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# The quality of work life in competitive potential development in the tourism industry: A conceptual model and research propositions<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** In order to be able to deal successfully with the challenges of increased competition tourism enterprises have to take measures to acquire adequate labour resources and to maintain a sustainable competitive advantage based on these resources. The aim of the paper is to create a conceptual model explaining relations between the quality of work life and competitive potential in the tourism industry. It is argued that the quality of work life, which is measured as a discrepancy between expectations towards work and its perceptions, is affected by individual and organisational factors, whilst its influence on competitive potential is moderated by individual characteristics and local labour market conditions. **Keywords:** quality of work life, human resources, competitive potential, tourism industry. **JEL codes:** J24, J28, L83.

## Introduction

Changes taking place in the contemporary tourism market concern both demand and supply – customers' rising expectations are accompanied by an increasing competition within the sector. As a result the tourism market is already a buyer's market and acquiring and maintaining a competitive advantage is more and more difficult. In order to deal successfully with the challenges of increased international competition and many new emerging consumer preferences the organisations in the industry have to seek new sources of competitive advantage.

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The fastest growing economic activity, a significant element of international business trading, a leading factor of local and regional development, a leading employer – these are terms often used by academics in the field of the economics of tourism [Alejziak 2000; Gołembski 2002]. At the same time certain researchers dealing with these problems draw attention to challenges that are faced by contemporary tourism companies and which the organisations have to handle in the process of competing for production factors, especially labour resources [Keller 2004; Baum 2007]. The limited competitiveness in the labour market stems from the nature of demand by tourists, especially the time concentration which results in a fluctuation of demand for the labour force and also from the activity dispersion which is demonstrated through the dominance of small enterprises [Bednarska 2012]. Under these conditions the efficient competition for employees is hindered.

The aim of the paper is to create a conceptual model explaining relations between the quality of work life and competitive potential in the tourism industry. It also puts forward research propositions concerning determinants of possibilities of acquiring labour resources and maintaining a sustainable competitive advantage based on these resources by tourism enterprises. Although it is generally recognised that human capital is the foundation of competitiveness in the modern economy there is a notable gap in the literature regarding links between tourism-related work quality and competitive potential. The paper opens by giving an insight into the concept of the quality of work life, its theoretical background and consequences. The second section is devoted to reviewing the literature on the sources of competitive advantage and the labour market in tourism. From this the research model is developed. Finally the overall implications and recommendations for future research are proposed and the main conclusions reached are summarised.

## **1. Quality of work life – background and consequences**

Quality of work life is a multi-faceted concept that encompasses both subjective (individual) and objective (organizational) criteria [Martel & Dupuis 2006; Green 2006; Gallie 2009] and it stems from the way in which employees perceive entities that offer work. Based on, amongst other things, their previous experience and personal needs, employees form their expectations for work and the possibility of fulfilling them is the basic criterion for choosing their employer. When it comes to the evaluation of potential employers, job seekers' perceptions are affected by the industry in which company operates [Cable & Graham 2000]. Thus, companies must be aware of inter-organizational interdependence which influences their reputation due to spill-over effects [Barnett & Hoffman 2008].

The considerations on quality of work life are conceptually supported by several socio-economic theoretical models specifically signalling theory, search and matching theory, stakeholder theory and expectancy theory.

Spence's signalling theory (1973) suggests that the labour market is characterised by information asymmetry and, consequently, hiring decisions are taken under uncertainty. Prior to commencing a job a potential employee cannot assess the quality of working conditions, nor is an employer sure of the capabilities of an individual at the time he hires him [Spence 1973]. Given the long-term implications of employment contracts for the employee and the employer both parties are motivated to reduce this information asymmetry and minimize the risk of adverse selection. Thus it is in the best interests of a potential employee to find out as much as they can about a prospective employer and for a prospective employer to signal to the labour market their competencies and characteristics. In other words because job choice takes place under imperfect information, job seekers interpret available data as signal about the working conditions in the organization and use them to assess the appropriateness of the employer.

