

AN ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT GREEK TRAVEL AGENCIES POLICY ON RECRUITMENT, DUTIES, ONGOING TRAINING AND EMPLOYEE ADVANCEMENT


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Our aim was to record a variety of aspects concerning personnel selection, employment status and education of the staff of the Greek travel agencies. We found that the current economic crisis affected personnel selection and management and Greek travel agencies tend to hire younger and more educated staff using correct and just hiring criteria. Agencies offer limited further education and specialization and do not sufficiently motivate their employees to increase their productivity, probably as a result of recession. We also found that when Greek travel agencies dismiss their staff they do it after a fair judgment. As responders did not refer to business developmental strategy and how it could affect personnel hiring, education, duties and employee's advancement, further studies are needed to clarify these subjects.

Key words: *Greek travel agencies, recruitment, training, economic crisis*

INTRODUCTION

Human resources are the cornerstone of every travel agency, as they are entitled to provide quality service to customers in a highly competitive environment. In countries like Greece with significant inbound tourism, education and vocational training in tourism professions is essential, as research has shown during the last decade (Asonitou and Vitouladiti, 2015, Vitouladiti, 2013). It is therefore necessary for travel agencies to recruit highly skilled, qualified and experienced employees and also create an attractive work environment to increase both job satisfaction and employee performance (Vitouladiti and Dedousopoulos, 2015, Buse, 2009; Raub and Streit, 2006, Dwyer, 2007).

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As there is no data of the current intra-crisis status of the employees of the Greek travel agencies on hiring, continuous education, qualifications, specific duties, effectiveness, specialization and other details of their work within the company, the aim of this study was to record a variety of aspects concerning personnel selection, employment status and education of the staff of the Greek travel agencies.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

To meet the objectives of this study a targeted questionnaire was used, distributed to 62 Greek travel agencies. From the 55 agencies that responded (88.7%), 34 (61.8%) were located in the major Athens area. Each agency manager or owner appointed a member of the staff to complete it; overall 55 questionnaires were available for analysis.

RESULTS

Of the people selected by the travel agency to answer the questionnaire, 54.8% were women. In the first part of the questionnaire we recorded responders' age and the distribution and the results of question one are shown in Table 1. This table however cannot give an estimation of the mean age of all the employees, as responders were selected by the travel agency managers to give the best possible data concerning the agency. Furthermore 77.4% of responders seem to have a limited work experience up to 10 years (48.4% under 5 years and 29% between 5 and 10 years, question two, Table 2) while 64.5% of them stated that they have been constantly working in travel agencies during the last ten years (question three).

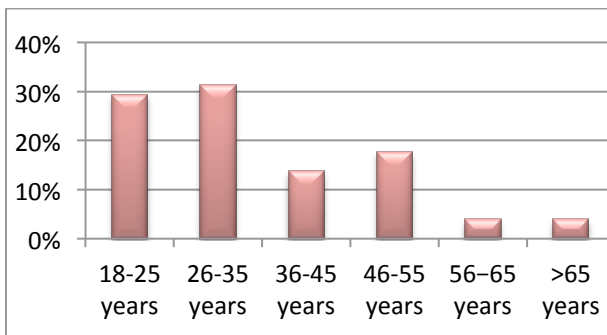
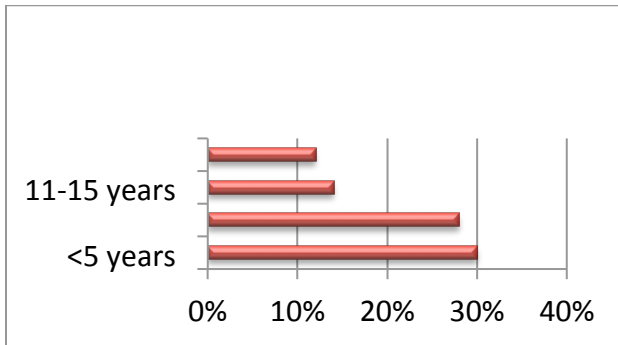
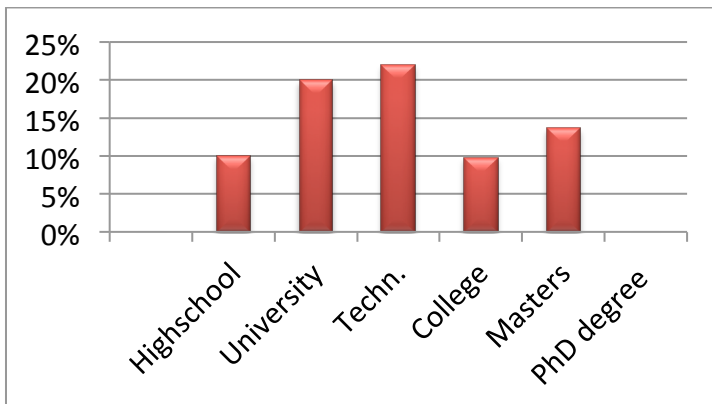


