



## **Re-examination of job experience on service quality**

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### **Abstract**

Travel agencies believe that experience can effectively upgrade the service quality and list it as a key item in the qualifications for the perspective employees. This research questions this assumption – the correlation between job experience and service quality, because of no empirical evidence. The tour guides, office worker and the customers were required to answer the questionnaires. As indicated in the results, the travel agencies' assumption is not necessarily valid. This research also suggested that KASO's-- Knowledge, Ability, Skill and Other factors such as personality-- and motives are critical elements regarding the employees' service quality. This research falsifies the assumption of the practices.

**Key words:** Travel agencies, tour guides, office worker, experience, service quality.

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## **Introduction**

The travel industry is very much a “people business” in which staffs make all the difference in the consumer experience (Powers and Riegel, 1993). As indicated in previous researches (Wang, Hsieh and Huan, 2000; Gould-Williams, 1999; Hartline and Jones, 1996; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1995; Goldsmith, Flynn & Bonn, 1994; Bitner, 1990; Heskett, 1987 and Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985; Schmidt, 1979), contact employees exert a strong influence on the service quality as perceived by the consumers. Consequently, travel agencies always upgrade their service quality through recruiting suitable employees (Lovelock, 1985; Schlesinger & Heskett, 1991; Schneider & Bowen, 1985, 1995; Zerbe, Dobni & Harel, 1998).

Earlier researches have confirmed that the professional knowledge increases as the job experience increases (Schmidt, Hunter and Outerbridge, 1986) and, as a result professional abilities of individual increase (Hunter, 1983). The job experience results in the increase of skills, techniques, working methods, and psychomotor habits; thereby bring the professional abilities to full play (Campion, Cheraskin and Stevens, 1994; Guthrie & Olian, 1991; Howard & Bray, 1988; McCall et al., 1988; Gabarro, 1987; Markham et al., 1987; Schmidt, Hunter and Outerbridge, 1986). Therefore, all personnel psychologists believe that the job experience affects the job performance (Schmidt, Hunter and Outerbridge, 1986) and, consequently, job experience is a key criterion for the selection of employees (Bartkus, 1995; Greenberg and Greenberg, 1989; White and Dillon, 1988; McDaniel, Schmidt and Hunter, 1988; APA, 1980; Levine and Flory, 1975; Blum and Naylor, 1968; Guion, 1965). Usually, the travel agencies consider the experience (Bartkus, 1995; Bartkus, Hartman, Michael Parent, 1994; Alfus, 1992) knowledge, techniques, and skills as the criteria when they select employees (Ross, 1997; Kaufman et al., 1996). In this connection, the most critical challenge for the travel agencies is how to find the suitable employees (Bartkus, Hartman & Parent, 1994). Therefore, travel agencies believe that experience can effectively upgrade the quality of service and, as a result, list the experience as a key item in the qualifications for the perspective employees.

Travel agencies always stress the importance of job experience when they recruit employees. The travel agencies' help-wanted advertisements listed in the job-opportunity web site justify this phenomenon (104 job-opportunity bank's web site:

2006-<http://www.104.com.tw/cfdocs/new-jobnews.dbm?>). According to the data of April/May 2006 listed in “104 job-opportunity bank” – the largest job-opportunity web site specializing in help-wanted and job-wanted services in Taiwan – there were 425 job opportunities in Taipei City alone listed in the food/beverage/transportation category, including the vacancies of 56 travel agencies. Forty-four travel agencies stated “travel agency-related experience required” in their advertisements as the criterion for the job applicants, regardless of whether the applicant was applying for the office staff or tour guide. Why do travel agencies stress so much on the job experience when they recruit employees? As a matter of fact, the emphasis on experience is derived from a commonly accepted assumption: profound job experience upgrades the quality of service. Therefore, the travel agencies believe that both office staff and tour guides’ experience affect the quality of service and they can predict the employees’ quality of services based on their experience. Moreover, no research has been made up till now to find out if the travel agencies should place equal emphasis on job experience for both office staff and tour guides.

