

Challenges to the professional training of cruise industry employees in Bulgaria

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Abstract: Today, the tourism sector is one of the industries that generate some of the highest levels of employment. The tourism industry as part of the whole concept of travel, tourism, and entertainment also annually marks a remarkable growth in its development. The need for well-trained and promising personnel in the sector is becoming more and more tangible, given the desire of the business to recover quickly after the years of the pandemic. In order to meet the global demand, managers in the industry are joining their efforts in the direction of human resource development in order to optimize recruitment processes and study the possibilities of retaining well-trained specialists. The study of the relationship between the two economic activities, tourism, and the cruise industry, in terms of the creation and development of prospective manpower, will highlight the range of professional growth with high importance to the cruise business.

Keywords cruise industry; professional training; tourism; employees; Bulgaria.

1. Introduction

Professional training is a key element in the development of human resources in the cruise industry. The specificity of the working environment determines the requirement for available complex knowledge and skills of those employed in the sector. The psychological attitude of working away from home, communicating in a multicultural and multinational environment, skills to work under pressure, and insufficient time for rest and free time activities, are some of the challenges facing future employees (Karadencheva, 2022). Furthermore, a gap exists between efficient employment and adequate remuneration, exacerbating staff turnover in the industry.

On the other hand, this modern type of tourism offers a wide variety of work positions in different departments and an extremely wide range of ongoing training and professional development. But a need for improvement is observed to attract more motivated and skilled employees (Fedotova et al. 2019). Changes in working conditions, upgrading the social benefits package, preparing a development plan and goals, and seeking constant feedback are just some of the measures that would increase the profession's attractiveness.

Modern educational training for personnel in the cruise industry worldwide reveals new directions for improving knowledge and skills for teamwork, conflict resolving, multi-tasking, cross-department training, and building sustainable educational habits. However, the use of technological innovations in the educational process has a positive effect on the development of the cognitive and creative activity of the students (Molodchik et al. 2018; Slyusarenko et al. 2021). This modernization is characterized by a combination of traditions with new ideas, which are related to the introduction of digitalization in the maritime industry and logistics (Dimitrakieva et al. 2023; Yotsov et al. 2017). The level of staff training depends on many factors and conditions, but building effective communication between educational institutions and business for the optimal result is determinative.

Moreover, the cruise industry is known for its constant evolution. From technological advancements to changing customer preferences, staying updated with industry trends poses a significant challenge for training

programs. Ensuring that students have a deep understanding of industry-specific subjects while also covering broader hospitality and service principles can be a challenge.

2. Aim/Purpose of the study

In this regard, the present study aims to find out how well the personnel and students studying in Bulgaria are prepared to meet the above-mentioned work environment specifics related to the cruise industry and whether operational mechanisms and standards are available to give them the confidence and freedom to make an informed and aware choice of workplace.

The object of the study is both employees in the industry and those who are in the process of training in the following areas:

- Hotel and restaurant management;
- Tourism and leisure management;
- Tourism;
- Management of cruise ships;
- International tourism business;
- Tour operator, agency, and transport activity;
- Food technologies in the culinary arts.

3. Methodology and limitations

The challenges facing new employees are highly polarized, for this reason, a SWOT analysis is performed to create an overview framework and highlight the main areas for improvement of the professional training of personnel with professional qualifications for working on a passenger ship. Thus, the areas in which the representatives of the business will take action would stand out, so that their employees do not just survive until the planned vacation on the coast, but are confident, motivated, and responsible to be present and work in the team. SWOT analysis is not the only approach that is widely used to review strategies, positions, and directions for a specific organization and product, but it is also applicable to any industry (Morrison 2016, Helms & Nixon, 2010).

The process of data collection for the present research contains observation of national statistical data, recruitment companies' job descriptions and publications, news, and feedback received from students studying in educational programs in Nikola Yonkov Vaptsarov Naval Academy and are closely related to the professional field of tourism and cruise industry. The statistical data, primarily sourced from national databases, was used to identify trends, validate the qualitative insights, and gain a broader understanding of the industry's workforce dynamics. Job descriptions were collected through a systematic approach. Sources such as publicly available job postings on websites, recruitment agencies, and industry-specific job boards were also used. To ensure relevance, eligibility criteria considering only job descriptions related to positions within the cruise industry was applied.

Most cruise lines work in partnership with national and regional recruitment agencies to hire the most suitable personnel (Cruise Lines International Association, 2020). Considering the fact that they are key players for both the cruise business and the employees, the present study will be limited to observing the qualification of their candidates. Another reason is that most cruise companies are unavailable for direct contact for information-gathering purposes.

4. Overview of the professional training related to the cruise industry in Bulgaria

The human factor in the cruise industry is undeniably the leading power and regardless of new technologies and the drive toward computerized management, in the travel and tourism service sector, it cannot be replaced.

