

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE QUALITY OF PROVIDED SERVICES IN THE VISION OF TRAVEL AGENTS IN SUCEAVA MUNICIPALITY

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Abstract

Taking into account its pragmatic meaning, the success of a travel agency frequently relies on the activity of travel agents. In the process of promoting and selling flat voyages, customer service can be directly influenced by the interaction of factors such as: offer accuracy, sales representatives quality, employee timeliness, politeness of the travel agent, maintaining eye contact etc., all of which are components of the offered product. Thereby, we conducted, within the period 5 - 15 March 2015, a research based on interviews with 26 travel agents from 20 different units, in order to determine their awareness about potential factors that may have an influence on the quality of offered services. By the instrumentality of a questionnaire, we attempted to assess the integrity and loyalty of employees, their attitude regarding the activities they carry, their dissatisfaction, negative and positive factors influencing service quality, and their positioning to the organization and brand.

Key words: *quality of services, travel agents, influence factors.*

JEL Classification: *L83, M12, M50, M53.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the production and marketing of holidays/voyages, success depends very often, on the activity of travel agents. Thus, it is more than obvious that not everyone is born to be a travel agent, but absolutely anyone can be a tourist. Travel Agent profession is difficult because the internal structure of travel agencies consists of small nuclei in which professionals must be polyvalent, able to make quick decisions to customers, responsible for contracts and documents, closed to customers and direct suppliers and able to solve financial-economic complementary tasks. Staff needs to demonstrate their abilities and potential in order to transform the serving clients strategy into something tangible, namely managing to determine the advantages enjoyed by individual customers. Preparing employees for good customer service begins with awareness of the factors that influence the service quality and the development of certain skills including: attitude, kindness, posture, quality, realism, professionalism, trust and loyalty. But all these features can not be developed if the employees of the travel agency are not motivated.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

To ensure better services that end with a good sale and a contact that can become a regular customer of the agency, we need to achieve a higher quality of service (Hapenciuc et al., 2014, pp. 22-29). Quality of services is defined in the study of Kumar (Kumar et al., 2010, p. 353) as the ability of the organization and, thus, of the employees to determine which are the consumer demands, and to effectively satisfy them accordingly.

According to Aydin and Yildirim (2012, p. 219), delivering high quality services to consumers is the strategic key to survival in the current tourism industry while Caro and Garcia (2008, pp.706-720) believe that ensuring quality of services by the staff of tourism businesses is a critical success factor.

In most cases, a very important element which significantly influences the quality of services, in addition to those related to product or service selection, is the employee's selling behaviour (Catan, 2002). The attitude of the workers in the commercial area can inspire confidence and total openness from customers, but, well, it can have unimaginable effects on the

perception of tourists. An unmotivated employee, placid or who adopts an ostentatious attitude in relation to customers, or one who does not know what to do are some aspects that may discourage the customers in becoming tourists (Stanciu, 2012, p. 57). David McClelland and David Winter discovered that some employees have greater motivation for achievement than others. It is considered, therefore, that a simple way to solve the problem of motivation lies in hiring individuals with a high need to achieve performance, but these individuals can not be easily identified. Sometimes, precisely the position held acts as a barrier to getting achievements. Thus, if the job is not demanding for the individual, offering few opportunities for creativity, even if he seeks to obtain achievements, the end result will be a lack of motivation.

Rachel Yee, Andy Yeung and Edwin Cheng (2008, pp. 651-668) show to what extent motivation and employee satisfaction contribute to improving the service quality and Snipes, Oswald et al. (2005) find that satisfaction at work is one of the key factors in ensuring quality of services and increase customer satisfaction.

Employee satisfaction is influenced in turn by a number of factors such as daily work schedule, aspect treated by Valcour (2007) in his paper. The length range of the working day can cause serious consequences for the family and social plan, which inevitably leads to decreased satisfaction at work and the related lower service quality. Other factors that determine satisfaction at work and hence quality are: wages, seniority/experience, peer relations, management style applied in the agency, tourism studies etc. (Kara, Uvsal et al., 2012, pp. 1047-1065).

III. METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

One of the best ways of staff evaluation and improvement of provided services is selective research that uses the survey as a tool, that allows obtaining information quickly and with a high degree of accuracy of data, providing an insight into employee dissatisfaction and factors that influence the service quality of the company (Hapenciuc et al., 2008, p. 23). Based on a questionnaire, we can evaluate the integrity and loyalty of employees, their dissatisfaction, negative or positive factors influencing quality of service, attitude of employees in relation to the activities they carry and their consciousness to the brand and to the organization.

