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HUMAN RESOURCE'S ROLE SEEKING TO GAIN A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Abstract. In the business environment the organizational and personnel's competences, knowledge creation and sharing it, implementation of innovation are closely related to the attempts of organization to increase the competitiveness, keep the competitive advantage and create value added. Gaining the competitive advantage and keeping it becomes one of the most important objects for investigation of industrial or services organizations. Enterprises what engage into production are more oriented to heighten the specifics of product, implementing the technologies into the process of production. Services providers are looking for possibilities to organize a professional team, to increase competence of contacting personnel in order to guarantee a quality of servicing a customer. An article represents the specifics of gaining a competitive advantage of services providers, and the main factor – the human resource aspect – is developed. On the ground of the survey in Lithuania, guidelines for travel and tourism services providers in order to satisfy the customers by quality of servicing are pointed.

Keywords: Lithuania, competitive advantages, human resource management, quality of servicing, travel and tourism services, services offerings.

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of the theme is based on the growing competitiveness in the market, increasing especially in the tourism services in Lithuania. High competition among travel and tourism services providers forces to look for possibilities to compete, underline the idiosyncrasy of supplied services (Chen et al., 2011). Services sector meets the larger competition from the one hand, but from the other – services providers are able to form the competitive advantage by personnel who creates the largest value for a customer and what is not very easy transferred by competitors (Gvaramadze, 2008). That is why in the modern services enterprises the most important recourses are not physical or financial, but human: personnel skills, knowledge, capabilities, experience, it is their personal competence. Human resource, especially managerial capabilities, still

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remains to be the most difficult copied competitive advantage, and resource for competitiveness in the market. Seeking the development of personality the employee should improve their capabilities and competence permanently. Otherwise personnel, who improve their knowledge and skills permanently, have real opportunities to help their organization trying to adapt to changing environment and being competitive one. A larger attention to human resource as a competitive advantage is paid in services what are customer-oriented, as tourism (Ruiz-Molina et al., 2011), wellness, health care, educational and other services. Services providers what are oriented to wishes and needs of a customer are better prepared to compete (Tsiotsou, 2010). The experience of global emerging markets showed that human resource factor in the market is crucial (Qu et al., 2005; Seyoum, 2007; Tsiotsou, Ratten, 2010). It is very important to identify what role for enterprises' competitiveness has human resource in the tourism services sector, in the sector which is underlying in Lithuania. This problem is very urgent, as creating an image of attractive country for tourism purposes personnel of tourism becomes to be crucial. They should be able to create, develop qualitative and competitive tourism products not only in Lithuanian local, but also international market. Qualitative and satisfying the expectations of services customer services increases the trust on travel and tourism organization as well as increases their competitive abilities in the market.

The aim of the article is to educe the human resource role trying to gain a competitive advantage in the travel and tourism services market. Travel and tourism services providers usually compete by the similar services, package, even by relatively the same prices. Thus human resource role could be detected as on the most important in creating a value for travel and tourism services consuming.

Methods of the research: comparative analysis of the scientific literature, qualitative (interview with travel and tourism services providers) and quantitative survey (questionnaire for tourism services customers).

2. OBTAINING THE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE IN THE SERVICES ECONOMY

Rising economy increase the competition in the industrial and services market. Providers of products do those best in order to obtain any competitive advantage before other. Capability to compete becomes to be the first precondition for competitiveness of goods and services providers. Competitiveness in the global market is related to ability of services providers to take actions quickly taking into account changes of the market and to capability to keep the positions already occupied (Slizienė, Langviniene 2010).

The competitiveness of services providers, upon M. A. Porter is described by market share and profitability of provider (Rinkauskaite, 2007), as well as competitiveness of goods suppliers. Competitiveness includes such aspects as the competitive environment and its subjects, characteristics of organization and its capability to manage them trying to achieve competitive advantage (Langviniene, Sekliuckiene, 2007). There are different opinions, how to gain an advantage, which is not very easy copied by competitors. Services industry is rapid increasing both in developed or developing countries recently (Seyoum, 2007). Growth of services economy overcame growth of manufacturing. International trade in services already makes about quarter of all international trade (goods and services totally) and more than 60% of local trade. That is why it is very important to identify what a factor enables to compete with services locally or internationally.

