

GAINING THE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE IN SERVICES: ASPECT OF HUMAN RESOURCES

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Abstract

Recent studies on competitiveness of goods and services underline the urgency to gain a long-term competitive advantage. Providers do their best to compete: by low costs, low price, exceptional product or service, service quality, managerial competences, marketing, reputation, new technologies, etc. Peculiarities of gaining competitive advantage in the services sector are presented in this article. The article focuses on human resource as one of the most urgent factors building competitive advantage for a provider by creating superior customer value. Theoretical theses are tested in the context of travel and tourism services by gathering data from Lithuanian companies. The results indicate that the role of human resource in striving to serve customers better is very urgent in services industry. The study assists managers of services enterprises in gaining a better understanding of relation of human resource and servicing quality trying to gain a competitive advantage.

Keywords: competitive advantage, human resource management, servicing quality, travel and tourism services.

Introduction

The relevance lies in the growing attention to competitiveness among providers. The competition among providers of goods and services is growing each year. On the one hand, strong competition forces the providers to look for possibilities to compete, reduce costs, use information and communication technologies (ICT) (Devlin, 2001; Minoja, Zollo, Coda, 2010) and in such ways to retain a customer. On the other hand, gaining a competitive advantage does not allow a provider to relax, as other market participants can copy any competitive advantage relatively very quickly. Use of ICT by one provider will be followed by another, reduction of price will be copied as well. Nobody can guarantee that a competitive advantage gained against others will be retained for a long time. Competitive wars continue throughout. The high growth rate of knowledge about market requires organizations to develop flexible organizational potential to match changing environments and keep up organizational competence (Gvaramadze, 2008). Human resource, especially managerial capabilities, still remains the most difficult to copy competitive advantage,

and a resource for competitiveness on the market. Greater attention to human resource as a competitive advantage is paid in services that are customer-oriented, such as tourism (Ruiz-Molina, Gil-Saura, Artega-Moreno, 2011), wellness, health care, education, and other services. A customer-oriented enterprise is better able to determine the needs and wants of target markets in order to satisfy them more effectively and efficiently than competitors (Tsiotsou, 2010). Access to appropriate managerial and marketing capabilities (human resource constraints) were found to be a significant predictor of market orientation in the Chinese tourism industry (Qu, Ennew, Sinclair, 2005). Strong competitive advantages existing in developing countries manifest in hospitality as well as transport industry (Seyoum, 2007). That is why it is rather important to identify all the factors impacting the competitive advantages for these kinds of businesses. The following questions that have not been widely analyzed are discussed in this article: what is the role of human resource in trying to gain a competitive advantage in the travel and tourism sector? What is the relation between high-quality servicing of customers and human resource in the tourism and travel organizations?

The aim of the article is to disclose the role of human resource in trying to win a competitive advantage for a provider.

An object of the research is human resource in seeking to gain a competitive advantage among the tourism services enterprises. Tourism services providers were chosen as providers mainly competing with the similar service, similar package of tourism services, practically the same price of the service, etc. When creating value for a customer, organizations working in the travel and tourism sector should always improve the quality of services. Thus, they need to assess potentials of human resource in order to serve customers with high quality, as well as create new diversified tourism products in places favourable for tourism.

The methods of the research are analysis of scientific literature, primary and secondary data analysis. The *structure* of this article is as follows. In the first

part of the article the theoretical analysis of the being analysed scientific problem is presented. The second part discusses the methodological issues of the article. In the third part the results of the survey and recommendations for providers of services are developed.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1. Gaining the competitive advantage in services

Competition and opportunity to gain competitive advantage become one of the most important factors of success for any kind of business. Concept of competitiveness could be construed in various ways. Firstly it relates to capability to compete with other participants on the market. Competitiveness on the global market is related to ability of services providers to take actions quickly taking into account changes in the market and to capability to retain the positions already occupied (Sliziene, Langviniene 2010).

