The Competency Gap of Travel Agents for Halal Tourism: A Case Study of Muang Chiang Mai District, Chiang Mai Province

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Abstract

The objective of this research is to monitor the skill level of the travel agents in Chiang Mai and the expected competency in serving Muslim tourists. Twenty-four travel agencies in Chiang Mai participated in this study, using self-assessment on the expected competency levels and an assessment of competency, consisting of three categories: core competencies, generic competencies and specific functional competencies on Halal; altogether there were 23 sub-capacities out of four work positions – General Manager, Assistant General Manager, Senior Travel Consultant, and Travel Consultant. The assessment form is divided into two sections: the first is designed to assess the expectations of the competencies in each position, while the second to assess the competency level of each position by analyzing the data and comparing the gap in competencies identified in the four positions. It was found that there is a statistically significant difference at the 95% confidence level between the expected competencies and the current level of competency on three aspects and in three of the positions: General Manager, Assistant General Manager, and Travel Consultant.

Keywords: competency gap, travel agencies, Halal tourism, Chiang Mai

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ช่องว่างสมรรถนะของธุรกิจนำเที่ยวกับการท่องเที่ยวฮาลาล: กรณีศึกษาอำเภอเมือง จังหวัดเชียงใหม่

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บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์ในการตรวจสอบระดับความสามารถของธุรกิจนำเที่ยวจังหวัดเชียงใหม่และสมรรถนะที่คาดหวังในการให้บริการนักท่องเที่ยวชาวมุสลิม โดยเก็บข้อมูลจากธุรกิจนำเที่ยว จำนวน 24 แห่งในจังหวัดเชียงใหม่โดยผู้เข้าร่วมในการศึกษาใช้การประเมินตนเองเกี่ยวกับระดับสมรรถนะที่คาดหวังและสมรรถนะที่เกิดขึ้นจริง ประกอบด้วยสมรรถนะ 3 ประเภท คือ สมรรถนะหลักทั่วไป สมรรถนะตามหน้าที่ และสมรรถนะพิเศษเฉพาะทางด้านฮาลาล จำนวนทั้งหมด 23 สมรรถนะย่อยใน 4 ตำแหน่งงาน ได้แก่ ผู้จัดการทั่วไป ผู้ช่วยผู้จัดการทั่วไป เจ้าหน้าที่ที่ปรึกษาการท่องเที่ยวอาวุโส และเจ้าหน้าที่ที่ปรึกษาการท่องเที่ยว โดยแบบประเมินแบ่งออกเป็นสองส่วน ส่วนแรกให้แต่ละคนประเมินความคาดหวังของความสามารถในแต่ละตำแหน่ง และส่วนที่สองให้ประเมินระดับความสามารถในแต่ละตำแหน่ง แล้วนำข้อมูลมาวิเคราะห์เปรียบเทียบหาช่องว่างของสมรรถนะทั้ง 4 ตำแหน่งงาน พบว่า มีความแตกต่างอย่างมีนัยสำคัญทางสถิติที่ระดับความเชื่อมั่น 95% ระหว่างสมรรถนะที่คาดหวังกับสมรรถนะปัจจุบันทั้ง 3 ด้าน ในสามตำแหน่งงาน คือ ผู้จัดการทั่วไป ผู้ช่วยผู้จัดการทั่วไป และเจ้าหน้าที่ที่ปรึกษาการท่องเที่ยว

คำสำคัญ: ช่องว่างสมรรถนะ ธุรกิจนำเที่ยว การท่องเที่ยวฮาลาล เชียงใหม่

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Introduction

The tourism industry is a rapidly expanding industry and of great importance to the Thai economy and society. It is an important income source for the country, bringing in foreign currency, creating employment and decentralizing development to other parts of the country. Chiang Mai is one of the top provinces in Thailand that sees the most repeat visitors (Visit Thailand Again, 2013). Thailand is considered among the 10 friendliest non-OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation) destinations of Muslims (MasterCard & Crescent Rating, 2016). The Muslim population is rapidly growing and expected to reach 29.7% of the total world population in 2050 (Pew Research Center, 2015). The increasing population and rising income of Muslims, which enables them to travel more, has made this segment one of the fastest growing in the tourism industry. However, Halal tourism management is still a new area in Chiang Mai in meeting the needs of Muslim travelers by providing services that meet Islamic requirements and obligations on food, religious understanding and culture. Therefore, developing a workforce with the competency to understand the needs of Halal tourism is important for providing Muslim-friendly service in the sector.