### **Hypothesis**

Previous researches have shown the service quality perceived by customers is highly dependent on the employees who provide services (Wang, Hsieh & Huan, 2000; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1995; Goldsmith, Flynn & Bonn, 1994; LeBlanc, 1992; Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985). According to LeBlanc’s research of 1992, the employees’ capabilities affect the service quality perceived by customers significantly. If the travel agencies’ employees have the knowledge and skills to provide satisfactory services, customers perceive the service as good service. Therefore, we can conclude that the experienced employees can accumulate working knowledge profoundly; are more skilled (Schmidt, Hunter and Outerbridge, 1986) and more capable (Hunter, 1983); know how to design and deliver the services expected by customers (Roth & Jackson III, 1995); and thus minimize the uncertainty in the process of delivering services and provide services steadily (Roth and Jackson III, 1995; Cohen, 1985; Cohen, 1982). Because the services are stable, the reliability, response, capabilities, and safety requirements to a certain level of superior service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985). Therefore, the employees

with profound experience can provide better services to customers. Based on these inferences, it is hypothesized as follows:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** *Travel agency employees' job experience correlates with their service quality positively*

The difference between office staff and tour guides of travel agencies is significant with respect to working environment and duties. As compared to tour guides, the office staff is in a certain and dependent position concerning the working environment and duties. The office workers are present repeatedly at the same workplace and have the opportunities to acquire new experiences with their supervisors' and co-workers' help (Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998). Therefore, with co-workers' assistance, the less experienced office workers' performance will not be affected simply because of their lack of experience. On the other hand, tour guides are in a completely difference situation. With the unique nature of their jobs, the tour guides have to play a number of roles, such as pathfinder, mentor (McKean, 1976), information and knowledge provider (LeBlanc, 1992; Cohen, 1985; Holloway, 1981; Nettekoven, 1979; McKean, 1976), leader (Oxford, 1933), mediator (Pearce, 1982; Nettekoven, 1979; de Kadt, 1979), middleman (Van den Berghe, 1980), culture broker (McKean, 1976; Nettekoven, 1979), temporary babysitter (Cohen, 1985; Holloway, 1981; Schmidt, 1979; Buck, 1978), etc. These roles indicate that the tour guides' duties and working environment are more independent, complicated, and uncertain than those of the office staff (Cohen, 1985). The supervisors have no way to control or monitor the tour guides' performance (Wang, Hsieh and Huan, 2000; Cohen, 1985) and, therefore, the tour guides cannot resort to their supervisors and co-workers for backup. In order to handle their duties properly, such as guiding the tours (Cohen, 1982; Holloway, 1981), safe control of tourist groups (Holloway, 1981; Schmidt, 1979; Buck, 1978), enhancing the group members' cohesion (Holloway, 1981; Schmidt, 1979), upgrading group members' interest (Cohen, 1985; Holloway, 1981), briefing the sightseeing spots (Cohen, 1985; Cohen, 1982; Pearce, 1982; Holloway, 1981; Schmidt, 1979; Nettekoven, 1979; Buck, 1978; McKean, 1976; MacCannell, 1973), and handling emergencies (Cohen, 1985; Schmidt, 1979), the tour guides need to possess a high level of professional knowledge and skills (Roth & Jackson III, 1995; Chase *et al*, 1984; Chase & Tansik, 1983; Cohen, 1985; Schmidt, 1979; Chase, 1978) and the abilities to solve problems (Ross, 1997; Holloway, 1994; Gregory, 1989; Cohen, 1985; Cohen, 1982; Holloway, 1981; Schmidt,

1979; Nettekoven, 1979; McKean, 1976), so as to accomplish their duties successfully and maintain a certain level of service quality. In other words, the tour guides' experience affect their service quality significantly. As far as personnel administration is concerned, the top priority for selecting employees is to match the duties (business) and manpower (humans) perfectly so as to achieve the goals (e.g. good service quality. Therefore, conditional relationship should be allowed if the employee's experience is used to predict service quality. In other words, the office workers can depend on supervisors and co-workers for backup, but the tour guides cannot look up to any one for help. The office workers and tour guides are in different situations with regard to influence on service quality because of experience. Based on these inferences, it is hypothesized as follows:

**H<sub>2</sub>:** *For the travel agencies, the office workers and tour guides are not in the same position with respect to the influence on service quality by experiences.*

As indicated in the archives, the knowledge-based capabilities are extremely important for the service industry that maintains a high level of contact with customers (Roth and Jackson III, 1995; Chase & Tansik, 1983; Chase, 1978). The tour guide is an information and knowledge provider (LeBlanc, 1992; Cohen, 1985; Holloway, 1981; Nettekoven, 1979; McKean, 1976) and is required to meet certain qualifications in order to earn his/her licenses and is, therefore, the most professional employee in the travel industry. For the employees who have to carry out the non-routine and non-formatted duties in a versatile and independent working environment (Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998), job experience is particularly important. In an independent working environment without any supervisor's and co-worker's help and with a high level of uncertainty and complexity (Cohen, 1985), the less experienced tour guides are unlikely to comprehend their extensive job knowledge in a short period of time (Ross, 1997; Holloway, 1994) and, therefore, cannot provide good services.