The competitiveness of services providers is described by M. A. Porter through market share and profitability of a provider (Rinkauskaite, 2007). Competitiveness comprises such aspects as the competitive environment and its subjects, characteristics of organization and its capability to manage them trying to achieve competitive advantage over others (Langviniene, Sekliuckiene, 2007). There are different opinions on how to gain an advantage that cannot be easily copied by competitors. Services industry rapidly expands both in developed or developing countries recently (Seyoum, 2007). The grow of services economy surpassed the growth of manufacturing. International trade in services already comprises about a quarter of all international trade and more than 60% of local trade. That is why it is very important what enables to compete with services locally or internationally.

Spyropoulou, Skarmeas, Katsikeas (2011) propose that providers of services *gain competitive advantage through resource engaged into the process* (resource-based view or RBV) while industrial enterprises are more oriented to competitive strategy and external factors (structure-conducts-performance or SCP). Successful providers of industrial goods react quickly to external environmental changes and adjust their production in order to satisfy the market. Moving from product-based strategy to service-based strategy becomes the most urgent change in all kinds of industries: services or manufactory (Godlevskaja, Iwaarden, Wiele, 2011). Meanwhile providers of services consider specific resources and capabilities to be central to gaining competitive advantage and satisfying the changing expectations of customers. Resource-based view emphasizes internal environment of services providers, as well as engaging resource

(material and human) and capabilities (organizational routines and practise) possessed.

Specialization of services could also act as competitive advantage of providers of services (Langviniene, 2009). A provider with narrow specialization in services is able to compete with a services provider who tries to provide everything to everybody. Of course, it is not able to manage a wide range of services very well. However, *differentiation of services also has its advantages*; these are particularly prominent in case of very rapid changes in services customers' demand.

Other researchers underline *market-led view* (Devlin, 2001) to gaining competitive advantage for a provider. According to the market-led view to competitive advantage in services, providers should focus more on output than on input. According to Devlin (2001), the competitiveness of offerings delivered to the marketplace will be the primary determinant of success. Competitive advantage may be reached when services are oriented to customers, to value for them.

What does it mean "to gain competitive advantage in services"? To gain competitive advantage means to distinguish from others the added value of the service, the services package (all offerings) of services providers. Providers consider *what value they should add* in order to do it more successfully than their competitors. It is not enough to sell a product alone anymore. Orientation of both service and manufactory economy changes nowadays, as customers require more and more. According to Godlevskaja et al. (2011), services providers must constantly *adjust their services portfolios* because it is important to have dynamic services adapted to various customer needs while recognizing that their needs are changing. An enterprise trying to position an offering as a low-price alternative will not necessarily be successful if consumers judge offerings primary on other attributes (Devlin, 2001), for example, kind servicing, use of information and communication technologies (Minoja et al., 2010), etc. Of course, *price and quality of services are still crucial* in determining the competitiveness of services providers (Seyoum, 2007). Competitiveness of services is affected by nature of services, as services are intangible, non-storable, and more regulated locally and internationally. Trade in services requires movement of services providers' staff or capital to the place of services' customers. Despite services being non-transportable, they can be provided at various locations: location of provider, location of customer, or at neither of these locations (for example, telecommunication services).

Tourism services that are analyzed in this article are provided to local or foreign citizens. These services could be offered in the territory of their provid-

er, or abroad. Human resource of a tourism agency usually influences a part of tourism services process, as nobody can influence the attention of staff, for example, at a Turkish hotel where a customer is going to stay. However, personal approach of a tourism services provider is very important in decision making process of a customer, as well as feedback after using the tourism services, keeping in touch with a client after the trip for shorter or longer time. Thus, competitive advantage created by human resource of a services provider becomes a very urgent factor in growing competitiveness on the market of such services, therefore analysis of how to increase the role of human resource in satisfaction of a customer is a crucial stage in management.

1.2. Human resource role in the competitiveness of services providers

Services differ from goods, as they are created and consumed at the same time. Even if a customer is a participant acting in the entire process of producing and consuming a service, personnel of a services provider may have a very strong 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 the customer are affected by customer experience, behaviour, etc. (for example, such are medical services). Services the package of which is closely related to serving, such as hospitality services (hotels and restaurants), are highly affected by competence of staff of services providers, their attention, personal approach to the customer. Researches on hospitality services industry (Erstad, 1997) have shown that it is very urgent to *empower the personnel* of hospitality services and to motivate it. If employees interpret the empowerment as added responsibility and increased workload, it should be covered by added motivation. Scientists underline that empowerment should be a matter of choice, not an obligation. 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 (of course, with motivation added) allows to increase the job satisfaction, improve customer service, and speed up decision making and human resource development (Maxwell, 1997).

