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Technology leadership and predicting travel agent performance

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ABSTRACT

This study primarily attempts to examine the effect of technology leadership on job performance. Intervening role of Internet self-efficacy and creative problem-solving capacity was also evaluated. Data were collected from sales agents and their supervisors from travel agencies functioning in Uttarakhand region and were analysed using confirmatory factor analysis and hierarchical regression analysis. Results revealed that technology leadership indirectly influenced job performance of sales agents through the mediating role of Internet self-efficacy. Creative problem solving capacity positively moderated between Internet self-efficacy and job performance. The limitations of this study paves way for future studies and the findings of this study contributes towards practical and theoretical implications.

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1. Introduction

The last two decades have witnessed dramatic change in the Indian tourism industry (Abhyankar & Dalvie, 2013; Babu & Gade, 2014). With the introduction of information and communication technologies (ICT), the tourism industry has gone far beyond its traditional way of functioning and has entered a new era of '*interactivity*' crossing the universal, omnipresent communication doorstep of information (Kaur & Sharma, 2015). Travel agents play a significant role in the success of the tourism business. Their valuable services such as providing opinions and recommendations to travellers are very important to meet the needs, wants, and preferences of today's technologically sophisticated national and international tourists (McKercher, Packer, Yau, & Lam, 2003). In order to fulfil the demands of technological transition, travel agents have changed their way of doing business and are providing online services. Working as information gateways, travel agents are taking multiple ICT-related initiatives to transform the way they operate, including ticket booking and supporting customers' purchase decisions (Bogdanovych, Berger, Simoff, & Sierra, 2006). Shifting towards online activities through the Internet, travel agents intermediate the tourism channel and avail cost-effective value-added services which are helping them in attaining higher profits and market shares (Abhyankar & Dalvie, 2013; Vrana & Zafiropoulos, 2006).

Technology is fast becoming the 'info-structure' of present-day organisations (Bogdanovych et al., 2006). Use of Internet and computer-based technologies has become part and parcel of organisational operations and processes, specifically in the service industry (which include travel agencies) (Shamala, Ahmad, & Yusoff, 2013). Studies, in this regard, have established technology leadership as the theory that can guide such technological advancement in service organisations like schools and tourism industry (Dexter, 2011; Ertmer et al., 2002). Their findings proved that when managers were more oriented towards technology implementation in their day-to-day operations, it encouraged their subordinates/employees to develop a learning attitude. Such learning intentions enabled learning of new information and communication technologies and encouraged their use to provide innovative and novel services to customers/users, thus increasing their performance (Ertmer et al., 2002; Flanagan & Jacobsen, 2003). However, in the absence of self-efficacy, usage and implementation of ICT technology can hinder the overall learning experience. Individual self-efficacy (ISE) to use Internet-based technologies plays a fundamental role in an organisation as it enables individuals to meet technological challenges through upgrading skills and knowledge, making decisions in problematic situations, using Internet with greater confidence, and Executing online tasks effectively and efficiently (Barbeite & Weiss, 2004; Srivastava & Dhar, 2016). An essential question that arises here is whether effective technology leadership can be ascertained as the key ingredient for efficacious performance. Very few scholars have paid attention to the psychological process of Internet-based self-efficacy that encourages individual performance, specifically in small service-oriented organisations. Hence, it is important to identify the extent to which ISE can determine the influence of technology leadership on

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performance. The primary aim of this study is to examine the effect of technology leadership on job performance of travel agents through the intervening role of Internet self-efficacy.

Employees in service-oriented organisations like travel agencies are prone to problems where travel agents are required to handle a new set of problems everyday (Edvardsson, 2005; Jaiswal & Dhar, 2015). Dynamic consumer behavior, changing customer needs, and drastically changing business and political environments have been found to further complicate the working of travel agents (McKercher et al., 2003). Further, when they provide their services in ever-changing technological environment, their issues increase manifolds as they need to keep themselves updated information (Spencer, Buhalis, & Moital, 2012). Isaksen and Treffinger (2004) suggested that in such cases, managers should acknowledge employees' creative problem-solving capacity (CPS) and ability that enables employees to use their creative skills and knowledge to solve problems. CPS includes convergent and divergent thinking in order to derive innovative and novel solutions to the problems being faced (Proctor, 2014). In India, large travel agents have recognised the relevance of creative problem-solving capacity among employees in long-term sustainability, though small travel agents still lag behind in identifying its advantage (Lather, Garg, & Vikas, 2015). As small travel agents in developing nations like India act as intermediaries in linking customers to different service providers like hotels, conveyance providers, etc. (Brown & Kaewkitipong, 2009; Shanker, 2008), employees' CPS for effective performance requires more emphasis. If travel agent employees fail to enhance their creative problem-solving capacity, their efficacy for effective performance might go down (Ganguly, Dash, & Cyr, 2011). Thus, in this study, we assume that an interaction of CPS and Internet self-efficacy can improve the performance of travel agents.

