



Tourism skills delivery: sharing tourism knowledge online

Tourism skills
delivery

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to share the authors' initial insights into tourism industry capacity building via flexibly delivered online skilling and knowledge sharing.

Design/methodology/approach – An online research survey approach was employed, involving a sample of 64 micro tourism operators.

Findings – The paper finds that the major benefits perceived by operators across the pilot region, were the time saving aspects demonstrated in the smart form concept. Operators were also drawn in by the best practise examples and direct links to the online resources to bring and keep them up to date with industry information and developments.

Research limitations/implications – The data presented in this paper represent initial findings of the pilot project. The project has since been completed.

Practical implications – The model used for the pilot in this paper has been adopted by the Tourism Accreditation Board of Victoria and is now being considered for national rollout across Australia. The model is a practical and replicable capacity building model for micro tourism operators anywhere.

Originality/value – The paper adopts a collaborative learning network approach to micro business capacity building and training.

Keywords Skills, Tourism, Knowledge sharing, Australia

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Skills augmentation, building destination relationships, linkages and industry-wide benchmarking are internationally recognised as leading economic drivers for economic growth in general and the tourism industry in particular (OECD, 2001). Tourism is a major component of the Australian Economy (DOTARS, 2003), where tourism businesses make up 4.5 percent of the GDP and represents 6 percent of all jobs in the Australian workforce (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2000). Tourism is a sector of small businesses with 91 percent of all businesses employing less than 19 people, and 62 percent employing less than five people (Bolin and Greenwood, 2003). In the European Economy, small tourism firms (SME) contribute about 10 per cent of the annual GDP and represent one in seven of all jobs (European Commission, 2004).

However, in today's economy small and micro tourism enterprises face enormous difficulty competing with their larger counterparts, both in terms of their operational capacity to run their business as well as their technological capability to operate in a global market place. The push towards networked information and communication technologies (ICT), combined with increased customer expectations, has put extraordinary pressure on the information-centric and service-based tourism industry to extend conventional distribution channels to include the Internet as a major new marketing channel (Bloch and Segev, 1996). By implication, this pressure extends to the need for business skills applied at both the operational and strategic



levels to match the expectations of the international and increasingly travel-mature domestic visitors small tourism businesses are now likely to attract through such distribution channels as the Internet.

To date, most research into the implications of ICT for micro and small tourism firms has focused on individual business barriers to ICT adoption, with a propensity towards the adoption of online booking systems via the Internet (Buhalis, 1999a; Evans and Peacock, 1999). Small tourism businesses have been slow to adopt and realise the benefits of ICT for their business and in many cases have yet to move beyond email for customer interaction and booking and a basic website for marketing purposes (Buhalis, 2003). Nor have they reached the stage where they are ready to integrate ICT into daily management to streamline operations such as sales, marketing and distribution (Main, 2002). Similarly, they have yet to grasp the potential of virtual clustering to aggregate capabilities and resources for knowledge sharing, economies of scale and scope (Braun, 2002b). The benefits of clustering have been demonstrated in research which suggests that when grouped together, small tourism firms can have a considerable influence on the economy, particularly within the tourism and hospitality industry (Braun, 2004; Buhalis, 1999b).

The advent of ICT and the internet has had a strong impact on the tourism industry, especially in its capacity to respond to the growth of mass travel by increasing capacity, flexibility and connectivity. Despite all the benefits that can be achieved by using ICT, many small and micro tourism businesses have failed to embrace ICT and the Internet. Indeed, there is widespread consensus that industry preparedness in terms of skills and training falls well short of the requirements to operate within a now ICT-driven sector (Braun, 2004; Buhalis, 2003; Danielle and Mistilis, 1999; Hollick, 2003). As Evans *et al.* (2001) have noted, small tourism firms may well remain lost in the electronic marketplace unless tourism SME acquire the skills needed to participate in the digital economy (Evans *et al.*, 2001).

Small tourism enterprises, much like other small enterprises, tend to be time and resource-poor, with their size being their main disadvantage (Werthner and Klein, 1999). Small and micro enterprises in Australia, as elsewhere, are characterised by a low skill base, feelings of isolation, being located in peripheral regions where access to skills support is limited, and an inability to leave their business to continually improve their skills (Hollick, 2003). Research further indicates that micro businesses engage in little formal skills and intelligence gathering and they rarely use external consultants due to resource constraints, lack of specialist expertise and size versus their perceived impact in the market place (Jameson, 2000). European research similarly reflects that small tourism operators generally do not have the time to attend training sessions by professional bodies. In addition, training is considered a cost rather than an investment for most small operators, who concentrate on their day-to-day operations and business management (Collins *et al.*, 2003).