Research Objective

The objective of this study is to compare the expected competency and the current competency of the tourism workforce in four positions in providing Halal tourism services in Chiang Mai.

The results of this study can be used by stakeholders in the tourism industry to build an understanding of Halal tourism and also as a way to develop greater workforce competency in the Chiang Mai tourism industry to serve Muslim tourists effectively.
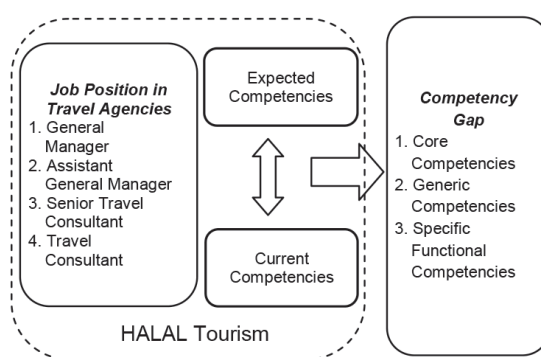
Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework used to identify the competency gap in Halal tourism focusing on three topics: core competencies, generic competencies and specific functional competencies, and comparing the differences between expected competencies and current competencies in four travel agency positions – general manager, assistant general manager, senior travel consultant and travel consultant, in order to assess the status of

each position and identify the competencies that should be developed to better serve Muslim tourists.

Literature Review

The literature review explores four research domains: Halal tourism, travel agencies, competency, and competency gap.

A. HALAL Tourism

Halal Tourism is a tourism program that serves the needs of Muslims (Chookaew, Chanin, Charatarawat, Sriprasert & Nimpaya, 2015). They are compliant with the rules of Islam in regards to the hotels and accommodation, transportation, restaurants, the facilities, and entertainment activities, as well as the religious activities (Al-Hamarneh, 2008; Henderson, 2009) which are permitted within Islamic doctrine (Battour & Ismail, 2015). Accordingly, tourism service providers need to respect and provide services compliant with laws of Islam and to maintain the service to the Halal standard (Muqbil, 2015).

B. Travel Agencies

Travel agencies are businesses that provide tourism services guiding visitors to travel to different to places by offering assistance and facilities that include accommodation, food, tourist guides, and other services involving traveling (Janchai, 2011), and they also function as a medium between the traveler and service in the tourism industry. In general, travel agencies provide service giving tourism information, making arrangements and travel programs, providing facilities and knowledge of tourist sites (travel with tour guide), providing transfer services between airport and hotels, selling flight tickets, providing rent/reserving hotels, arranging tour programs according to tourists' requirements, offering education consulting services, and arranging travel documents. Each travel agency may provide every type of service or only some depending on the company's target and its own potential. There are four main work positions in the travel agency business: General Manager, Assistant General Manager, Senior Travel Consultant and Travel Consultant (Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN], 2013).

C. Competency

Competency involves personality, skill, knowledge and potential in each individual that can push him/her to perform effectively in the work (his/ her is responsible for) (Jackson & Schuler, 2014) and perform better than others (Boyatzis, 2008). It can be divided into three categories (ASEAN, 2013).

The Core Competencies involve having a shared standard of behavior that requires everyone in the organization to achieve the organization's goal (Hafeez & Essmail, 2007), such as foreign language skills, management skills, written foreign language communication

skills, applying and using tourism information skills, and the ability to accept change.

Generic Competencies / Common Competencies are the abilities in the specific field of work that help staff working in different positions to be successful and achieve the required outcomes such as rhetorical skills, problem-solving skills, conceptual skills, adaptation in work skills, proactive communication skills, adjustment to different culture skills, ability to work under pressure, self-management skills, maintaining promises, self-motivation and willingness to learn, the effort to improve any activity, and the ability to make decisions.

Specific Functional Competencies / Technical Competencies are the specific abilities directly concerning to the work, such as an interest or understanding of Islamic culture, knowledge of Muslim culture ,knowledge of Islam and its technical terms, an understanding of Halal, and of how to perform following Islamic customs and knowledge of Arabic.