In order to determine possible factors influencing the quality of services provided by travel agencies in Suceava Municipality, we started, over the period 5 to 15 March 2015, a research which focused on interviews with 26 travel agents from 20 different entities across Suceava (Table 1). When setting the target group, absolute data taken from the official site of the National Tourism Authority (www.turism.gov.ro) was considered, and also

information obtained from the analysis performed on the field.

Table 1. Travel Agents in Suceava that were subject to the research

Agency Name	No. of interviewed travel agents	Licence Type	
		Retailers	Turoperators
BEST TRAVEL BUCOVINA	1		X
BILCO TRAVEL AGENCY	2		X
CHRISTIAN TOUR	1		X
DREAM TRAVEL	1		X
EXIMTUR	1		X
FILADELFIA	1	X	
GENERAL TURISM	1	X	
IASAIR TRAVEL	1		X
IASON TURISM	1		X
JUVENTUS NORD-EST	1		X
LIFE TOUR	2		X
MILLENIUM TOUR	1		X
MONNY TRAVEL	1		X
SIMPLY TRAVEL	2		X
TOURING EUROPABUS	3		X
TRAVEXY NORD	1		X
WEST TRAVEL	3		X
VIKING TRAVEL	1		X
IAKIUS	1		X
TOTAL	26	2	18

It should be noted that, at the moment of the study, we identified 24 travel agencies in Suceava, however, for objective reasons related to the internal politics of the agencies or the availability/receptivity of their employees, we obtained responses from employees of only 20 of them, the response rate being 83.3%. We also note that we excluded from the population studied, employees of tourism licensed firms, that have CAEN code 7911 - Activities of travel agencies and 7912 - Activities of tour operators, but only carry on activities specific to companies providing passenger (internal and/or external) transport or activities specific to agencies with incoming quiddity.

To record the responses, we used a questionnaire based on 35 questions, both open and closed, which address from general to particular, various possible factors influencing the quality of services. In order to identify and eliminate errors that occurred in developing questions and to efficiently correlate objectives of this research, the questionnaire was pre-tested on a sample of 5 people. Following the pre-test occurred ambiguities were analyzed in completing the questionnaire and certain questions were reviewed in order to be better understood by respondents.

IV. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND HYPHOTHESES

Specific objectives and hypotheses around which the whole research approach articulates are presented below:

Objective 1: Identifying the level of seniority in tourism of travel agents in Suceava.

Hypothesis 1: Most travel agents are older than 8 years in tourism.

Objective 2: Identifying the main reasons that have led the current travel agents to follow this profession.

Hypothesis 2: The main reasons that have led to current travel agents to follow this profession are related, most likely, to the passion for travel, namely the desire to practice in the field they studied.

Objective 3: Knowing the perceptions of Suceava travel agents on the main advantages and disadvantages of working in a travel agency and how they influence the quality of services provided.

Hypothesis 3: The main advantages of working in a travel agency are the opportunities to travel, to participate in various training programs, including infotrips. The main disadvantages are the relatively low wage levels compared to other industries and working long hours.

Objective 4: Determining the stage of peer relationships that are established in the travel agencies in Suceava.

Hypothesis 4: In general, travel agents in Suceava are satisfied with their relationships with coworkers.

Objective 5: Determining whether Suceava travel agents fulfill their personal and professional goals through the activity performed at their work place.

Hypothesis 5: Given the sheer volume of work and often extended working hours travel agents fulfill their personal goals to a smaller extent in comparison to the professional ones.

Objective 6: Determining the degree of satisfaction of employees in travel agencies on program / work schedule.

Hypothesis 6: The vast majority of travel agents in Suceava are satisfied with the daily work, complaints intervening only when, due to heavy workloads, the program is extended by a certain number of hours.

Objective 7: Assessing the level of theoretical and practical knowledge interviewed travel agents possess and their opinion on the need and importance of tourism educational experience in providing high quality services.

Hypothesis 7: Fewer than half of Suceava travel agents have completed higher education in tourism or a training course / training in the field. Opinions on the importance of tourism studies are divided, depending on experience and conjunctural situation undergone by each agent individually.