SME inertia vis-à-vis business skilling reflects the deregulated state of the industry in general and a fear of opportunistic behaviour from competitors and a lack of trust in each other in particular. In an increasingly competitive environment for destination market share, and the dominance of micro enterprises in destinations, lack of small enterprise capacity and consequent lack of ability to engage effectively with other tourism stakeholders results in loss of competitive advantage for the destination region and thus the wider economy (Hollick, 2003). As a study funded by the Australian

government reiterates, the conduct of unethical (e.g. unskilled) operators is expected to cost the Australian tourism industry tens of millions of dollars (DITR, 2003).

To date self-regulation efforts in the tourism sector have resulted in little evidence that the industry is capable of capacity building without external planning and intervention (Hollick, 2003). Tourism operators need to understand that ICT is not only useful as a marketing tool to reach a global market, but also that it is imperative in tactical and strategic management and competitive advantage (Main, 2002). With the characteristics of the industry being predominantly micro, greater consideration should hence be given to helping small firms to be able to respond to market needs by adopting business systems that allow them to increase their skills and respond to an increasingly savvy consumer. Indeed, in an increasingly global tourism market, it is essential for Australian tourism firms to strive for continual improvement in their performance. One way of raising industry standards is through accreditation or the development of benchmark and best practice standards that can be displayed by businesses that have reached satisfactory standards of practice (DITR, 2003).

To overcome these multiple barriers, an Australian pilot skilling project was launched to develop a more effective capacity building model for tourism enterprises. The venture addressed a major gap in current training initiatives by performing a coordination role between the diversity of stakeholders in the provision of tourism capacity building. Aiming to raise industry standards and move away from ineffective silo approaches to industry training and capacity building, this skilling project reflects the importance of and contributes to the development of an effective national voluntary accreditation system, a theme strongly advocated in the Tourism White Paper (DITR, 2003).

The pilot, which will be discussed in detail below, used ICT to facilitate flexible delivery of a wide array of learning content, tailored to the needs of both start-up and established small and micro tourism operators. The project built on the concepts that ICT, in the form of online learning, can enhance operator use of ICT and create awareness of what ICT can do for business operations (Collins *et al.*, 2003); and that industry knowledge sharing can enhance collaborative learning and create competitive advantage.

ICT and industry benchmarking

Given the market in which small and micro tourism businesses are operating and the increasing importance of raising industry standards to keep up with the pressures of today's global business climate, it is imperative that small and micro tourism operators increase their general knowledge as well as their core competencies (Collins *et al.*, 2003). Despite the fact that many small tourism business fall short in ICT skills and have remained reluctant to move away from manual processes, ownership of technology and Internet access is on the rise and, when introduced at the right time and in the right way, may in fact point small business owners to embracing ICT for innovative uses such as online learning (Louvieris and Lockwood, 2002).

ICT and the internet may help overcome barriers experienced by small business owners such as an inability to leave the business for training purposes during business hours, in addition to feelings of isolation. ICT and the internet are ideally suited to training small and micro tourism operators, as it allows small business to access cost effective training and learn anytime they want without disrupting normal business

operations. Especially when it involves the use of online environments, flexible learning can boost opportunities for the development of e-commerce, e-business and skills (Mitchell, 2003). For small businesses that lack time to travel long distances to learning venues, ICT enables them to study according to their seasonability and other operational management commitments they may have. Other beneficial factors include quick and easy access to course content and up to date information (Collins *et al.*, 2003).

Online learning or e-learning is defined as learning that takes place anytime someone uses electronic means for gathering information either with (synchronous learning) or without another live person (asynchronous learning) present (Zhang and Nunamaker, 2003). E-learning can include web-based technologies, CD-ROMS, DVDs and videoconferencing. Some disadvantages of e-learning include the operators' initial set-up and access to infrastructure cost; operators may find it too impersonal; and participants need a high level of discipline (Collins *et al.*, 2003).

While the adoption and innovative use of computer-mediated communication technologies can have positive outcomes for individual learners and for destination development, it should also be noted that online learning is still in its infancy. Online learning is expected to grow dramatically with the increased understanding that distribution of and sharing of knowledge via online environments is key to successful relationship building. Knowledge and relationships now underpin competitive advantage and in order to compete in the networked economy, regions and firms across the globe should use technology-mediated channels and organise resources around knowledge and relationships (Scott and Storper, 2003).

