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Sales Competency Identification: A Thai Incentive Travel Business Case

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Abstract

Thailand strives to promote the MICE sector in order to even off the seasonal demand of the tourism industry, which has secured the economic and social welfare of the nation for decades through foreign income and employment. However, the productivity of Thailand its MICE human capital is considerably lower than that of many other leading MICE regional destinations (18 times lower than Singapore, for example). Human resource management and development warranted urgent attention from stakeholders of the industry. Competency-based human resource management has been recognized for its superiority to a task-based approach due to its ability to facilitate employees' versatility and adaptability to external changes and growth plans. To improve the productivity of Incentive Travel, a component of the MICE industry, threshold and differing competencies must be identified. Through structured in-depth interviews with different groups of stakeholders of Incentive Travel's sales executive about threshold, differing, and ideal performance and competencies in regard to knowledge, skills, and attributes, competencies of such a position were identified. The researchers found that threshold competencies mismatched the key success factors of the Incentive Travel Industry. Only differing and ideal competencies, which can rarely be found in job incumbents, would contribute to the achievement of success factors. Discrepancies of stakeholders' expectations were found. Job descriptions were developed from a task-based approach and were vaguely formulated. Apart from competencies, organizational conditions, especially organizational culture and leadership styles, might enhance or decrease the competency potential of employees. A competency-based approach to human capital management is advised by focusing on competencies that contribute to the key success factors

Keywords: Thailand. MICE. Incentive Travel. Competency. Human Resource Management

01. INTRODUCTION

Business Travel, which is a broader view of MICE (Meeting, Incentive Travel, Convention, and Exhibition), otherwise known as the Business Event Industry, has increased its significance in most destinations, including Thailand, over decades. Thailand used the MICE industry to even out the demand for its tourism products due to seasonality of its reputable leisure tourism markets. This sector also attracts much attention from business operators for business travelers' reputation of high spending and their destination friendly behaviors (Firoiu, Dodu, & Patrichi, 2011). Considering the Thailand Travel and Tourism Competitive Index 2013, in which Thailand was ranked 43rd out of 140 countries and 9th in the Pacific Asia sub-region, the sub-indices also showed impediments to its competitiveness in regard to Business Travel and MICE (Blanke & Chiesa, 2013). Thailand was ranked 90th in regard to ICE infrastructure and 77th in regard to regulatory and legal environment, and 70th in regard to human resources. Within the human resources index, quality of education system and availability of skilled labor also seemed problematic, which is consistent with the results shown in the Barnes Report about the statistics of Convention and Exhibition Industries worldwide (Barnes Report, 2010; Blanke & Chiesa, 2013). Table 1 illustrates the average sales per employee of Thailand's convention and exhibition business as compared to its neighboring countries.

Table 1: Comparative statistics of sales per employee of Thailand with neighboring countries

<i>Country</i>	<i>Sales/ Employee</i>	<i>PPP Ratio</i>	<i>PPP Sales/ Employee</i>	<i>Efficiency Ratio</i>
Singapore	340,631	1.377	469,048.89	18.08
Australia	135,533	0.851	115,338.58	4.45
New Zealand	114,590	0.973	111,496.07	4.30
Japan	108,873	0.819	89,166.99	3.44
South Korea	20,549	1.634	33,577.07	1.29
Malaysia	15,191	1.966	29,865.51	1.15
Thailand	12,551	2.067	25,942.92	1.00

China	12,698	1.81	22,983.38	0.89
Indonesia	8,084	1.769	14,300.60	0.55
India	4,026	2.816	11,337.22	0.44
Philippines	4,601	2.006	9,229.61	0.36

Adapted from: (Barnes Report, 2010)

Table One shows sales per employee of average Thai convention and exhibition companies adjusted by the purchasing power parity (PPP) to ensure comparability of the number of countries of different levels of cost of living. Thailand had 12,551 US\$ sales per employee, equivalent to 25,942 US\$ after adjusting the outstanding figure by PPP. Using Thailand as the basis for comparison, it can be seen that Thai convention and exhibition employees are 18 times less productive than those of Singapore and 4-5 time less productive than those of Australia and New Zealand. The statistics also show that the peer competing destinations of Thai convention and exhibition firms are South Korea, Malaysia and China.

It can be argued, however, that the productivity ratio as compared to neighboring countries cannot be attributed to employees' productivity alone. There might also be industrial, market, and organizational as well as destination factors that influence the figures shown in the above table. Despite such facts, personnel productivity cannot be left out of consideration when determining strategic ways to increase the competitiveness of the Thai MICE sector.

Competition among firms and nations is not limited only to market factors but also to the development, attraction, retention, and motivation of talents (Testa & Sipe, 2012). Human resource management and development has increased its role in the modern business environment, where changes are happening at an unprecedented rate (Jain & Haley, 2009) in from unpredictable directions (Roland Berger Strategy Consultants GMBH, 2011), and humans are now regarded as a type of major capital, which can be appreciated or depreciated with good or bad management like other types of assets.