D. Competency Gap

Competency mapping tracks the behavior within each competency sector. It reveals ability and compares the necessary levels of response in the workplace, as well as the ability and arranging comparisons of each work position in order to take into consideration the level of standards within each work position.

For example, regarding the gap between the level of utilization and the level of importance in the Kenyan hospitality industry, there are three significant competencies: taking initiative, presenting written information effectively, and organizing (Wadongo, Kambona & Odhuno, 2011). This is done by the tables' indication of which level the work positions should include and the core competency level that every staff in the organization should bear. However, every work position does not require the same level of competency. Thus, Competency Gap is an important input factor to indicate the Training needs, which leads to the development of a training plan that is consistent with the missing competency in the position.

Research Methodology

The sample group participating in this study consists of staff from travel agency businesses which are members of the Chiang Mai Travel Business Association, which has 24 companies as established members. A questionnaire was administered to learn and assess the competency level of four staff positions in the travel agency: General Manager, Assistant General Manager, Senior Travel Consultant, and Travel Consultant. The data analysis uses descriptive statistics, frequency and means, to consider the competency level. Scoring and result interpretation are as follows: expected competency assessment has a 10 score in total, divided into two parts:

measuring the significance of the competency to achieve the goal (five scores) and scoring in need competency according to the work position (five scores). On the assessment of the current competency, there are 10 scores in total, divided into two parts: scoring the skill used in the present (five scores) and scoring the competency level that shows the person's competency in current work positions (five scores). The data were analyzed to find the mean to interpret the result. The criteria for the result interpretation are as follows: a score of 9.01-10.00 means competency is at an excellent level, a 8.01-9.00 score means competency is at a very good level, 7.01-8.00 means competency is at a good level, 6.01-7.00 means competency is at a medium level; and at 1.00-6.00, competency is at a low level.

Then the competency information gained is analyzed using the Competency Gap Paired-samples *t*-test to see the difference between the expected competencies and the current competencies in each work position.

Findings

The information gained from the travel agencies staff on the workforce competencies assessment can be analyzed in two parts: the first part is the competencies comparison between expected competencies and current competencies. The second part is the mean comparison by *t*-test to find the competency

gap. Therefore, below you can find diagrams presenting the given findings.

A. Expected Competencies and Current Competencies

The data gathered on the assessment of travel agency staff competencies for four positions – General Manager, Assistant General Manager, Senior Travel Consultant, and Travel Consultant – can be used to compare the expected competencies and current competencies, which are presented in the following four figures.
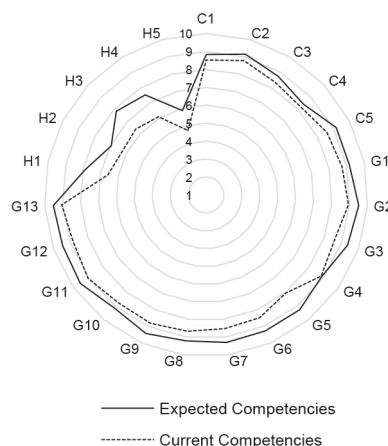

Figure 2 General Manager Competencies

For the position of *General Manager* overall, it was found that the current *Core Competencies* of the position were at a very good level ($\overline{X}=$ 8.50), which is at the same level as the expected competencies ($\overline{X}=$ 8.86), with the expected competencies at an excellent level equivalent to C2: Fundamentally sound

in management, and C5: An ability and willingness to change.

Generic Competencies: The current competencies were at a very good level ($\overline{X}$ = 8.72), but expected competencies were at an excellent level ($\overline{X}$ = 9.31). The expected competencies that were at an excellent level are G1: rhetorical skills, G2: problem solving skills, G3: conceptual skills, G5: proactive communication skills, G6: adaptability cultural differences skills, G7: ability to work under pressure, G8: self-management, G9: keeping promises, G10: self-motivation and willingness to learn, G11: determination and goal orientation, G12: improvement activities skills, and G13: decision-making abilities; at the very good level, we have G4: Adaptability skills. All current competencies were at a very good level, except G11: determination and goal orientation, and G13: decision-making abilities, which were at the excellent level.