Online learning also provides the context and the potential for "learning regions" to emerge. In learning regions, a variety of regional agents and institutions are brought together to "learn to learn" together. Learning region actors are encouraged to take part in collaborative learning (Lundvall and Archibugi, 2001). By formulating learning networks and entering into interactive learning processes, it is believed that regions can create competitive advantage (Florida, 2002). Conversely, while regional development will be increasingly dependent on local communities' capacities for continuous collaborative learning and innovation, it is also dependent on the availability of a skilled and flexible workforce. As noted above, research has indicated that tourism regions across the globe experience chronic shortages of skilled workers (Collins *et al.*, 2003; Hollick, 2003). Two projects, one in Europe and one in Australia, are addressing skill shortages through the strategic uptake of online learning opportunities.

The European initiative

Funded by the European Commission, SMART-UP was designed to help small European firms in tourism and hospitality to increase their know-how and ICT literacy through the provision of specific tourism-related modules via an internet-based learning platform and to apply ICT applications to stay on the leading edge of learning technology. The initiative also aimed to encourage small tourism firms to work with up-to-date ICT and management practices. Other aims of the project were to identify the skills and requirements of small tourism firms to ensure that the e-learning content modules corresponded with their needs. SMART-UP therefore compiled the technical and content specifications in conjunction with the potential users. Test cases were generated to ensure that the online learning system was in line with what the small

firms specified. The scope of the research was to target small and medium-sized hotels in Austria, Ireland, Great Britain and Switzerland (Collins *et al.*, 2003).

Analysis of the SMART-UP program involved a survey of participants resulting in a respondent sample of 55. In reporting the findings of potential users of SMART-UP and their perception of online learning, researchers found that many small tourism firms targeted for the program were still in the “ICT denial stage” and were not yet using ICT and the Internet for inter- or intra-organisational purposes. Most managers reported that they did not find the time to attend training sessions offered by professional bodies; that training was not considered an investment, implying that there would be a high demand for online and cost-effective training. Nonetheless, these same small businesses reported their major current challenge facing their business was a lack of knowledge in human resource management.

The content of SMART-UP online learning modules perceived by the majority of respondents to be useful for inclusion in an online learning system was ICT trends, followed by marketing, strategy, law, quality management and industry news. However, none of the respondents indicated learning about basic technical skills as important enough to be included in an online learning module. This suggests a lack of awareness of the relationship between technical skills and the capacity to find useful information and resources to assist the business. However, the results also gave the indication that small tourism firms are becoming more conscious of the importance of ICT as a result of the SMART-UP learning process. They are willing to learn how they can utilise ICT to help them achieve competitive advantage in the digital world if the benefits to their businesses can be demonstrated.

The survey results also indicated that internet links, access to download online consultancy reports, periodical newsletters on hotel industry trends, and access to a range of academic resources to support their understanding and enhance their learning are desirable features for the e-learning environment. The survey results gave no indication that information on technological skill (i.e. using a computer) or inadequate technical support was considered a major disadvantage for participating in online learning activities. However, the survey did indicate that small firms perceived the lack of industry and best practice examples as a disadvantage, while respondents also indicated that online learning did not provide the opportunity of achieving a recognised qualification or accreditation. If recognition of the program was given, it could provide an incentive to employees and may also help to alleviate high staff turnover (Collins *et al.*, 2003).

The Australian project

The Australian project, [bbbonline\[1\]](#), targeted 520 micro tourism enterprise owners and managers in the Goldfields region of Victoria, Australia. The pilot project was a flexibly delivered capacity building and business skills development program for small and micro tourism enterprises. It aimed to augment tourism operators’ business skills and facilitate the uptake of voluntary industry accreditation. Funded by the Australian Federal Government body AusIndustry under the 2003 Small Business Enterprise Culture Program (SBCEP), the pilot was developed by the Centre for Regional Innovation and Competitiveness (CRIC) at the University of Ballarat in conjunction with the Better Business Tourism Accreditation Program (Victorian branch). The SBCEP pilot project for tourism operators in the Goldfields region

(75 percent of which are micro operators), directly complements a \$2 million Australian Government initiative of the Tourism White Paper towards setting up a national tourism accreditation program to improve tourism industry performance and encourage tourism growth in Australia's region.

The Goldfields are centrally located, just over one hour's drive North-West of Melbourne, the capital of Victoria, with a number of highway access points via the Western Highway which connects the major metropolitan areas of Melbourne and Adelaide. The region includes two major regional centres, Ballarat and Bendigo, and the Central Highlands.