Thailand's entrance to the ASEAN Economic Community, when skilled labor and foreign capital are expected to fluctuate in the country, means that opportunities and threats avail themselves for Thai MICE operators and labor market to conquer (Economic Intelligence Center: Siam Commercial Bank, 2011). The Mutual Recognition Arrangement (MRA), through the use of the ASEAN Common Competency Standards (ACCS), is now used to

ensure mutually agreed minimal standards for personnel in different sectors, according to the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement on Services (AFAS), which now covers seven professional areas including Tourism and Hotel (ASEAN Secretariat Office, 2009; Department of Trade Negotiation, 2012). The Common Competency Standards for Tourism Professionals cover 32 positions in Hotel and Tourism Industry (Soydhurum, 2012; Tourism Personnel Development Institute: Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2011). Although the completed competency standards and reinforced do not yet cover any positions in the MICE industry, it is expected that the standard framework will expand itself to positions in the MICE industry in the foreseeable future. It would, therefore, be more beneficial for the whole industry as well as for educators and the future workforce to increase the work standards by taking an active stance through the development of its own professional standards at the national level before the standard framework prescribed by ASEAN secretariat is imposed on it, which will lead to the country competing with other destinations from a reactive stance. The two major MICE industry professional associations, the Thailand Incentive and Convention Association (TICA) and the Thai Exhibition Association (TEA), have been well aware of these potential challenges and are acting to set their own job standards at the earliest possible opportunity.

Within the MICE industry, Incentive Travel is one of the major sub-industries with high revenue generating power reputation (Ricci & Holland, 1992) and a wide range of services consumed from local businesses (Severt & Breiter, 2010). Despite the fact that incentive travel clients and the participants want to create an experience that awes participants while inducing desirable behavioral changes towards exceptional performance through recognition and trophy experience, one conflicting point of interest between host and participants can be identified, namely budget and quality (Incentive Travel Council & SITE International, 2012; Severt & Breiter, 2010; Shinew & Backman, 1995). On this point, Thailand can capitalize its “value for money” image it has been well recognized by business travelers from all over the world as the first destination that offers such a benefit (Future Brand Index, 2011) by offering a trophic experience for participants within the budget range of the host organizations. It is the sales agent or sales representative’s competence in designing the program that excites and impresses the clients’ organization within their constraints that determines the success of business. The work standards of sales representatives should, hence, be a priority to be developed to serve as guidelines for personnel management and development, both by practitioners and educators nurturing graduates to serve the sector.

Amid changes, working natures and industry dynamism need to plan the workforce to be adaptive and versatile to uncertainties of the industry and the market (Hirvonen, 2011). Competency-based human resources and development are gaining higher acceptance from both scholars and practitioners as compared to their task-based counterparts (Bhatawdekar & Bhatawdekar, 2012; Holton III, Coco, Lowe, & Dutsch, 2008). A competency-based approach to human resources management and development also allows the management to take a long-term approach to each human capital it has by planning their career path, growth and succession plans (Bhatawdekar & Bhatawdekar, 2012; Soderquist, Papalexandris, Ioannou, & Prastacos, 2010). Considering both the importance of the Incentive Travel subsector's role in MICE and Tourism as a whole and the uncertainties of working and competitive environments, this particular study aims to

- Identify competencies required for a sales executive in the Thai Incentive Travel Business
- Identify competencies that distinguish top performers and average performers as Sales Executives in the Thai Incentive Travel Business
- Provide decision guidelines for human resources managers and job supervisors in recruiting, evaluating, training, and retaining Sales Executives in the Incentive Travel Business in Thailand

02. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Incentive Travel

Among the MICE sub-industries, Incentive Travel is the most desirable market in regard to destination tourism management bureaus due to the high spending power of clients and the number of services and products consumed by both clients and participants thanks to their nature of fantasy experience creation and other team-building activities included in the program to further motivate already exceptionally productive performers to shift their behaviors towards another level desired by the companies' management (Ricci & Holland, 1992; Severt & Breiter, 2010). As a managerial tool primarily used in the fields of sales and marketing, Incentive Travel is used to motivate employees or distributors, both as individuals or teams, to achieve an uncommon goal by promising rewards and trips that offer them an extraordinary, or "Trophy", experience (Severt & Breiter, 2010; Shinew & Backman, 1995).

Currently, Incentive Travel is used outside the scope of sales and marketing, located instead in other functional areas of big corporations, including finance and administration, with the primary objectives of not only motivating employees but also of seeding a desirable culture, and of stimulating profit growth through higher productivity and efficiency of resources utilized (Ricci & Holland, 1992). Practically, it can be said that Incentive Travel is meant to motivate the behavioral shift of key staff or distributors towards exceptional goal achievements.

The effectiveness of behavioral shifts influenced by Incentive Travel depends on a number of factors, including the appeal of the rewards and the trip, prestige associated with the “earners’s” status, good memories of the trip, recognition by top management, and camaraderie among top performers (Ricci & Holland, 1992; Severt & Breiter, 2010). However, the Incentive Travel programs that appeal to all targeted participants become harder and harder to design due to cultural and social diversity as well as to fast evolving tastes and preferences (Incentive Travel Council & SITE International, 2012).

