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

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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.

Keywords: e-Learning, e-Tourism, travel agent training, destination management organization

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 and colleagues (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.

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 et al., 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. Firstly, it provides insights on how best to evaluate e-learning courses created specifically for travel agents. Secondly, 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, et al., 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 et al., 2007; Huang et al., 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 Orbitz (Cheyne et al., 2006; Garkavenko & Milne, 2008; O'Connor & Frew, 2000). Despite the fact that the number of traditional travel agencies has decreased significantly (Alvarez et al., 2007), their recommendations are still an important source of information for tourists in their decision making (ASTA, 2011; Frias et al., 2008; Tnooz, 2011; Travel Market Report, 2011). The travel agent influences the client's satisfaction and contributes to the success of any hospitality business, tourism attraction, or destination. In addition, travel agents' knowledge of the product (Baloglu & Mangaloglu, 2001; Klenosky & Gitelson, 1998), their experience (Bogdanovych et al., 2006), their ability to sell the right destinations to the right people (Morgan & Trivedi, 2007), and their ability to develop relationships with their clients (Milne & Gill, 1998; Novak & Schwabe, 2009) are still their greatest competitive advantages.

Tourists in developed countries, when making complex travel arrangements to less-familiar destinations or buying costly packages, still seek help from travel agencies (Chi & Qu, 2008; Dolnicar & Laesser, 2007). Moreover, in some parts of the world, where e-commerce is still at an early stage (such as China, India, and Brazil), traditional travel agents are still the most reliable option for travelers (Li & Suomi, 2008; Nunes et al., 2011). In addition, other reasons justify the role played by travel

agents in emerging markets, such as the lack of so-called Frequent Independent Travelers (FIT), bureaucratic and visa-related issues, and language barriers.

In order to stay on the cutting edge and consolidate their position in the market, travel agents should constantly upgrade their knowledge and skills (Milne et al., 2008). They need personalized training to do so, as clients will ask them for tailored information. Agents may also seek out certification as a way to differentiate themselves from their competitors. In this situation e-learning (also known as distance learning or technologically-enhanced education) can form the link between the new requirements of the market and the training qualification strategies within the tourism industry (Braun & Hollick, 2006; Sigala & Christou, 2002). In particular, DMOs have seen this as an opportunity.

2.3 e-learning courses by DMOs

Leveraging the new requirements of the market, DMOs worldwide have started to use digital technologies not only to spread marketing messages to potential clients (that is, business to customer or B2C), but also to coordinate all the partners and industries involved (business to business or B2B communication) in the production and delivery of the tourist activity/product (Bieger et al., 2009). Today, DMOs around the globe use ICT to better support and provide travel professionals with more extensive and current information while offering a full range of opportunities (via e-learning) to learn about a destination and its attractions. E-learning has been defined as “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).

From 2006 onward, e-learning courses have been designed to provide travel agents and distributors with the knowledge and skills to sell the destination effectively and to suggest it to the right people (Cantoni & Kalbaska, 2010).

While considering the content of Destination Management Organizations' e-learning courses, most of them are represented in especially designed learning modules covering general information about the destination itself (including geographical position, demographics, languages spoken, etc.), history, culture and traditions, accommodation and transportation systems, formality issues, selling tips, as well as help in itinerary planning. Moreover, the following media are used in the development of courses: rich flash animations, videos, interactive maps, and high-impact images. Most of the courses are easily navigated. At the end of the training activity, after passing an evaluation exam, travel agents receive a certificate of completion, which may then be displayed in the agency. The time needed to complete an online training ranges from 40 minutes to 30 hours, with an average of 4-5 hours. All the course developers have chosen self-study as a strategy of training delivery. As a result, courses have low interactivity and low (if any) assistance from the DMO side.

In 2011, 69 national DMOs worldwide provided e-learning courses for travel agents, almost double the number available in 2009 (Kalbaska, 2012), which shows clear interest in exploiting the opportunities presented by e-learning to provide agents with a structured and comprehensive view of what a destination can offer.

