

## INTEGRATION OF THE SAP CONCEPT IN THE EMPLOYEE ASSESSMENT OF TRAVEL AGENCIES IN SUCEAVA COUNTY THROUGH MYSTERY SHOPPING TYPE METHODS

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### **Abstract**

*Being on a positive trend and addressing to a market that is less willing to compromise, the tourism industry develops a highly complex content, represented by various organizations and services, having as a main objective meeting the expectations of consumers of tourism services and reporting to the challenges of contemporary dynamics generated by the emergence of new information technologies. To respond effectively to these issues, tourism requires among other things a modern HR management.*

*For travel agencies, human resources are the main asset of the company that serves to implement the entity's objectives. The most important qualities of the travel agent are polite attitude, promptness, sagacity and firmness. However, the ability to display with celerity their own capabilities - intellectual, psycho-motivational and persuasive - represents the quintessence of the travel agent profession.*

*When we refer to these features, in the universal tourism language we talk about SAP concept: Speed, Accuracy, Politeness. Therefore, the major objective of this study aims to assess the employees of travel agencies from Suceava County in terms of SAP components using three different methods of qualitative research: Mystery Shopping, Mystery Calling and Mystery Emailing.*

**Key words:** *SAP, Human Resources, Travel agent, Mystery Shopping, Mystery Calling, Mystery Emailing.*

**JEL Classification:** *J24, M12, M15, O15.*

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Under the current conditions of the globalization of tourism market, organizations in the field are constrained to make strategic plans oriented towards obtaining results, trying to estimate the change in order to adapt on the run to an environment that is in a continuous transformation. Also, the travel agencies try to permanently improve the quality of services, activity that implies important material and human efforts (Hapenciuc et al, 2008, p. 17).

According to Aydin and Yildirim, performing superior quality services to consumers represents the strategic key to survival in the present environment specific to the tourism industry (Aydin, Yildirim, 2012, p.219), and Caro and Garcia consider that assuring the quality of services by the personnel of the tourism companies represents the critical factor of

success (Caro, Garcia, 2008, pages 706-720).

In the series of multiple processes that the tourism industry incorporates, there is the production and commercialization of holidays, fundamental competence of travel agencies, which has the difficult mission to mediate, under efficiency conditions, the relationship of correspondence between the performers of tourism services and consumers, through the equitable evidencing of the value for money and having a mediator role in the process of materialization of tourism consumption (Stanciu, 2012, p. 31).

The tourism product must be seen, especially, on its intangible side, because its commercialization implies „on trust” and anticipated purchase, between the date of the purchase of the inclusive tour and the moment of the effective consumption being a considerable spatio-temporal difference (McIntosh, Goeldner, 2009, p.52). The tourism industry,

regarding the inputs and the outputs, emphasizes the human element, as a determining element of this activity. To this effect, the managers of travel agencies must support the improvement of human resources and, implicitly, the improvement of the service quality performed by them, in order to obtain a growth of the level of satisfaction of the consumers and a creation of the maintenance of the consumer loyalty (Haghkhal, 2011).

## II. THEORETICAL APPROACHES CONCERNING

### THE SAP CONCEPT

The office of travel agencies is recognized as „labour industry”, because, as in any other activity that perform services, the product consists, to a great extent, in human relationships, characterized by approaching the client. The travel agent will meet and serve a vast typology of clients, and each person with whom he/she will interact offers him/her the possibility to learn new things about human psychology and about the necessity to improve in order to assure some highly qualitative services (Chen, Chang, 2005, pp.79-87). In fact, the perception regarding the service quality lies in the specific client-employee interactions, the latter having the role, that promptly, the speed of reaction, politeness, accuracy and information supply, influence in a strict positive sense this perception (Ishaq, 2012, pp. 25-36).