As compared to the tour guides, the office workers work with their supervisors in the same workplace and can, therefore, sharpen and develop their skills with their supervisors and co-workers' help (Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998; Maurer & Tarulli, 1994; Noe & Wilk, 1993; Kozlowski & Farr, 1988; Kozlowski & Hulst, 1987). With their sufficient backup, the office workers can resort to their supervisor's and co-worker's for help whenever problems arise; and the supervisors and co-workers can help the office workers to learn skills from work (Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998; McCauley *et al*, 1994) and apply new

knowledge and skills to work (Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998) in order to handle complicated tasks in the future (Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998; Ford *et al.*, 1992). Therefore, the office workers' lack of experience is compensated; the office workers still can handle the emergencies; the office workers' services can meet a certain level of requirements and their service quality is unaffected even though they lack experience. Therefore, experience affects the tour guides more than the office workers.

As discussed above, job experience affects the service quality vitally. This becomes apparent in the case of tour guides. Tour guides cannot resort to supervisors and co-workers for help. The office workers can obtain help from supervisors and co-workers anytime. In this connection, job experience affects the service quality of tour guides more than that of office workers. Therefore, it is hypothesized as follows:

**H<sub>3</sub>:** *Job experience affects the service quality of tour guides more than that of the office workers of travel agencies*

## **Methodology**

### *Sample and Data Collection*

As shown by previous researches, the customers' perception of quality of service offered to them highly depends on the employees who provide services (Wang, Hsieh & Huan, 2000; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1995; Goldsmith, Flynn & Bonn, 1994; LeBlanc, 1992; Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985). This research randomly selected 30 travel agencies from the northern, central, and southern areas of Taiwan as sample; and sent out questionnaires to the tour guides and office staff of the Direct Sales Department of the 30 travel agencies; then sent out customer questionnaires to the group members guided by all tour guides of the sample as well as the customers assisted by the office staff of the sample.

Prior to the questionnaire survey, the supervisors of tour guides and office staff were telephoned for the survey details; and the supervisors announced their participation in this questionnaire survey in order to acquire the cooperation of employees and customers. The tour guides and office workers who provided services to customers as well as the customers who received services were required to answer the questionnaires. The customers were required to indicate the name of his/her service provider on customer questionnaires to make it clear that the service quality customer received was from an

office worker or a tour guide. Then, according to the name list customer indicated, questionnaires were sent out to tour guides and office workers who were mentioned in the customer questionnaires. Sending out questionnaires and receiving questionnaires took three months. Out of 500 questionnaires sent out to customers, 258 (51.6%) responses were received. Out of 258 questionnaires sent to employees 237 (91.86%) responses were received.

### *Measurement*

Based on the 10 dimensions presented by Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1984, 1988) regarding the assessment of service quality, LeBlanc (1992) identified 6 elements that affected customers' perception of the travel agencies' service quality--corporate image, competitiveness, politeness, response, accessibility, and competence. The results support the knowledge existing in the service quality dimensions presently. Based on the SERVQUAL scale of Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1988), the researcher followed the recommendations of Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1991) to revise and adjust the original scale according to the features of the travel industry. The purpose of this research is to clarify the relationship between employees' experience and the service quality perceived by customers. From the 22 items originally contained in the SERVQUAL scale, this research deleted the items irrelevant to contact with customers and reserved 14 items; then used a 7-point scale ranging from "much worse than what I thought" to "much better than what I thought" and the scale's Cronbach'  $\alpha = 0.96$ , which means that this scale was highly reliable.

Based on the job experience model developed by Tesluk & Jacobs in 1998, two quantitative indexes were used to measure the employees' job experience- one, use time (McDaniel, Schmidt & Hunter, 1988a; McEnrue, 1988; Borman, Hanson, Oppler, Pulakos & White, 1993) as the basis (e.g. the number of years employees have stayed in their organization) - the seniority in the travel industry for both office workers and tour guides. Two, use quantity (Lance, Hedge & Alley, 1989; Vance, Coovert, MacCallum & Hedge, 1989) as basis (the number of certain tasks, or the total number of various tasks for employees) - use the number of groups guided by the tour guide as the basis for measurement.