This study aims to contribute towards the key stakeholder of hospitality industry employees (workforce), tourists (customers), and the travel agency (organisation). Every organisation requires effective employee performance and better productivity to differentiate itself from competitors raise their market share and emphasise on quality service (Jones & Pizam, 1993). To attain such goals and have positive results on these areas, managers/supervisors need to develop right skills and knowledge. This study suggests technology leadership to improve awareness and knowledge of Internet technology to achieve effective job performance. Towards employees, this study provides the need for managers/supervisor's technology leadership to improve employee's confidence and efficacy to learn and use Internet technology in their daily operations. Towards tourist, this study provides intervention of Internet-based technology to facilitate effective performance/services by the employees towards the tourists. Finally, towards travel agency, this study encourage learning the use and meaningfulness of technology by the managers/supervisors to motivate overall employee's job performance. Through improving the job performance, the travel agency can differentiate themselves from others and can provide cost-effective products and services to their customers/tourists. Further, this study also shows moderating effect of employee's creative problem-solving ability as the key to induce their job performance towards tourists thus benefitting the travel agency.

Therefore, the present study examines the extent to which managers' technology leadership impacts job performance through the mediating role of employees' Internet self-efficacy and moderating role of creative problem-solving capacity. The following part of the paper includes theoretical foundation and assumed hypotheses followed by research methodology and findings of the study. Discussion, implications and conclusion ensue.

1.1. Background

Travel agencies working in different tourist destinations of Uttarakhand are taken as the context of the study. Studies argue that technology is important for effective performance of travel agencies (Bogdanovych et al., 2006; Dhar, 2015). Information technology helps travel agents to acquire and use computer-based easy information on arrival and departure of trains and flights, economic fares of conveyance and travel, hotel ratings and accommodation. Such information enables them to learn relevant skills and execute business tasks related to customer services. Effective execution of customer services improves customer loyalty and brand image of the travel agency based on the appreciation and rating of satisfied customers (Salwani, Marthandan, Norzaidi, & Chong 2009).

Uttarakhand has been the hub of tourists for many decades (Babu & Gade, 2014). However, the percentage of tourists in the last decade has declined (McKercher et al., 2003). Reports have shown incompetency of travel agencies in attracting more customers to different tourist destinations (Chitravanshi, 2012; Kaur & Sharma, 2015). Lack of technological and related infrastructural facilities is considered the key reason for the decline in the performance of the tourism business. Chaudhary (2000) showed that although multiple technological advancement plans were introduced in the nation, travel agencies in tourism business were the slowest among all other industries to accept technologies. Entrepreneurs and managers in travel agencies are found to be aware of new technologies, which can simplify their transaction while reducing costs, yet they doubt the meaningfulness of the systems in the process (Khare & Khare, 2011). Such perception affects their approach towards adoption of information technology, and ultimately, their performance. In India, travel agencies are categorised based on size and turnover (sales) (Kaur & Sharma, 2015). Large travel agencies have a more open attitude towards usefulness and affordability of information technologies while small travel agencies lack such openness. Small travel agencies view online systems and Internet as an expensive decision and believe in personal dealings with the customers (Lather et al., 2015). However, solutions to issues like investment, manpower, and financing facilities can motivate them to use technology, thus increasing their performance in the future (Sathyanarayanan, 2014). Travel agencies were also categorised into retail and wholesale travel agencies. Retail travel agencies deal directly with the customers while wholesale agencies deal in bulk tourist packages and delegate them to retail agencies. This study focuses on retail travel agencies as their performance ensures effective returns for the whole industry and examines the effect of technology leadership on job performance of travel agents.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical foundation

To develop the model for this study, we followed Davis' Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and considered individual response to technology (adoption or rejection) a result of the individual's perception towards usefulness and ease of using technology. Davis (1989), and Bagozzi, Davis, and Warshaw (1992), showed that when a new technology was introduced, a sense of hesitation and intricacy developed in the mind of the prospective user regarding its adoption. This complexity leads them to develop different kinds of attitudes and intentions to learn the usage of that technology before actually using it. Depending upon the direction of their own attitudes and intentions (negative or positive) towards preliminary learning, they decide whether to accept or refuse the adoption of technology. In the words of Bagozzi et al. (1992), '*Attitudes towards usage and intentions to use may be ill-formed or lacking in conviction or else may occur only after preliminary strivings to learn to use the technology evolve*' (pp 664). In other words, introduction of any technology requires employee's positive attitude to further use it in their actual place of work. In the context of this study, we hypothesised that intentions of travel agents towards adoption of new technology was dependent upon how they perceived its usefulness and how easy to use they found it. As employees are generally apprehensive of using new technology, due to its complexity and strange activities involved, they may develop certain ill attitudes due to this

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