

Knowledge Management Perspective in the Tourism and Hospitality Industry

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Abstract

The modern business environment is rapidly changing generating unpredictable competitive challenges. Tourism and hospitality industry is specifically vulnerable to such unplanned changes and forced to respond in quick time to address detrimental business situations. It is known for a long time that competitiveness in the global market depends on the organisation's ability to capitalize on its intellectual and knowledge-based assets. In that sense, knowledge is recognized as fairly potent asset supporting organisations and the entire tourism industry in creating an efficient model for achieving competitive advantage and realise their desired business performance. The paper discusses a tourism and hospitality industry model of a knowledge management system including advice and guidance in selecting different concepts and models of knowledge and information flow. Tourism enterprises are quite inefficient in implementing knowledge management concepts and processes due to adverse knowledge adoption environment. Therefore, the paper argues that introduction of the knowledge management practice in tourism sector ensures new opportunities in addressing the challenges of a globalised market and increase the competitiveness and improve the innovative processes in tourism.

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Introduction

Progress and development of the tourism and hospitality industry rely on its adaptation capacity in terms of responding to economic, social, political, environmental and technological challenges. It requires the development of the integrated market and business strategies, organisational structures, and adoption of sound policies that enable the tourist sector to utilise all its potential in the realization of the business goals and achieving a competitive advantage (Musulin et al., 2011; OECD, 2001; World Tourism Organization, 2007).

According to Weaver and Oppermann (2000), definition of the tourism embraces „the sum of the phenomena and relationships arising from the interaction of tourists, business suppliers, host governments, and host communities in the process of attracting and hosting these tourists and other visitors“. According to Altinay et al. (2015), it can be also described as an industry that delivers an experience for groups or individuals in terms of “transportation, accommodations, eating and drinking, shopping, entertainment, leisure and sports facilities” and the number of other hospitality services. It covers both the guests providers and services aimed to satisfy guest needs (Aszl, 2007; Gretzel et al., 2015; Kabene et al., 2006;).

Being beyond attractive destinations only, tourism as a highly important sector is a source of a significant contribution to the country economic growth. Apart from generating numerous economic values and benefits, tourism and hospitality industry contributes also in building the country's brand value, image and identity. Contemporary studies provide excellent insight in perspectives of tourism's steady growth and development (Gretzel et al., 2015; Musulin et al., 2011; OECD, 2018; Scott & Laws, 2006; Zaei & Zaei, 2014;). Tourism as an economic activity plays vital role in global economic development, provision of new job opportunities, and as a powerful creator of added-value and export revenue.

Worldwide tourism and hospitality industry is witnessing rapid and stable growth in past decades, reaping the fruits of globalization and overall technological progress enabling potential visitors to organize their travels and excursions on easy and simple manner (Jones et al., 2016; Mistilis & Sheldon, 2006; Shaw & Williams, 2009). Throughout this period of sustained growth, tourism being labour intensive economic activity and thus a significant employment provider has shown significant resistance to a range of different business, market and environment challenges (Aszl, 2007; Faulkner et al., 2003; Gretzel et al., 2006; Hallin & Marnburg, 2008; Zaei & Zaei, 2014).

The adoption of new knowledge in terms of generating innovation and boosting product development becomes to play a critical role for improvement of the competitiveness of entire tourism and hospitality industry (Kabene et al., 2006; Tribe & Liburd, 2016). The pivotal processes of knowledge management (KM) as an effective tool to increasing performance of the tourism industry involve, among others, knowledge identification, capturing, storing, transferring, sharing and application of the knowledge, ensuring optimised and efficient information flow and management of organisational processes (Aszl, 2007; Jones et al., 2016; Šimková, 2009; Zaei & Zaei, 2014).

That approach requires establishing of an open, supporting and friendly environment, where employees are capacitated and motivated to generate, use and share the knowledge as a valuable organisational resource (Scott & Laws, 2006; Shaw & Williams, 2009; Tribe & Liburd, 2016). Although the knowledge management has a fundamental importance in any contemporary organisation, in terms of enabling employees to generate and implement new ideas for gaining competitive advantage, tourism sector has demonstrated slow adoption of this concept and practice (Agyeiwaah et al., 2017; Cooper, 2014; Omotayo, 2015).