The specific activities of the frontline/front-office personnel represent the first contact of the client with the travel agency. The impression that this field and its specific activity create represents the first element of appreciation of the activity of that agency. Consequently, this activity must be characterized by: speed in answering, promptitude, firmness, polite attitude that express trust and seriousness regarding the modality of taking an inquiry, proper offer, consultancy, booking etc. When we refer to these characteristics, in the universal tourism terminology we speak of the SAP concept: *Speed*, *Accuracy* and *Politeness*.

The deep knowledge of the sold services, the presence of mind and the exquisite education, spontaneity, understanding and tolerance in confronting the most uninformed clients, sense of initiative and adaptation to the most unusual requirements are other abilities that one acquires in time, confers personality to the travel agent and generate notoriety to the agency (Chand, 2007, pp. 185-188).

Pragmatically speaking, the success of a holiday depends, many times, on the activity of the travel agents, their profession being rigorous, sometimes difficult, but attractive and implying tact, patience and professionalism. The difference between a professional and a simple travel agent lies in the fact

that, though both took training courses in the field, the first carries on his/her tasks, firstly, with passion.

It is a difficult profession, because the internal structure of travel agencies is made up of small nucleuses in which the professionals must be versatile, capable of making rapid decisions in front of the clients. The speed in making decisions, the response time in front of the requests of the clients, represent one of the essential factors which influence the perceived quality of services and implicitly the results of the organization.

## III. ANALYSIS AND HUMAN RESOURCES

### ASSESSMENT WITHIN THE TRAVEL AGENCIES IN SUCEAVA COUNTY THROUGH THE SAP FILTER

From the point of view of the three of the distinct features of the services: intangibility, heterogeneity and inseparability production-consumption, one can affirm that it is relatively difficult to measure the quality of services and, implicitly, of human resources within the travel agencies (Aydemir, Gerni, 2011).

A form of assessment may be achieved from the point of view of the clients' opinions, but one must take into account that these don't accurately present the reality because, many times, the negative experiences personally lived or transposed by other clients, manifest a predominant character in their overview concerning a certain travel agency. For this reason, as one can see in the study of Kobylanski (2012, pp. 29-42), the assessments made with the help of the clients provide information rather about their opinion and not about the quality of the employees.

### The methodology of research

In order to analyze and assess the human resources within the travel agencies in Suceava County through the filter of the elements of the SAP concept, we used a qualitative method of research - Mystery Shopping - successfully applied by multinational corporations especially in the retail field, which investigate the quality of services and the relationships of the personnel with the clients. Taking into account that there are similitudes between the retail market and the tourism market, we consider that the previously mentioned assessment method may be successfully transposed in the activity of commercialization of package holidays.

Under these conditions, in the period 10 - 30 March 2014, we took into account the analysis and the personnel assessment from 31 various travel agencies within Suceava County. Although there are in the county, at the moment, according to the main CAEN code declared (7911 - Activities of travel agencies,

7912 - Activities of tour operators), 68 registered travel agencies, we took into account the analysis only of the active organizations which perform effectively activities specific to outgoing travel agencies, thus excluding the organizations which perform transport services for persons (internal or external), respectively tourism services of incoming type (Table 1). When we constitute the target group, we took into account the absolute data taken from the official site of the National Tourism Authority ([turism.gov.ro](http://turism.gov.ro)) and the information obtained empirically, from the analysis made on the spot, in the five municipal towns of Suceava County.

Concerning the data processing, it was achieved with SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences), version 22.

**Table 1. Travel agencies in Suceava County which were the object of the research**

Locality	No. of agencies submitted to analysis	Licence type	
		Retail dealer	Tour operator
Câmpulung Moldovenesc	2	1	1
Fălticeni	3	0	3
Gura Humorului	1	0	1
Rădăuți	3	1	2
Suceava	22	4	18
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>25</b>

The method implied a client „under cover” (mystery shopper) who went to the selected travel agencies and the assessment, through the eyes of the client, of the way of the relationship between the employees, the speed in making decisions and the performance of services, their spontaneity, ability, accuracy of the information presented, the confidence and the politeness. Consequently, we assessed the quality of the relationship with the public and, implicitly, the personnel of the agencies, through observation. The assessment through the Mystery Shopping method implied that the researcher „disguised” in a possible tourist pays a visit to the travel agency, behaving like a common client, but respecting a pre-established scenario (Jankal, Jankalova, 2011, pp. 45-49).