The use of Incentive Travel as a managerial tool started in the 1960s, initially to stimulate sales forces and distributors to work extra miles to stimulate sales to the market followed by European. For Americans, the preferred destination is Europe while Asia was reported to be the preferred destinations for Europeans (Ricci & Holland, 1992). Unlike Europeans, Asian companies tend not really to understand the primary objective of Incentive Travel and do not use it as a reward for top-performing employees (Pizam, 2000; Ricci & Holland, 1992). Therefore, the European market should be a target market for Thailand and other Asian destinations as they are inherently attractive to Europeans. Given the global economic downturn, which affected Europe more severely than other continents, Incentive Travel business operators should even out the declined demand by focusing on Asian multinational corporations, but they might have to apply greater effort educating such firms about the full potential use of incentive travel as a managerial tool to create a fantasy and trophy experience in order not only to motivate employees but also to seed desirable corporate cultures and communities of best practice among top performers.

Players in the incentive travel markets fall into five categories, namely full incentive marketing companies, full incentive service houses, incentive travel fulfillment companies, destination selection companies and destination management companies, and, finally, travel agencies that sell certain travel components to the incentive travel programs (Ricci &

Holland, 1992). For most Thai incentive travel businesses, destination management companies (DMC) seem to be the most common. Seeing the lucrativeness of the market, many tour operators in Thailand established incentive travel departments within their leisure mainstream tour operating businesses, making them unable to fully capture the core essence of the incentive travel concept as a managerial tool. One of the points that should be noted, however, is the need and the willingness of most corporations to invest in incentive travel programs, especially during the economically challenging period, and the need and desire to stimulate the performance and productivity of the organizations and to seed constructive corporate cultures still seemed contradictory. The price-value dimension is, hence, usually one of the considerations of the host organizations (Severt & Breiter, 2010; Shinew & Backman, 1995). In this regard, Thailand should be in an advantageous position given that one of its most prominent images is the value for money given to travelers and tourists (Blanke & Chiesa, 2013; Future Brand Index, 2011). Thai destination management companies should, therefore, capitalize on this image despite the fact that such an image is not the most desirable one for the destination.

From the above paragraphs pertaining to incentive travel, critical success factors of incentive travel businesses can be listed as follows:

- Ability of incentive travel companies to thoroughly understand client organizations' needs and demands as well as the concerns and constraints about incentive travel programs
- Ability to translate such an understanding into activities and program components that can best satisfy the needs and meet the constraints of the host organizations
- Ability to create fantastic and memorable trip experiences for the participants yet constructive enough to induce behavioral changes
- Ability to appropriately integrate conference and team building activities that enhance the objectives of the host organizations
- Ability to perform the role of clients' consultants, not just service providers, so as to allow clients to achieve their objectives and maximally satisfy their constraints.

The success factors listed above should serve as the benchmark in talent or personnel management for the whole organization and its employees if they contribute to these factors.

In the modern business environment, where the job nature of each profession or business has changed at an unprecedented rate, competency which looked into inherent and developed characteristics that allow individual to perform certain tasks in adequate or superior manner.

The concept of competency and competency-based human resources management

The concept of competency has been approached at both individual and organizational levels. The former refers to individual characteristics that constitute his/her capabilities in performing certain tasks while the latter refers to the accumulated competencies of individual employees within an organization that contribute to its competitiveness vis-à-vis competitors (Jauhari, 2006). Using competency as the basis for human resources related issues allows an organization to be more efficient and productive as its competencies are aligned with its strategies and key industrial success factors (Chapman & Lovell, 2006). As a consequence, a sales executive in an incentive travel business should possess the competencies that allow the organization to possess such factors.

Competency can be defined as a set of standards in a workplace that specifies the adequacy and/or superiority of an individual to perform tasks under the scope of responsibilities of a position within a workplace setting, comprising inherent and developed knowledge, skills and personal attributes (Holton III, et al., 2008; Purdue, Ninemeier, & Woods, 2002; Rainsbury, Hodges, Burchell, & Lay, 2001; Soderquist, et al., 2010). Incentive travel business in Thailand, which is the context of this study, need to identify competencies that allow incumbents and applicants to perform their jobs in an adequate or superior way. Therefore, competencies to be identified for incentive travel sales executives should be identified against the job performance standards.

Like various other social science constructs, scholars define different dimensions and components of competency. Competencies of an individual comprise two broad categories, namely hard and soft skills, and hard skills competencies (Weber, Finley, Crawford, & Rivera Jr., 2009). The former refers to technical skills while the latter refers to human and managerial skills which are believed to enhance one's capability to perform the former. Besides, as one climbs up the organizational ladder, the more important the soft skill competencies become (Weber et al., 2009). However, for hospitality professions where uncertainties and ambiguities come with human factors and direct encounters with customers, soft skill competencies are required in the front-line positions as they greatly contribute to

higher service quality and smooth task coordination with colleagues and suppliers (Baum, 2008; Jauhari, 2006; Testa & Sipe, 2012). Despite the difficulties in observing soft-skill competencies, it is advisable for human resources managers to assess these skills in job incumbents and applicants in order to support recruitment, appraisal, promotion, and succession decisions by using aptitude tests that are commercially available in the market as they have been proved for accuracy in measuring these soft skills in employees (Bhatawdekar & Bhatawdekar, 2012).

