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ESTABLISHING EFFECTIVE METHODS OF INTRA-COMPANY TRAVEL COMPANY STAFF EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITALIZATION

ESTABLECIMIENTO DE MÉTODOS EFECTIVOS PARA LA FORMACIÓN DEL PERSONAL DE LAS EMPRESAS DE VIAJES EN EL CONTEXTO DE LA DIGITALIZACIÓN

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ABSTRACT

The current challenges of post-industrial society accelerate the transformations of the labor market and considerably alter approaches to personnel education and development in the new economic reality. The high unpredictability of today's business environment objectively raises the need for a scientific rethinking of new formats of personnel education driven by radically novel tasks in the sphere of human capital management in the digital era. The present study aims to identify modern innovative methods of in-house education of staff of the travel company and analyze their characteristics, advantages, and disadvantages for implementation by Russian travel companies. By means of an expert survey, the advantages and drawbacks of the introduction of contemporary staff training methods by travel companies are identified and an expert assessment of modern training methods is conducted. The study concludes that the most effective personnel training methods for travel companies are mobile learning and video education.

Keywords:

Intra-company training, travel company, personnel training methods, digitization, digital transformation.

RESUMEN

Los desafíos actuales de la sociedad posindustrial aceleran las transformaciones del mercado laboral y alteran considerablemente los enfoques de formación y desarrollo del personal en la nueva realidad económica. La alta imprevisibilidad del entorno empresarial actual plantea objetivamente la necesidad de un replanteamiento científico de los nuevos formatos de formación del personal impulsados por tareas radicalmente novedosas en el ámbito de la gestión del capital humano en la era digital. El presente estudio tiene como objetivo identificar métodos innovadores modernos de educación interna del personal de la empresa de viajes y analizar sus características, ventajas y desventajas para su implementación por parte de las empresas de viajes rusas. Por medio de una encuesta de expertos, se identifican las ventajas y desventajas de la introducción de métodos de capacitación de personal contemporáneos por parte de las empresas de viajes y se lleva a cabo una evaluación experta de los métodos de capacitación modernos. El estudio concluye que los métodos de capacitación de personal más efectivos para las empresas de viajes son el aprendizaje móvil y la educación en video.

Palabras clave:

Formación intraempresarial, empresa de viajes, métodos de formación de personal, digitalización, transformación digital.

INTRODUCTION

One of the key elements of the success of a travel company as a business unit is highly qualified personnel (Puzynya et al., 2022). Despite the dramatic development of technology and its changes, the training of specialists in the tourism industry, which allows for the timely renewal of knowledge and development of new necessary skills and abilities, the time of obsolescence of which is getting shorter and shorter, is vastly important (Bayev et al., 2022). Personnel training enables travel companies to increase their adaptability and ability to respond to external challenges (Goicochea Morales & Kapustina, 2021; Kiseleva et al., 2017; Nedosugova et al., 2021). According to Lettieri et al. (2004), 76% of companies, when choosing between finding and hiring new gifted workers and training their own staff, rely more heavily on training. For this reason, intra-company training of staff in travel companies has been growing more relevant in recent years (Rakhinsky et al., 2021).

Meanwhile, new demands for staff training in the digital era require changes in the forms and methods of training. Accordingly, preference should be given to innovative methods, which utilize the most effective means of communication (Iudina et al., 2022), allow better structuring information and packing it into concise visual formats, provide a practical orientation, interactivity, and maximum involvement of participants in the learning process, incorporate the inclusiveness of learning tools that contribute to the personal development of workers, and create opportunities to use the distance form of learning and individualize the learning process as part of the advisory support of specialists (Vaseyskaya & Glukhov, 2018).

Speaking of the specifics of staff in the travel industry, we should point out that the key job functions of a specialist in the tourism industry include the design function (determining the forms and types of activities in a group of specialists given a specific deadline and relying on experience with regards to the directions of development of the tourism industry; justifying decisions on the development of a tourist route project, a separate tourist service, or a draft of the tour product), the organizational function (organizing the promotional activities of the tourist enterprise, developing and implementing the tour product, partnerships and activities of the travel company), the management function (managing the quality and competitiveness of tourist services), and the production function (the technological: development of a tourist product; preparation of documentation at various stages of the formation and implementation of the tour; testing the operation of the system of consumption of a tourist product or a separate tourist service; control and evaluation of the quality of tourist services).

The tourism industry needs specialists who have sufficient knowledge, skills, and abilities in forming, promoting, and implementing a tourist product (Ukhina et al., 2022). The set of various competencies of travel company personnel, depending on the specifics of their job, is formed at different levels.

