

What will it take for travel consultants to survive?

They say that the universities and colleges of today are training people for careers that don't even exist. According to the World Economic Forum, some 65% of children entering primary school today will ultimately end up working in completely new job types that have yet to be created.



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The rate at which new industries are being born and old industries are becoming obsolete is fuelled by disruptive changes to business models. And few industries are experiencing that rate of disruption more than travel, with the advent of sharing economy services and new technology.

The question we should be asking in travel is: **What are the skills that future travel professionals will need to do their jobs?** Our ability to anticipate and prepare for these future skills requirements is critical if the travel industry hopes to survive and grab the opportunities presented by these trends. That is, embrace the change through skills development, instead of running away from it.

Survival skills of the future

Global Education Research Fellow, Tony Wagner, highlights seven survival skills of the future that young people entering the workforce need to meet their full potential. These include critical thinking and problem-solving; collaboration across networks and leading by influence; agility and adaptability; initiative and entrepreneurship; effective communication; accessing and analysing information and curiosity and imagination.

According to Monique Diez from the Association of Southern African Travel Agents (ASATA), the travel industry should be training for flexibility and agility in business. “We should be exposing travel consultants to new trends all the time. It is critical to understand a changing customer, who is not only more informed than ever before, but also has instant access to far more options other than their travel agent.”

Consultants need to be seen as the experts, not only in travel but in travel-related technology, says Diez. They need to develop a broader knowledge of what’s available and to share value adds to address itinerary, risk and expense management if these are not already offered by their employer.

Travel consultants of the future need to offer far more than point-to-point airfares, agrees Sam van Gool, Flight Centre Travel Group Peopleworks general manager. “They need to be masters of their craft by embracing technology, providing 24/7 communication, personalising the needs of their clients and ensure customer convenience, allowing them to engage when and where they choose.”

How has the role of travel consultant evolved?

In the past, travellers questioned consultants less, and were not as quick to hop online to verify information or options given, says Diez. “It’s important to build that trust again by informing customers of all the options but making recommendations based on the consultant’s experience and expertise. We all know what can go wrong when booking online with no fall-back in place. So, it is important to create that security, but not be closed to alternatives.”

The professionalism of the travel industry is something ASATA has placed great emphasis on, having recently been awarded the status of a professional body by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). The association is the first in the travel industry in South Africa to be able to award a professional designation to travel consultants.

To remain relevant, Diez suggests that travel consultants, who are serious about their career and future, register on the ASATA Professional Programme and apply for a professional designation. “One of the biggest advantages of the app is that it allows ASATA to present a personalised Training Needs Analysis, not only to the applicant and employer but also to training providers.

“This can be used to create a career path for individuals in the travel industry, as well as give training providers a clear brief on what training is needed and how they can best add value to the industry by offering relevant training that helps contribute to the Continuous Professional Development (CPD) points consultants need to retain their professional designation.”

How to remain relevant

Van Gool also offers the following advice for consultants wanting to remain relevant in this new environment:

- Join social network groups for travel consultants, e.g. industry-specific Facebook groups, so you can share information with your peers.
- While you can never be an expert in all destinations, the internet can often be a confusing and inaccurate source for customers, which is why travel consultants need to ensure they offer accurate and reliable information so customers can trust them as the experts.

- The travel industry is changing faster than ever before, so consultants should sign up to tour operators, airline, tourist board and travel website newsletters to ensure they keep abreast of the most current developments.
- Become an expert on the products you offer and understand the extras and unique offers that will make you stand out above the internet, which cannot understand the customer's unique needs.
- Ensure you are the expert on all online booking tools and GDS system enhancements so that the booking process is seamless.
- The travel industry offers many types of fares – student, companion, immigration, private, seaman, air passes, circle trips, etc., which the internet does not offer to customers that fit these profiles. Talk to the airline reps and research on TravellInfo so that you become an airfares expert.
- Understand emerging markets, which is an evolving market sector and has specific requirements you need to understand to service correctly. It is more important than ever to understand the customer's needs and how the customer thinks. A consultant can no longer just 'tell' the customer about the destination. Rather, they must sell the experience providing an end-to-end customised itinerary that will differ from client to client.

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