The scenario taken into account implied that the possible tourist is a young man interested in making a surprise to his girlfriend (on her birthday) consisting in a 7 nights holiday, at the end of July, destination Antalya/Turkey, air transport- departure Iași or Bacău. The client is interested in a very well located hotel (preferably the beach area), with 4\* accommodation conditions and All inclusive regime for meals. The budget of the whole holiday is about 1400 Euro. Also, the scenario implies that the possible tourist requests information concerning the location of the hotel, conditions, sand type, the distances to the main commercial road etc in order to deeply analyze

the elements integrated in the SAP.

Having as inspiration the 10 dimensions of the quality of services proposed in 1985 by Parasuranam: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, and understanding the customer, subsequently transformed into the 5 dimensions of SERVQUAL concept (tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy) (Landrum, 2009, pp. 17-35), we achieved a questionnaire based on 27 items that includes aspects concerning the 3 dimensions of the SAP concept and whose responses were assessed on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, 1 representing the minimum score and 5 the maximum one.

In order to go deeply into the problems of SAP on the level of travel agencies, we considered opportune also an analytical approach from the distance of the phenomenon. Consequently, besides the present assessment, we made an analysis through Mystery Calling and through the transmission of inquiries through e-mail (Mystery Emailing).

The analysis and the assessment of travel agents through Mystery Calling eliminated from the assessment grid the visual factor, but there were a series of other factors submitted to analysis and which can influence the client in choosing the services of travel agencies or re-orientation towards the services of the competition: the voice and its particularities, the approach style, availability, receptivity of the travel agent respectively, the time in which he/she answers the phone (daymaker.co).

The analysis through Mystery Emailing aimed at the emphasis of the SAP in the virtual space relative to the employees of 31 travel agencies in Suceava County, and the necessary information to make the study, so implicitly the e-mail addresses to which the inquiries were sent, were empirically obtained from the presentation sites of the agencies.

The whole approach took into account as major objective - the analysis and the assessment of human resources from the travel agencies of Suceava County through the SAP filter - through three complementary qualitative observation methods: *mystery shopping*, *mystery calling* and *mystery emailing*. If in the case of the assessment through *mystery shopping*, the specific objectives of the research consisted in the assessment of some elements like the degree of promptitude with which the travel agent responds to the questions, the relevance and the accuracy of the information presented, the speed in the solution of some special requests, the confidence transmitted to the client by the agent, the degree of politeness of the agent in the discussion with the client etc, in the case of the assessment through *mystery calling* and *mystery emailing*, the specific objectives consisted in the analysis of some elements like time/speed with which the phone/e-mail is answered, the style of phone/online approach and the availability/receptivity

of the agent to the phone/e-mail, the degree of politeness in the online environment.

The main hypotheses around which the whole research approach is made are:

**1st hypothesis:** The communication capacity of the travel agents and the confidence transmitted by them through e-mail and phone are bigger than in the case of face- to- face discussion.

**2nd hypothesis:** The relatively high value of the SAP of the travel agents subsequent to the phone discussion encourages the client to come to the agency for further discussions or even for a possible booking/acquisition.