Defillipi and Arthur (1994) contended that for individuals to successfully fulfill their duties as required in their job position, they need to be competent in performing the tasks associated with the position by possessing “know-how”, “know-why”, and “know-whom”. While “know-how” competencies refer to technical knowledge and skills required by the job, “know-why” and “know-whom” competencies refer to self-motivation, identification discipline, and personal network that contribute to the fulfillment of a job in a superior manner (Defillipi & Arthur, 1994). Of the three dimensions, “know-why”, which refers to self-identification with a profession, industry, and motivation and devotion to work, seems to be the predominant factor in success. A special characteristic of incentive travel and the nature of sales agent work that deals with uncertainties, variety, ambiguity, diversity, and high competitiveness, “know-whom” competencies or personal and professional network that contribute to sales pitching success (Defillipi & Arthur, 1994; Melaia, Abratt, & Bick, 2008). When making decisions regarding incentive travel sales agents, “know-why” and “know-whom” competencies seem to be the priority criteria in decision-making.

In order to pinpoint what the criteria should be to support human resources related decision-making, managers should be able to accurately identify the competencies that are requisite for the job and competencies that distinguish top performers from average ones (Testa & Sipe, 2012). Most competency models are in the form of matrixes and emphasize too much the hard skill competencies, which might be appropriate for short term decision-making but do not support the long-term plan of an employee (Langdon & Marrelli, 2002). Looking into soft-skill competencies offers benefits to the organization in ensuring that the applicants and incumbents do contribute to the organization’s competitiveness despite changes in work natures and managerial levels. Competency models usually help managers identify threshold or minimum required competencies for the job and differing competencies which distinguish top performers from the rest of the crowd (Duad, Ismail, & Omar, 2010; Soderquist et al.,

2010). These models usually require each organization to identify their respective competency models that align with their strategies by incorporating the marketing strategies, corporate cultures, organizational structures, and workflows within the organization in order to ensure that the developed competency models fit well with their organizations and contribute to the competitive advantage of the company (Chapman & Lovell, 2006; Langdon & Marrelli, 2002). Before identifying competencies for a job position, job performance standards must first be identified from as many groups of stakeholders in the job position as possible to make sure that the performance and competency identified would be realistic, comprehensive, and applicable to the position (Dua et al., 2010; Langdon & Marrelli, 2002). However, as this study has been developed for the whole industry, it does not touch on the organizational factors that vary from one organization to another. The findings of this study do, however, provide guidelines for general incentive travel businesses in Thailand in making their own decisions related to hiring, appraising, promoting, developing, and remunerating their respective sales executives. Further development by taking strategic and organizational issues into consideration needs to be done in a customized fashion suitable for specific firms.

03. METHODS

This study adopted a constructivism paradigm as the researchers wished to reach, from different angles, a thick and rich description of what is expected at different levels of job performance of sales executive in the Thai incentive travel business while being able to explain why things are as they are (Maholtra, 1999; Neuman, 2006). The study was designed to explore the expected performance of incentive travel sales executives in Thailand and the associated knowledge, skills, and attributes, and the validity of the findings was verified with an expert panel. It partially adopted the model proposed by Langdon and Marelli (2002) called Language of Work (LOW), which is a backward study from expected job performance, tracing back their enabling knowledge, skills and attributes. However, half of that model, which investigates organizational factors, has been excluded due to the scope of this study, which aimed to identify competencies for the whole industry to serve as guideline for all businesses in this sector. To distinguish top from average performers as well as to pinpoint the training needs of job incumbents, this study has also adopted the design of Dua, Ismail and Omar (2010) by asking what competencies (skills, knowledge, and attributes) are needed in an individual to perform certain tasks at threshold, differing, and ideal levels. The designs

of these two studies have been combined to serve as the data collection structure of this study.

The first part of the data collection is an in-depth interview on a semi-structure basis conducted on a face-to-face basis with five different groups of stakeholders, namely the job incumbents, job supervisors, inter-departmental colleagues, suppliers and clients. Interview questions were constructed from job descriptions of incentive travel sales executives from four companies selected by the Thailand Incentive and Convention Organization (TICA), combined, collapsed and reorganized into areas of responsibilities. The typical duties of incentive travel sales executive are listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Typical Job Description of Incentive Travel Sales Executive in Thai Destination Management Companies (Incentive Travel)

Areas of Responsibilities	Task
Sales and Marketing	Making sales calls for business development
	Receive brief
	Co-design projects for bidding proposal development
	Coordinate prices and service conditions of potential suppliers
	Follow up on unclosed sales
	Facilitate clients' site inspection
	Summarize quotations
Operation	Co-plan operational plans with colleagues from other departments
	Perform the role of center of coordination between colleagues, clients and suppliers
	Verify suppliers' services and products to approve payment
Administration	Coordinate with internal and external colleagues, clients and

suppliers, and prepare necessary documents

Maintain and file documents and information

From the job descriptions of the four companies as given by TICA, the task can be grouped into three areas of responsibility, namely sales and marketing, operation, and administration. Informants were nominated by TICA to ensure the parameter and appropriateness of informants in providing detailed and extensive information about both performance and its associated competencies of sales executives for incentive travel businesses (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011). Informants were asked how they think a sales executive in an incentive travel business, at the threshold level, should perform the job and what knowledge, skills and competencies they considered necessary for such a performance. Next, they were asked how a high-performing sales executive in an incentive travel business performed such a job differently from an average executive and what knowledge, skills, and attributes constituted the difference. Finally, informants were asked how an ideal sales executive in an incentive travel business would perform certain tasks differently from a top performer and what competencies they required. Then the next task was asked to informants until the last job specification.

