary planning, health and travel insurance, visa, foreign language and foreign exchange procedures etc. Knowledge of these products is essential for improved performance of travel agency employees. Behavioral trainings are related to soft-skills trainings in managing business, managing people, managing customers, managing self and some of these are related to sales negotiation skills, leadership, customer service, problem solving and decision making, team building, presentation skills, business communication, stress management, time management.

As a result of the rapid changes in the structure of employment and in the organization of work, there is a growing recognition that the possession of soft skills (which are variously referred to as generic, personal, or behavioral) are integral to working effectively in new work patterns. These types of skills are reported to be of increasing importance to employers as they relate to a person's ability to operate effectively in the workplace either alone or with others. Traditionally, the word skill has been associated with a range of technical, job-specific abilities which require training and instruction for a worker to become proficient or skilled within a particular job reference. In recent times, there has been growing interest in a range of abilities which are variously referred to as generic, personal, and behavioral or soft. The need for these types of skills is not new, but contemporary changes in the organization of work, the focus on team-working, and the growth in the services sector have increased their importance and they are now emerging as a critical feature for organizational success. Behavioral or soft skills, responsible for improving the productivity of the workforce are people-oriented skills and self-management skills.

The following 4-competence type framework, based on the work of Bunk (1994) was found to be valuable for understanding the range of competences and skills required in the world of work.

Table 1			
The Competences Associated with Innovative Employment Systems			
<i>Specialised Competence</i>	<i>Methodological Competence</i>	<i>Social Competence</i>	<i>Participatory Competence</i>
Delivers CONTINUITY	Delivers FLEXIBILITY	Delivers SOCIABILITY	Delivers PARTICIPATION
Knowledge, Skills and Abilities	Procedures	Modes of Behaviour	Structuring Methods
Occupation Specific: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Extended vertical and horizontal knowledge about the occupation Enterprise Specific Experience Specific	Variable Working methods: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Situated Solutions o Problem Solving solutions o Independent thinking and working o Planning, assessing and executing work o Adaptability 	Individual Social Skills: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Willingness to achieve flexibility and adaptability o Willingness to work Interpersonal Skills: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Willingness to co-operate o Honesty o Fairness o Willingness to help o Team Spirit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Co-ordination skills o Organisational skills o Combination skills o Persuasion skills o Decision making skills o The ability to assume responsibility o Leadership skills

Source: ESF Programme Evaluation Unit Report, "Education & Training for New Forms of Work Organisation", P.33

As high performance practices become the organizational norm, the workforce requires the necessary education and training foundations to contribute effectively. With work structures changing, traditional command and control methods are being replaced by flatter, horizontal, structures; teams are being empowered to make decisions; workers require higher skill levels and there is greater partnership between employees and management. With innovative work systems and practices are introduced, such as team working, performance related pay, job rotation or TQM, there are immediate implications for employee skills. Behavioral or soft skills are becoming increasingly important, both to cope with the level of change, and to work with a more participatory management style.

The increasing emphasis on customer care has further emphasized this. Further, all employees require the skills to interact in a positive manner to be able to create and maintain a safe and dignified working environment. While the continued emphasis on developing core technical and hard skills is essential for the industry, the need for soft skills is increasing and requires attention now to prevent a critical gap arising in the future. The lack of soft skills will impact on the effectiveness of organizations, and ultimately the economy, over the long term.

The authors propose some elementary trainings, including both product and behavioral, for the employees of travel agencies. The research has been conducted based on this list of trainings.

Different Types of Trainings for Travel agency staff

Classification	Type of Training
Behavioral	Computer Basics (Behavioral expression while communicating with the customer online)
Behavioral	Telephone Etiquettes
Behavioral	Consultative Selling Skills
Behavioral	Negotiation Skills
Behavioral	Customer Service
Behavioral	Time Management
Behavioral	Business Communication
Behavioral	Team Building
Behavioral	Key Accounts Management
Behavioral	Customer Relationship Management
Behavioral	Presentation Skills
Behavioral	Leadership Skills
Behavioral	Decision making & Problem solving Skills
Behavioral	Interviewing Skills
Behavioral	Finance for Non-finance personnel
Technical	CRS Training
Technical	Fares
Technical	Ticketing (Domestic)
Technical	Ticketing (International)
Technical	Itinerary Planning
Technical	Foreign Language
Behavioral	Train the Trainer

