HUMAN RESOURCES, IT SYSTEMS AND THEIR ROLE IN IMPROVING THE EFFICIENCY OF TRAVEL FIRMS

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Abstract

The technological changes in electronic channels, such as on-line access, will have an important impact on tourism, including marketing, consumer protection, information, education and employment. The demand for travel information is increasingly sophisticated and tourism industry employees need to learn how to use the technology for a proper response to a wide range of needs.

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Today, computer networks allow organizations and their employees to access large amounts of information about themselves or their consumers. This happened, on one hand, as a result of rapid development of computer technologies and, on the other hand, due to significantly lower costs of these technologies, thus positively impacting their introduction in every tourism activity. Most tourism firms use an increasing number of computers (used for tasks such as the creation of reports, data analyses and what-if scenarios), not only in the human resources department, but also in every other department, computers interconnected through an internal network, or an Intranet.

In a competitive industry, the organizations must try to develop a highly skilled workforce in order to develops and use the available technology. Highly educated workers will become a competitive advantage in using improved and innovative technologies. Nevertheless, the new information technologies are likely to replace many employees, leading probably to higher unemployment rates. The advances

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made in the new technology could also determine a deskilling of the human resources, which may result in a wider gap between the skill levels of those who develop new technologies and those of the employees who use them.

The skill requirements will affect all kinds of jobs al all levels, not only in the tourism industry. As skill requirements change because of the technology, the education and training needed by workers must also change. The question asked is: will the advances in technology increase or the decrease of skills requirements?

The answer to this question is that the skill requirements increase initially, as a new technology is developed, but the skill requirements needed to use that technology actually decrease in the longer term.

The best example in this respect relates to the computer skills. When the computer was originally invented, it was a very complex and very difficult to use machine. As the technology developed, the computer became a smaller, more powerful machine that was immensely more complex than the original one. However, while the computer became much more advanced, it also became more user-friendly; computer technology has led to the development of a machine that is relatively easy to use. The idea of simplifying the use of equipment determines a deskilling of the workforce because the technology reduces the need for much of the mental and physical work previously required.

The applications of technology in the travel and tourism industry allow providers to supply new and flexible services that are cost-competitive with the conventional mass-produced, standardized and rigidly packaged options. Technology gives suppliers the flexibility to react to market demands and the capacity to combine their services with those of other suppliers to provide new packages of services and improve their cost effectiveness.

A variety of interrelated computer and communication technologies are being introduced to the travel and tourism industry. The system of Information Technologies (SIT) includes computerized reservation systems, teleconferencing, video text, videos, video brochures, computers, management information systems, airline electronic information systems; electronic funds transfer systems, digital telephone networks, smart cards, satellite printers, and mobile communications.

Each technology used has the potential of influencing the interface between clients and employees in a positive matter. For example, computer-to-computer communications allow hotels to integrate their front & back offices and food and beverage operations. Computerized reservations systems have emerged as a dominant technology throughout the travel and tourism industry. Interactive automated ticket machines (ATMs) have also been introduced. These consist of a computer with an attached printer that enables passengers to research schedules and

fares, make reservations, purchase tickets and obtain boarding passes without the intervention of a human agent.

The rapid diffusion of information technologies throughout the travel and tourism industry is expected to improve the efficiency of production and the quality of services provided to consumers, and to generate increasing demand for new services. The computer simplifies work processes and can lead to higher profitability of a company's resources and actions.

But in order to reach that goal it is necessary to accentuate the role of I.T in the human resource area by supporting continuous improvements in the employee performance that will later translate into competitive and high-level service offerings.

The computer should be recognized as a simple instrument of human resources management, as a development program that can maximize the quality of products and services offered.

The most recent purpose of the computer based activities represent, in the tourism segment, the improvement of services quality. With the help of electronic mail - email and the web pages, the public relation area is in progress to higher efficiency.

The market of human resources-focused computer applications has been dominated by software centered on wage-related activities. However, over the last couple of years, applications with wider HR applicability (beyond management of employee compensations) have gained stronger visibility and reach in the travel industry.