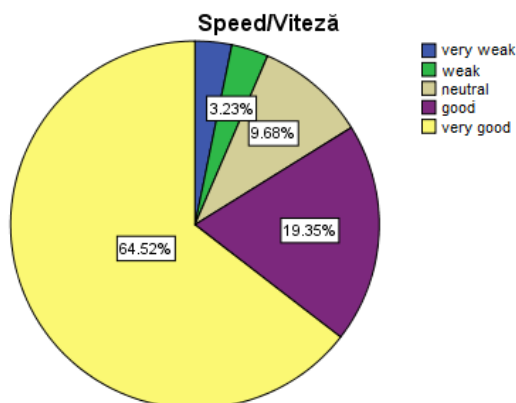
**3rd hypothesis:** On the local plan, there is an extremely heterogeneous situation on the level of the travel agents from the point of view of the three dimensions of the SAP concept determined through the *Mystery Shopping, Mystery Calling and Mystery Emailing* methods.

**4th hypothesis:** The employees in the travel agencies from Suceava County can be characterized by the capacity of assimilation and efficient use of the new informational technologies, respectively of the availability and receptivity in the online environment.

**5th hypothesis:** The perceived value of SAP on the level of the travel agents differs depending on the notoriety of the agency they belong to.

**The results of the research**

Subsequent to the analysis and the assessment of human resources through the Mystery Shopping method, the results obtained were sometimes surprising. Only 22.59% of the travel agents that were the object of the study were appreciated with maximum score at the speed (S) chapter. Though, generally, it was found that the possible clients are immediately welcome by a travel agent at the entrance in the agency, the results of the study show that, the personnel of the travel agencies from Suceava County faces difficulties many times when they have to respond promptly to the questions of the client. Nevertheless, more than 64% of the total of the employees that were the object of the study obtained a score situated between 8 and 10 points, relative to the

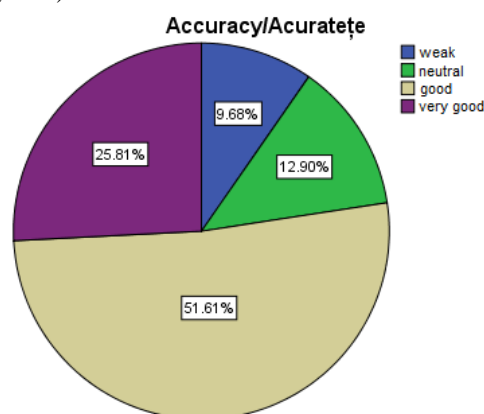


„very well” rating (Figure 1).

**Figure 1 – General situation of speed determined through the Mystery Shopping method.**

The average score for speed obtained by the employees of the travel agencies from Suceava County is 8.25 from 10 possible points, at this chapter excelling agencies like: Mareea, Viking Travel, Simply Travel, Paralela 45, Life Tour, Christian Tour from Suceava, respectively Speed Travel from Radauti, which obtained te maximum score.

From te point of view of the *accuracy of the presented information (A)*, 48.38% of the employees who were the object of the study obtained more than 40 points from the 55 maximum possible. Also, 51.61% of the agents obtained a score relative to the „good” rating and only 25.81% obtained a score close to the maximum relative to the „very good” rating (Figure 2).



**Figure 2 - General situation of the accuracy determined through the Mystery Shopping method**

From this point of view, the best positioned agencies are: Mareea (55p), Christian Tour (53p), Life Tour (52p), Simply Travel (51p) and Paralela 45 (50p). The lower scores (under 20p) obtained by the agencies like Millenium Tour (13p) or General Turism (17p) are due to the following aspects: the travel agent created the impression that he/she didn’t know very well the travel destination, the travel agent didn’t put enough questions to learn the requirements of the client, the agent didn’t make available sufficient information concerning the offer requested by the client (the employees only requesting to the possible client the e-mail address and the telephone number in order to transmit the subsequent offer), not providing some precise information concerning the price of package holidays.