To reach a rich and thick description of competencies of different levels demanded of a sales executive in an incentive travel business, knowledgeable participants were selected by the incentive travel professional association (TICA), who served as gatekeeper to the informants (Hennink et al., 2011; Neuman, 2006). Snowball recruitment, with approval from TICA, was also used to add to the number of informants. The interview findings were transcribed, compared, combined and condensed. To ensure the reliability of the findings, the interview guide of Patton (2002) was used, including open-ended questions, neutral, clear and singular. In cases where the interviewers felt that the answers given by informants were still unclear or needed further clarification, they were probed with further questions to provide more information (Patton, 2002). Each session lasts between 150 minutes and 210 minutes, depending on the information provided by the informants. The next level of data collection aimed to ensure the validity of the findings by using a focus-group interview with an expert panel selected by TICA. Performance and competencies were discussed if such items belong to the task, level of performance. Panel members were also asked to add and delete items in both performances and competencies reported in the initial in-depth interviews with targeted participants.

04. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In-depth Interviews

Sixteen participants were recruited after nomination by the Thailand Incentive and Convention Association. They can be grouped as follows; 3 job incumbents, 6 job supervisors, 2 suppliers, 3 colleagues and 2 clients. The interview findings show that an average sales executive of a Thai incentive travel business should acquire information about each potential client before communicating with them through various channels, using social skills in order to create and retain a constructive relationship. In a sales call after receipt of the Request for Proposal (RFP), the communication should be analogous, allowing two-way communication and introducing an initial brief of the project design to arouse the client's interest while mentioning project components that suit the needs and conditions of the prospective client.

A high-performing incentive travel sales executive is expected to make a sales call by pinpointing clients' subconscious needs by analyzing both clients' information and market intelligence and referring to past successful projects (in the case of repeat clients) and responding to them promptly by referring to what had been discussed on previous occasions. The initial project design proposed or discussed with clients should include project components (for example accommodation, team-building activities and special events) that are unconventional yet accessible. Executives should show how creative they are in designing the program and be adaptive to clients' needs and constraints.

An ideal sales executive for incentive travel should make a sales call by referring to their knowledge of other types of MICE activities that are relevant to the incentive travel project as well as to the operation process. As a consequence, they should be able to close a sale during the first contact without any need for further discussion.

Usually, sales executives for the incentive travel business need further discussion to develop a quotation through various means of communication. At a minimally acceptable level, a sales executive should carefully read and analyze the initial Request for Proposal (RFP) and request additional information from the appropriate person in the client's organization if the given information is insufficient to design the whole project. After obtaining adequate information, the sales executive should share such information with colleagues and brainstorm the design of the project with all others concerned by considering logistical and

operational issues. The designed proposal must be submitted within the timeframe determined by the clients.

A high-performing sales executive handles a brief from a client differently, by analyzing non-verbalized needs of clients through a close analysis of the RFP and the conversation. The brainstormed project should be something new, including project components that exceed the expectations of the client. The client should also be informed of the conditions and limitations of the venues proposed or specified by the clients to prevent unrealistic expectations.

Ideally, a sales executive in an incentive travel business receives the brief for a project design by accurately inferring the actual needs and objectives of the clients without having to request additional information. A high level of creativity should be used in designing the project and overcoming obstacles and limitations of venues and other project components. Executives should utilize their personal and professional networks in designing a breakthrough project that creates excitement in the clients and participants.

After receiving a brief, incentive travel sales executives co-design the project with colleagues from within and other departments as well as potential suppliers. At the threshold level, executives brainstorm with colleagues both within and from other departments the design of a project that can make the proposal impressive for clients by following the strategic directions determined by job supervisors or management. They also need to select appropriate project components that are within the clients' budget range yet suit well their objectives and needs before starting negotiations with them based on the market price of such components. They should also accurately estimate the hidden costs before strategically pricing the project.

High-performing sales executives would design the project with their colleagues by proposing something new and creative through the inclusion of components that are completely new to clients. They add value to the project by incorporating some supplementary project features that would make the project better satisfy clients' needs and they provide a sound justification for their additions. This part is of value to both clients and companies as it serves as up-sell opportunities. Their proposals are prepared neatly and according to the company's format, and are electronically and physically submitted to clients within the timeframe specified by clients.

None of the interviewees could report on their expectations of the ideal performance of a sales executive for the incentive travel business with regard to the co-planning of and quotations for projects.

After the design process, average-performing sales coordinators start coordinating with suppliers. They negotiate with potential suppliers on a case-by-case basis in order to ensure that the company obtains the best deal with the highest margin for the company. During the negotiation process, they also communicate clients' detailed needs and conditions in the clearest and most complete fashion while convincing potential suppliers to adapt products or services to such needs and constraints. If the initially proposed suppliers do not agree with the deal and adaptation, sale executives normally propose alternative suppliers that are of equal value to clients. After choosing the best suppliers, executives also consistently monitor the quality and progress of suppliers' work.

High-performing sales executives coordinate differently with various potential suppliers as this tends to result in the best deal for the project in terms of price and conditions. They always seek to negotiate complementary products or services from each supplier for the use of current or future projects.

After submitting the proposal finalized by the team, an average-performing sale executive follows up the unclosed sales with the client's key contact person via non-personal modes of communication (e-mail or telephone) to check if the proposal has been well received and if all points pertaining to the proposal are clear. Clarification should be provided if there are unclear points or concerns. If clients contact them to ask for clarification of unclear issues or to voice concerns, executives should respond promptly to such issues. They should also remind potential clients of the option date (the day until which the proposal and its conditions would still be valid). It can be seen that each client's insights regarding their decision-making process are important; therefore, executives should source and acquire such insights in advance.