Regarding *Specific Functional Competencies*, the current competencies are at a medium level ($\overline{X}$ = 6.01), but the expected competencies are at a good level ($\overline{X}$ = 7.22). The expected competencies at a good level are H1: Knowledge of Muslim culture, H3: Understanding about HALAL, and H4: Islamic expressions and meanings; at a medium level, we have H2: Knowledge of Islamic terminology, and at a low level, H5: Arabic knowledge. All five current specific functional competencies

were at the medium level.

For *Assistant General Manager*, it was found that in the overall picture of *Core Competencies*, the expected competencies were very good ($\overline{X}$ = 8.34), but the current competencies are at a good level ($\overline{X}$ = 7.92). All expected competencies were at a very good level. The current competencies at a good level include C2: Fundamentals in management, C3: Written foreign communication skills, and C4: Applying and using tourism information, except C1: Language competencies, and C5: Ability and willingness to change, which were at a very good level.
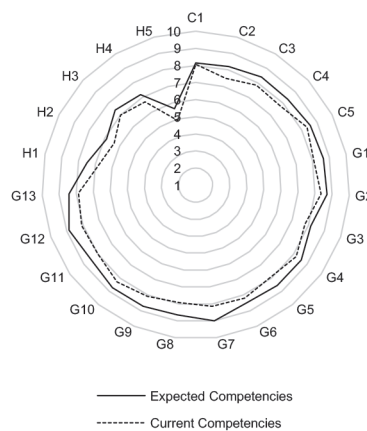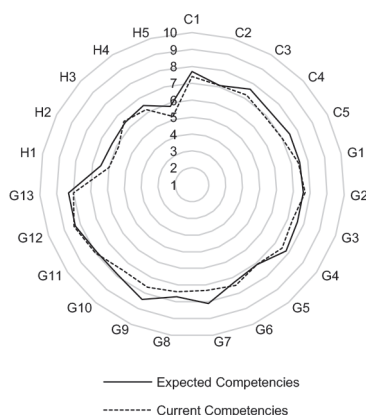

Figure 3 Assistant General Manager Competencies

For *Generic Competencies*, current competencies are at a very good level ($\overline{X}$ = 8.07) and are at the same level as expected competencies ($\overline{X}$ = 8.61). The current competencies, which were lower than the very good level, were G3: conceptual skills, G5: proactive communication skills, G8:

self-management, and G13: decision-making abilities.

For *Specific Functional Competencies*, the current competencies are at a medium level ($\overline{X}$ = 6.36) and are at the same level as the expected competencies ($\overline{X}$ = 6.93). The current competency that was lower than the medium level was H5: Arabic knowledge.
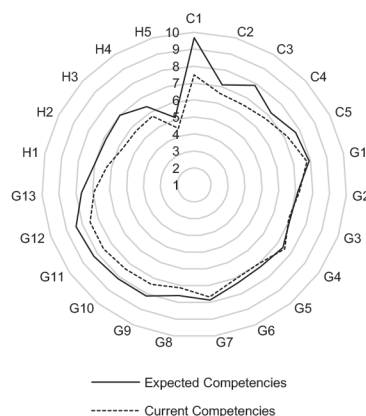

Figure 4 Senior Travel Consultant Competencies

Concerning the *Senior Travel Consultant* criteria, in the overall picture, *Core Competencies* were found to be at a good level ($\overline{X}$ = 7.12), which was the same level as expected competencies ($\overline{X}$ = 7.44). The current competencies that were recorded lower than the good level include C4: Applying and using tourism information.

For *General Competencies*, current competencies are at a good level ($\overline{X}$ = 7.59) and are at the same level as the expected competencies ($\overline{X}$ = 7.77). The expected

competencies that were at a very good level include G7: ability to work under pressure, G9: keeping promises, G12: improvement activities skills, and G13: decision-making abilities. All current competencies were at a good level, except G11: determination and goal orientation, and G12: Improvement activities skills, which were at the very good level.

As to *Specific Functional Competencies*, the current competency was at a low level ($\overline{X}$ = 5.96), while the expected competencies are at a medium level ($\overline{X}$ = 6.30). The expected competency that was at a low level was H5: Arabic knowledge. The current competencies that were at a low level include H2: Knowledge of Islamic terminology, and H5: Arabic knowledge.