Objective 8: Determining the freedom degree in making decisions and travel agents opinions about the importance of freedom of decision in good conduct of business in the travel agency.

Hypothesis 8: Most travel agents believe that decision freedom is a very important aspect in the daily work carried out within the agency, but many say they are not free in terms of decision making.

Objective 9: Measuring satisfaction of Suceava travel agents on monthly wage.

Hypothesis 9: Less than half of Suceava travel agents are satisfied with monthly income obtained from work performed in the workplace.

V. RESULTS OF RESEARCH

Assuming that the length of service in tourism automatically ensures a minimum level of experience in this field, we can say that in order to ensure a high quality of service, the two concepts (age and experience) are of major importance. Regarding travel agents in Suceava, when surveyed, we found that 38.46% have been working for less than 1 year in the current travel agency, 38.46% already have length of service and hence major experience, working for over 5 years in the same organization, and, on the opposite, an equal 11.54% have a length between 1 and 3 years, respectively 3 and 5 years.

In terms of overall experience in tourism, we can see that 26.92% of all agents who have been surveyed have an experience between 1 and 3 years in the same proportion as agents with between 5 and 7 years of experience. Interestingly, less than 23% of all agents interviewed have been working for more than 9 years in tourism, which allows them, at least theoretically, to ensure a high quality of services, in terms of accuracy of the information provided, and safety transmitted to the client (Figure 1).

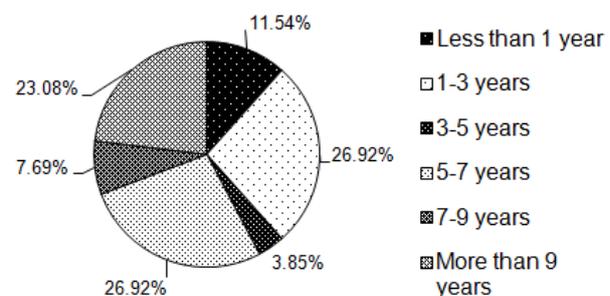


Figure 1 – Length of service of interviewed tourism agents

As in any other field, working in tourism requires, undoubtedly, a number of advantages and some disadvantages, more or less substantial. Regarding the advantages of working in tourism, surveyed agents believe that the opportunity to travel (to participate in infotrips) is one of the main advantages of working in a travel agency. In this sense, 57.69% of the surveyed agents participating in the study argue that the opportunity to travel is an advantage of the utmost importance, scoring this element with a maximum score of 5 on a Likert scale from 1 to 5. Moreover, most of the surveyed agents

consider participation in infotrips to improve service quality since agents have, on one side, the opportunity to acquire knowledge on destinations and, on the other, to relax, to socialize, to share experiences with other colleagues.

Table 2. The main advantages of working in a travel agency

Advantages	Cumulated scores	Average
The opportunity to travel (infotrips)	110	4.23
The opportunity to work with people	111	4.26
The possibility of a flexible schedule	74	2.84
Ability to relate with other tour operators	108	4.15
Participation in various courses, seminars paid by the Agency	107	4.11
The ability to purchase holidays at preferential prices	106	4.07

As shown in Table 2, we see that in the opinion of Suceava travel agents, the main advantage of working in a travel agency is the opportunity to work with people and then the opportunity to travel, ability to relate to other tourism operators, or even the possibility to purchase holidays at preferential prices. In these circumstances, we can say that there are prerequisites to ensure high quality services and achieving a high level of customer satisfaction.

