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PERCEPTION AND REALITY IN TRAVEL-RELATED EMPLOYMENT

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ABSTRACT

College students choose a major or an area of specialization for a variety of reasons. Earning potential, parental pressure, perceived demand and sometimes accident may enter in. They often report choosing travel and tourism or related fields based on pre-employment expectations of the glamour and excitement that this field is thought to provide. Graduates of many fields often enter professions and occupations only to find that reality does not meet pre-employment expectations. As the tourism and travel industry matures, and greater numbers of students are attracted, differences between expectations and experiences take on added importance. The objective of this study was to ascertain, the actual experience across the U.S. in a variety of travel/tourism occupations. This paper concerns the special comments made by those surveyed relative to their extreme "likes" and "dislikes".

PERCEPTION AND REALITY IN TRAVEL-RELATED EMPLOYMENT

INTRODUCTION

Travel- and tourism-related businesses provide an increasing number of employment opportunities. Recent reports indicate that the industry employs some five million people in the United States.(8) According to

most accounts, tourism and travel now ranks in the top three sources of income generation in the country. Projections suggest that employment in the industry will continue to increase at a rate exceeding that of job creation in general.(1)

College students, in their choosing of a field/major, may not have access to adequate information to make wise choices. In fact, the public in general may suffer from a lack of awareness or confusion as to the:

- * importance, composition, diversity and complexity of the industry
- * recent origin of certain industry sectors
- * occupations and professions within the industry
- * recent emergence of tourism and travel as an academic field of study

"Glamour and excitement" of the travel industry are the characteristics most commonly instilled by media advertisements, travel company brochures, the family vacation experience and popular television entertainment. Published occupational career guides allude to this as a career motivator.(5) Professional literature is largely silent on the matter. Students frequently have no access to "war story" telling trade publications. Real issues, though perhaps not intentionally, are often masked. The question becomes--"How close to reality are pre-employment perceptions?"

This part of the larger study, results from two open-ended questions, was designed only in part to reveal:

- * attitudes of persons currently employed in the industry toward their jobs
- * differences in attitudes between travel agency owners, managers, owner/managers and travel agents toward their jobs

It was expected that pre-employment perceptions of the "glamour" of tourism- and travel-related positions may differ from actual experiences as stated by those surveyed.

METHODOLOGY

A survey instrument for tourism and travel professionals was constructed and mailed to a stratified proportionate nationwide sample of 2,000. There was slightly more than a 25% return. This paper presents the results from two of the survey's open-ended questions as follows:

- * What one thing about your job do you like best ?
- * What one thing about your job do you like least ?

These "open-ended" questions provided a great diversity of responses. A limitation, however, was that many individuals gave more than the "one" response requested. It was also difficult to subjectively cluster "similar" responses together in meaningful categories; for example, "travel, trips" (as employment benefits).

RESULTS

What one thing about your job do you like best? There were a total of 572 responses from 472 respondents to this question (because of the multiple responses).

A summary of the top ten responses (by frequency) follows, with corresponding frequencies and percentages:

<u>Most Favored Tasks</u>	<u>Frequency</u> (n=572)	<u>%</u>
meeting, helping the public	165	29
satisfying customers, hearing client memories	101	18
travel, trips	96	17
variety, diversity	66	12
building itineraries, dreams	46	8
challenge, problem solving, responsibility, keeping busy	27	5
learning about new places	26	5
co-workers	18	3
freedom, being my own boss, working at my own pace, managing, controlling my own schedule	16	3
corporate/commercial accounts	11	2

A great variety of other responses was given including: working on the computer, ownership, closing a sale/salesmanship, selling tour groups, "nothing", promoting special interest tours, working only part-time (mentally), working under pressure, advancement opportunity, the changing industry, the career, writing, using the telephone, my boss, attending seminars, summers (when it's slower), morning coffee and Friday afternoons.

Varying degrees of taste were reported with respect to high-count "best-liked" job characteristics by those employed in travel agencies.

<u>Most Favored Task</u>	<u>Job Category</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>% of Category Response</u>
satisfying customers, hearing client memories, having vicarious experiences	Owner	17	12
	Owner/Manager	95	44
	Manager	130	9
	Agent	211	21
meeting, helping the public	Owner	17	53
	Owner/Manager	95	11
	Manager	130	42
	Agent	211	41

travel, tips	Owner	17	18
	Owner/Manager	95	19
	Manager	130	22
	Agent	211	21
variety, diversity	Owner	17	18
	Owner/Manager	95	15
	Manager	130	17
	Agent	211	13

With respect to enjoying the travel benefits and variety/diversity, there seems to be little difference in attitude between those with different job titles in travel agencies. However, they did report quite different feelings about meeting and helping the public as well as about satisfying customers, hearing client memories and having vicarious experiences.

What one thing about your job do you like least ? There were 534 responses from 472 respondents to this question.