Scientists working on human resource underline not only the value of empowerment for achievement of better results of organization's activity, but *engagement of personnel*, too. The psychological empowerment of employees might affect their engagement (Stander, Rothmann, 2010). According to Sardar, Rehman, Yousaf, Aijaz (2011), each organization

wants to gain competitive advantage over others and the employee engagement is the best tool for that. Engagement is creating prospect for human resources to attach to their managers, colleagues, and organization. It aims to shape an environment where employees are motivated and connected with their job in a really caring manner and therefore do a great job. Stander and Rothmann (2010) say that employee engagement positively affects the individual and organisational outcomes. Performance of engaged employees brings the company customer satisfaction which ultimately directs an organization towards profitability or business outcomes (Sardar et al., 2011).

Human resource factor, as a factor for strengthening the competitiveness, creates the greatest value in the enterprise. It covers *education level, mental capabilities, and practical skills* – all these determine that the other resources of the organization start to create a value. According to Sekliuckiene and Hopeniene (2011), the human resource management involves the selection and retention of competitive employees by creating positive organizational climate, offering possibilities for employees' development, increasing their motivation to work. These aspects can determine the results of tourism and travel services enterprises.

The most important factors for competition in the tourism and travel sector are the quality of serving the customers, motivation of selling, price, differentiation of services and products, specialized supply. Personnel of services enterprises acts as a direct participant in production of service, thus human resource is one of the most important factors creating the competitive abilities. Therefore it is very important to create a learning-stimulating climate within the organization, to invest in employee in-service training, to try to empower and as much as possible to involve the employee into the management of the organization. Successful results of tourism and travel enterprises will show the *market-oriented character of enterprise* and capability to provide the best value for their customers. Quality of services often relates to servicing quality. That is why encounter between a customer and an employee of a tourism and travel services enterprise can predict the satisfaction of the customer with the service. According to Kotler (2002), the relation between quality of services and the level of employee satisfaction exists, too. High employee turnover shows that the services enterprise does not focus its activity on creating a positive attitude of employees to their work. Employee turnover is closely related to their evaluation of the quality of the services they provide. The majority of employees quit their job because they are forced to sell services that have poor quality. Moreover, these people may be dissatisfied with the overall climate at the enterprise. Quality is a

very important factor in the tourism and travel industry (Pender, Sharpley, 2005). Contemporary tourists are demanding and conscious, thus the high-quality provision of services is vitally important for survival of tourism and travel enterprises on the highly competitive market.

2. Research methodology

With the world's population getting older and travelling becoming cheaper and faster tourism will remain a cornerstone of the global economy (Tsiotsou, Ratten, 2010). It should be noted that tourism in Lithuania is one of the most rapidly growing sectors of economy. Statistics show that in 2009 in Lithuania there were 312 inbound and outbound tourism enterprises with 2329 people engaged in servicing tourism (Tourism in Lithuania, 2010).

To measure the role of human resource in seeking to attain competitive advantage, the following surveys were carried out: 1) a semi-structured interview with 11 managers of the largest Lithuanian tourism and travel enterprises; 2) a pilot survey of customers' attitude was conducted with 110 respondents questioned. As the survey of customers was a pilot one, the results of the research could be interpreted and used only for identification of general views of customers.

The first block of the semi-structured interview was designed on the basis of the general characteristics of tourism and travel enterprises. The second block of questions was oriented to competitive advantages of providers, such as the potential for competitiveness, the uniqueness and oneness of an enterprise. The third block of questions of the semi-structured interview was based on the human resource management in which we stressed an impact of human resource management, empowerment and engagement on the decisions of the team, and personnel motivation increase.

Questionnaire for customers of tourism and travel services was designed to disclose the correspondence of professional and communication skills of staff to customers' needs. The criteria analysed included capability to identify needs and expectations of customers, capability to offer appropriate and valuable offerings; capability to create and provide servicing quality to a customer.