Proposed by the authors, March 2008

Objectives and Research Methodology

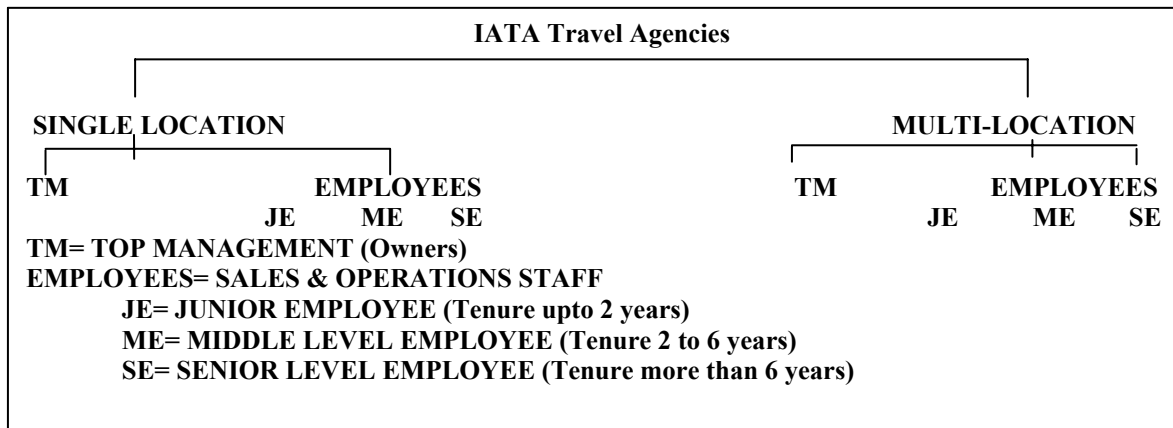
The main objective of this study is to study the importance given to behavioral trainings for the employees in travel agencies in comparison to product trainings. The study has been carried out in randomly selected, 14 IATA (International Air Transport Association) approved travel agencies with turnover more than Rs. 5 crore, located in and around Delhi. Of these 14 agencies, 7 were single location travel agencies (those operating out of one office location), and 7 agencies were multi-location (those companies with more than 1 office).

The total sample was 50, out of which 14 were top management, and 36 were employees at different levels. The senior level (experience more than 6 years), middle level (experience between 2 to 6 years) and junior level employees (experience upto 2 years) who participated in the survey were a part of the sales and operations (ticketing and tours) functions. The response rate was 100%. Table 1 describes the sample distribution.

	SINGLE LOCATION			MULTI LOCATION		
TOP MANAGEMENT	7			7		
	14					
EMPLOYEES	JE	ME	SE	JE	ME	SE
	6	6	6	6	6	6
	18			18		
TOTAL SAMPLE	50					

Table 1

The factorial design is given as below



Primary data was collected on the basis of two structured questionnaires, one for the top management and the second for the employees. Based on the review of literature, discussions and feedback with industry experts and academia, this questionnaire was designed. The collected data was subjected to various statistical tools so as to reach meaningful conclusions. A five-point scale was used to understand the importance given to the different types of trainings for the top management and the employees.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study are given in the tables 2-5.

Table 2. The sample characteristics

	Males	Females	Total
Top Management	10	4	14
Employees	17	19	36
Total	27	23	50

Table 3. Age group of Employees

	Junior level	Middle level	Senior level
21-25 years	66.7%	25.0%	-
26-30	16.7%	50.0%	33.3%
31-40	16.7%	8.3%	50.0%
41-50 years	-	16.7%	8.3%
50 years and >	-	-	8.3%

Table 4. Training Data

Average No. of trainings attended last year	Employees		
	JE	ME	SE
1.33	1.5	2.75	

It is quite clear from the analysis that firstly, the employees are sent for very few trainings. And secondly, the focus area of the trainings is mainly technical and product – related. The responses indicate that of these 36 employees from 14 agencies, only 2 were sent for behavioral trainings, that is only 5.6% in trainings conducted last year. The mean of the ratings of top management for behavioral trainings is 3.88, while the rating for product trainings is 3.92. The mean of ratings of employees for behavioral trainings is 3.91, while

importance given to product trainings is 4.44. There is a significant difference in the ratings given by employees and the management, clearly indicating the difference of attitude towards the two types of trainings. Although the employees are sent mostly for product trainings, they realize the importance of behavioral trainings, in comparison to the top management. The orientation of employees towards behavioral trainings is much less as compared to their outlook towards product trainings, because of their awareness and knowledge of the latter. The summation of mean ratings with a break-up of the employee level is given in Table 5.

Table 5

Training type	Top Management	Junior Level	Middle Level	Senior level
Behavioral	3.88	3.78	4.03	3.92
Product-technical	3.92	4.21	4.26	4.26
	0.04	0.43	0.23	0.34

Conclusions and Recommendations

Being intangible in nature, this concept is difficult to measure and understand. However, the top management must realize that for service organizations the interaction between front-line personnel and the customer is crucial as they aim to create high quality service encounters. In the travel industry, just as it is important to keep technical skills up to date for employability, similarly, for rising in the ranks, it is important to be able to work well with people and know how to lead a team. Those travel industry professionals who recognize the importance of these so-called soft skills or behavioral skills are miles ahead of their peers.

In many cases, managers may not realize that they themselves have room for improvement. Bad interpersonal skills hamper the ability to climb the corporate ladder. The most important element in individuals is their human capital – success does not hinge on scholastic qualifications or technical brilliance alone. The quality of people is of primary importance and a large part of this comes from soft skills. Employers may shortlist candidates based on their technical skills, but they eventually hire them for soft skills.

The authors make the following recommendations to enhance the development of soft skills in Indian travel and tourism industry.

- The acquisition and development, on an on-going basis, of soft skills proficiency and use will be an increasingly critical success factor in maintaining and improving both the competitiveness of the industry and individuals' employability. The development of soft skills should form an explicit and integral part of the national policy agenda, both in respect of enterprise development and of education or training.
- A national framework of qualifications can help establish the importance of soft skills by ensuring that their acquisition forms a key part of education and training programmes. Specifically, IATA and other recognized tourism training programmes should ensure that qualifications approved by them explicitly incorporate recognition of the acquisition of soft skills in terms of outcomes.
- At all levels of the education or training system, the faculty must incorporate behavioral skills trainings in the curriculum by making it a part of conscious learning of students, so that they can learn to operate effectively in workplace.

It is high time the industry diverts its energies towards training efforts, particularly, behavioral skills, for its own good.

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