### *Validity and Reliability*

This research used the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to analyze and test the effect of implementation. The purpose of this stage of the analysis was to identify and eliminate poorly performing items for the reflective measures. It was found that GFI = 0.9123 and AGFI = 0.8755. Both figures were larger than 0.8. The t value of 14 items in SERVQUAL table fell in the range between 13.1718 and 17.0449. All t values were in the significant level, meaning the proper distribution of all data with effective implementation. The scale's Cronbach'  $\alpha$  = 0.96, indicated that all items of the scale were highly consistent, were suitable for inclusion into analysis, and were highly reliable.

## **Result**

### *Basic Analysis*

As far as the questionnaires for employees are concerned, 258 questionnaires were sent out and 237 responses were received; and 229 questionnaires were usable that included 81 from tour guides and 148 from office workers. The average work experience of the interviewed employees was 3.94 years. The number of groups guided by a tour guide annually in the last 3 years was 7. The average work experience of the tour guides was 3 years.

In the case of questionnaires for customers 238 responses out of 258 were received. Of these 234 questionnaires were usable with 94 men and 140 women responding. 46.6% of the respondents were in the age group between 20 and 29. The majority of respondents were graduates from junior colleges (63.3%). As far as the professions are concerned, most respondents were in either "Business" (29.9%) or "service industry" (27.4%). Most respondents had visited foreign countries 1 – 3 times (86.8%). Most respondents had toured Asian countries (58.5%), followed by USA and Canada (17.9%) and Europe (15.4%). Only 47% of respondents were 'satisfied with the service of travel agencies', 34.2% of respondents said they chose the travel agencies through 'the recommendations of friends and relatives', 24.4% of customers said the reason for choice was 'services'.

### *Relativity analysis*

The test indicated that there was a significant positive correlation between the 'seniority of the employees of travel agencies in the travel industry' and the service quality perceived by customers (0.11,  $t = 0.048$ ). Another significant positive correlation was between the 'number of groups guided by a tour guide annually in the last 3 years' and the

service quality perceived by customers (0.145,  $t = 0.014$ ). These findings support the first hypothesis: travel agency employees' job experience correlates with their service quality positively.

*2-way ANOVA test*

This researchers tested hypothesis H<sub>2</sub> using 2-way ANOVA and found the insignificant cross influence (0.858) between 'if respondent is a tour guide or an office worker' and 'the seniority of the employee of the travel agencies in the travel industry', which did not support the hypothesis 'for the travel agencies, the office workers and tour guides are not in the same position with respect to the influence on service quality by experiences'. The cross influence imposed by these 2 variables was insignificant. Therefore, this research used t- test and 1-way ANOVA to analyze if there was any difference among 'the service quality perceived by customers', 'if respondent is a tour guide or an office worker', 'number of groups guided by a tour guide annually in the last 3 years', and 'seniority of employees of travel agencies in the travel industry'.

*t-Test*

t- Test was used and it was found that the difference (0.067) between 'service quality perceived by customers' and 'if respondent is a tour guide or an office worker' was significant. The average score for the tour guide was 8.720E-02; and -0.1650616 for office workers.

Table 1: t-Test for independent samples of 'if respondent is a tour guide or an office worker'

Variable	Number of Cases	Mean	SD	SE of Mean
Office worker	148	-0.1650616	1.0715016	7.7667E-0.2
Tour guide	81	8.720E-02	0.9448658	0.1190557

*One-way ANOVA test*

One-way ANOVA was used to analyze if there was any variance between the 'service quality perceived by customers', 'number of groups guided by a tour guide annually in the last 3 years', and 'seniority of employees of travel agencies in the travel industry'.

The results indicated that there was a significant difference between the ‘service quality perceived by customers’ and ‘number of groups guided by a tour guide annually in the last 3 years’ ( $t = 0.039$ ). There wasn’t any significant different between the ‘service quality perceived by customers’ and ‘seniority of employees of travel agencies in the travel industry ( $t = 0.062$ )’.

%

Table 2: t-Test for Equality of Means

Variances	t-value	df	2-Tail Sig	SE of Diff
Equal	1.775	147.994	0.078	0.1421496
Unequal	1.841	227	0.067	0.1370150

Levene’s Test for equality of variances;  $F=1.567$

## Discussion

All travel agencies assume that the employees’ job experience upgrades the service quality and, therefore, consider the job experience a major criterion when they recruit employees. However, this assumption falls short of empirical evidence. This research questioned the validity of this assumption and, as a result, studied this issue and presented the findings in this paper.