The region was chosen as the pilot study area as it was a sufficiently mature destination with a solid infrastructure of tourism management and support, diversity of product, and ICT access for the model to proceed. The region has also experienced impressive growth of micro tourism businesses, especially of Bed and Breakfast and self-contained accommodation. The Goldfields are considered one of Australia's strongest heritage and product regions drawing in excess of 2.8 million visitors per annum. The Goldfield's region's diverse and comprehensive range of geographical, historical and topographical features include the nineteenth century gold rush history; strong links with Australian nationhood and educational aspects of the region; extensive, intact architectural structures; historic attractions, museums galleries, natural attractions; wineries and cultivated flora and fauna.

Building on the concept that tourism growth lies in the industry's ability to deliver high quality products and services by meeting and exceeding customer expectations from arrival to departure, the pilot program aimed to contribute to continuous improvement of industry performance and industry standards by creating tourism businesses that are professional in their approach and generate consumer confidence. bbbonline is an internet-enhanced program (www.bbbonline.com.au) providing quality industry training mainly targeted to the needs of micro tourism operators. The pilot featured best-practice examples for bed and breakfast (B&B) and cellar-door operators. Operators were able to register online and receive personal logon details to access the online content. Unlike SMART-UP, the Australian pilot content was made available online, in CD-ROM format and was underpinned by information, workshop, phone and mentor support. Like SMART-UP the pilot employed so-called smart forms (called intelligent agents in SMART-UP), which facilitate linkages to information sources and the most recent, accurate static and dynamic information. However, unlike SMART-UP, the bbbonline pilot smart forms tailored information dynamically to sector and business size needs, e.g. once an operator identified her/himself as a (micro) B&B operator, only micro and sector-specific information, resources and links were generated.

Given the growing number of women in new tourism start up ventures, this project particularly aimed to augment the capacity and skills of women in micro tourism businesses. There are approximately 1,500 new and established tourism operators within the region and the pilot targets 25 percent of these. While the Goldfields Region pilot was predominantly aimed at small accommodation operators, the pilot expected to make a significant contribution towards an effective and sustainable tourism accreditation framework, which is currently being developed by the National Tourism Accreditation Working Group (NTAWG). Following a National Accreditation Forum in July 2003, the Australian Government, together with State, Territory and Industry

representatives established a National Tourism Accreditation working group to help address the constraints to tourism accreditation in Australia and work to a national benchmark (DITR, 2003).

bbonline further differentiates itself from SMART-UP in that it is not a stand-alone training program. The developers of the program successfully formulated partnerships across state and regional (Goldfields) tourism bodies. Partners in the program included Tourism Victoria, Better Business Tourism Accreditation Program, Goldfields Tourism, Ballarat Tourism, Bendigo Tourism and Hepburn Shire Tourism. By conducting continuous consultation with the project partners and working with the accreditation body to ensure that the latest national standards for accreditation were being adopted and included in the program, bbonline was able to offer comprehensive skill development that aligns with national tourism accreditation requirements. Thus, unlike SMART-UP, the program was able to offer access to a recognised qualification such as accreditation.

In addition to aligning the program with tourism accreditation requirements, the pilot also included industry and best practice examples, cited as valuable resources in the SMART-UP analysis, which aimed at providing operators with the skill base needed to run a sustainable business.

Skills augmentation focused on business development enhanced by ICT development, including business planning, operations and marketing. SMART UP research has indicated that lack of interpersonal contact with other users and lack of communication, support and feedback from module co-ordinators led to low motivation and was one of the major disadvantages operators perceived from their experience of online learning. The bbonline program addressed this issue. Cognizant of the fact that small business managers are often time- and resource-poor and many SME have yet to embrace ICT beyond email, knowledge transfer involved multi-modal, e.g. face-to-face, individual mentoring, CD-ROM based and call assisted business learning. Under the theme, "Any Time, Any Where, Any Place", the program maximised operator involvement at any time of their choosing. Introductory face-to-face workshops were provided to familiarise tourism operators with the online learning environment and provide them with the technical tools to engage in learning at their own pace.

Moreover, the pilot program sought to overcome micro-operator barriers to skilling through the creation of a community of practice within the learning region as part of the skilling process (Florida, 2002). Communities of practice are informal groups of people who regularly share their expertise and experiences; are not formulated or controlled by management; set their own leadership; and follow their own agenda (Wenger *et al.*, 2000). Building on the aforementioned concept that global positioning and competitive advantage for small business may be achieved through collaborative knowledge creation in a regional learning environment (Lundvall and Johnson, 1994), the pilot explored the potential of a timely synergy between connectivity and collaborative business models for SME in embracing social networking practices.