Some of the reasons for that insufficient adoption of knowledge management and new technologies are:

- Yiu and Law (2014) have studied the relationship of the tourism sector and the research and found it as poor because of lack of a closer and formalized relationship between tourist businesses and research. Shaw and Williams (2009) and Baggio and Cooper, (2010) have noted that knowledge capture and transfer to and within the tourism sector is among the most challenging issues.
- According to Zaei and Zaei, (2014) and Altinay et al., (2015) adoption and use of the knowledge management in the tourist industry is characterized with the hostile-adoption environment because knowledge management requires extensive financial and time investment. Some authors refer that adoption and use of the knowledge management models in tourism and hospitality services are characterised with unclear applicability and inter-organizational perspectives (Cooper, 2006; Gretzel et al., 2015; Shaw & Williams, 2009) because the fundamental concept of knowledge management is based on manufacturing and international outlook, neglect several features of tourism and hospitality industry.

Tourism is an information-intensive activity and highly people-oriented service, experiencing increasing powerful worldwide competition. Therefore, to improve their performance and ensure a high level of competitiveness, adoption of knowledge management concepts and models is must for organisations in tourism and hospitality sector (Aszl, 2007; Musulin et al., 2011; Tribe & Liburd, 2016).

Although trough recent years the KM adoption rate in the tourism and hospitality industry has indisputably grown, its implementation was largely market-driven and focused on operational short-term objectives. Some authors argue that reasons for that approach are mostly in the fact that tourism is primarily service and product-based industry, very often insufficiently aware of the power of KM introduction in their business operations (Aszl, 2007; Faulkner et al., 2003; Hallin & Marnburg, 2008; Jones et al., 2016; Mistilis & Sheldon, 2006; Scott & Laws, 2006). The tourism and hospitality industry consists dominantly from small or medium-sized enterprises, traditionally reluctant to introduce and apply new technologies and business concepts, and thus the application of the KM approach, thereby reducing the competitiveness of the sector as such (Gretzel et al., 2006; Scott & Marzano, 2015; Shaw & Williams, 2009; Tribe & Liburd, 2016).

Knowledge management as a strategic function in tourism

As stated in OECD (2001) report, "generating, spreading and using of knowledge has become a vital factor for economic growth and changes that are essential for innovation and knowledge economics".

In contemporary knowledge-based economy, knowledge is considered as a fundamental resource aimed for developing and improving organisational competitiveness grounded on the processes of production, distribution and use of information (Mistilis & Sheldon, 2006; Nielsen et al., 2011; Omotayo, 2015). In that sense, organizations have to establish and manage processes of generating, sharing and implementing new knowledge by continuous improvement of their business activities, creation of new applications originated from their efficient and successful processes and continuous innovation as a part of organisation's strategy (Baggio & Cooper, 2010; Scott & Laws, 2006; Tribe & Liburd, 2016).

Knowledge is multifaceted perspective which may be regarded in variety of categories such as "object, interpretation, process or relationship" (Faulkner et al., 2003), while "knowledge management (KM) refers to the creation of knowledge repositories, the improvement of knowledge acquisition; the enhancement of the knowledge sharing; and the management of knowledge as an asset" (Yiu & Law, 2014).

Knowledge as a business perspective is much more than information and knowledge sharing in terms of sharing experiences, practices, and procedures is beyond information sharing (Omotayo, 2015). Therefore, KM as concept and approach is a critical for successful management practice in all organisations including tourism and hospitality industry, as well. Although tourism sector is not as effective in adopting KM approach as an advanced business practice, KM concepts and models for application as a *modus operandi* in tourism services, have been incrementally developed on both levels of a tourism destination and tourism and hospitality organisations (Baggio & Cooper, 2010; Faulkner et al., 2003; Scott & Marzano, 2015).

An organisation's knowledge strategy and KM practice in the tourism industry has to connect a generation of business value and developing the competitive advantage, evaluating knowledge resources, competences and capacity to successfully execute business processes (Baggio & Cooper, 2010; Hallin & Marnburg, 2008; Nielsen et al., 2011; Tribe & Liburd, 2016).

Therefore, the competitive advantage of the tourism industry is reflected in specific core competencies. In that respect, core competencies as the composition of resources and abilities are unique for every organization, based on knowledge of employees, knowledge of customers, knowledge of technology, knowledge of processes, etc., and thus determine an organization's KM effectiveness (Budeanu et al., 2016; Cooper, 2014; Kabene et al., 2006;). Thereby, organisation's key knowledge processes are affected with its organisational characteristics in terms of individual and organizational technology, individual and organizational skills and behaviours (Baggio & Cooper, 2010; Nielsen et al., 2011; Racherla & Hu, 2009). Transformation of knowledge into key competencies and competitive advantage in the tourism and hospitality organisations primarily is influenced with transferring and sharing knowledge within the organization and with cooperating enterprises, resulting in connecting KM practice with organisation's vision, mission, strategy, organisational architecture, organisational culture, management style and procedures, employees, and organisational processes as tools for managing both the tacit and explicit knowledge such as destination knowledge and logistical knowledge (Liu, 2003; Mistilis & Sheldon, 2006; Racherla & Hu, 2009; Scott & Marzano, 2015).