Table 2. Years of work experience



Responders' education level (question four) is shown in Table 3. Most employees have a higher education (54.9%), while 13.7% also have a master's degree. None however had a PhD degree. Furthermore (question five, a multiple answer) 96.1% of them speak English fluently, 41% French, 13.7% German, 11.8% Spanish, 11.8% other languages and only 5.9% speak Russian, despite current tourism trend. It is also very interesting that only 58% of all employees have some kind of tourism education (question six).

Table 3. Education status



The next two tables show the responders' position inside the company (question seven) and their job specialization (question eight). One fifth of responders (19.6%) are business executives while nearly 35% work in customer's service and sales (21.6% and 11.8% respectively) with only 13.7% working in the marketing and public relations departments (9.8% and 3.9% respectively, Table 4). They also specialize mostly in tourism packages sales (41.2%), accommodation (37.3%) and air transportation (23.5%, Table 5).

Table 4. Job specification

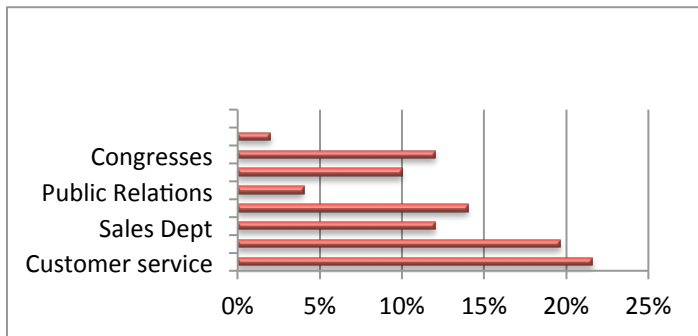
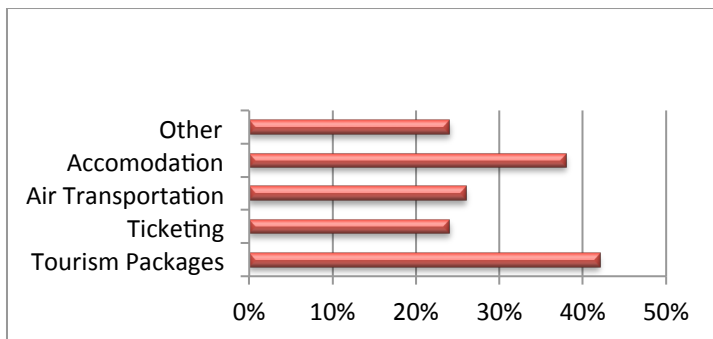


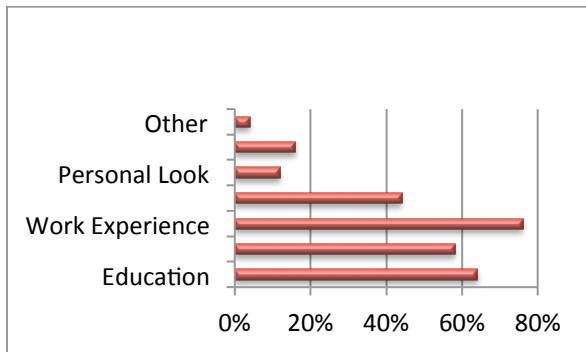
Table 5. Job specialization



In the second part of the questionnaire we examined the employment criteria of the Greek travel agencies. On answering if the current economic

crisis affects personnel selection and management (question nine), 89.7% of responders gave a positive answer. Accordingly, when answering question ten (multiple answer question, Table 6) on selection criteria, work experience was the primary criterion (76.5%) followed by tourism education (62.7%) and foreign language knowledge (56.9%), while the employee’s character (as identified during the interview) appears to be important in 43.1% of cases. Salary and personal look do not seem to be important selection criteria (15.7% and 11.8% respectively), although on answering a further question (question eleven) on the importance of salary on employees’ productivity, 90.3% of the responders gave a positive answer.