The development of a regional skills network through central access to flexibly delivered training content and online interaction sought to overcome two of the major barriers identified in micro business training cited earlier: operator sense of isolation and inability to leave the business as a sole trader. By using a learning region and community of practise approach (Braun, 2002a; Wenger, 1998) tourism operators could

effectively learn with and from each other to leverage their knowledge of business and best practise to become sustainable businesses in their own right and thereby enhancing whole-of-destination knowledge. The use of online technologies enabled learner access to current content, online interaction, knowledge building and best practice through a “knowledge bank” depository, while the operator remained physically within the business.

Pilot project outcomes focused on the enhancement of small business viability, creation of regional competitive advantage and reduction of the current high rate of business failure in the tourism industry. Specific outcomes of the overall learning processes focused on augmented business skills for small and micro tourism firms; a better understanding of destination interdependencies such as regional supply chain and value chain complementarities and placing the destination in the global environment; initial strategies for collaboration; networking and trust; and a broader understanding of the requirements to build competitive destinations in a highly competitive global market.

Pilot issues

Documentation collected during the course of the project provides a unique insight into the learning styles and progressive business acumen of small business. Operators were also invited to exchange experiences and provide feedback on the pilot at a regional face-to-face action-learning seminar at the end of the pilot.

Workshops introduced the program to a total of 64 micro tourism operators across the region. A number of issues were identified, reflecting the different cultures varying levels of maturity of the destination areas. For operators in the Bendigo and Ballarat regions, for example, the link between the bbonline program and tourism industry accreditation was not necessarily seen as an advantage. In these mature tourism destination, where tourism leadership for accreditation has been strong for many years, operators and the tourism area managers felt let down by the lack of progress toward formal recognition of the industry and subsequently have moved toward a focus on skills building. Operators in these areas did not express a significant desire at this stage to proceed to accreditation.

Operators in the Daylesford area, by contrast seemed more interested in industry accreditation for the commercial benefits it offers: e.g. reduced costs for state sponsored online distribution and cooperative marketing campaigns.

Awareness raising of the program also brought to light significant variance in ICT facilities and capacity by operators with new industry entrants, not yet engaged with their local associations, revealing low connectedness. In some instances operators did not have a computer in their business. As a result of the introduction to the program they saw a reason to acquire online infrastructure. Thus the range of multi-modal learning options: CD-ROM, online, supported by telephone mentoring and the workshops provided significant appeal for a still disparate industry.

The pilot program offered operators the option of saving their progress either online or on their personal hard drive. Operators in all pilot program areas, expressed concerns about the security of their personal business planning and marketing details and other materials being entered onto an online server; their ability to move data from their business to home office; and their ability to access business data for later retrieval; and use for (renewal of) accreditation or other commercial purposes.

The major benefits perceived by operators across the pilot region were the time saving aspects demonstrated in the smart form concept, reflecting Mitchell (2003) view the time is indeed “the new distance”. In line with the SMART-UP findings operators were also drawn in by the best practise examples and direct links to the online resources to bring and keep them up to date with industry information and developments.

Conclusion

This paper has provided some insights into tourism industry capacity building via flexibly delivered online skilling and knowledge sharing. It has highlighted two online learning programs for small tourism firms in Europe and Australia respectively. While both programs offered tourism information and skills development, the Australian pilot enabled operators to complete tourism industry accreditation. Aiming to raise industry standards and move away from ineffective silo approaches to industry training and capacity building, the Australian pilot reflects the importance of and contributes to the development of an effective national voluntary accreditation system.

The bbbonline pilot built on pre-existing business and ICT infrastructure and tourism industry objectives; e.g. centralising training resources, integrating a range of services, and making a significant contribution to establishing industry-wide benchmarking. In responding to the findings of other researchers in the field, the Australian pilot project addressed a gap in current training initiatives in Australia by performing a coordinating role between the diversity of tourism managers and operators. It maximised the advantages and minimises the disadvantages of online learning through flexibly delivered, multi-modal and learning region approaches.

The model used for the pilot has been adopted by the Tourism Accreditation Board of Victoria and is now being considered for national rollout across Australia. Considered a practical and replicable learning model for micro and SME businesses anywhere, this model is applicable to tourism regions outside Victoria and Australia, as well as other service sector industries.

Online learning has the capacity to facilitate operator knowledge of best practise, business sustainability and thus contribute to triple bottom line outcomes for individual business and thereby their destinations.

Note

1. The pilot title represents the concept of Building a Better Business, online (www.bbbonline.com.au). The program content augments and enhances the national Better Business Tourism Accreditation Program, which is marketed to tourism operators as a business skills development program, rather than to consumers as a product quality guarantee at this stage.

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