High-performing sales executives follow up unclosed sales differently by probing strategic questions in order to induce up-sell and cross-sell opportunities. They also source well information about clients' organizations and key decision makers before following up. None of the ideal performance was reported.

After closing the deal, sales executives participate in formulating an operational plan with colleagues and suppliers. At the threshold level, they normally call for meeting with all parties concerned with the project, including suppliers. In such a meeting, they summarize and list information about the project and deals made with suppliers as well as the clients' information. They should be receptive to and welcome others' opinions to ensure that the ideas are crystalized among team members. All initiatives and opinions voiced by team members should be considered and discussed to ensure that the operation part of the project is practicable. Apart from anticipating operational problems, they also need to facilitate solutions to potential problems for team members and suppliers.

High-performing sales executives help formulate the operation plan by providing competitive intelligence about competitors and clients to the meeting. In the meeting with the full team, they should be assertive in voicing their opinions and should provide suggestions when seeing the necessity for doing so, and should be able to persuade the team to comply with the direction they propose. Among team members of different backgrounds and profiles, they should create a working atmosphere that welcomes differences and diversity.

Ideally, sales executive for the incentive travel business should assist with the formulation of operational plans by ensuring that all parties concerned, including suppliers, have a mutual understanding and obtain the information pertaining to the project. When persuading the team members to comply with their suggestions, ideal sales executives mediate conflicts among team members with different points of interest to achieve coherent work by seeing the project success as a mutually desirable goal.

One of the final steps that make or break the deal with clients is summarizing the quotation. Average sales executive of incentive travel businesses summarize the quotation by proposing a price appropriate to the project objectives and clients' constraints. To back up the proposal, pictures or solid evidence that support and justify the price quoted should also be attached. Special attention should be paid to the detail and correctness of the quotation, especially in regard to figures. As most clients of incentive travel are international firms, sales executives should possess knowledge about the best methods for international financial transactions. Conditions and terms should inform accounting department accordingly.

High-performing sales executives summarize quotations differently by allocating responsibilities to team members to source information and verify the correctness thereof

before submitting. Ideally, they adjust the figures to evaluate the attractiveness of the proposal/ quotation and adjust the figures to make it more competitive.

Once the deal is made with the clients, the clients' representatives normally need to inspect sites to be used as venues and other activities for the project. At the threshold level, a sales executive should prepare relevant information about all venues to be inspected and coordinate well with the venue's management or representatives. They should prepare alternative venues that are equally attractive in case the venues do not meet with the clients' approval. During inspection visits to venues, the sales executive should present the aspects that help satisfy the clients' needs and objectives while assuring them that the right choice has been made.

High-performing sales executives conduct site inspection visit differently by using their networks to source alternative venues in case of problems. During the inspection visit, they should assure clients by showing that they are well acquainted with the venue's management and can solve problems that might arise during the operation phase. They should also turn problematic situations into up-selling opportunities. None of the informants reported on the ideal performance of sales executives in assisting clients during site inspections.

Being the first point of contact with clients and the ones who make promises to them, sales executives are expected to be the center of coordination between clients, operation and suppliers throughout the project. At the base level, a sales executive should study the information well so that all issues pertaining to the project become clear and crystalized. They should call for a meeting of the whole team, including clients and suppliers' representatives, to verify mutual understanding about the projects and activities as well as other potential problems and other issues that still need clarification. They should stay focused on the core issues of the project and avoid becoming embroiled in details of trivial issues. As they have to help colleagues, customers and suppliers to solve problems and mediate conflicts, they should have all information needed at hand and easy to retrieve or refer to.

High-performing sales executives perform the coordination task differently by convincing clients that the changes or modifications to the program operation would be the best solution for the situation. At the same time, they should convince and motivate the team to comply with the timeframes and quality of work as specified in the agreement or as requested by

clients. They should also plan the operation one step ahead and ensure that everything goes according to the agreement with clients, especially when problems arise.

Ideally, sales executives for incentive travel businesses should be able to explain and present things and ideas in such a way that allows information recipients to visualize the picture in a logical sequence. As coordination concerns solving problems for clients and colleagues, sales executives should be able to respond immediately to concerns and instantaneously retrieve information to support decisions. As regards personality, they need to be liked by all parties concerned.

In some incentive travel businesses, sales executives are required to perform the process of suppliers' services and products before approving the payment. Average sales executives check and verify both the suppliers fulfillment of the agreement as well as logistical and safety requirements of the venues. They also check if the services and products are according to the agreement and worth the money to be paid. In the case of complicated items, they bring in certified experts to perform these tasks.

A high performing sales executive performs such a task differently by being friendly and facilitating the work and checking the services and products provided by suppliers. If some money is to be deducted from the total sum, the reason needs to be clearly and fairly communicated so that suppliers do not feel they are being taken advantage of.

Some companies require sales executives to follow up on the late payments as well. Average sales executives for incentive travel businesses usually submit invoices to customers according to the conditions specified in the contract. They remind clients in an appropriate way when the due date is near. If the payment is settled late, they should follow up on the payment tactfully in order to maintain a long-term constructive relationship.