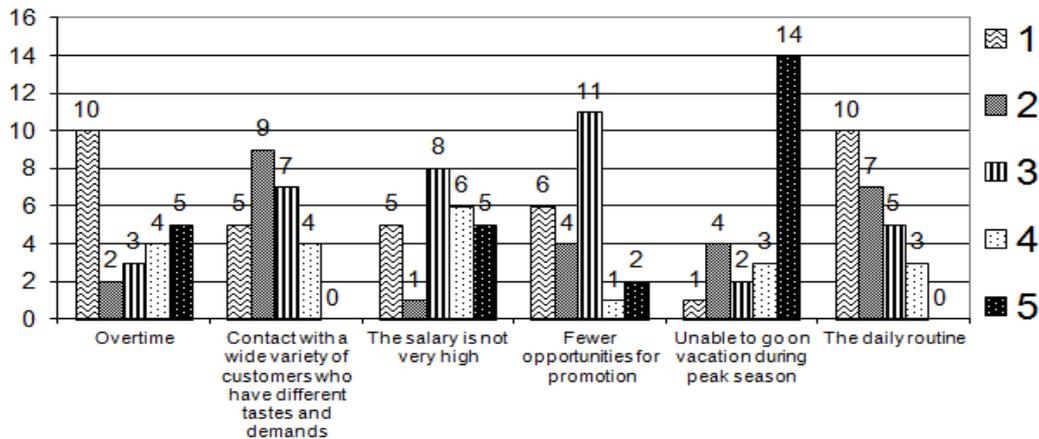


Figure 2 – The main disadvantages of working in a travel agency

As can be seen in Figure 2, the respondents are of the opinion that impossibility to go on holiday during the season is, unequivocally, the main disadvantage of the profession of travel agent. During this period, work in travel agencies is extremely complex, high workload and, therefore, in conjunction with the lack of motivation, the premises to decreased service quality arise and hence the level of satisfaction expressed by customers.

Cumulated and average score situation (Table 3) reveals that, according to travel agents, the second largest professional disadvantage is the relatively low wage levels compared to those in other fields. According to respondents, the minimum disadvantage is the daily routine, which demonstrates that working in a travel agency often requires the fulfillment of various tasks, meeting new people with different requests, issues that do not allow the establishment of routine.

Table 3. The main disadvantages of working in a travel agency

Disadvantage	Cumulated scores	Average
Extended schedule	64	2.46
Contact with a variety of clients who have different tastes and demands	60	2.30
Wage level is not very high	80	3.07
Fewer opportunities for promotion	61	2.34
Unable to go on holiday during peak season	97	3.73
Daily routine	51	1.96

One factor that does not allow the establishment of routine and has a high influence on work climate and hence quality of services is the relationships that travel agents have with coworkers. So, of all agents working in one of the agencies with two or more employees, 57.69% are very satisfied with the relationships with coworkers, 34.61% believe that peer relations are satisfactory, and 7.69% of respondent agents declare themselves neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with their relationships with colleagues at work.

A highly motivated travel agent carries a sustained activity in the workplace, but not every intense effort leads to performance. The employee must

also channel these efforts to meet organizational objectives, which form the qualitative component of the effort. The closer the personal goals are to the organization, the greater contribution the effort will make to the organization expected results, as the misalignment of these goals will result in poor performance at work, represented by a lower quality of service provided and hence, by a low degree of customer satisfaction. In this context, we found that 57.69% of all agents interviewed say they meet in a high proportion their personal goals through the work carried out within the agency, and 26.92% think that they accomplish personal objectives in the workplace in a very high proportion. In terms of professional goals, 65.38% of agents believe that they reach to a large extent these objectives through daily activities within the agency, and 23.07% think that they fulfill their objectives in a very large extent (Figure 3).

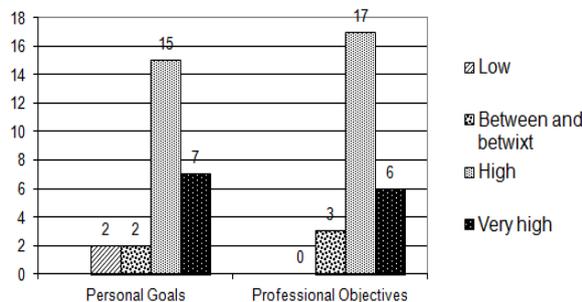


Figure 3 – Balance between achieving personal goals vs professional goals

A comparative analysis of the average score for the fulfillment of personal goals (1.03) and fulfilling professional goals (1.11), we see that travel agents in Suceava reach their professional goals in a slightly higher percent than their personal goals, but the overall situation is balanced.

Salary package and long work hours remain major concerns for European workers, especially in countries that have overcome the economic crisis, according to the barometer Edenred - Ipsos (www.edenred.com). Accordingly, daily work schedule is a factor influencing the quality of services. It is already known that specific activities of travel agencies require long work programs and very demanding for agents. Productivity decreases along with quality services, when the work schedule extends in other industries. Thus, overtime contributed to decreasing output per hour, and so reducing the potential for productivity growth. Overall, 53.85% of all travel agents surveyed are satisfied with the daily work in the agency, and 15.38% show a maximum degree of satisfaction on this aspect. It should be noted that only 3.85% of all respondents claim their dissatisfaction with the work program.