Concerning the third dimension of the SAP concept - politeness (P) - we find that 51.61% of the employees obtained a score above the general average from the county of 38.16 points. At this chapter excel the representative agents of Mareea (54p), Christian Tour (51p), Paralela 45, Life Tour and Simply Travel

with 50 points each. Opposite, the lowest score relative to the politeness was obtained by the employees of Millenium Tour (18p) - Suceava and Net Bucovina (21p) - Rădăuți. Among the causes which determined a lower score one can mention: the lack of smile/ visual contact, the travel agent doesn't invite the client to take a seat, the travel agent doesn't say hello and good bye to the client at his/ her

entrance/ exit in/ out of the agency, the travel agent is not interested in answering the inquiry, the agent seems bored, using the computer for search and not continuing the conversation in the meantime etc. From the analysis of the score obtained by each agency (Figure 3) one can appreciate that, on the level of Suceava county, the situation is extremely heterogeneous.

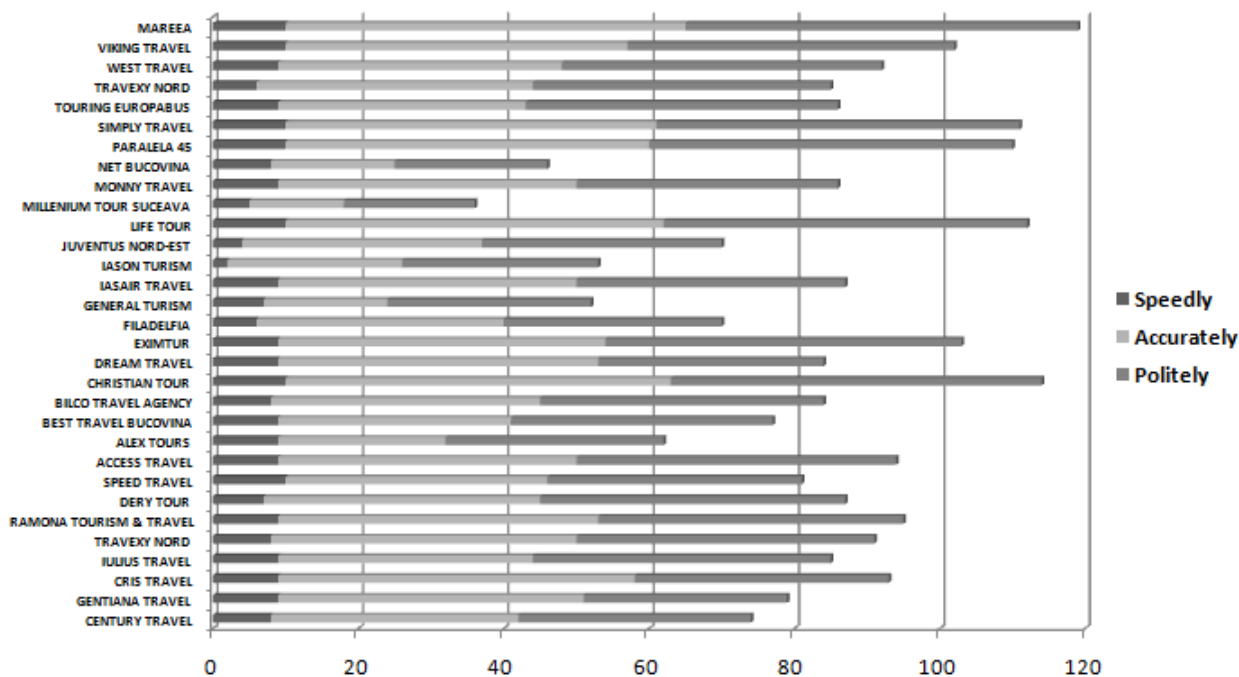


Figure 3 - The score obtained by the employees of travel agencies from Suceava county. Maximum score - 120 points

As one can see in figure 3, the top 5 agencies whose employees obtained the biggest SAP coefficient are the following (Table 2):