Table 6. Selection criteria



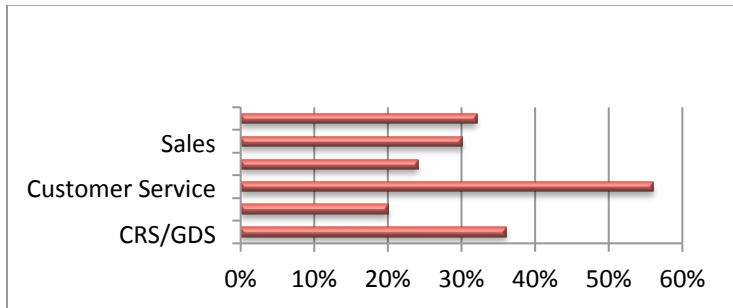
Responders were further asked (question twelve) as for the employment status (full or part time) of their agency staff: it seems that 15.34% of employees (range 10 to 25%) were hired using a flexible form of employment, a reflection of measures taken under the current economic crisis; a six months work with minimum salary in travel agencies or hotels is also a requirement for tourism students in order to complete their study.

The following open answer question (question thirteen), was on the responder’s personal view on personnel hiring criteria. Most answers (14/55, 25.45%) revealed a preference on job interview, followed by the use of certain tests or a test period in the office, while employee’s experience and zeal seems also important. These answers are very important, as they come from employees and not the managers of the travel agencies.

Next question (question fourteen) was on employees’ further education and specification offered by the agency. It seems that 62% of travel agencies do

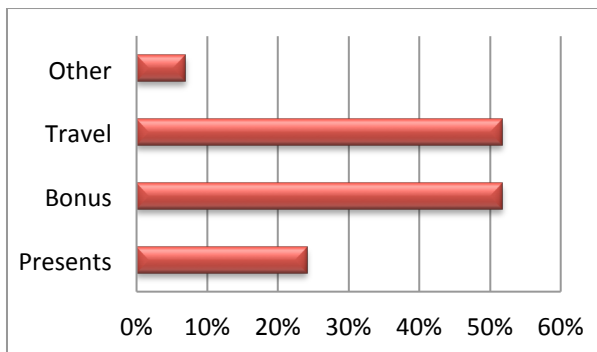
offer targeted specialization on their subjects of interest, as continuous education is very important in keeping up with the tourism market developments. On clarifying the subject (question fifteen, a multiple answer question, Table 7), 54.9% of employees undergo further training on customer's service, 37.3% on CRS/GDS, 29.4% on sales and 23.5% on crisis management.

Table 7. Continuous Education



The next two questions (questions sixteen and seventeen) referred to productivity motivations. It seems that 54.8% of travel agencies do offer productivity motives, merely bonuses and travel opportunities (51,7% for each one) and presents (24,1%), while only 6.9% of travel agencies chose some other kind of motivation (Table 8).

Table 8. Motivation



The next question (question eighteen) was on the factors influencing employee advancement. It was a multiple answer question and the recorded factors were employee efficiency (18 positive answers), productivity (13), hard working (13), loyalty, zeal and passion (7), versatile and skills (6), achieving goals and increasing revenues (3), good behavior (3 answers), while consistency, customer satisfaction, trust, flexibility, thoroughness, responsibility and honesty all had one positive answer. This huge variety means that promotion is highly personalized.

On answering what leads to dismissal from work (question nineteen, again a multiple answer question), the main factors were negligence (17 positive answers), inappropriate behavior (12), inactivity (8), poor performance (4), lack of cooperation (3), inconsistency (3), deceit (2), carelessness (2 answers), while grizzling, rudeness, lack of trust, failure to meet duties, misperception, irresponsibility, foolishness or alleged smartness, ignorance, repeated errors, lack of discipline and stagnation all had one positive answer. Again, it seems that dismissal is highly personalized.

In the final open question (question twenty) we asked if responders were happy from the level of organization and operation of their agency and what their suggestions are to further improve its performance. Over 80% of responders stated that they are happy, while their suggestions were mainly on organization and employment issues. Clear determination of business objectives, better cooperation between employees and management, higher quality in work, further use of modern technology and minimization of competition among employees were the proposed organization measures, while the employment of younger people with innovative ideas and eager to work, the attraction of people with higher training and industry experience and further education of the staff through seminars and other educational programs were the proposed measures for improving staff level.