According to the same Enred-Ipsos barometer, the salary package is the most frequent cause for concern among European workers. This element is the main concern of travel agents in Suceava also, while

only 16.67% of them consider themselves very satisfied with the monthly salary (Table 4), 20.83% are dissatisfied with wage levels, while 29.17% say they are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

Table 4. Level of monthly salary received by travel agents in Suceava

Salary level	Relative value
500 – 700 lei	11.11%
701 – 900 lei	22.22%
901 – 1100 lei	33.33%
1101 – 1300	22.22%
1301 – 1500	5.56%
Over 1900 lei	5.56%

Human resources experts believe that travel agencies managers must find various non-financial ways for the motivation of employees, given that budgets for salary increases are almost nonexistent. Undoubtedly, one of the non-financial ways of motivating employees is to ensure freedom of decision. According to this study, we find that 84.61% of respondents see freedom in decision making as a very important factor in the smooth functioning of daily activities of the Agency and only half are satisfied with the level of freedom of decision in the company, and 19.23% say they enjoy complete freedom in making decisions. Interestingly, 3.85% of employees in Suceava travel agencies are totally dissatisfied with the decision-making freedom, saying that they are barred from all points of view when it comes to make some important decisions in everyday activity.

The success of a travel agency depends to a large extent on the quality of human resources and how they performed various activities for the organization. Therefore, we believe it is imperative that employees have completed studies in tourism, before taking up a position in this sector. However, certificates / diplomas certifying training in tourism are not a guarantee of quality training or quality of services, but rather the premises for a good development of business.

Situation in Figure 4 shows that only 15.38% of all agents followed high school in tourism. Although 92.3% of employees have a Bachelor degree, only 45.8% of them hold a bachelor's degree in a field of tourism profile. Master cycle studies have been pursued by 46.15% of agents that have undergone the study, about 84% of them focusing on a degree in tourism.

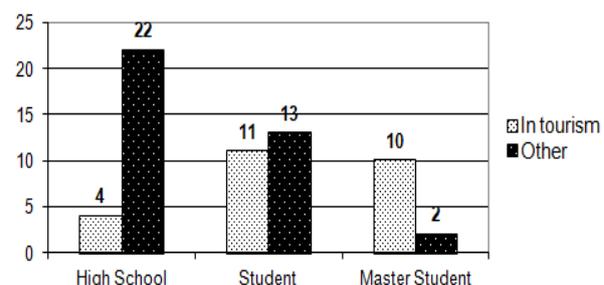


Figure 4 – Level of training in the field of travel agents in Suceava

Regarding the significance of tourism studies, opinions differ among travel agents in Suceava, whereas only 46.15% consider studies in tourism as very important, and 7.69% say that having a degree in tourism is important. In contrast, 3.85% of agents believe that studies in tourism have no relevance to the smooth running of daily activity within the agency, and 15.38% reinforce this opinion, considering education as simply unimportant.

Of great importance is, however, training and development of staff, level of training and specialization of each worker in tourism. This has two major lines of action: raising the level of employee training and changing the mentality of the tourism worker, long and not lacking complexity process. From this point of view, it is good to note that 42.3% of surveyed agents followed complementary skills courses and / or training in tourism.

We find that 53.85% of agents would agree to participate in various training courses and seminars in order to ensure a high quality of service. Interestingly, 19.23% of agents have agreed to participate in such training but with certain reservations pertaining to their

concerns about the possibility of participating in a ineffective training program, that will not bring any new information to agents involved. Also, 23.08% of agents are undecided about future likelihood to participate in such courses and seminars, while 3.85% are partially against participation in these training programs.

A form of training specific to travel agents is the participation in infotrips. The infotrip is the "journey" organized by a tour operator for partner travel agencies (reseller), where a particular destination is visited, hotels, resorts, restaurants are "tested", leisure bases etc. An infotrip is not a holiday, but rather a "recognition" trip of the destination in order to familiarize with it (www.turismmarket.com).

According to travel agents interviewed, this form of training is of paramount importance, since 73.07% of agents believe that infotrips are very important, while 26.93% consider them to be important. In terms of frequency of participation in infotrips, we see (Figure 5) that more than half of travel agents in Suceava participate once a year in such displacements.