Table 2 - Top 5 agencies whose employees obtained the biggest SAP coefficient

No.	Travel agency	Locality	SAP coefficient in absolute values	SAP coefficient in relative values
1.	Mareea	Suceava	119 p	99,17%
2.	Christian Tour	Suceava	114 p	95%
3.	Life Tour	Suceava	112 p	93,34%
4.	Simply Travel	Suceava	111 p	92,5%
5.	Paralela 45	Suceava	110 p	91,67%

The assessment of human resources within the travel agencies from Suceava county through Mystery Calling emphasizes that, from the point of view of the first dimension specific to the SAP concept - speed (S) - 41.37% of the employees obtained the maximum score (5 points), 48.27% obtained 4 points, and 10.34% of the employees obtained 3 points. Totally, the average score obtained by all the employees that

were the object of the study is situated at 4.31 points of 5 possible. Also, one can find that, as an average, it is needed approximately 3 calls until the travel agents answer the phone.

From the point of view of the accuracy of the information presented on the phone (A), 79.31% of the employees that were the object of study obtained between 15 and 20 points, the average value per total being 17.41 points. From this point of view, the best positioned agencies are: Access Travel, Best Travel Bucovina, Christian Tour, Life Tour, Paralela 45, Eurolines/Tui Travel Center and Mareea with maximum points (20).

Regarding the third dimension of the SAP concept – politeness (P) – we find that 58.62% of the employees obtained a score above the general average of the county of 23.03 points. At this chapter excel the representative agents of Travexy Nord, Speed Travel, Access Travel, Best Travel Bucovina, Bilco Travel, Christian Tour, Dream Travel, Life Tour, Paralela 45, Eurolines, Mareea and Viking Travel, with maximum points (25). It is interesting that only 86.2% of the agents submitted to analysis answered the phone with a formulation type „Agency X, hello!”, the rest of

13.8% answering the phone improperly with formulations like: „Yes!”, „Hello!”.

points obtained following the assessment through the Mystery Calling is less heterogeneous

Unlike the assessment through the Mystery Shopping method, one can see that the situation of the on the level of Suceava county (Figure 4).