DISCUSSION

Employees of the travel industry should be carefully selected according to certain established criteria, as they are directly related to customer satisfaction (Vitouladiti, 2015): these criteria include professionalism, knowledge, education, experience, interpersonal skills, positive self image, high tolerance level, ability to satisfy customer's needs, creativity, communication skills and also trust, loyalty, respect and commitment to the travel agency (Asonitou and Vitouladiti, 2015). It is therefore mandatory for a travel agency to select the most suitable candidates and establish a well-designed training program (Kurtz and

Boone, 2011, Treven, 2006, Whetstone et al., 2006, Raub and Streit, 2006) while some authors think that a degree in tourism and travel should be mandatory in travel agencies' recruitment (Buse, 2009, Henkens et al., 2005). Moreover, as the quality of service provided by a travel agency is directly connected to staff quality, recruited employees must ensure effective, efficient and profitable service delivery (Vitouladiti, 2015); recruitment is therefore an important function and successful recruiting managers should rely on the candidate's resume, interview and respond to thorough tests, by which the candidates' behavioural, organizational and technical competencies can be assessed (Vucetic, 2012, Raub and Streit, 2006, Lee, 2007).

Skilled employees become part of the value-adding activities of the travel agency, as they contribute to better consumer satisfaction (Asonitu and Vitouladiti, 2015, Vitouladiti, 2013, Chanda et al., 2010, Stewart and Brown, 2011). The motivation therefore of these skilled persons is absolutely necessary, as it contributes to employee's satisfaction and increases their productivity; motivation today is based on the culture of diversity and thorough training (Kurtz and Boone, 2011, DeCenzo and Robbins, 2010).

In our study the age distribution of the staff (Table 1) probably reflects the flexible forms of employment implemented in Greece during the current economic crisis; we recorded a 15.34% of flexible work forms in our study and we think that the short work experience of the employees shown in Table 2 is an expected result. The same is true for the education status (Table 3), as more qualified people enter the travel industry and most travel agencies (54%) employ staff with a tourism degree. Agencies also seem to have a balanced staff when job specification is concerned (Table 4): job specialization however (Table 5) does not meet international standards, as the Greek travel agencies necessarily deal with a variety of aspects (packages, air-ticketing, sea-men tickets, accommodation, bus tourism, short excursions) in order to survive (Asoniti and Vitouladiti, 2015).

As for the employment criteria used by the Greek travel agencies (Table 6), they are in consistency with other findings of this study (Tables 2-4) as people with work experience, tourism studies and foreign languages knowledge are easily hired, a finding in consistency with previous studies (Asoniti and Vitouladiti, 2015, Vitouladiti and Despotopoulos, 2015, Vitouladiti, 2015). Responders also showed a preference to job interview and in-office testing period, reflecting their view on proving their ability in practice rather than being judged by their resume. We think that this finding should be thoroughly considered by the travel agencies' management.

Many travel agencies (54.8%) offer their personnel a targeted specialization on subjects of interest in their effort to keep up with tourism market developments. Customer service, reservation systems, sales and (surprisingly) crisis management are the main subjects (Table 7). No encouragement, however, of the staff without tourism studies to undertake a relevant course has been recorder.

As stated earlier, motivation is considered to be the method of choice in productivity raise and some Greek travel agencies, despite current crisis, do offer certain motives (see Table 8) to increase staff productivity: their percentage however appears to be quite low. Agencies also appear to apply objective criteria for personnel advancement in the agency's hierarchy (Table 9), although from the given answers it seems that promotion is highly personalized. At this point one should also take into account that, after the onset of the current economic crisis, the mobility of the executives of the Greek travel industry is very limited.

The criteria for dismissal from work have also not been affected by current crisis. As reflected in the responders' answers, these criteria appear to be just although, again, dismissal is highly personalized. Surprisingly, reduced turnover was not included among those criteria, as responders possibly targeted on personal and performance related causes.

The findings from the final question of our questionnaire were also interesting. Firstly, the very high positive respond on the agencies' organization status possibly reflects the responder's low position in the hierarchy, as the Greek travel agencies are not profitable organizations nowadays; secondly, all suggestions had nothing to do with developmental strategy and expansion to new markets or areas of interest, such as e-commerce and internet marketing (Vitouladiti, 2015, Su et al, 2011), thus reflecting limited perception of the current crisis situation. This is probably the main disadvantage of our study: if the owner or the executive manager of the travel agency, acting as a stakeholder, had answered our questionnaire, it is possible that our results could be more conclusive (Papageorgiou and Lytras, 2015).

In conclusion, Greek travel agencies hire younger and more educated staff using correct and just hiring criteria, offer limited further education and specialization, do not sufficiently motivate their employees to increase their productivity but dismiss them after fair judgment. As responders did not refer to business developmental strategy and how it could affect personnel hiring, education, duties and advancement, we think that it would be extremely helpful if these fields were the objectives of a future study.

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