Respondents for the qualitative research were selected according to the following criteria: a travel organizer or a travel agency should be among the leaders in their field, to have been functioning for more than 5 years, to have more than one department in different cities of Lithuania. The following criteria were chosen as estimating the importance of human resource and aspects of human resource management: the gained experience, scope of activity and capability

to adapt to changes in environment and to survive in the market during the period of economic recession and after it. In the survey the following enterprises were included: 'Krantas travel' UAB, 'Litaura' UAB, 'West Express' UAB, 'Novaturas' UAB, 'Baltic Clipper' UAB, 'Zig Zag' UAB, 'Glotera' UAB, 'Megaturas' UAB, 'Delta interservis' UAB, 'Virtualita' UAB and 'Rest turas' UAB. While analysing the data the number of the chosen answers was counted, as well as percentage and percentage from all answers of respondents were estimated. The survey was done in March – May, 2010.

Limitations of the survey: future research should include more travel and tourism agencies in Lithuania, as well as sample of customers should be increased to ensure greater reliability of the results.

3. Findings of the survey

3.1. Results of the research on providers of services

The provider's attitudes to such criteria as competitive advantages of enterprise, human resource management, competencies development seeking to involve employees into the creative climate inside the enterprise have been analysed.

A large part of the enterprises that participated in the survey have been working in the Lithuanian tourism and travel services market for more than 10 years; they account for 72.73% of the respondents. Their departments (from 2 to 17) are located in different towns of Lithuania. Respondents who represent enterprises working rather long in the market have a very clear position about human resource role and human resource management in services enterprises.

Competitive advantage of providers. According to the respondents, enterprises of tourism and travel services sectors try to compete by servicing quality (36.36%) and services supply (36.36%). Experts were mainly referring to such criteria as: servicing quality, personnel's attitude to a customer, qualification level, range of services, variety of services, and special offerings. Findings of the survey show that a small part of the inquired respondents (18.8%) tries to compete by price, despite of the recession in economy and despite of tourism being not an essential service for people. To be competitive, enterprises use discount systems and loyalty programmes (25.93%). 22.22% of the enterprises (6 answers of 27) apply expansion of range of products, 14.81% – boost, and 18.53% take other actions.

In order to retain the positions on the market 45.45% of the enterprises try to improve the servicing quality and competence of staff (comprises 18.52% of the marked answers); such enterprises are 'Virtualita' UAB, 'Megaturas' UAB, 'Zig Zag' UAB, 'West

Express' UAB and 'Rest turas' UAB. However, 9 out of 11 (19.15% of all answers) see the staff as an exclusive and mandatory feature for competing. 81.82% of the surveyed tourism agencies underline the strategic location as one of the largest competitive advantages (19.15% of answers), 72.73% refer to the variety of services, moreover, variety as a factor for survival on the market is used by 54.55%. Strategic resource of enterprises of tourism and travel sectors is intangible assets (63.64% respondents: 7 out of 11). People as an essential resource were identified only by 36.36% of the respondents (although 81.82% of them mentioned that the main feature of competitiveness is staff). Thus human resource is a means for competing for the majority of respondents. However, according to them, human resource is very important only for creating an image, prestige and trademark of the enterprise, – all that they need most.

Human resource management. Findings of the survey show that great attention is paid to recruitment of staff. Main criteria for personnel selection are the following: communicativeness (mentioned by 100% of the respondents), language skills (90.91%), work experience (81.82%) and cordiality (54.55%). These features often influence the satisfaction with a provider. Appearance of a candidate was considered being a rather important factor for employment of personnel: 4 points were given by 63.64% of inquired experts. A presumption could be formulated that often an opinion of psychologists about success of nice, tidy people in influencing the success of selling is considered. Important though not essential factor is education (special or higher). The lowest attention is paid to the age of a candidate. Language skills are one of the most important, however, only 54.55% of the respondents know 3 languages.