Mortensen & Pissarides's search-matching theory (1994) reflects the permanence of the mismatch between supply and demand in the labour market. The mismatch is a result of costs incurred by both parties to find appropriate job opportunities and appropriate candidates to fill vacancies. Labour market equilibrium strongly depends on the intensity with which workers search for and on their decision when to accept a job offer [Mortensen & Pissarides 1994]. Information about job quality definitely affects the matching process between employees and employers.

Freeman's stakeholder theory (1984) implies the existence of a duty to all groups and individuals with a legitimate 'stake' in the activities of the firm – not only to the shareholders who own the enterprise in the financial sense [Ewing et al. 2002]. It suggests that companies must be responsive to the competing demands of those who can affect or are affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives. There seems to be a general consensus that employees are a key stakeholder group who co-operate with customers, suppliers and other stakeholders to co-create value. Like each group of stakeholders employees represent interests of intrinsic value and they merit consideration for their own sake and not merely because of their ability to further the interests of some other group [Donaldson & Preston 1995].

Vroom's expectancy theory (1964) postulates that an individual's behaviour is influenced by a multiplicative combination of a person's subjective assessment that effort will lead to specific outcomes and the extent to which the outcomes are valued. In line with the expectancy theory total motivation to join an organisation as an employee is as much a function of the calculated attractiveness of an organisation (itself the function of beliefs about the firm's attributes and the importance of each attribute) and the applicant's evaluations of the likelihood of being offered a position in that organization [Knox & Freeman 2006].

Perception of the quality of work life is of great importance both at a micro- and macroeconomic level. Favourable employment conditions give rise to high internal work motivation and satisfaction, high quality and productivity in work performance, low staff absenteeism and turnover. Consequently they lead to an enhancement of productivity from allocated resources and an improvement of the financial outcomes of enterprises [Heskett et al. 1994; Grönroos 1994]. Subjective satisfaction with the work experienced by individuals can cause a higher productivity of the whole economy through stimulating the creativity and innovativeness of workers. It also affects the decision of the workforce to enter, stay with or leave certain sectors, therefore it induces structural changes in the economy [Bukowski 2010].

## 2. Research rationale

Competition is omnipresent which means that it is a necessity to create and protect competitive advantages [Godziszewski 2006]. Amidst rising competition in the tourism market and rapid changes in the expectations of customers tourism companies are also forced to intensify their activity in relation to producing and safeguarding competitive advantages. Competitive advantage became the focal point of extensive research as the resource-based view appeared [Prahalad & Hamel 1990; Barney 1991], although the reasons why business entities succeed were also examined by the positioning school [Porter 1985].

According to the resource-based view of the firm reasons why a company reaches a competitive advantage can be found within the company itself and are viewed as the competitive potential. It describes a company's relative ability to compete in the future (where 'relative' is understood as 'the one referring to competitors' ability) [Gorynia 2002]. The competitive potential of business entities generally includes their tangible and intangible resources which are indispensable for the entities to be able to operate in a competitive market [Stankiewicz 2005].

The reference literature has two main trends in discussions on competitiveness in the tourism industry – on the meso- and micro-level. In the literature concerning tourist destinations the causes of gaining a competitive advantage are mainly thought of as environmental and anthropogenic values and tourist infrastructure as the determinants of an area's tourist attractiveness [Dwyer & Kim 2003]. In relatively few models the importance of human resources is stressed as a reason for gaining a competitive advantage [Poon 1993; Ritchie & Crouch 2003]. The researchers claim that the major causes of tourist companies gaining a competitive advantage are: human resources [Canina, Walsh & Enz 2006], knowledge [Haas & Hansen 2004], innovations [Simonceska 2010], technology [Bilgihan et al. 2011], locali-

sation [Dubé & Renaghan 1999], relations with other entities [Rodríguez-Díaz & Espino-Rodríguez 2006].