The KM applications can be divided into six main areas such as

- transactional management,
- asset management,
- process-based management,
- analytical management,
- innovation management and
- developmental KM practice (Cooper, 2014; Kabene et al., 2006; Tribe & Liburd, 2016).

The challenges in adopting and using KM approach in the tourist industry are about how to identify and collect important, appropriate, correct and authentic information; how to organize and process information; how to access, share and use resources; and how to recognize knowledge and previous experience to prepare

them to assist present decision-making processes (Budeanu et al., 2016; Cooper, 2014; Gretzel et al., 2006; Nielsen et al., 2011).

Development of effective KM system requires an incremental approach. The literature proposes a consecutive two-step approach to develop and adopt KM in tourist organization or destination. The first step can be used in building awareness of KM throughout the organization or destination, to instruct employees about KM, to commence some small pilot projects with, developing in the same time the technology infrastructure to support KM adoption (Altinay et al., 2015; Faulkner et al., 2003; Racherla & Hu, 2009; Tribe & Liburd, 2016). The technology will enable knowledge sharing, and assist in integrating KM practice into organisation's strategy of human resource management. During the next step, the establishing of the organisational infrastructure is required to implant KM processes into the organisation's business operations (Omotayo, 2015). It enables also for pilot projects to be transformed into mature projects supporting the daily work of employees. Such a strategy is equally suitable to be applied to a tourism destination at all levels of public and private sector (Baggio & Cooper, 2010; Budeanu et al., 2016; Gretzel et al., 2006).

After successful fulfilment of these two steps, implemented KM system allows the tourist destination and its related service sector transition into learning destination, where organizational learning is recognized as knowledge acquisition, retention, and retrieval.

Factors for effective knowledge management in tourism enterprises

Knowledge management presents a key instrument in enabling organisations to face critical challenges of the adaptation, existence, and competitiveness in the world of growingly incoherent change of the business environment (Agyeiwaah et al., 2017; Liu, 2003; Maier & Hadrach, 2011; Yiu & Law, 2014;). In the tourism and hospitality industry, manifestation of this change is reflected in the supply chain and the nature of guests' behaviour. Tourist destinations, intermediary sector and related service organisations are forced to adapt constantly by generating and applying knowledge (Baggio & Cooper, 2010; Cooper, 2014; Faulkner et al., 2003).

Despite the number of studies on tourism and related disciplines, there are very little evidences of the adoption and use of KM (some examples of KM use in tourist information centres, intermediaries sector and management of hotels) (Budeanu et al., 2016; Liu, 2003; Racherla & Hu, 2009).

Employees and their performance are substantially important to hospitality and tourism organizations and have an exceptional impact on performance at organisational level. Because employees' accomplishment can highly affect the adoption of knowledge management approach in tourist organisation, human resource management function in the organisation is responsible to cultivate a KM culture that encourages KM usage (Hallin & Marnburg, 2008; Hjalager, 2010; Jones et al., 2016). Studying the relationship between human resource and KM, Agyeiwaah et al. (2017) found that employee motivation, performance and competences are highly correlated with KM.

The adoption of knowledge management approaches in the tourism industry has been slow, specifically in the sectors having a strong service background. The successful implementation of KM concepts has been noted in some tourism related activities such as transport and distribution. The fast progress in those particular areas is linked with the usage of information technology and development of appropriate

applications (Oppermann & Weaver, 2000; Hjalager, 2010; Maier & Hadrich, 2011; Altinay, Paraskevas & Jang, 2015).

Use of KM approach can help organisations to retain workforce and increase guests/visitors satisfaction (Maier & Hadrich, 2011; Tribe & Liburd, 2016). Knowledge in tourism and hospitality industry is substantially labour dependent and employees, knowing guests preferences, use that knowledge in providing the best service for customers, because guests satisfaction and their loyalty are among key success factors in the tourism business (Racherla & Hu, 2009; Baggio & Cooper, 2010; Agyeiwaah, McKercher & Suntikul, 2017).