According to Sekliuckiene and Hopeniene (2011), companies functioning in the sector of tourism and travel most often fall within the category of small and medium enterprises. Thus managers of these 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 through financial means. Results of the survey show that the surveyed experts underline the cosiness of working place, development and motivation of staff (63.64%). Normally tourism agencies tend to motivate their employees by offering them discounts for the services being provided (relative percent of the possible options is 30.3% (10 out of 11 respondents)), organizing excursions (18.18%, 6 of 11 respondents), giving more days-off and monetary premiums (12.12%, 4 out of 11 respondents). Organization 'Krantas travel' is exceptional, as it awards supplementary written acknowledgement for good progress (for example,

preparation of an interesting tour) and gifts depending on their working duration at the enterprise.

Competencies needed to achieve cooperation within the enterprise and self-motivation of personnel. Analysing the aspect of personnel competence improvement it should be noted that enterprises that participated in the survey invest in their staff (10 out of 11, which makes 90.91%) by sending them to customer servicing courses, selling seminars and info-tours (looking around countries and hotels), and presenting new catalogues a few times a year. Supposedly, such one-shot seminars are adequate. However, the need for permanent and systemic staff teaching and learning is underestimated. This presumption is confirmed by the fact that 36.36% of all employees of the analyzed enterprises do not analyse daily problems arising while working with clients directly during administration meetings, do not investigate origin of complaints, etc. The remaining part of the inquired enterprises makes an analysis of customer servicing quality periodically: every 2-3 months or out of 4-6 months. Findings show that though the majority of the inquired enterprises trust their staff and underline the importance of it, they do not see a need to invest additionally and organize permanent trainings at the organization. This opinion is partly confirmed by the research of J. Sekliuckiene and R. Hopeniene (2011). On the grounds of a sample of 98 travel sector participants from Lithuania these authors report that managers of the surveyed travel enterprises pay greater attention to the search and selection of competent employees as well as creation of positive organizational climate. However, they do not invest enough in the employees' systematic learning and ensuring of conditions for their improvement. It may be noted that the managers of the surveyed travel trade enterprises underestimate the fact that in order to achieve good performance as well as to ensure competitive position it is necessary to continuously develop the competence of the enterprise's staff. This helps to ensure a smooth process of service provision.

3.2. Results of the research on customers

The data on customers' viewpoint are analysed with the focus being on providers' professional skills to satisfy the needs and expectations of customers as well as providers' personnel communications skills.

Evaluating *professional skills* of staff of tourism and travel enterprises as well as its ability to identify the needs of customers, 34.55% of respondents stated that their needs were explored very well. 54 respondents mentioned that they bought services provided by tourism agency; others came to get information only. The best evaluations were given to 'West Express',

'Baltic Clipper', 'Zig Zag', 'Litaura' and 'Novaturas' (an average of 4.5 points). These were the enterprises that sold services to 53.7% of all the surveyed purchasers. According to the respondents their needs were identified the worst by 'Virtualita', 'Glotera' and 'Delta interservis' personnel. The average of their evaluations was 2.5–3 points. This is confirmed by a large part of the potential clients who did not purchase their services – 15 out of 36, which makes 41.67%. It can be seen that customers appreciate identification of their needs and their expectations as well as provision of the best value offerings. Insufficient value offerings add to the customers' dissatisfaction with a services enterprise. During the survey one more task was formulated: to find out whether selling personnel who sell tourism services packages are professionals, have broad knowledge about the tourism package (for example, new direction, hotels, flights, etc.), provide additional information, other suggestions. Knowledge of tourism enterprises personnel was positively evaluated by 77.27% of the respondents, while the remaining respondents (22.73%) assigned poor evaluations to the personnel of tourism enterprises. The smallest amount of information about the being provided tourism packages was given by the personnel of 'Virtualita', 'Megaturas' and 'Glotera' (average evaluation: 3.3 points). A large part of people (77.78%) who contacted these enterprises refused their services and 44.44% of customers of these enterprises decided to choose another tourism agency. Expectations of the respondents to receive comprehensive information about destinations and their products were satisfied better at such enterprises as 'Zig Zag', 'Krantas travel', 'Litaura', 'Rest turas' and 'West Express'. Personnel of the agencies mentioned above provided information about discounts, promotions, loyalty programmes and extra services.