The findings supported hypothesis H<sub>1</sub> ‘travel agency employees’ job experience correlates with their service quality positively’, but didn’t support hypothesis H<sub>2</sub> ‘for the travel agencies, the office workers and tour guides are not in the same position with respect to the influence on service quality by experiences’ and hypothesis H<sub>3</sub> ‘job experience affects the tour guides more than the office workers of travel agencies’. On the other hand, there was a significant variance between the ‘service quality perceived by customers’ and “if the respondent is a tour guide or an office worker”; and the tour guides’ average score was higher than that of the office workers’ average score. These findings indicate that the service quality perceived by customers varies between office workers and tour guides. In other words, “as far as performance is concerned, customers feel that the tour guides’ services are better than the office workers’ services”. This finding coincides with the findings of McCauley *et al* (1994) - those who are in a highly independent and challenging environment will be inspired and take actions to accomplish their goals,

thereby providing better services than the office workers do. The work environment of office workers is steadier than that of the tour guides'. And office workers' job complexity is much less than tour guides'. Office workers would have strong motive and enthusiasm to perform their service or not will affect the perception of service quality customers. Because of this reason, customers feel that the tour guides' services are better than those of the office workers' services.

On the other hand, the findings indicate a significant variance between 'service quality perceived by customers' and the 'number of groups guided by a tour guide annually in the last 3 years' and the average variance between those who guide tour groups more than 16 times per year and those who guide tour groups less than 15 times was between +0.5 and +0.8. This finding coincides with the opinions of Tesluk & Jacobs (1998): if the jobs are non-routine and non-formatted and the employees are in a unique and diversified environment, the qualitative indexes of the employees' job experience (e.g. the number of guiding tour groups implies the complexity of jobs) make sense. The cross influence between 'if respondent is tour guide' and the 'seniority of employees of travel agencies in the travel industry' is not significant; and there is no significant variance between the 'service quality perceived by customers' and the 'seniority of employees of travel agencies in the travel industry'. Based on these findings, it was concluded that the 'seniority of employees of travel agencies in the travel industry' does not affect customers regarding their perception of the quality of services provided by office workers and tour guides. In other words, no matter how many years the employees of travel agencies have worked in the travel industry, there is no significant variance for the service quality perceived by customers. These findings support the opinions of Gordon & Johnson (1982): few data suggests that the seniority is sufficient to serve as an effective index for selecting employees.

#### *Managerial implication*

The findings indicated that the travel agencies' assumption – the relationship between job experience and service quality – is not necessarily valid. The qualitative indexes of the employees' job experience (e.g. the number of guiding tour groups implies the complexity of jobs) make sense. The travel agencies' assumption 'experience upgrades the service quality' (40 travel agencies out of 44 require 1-5 years job experience – 104 manpower bank website, 2002, <http://www.104.com.tw/cfdocs/new-jobnews.dbm?>) does not confirm

Those who list job experience as the key qualification for selecting employees need to revise this requirement. The travel agencies should not consider the applicants' seniority alone. They need to include the qualitative indexes of job experience in the criteria (e.g. the number of guiding tour groups implies the complexity of jobs) as well. That is the only way to make the criteria comprehensive.

As far as personnel administration is concerned, the KASO's (knowledge, abilities, skills, and personalities) and motives serve as the major criteria for selecting employees. A suitable employee for travel agency needs to possess enthusiasm and ambition (Ross, 1997; Holloway, 1994), work motives (Gregory, 1989), personality and the professional abilities to solve problems (Ross, 1997; Gregory, 1989), and be capable of providing service to customers' satisfaction as well as that complies with the requirements of politeness and abilities. In other words, the employees of travel agencies need to meet the requirements of KASO's and the motives. Then they would be suitable employees and could help the travel agencies upgrade the service quality by selecting the right employees (Lovelock, 1985; Schlesinger & Heskett, 1991; Schneider & Bowen, 1985, 1995; Zerbe, Dobni & Harel, 1998). Therefore, both KASO's and motives are critical elements for the quality of service provided by employees; and both KASO's and motives are equally important.

#### *Suggestions for further studies*

Seniority has been used as a quantitative index to measure the employee's job experience in many researches. Even companies recruit employees using seniority as the basic qualification. However, as indicated by the findings, qualitative indexes will be a better way to measure the employee's job experience. The way to measure job experience is just an unidentified field. Future researchers can try to clarify this construct and build a model for job experience, which can make more advanced researches find out the relevant knowledge about job experience.

This research took an analytical approach to study the relationship between the employees' job experience and the service quality. A few researches took the analytical approach or presented the relationship between KASO's and other variables just as concepts. Therefore, other researchers can try to study the relationship between KASO's and other variables by a system approach, and thereby clarify the interaction between all the variables.

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