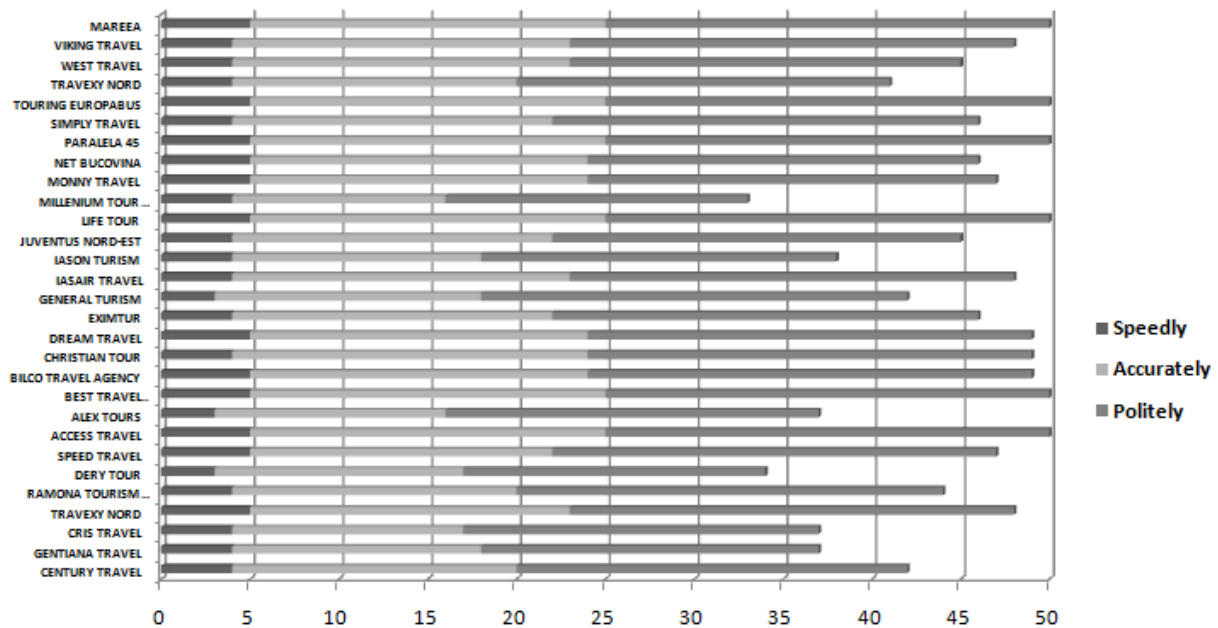


Figure 4 - The score following the assessment through the Mystery Calling method. Maximum score - 50 points.

As one can see in figure 4, top 6 travel agencies whose employees obtained the biggest SAP coefficient following the phone assessment are the following: Access Travel, Best Travel Bucovina, Life Tour, Paralela 45, Eurolines/TUI Travel Center and Mareea, with maximum points (50 p).

In any field, so much the more in tourism, the e-mail address constitutes one of the first virtual contacts with a possible client and its form influences any subsequent approach. In order to study the speed with which the travel agents from Suceava county respond to the possible inquiries, we considered opportune to send, automatically, on March 20, 2014, time: 10:10, from a fictitious e-mail address (doru.ivanovici@gamil.com) 31 inquiries through e-mail, to 31 travel agencies submitted to analysis. The content of the e-mail sent was the following: „Hello, I am Doru Ivanovici and I would like you to make me an offer for 2 adults, destination Greece (Crete), at the end of July (after July 25), a 3 - 4 \* hotel with bed and breakfast or All Inclusive. I would like transport by plane, departure from Bacău. Thank you!”

Due to technical problems, that belong to the functional character of e-mail addresses of the agencies, 4 of the inquiries couldn't be transmitted (the case of the agencies Bilco Travel, Eco Holiday, Dream Travel Agency and Iasair Travel from Suceava). Following the experiment, we found that only 69.23% of the travel agencies submitted to analysis responded to the inquiry less than 24 hours

from its reception (among these, 66.67% responded in the first 3 hours, 22.22% between 3 and 6 hours, and 11.11% between 6 and 9 hours) (Figure 5). Of exemplary promptitude were 33.34% of the agents who confirmed the reception of the request for booking and trasmitted an offer in less than an hour.

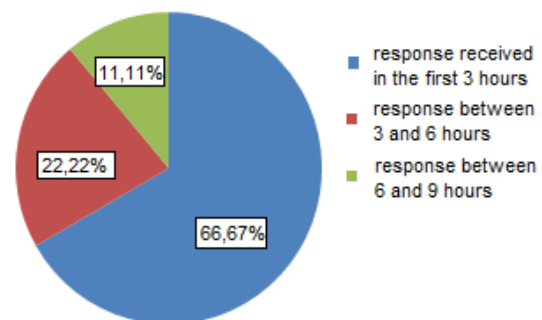


Figure 5 - Time necessary for the travel agents from Suceava county to respond to an inquiry

It is discouraging that, from the point of view of the promptitude, only after 48 hours we received answers from other two representatives of the travel agencies analyzed. This indicates irresponsability, lack of promptitude, which cannot lead but to a diminution of the trust of the possible tourists in the services performed by the travel agents and, implicitly, in the agencies they represent.

The politeness of the travel agents and the accuracy of the information transmitted through e-

mail represent essential elements in the process of online offer, because it determines the success or the failure of the offer. That is why a message must respect some basic principles, among which: simplicity (the message must be simple and concise, and the information placed in hierarchical order), visibility, clarity, conciseness (the message must be focussed on the essential points of the offer, price etc), orientation towards the client (personalization of the message depending on the category of the target public, implication of the addressee by using a

friendly voice, advice), interactivity (facilitating and encouraging the response). Taking into account these criteria and taking into consideration the reaction times previously determined, we made an assessment grid of all e-mail messages received as response in the first 24 hours since sending the inquiry, on a scale form 1 to 5 points. Following the assessment of the e-mails received, we considered opportune evidencing the travel agents who excel from the point of view of the SAP in the online environment (Table 3).