For analysis of tourism enterprises' *personnel communication skills* with a customer the tasks to evaluate fluency of language, courtesy, patience, buoyancy and enthusiasm of personnel were set. The findings of the survey show that 84.55% of the surveyed customers of tourism services appreciated or highly appreciated the manner of speaking of staff. 86.36% of the respondents were satisfied with their communication style and their complaisance. According to the respondents, only 58.18% of personnel were in good mood. 23.64% of the surveyed customers told that operating personnel was not bouncy enough, did not show enthusiasm to communicate, or had personal problems. Personnel of 'Delta interservis', 'Virtualita' and 'Megaturas' received the worst evaluations; personnel of 'Zig Zag', 'Krantas travel', 'Litaura', 'West express' and 'Rest turas' were appreciated the most.

When assessing the *servicing quality* and over-

all image of a specific enterprise to a customer the majority of the respondents specified that they were satisfied with servicing and its quality (76.36%). The largest part of the customers dissatisfied with customer service was customers of such enterprises as 'Virtualita' (60% of its surveyed customers), 'Megaturas' (50%) and 'Glotera' (50%). It should be noted that respondents who were satisfied with personnel qualification and professional skills similarly judged overall servicing quality as well. And everybody who was dissatisfied with it decided to apply to some other tourism agency. Enterprises the personnel which made a perfect impression were recommended to colleagues, friends, and family more often. By giving positive experiences to their customers enterprises gain a long-term partnership with a customer and his loyalty to the enterprise. Enterprises that received the best evaluations were 'Zig Zag', 'Rest turas' and 'West Express'. Customers of these enterprises often recommend them to other people. Meanwhile 'Glotera', 'Virtualita' and 'Megaturas' have built a negative image: 46.67% of their clients had a negative impression and 53.3% of them would never recommend these companies to others.

To sum up, it can be said that professional skills and abilities to satisfy customers' needs were evaluated worse than communication skills of personnel of tourism enterprises. This shows that tourism services enterprises do not fully satisfy the expectations of their customers. Their staff is unable to find out the needs of tourism services customers. Insufficient management of information about tourism products and tourism market participants contributes to the drop of competitiveness of tourism services sector as well as the shaping of poor image of their providers.

Conclusions

Human resource role in creating competitiveness and gaining a competitive advantage for a services enterprise is no longer questioned in tourism and travel services business. Human resource has mental skills, communication skills, and knowledge – all that influences the capability of an organization to create a value for a customer. The target market of tourism and travel organization firstly needs personnel of the organization; customers stand after that. When trying to engage personnel into creation of an idiosyncrasy of an enterprise and when seeking a competitive advantage a continuous investment is a crucial matter. The most effective method is training and education that allow improving qualification and developing skills of employees. Psychological state of personnel has great effect on customer satisfaction. That is why much attention to communication between a manager and an employee is important. This increases the level

of job satisfaction as well as improves inner motivation of the personnel.

Seeking improvement of tourism and travel services the managers could use the following recommendations:

- *Involvement of all* – inclusion of personnel of travel and tourism enterprises into the decision-making processes at these enterprises. Servicing quality will be improved if employees feel the support of managers and the security of future employment in this enterprise; furthermore, employees will join teamwork and decision-making about improvement of the entire tourism services provision system. Moreover, contact personnel at a tourism services enterprise knows better what customers want, what their expectations are, what plans for the next summer they have, etc. Thus personnel working directly with tourists should be given a possibility to create new tourism destinations, to arrange flights to less popular countries, etc.
- Attention of managers should be extended to include *selection and recruitment of personnel*. As servicing quality is one of the most important factors creating value for a customer, the set of characteristics of a candidate to a vacancy in a tourism and travel enterprise should include not only language and communication skills. Skills in personal sales as well as ability to carefully consider the problems of a customer and to solve them are very important. Of course, a role of a manager here is important, as contact personnel at a tourism enterprise should be empowered to make decisions about daily problems arising in the tourism services business.
- *Strengthening of cooperation inside the tourism and travel enterprises*. Managers of enterprises should stimulate sharing of information among contacting personnel as well as systematically analyse the cases of success and failure in order to identify gaps in quality in service provision process.
- *Stimulate the personnel of a tourism and travel enterprise to sensitively respond to customers' needs*. The personnel should foresee customers' expectations, to be able to identify hidden expectations of clients and plan provision of tourism services accordingly.