Despite growing interest from the industry, there is little academic research on the topic. Specifically, no study has yet looked at travel agents' (that is, users') perception of these platforms, changes in users' beliefs and improvement in their knowledge, the usefulness of such online courses, or the application of the knowledge in their working activities (so-called knowledge transfer). These three areas of

enquiry fit well with three of the four stages of the evaluation model proposed by Kirkpatrick (1994), which suggests that every teaching/learning experience can be evaluated at the following levels:

- **Reaction** to the course by learners; are they comfortable/happy with the content? What is their overall level of satisfaction? What were the main drivers for them to embark on this learning experience?
- **Knowledge** gained by learners: how much and what did they learn within this course?
- **Transfer** of learning to the everyday professional lives of travel agents attending the course: are they able to apply the knowledge they have acquired in their working activities?

Moreover, several researchers have studied the factors influencing satisfaction with e-learning in a corporate setting, such as number of courses attended based on the expectation-confirmation model (Bhattacharjee, 2001; Lee, 2010), increased knowledge (Womble, 2006) and confidence (Ring & Reeves, 2002), and change of beliefs and opinions based on cognitive dissonance theory (Sun et al., 2008). However, none of these studies consider the combined influence of these four factors on overall user satisfaction levels, which is one of the goals of the current research.

3 METHODOLOGY

This research aims to fill the gap identified in the literature review by exploring the perceptions of UK travel agents toward e-learning courses created by DMOs worldwide. It is thus exploratory in nature, with the aim of carrying out a deeper investigation of this topic. With the purpose of collecting data worldwide, the survey was conducted online in order to reach as many travel agents as possible,

independently from their previous acquaintance with DMO e-learning courses. Indeed, this research was concerned with the perceptions and interests of nonusers as well as users.

The questionnaire was pretested at the beginning of April 2011 by a focus group of 10 international travel agents. The purpose of the pretest was to reduce ambiguity and ensure the questions were clearly worded. The revised questionnaire was then administered online from April 10 to June 11, 2011. It consisted of 34 questions in four categories, namely (1) demographics, (2) knowledge acquisition, (3) use or nonuse of DMO e-learning courses, and (4) the application of knowledge acquired online and its transfer to professional practice. Respondents required approximately 15-20 minutes to complete the questionnaire and were offered no financial incentive to do so. A dedicated website (www.elearning4tourism.com) was developed to support and provide details about the research.

The link for the online questionnaire was distributed to travel agents by means of direct emailing and via the professional social network LinkedIn. Email invitations were sent directly to members of the World Association of Travel Agencies, Online Travel Training, PromAx Communication SA, International Federation for IT and Travel & Tourism (IFITT), and International Aviation Transport Association (IATA) Training & Development Institute. In total, about 60,000 potential respondents worldwide were invited to participate. After the two-month period (April – May 2011), 1,004 responses worldwide had been received, giving a 1.67% response rate. It should be noted that low response rates ranging from 1-20% are common in organizational surveys (Paxson, 1995).

Data analysis was conducted using PASW Statistics version 18. General descriptive statistics procedures were firstly applied followed by logistic and linear multiple regressions on certain questions.

3.1 Profile of Sample

A total of 1,004 valid questionnaires were received for the online survey *Travel Agents' Perception of Destination e-learning*, with several nationalities represented. Taking into consideration the low frequency of responses from most countries other than the UK, and to avoid creating distortions caused by differences in nationality, the decision was taken to analyze only those questionnaires completed by UK respondents. As a result, the final return sample for this research totaled 304 responses.

The age distribution of the sample was fairly even, with almost 16% ($n=47$) of responses from individuals aged under 30, 22% ($n=68$) aged 30-39, 24% ($n=74$) aged 40-49, 28% ($n=84$) aged 50-59, and 10% ($n=31$) over 60. In terms of gender, 76 respondents were male (25%) and 228 female (75%). As for professional and employment factors, half the respondents (50%) worked for privately-owned companies (independent agencies), followed by home-based/consultancies (16%), call centers/Internet-based companies (13%), travel agencies (worldwide chains) (10%), corporate buyers (2%) and other (9%).