There are a lot of thoughts what factors should be strengthened in order to gain competitive position in the market. Increasing war of competitors forces to look for possibilities to compete engaging not only price factors (Ciriaci, Palma, 2008). Pricing wars is not a way for competing any more for industrial and services providers. Low price could act its role in strengthening the competitiveness, but could not act alone. Enterprises trying to prepare an offering as a low price alternative is not necessarily going to be successful if consumers judge offerings primary on other attributes (Devlin, 2001), for example, kind servicing, implementation of information and communication technologies (Minoja et al., 2010), etc. Of course, *price and quality of services* still important in determining the competitiveness of services providers (Seyoum, 2007; Zvirblis, 2007).

There is a specifics of gaining a competitive advantage in the services sector, as supplier of services *gain competitive advantage resource engaged into the process* (resource-based view) while industrial enterprises are more oriented to competitive strategy and external factors (structure-conducts-performance) (Spyropoulou et al., 2011). Successful industrial goods providers react quickly to external environmental changes and fit their production in order to satisfy a customer. Moving from product-based strategy to service-based strategy becomes to be the most urgent change in all kind of industries (Godlevskaja et al., 2011). While services providers consider specific resources and capabilities as central to attaining competitive advantage in the turn to satisfy of changing expectations of customers. Resource-based view emphasis internal environment of services providers, as well as engaging resource (material and human) and capabilities (organizational routines and practise) possessed.

Authors also highline the opportunity to engage *specialization into the offerings*, as specialized, idiosyncrasy service also can acts as competitive advantage before others (Ciriaci, Palma, 2008; Langviniene, 2009). Clear specialization of services is capable to compete with services provider, who tries to supply everything to everybody. Of course, he is not capable to manage wide assortment of services very well. However, *differentiation of services also has its*

advantages, as in case of very quick changes in services customer demand, differentiation can compensate discrepancies in consuming demand.

Other authors underline *market-led view* (Devlin, 2001) in order to gain competitive advantage for a supplier. According to market-led view competitive advantage of services providers should focus more on output than on input. The competitiveness of offerings delivered to the marketplace will be the primary determinant of success (Devlin, 2001). A competitive advantage is able to exist if a services provider will be oriented to a customer, value creation for him.

To gain a competitive advantage it is to exclude from others adding value to service, to services package of entire offerings of services suppliers. Suppliers meet a discussion question *what value they should add* in order to do it more successful than competitors. It is not enough to sell a product without leading extra value anymore. Orientation of both service and manufactory economy changes recently, as customer requires more and more. Services providers must constantly *adjust their services portfolios* because it is important to have dynamic services adapted to various customers needs while recognizing their needs should be changing over all time (Godlevskaja et al., 2011). Competitiveness of services is affected by nature of services, as services are intangible, non-storable one, as well, as they are more regulated locally and internationally. Trade in services requires movement of services providers staff or capital to the place of services customer. Despite of services are non-transportable one, they can be supplied in various locations: location of services provider, location of customer, or at neither of these locations.

Tourism services which are investigated in this article are supplied for local or foreign citizen. They could be organized in territory of services provider or abroad. Services what are rather similar, as tourism and travel, should include value added. One of the most important factors becomes recently contacting personnel of tourism services provider. Human resource of tourism agency usually influence a part of tourism services process, as nobody can influence the attention of staff. Extra value helps to communicate for a customer, attracts him to come to agency. Therefore personal approach of tourism services provider is very urgent in decision making process of a customer, as well as return information after using the tourism services, keeping in touch with a client after trip for short or long relationship.