To sum up it should be noted that human resource role in any service enterprise, including those working in tourism and travel services sectors, is crucial. Thus the greatest attention of managers to human resource will benefit the enterprise: it will bring a possibility to create idiosyncratic service, ensure high quality of service, and in cases of services created primarily by

the personnel it is the most important factor on the highly competitive market.

Future research should include smaller enterprises providing tourism and travel services in Lithuania in order to identify their peculiarities in gaining competitive advantage through human resources management; comparative analysis of tourism agencies and travel operators and their idiosyncrasy as well as statistically measured quantitative research on customers could be done.

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Konkurencinio pranašumo paslaugose įgijimas: žmogiškųjų išteklių aspektas

Santrauka

Pastarųjų metų prekių ir paslaugų konkurencingumo tyrimai pabrėžia galimybę išsikovoti ilgalaikį konkurencinį pranašumą. Produktų teikėjai imasi visų veiksmų, kad galėtų konkuruoti rinkoje: žema kaina, žemesnėmis sąnaudomis, išskirtine preke ar paslauga, paslaugos kokybe, vadybos kompetencijomis, rinkodara, reputacija, naujomis technologijomis ir pan. Temos aktualumas pagrįstas vis stiprėjančia konkurencija prekių ir paslaugų rinkoje, kuriai įveikti kiekvienas teikėjas ieško savų būdų. Didėjanti konkurencija, viena vertus, verčia prekių ir paslaugų teikėjus ieškoti, kaip konkuruoti, sumažinti sąnaudas, diegti informacines ir komunikacines technologijas (IKT) (Devlin, 2001; Minoja, Zollo, Coda, 2010) ir taip išlaikyti vartotoją. Kita vertus, konkurencinio pranašumo įgijimas neleidžia paslaugų ar prekių teikėjui atsipalaiduoti, kadangi kiti rinkos dalyviai tą konkurencinį pranašumą gali nedelsiant nukopijuoti. Įdiegus IKT, tą gali padaryti ir konkurentai, sumažinus kainas – tą patį padarys ir jie. Niekas negali garantuoti, jog konkurencinis pranašumas, įgytas paslaugos teikėjo, bus išlaikytas ilgai. Konkurenciniai karai vyksta visą laiką. Greitai augantis žinių poreikis lemia organizacijų tobulėjimą ir organizacijos kompetencijų išlaikymą (Gvaramadze, 2008). Žmogiškieji išteklių, ypač vadybos kompetencijos, lieka gana sunkiai nukopijuojamu konkurenciniu pranašumu konkurencingoje rinkoje. Ypač daug dėmesio skiriama žmogiškiesiems ištekliams kaip konkurenciniam pranašumui tokiose paslaugose, orientuotose į vartotoją, kaip turizmas ar kelionės (Ruiz-Molina, Gil-Saura, Arteaga-Moreno, 2011), sveikatingumas, sveikatos priežiūros ir švietimo paslaugos. Į vartotoją orientuotos organizacijos geriau identifikuoja vartotojo norus bei lūkesčius ir geba juos geriau tenkinti nei tai daro jų konkurentai (Tsiotsou, 2010). Atitinkamų vadybos ir rinko-

daros kompetencijų įgijimas suvaidino svarbų vaidmenį Kinijos turizmo paslaugų rinkoje (Qu et al., 2005). Ypač stiprų konkurencinį pranašumą sparčiai kylančios ekonomikos šalyse išsikovojo svetingumo, turizmo paslaugų pramonė (Seyoum, 2007). Todėl taip svarbu išskirti veiksnius, kurie lemia tokių paslaugų verslo sėkmę.