Modern trends in the development of the cruise sector form high requirements for the organization and content of the training process of specialists, changes in the travel and tourism market also put pressure on the pace of personnel development, in addition, tourists themselves are now more demanding and expect a high quality of the products and services offered (Scherbak 2022). To offer quality services according to the wishes and preferences of tourists and to provide better personal service to functions at different hierarchical levels in

tourism enterprises and organizations is required staff with specific knowledge, skills, and competencies in various fields of knowledge, but refracted through the prism of tourism (Yancheva et al. 2016).

The cruise industry faces a number of challenges in terms of recruiting service personnel who can successfully integrate into the dynamic work environment while developing loyalty to the employer company and a willingness to upgrade in the future. In this regard, this research aims to explore the attitudes and difficulties that tourism professionals encounter on their way to a sustainable and attractive career on board.

Bulgaria is a maritime country in Northeastern Europe, bordering the Black Sea to the east. Historically, the direction of the country's development has been and still is extremely strongly determined by its geographical location. In the economic aspect, the construction of the infrastructure and superstructure of the ports supports trade and supply activities growth (Gancheva 2021). In order to provide a workforce in the maritime sector and to prepare qualified specialists for work in national and international companies, maritime educational institutions have been established in the country (Mednikarov et al. 2019). In parallel with this, the development of the tourism sector in Bulgaria contributes to the emergence of specialized educational structures engaged in the education and training of tourism personnel. The territorial concentration of the people employed in the Tourism sector, based on statistical division, follows the flow of tourists, and it is mainly in the Black Sea region - Northeast and Southeast statistical regions (Mileva 2012).

As of March 2023, there are 15 higher education institutions in Bulgaria that train students in the field of Tourism (Table 1).

Higher education institutions	City (Country)	Program
Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski	Sofia (Bulgaria)	Tourism
University of Forestry	Sofia (Bulgaria)	Management and alternative tourism
Varna University of Management	Varna (Bulgaria)	Hotel Management; Hospitality and Culinary arts; Food Technology and Culinary arts
University of Economics Varna	Varna (Bulgaria)	Tourism; International Tourism
International Business School	Botevgrad (Bulgaria)	Tourism and entrepreneurship
The University of Food and Technology	Plovdiv (Bulgaria)	Tourism and culinary management
New Bulgarian University	Sofia (Bulgaria)	Business and Entrepreneurship Management
South–West University Neofit Rilski	Blagoevgrad (Bulgaria)	Tourism
Agricultural University of Plovdiv	Plovdiv (Bulgaria)	Agricultural Tourism
Veliko Tarnovo University	Veliko Tarnovo (Bulgaria)	Tourism
Nikola Vaptsarov Naval Academy	Varna (Bulgaria)	Management of passenger ships
University Prof. Dr. Asen Zlatarov	Burgas (Bulgaria)	Tourism
University of Plovdiv Paisii Hilendarski	Plovdiv, Smolyan, Kardzhali (Bulgaria)	Tourism
Shumen University	Shumen, Varna, Dobrich (Bulgaria)	Tourism
College of Tourism Blagoevgrad	Blagoevgrad (Bulgaria)	Organization and Management of tourist services; Organization and management of hotels and restaurants
University of National and World Economy	Sofia (Bulgaria)	International Tourism and Economy

Table 1. Bulgarian University Ranking (2022)

A brief overview of the announced programs in Bulgarian higher educational institutions indicates the acquisition of the necessary knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary for successful implementation in the tourism and cruise industry. The main skills are developed in the following directions: Hotel and Restaurant Management; Hospitality Management; Tourism; Customer Service Management; Animation and free time activities; Tour Operator, Travel Agency, and Transport Activity; Food and Beverage service; Culinary Arts.

It is important to note that, compared to the labor market in the cargo sector, in the cruise industry the diversity of work positions, hierarchical features, and the increasing size of ships results in a more complex organizational structure (Wu 2005). In this regard, the mentioned various skills are extremely important for

securing the vacant job positions and can be highlighted as a competitive advantage in favor of Bulgarian students.

The main challenge facing universities and colleges in Bulgaria is how to prepare students who can successfully meet the needs of the business. Educational materials and theoretical concepts must not remain only in academic halls but rather be turned into practice and together with good practical tools to achieve the objectives of society (Dimitrakiev et al. 2010).

A study of the demographics of cruise ship personnel highlights a fact that should not be overlooked, namely that workers from industrialized countries are aware of the terms of the contract for a specific job position, while those from Eastern Europe (including Bulgaria) often do not know to the last detail what work they will be hired for, primarily interested in wage, working hours and contract duration (Bulikhov 2009, Raub, 2006). In the same research, Bulikov mentions that recruitment agencies in Eastern Europe collect fees from candidates for job placement. An observation of the information submitted by the agencies nowadays shows a change in this trend and confirms that recruitment services in Bulgaria are free of charge to applicants.