3. HUMAN RESOURCE AS A FACTOR FOR BECOMING A COMPETITIVE

Recent studies on competitiveness (Ciriaci, Palma, 2008) underlines the urgency to compete not only on prices, as was discussed. Services differ from industrial items, as they are created and consumed at the same time. Even if a customer is a participant acting in all process of producing and consuming

a service, personnel of services provider is able to have a very large impact on how services are perceived by a customer. The *impact of personnel* depends on the *nature of services*. Services that are more related to participation of services customer are affected by customers experience, behaviour, etc. (for example, services of cosmetologist, advocate). Services which package is tightly related to servicing, such as hospitality (hotels and restaurants), are highly affected by competence of staff of services providers, they attention, personal approach to a customer. Researches on hospitality services industry (Erstad, 1997; Sekliuckiene, Hopeniene, 2011) underlined that it is very urgent to *empower* and motivate the hospitality's services *personnel*. If employees interpreted the empowerment as added responsibility and increased workload, it should be covered by added motivation of course. Empowerment should be a matter of choice. Empowerment in the scientific literature is understood as managerial style where managers share with the members of organization their influence in decision making process (Pardo, Lloyd, 2003). Empowerment of hospitality staff together with appropriate motivation for it enables to increase the satisfaction with job, better customer service, more rapid decision making, and human resource development (Maxwell, 1997).

Authors investigating the human resource object underline not only the empowerment value in order to achieve better results of organization activity, but also *engagement of personnel*. The psychological empowerment of employees might affect their engagement (Stander, Rothmann, 2010). Each organization wants to gain competitive advantages before others and the employee engagement is the best tool for it (Sardar et al., 2011). Engagement is creating prospect for human resources to attach with their managers, colleagues and organization. It concerns to shape a milieu where employees are motivated and connected with their job in real caring manner to do a high-quality job. Employee engagement results positively the individual and organisational outcomes (Stander, Rothmann, 2010). Performance of engaged employees leads the company towards customer satisfaction which ultimately directs an organization towards profitability or business outcomes (Sardar et al., 2011).

Human resource factor, as factor for strengthening the competitiveness, creates the largest value in the enterprise. It covers *education level, mental capabilities and practical skills* – all these determinants acts that the rest resource of organization starts to create a value. Human resource management involves the selection and keeping of competitive employees by creating positive organizational climate, offering possibilities for employees' development, increasing their motivation to work (Sekliuckiene, Hopeniene, 2011). These aspects are able to determine the results of tourism and travel services enterprises and increase the competitiveness them acting in the market.

The most important factor for competition in hospitality industry is a quality servicing of customers, motivation of selling, price, differentiation of services

and products, specialized supply. Personnel act as direct participator in creation of service. Thus human resource is one of the most important factors creating the competitive abilities. That is why it is urgent to create a well-affected for education climate inside the organization, to invest into training course of employee, try to empower and as much as possible engage into the management of organization the employee of organization. Successful results of tourism and travel enterprises will show the *market-oriented character of enterprise* and capability to supply the best value for a customer. Quality of services often relates to servicing quality. That is why encountering between customer and employee of tourism and travel services enterprise is able to predict the satisfaction of customer with a service. Upon Ph. Kotler (2002), the relation between quality of services and the level of employee satisfaction exists, too. High fluctuation index of personnel shows that services enterprise does not concentrate its activity for creating the positive view point of employees to their work. Fluctuation is closely related to their evaluation of their services quality. The majority of employees quick their job because there are forced to sell services at poor quality level. Besides that, these people could be not satisfied with the general climate inside the enterprise. Quality is very urgent factor in the tourism and travel industry (Pender, Sharpley, 2005).

4. METHODOLOGY

Tourism services industry recently became as one of the most important factors for local or global economy. Rising revenue from tourism, new touristic directions, open borders to any country enables to increase the role of tourism to entire the economy, as well as economy of the region, and continent. Tourism services industry in Lithuania already recovered after the global crisis, according the data of first quarter of 2011 (*Economic and Social Development in Lithuania 2011/04*).

In order to evaluate the role of human resource in the tourism and travel services business eleven semi-structured interview with managers of largest Lithuanian sector's enterprises were done. As well as survey of travel and tourism services customers viewpoint were organized. The survey was quantitative one, written form questionnaire was used. The number of respondents 110, thus the survey was pilot one and findings of the survey could be only fitted for surveyed enterprises.