Straipsnyje analizuojami tokie **probleminiai klausimai**: koks yra žmogiškųjų išteklių vaidmuo užtikrinant konkurencinį pranašumą turizmo ir kelionių paslaugų versle? Koks yra santykis tarp kokybiško vartotojų aptarnavimo ir žmogiškųjų išteklių kelionių ir turizmo paslaugų įmonėse? Siekiant atsakyti į šiuos klausimus, išskirtas **tyrimo tikslas** – atskleisti žmogiškųjų išteklių įtaką paslaugų teikėjo galimybei įgyti konkurencinį pranašumą. **Tyrimo objektas** – turizmo ir kelionių paslaugų teikėjų žmogiškieji išteklių kaip konkurencinis pranašumas. Pasirinkti turizmo ir kelionių paslaugų teikėjai, kurie iš esmės teikia labai panašias paslaugas, panašų turizmo paslaugų paketą ir netgi praktiškai ta pačia paslaugų paketo kaina. Įmonės, veikiančios turizmo ir kelionių paslaugų srityje, iš esmės konkuruoti ir sukurti pridėtinę vertę vartotojui siekia kokybiškesniu klientų aptarnavimu. Dėl šios priežasties žmogiškieji išteklių ir yra tas veiksnys, kuris gali lemti turizmo ir kelionių paslaugų teikėjo išskirtinumą. **Tyrimo metodai**: mokslinės literatūros analizė, pirminių ir antrinių duomenų analizė.

Pirmojoje straipsnio dalyje nagrinėjami mokslo darbai, analizuojantys konkurencingumo paslaugų sferoje specifika. Konkurencingumas bendrąja prasme – tai galimybė konkuruoti rinkoje. Vienu svarbiausių uždavinių prekių ir paslaugų teikėjams – surasti išskirtinį konkurencinį bruožą, kurio negalėtų greitai nukopijuoti konkurentai. Autoriai, analizuojantys konkurencingumo paslaugų sferoje

specifiką (Spyropoulou, Skarmeas, Katsikeas, 2011), pirmenybę teikia konkurenciniam pranašumui, kuris kyla paslaugos teikimo procese. Pramonėje kuriamas konkurencinis pranašumas yra labiau orientuotas į išorinės procesus, aplinkos įtaką ir pan. Konkurencinį pranašumą paslaugose pastaruoju metu tiek paslaugų teikėjai, tiek pramonės atstovai stengiasi įgyti orientuodami verslą į vartotoją, o ne į produktą (Godlevskaja, Iwaarden, Wiele, 2011).

Mokslinėje literatūroje sutinkama, jog žmogiškųjų išteklių įgalinimas (Stander, Rothmann, 2010; Sardar et al., 2011), įtraukimas į sprendimus (Maxwell, 1997), didesnių laisvių priimti greitai reikalingus sprendimus bendraujant su klientais (Pardo, Lloyd, 2003) ir kiti žmogiškųjų vadybos aspektai rodo, jog sėkmingos turizmo, svetingumo ir kt. paslaugų įmonės paprastai vykdo savitą žmogiškųjų išteklių vadybos politiką. Konsultantai įgalioti ne tik aptarnauti turistus, bet ir siūlyti savo programas, keisti maršrutus, nes būtent jie geriausiai žino, ko nori galutinis turizmo paslaugų vartotojas.

Empirinio tyrimo rezultatai parodė, kad turizmo paslaugų teikėjai iš esmės konkuruoja paslaugų kokybe ir aptarnavimu. Siekdami išsilaikyti rinkoje, turizmo paslaugų vadovai siekia didinti personalo kvalifikaciją ir vartotojų aptarnavimo kokybę. Daugelis apklaustųjų minėjo, kad iš esmės jie konkuruoja personalo kompetencija, kuri būtina kvalifikuotai ir maloniai patarnauti vartotoją. Siekiant suformuoti profesionalią komandą atskiras dėmesys skiriamas personalo atrankai, mokymams. Deja, patys konsultantai nėra skatinami dalytis patirtimi tarpusavyje ir dirba pernelyg individualizuotai. Vartotojų apklausa parodė, kad jie dažniausia patenkinti ir aptarnavimo kokybe, ir paslaugų teikėjo personalo įsijautimu į jų norus, kalbos maniera. Deja, profesiniai personalo genėjimai, informacijos pateikimas, vartotojų lūkesčių numatymas buvo vertinami prasčiau. Straipsnyje pateikiamos rekomendacijos turizmo paslaugų teikėjams.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: konkurencinis pranašumas, žmogiškųjų išteklių valdymas, aptarnavimo kokybė, kelionių ir turizmo paslaugos.

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