On the one hand, it is the management functions (for instance, of travel company executives, tourism managers, and specialists in planning and organizing leisure activities).

Important requirements for workers in the tourism industry are communicability, public speaking skills, and an understanding of the fundamentals of human psychology. A considerable share of time is devoted by travel specialists to communication with clients. Thus, the outlined skills allow the worker to determine the needs of the client who contacted the travel specialist, find the exact place where the client will feel best, and realize their dream, i.e., satisfy the consumer's need. Of considerable importance are also the skill of making creative and unconventional decisions, stress resistance, and diligence.

Since tourism is a part of the service sector, employees of a travel enterprise are in a certain sense service personnel. Therefore, a worker who services clients has to have professional knowledge (appropriate education); be familiar with laws, regulations, and international norms in the field of tourism; speak foreign languages, have knowledge of geography, sociology, and psychology; be able to use the appropriate technical means (computer); have specific psychological aptitudes; know the rules of etiquette; have a good command of the principles of making deals, providing services and payments; have an appropriate appearance; be polite and patient.

Given the problem of recent scientific research on the impact of digital technology on new personnel requirements, it can be concluded with absolute certainty that the ways of finding new personnel training methods for travel companies in the new digital reality have just started to be actively discussed.

There are a variety of different approaches to interpreting the essence of intra-company training (Table 1).

Table 1. Interpretation of the essence of intra-company personnel training.

Source	Definition
Jehanzeb & Bashir (2013)	A continuous process in which company personnel is trained and adapted through the systematic integration of new knowledge.
Bishop (2016)	An ongoing process within the company that enhances the collective ability to accept, comprehend, and respond to internal and external changes.
Noe (2016)	The process of preserving, creating, and transferring organizational knowledge by companies from their experience in response to changes in the environment.
Yap et al. (2010)	The social process of improving knowledge and understanding through which workers improve their decision-making and problem-solving.
You et al. (2017)	A process that seeks to systematically and consistently improve the competence (or training) of personnel to achieve its goals.
Aguinis & Kraiger (2009)	The process of continuous development of employees to improve their performance.
Danvila & Sastre (2009)	A process in which managers and employees in a company learn to act in new situations, solve problems, and become more skilled and experienced.

Summarizing the above definitions, we can conclude that intra-company training is a continuous process of the assimilation of new knowledge through its dissemination and shared use in response to changes in the external environment at the individual, group, and organizational levels for the sake of improving the company's competitiveness in the long term.

The results of literature analysis suggest that there is currently a wide variety of methods of training that are actively employed in travel companies. However, among them are several modern methods that best respond to the needs of travel companies and the trends of technological advancement. To these methods, researchers attribute:

1) Learning by doing. Flexible approaches to management largely prioritize this method of training. There are special technologies designed to stimulate the training of employees as part of their job duties through the analysis and fixation of problems arising in the process of work already performed. A critical aspect of this process is the promotion of trust and openness, as the recognition of one's mistakes and analysis of the ways to avoid them in the future are vital. It is the analysis of the mistakes made that lies at the heart of this training method. One technology that allows for quick learning is retrospective analysis addressing three main questions: what was done correctly, what needs to be changed, and how to implement these changes (Yap et al., 2010). Since this analysis is performed continuously, it gives an opportunity to respond to mistakes at once, make prompt adjustments, and gain new knowledge about the most effective practices.

2) A buddy system as a training method suggests that employees are assigned a "buddy", a partner. This method is also sometimes called informal coaching or peer coaching. A buddy system helps to build new skills in the travel industry specialist and provides them with support in achieving their personal goals and the goals of the travel agency. The main feature of this method is the provision of feedback and constant communication with one person. The employee and their partner are fully equal participants in exchanging information, as the budding method does not presuppose the categories of senior and junior (You et al., 2017).

3) The in-basket technique is a form of individual training based on the imitation of situations that arise in tourism-related business. The specialist is asked to play the role of a manager, who needs to make an appropriate management decision based on the available information. Quite often, to complicate matters, unplanned meetings, phone calls, and the like may be added in the course of training. During the work, the specialist undergoing training must make a management decision and prepare the necessary documents (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009).

The emergence of digital technologies gives travel enterprises an opportunity to change their approaches to personnel training and create more effective training activities by integrating new developments in the learning process. Researchers suggest that innovative learning methods can be considered to be the following:

1) Video training. In recent years, videos have become a media resource that changes the rules of the game both for external (marketing, sales) and intra-company use (training). A study by K. Jehanzeb & Bashir (2013), shows that 44% of executives firmly agree that videos are to become the main form of intra-company communication in the next five years. In addition, 75% of workers note they enjoy watching videos more than reading e-mails, articles, or documents.