In terms of number of years working in the tourism industry, 31% of respondents had more than 20 years' experience with 22% having fewer than 5 years. Of the remainder, 19% had 6-10 years' experience, 16% 11-15 years, and 12% 16-20 years.

In terms of education, 30% of respondents had been educated to below high school standard, with 45% having completed high school. A Bachelors' degree was held by 19% and 6% were educated to Masters' level.

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To address the first research objective, that is to examine whether personal characteristics such as age, gender, and working context have any influence on participation in e-learning activities, logistic regression was used.

Table 1. Regression coefficients

	<i>B</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Odds Ratio
Age	0.291	4.429	1	.035	1.337
Gender	-0.049	0.022	1	.881	0.952
Kind of agency	0.357	13.411	1	<.001	1.429
Previous working experience	-0.048	0.211	1	.646	0.953
Level of education	0.114	0.444	1	.505	1.121
Constant	-3.107	24.630	1	<.001	0.045

The results show that age and type of agency affect whether or not someone takes an e-learning course about tourism destinations (see Table 1). Other factors, such as gender, experience, and education level have no significant influence.

Table 2 shows the frequencies of these two significant factors with the dependent variable. It can be seen that travel agents aged 60 or over are less likely to participate in e-learning courses, while those of other ages have similar attitudes towards online training. Table 2 also shows that people working in travel agencies are more likely to participate in online training compared with those working as corporate buyers or in other types of business.

Table 2. Frequency

	Have you ever taken any eLearning courses on tourism?	
	Yes	No
Age		
Under 30	78.7%	21.3%
30 – 39	85.3%	14.7%
40 – 49	78.4%	21.6%
50 – 59	82.1%	17.9%
Over 60	41.9%	58.1%
Total	77.3%	22.7%
Type of Agency		
Travel agency (Worldwide chain)	90.3%	9.7%
Travel agency (Independent agency)	82.1%	17.9%
Travel agency (Call center/Internet-based)	75.0%	25.0%
Travel agency (Home-based/Consultant)	77.1%	22.9%
Corporate buyers	40.0%	60.0%
Other	48.3%	51.7%
Total	77.3%	22.7%

To address the subsequent research objectives (that is, insights into reaction or satisfaction with e-learning, the factors affecting satisfaction, assessing change or knowledge acquisition, and evaluating overall usefulness), three of the four stages of the evaluation model proposed by Kirkpatrick (1994) are employed, namely reaction, knowledge, and transfer.

4.2 Reaction

Respondents were asked questions about their awareness of specific e-learning activities and their immediate reaction to them. Seventy-seven percent (or 235) answered yes to the question: “Have you ever taken any e-learning courses on tourism?” so it may be inferred that participants in general were aware of this approach to training delivery.

Those who had not taken any e-learning courses before (69 respondents, or 23%), gave the following reasons for nonparticipation (multiple answers were

possible): not knowing about the possibility (55%), having insufficient time to participate (36%), not being interested (9%), and not considering it useful for their business (6%). However, 80% of respondents who had never participated in e-learning indicated they planned to do so within the next 12 months.

Looking at those travel agents who had undertaken e-learning it can be mentioned that on average a travel agent in the UK has participated in 7 courses, which indicates a high level of satisfaction and interest in online training activities. 58% reported having completed all the DMO e-learning courses they had embarked upon. The reasons given by those who did not finish the courses were (multiple answers were possible) that the course was too long (54%), there was too much textual information (36%), the course was too boring (30%), the information was not useful (12%), there were too many tests (11%), the participant needed more assistance from the DMO (3%), or the respondent already knew everything about the destination (2%).

To probe the level of satisfaction of travel agents using online courses and the factors influencing it, respondents were asked: “What is your level of satisfaction with the destination online training you have done so far?” Respondents tended to be positive about their previous experience of e-learning, with 40% saying they were significantly satisfied, and nearly half (51%) being somewhat satisfied. Only around 9% of respondents were slightly satisfied.

A further four variables were analysed in order to address research objective (iii), that is to explore their influence on the satisfaction levels of e-learning users; number of courses attended, change in beliefs/opinions, increase in knowledge, and increased confidence.