Successful and effective use of KM in tourism sector is affected by many important factors. Some of them are:

- The organisational culture; –the organisational culture plays an important role in the implementation of KM function in tourism organisations. Human interactions include knowledge management challenges such as technical, social, managerial and personal (Cooper, 2014). Developing an organisational culture that values knowledge sharing and knowledge creation can assist in the process of transforming individual or tacit knowledge into collective knowledge. In that respect organisational learning culture is vital for knowledge creation (Hottola, 2004; Maier & Hadrich, 2011; Tribe & Liburd, 2016).
- Knowledge management processes; - concerning the process-based view of management theory, major knowledge related activities/processes are: i) generating/creating new knowledge; ii) capturing knowledge from external sources; iii) implementation of KM in processes of making decisions; iv) developing knowledge intensive processes, products and services; v) creating knowledge databases; vi) enabling knowledge creation by using organisational culture; vii) transferring and sharing present knowledge; viii) measuring the results of usage of KM processes and knowledge resources (Racherla & Hu, 2009; Hjalager, 2010; Budeanu, Miller, Moscardo & Ooi, 2016).
- Knowledge creation; - The effective generation/creation of new knowledge, with a focus on tacit knowledge, depends on strong relationships among the employees in an organization. KM approach has to pay attention especially to tacit knowledge and explore new organizational forms, cultures and incentive packages to advance interpersonal interaction and social relationships (Hjalager, 2010; Yiu & Law, 2014; Tribe & Liburd, 2016).
- Leadership; - Knowledge can be managed when leaders understand, cultivate and assist in the knowledge creation. Senior management has to enable and support knowledge creation, nurturing, growth and sharing, ensuring the creation of systems and ecologies, platforms and cultures where knowledge can freely emerge (Faulkner, Laws & Moscardo, 2003; Yiu & Law, 2014).
- Learning and Participation; - Employees can learn participating in communities of knowledge sharing their specific perspectives and practices. Basic instruments of knowledge creation are communication, consideration, debate and negotiation. In that sense, the organisational culture is expected to provide a climate where learning and knowledge are highly respected, and leadership is responsible to nurture trust and encourage sharing and experiential learning generating tacit knowledge. Tourism organisations have to develop a corporate learning strategy to achieve knowledge management benefits (Weaver & Oppermann, 2000; Yiu & Law, 2014).

- Strategy; - In a tourist organization, employees can use their competencies externally or internally in creating added value. The external perspective contains relationships with customers, suppliers and the image of the firm. The internal perspective contains concepts, management, administrative systems, models, attitudes. Sound knowledge strategy has to be connected with business strategy (Faulkner et al., 2003; Hallin & Marnburg, 2008; Hjalager, 2010).

Conclusion

Due to its nature, mode of operations and fragmented structure, it is often difficult to initiate and coordinate tourism sector responses to crises and potential accidents. This sector is information-intensive and requires an effective management system in terms of a knowledge framework for the organisation's operations on the demanding tourist market.

The existing approaches to the adoption of the KM neglect to discuss and solve a number of issues affecting tourism and hospitality industry. Therefore, in order to empower tourism sector and fulfil its specific requirements, KM approach, therefore, needs to be improved. Additionally, managers in tourism sector are often facing challenges of misunderstanding unclear and complex KM concepts and practices which makes the difficult selection of the appropriate KM model and thus slows down faster penetration of KM concepts in tourism and hospitality industry.

The KM processes require a change in management, and considerable time and financial investment to achieve desirable results (Cooper, 2006). Tourism and hospitality organizations are focused to their regular daily business operations, and although it is easy for employees and managers to gather information of all kind, they are trying to avoid facing the challenges of identifying and planning of using existing knowledge. Therefore, although being aware that knowledge is becoming the fundamental determinant for supporting rapid and successful development of tourism and hospitality industry, the KM concepts transmission to the tourism sector is fairly slowed.

The same as for tourism as a significant economic constituent of the destination, the knowledge concepts and perspectives as an outline can be developed and embedded in the broader destination business plan enabling its transition into learning destination.

Yet, the mere existence of awareness and understanding of the KM concepts and processes is not sufficient in providing competitive advantage and enabling profit generation. Adoption and implementation of the KM applications may advance business performance and satisfy organisation's mission and vision, but to make it happen, it is critical to link business strategy and KM and applies KM processes in all business operations.

The future development of tourism and hospitality industry continuously will be affected by a wide variety of different economic, social, political, environmental and technological challenges and opportunities such as permanent tourism development and growth, developing and transforming of visitor demand, increasing travel mobility and rapid development of technologies. In that respect, adoption of the knowledge perspective in tourism sector is among preconditions, (together with, investment and financing) to transformation of the tourism sector to a sustainable "low carbon, resource-efficient and socially inclusive environment" (Budeanu et al., 2016).

Usage of KM approaches can support tourism organisations in establishing systemic and strategic practices and processes and easy adaptation to a fast paced, interconnected and dynamic global environment, promoting effective management of changes and supporting innovation culture.

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