2) Mobile learning is based on the use of mobile devices. This training method is quite convenient as there is no strict dependence on the time and place of study. Furthermore, the elements of gamification promote the engagement of staff in the training process. The introduction of mobile learning entails rather high costs. However, these costs can be reduced if mobile applications are developed by the company's own specialists instead of outsourced ones.

3) Virtual simulators. To give an example, the multinational travel company TUI AG turns learning opportunities into interactive digital experiences and uses augmented and virtual reality technologies to accelerate the learning process and broaden the professional experience. TUI AG uses virtual simulators in training specialists' tour presentation skills, which can be practiced in virtual conditions before using them in real life. The workers can upload their presentation slides, receive feedback generated by artificial intelligence, and track their progress (Danvila & Sastre, 2009).

Importantly, in the digital era, the transformation of intra-company staff training systems, including those of travel companies, is largely determined by current trends in the development of the educational services market in the digital environment. Among such trends are the scalability of the learning process through the large-scale use of online technology; the reduction of training costs per person and the respective reduction in the cost of educational programs outside of intra-company training, which gives an opportunity to learn from the best specialists in the world's best programs (Schuchmann & Seufert, 2015); the increasing role of tutors in the implementation of training programs along individual learning trajectories (Verhoef, 2021); considerable reduction of the life cycle of educational courses (Kohnke, 2017) and the rising need for their constant renewal, revitalization, and recombination in accordance with specific job tasks and situations.

Giving credit to the existing research, we must point out that the issues of personnel development in travel companies in the age of the digital economy and the appropriate use of intra-company training methods are still not fully resolved, as the rapid pace of development of modern information technology calls for additional analysis of the latest best practices.

The proposed research hypothesis states that the most effective methods of intra-company staff training in travel companies are innovative learning methods associated with the introduction of digital technologies.

The purpose of the study is to establish the modern innovative methods of intra-company personnel training in travel enterprises and analyze their characteristics, advantages, and disadvantages for implementation by Russian companies.

Research objectives are to perform a theoretical analysis of the features of intra-company personnel training in the digital era; to determine the advantages and disadvantages of the introduction of modern personnel training methods by travel companies; to assess and characterize modern intra-company personnel training methods used by travel companies.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To address the established research objectives, the study utilizes the following general scientific research methods: a) theoretical: analysis of peer-reviewed scientific sources on the problem of personnel training in the digital era; b) empirical: an expert survey.

The study was conducted in three phases between February and April 2022.

At the first stage, the existing scientific papers and analytical sources on the problem under study were analyzed and six of the most frequently mentioned intra-company training methods were selected.

At the second stage of the study, online communication with experts was carried out. The expert survey was conducted via e-mail and administered in Russian. E-mails with the question "Name the advantages and disadvantages of the listed methods of intra-company training of the staff of travel companies and rank them on a scale from one (the least effective) to six (the most effective)" were sent to 58 experts, 33 of which were employees of specialized recruitment agencies and 25 were worker of the HR departments of Russian travel companies. The letter also asked the respondents for a free-form justification of their answers. Responses were collected from 52 experts.

All participants in the survey were informed of its purpose and that the survey organizers planned to publish the results in a summarized form.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Because of the importance of making informed decisions about the choice and combination of teaching methods, as each of them bears its own benefits and drawbacks shaped by the specifics of technologies the method relies on and the costs of development and implementation, the surveyed experts determined the advantages and disadvantages of the introduction of the above personnel training methods in travel companies (Table 2).

Table 2. Advantages and disadvantages of the introduction of modern personnel training methods by travel companies.

Methods	Key advantages	Disadvantages	Rank
Learning by doing	Acquisition of practical skills and rapid correction of errors; opportunity to develop the ability to self-analysis; formation of the desire for continuous improvement.	Based on empirical experience; the acquisition of new knowledge is accompanied by a significant number of errors.	3
Buddy system	Opportunity to receive timely feedback and correction of actions; a sense of support for the employee, compliance with the principle of openness.	Potential for interpersonal conflicts; considerable time spent on buddy preparation.	4
In-basket technique	Faster acquisition of skills for a particular position; opportunity to assess employee readiness for new responsibilities.	Difficulty in assessing learning outcomes; significant preparation time.	6
Video training	Freedom of location and time; simultaneous training of a large number of workers; easy to change the content.	Limited interaction with the trainer/instructor; need for effort to increase employee engagement in the training process and for continuous monitoring of content.	2
Mobile learning	Opportunity to choose a convenient time and place; opportunity to involve a large number of workers in training simultaneously; opportunity to develop in-house mobile applications.	Significant development costs; high risk of employee distraction during training.	1
Virtual simulators	Illustrative nature; repeatability; high involvement of the employee in the training process; formation of the ability to respond in crisis and emergency situations without risk to employees.	High cost of development; imperfections in existing technology.	5

Table 3 reports the results of the expert assessment of training methods.