High-performing sales executives usually follow up on payment by justifying all items that appear on the invoice while, ideally, they pressure clients psychologically so as not to make them feel that they are being forced to pay.

One of the functions that is required in all job positions is document communication and rank and files. Generally, a sales executive should prepare documents that organize ideas and information into topics and arrange them in a format that is easy to understand. The dispatch of or response to documents should be on a timely basis and involve social skills to induce a

positive relationship with colleagues, clients and suppliers. When filing the documents, they should sort the documents according to topics and dates of receipt.

High-performing sales executives usually add additional details to documents to make the document insightful in a time-efficient manner. They also continue updating their document files as the project progress and sort documents into sub-categories and insert opinion notes so that the future planning can be done effectively.

Table 3: Threshold, differing, and ideal competencies required in Incentive Travel Sale Executives

Competency Components	Threshold	Differing	Ideal
Knowledge	Product knowledge: in the contract list/ other potential project components/ safety measures/ logistic requirement/ cost	How to adapt/ use/ mix/ and match to create phenomenal experience	
	Market intelligence: Consumer trends/ Competitors' moves	Market intelligence of other MICE businesses	
	Customer knowledge: needs/ objectives/ business goals/ key success factors/ industry trends/ mission/ value/ key decision makers	Good memory about customer records and what has been preferred and problems about customers' past events	
	Knowledge about socio-economic affairs	Most updated international affairs	
	Knowledge about program organizing and operation: Logistics/ time/ safety requirement/ crowd management	Adaptive to conditions and constraints	Knowledge about natures and key success factors of other MICE events
Skills	Market intelligence: Consumer trends/ Competitors' moves Communication: concise/ precise/	Imagery	Charismatics

	accurate/ persuasive/ audience appropriate		
	Social skills: appropriate for people from broad range of backgrounds/ well mannered/friendly dialogue Critical listening	Social acumen: High level of interpersonal skills	
	Negotiation skills: Fair and systematic	Comprehensive/ Consider long-term relationship	Integrative
	Teamwork skills: Task coordination/ collaborative/ decision making/ collaborative problem solving	Openness to opinions and criticism/ conflict management	Integrative conflict management
Skills	Problem solving skills: systematic/ responsive	Comprehensive: unplanned/ anticipative	Contingency/ complex situations/ integrative
	Basic financial skills/ Mathematic skills	Comprehensive estimation of hidden cost/ profit-loss instincts	Strategic pricing/ psychological pricing
	English proficiency	Third language mastery	Integrative contingency
	presentation skills: vivid and logical	Imagery	
	Document preparation: logical sequence/ easy to understand format and language appropriate to audience/ appropriate insertion of social skills Planning skills: systematic	Appropriate for recipients and objectives Anticipative of scenarios Anticipative of problems/ accurate calculation of figures/ Positive attitudes on team members	
	Relationship management	Strategic questioning	
	Project management Skills: project knowledge/ contract timeline/manpower planning/ profit and loss	Time management skills	
Tactful questioning	Virtual reality presentation		

Attributes	Computer Literacy	Having the world-as-market perspective	
	Cross-cultural consciousness		
	observant/ detail oriented	Meticulous	Scrutinizing
	Personality: agreeable/ friendly	Compromising/ sense of humor/ open to new experience	Calm/ prudent
	Attitude: optimistic/ goal oriented	Persistence on goal achievement/ Excellence oriented attitude/ Customer oriented attitude	Optimism about obstacles and limitations
	Look and manner that command respect and trust		
	Politely assertive	Self-confidence and esteem	Charisma and prudent Look
	Well-organized	Organizational loyalty	
	Well-prepared	Service mind	Service psychology skills
	Work attitude: enthusiasm/ patience/ devotion to work	Wide and quality professional and personal network	Personal network with high-ranking governmental authorities
Attributes	Adaptive to change and uncertainties/ Flexible on process but firm on quality	Open to opinions of others	Constructive conflicts
	Change welcoming/ active learner	Work discipline	Experience from several organizations
	emotional control	Optimism and obstacles/ Result oriented attitude	
	Ethics	Many service years in Incentive Travel Business	
	Be fair	Acumen	
	Pride in one's organization	Professionalism	
	Honesty	Entrepreneurial instincts	

	Courage to accept mistakes	Leadership
	Dependability	
	Avoid negative opinion voicing	
	Refrain from price cutting	

Focus Group Interview

To validate the job performances collected from the in-depth interview sessions as the competencies defined here are supposed to be the starting point for incentive travel business operators to apply to their respective organization in regard to human resource issues concerning sales executives, a group interview, otherwise known as a focus-group interview, was conducted with informants who were regarded as experts as they are professionals and entrepreneurs who have served in the incentive travel sub-industry for a long period with highly recognized professional success. The panel comprised seven members, of whom three were company owners and four were high-ranking management in the field of marketing for the incentive travel business in Thailand. They were briefed on the details of job performance and associated competencies. The focus-group moderator, the second author of this paper, read the task and threshold job performance and associated competencies. Panelists were asked to voice their concerns if the performance and competencies reported from the in-depth interview sessions were appropriate and if they wished to add something, cut some items, words or clauses, or make other modifications. Group flow from the discussion of the panelists was moderated by the researchers, resulting in changes, cuts, additions, and modifications of both performance and competencies.