Such criteria for choosing the respondents for qualitative research were selected: travel organizer or travel agency should be on of the leaders in their field, acting longer than 3 years, to have established more than one department in different cities of Lithuania. These criteria were chosen, as estimating the urgency of human resource, aspects of human resource management – the

existing experience, amount of activity and capability to fit to changes in environment and to survive in the market in period of financial recession and after that are very urgent. Analysing the data the number of chosen answers was calculated, as well as percentage value and percentage value from all answers of respondents were estimated.

5. RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

Results of the **provider's viewpoint** are analysed on such criteria as competitive advantages of enterprise, human resource management, competencies' development seeking to engage employee into the creative climate implementing inside the enterprise.

Characteristics of interviewed enterprises are presented below (Table 1). As we can see, the majority of interviewed tourism services providers have had rather long experience (72.73%), as they worked for 10 years and longer. A presumption that they are rather well acknowledged with importance of human resource management could be made.

Table 1. The duration of tourism agencies experience

No.	Name	Number of subsidiaries	Experience of activity
1.	'Mega turas'	8	5-10 years
2.	'Virtualita'	1	5-10 years
3.	'Zig Zag'	4	more than 10
4.	'Novaturas'	8	more than 10
5.	'Krantas travel'	4	more than 10
6.	'Litaura'	2	more than 10
7.	'Rest turas'	1	less than 5
8.	'Delta-interservis'	7	more than 10
9.	'West express'	17	more than 10
10.	'Baltic clipper'	9	more than 10
11.	'Gloterá'	2	more than 10

Besides that managers of tourism services enterprises were well informed about the importance of human resource management seeking to gain competitive advantage, the large part of them (36.36%) mentioned – they compete in the market by servicing quality and the same part of them mentioned services supply (36.36%) '*<...> servicing quality is the thing that we should do obviously, as well as tourists should find a service that they wish and expect*'. As a question about it was an open form, 22 versions of answers were got to it. Respondents

mentioned such criteria as: servicing quality, personnel attitude to a customer, qualification level, services assortment depth, services variety, and special offerings. Results showed that a small part of tourism services providers (18.8%) tries to compete by price. Trying to be a competitive enterprises use the discount system, loyalty programmes (25.93%). 22.22 percent of enterprises applies development of assortment, 14.81 percent – boost and 18.53 percent takes other actions.

Asked to identify the ways for gaining the competitive advantage before others, managers of tourism services enterprises did not use direct terms to personnel competence improvement. However the importance of human resource management is hidden under such affirmation, as '*<...> we invest into training of personnel, <...> we incite personnel to be pleasing when they consult a tourist*'. Besides the human resource as a factor for competing, enterprises use loyalty programmes (25.93%), expanding the services offerings (22.22%), promotion (14.81%) and other elements of competing.

Tourism agencies imagine themselves that they differs from others participants in the market by strategic location of office (9 answers from 11, or 19.15% of all answers), services assortment ('*we supply all tourism services for local or outer tourism, trips for relaxation or active tourism*'), personnel (9 or 19.15%), active public relations and promotion / discount system (accordingly 6 from 11).

During the interview the specific approach to personnel importance was tried to do. Even 7 from 11 managers (63.64%) of tourism services enterprises mentioned, that '*the most important resource for competitiveness is intangible*', and human resource was mentioned only by 36.36 percent of them.

Going more deep to human resource management in the tourism services market, it should be noticed that a large attention is paid to recruitment of staff. Main criteria for personnel selection becomes capability to communicate (100%), language skills (90.91%), working experience (81.82%) and cordiality (54.55%). As rather important factor for employment of personnel an appearance of candidate was identified – 4 points was estimated by 63.64 percent of inquired experts. A presumption could be formulated – often an opinion of psychologists about success of nice, tidy people influencing the success in selling is considered. Urgent but not the essential factor is education level. The lowest attention is paid to the age of candidate. Language skills are one of the most important skills, however only 54.55 percent of respondents know 3 languages.