Each business entity, regardless of its organisational and legal frame or type of activity undertaken, aims at acquiring, processing and using resources to satisfy specific social needs. Specific resources and abilities that enable the entity to maintain a competitive advantage in the future are called strategic resources [Schoemaker & Amit 1997]. They ensure the entity's sustainable uniqueness and, as a result, a sustainable competitive advantage [Oblój 2007]. A company's success in the market is dependent on whether it has properly selected tangible and intangible resources and whether it is able to use them innovatively and efficiently. This means that the source of a competitive advantage is the combination of exceptional abilities and resources which help create a value for a customer [Evans, Campbell & Stonehouse. 2003]. At present it can be noticed that there is a marked increase in the significance of intangible resources because advantages based on tangible elements of a product are easily copied [Nonaka, Toyama & Nagata 2000]. The advantages include labour resources which have abilities and competences that can be viewed as autotelic [Zajac 2008]. With a rising significance of services it is the employees' qualifications, motivation and efficiency that is key in creating the competitive advantage of business entities.

One of the most essential features of economic activity in tourism is high labour intensity. This stems from the dominant share of services in tourism and travel-related activities, especially simultaneous services which are susceptible to the human factor being substituted for the capital factor to a small degree [Kusluvan 2003]. An entity that wishes to conduct business activity in the tourism market and compete with other entities effectively must make sure that it has an appropriate number of employees and that the employees are committed and have proper vocational qualifications. Only if these conditions are met are companies able to carry out their tasks at a proper level and meet tourists' rising expectations. The ability to acquire and maintain suitable labour resources is mainly dependent on the quality of employment offered by a particular business entity. Employees who are sufficiently satisfied with their working conditions are loyal to their company and their attitudes and behaviour are conducive to providing a high level of service as well as maintaining a positive and sustainable rapport with the buyers which translates into optimizing the company's profitability [Heskett et al. 1994; Van Looy et al. 2003].

The long-lasting success of tourism organisations is conditioned by the attraction of well-educated, motivated and committed people who experience job satisfaction [Roney & Öztin 2007]. As can be seen in the previous research works attracting and keeping such competent employees in tourism presents a considerable challenge [Keller 2004; Richardson 2009]. In line with the concept of the dual labour market in which employment is divided into the primary and secondary sector [Doeringer & Piore 1971], employment in tourism is characterised by numerous features typical of the secondary labour market [Jameson 1998]. The sector offers jobs that are

not very attractive and that do not have social prestige, working conditions are not stable and do not provide job security, very often employees are offered short-term employment contracts, part-time jobs or civil-law contracts which means that employment is temporary and employees' interests are not sufficiently represented. The secondary sector offers low pay, few fringe benefits, limited professional development prospects and slim promotion chances [Smandek 1993]. It has very often been diagnosed that the work is low paid, does not require high qualifications, is related to a low social status and does not bring satisfaction [Barron et al. 2007; Roney & Öztin 2007].

Another particular problem that tourism organisations face is a high employee turnover [Riley, Ladkin & Szivas 2002; Walsh & Taylor 2007]. A barrier to creating a competitive advantage based on human resources is the negative perception of tourism industry as employer [Wood 2003; Bednarska & Olszewski 2010]. As a result work in tourism is treated as an initial and transitional stage of someone's professional career and not an opportunity for long-term career development [Jiang & Tribe 2009].

The low attractiveness of business entities as employers creates difficulties in attracting and keeping the best employees which may lead to the deterioration of the competitive potential. The studies conducted of the literature and empirical research show that employees' negative attitude may be the cause of the difficulty in acquiring and keeping indispensable labour resources in the tourism industry [Hausknecht, Rodda & Howard 2009]. That means that only when organisations work towards identifying employees' expectations and then strive to meet these expectations can they hope to successfully compete in attracting and retaining the best available candidates and in acquiring and maintaining a competitive advantage in the tourist market.