Training methods	Total sample, N = 52	Sphere of work		Rank
		Recruitment agency, N = 28	HR department, N = 24	
Learning by doing	3.86	3.55	4.15	3
Buddy system	3.54	3.35	3.56	4
In-basket technique	3.28	3.11	3.54	6
Video training	4.57	4.18	4.73	2
Mobile learning	5.35	5.54	5.17	1
Virtual simulators	3.49	3.67	3.21	5

Analysis of the results provided in Table 3 suggests that the most effective methods of personnel training in travel companies are mobile learning (5.35) and video training (4.57).

Let us now discuss the above training methods in more detail, in descending order of importance, according to expert opinion. As noted by one expert (Sergei K., 35 years old, head of the HR Department of a travel company), "the introduction of mobile training in the process of personnel training allows the travel company to make it as accessible and comfortable for its staff as possible, since everyone can individually choose a convenient location and time for training". An example of this type of training is the creation of a special app by the German travel agency TUI Deutschland for the sole purpose of giving new employees an opportunity to master the corporate culture of TUI Deutschland and integrate into it more quickly (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009). This method of training is suitable for all categories of travel company staff.

Commenting on video training, one of the experts (Valentina S., 32 years old, HR agency employee) emphasizes that "this method of training is very attractive to Russian travel companies, given the relative ease of its application". The expert also adds that "there currently are many free online tools that can simplify this process, but it is important to monitor the quality of video content, especially its relevance and availability". One example is the British travel agency Hays Travel, which uses video training on its own YouTube channel. A part of the videos is accessible not only to company staff but to a broader audience (Schuchmann & Seufert, 2015). This training method is also appropriate for all categories of travel company employees.

In assessing learning by doing, one expert (Nikolai N., 29 years old, HR employee of a travel company) argues that "in order to preserve the knowledge gained in this way, the lessons learned must be documented and a knowledge base available to all staff has to be created". A study by J. Kim and S.M. Miller (2017) suggests that this method enables travel companies to promptly and effectively find solutions to typical problems and learn from the experience of colleagues; organize a centralized knowledge database to avoid repeating negative experiences; to improve the process of the exchange and use of knowledge by workers. This method, too, can be used with all categories of personnel of a travel company.

The buddy system method, according to one of the experts (Stanislav P., 38 years old, head of the HR Department of a travel company), "is more suitable for training management staff in a travel company, as it requires considerable time to prepare the mentor". At the same time, this method "makes the adaptation process as easy and comfortable as possible for a new team member".

Discussing virtual simulators, one of the surveyed experts (Svetlana V., 36 years old, HR agency employee) notes that "the main drawback of this method is its high costs and the imperfection of the existing technologies, which act as the main hindrances to its proliferation. However, given the rapid development and the emergence of new solutions, this method is very promising and deserving of attention". Considering the high costs of this method, we believe it should be recommended for use in the training of management personnel of the travel company.

Evaluating the in-basket technique, two experts (Leonid S., 34 years old, and Viacheslav O., 43 years old, heads of travel company HR departments) assert that it can be used to prepare and train applicants for the position of project manager in companies specializing in the development of tourist destinations. One expert response reads that "the ability to handle the mundane responsibilities of the position and the appropriateness of the decisions made during training should also be considered as criteria for selecting candidates for promotion". Thus, this method of training is appropriate for the development of managerial staff in travel companies.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, among the advantages of travel companies using modern intra-company personnel training methods we can note: the timely renewal of the knowledge, skills, and abilities of staff; improvement of business processes; development of the culture of continuous learning; improvement of the adaptability of both individual specialists and

the travel company as a whole; high employee engagement in the learning process (new technologies and methods evoke interest and the desire to try them); creation of a positive image of the employer (the opportunity to learn and develop is one of the main factors in choosing a company for employment).

To the limitations of the present study, we can attribute the insufficient size of the expert pool and the number of considered methods of travel company personnel training. The training methods reviewed were selected based on document analysis as the most frequently used for personnel training in travel companies. However, the research was limited by resources and the research program, which prevented us from exploring additional methods of staff training.

Consequently, the prospect for further research could be the study of the possibilities for training travel company personnel using such methods as mentoring, shadowing, facilitation, storytelling, gamification, business simulation, and team building.

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