Enterprises functioning in the sector of tourism and travel mostly are small and middle usually (*Economic and Social Development in Lithuania 2011/04*). Thus managers of enterprises have to decide how they create favourable conditions and possibilities for their employees to develop and learn by increasing their employees' motivation not only by using financial means. Surveyed experts

underline the cosiness of working place, cultivating staff and motivating (63.64%). Normally tourism agencies tend motivate their employee providing discounts for supplied services (relative percent from possible options 30.3 percent), organizing excursions (18.18%), giving more free days and monetary premiums (by 12.12%). The only organization ('Krantas travel') awards supplementary a written form acknowledgement for well achievements (for example, preparing interesting tour) and gifts reliant on them working duration in the enterprise.

Analysing the aspect of personnel competence improvement it should be noticed that enterprises invests in their staff (10 from 11), sending them to customer servicing courses, selling seminars and info-tours (overlook of countries and hotels), review of new catalogues and their presentation a few times per year. One of enterprises ('Rest turas') mentioned that *'they participate themselves in the activity of enterprise very actively and this gives a good sample for rest personnel'*. Supposedly, such seminars are adequate. However urgency of permanent and systemic staff education and study is not appreciated. This presumption is confirmed by that actually 36.36 percent of all inquired enterprises employees does not analysis daily problems arising in contacting with clients during administration meetings, does not investigate origin of complains, gaps of quality of servicing, etc. The rest part of inquired enterprises makes an analysis of customers qualitative servicing periodically (2–3 months or 4–6 months). Despite of the majority of inquired enterprises trust their staff, underlines their urgency, they do not see a need to invest additionally and organize permanent trainings in the organization. It may be noted that the managers of the surveyed travel trade enterprises undervalue the fact that in order to achieve a good result of performance as well as to ensure a competitive position, it is necessary continuously develop the competence of enterprise's staff.

The results of **customers' viewpoint** are analysed on the ground of professional skills to satisfy the needs and expectations of customers and supplier's personnel communications skills. Evaluating *professional skills* of tourism and travel enterprises staff, capability to ascertain needs of customers 34.55 percent of respondents stated, that their needs are disclosed very well, (see Table 2). 54 respondents from surveyed mentioned that they bought services supplied by tourism agency; other – came to get information only.

Table 2. Capability of tourism enterprises personnel to identify the customers' needs

No.	Name	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.	'Mega turas'	1	-	3	2	4
2.	'Virtualita'	3	-	6	1	-
3.	'Zig Zag'	-	-	2	2	6

Table 2 (cont.)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4.	'Novaturas'	-	1	-	7	2
5.	'Krantas travel'	1	-	-	8	1
6.	'Litaura'	1	-	-	2	7
7.	'Rest turas'	-	-	5	3	2
8.	'Delta-interservis'	1	-	7	2	-
9.	'West express'	-	-	-	3	7
10.	'Baltic clipper'	-	1	-	1	8
11.	'Glotera'	1	2	4	2	1
12.	Totally	8	4	27	33	38
	%	7.27	3.64	24.55	30.00	34.55

Better evaluated (average 4.5 points) 'West express', 'Baltic clipper', 'Zig Zag', 'Litaura' and 'Novaturas'. They were enterprises who sold services to 53.7 percent of all surveyed purchasers. On the ground of respondents worse needs were identified by 'Virtualita', 'Glotera' and 'Delta-interservis' personnel. The average of their evaluation was 2.5–3 points. This is confirmed by large amount of clients who did not purchased services – 15 from 36 (41.67%). It is possible to notice that customers appreciate their needs identification, description of their expectations as well as the best value services offerings. Insufficient value offerings influence the customers' dissatisfaction with services enterprise. One more task was formulated – to find if selling personnel who sell tourism services packages is professional one, has exhaustive knowledge about tourism package (new direction, hotels, flies), supplies additional information. Positively knowledge of tourism enterprises personnel was estimated by 77.27 percent of respondents, while rest respondents evaluated personnel rather critically. To less information about packages of tourism was given by personnel of 'Virtualita', 'Mega turas' and 'Glotera' (average 3.3 points from 5 by Liker scale). The large part of clients (77.78%), who were applying to these enterprises, have had refused from them and 44.44 percent of these enterprises customers were decided to apply to other agency. Expectations of respondents to get a comprehensive information better were satisfied in such enterprises as 'Zig Zag', 'Krantas travel', 'Litaura', 'Rest turas' and 'West express'.