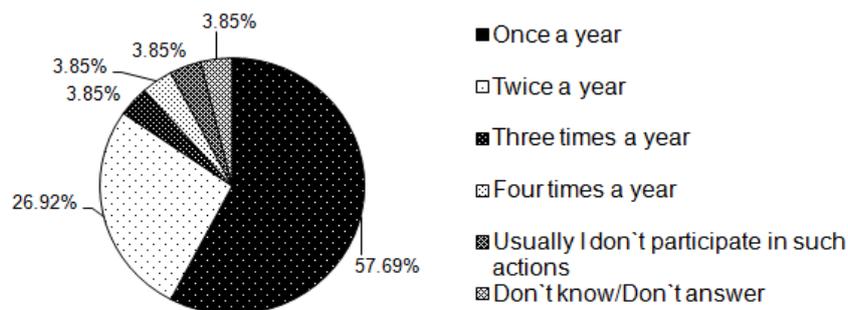


Figure 5 – Frequency of participation to infotrips of travel agents in Suceava

VI. CONCLUSION

In the analysis carried out on the ground, we find a number of possible factors that can influence the quality of services in tourism agencies in Suceava: level of seniority in tourism, which inevitably leads to routine, the main drawbacks of work at a travel agency, high workload that may underlie personal achievements, the degree of freedom in decision making etc.

We consider that the assumption that most travel agents in Suceava have been working for more than 8 years in tourism, is verified by analyzing the results, as well as the main reason why most of them chose to pursue this profession, namely the opportunity to travel. However, according to the opinions of travel agents surveyed, the main advantage of working in a travel agency is the opportunity to work with people, then the opportunity to travel, which leads us to consider the hypothesis number 3 as false. Another conclusion that we can draw from the study conducted is that travel agents in Suceava do not perceive this profession as one that does not allow you to achieve

your personal goals, but on the contrary, the situation is balanced, thus demonstrating that the hypothesis on this is a false one.

Study results confirmed the hypothesis that the vast majority of travel agents in Suceava are satisfied with the daily work, the degree of dissatisfaction is very small (3.85%), dissatisfaction only intervening when, due to heavy workloads, the program is extended by a certain number of hours.

In the composition of hypothetical elements that might affect the quality of services we can mention: collegial relationships - most declared themselves satisfied with the relationships formed at work (assuming no. 4 confirmed) and daily activities - travel agents in Suceava, in average, reported to be satisfied with the daily work they perform in the Agency. The level of theoretical and practical training of travel agents play an important role in the quality of services provided, however, some travel agents consider this as unimportant, result confirming the hypothesis at point 7. Also tourism agents in Suceava either agree, but with certain reservations or are undecided or partially against in terms of the probability of participating in future training courses and seminars.

We believe that continuous education of employees is an effective method to improve the quality of services, but also a technique to stimulate employees and attract new customers. Training programs for travel agents should be designed according to specific needs of the travel agency, determined by its areas of activity. It is essential that, regardless of their background, training programs work towards the establishment of a sense of loyalty from employees, the formation of conscience that the company and hence their future employment depends on their efforts.

Interestingly, the monthly wage is the main concern of travel agents in Suceava, this having a significant role in the factors influencing the quality of services, as well as the freedom they have in making decisions - which in the case of (3.85%) of travel agents is lacking, results broadly confirming assumptions 8 and 9.

VII. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF THE RESEARCH

This paper presents some limits, but without a solid impact on its results. One of these limitations is the refusal of some travel agents to respond positively to our research approach. Thus, for reasons more or less objective, related to company policy or the simple availability / responsiveness of employees, the answers were obtained only from 26 travel agents from 20 different agencies, the responses level reaching just over 83%.

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Wishing to cover a broad range of issues related to possible factors that influence the quality of services provided by travel agencies in Suceava, we resorted to using a comprehensive questionnaire consisting of 35 questions, both closed and open, fact that often sparked restraints from travel agents to respond fully to all the questions.

We believe that in order to obtain a high response rate and better accuracy of the results, the questionnaire could be optimized in the sense of its restriction.

In any case, this work is preliminary, outlining an approach for future investigation, following which to formulate concrete solutions leading to improved conditions underlying the judicious provision of services specific to a travel agency. Moreover, one of the development directions of the study aimed at taking into account performing the survey with an annual periodicity in order to process data and obtain dynamic analyzes that can bring us a clearer picture of the phenomenon.

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