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## Critical Perspectives

# Travel agency managers' perceptions of tourism industry employability



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## ABSTRACT

This study determined the employability of vocational college graduates as perceived by travel agency managers in Taiwan. The AHP was performed on data from 50 valid returned questionnaires. The results show that travel agency managers identified 'generic skills' to be the most important employability skill, followed by 'professional attitude', 'discipline', and 'career planning'. For specific scale-items, travel agency managers ranked 'communication' the highest, followed by 'lifelong-learning', 'dedication to work', 'crisis management', 'selfmarketing', 'teamwork', and 'tour planning and execution'. It is recommended that the vocational colleges of Taiwan design curricula to improve students' competency in these areas for enhanced employability.

## 1. Background to the study

There are varieties of categorisation in travel agency. In the United Kingdom, travel agencies are categorised as either (1) travel wholesaling manager or (2) commercial agents (travel retailing). In travel wholesaling, the agency is primarily managed by the organisation and the travel product determines the wholesale prices. Sometimes these businesses sell travel products on a retail basis. During a business transaction, transportation, lodging, and a tour sites are agreed upon, and the purchase price of these products based on the wholesale cost for each individual service. These companies then survey, analyse, and forecast the market and after packaging and deciding on the price of the travel products, they sell them through commercial agents or directly to consumers. Travel wholesaling businesses typically include larger management departments than do commercial agents, and such firms are relatively fewer. Turning to the interest of this particular study, most package tours to Taiwan from Europe and America are sold wholesale.

Although individual travel agents are the typical face of travel retailing, related organisations of commercial agents are also included in this category. Most commercial agents sell products such as tours, lodging, travel, and entertainment; they simultaneously represent the aforementioned wholesale travel firms and sell individual products to customers. However, rather than collect money from customers, commercial agents receive commissions from the firms that they represent.

Taiwan's travel agencies, which are categorised primarily on the basis of their managerial range, include consolidated travel agencies, class-A travel agencies, and class-B travel agencies. Consolidated travel agencies have the widest business range. They make purchases on behalf of others, sell tickets for domestic and international travel, conduct inbound and outbound visa paperwork, solicit business, and sell lodging. Moreover, they run, organise, and otherwise manage tours (both outbound and inbound), including designing tours, and arranging tour guides or leaders. Consolidated travel agencies may also authorise class-A and class-B travel agencies to solicit business on their behalf, thus serving as wholesalers of travel products. Additionally, they may represent their travel business abroad, facilitating business communications, promoting their company, and reporting prices. Class-A travel agencies are similar to consolidated travel agencies, with the distinction that they only perform direct-sales and cannot authorise other travel

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agencies to solicit business. The business range of class-B agencies is limited to domestic travel, providing relevant services in transportation, dining, lodging, and transportation; this is known as the citizen travel business. These agencies cannot manage outbound or inbound-related travel business or provide tour guides or leaders.

## 2. Introduction

The career education system has undergone rapid changes over the last 20 years in Taiwan. Three institutes of technology and 74 vocational junior colleges existed in 1992. However, in 2011, there were 49 universities of science and technology, 28 institutes of technology, and 15 vocational junior colleges throughout Taiwan and its territorial islands. Along with the decreasing birthrate over the past decade, colleges and universities are struggling to attract students to maintain the desired enrolment numbers. To meet this challenge, schools must convince students (and their parents) that prospective employability awaits them upon graduation; the phenomenon of ‘graduate unemployment’ must be averted. Conversely, as unemployment numbers rise, Taiwanese enterprises frequently face the challenges of fulfilling human resource demands. This apparent contradiction (enterprises unable to locate adequate personnel despite increases in unemployment) can be traced to the training provided to vocational college students, which may not correspond with the needs of their prospective industries.