As it's very urgent for a customer communicating skills, language, courtesy and patience of personnel of tourism services provider, next step in the survey was to identify, that respondent thinks about tourism services providers upon personnel's characteristics. 84.55 percent of respondents estimated the manner of staff speaking well or very well; 86.36 percent were satisfied with their communication style and their complaisance. Only 58.18 percent of respondents

mentioned that personnel were well minded. 23.64 percent of surveyed customers stayed that servicing personnel was not enough bouncy, does not showed the enthusiasm for communication or have had any other personal problems. Worse were evaluated personnel of 'Delta-interservis', 'Virtualita' and 'Mega turas'; the best – personnel of 'Zig Zag', 'Krantas travel', 'Litaura', 'West express' and 'Rest turas'.

The majority of respondents specified that they are satisfied with a servicing quality (76.36%). The largest part of customers dissatisfied with a customer's servicing were customers of such enterprises as 'Virtualita' (60% of respondents), 'Mega turas' (50%) and 'Glotera' (50%). It should be noticed that respondents who were satisfied with personnel qualification, their professional skills, similarly estimated and general servicing quality, too. Everybody who was dissatisfied with it – decided to apply to other tourism agency. Enterprises which personnel made a perfect image are recommended to colleagues, friends, familiar more often. Making a positive effect for a customer enterprises guarantee the long duration partnership with a customer and him loyalty to an enterprise. Best evaluated enterprises are 'Zig Zag', 'Rest turas' and 'West express'. Customers of these enterprises are tended to recommend them to other people. While negative image was made by 'Glotera', 'Virtualita' and 'Mega turas' – 46.67% of their clients have had a negative image and 53.3% of them will never recommend them.

Summarizing it should be declared that professional skills and capabilities to satisfy customer's needs were evaluated worse than communication skills of personnel of tourism enterprises. This shows that tourism services enterprises not enough satisfy expectations of customers. Personnel are not capable to foreseen needs and demand of tourism services customer. Insufficient management of information about tourism products and tourisms market participators influence the drop of competitiveness of tourism services sector as well as shaping of poor image of their suppliers.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Summarizing the theoretical and empirical survey, such guidelines for improvement the situation of travel and tourism services providers could be done:

1. The quality of services will be increased by travel and tourism services providers' personnel, if the latter will keep closely in touch with managers of enterprise. Contacting personnel should be empowered to take decisions in their working place, contacting to customer daily. Contacting personnel knows better wishes and expectations of a customer, thus they should be empowered to satisfy them on daily view. Empowerment of personnel, taking into account their suggestions for new destinations, new hotels, and other tourism services

specifics enables to create a larger value for a customer, thus – to increase their loyalty to an enterprise.

2. The most important functions of human resource management – selection, recruitment and training – should be improved. As survey shows, servicing quality is created in large part by contacting personnel. Thus, characteristics of candidate should be investigated more accurately. Not only language and communication skills, but also skills of empathy, capability take decisions rather quickly are urgent. As well, as permanent education, training of personnel both inside and outside the premises of agency should be guaranteed.

3. Sharing of information inside the enterprise should be organized in the better way. People, contacting to customers, should share the problematic cases with customer, discuss the possibilities to avoid them, to listen to other recommendations how to keep customers satisfied with a service. As well as sharing the information with managers of tourism and travel agency in very specific cases in order to avoid them should be improved.

4. Quick reaction to changing needs of customer should be guaranteed. Contacting personnel who daily communicate to customers, consult them, etc., should investigate customers expectations, hidden wishes and to be capable to foresee their wishes in advance. On the ground of it an offering s of tourism and travels services should be organized.

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