### **3. Conceptual framework**

In the light of the literature review on sources of competitive advantage and the labour market in tourism what appears interesting is the research problem expressed in the following question: what is the ability of the tourism industry to compete for labour resources and to create a sustainable competitive advantage in the contemporary market and what are the determinants of this ability? In order to clarify the main problem five detailed questions have been posed:

- what are the expectations of actual and prospective employees towards tourism enterprises as employers?
- how are tourism organizations perceived as employers?
- is there a mismatch between expectations of employees concerning working conditions and perceptions of these conditions in the tourism labour market?

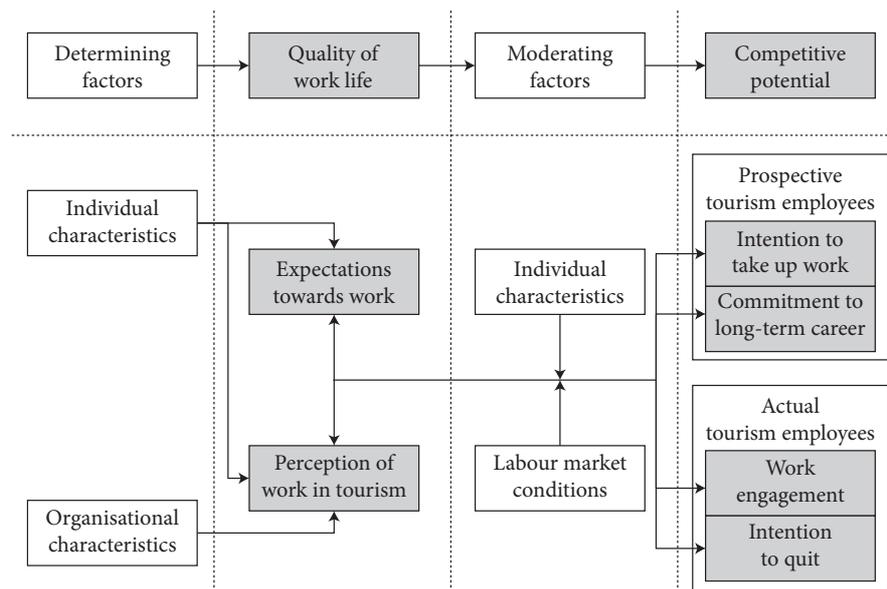
- what factors impact the differences of the level and structure of a possible mismatch?
- what moderating factors influence the strength of a relationship between the quality of work life and the competitive potential in the tourism industry?

The authors argue that because of the inherent features of the tourism industry its ability to obtain and maintain a sustainable competitive advantage based on human resources is limited, which stems from the low quality of work life understood as a mismatch between the expectations of actual and prospective employees towards working conditions and the perception of these conditions. Based on the discussion the following propositions are developed:

- P1: The quality of work life in tourism influences the competitive potential of tourism enterprises.
- P2: The strength of a relationship between the quality of work life and the competitive potential is moderated by individual characteristics and the local labour market conditions.
- P3: The quality of work life is affected by individual and organisational factors.

The aforementioned propositions are summarised in the following conceptual model.

On the basis of literature studies it is assumed that the ability to compete for labour resources is influenced by the quality of work life in the tourism industry. The



**Figure 1. Conceptual framework of relations between the quality of work life and competitive potential in the tourism industry**

measure of work quality is a mismatch understood as a discrepancy between expectations of actual and prospective employees concerning working conditions and perceptions of these conditions.

In the model the competitive potential is seen as the ability to acquire and maintain labour resources. The dimensions are specified through:

- the propensity to take up work in the tourism industry (prospective employees),
- the propensity to develop a long-term career in the tourism industry (prospective employees),
- work engagement (actual employees),
- loyalty towards their employers (actual employees).