The focus group interview findings show the differences performance from in-dept interview as detail following. An average sales executive of a Thai incentive travel business should know potential project components and consider in logistics side of the project, “venue” rules and regulation. They should consistently do customer relationship management and understand cultural differences. A high-performing incentive travel executive should be balance benefits of firms and customer satisfaction with internalize knowledge and skill into their natural working styles and thinking process.

After receiving brief, a high-performing incentive travel sales executive co-design the project by propose something new (project components) with higher value and justify the recommendation from client’s point of view. Moreover, they should be able to offer components of different product selection with the price ranges for client to choose. The experts say an ideal sale executive incentive travel should develop proposal that is distinctively differentiate with assistance from personal and professional networks in regards to co-planning and quotations for the project.

After submitting the proposal, a high-performing sales executive incentive travel follow up unclosed sales by act as client’s consultant by asking probing strategic questions to client’s project success and recommend additional services before the deal is closed. In addition, they should concern to ask the questions about the reason why the clients not choose the company for further improvement.

After closing the deal, an average sales executive incentive travel participate in an operational plan by receptive other’s opinions and co-analyze the idea, then search for the best practice of the program operation and implementation. In addition, they should do priority setting in terms of what is to be completed first according to the operation plan and internally communicate with team members about the objectives, components, and venues. High-performing sales executive incentive travel help operate the operation plan by be neutral in conflict situation and create welcoming working atmosphere from the diversity and difference of backgrounds and profiles. They should follow up with the information recipients to ensure mutual understanding of the project. Ideally, sales executive for the incentive travel business should be ensure that the whole team receives the information completely and correctly in order to avoid potential mistakes during the operational phrase.

The next step is being a center of coordination. At the threshold level, sales executive incentive travel should study the project information profoundly therefore, all issues and concerns are crystalized. She/he should call for meeting with all parties concern with the project including suppliers in order to verify the mutual understanding about the project objectives. She/he should clarify more on issue that are potential problems. A high-performing sales executive incentive travel should be able to convince clients to comply or modify their work process according to advices or suggestions as well as convince the team member to progress and perform operation plan according to Request For Proposal (RFP). They should balance the company's benefit and customer's satisfaction. Ideally, sales executive incentive travel should propose the visualized presentation of information in a logical sequence while gain trust and respect from the clients and colleagues.

In some incentive travel company, sales executives are required to follow up on the late payment as well. An ideal sales executive is required to possess the tactfully put psychological pressure on customers, yet being able to maintain long-term relationship with clients.

From the focus group interview, the expert panelists did not change the competencies required in a sales executive despite the change of performance standard. In order to address the research objectives, the competencies and performance standards identified by informants and adjusted by the expert panel with the critical success factor of the incentive travel business to see if the expectations of employers and job incumbents really contribute to the competitiveness of the company. The findings show that the threshold competencies identified are not fully consistent with the key success factors, especially in regard to analytical parts of clients, needs, creativity, the knowledge of operation parts, and social skills and acumen that allow them to assume the role of client consultant rather than service provider. Considering that these factors usually pertain to the attribute dimension of competency which are normally inherent in individuals, human resource managers should measure inherent qualities through the use of commercially available aptitude tests that allow the measurement of qualities that are hard to observe and measure (Dua et al., 2010). The knowledge component of the competency can be developed both an on and off the job basis but without these inherent qualities, sales executives can hardly contribute to the competitiveness of the company.

During the in-depth interviews, from the number of performance standards reported by different groups of stakeholders researchers found that job supervisors and customers tend to have higher expectations of sales executives than the job incumbents and colleagues do. The group interview also support this proposition as seen by the movement of performance standards from differing to threshold level. This proposition can, probably, explain why the productivity of Thai MICE employees is lower than that of employees in Singapore, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and Malaysia. Job incumbents might not be aware of what is expected of them as the job descriptions given by TICA were written so broadly that no specific standards of performance were mentioned. Job descriptions should be clearer and more detailed and should specify the task standard to ensure a common ground of understanding of what is expected of employees.

Despite the fact that incentive travel requires sales executives who are highly creative, adaptive and versatile, leadership style and corporate culture tend to play a role in regard to the capitalization of incumbents' competencies in contributing to the organization's competitiveness. One of the job supervisors with an authoritative leadership style working in a very structured, multi-layered organization asserted that he did not expect his sales executive to be creative or recommend any project components that were not included in the contract as he, as job supervisor, knew better how to make things happen. In contrast, a job supervisor with a participative style working in a cooperative culture organization asserted that creativity was everything and he welcomed all initiatives from employees as there might be some hidden great idea under his nose. This proposition contended that a competitive incentive travel business should have a less structured style of management with cooperative and participative cultures.

A competency-based approach to human resources decisions is recommended for incentive travel businesses as the critical success factors require performances that are enabled by mostly inherent qualities of individuals, which are harder to observe, develop, and measure. Hiring new employees with the required attributes usually allows firms to develop skills and knowledge required to perform the tasks up to differing level through human resources development schemes.

Despite the above-mentioned propositions found in this study, organizational factors should also be considered when performing decision tasks regarding human resources. Further development of an organization-specific competency model is suggested and further

quantitative study to explore the relative importance of competencies is recommended for scholars and practitioners who are interested in the areas of competency-based human resources management.

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