Academic Papers

UK travel agents' evaluation of eLearning courses offered by destinations : An exploratory study

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study aims to develop an understanding of the use of e-learning courses created for travel agents by Destination Management Organizations (DMOs). It explores agents' perceptions of such courses. The research examines the views of 304 UK-based travel agents using online survey and investigates whether age, sex, type of agency, work experience, and educational level have influence on e-learning uptake. The satisfaction of travel agents with DMO e-learning is also assessed and found to depend on the number of courses previously attended, knowledge acquired, change in beliefs about the destination, and increased confidence in serving potential tourists.

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1. Introduction

The complex nature of the tourism and hospitality industry presents unusual challenges for training and education providers in terms of access, deliverability, time, and need. Constant change and uncertainty across all sectors of the tourism business environment creates a situation that requires all employees to learn continuously (Cho & Schmelzer, 2000). Moreover, the success of tourism enterprises depends largely on employees—how they are recruited, managed, trained and educated, valued and rewarded, and supported through a process of continuous learning and career development (Baum, 2007). Accordingly, over the last decade, e-learning, or "the use of new multimedia technologies and the Internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services as well as remote exchanges and collaboration" (European Commission, 2001, p. 3), has been widely adopted in the tourism and hospitality industry (alongside other methods of training delivery) as a means of increasing skills and providing knowledge, although levels of adoption differ significantly (Baum & Sigala, 2001; Buhalis & Law, 2008).

Several attempts have been made by tourism academics to understand and describe the use of e-learning in hospitality and tourism (Haven & Botterill, 2003; Kuttainen & Lexhagen, 2012; Nadkarni & Venema, 2012; Sigala, 2002). Cantoni, Kalbaska and Inversini, 2009 classify existing online courses in the field of hospitality and tourism into four different categories according to the providers of the service: Academic, Corporate, Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), and Independent. DMO e-learning courses are online training activities offered by DMOs at national, regional, or local level to travel agents and tour operators involved in selling the country (or region, city, and so on) as a tourist destination. Examples include the Botswana Tourism Training Course, Switzerland Travel Academy, or the Aussie Specialist Program.

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Nowadays, DMOs are assisted by the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in spreading marketing messages to potential clients, coordinating all the partners and industries involved in the production and delivery of the tourist activity/product (Bieger, Beritelli, & Laesser, 2009), and in supporting travel professionals – that is, travel agents and tour operators – by providing more extensive and current information and training online (Cantoni & Kalbaska, 2010). From 2006 onward, tourism ministries worldwide have delivered online training to their trade partners, preparing them to sell more trips and send more people to a given destination (UNWTO, 2008) and deliver a better service to their clients.

Despite the growing interest from the industry, however, little academic research has been done on the subject. Little is therefore known about the status of e-learning courses created by DMOs for travel agents. This study intends to fill this research gap. It presents the analysis of a worldwide online survey of travel agents conducted in spring 2011. Its general purpose is to explore the assessment and evaluation of specially-created DMO e-learning courses by actual end-users, namely travel agents from the UK.

The main research objectives of the study are:

 (i) to examine whether personal characteristics such as gender, and working context (that is, type of agency, previous work experience, and level of education) influence travel professionals' decision to participate in e-learning; In addition to those, also the age of the respondents has been considered, in order to investigate if so-called "digital natives" (Cantoni & Tardini, 2010) use e-learning in a different way;
 (ii) to offer insights on travel agents' reaction to DMO e-learning courses and their level of satisfaction with them;
(iii) to explore whether their overall satisfaction depends on factors such as the number of courses attended, the knowledge acquired, changes in their beliefs about the destination, and increases in confidence;
(iv) to analyse how users' knowledge and beliefs changed or improved; and
 (v) to assess the overall usefulness of such online courses to the current business activities of travel agents.

Research objectives (ii) to (v) are structured using the evaluation model proposed by Kirkpatrick (1994), which suggests that every teaching/learning experience can be evaluated at four different levels: reaction, knowledge, transfer, and impact. The last level has been taken into consideration in the current research as a general indicator by asking the question: "Have you ever sold a destination to a customer as a result of taking an online course?" However, it was not possible to tackle the issue of return on investment for the travel agents (in terms of their time spent learning vs. the additional revenue generated), nor the DMO (such as the cost of the e-learning offering vs. the additional bookings resulting from it).

This study contributes to the tourism e-learning literature in several ways. First, it provides insights on how best to evaluate e-learning courses created specifically for travel agents. Second, it tests Kirkpatrick's model of evaluation in a new context. Furthermore, it has important applications to the tourism industry, since marketing managers are responsible for creating trade partnerships within National Tourism Boards/Ministries of Tourism, and so will benefit from considering this first study of travel agents' evaluation of e-learning courses.

The next section presents a review of the literature on the use of e-learning by travel agents, then identifies some of the trends and messages surrounding the issue. This is followed by sections outlining the research method and describing the results of the survey. The final sections of the paper present the conclusions and identify some limitations.

2. Literature review

2.1. E-tourism and DMOs

The impact of ICT on the tourism and hospitality industry, as one of the major changes in recent decades, has been widely recognized and investigated by academic researchers. New ways of communicating online with prospective tourists and offering them opportunities to purchase tourism products have become an inevitable part of the industry (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Nowadays, DMOs use new technologies not just to spread marketing messages to potential clients but also to coordinate all the partners and industries involved in the production and delivery of tourism activities/products (Bieger et al., 2009). The role and importance of DMOs in the tourism industry, and the success of a country as a whole as well as its regions and cities, have been widely acknowledged academically (Bornhost, Ritchie, & Sheehan, 2010; Frew & O'Connor, 1999). This has been even more important since the extension of the Internet, which has offered DMOs the chance to reach global audiences. ICT enables DMOs to better support and prepare travel professionals (travel agents and tour operators) with more extensive and current information as well as through online training activities (Cantoni & Kalbaska, 2010).

2.2. Impact of ICTs on travel agents' business activities

Over the last decade, technology has had a significant impact on the evolution of professional travel agencies worldwide (Alvarez, Martin, & Casielles, 2007; Huang, Yung, & Yang, 2011). Many travel agents are concerned about the survival of their business given the strong competition from online travel agents (OTA) such as Expedia, Priceline, and