A multiple linear regression was used to explore this question. This aspect of the analysis included 216 questionnaires (88 were excluded as data were missing). The results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Coefficients for model variables

	<i>B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Number of courses	.034	.192	3.430	.001
Change in beliefs/opinions	.010	.014	.201	.841
Knowledge	.218	.242	3.263	.001
Confidence	.279	.367	5.202	<.001

The results show that the level of satisfaction of travel agents taking DMO e-learning courses is significantly influenced by three factors; number of courses previously completed, knowledge acquired, and increased confidence. No significant relationship was found between satisfaction level and change in beliefs/opinions.

4.3 Knowledge

Travel agents who had used e-learning were generally content with the level of knowledge imparted (significantly satisfied 52.5%, somewhat satisfied 35.5%, slightly satisfied 11.5%, and not at all satisfied 0.5%). Those who had never undertaken e-learning were asked if they believed these types of courses had any value, with 39% feeling that they might significantly add value to their knowledge about a tourism destination, 50% anticipating that their knowledge might be somewhat increased, and 11% seeing the prospect of only slight improvements.

4.4 Transfer

While analysing the transfer of e-learning courses to travel agents' current working activities the answers to two questions are of interest. Firstly, 63% of UK

travel agents participating in this survey who had taken a DMO e-learning course said that they had sold a destination package as a result.

Furthermore, 44% believed that DMO e-learning had improved their business ability or skills, while 22% thought that their abilities had increased significantly.

Nearly half the respondents (49.8%) believed that after completing a DMO e-learning course they had felt significantly more confident about selling a specific destination, with 31.8% being somewhat more confident, and 15.2% slightly more confident. Only 3.2% did not experience any improvement in confidence after undertaking online training.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The results reported above show that the UK travel agents participating in this survey had a positive perception of the e-learning courses created by DMOs. They believed that online training of this type added value to their overall knowledge of tourism destinations worldwide, helped them to sell packages, and gave them more confidence in serving clients (all of whom are potential tourists).

The study has also showed that age and type of agency affect whether or not an agent undertakes an e-learning course about a destination. Previous work experience, gender, and education level have no influence on this decision.

Moreover, the study shows that satisfaction with DMO e-learning courses among UK travel agents is significantly influenced by three factors, namely the number of previous courses attended, the knowledge obtained, and the increase in confidence as a result of participation. However, there is no significant relationship between satisfaction level and the participants' change of beliefs/opinions about the destination.

From a theoretical point of view current research has a great value thanks to the empirical data collection on the topic , which has been investigated for the first time. Moreover, this research has contributed to the literature on e-learning and e-tourism by exploring its relevance in a tourism industry context. This is a valuable academic contribution, as it gives the first insight into the evaluation of e-learning courses created specifically for travel agents, and tests Kirkpatrick's model of evaluation in a new training context.

From a practical viewpoint, these findings suggest that DMOs may need to work even more closely with travel agents than before, as their destinations are still being strongly promoted by such agencies. DMOs need to find their way to the customers – travel agents – through specialization and training. In the short term, online training can play an important part in enriching the trade of a tourism destination website and is an additional channel through which to influence the market as well as to support travel professionals in their sales activities. Moreover, considering the high appreciation and expressed need for these courses, DMOs should take into consideration the broader promotion and expansion of this kind of training. In the long term, e-learning courses for travel agents may add value to the destination's innovative communication concept as well as strengthening awareness of it among trade partners and, through them, potential tourists.

Although the present study has provided valuable insights into travel agents' perception of e-learning courses created by DMOs, these findings should be interpreted in the light of the limitations of the research. The study included only UK travel agents, so the generalizability of the findings to other countries may be limited. Further research may seek to focus on a larger sample including travel agents from elsewhere, as the inclusion of more countries will better support the conclusions. In

future, further empirical studies may evaluate additional aspects of e-learning such as the motivational drivers for doing those courses, evaluation of the quality of online training materials, the impact of courses on the recommendations made by travel agents to potential tourists, and whether these courses give agencies any competitive advantage. These further insights would certainly help researchers and destination practitioners to understand more about the trend and rationales of e-learning adoption in hospitality and tourism.

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