A summary of the top ten responses follows, with corresponding frequencies and percentages:

<u>Least Favored Tasks</u>	<u>Frequency</u> (n=534)	<u>%</u>
paperwork, details, follow-up, office duties	78	15
low pay/commissions, no benefits/advancement	77	14
complaining/demanding customers/public	68	13
supplier failure, cancellations, lack of product control, inferior products	67	13
stress, constant change, rush, overload	53	10
non-buying callers	21	4
deregulation, mixed fares, price wars, best deal hunt, competition	21	4
airlines' rules, no service, greed, abuse	12	2
long hours	12	2
nothing	12	2

A great variety of other responses was given including: debt collection, quoting fares/routes/ticketing, constant changes (client itineraries, suppliers, fares), agents (poor quality, unprofessional, "pig-headed", lazy, ignorant), lack of public knowledge of our job (They think we enjoy glamour, travel benefits only.), dealing with uneducated suppliers (many with poor attitudes), computer lag, being put "on hold" (telephone), terrorism, public speaking, "cheapskates", my owner, administering personnel (hiring/firing), being away from my children, lack of travel opportunity, selling vacation packages, immense amount of time spent on the telephone, lack of recognition, constant interruptions, slow days, sales and marketing, solving problems, outrageous airline newspaper ads, client indecision (They want me to make their travel decisions and then be accountable if things don't go just right.), commuter sales/cheap airfares, being the middleman, re-work/correcting errors, homework, unfamiliar planning, office meetings, co-worker job dissatisfaction, holiday travelers, office politics, people overdose, corporate take-overs, cruises, airline award certificates, new college/university graduates thinking the job only involves free travel benefits (one which we had hoped not to see!) and lack of glamour (one which we had hoped to see more of!).

Once again, varying degrees of distaste were reported with respect to high-frequency "least-liked" job characteristics by those in travel agencies.

<u>Least Favored Tasks</u>	<u>Job Category</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>% of Category Response</u>
paperwork, details, follow-up, office duties	Owner	17	6
	Owner/Manager	95	22
	Manager	130	29
	Agent	211	11
low pay/commissions, no benefits/advancement	Owner	17	18
	Owner/Manager	95	1
	Manager	130	16
	Agent	211	24
complaining, demanding customers/public	Owner	17	35
	Owner/Manager	95	12
	Manager	130	22
	Agent	211	10
supplier failure, cancellations, lack of product control, inferior products	Owner	17	18
	Owner/Manager	95	24
	Manager	130	14
	Agent	211	11

Owners were the least dissatisfied with complaining customers. Owner/managers were the most dissatisfied with supplier failure; managers with paperwork and agents with pay and benefits.

REMARKS

Perhaps one of the most significant results of this study was the response of more than 25%. This was anticipated by the researchers in view of their numerous previous conversations with industry employees expressing criticisms toward the "inadequate preparation of university graduates."

A few summary remarks can be made:

- * There were 38 more statements of satisfaction made than statements of dissatisfaction.
- * Only approximately 20% of the sample of 572 respondents to the first question listed "travel, trips" (benefits) as the "one thing" they liked about their job the "most".
- * There were 7 respondents who reported a "lack of glamour" and "lack of access to travel benefits".
- * The list of job characteristics liked "least" was far more diverse than the list of those liked "best"; nearly double in number.
- * When comparing the categorical responses for each of the two questions, there seems to be considerable contrast, perhaps reflecting the roles of the different groups. For example, owner/managers may be somewhat insulated from meeting the public and hearing their complaints while agents may have built a certain degree of immunity toward complaints. Owner/managers may have the most at stake for supplier failure.

Generally, some concluding remarks could be made from responses to the two questions reported in this paper. At least 78% of the groups surveyed did not report "travel, trips" (the glamour variable most often associated with travel-related employment) as being a "most favorable task." This is not surprising. Many industry employees, even cruise sales representatives who take frequent cruises, will voluntarily state their fatigue from travel as well as their dislike for the "working trip."

It must also be said that one could not enjoy working in the industry without also enjoying meeting and helping the public, and certainly listening to their complaints. Selfish motives alone such as "free travel", high income, good benefits, advancement opportunity, working in a stress-free environment with no "busywork" would not be those reflected in this employment setting.

The positive and negative characteristics identified in this paper may actually reach beyond the four classes of position titles covered. Smaller groups of tour guides and wholesalers responded to the survey. Their responses to these questions seemed to follow the same patterns. However, the responses were too few to represent a broad perspective.

While at this point in time, most universities would not expect a large number of graduates to join the ranks of travel agencies, it is possible that this field will make itself more attractive in the future with higher salaries and improved benefits. Agencies may become larger and more sophisticated, thus requiring a higher level of skill as predicted by many industry leaders. However, the "agent" will probably always be the entry level in this sector. Thus, certain characteristics of this type of employment will continue to be expected. Furthermore, no matter what sector of the travel industry the student has in mind, his/her expectations may, in fact, be based upon pre-existing perceptions of the travel agent's job in terms of benefits and opportunity.

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