A case study realized by Smartree and IRSOP revealed a deeper interest, especially in the middle and large firms, in the acquisition of specialized application for evaluating employees' performance, the administration of human resources files and the recruiting process, programs conceived to optimize the activities of the human resources departments and economize the internal resources allocated to these tasks. These IT solutions specialized on the administration of all aspects of HR management have begun place their focus on following the employee's professional evolution starting even from the selection period.

The importance of IT systems within a company depends, on one part, on the stage of development of the organization and, on the other part, on the importance given to human resources management.

For example, a company that has recently entered the market, with a limited number of employees, will probable require a simple, basic software solution to manage its employee records and their work compensation. Requirements for such systems are not very elaborated; their functionality includes storing employee information and producing a fairly large and diversified variety of reports. Few

companies – or none – would request, at this level, a specialized application for human resources management.

When the organization is expanding its size and operations and has a more prominent market position, the human resources activities are enlarged to include benefits management, organizational development, recruiting, training, performance evaluating, and so on. Only then will the organization need a complex IT system capable of comprising all these areas.

Another trend recently present in the area of HR solutions relates to the integration of these systems and with the ERP solutions (Enterprise Resource Planning) used within the companies, through specialized, complex modules for the management of human resources, resulting in improved information availability, higher security of employee data and improved automation of associated wage payments..

Taking into account the importance of human resources management for the companies, the IT systems must have flexible capacities for efficiently exploring and integrating the various informational flows. The applications used have to contain a number of specific functions, such as employee evaluation, management of the internal and external training efforts, etc Also, specialized applications are used for managing the recruiting process, potentially leading to substantial reductions of recruiting costs.

A new trend in the human resources department represents the large transformation form a administrative, routine activity to a strategic and competitive instrument used for planning and developing the business. The use of informational technology represents, in today's competitive environment, a successful business strategy.

Many organizations also give employees the opportunity to learn about the administrative activities (otherwise difficult to explore) and perform simple HR-related tasks (which would normally require the involvement of a human resources specialist) by using self-service computer applications. The main advantage here consist in the amount of time spared, time that can be better and more profitably spent on more important work processes and activities.

Having a large capacity of storing, maintaining and saving information, the computer system used in the human resources department can become an informational centre for the tourism organizations. Nevertheless, computers can't replace the experience and specialization of the managers. However, they have the capacity to provide important data and information for decisions making, resulting in more efficient human resources efforts.

The necessity of computers in tourism firms, in general, and in human resources area, in particular, is obvious considering the numerous benefits provided.

The factors that determine the extent to which a company in the Romanian tourism industry can benefit from a computerized human resources system and the specific scope and features that such a system must possess are:

1. The size of the organization;
2. The nature of firm (travel agency, hotel, transport firm);
3. The complexity of the professional training programs and the level of employee performances requested/expected within the tourism organization;
4. The firm's market position and its long term development plans;
5. The scope of activities and positions in the organization;
6. The life cycle stage of the organization;
7. Its organizational culture;
8. Its target market (domestic and/or external market) etc.

Regardless of the factors' nature, an HR information system represents a challenge of the millennium and its applications present multiple advantages for every organization: financial, material, human.

The studies about Romania's travel market show a decreased interest from foreign tourists, the main reason being a low quality service. As a result, and considering the large number of employees active in a variety of companies in the travel industry, it is necessary to implement an intelligent and scientific human resources policy in order to stimulate the employees and translate the higher employee engagement and professionalism into economic benefits.

Although other elements that contribute to the clients' satisfaction shouldn't be minimized, the development of Romanian tourism should also rely on improved employee training and skills, and HR-focused computer applications can provide significant assistance in this respect. Therefore, IT investments in the travel industry companies must be focused on their strategic components, among which human resources are a key element.

At the same time creating a human resources strategy can diminish the important influence of seasonality specific to the industry, which affects the interest and engagement of the employees in this area.

The human resources strategy and a performing IT system to support it can lead to a significant development of travel industry, with multiple advantages for both the employees and the organizations hiring them.

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