**Table 3 - Travel agents with maximum SAP in the virtual environment**

No.	Name of Agent	Represented agency	Locality	e-mail address:	Points
1.	Loredana Horodișteanu	Christian Tour	Suceava	suceava1@christiantour.ro	5
2.	Corina Păun	Eurolines (TUI)	Suceava	suceava@eurolines.ro	5
3.	Vlăduț Giosanu	Paralela 45	Suceava	suceava@paralela45.ro	5
4.	Dan Popa	Viking Travel	Suceava	office@viking-travel.ro	5

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

From the analysis made on the spot, we find a series of possible factors which influence the human resources SAP within the travel agencies, that belong to the internal side of the organization (the management style adopted by the decision makers, the motivation of human resources, the work environment, etc), and the external one (personal problems of the employees, typology of the clients with whom the employee come into contact etc).

One can see, some differences between the average level of the SAP of the employees determined by the Mystery Calling and Mystery Shopping methods. As one can see from the information presented in Table 4, the employees of the travel agencies from Suceava county have an availability/receptivity bigger in the phone discussions than in the face-to-face discussions, the same we can say about the accuracy of information presented, respectively the degree of politeness of the travel agents (Table 4).

**Table 4 - Comparative analysis concerning the average level of the SAP of travel agents**

	Speedly	Accurately	Politely	SAP
Mystery Calling	86,2%	87,05%	92,12%	89,5%
Mystery Shopping	82,5%	69,25%	69,38%	70,42%

Another conclusion that can be deduced from the research made is that the value perceived of the SAP on the level of the travel agents differs depending on the notoriety of the agency which they belong to. Following the assessment through the Mystery

Shopping method and following the assessment through Mystery Calling and Mystery Emailing

methods, we found that the significant values of the SAP are attributed, usually, to the representatives of the agencies with notoriety: Christian Tour, Paralela 45, Eurolines/TUI Travel Center, Mareea etc. This is due, mainly, to trainings, infotrips and other programs of training of the employees, that are made according to the needs of the agencies. It is essential that, irrespective of their type, the programs of training act also in the sense of the creation of a loyalty sentiment from the part of the employees and of the formation of the conscience that the future of the agency and implicitly, the job depend on their efforts.

#### V. THE LIMITS OF THE RESEARCH

Like any scientific research, this study presents, undoubtedly, a series of inherent limits that we identified, but not having significant effects on the conclusions obtained from the analyses and assessments made. Of course, the methods used (Mystery Shopping, Mystery Calling, Mystery Emailing) and, implicitly, the scientific research are inevitably influenced also by the subjectivism of the researcher, of his/her cultural - scientific level and the possible errors of perception and reception of information which are directly proportional to the period of time elapsed from the manifestation of the events researched by the mystery shopper and until their analysis and assessment.

#### VI. PERSPECTIVES OF DEVELOPMENT OF THE RESEARCH

Starting from the premise that this research doesn't want to present in an exhaustive manner the entire problems of the SAP on the level of human resources within the tourism organizations, I consider that there are the perspectives of a subsequent

development of this study in the following directions: initiating and implementing an adjacent research based on an instrument of questionnaire type, through which to determine the possible correlation between the motivation of the employees from the travel agencies and the value of their SAP, between the length of service/experience and the value of the SAP etc. Also, other perspectives of development of the research imply the entire repetition of the mystery shopping/calling/emailing event with the help of

several „disguised shoppers” through which a better accuracy of results is obtained, the use of a method of audio-video recording of the whole discussion between the travel agent and the possible client, taking into account the achievement of the study with an annual periodicity and even extending the target territorial area and, implicitly, the researched population.

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