Moreover four groups of potential factors which affect the competitive potential in the tourism industry directly or indirectly have been specified. Two of them determine the quality of work life (by impacting perceived employment conditions or expectations); the other two assess the strength of relations between the work quality and the competitive potential. Next, each group is assigned with a list of variables subject to measurement:

- job and organisational attributes that are the basis for determining work quality
  - job content, economic benefits, development opportunities, social relations, reputation;
- organisational factors influencing the way in which work conditions are perceived
  - size, level of internationalisation, chain affiliation, ownership and management relations and type of services offered;
- local labour market conditions that impact the work quality-competitive potential relations – alternative possibilities for taking up employment;
- individual characteristics that determine both the quality of work life (the expectations towards and the perceptions of working conditions) and the relations between the work quality and the competitive potential – sex, age, the person's and their family's professional experience.

## **4. Discussion and implications**

Due to the knowledge gap in research into the ability to compete for labour resources and to subsequently gain a sustainable competitive advantage in the tourism industry on a micro- and meso-level, this paper develops a model explaining the relations between the quality of work life and the competitive potential. The discussion includes both a meso- and micro-economic perspective, which means that the results of the investigation may not only contribute to the development of science but also to obtaining better performance outcomes by tourism companies.

The previous research on work quality in tourism included actual employees' perspectives [Qu, Ryan & Chu 2001; Kandasamy & Ancheri 2009] or students' (as prospective employees) perspectives [Richardson 2009; Jiang & Tribe 2009]. Furthermore most of the studies were limited to one university or one company. There has been no complex research, however, in which opinions of these two groups are considered jointly and in which entities representing the whole country are included.

The research areas including industry competitiveness, human resources as a source of competitive advantage and quality of work life in tourism have not been thoroughly and comprehensively explored in Polish and foreign literature. The greatest value of the proposed model stems from a combination of these issues and referring them to particular conditions in which entities operate in the tourism industry. The realisation of the research will therefore make a significant contribution to the current knowledge of tourism economics, especially when it comes to the competitive potential of the tourism industry and behaviours of entities operating in the resources market. The study will contribute to personnel economics which has emerged as a significant subfield of labour economics – this line of research considers interactions between a firm and workers and seeks to explain the human resources and internal labour market practices of organizations from an optimization perspective. It focuses on matching firms and workers and its consequences for an organisation's performance [Lazear & Shaw 2007].

By investigating the research propositions developed in the paper it will be possible to:

- determine the hierarchy of expectations for employment conditions and their degree of diversification,
- diagnose the way in which working conditions in the tourism industry are perceived and create a ranking of job attributes,
- measure the discrepancy between expectations concerning working conditions and perceptions of these conditions which, as a result, will enable the determination of the work quality,
- measure the impact of factors that represent the level of a mismatch,
- identify factors that effect the relation between the quality of work life and the competitive potential.

Reaching the assumed goals will also make it possible to carry out further research and make comparisons across sectors (by extending the subjective scope) and internationally (by extending the spatial scope). In addition the research is also important for economic policy because it is in line with European Union's Europe 2020 headline targets to create the conditions for a more competitive economy with higher employment. Besides which it highlights shared values leading to the improvement in the quality of life for the of whole society.

## Conclusions

It is generally assumed that the only value that cannot be replicated by the competitors and that provides a real, exceptional and sustainable advantage over others is people [Wright, McMahan & McWilliams 1994]. The role of the service provider in the consumer's perception of the service organisation is paramount. This is particularly so in tourism companies where the visitor experience is based to an enormous extent on interaction with employees. By adapting to individual customer requirements and enabling the co-creation of a personalised service experience the staff has the potential to influence the perceived value of offerings. High job satisfaction obtained by employees is the prerequisite for high satisfaction obtained by customers. It contributes to staff engagement, loyalty, willingness to invest in firm-specific human capital, service effort and customer orientation, hence it adds to the quality of human assets.

Although it is recognised that human capital is the foundation for raising the competitiveness of tourism companies in the modern economy there are relatively few empirical studies on the quality of work life in tourism. The present conceptual framework attempts to address this gap – the realisation of the research and verification of proposed model will contribute to existing knowledge in the scientific field of economics and its specialist subfields: tourism economics, economics of enterprise and labour economics. The importance of such an investigation is paramount given the strategic role that tourism employees play in sustaining competitiveness in the marketplace.

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