Employability has many definitions extending beyond simply the ability to ‘acquire work’ and highlighting the development of attributes and skills. As [Harvey \(2005\)](#) contended, the emphasis should be less on ‘employ’ and more on ‘ability’. The concept of ‘ability’ or ‘competency’ gained traction following the research conducted by [McClelland \(1973\)](#), which advocated moving away from viewing ‘competency’ as knowledge, skills, and attitude to focus instead on specific self-image, values, traits, and motivational dispositions for ‘occupational competency’. Later, [Spencer and Spencer \(1993\)](#) proposed five components of competency: motives, traits, self-concept, knowledge, and skill.

Rampant mixed messages about college graduate's employability are caused by the confusion associated with these varying definitions of ‘employability’ ([Harvey, 2001](#)). Matching student competencies with employer demands is the task of vocational colleges under a general notion of ‘employability’; however, the graduate competencies sought by businesses may be disconnected from those provided by colleges. In particular, employers tend to be favourably disposed towards graduates with formal or informal work experience, including short-term contracts and internships with a company ([Harvey, 2001](#)).

[Yorke and Harvey \(2005\)](#) argued that aligning higher education with the needs of the workforce should be engendered through careful actions by institutions to embed skills and attributes within instructional programmes. Employers typically desire a more flexible, adaptable workforce in response to the volatility of market needs ([Bennett, 2002](#)); consequently, employers are hiring and firing their employees more readily across industries and life-long employment is scarce ([Nolan & Wood, 2003](#)). Simultaneously, the notion of graduates developing the skills to enhance their ‘employability’ at their first job at the expense of their initial employer is also disappearing ([Davies, 2000](#)). Thus, being prepared with work-related skills in addition to subject-specific skills is essential to a graduates’ employability ([Dench, 1997](#)).

[Nabi \(2003\)](#) showed that employed and underemployed graduates are distinguished by the portfolio of skill sets they offer. Individual subject skills may not always meet employer requirements, because of the tension between formal education and vocational training ([Foley, Frew, McGillivray, McIntosh, & McPherson, 2004](#)). Nonetheless, a clear, formal, and universally accepted distinction between skills acquired through education and those acquired through training is not available ([Bennett, 2002](#)). Thus, a potential incompatibility between the supply and demand of skilled employees has emerged, triggering dissatisfaction and disappointment for all concerned ([Skinner, Saunders, & Beresford, 2004](#)).

Although close relations with the business community are crucial for schools to produce employable graduates, vocational colleges should not necessarily deliver exactly what the industry requests. The role of schools, as the medium between potential employers and employees (graduating students), is not only to follow trends and industry developments but also to stimulate them. As [Jungshagen \(2005\)](#) stated, continuous input from industry is essential to define future practice. Hence, this study explored the tourism industry to determine how Taiwanese travel agencies view the employability of vocational college graduates as their prospective employees.

## 3. Literature review

Employability is not a new term or concept; according to [Mansfield \(2001\)](#), it was coined by Beveridge in 1909. However, the definition of employability has changed, and apparently varies by generation. Beveridge used employability to judge whether people possess the ability to work; in short, whether an unemployed individual possessed the ability to become employed. Beveridge's definition, which [Mansfield \(2001\)](#) called the ‘two point method’, can effectively categorise the characteristics of unemployed individuals. However, this method is more applicable to emergency responses than as tool for labour market strategy.

[Soloff and Bolton \(1969\)](#) pointed out that before the 1960s in the United States, an individual's employability depended on their accumulated work experience. The policy makers of their generation also believed that employability was more affected by individual attitudes. Thus, the key focus of employability was the attitude of the employed individual, which alludes to the development of career self-cognition.

Throughout the 1970s, the focus of employability gradually shifted to individuals’ holistic value, rather than only their work attitudes; that is, employability in this period included not only fundamental work skills but also broader knowledge. However, towards the end of the 1970s, successfully obtaining and maintaining employment was not easy because the U.S. labour market was in economic recession. Thus, the key to being employed transferred to interpersonal relationships and social skills, which an

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