5. SWOT analysis

The data published by the statistics were used as an analytical tool to determine the opportunities and threats for Bulgarian employees in the cruise industry. While national specificities of a cultural nature supported by feedback from recruitment agencies contributed to the assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of working in the industry.

Analysis of the research results and the subsequent findings and conclusion will be a good basis for future improvements and for creating a successful pathway in the cruise business, prior to safety and well-being, working time, and work-life balance.

5.1 Strengths

- International career development by moving from country to country and becoming part of the experience economy (Hjalager 2003).
- There is an increased interest in pursuing a profession on board a cruise ship. Combining work with travel also attracts candidates who until recently practiced their profession on the shore.
- Obtaining higher professional qualifications on a luxurious cruise ship with high-class service provided.
- Constant feedback and evaluation of the work by the employer. Every employee on a cruise ship is passing through different types of assessments in order to receive feedback.
- Most cruise lines have established and managed orientation kits in order to help employees to become productive more quickly, to instruct them on how to do the job correctly, and create team fellowship and cooperation. This contributes to a high level of consistency in employee training and development

5.2 Weaknesses

- Higher education in Travel and Tourism, passenger ship management, or customer service operations is not a mandatory requirement for applicants. The minimum requirement is a high school education, which calls into question the practical skills of the employees.
- Previous experience aboard passenger ships is optional. Few cruise lines have this requirement as mandatory. This can result in the inability of workers to reliably adapt to the physical, psychological, and social working environment of a passenger ship.
- Recommendations from previous employers are not mandatory, and if they are available, they are not a guarantee of a successful interview.
- Lack of detailed and accessible information on possibilities for conducting “on-the-job” training in the Travel and Tourism, and cruise industries. Providing such information in advance, the employees will be more confident in the work environment.
- The plenty of regulations, checklists, etc. that make everyday responsibilities difficult for staff. In addition to that increased control by on-board supervisors may seem disconcerting to employees (Ariza-Montes et al. 2021).

5.3 Opportunities

- Opportunity to become familiar with widely established management systems, processes, and tools concerning the long-term maintenance of a high-quality tourism product/service.
- Opportunity for quality training and qualification/re-qualification of staff involved in the process of providing high-quality products and services to cruise ship guests.
- Communicating in a multicultural and multinational environment.
- Developing loyalty to the organizations and building trust to the team.
- Opportunity for short-term contracts for students during their education in the field of tourism.

5.4 Threats

- Limited social contacts and the psychological attitude of working away from home are prerequisites for uncertainty in a long-term cruise industry career.
- Insufficient time for rest and free time activities. Feedback from recruitment agencies reveals that the majority of employed Bulgarians are not prepared for long work shifts. Also, working under pressure and the ability for multitasking are required in some situations (Gundić et al. 2021).
- Routine in performing daily duties and reluctance to professional upgrade due to exhaustion. Cruise companies should provide continuous training, extremely important for setting and achieving new goals for employees.
- Lack of preliminary information concerning medical insurance and social benefits while working on board.
- Irregular actions regarding receiving more tips.

The modern educational training of personnel in the cruise industry faces challenges stemming from rapid technological advancements, diverse skill requirements, language barriers, and high turnover rates (Radic et al. 2020, Raub et al. 2023). However, there are numerous opportunities to address these issues and improve the quality of training.

By leveraging e-learning, simulation technologies, industry partnerships, multicultural training, and sustainability education, the cruise shipping educational institutions can develop a highly skilled and adaptable workforce. This, in turn, will enhance the passenger experience, improve safety standards, and contribute to the long-term sustainability and growth of the industry.

6. Conclusion

The cruise industry's rapid recovery post-pandemic underscores the urgency for well-prepared, educated personnel (Brewster et al. 2020). The efforts of the companies are focused and forced to push the business in the direction of upgrading and improving the offered products and services. Furthermore, the cruise HR management faces a number of challenges related to recruit and developing well-educated and trained staff with strong personal intentions to work on a cruise ship.

However, collaboration between educational institutions and industry stakeholders is essential for effective training. Higher education institutions and their subdivisions should establish sustainable communication with the representatives of the business sector in order to ensure reliable student orientation and future possibilities towards „on-the-job” training as a successful path to future professional growth in the labor market.

While employee recruitment and selection are crucial to a cruise organization's success, they do not guarantee that employees will perform well. Cruise companies should provide training to new employees to transform their high potential into high performance. In the cruise industry, service and quality determine the success or failure of a service. Not surprisingly, the employees determine the level of service provided, and, thus, the overall quality of the guest experience. Therefore, well-considered, adequate training should be provided to ensure guest satisfaction and, ultimately, increased profits. Investing in the education and training of cruise industry personnel is not only a necessity but also an opportunity for the industry to set new standards for excellence and innovation in the global tourism sector. Through strategic planning and a

commitment to excellence, we can prepare the next generation of cruise industry professionals for a rewarding and fulfilling career at sea.

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