Figure 5 Travel Consultant Competencies

On Travel Consultant *Core Competencies,* for the overall picture, it was found that the current competencies were at a medium level ($\overline{X}$ = 6.91) when the expectation in

the core competencies was at a good level ($\overline{X}$ = 7.92). The expected competencies that were at an excellent level were C1: Language competencies. The current competencies that were at a good level include C1: Language competencies, and C5: Ability and willingness to change.

For *Generic Competencies*, the current competencies are at a good level ($\overline{X}$ = 7.30) and the expectation in the competencies are at a good level ($\overline{X}$ = 7.70). The expected competencies recorded at a very good level were G9: keeping promises, G10: self-motivation and willingness to learn, G11: determination and goal orientation, and G12: improvement activities skills. The current competencies recorded at a medium level were G3: Conceptual skills, and G13 Decision-making abilities.

For *Specific Functional Competencies*, the current competencies are at a low level ($\overline{X}$ = 5.57), but the expected competencies were at a medium level ($\overline{X}$ = 6.48). The expected competency which was at a low level is H5: Arabic knowledge. The current competency which was at a medium level is H1: Knowledge of Muslim culture.

B. Competencies Gap

Competencies Gap analysis used a mean comparison between expected competencies and current competencies and was tested by a *t*-test at a confidence interval at 95%. From the test, it was found that there are differences between expected competencies and current competencies with statistical significance in the positions as follows:

General Manager: Competency gaps were found in three competency categories: *Core competencies* on Ability and willingness to change, *Generic competencies* on Conceptual skills, Proactive communication skills, Adaptability cultural difference skills, Ability to work under pressure, Self-management, Keeping promises, and Improvement activities skills. For *Specific functional Competencies,* there were gaps in the Knowledge of Muslim culture, Understanding about HALAL, and Arabic Knowledge.

Assistant General Manager: it was found that there is a Competency gap in *Generic competencies* on Ability to work under pressure and Improvement activities skills.

Senior Travel Consultant: the Competency Gap was not significant between the expected competencies and the current competencies in every competency category.

Travel Consultant: a Competency gap was found in three competency categories: *Core competencies* on written foreign communication skills, *Generic competencies* on Improvement activities skill and *Specific Functional Competencies* where there was a gap in Knowledge of Islamic terminology and understanding about Halal.

Table 1

Competencies	General Manager (n=21)			Assistant General Manager (n=14)			Senior Travel Consultant (n=10)			Travel Consultant (n=15)		
	Expected ($\overline{X}$)	Current ($\overline{X}$)	Sig.	Expected ($\overline{X}$)	Current ($\overline{X}$)	Sig.	Expected ($\overline{X}$)	Current ($\overline{X}$)	Sig.	Expected ($\overline{X}$)	Current ($\overline{X}$)	Sig.
Core Competencies												
C1: Language Competencies	8.84	8.53	0.187	8.14	8.07	0.850	7.70	7.40	0.591	9.66	7.47	0.300
C2: Fundamentals in management	9.15	8.79	0.185	8.21	7.50	0.117	7.10	7.10	1.000	7.13	6.60	0.120
C3: Written foreign communication skills	8.74	8.37	0.274	8.42	7.86	0.311	7.60	7.20	0.309	7.87	6.53	0.003*
C4: Applying and using tourism information	8.42	8.21	0.480	8.36	7.79	0.120	7.30	6.90	0.443	7.20	6.73	0.301
C5: Ability and willingness to change	9.16	8.58	0.030*	8.57	8.36	0.385	7.50	7.00	0.363	7.73	7.20	0.150
Total	8.86	8.50	-	8.34	7.92	-	7.44	7.12	-	7.92	6.91	-
Generic competencies												
G1: Rhetorical skills	9.16	8.74	0.072	8.64	8.07	0.205	7.50	7.40	0.832	7.93	7.80	0.728
G2: Problem-solving skills	9.53	8.95	0.061	8.71	8.36	0.266	7.60	7.70	0.780	7.13	7.20	0.836

Table 1 (continued)

Competencies	Job Position											
	General Manager (n=21)			Assistant General Manager (n=14)			Senior Travel Consultant (n=10)			Travel Consultant (n=15)		
	Expected ($\overline{X}$)	Current ($\overline{X}$)	Sig.	Expected ($\overline{X}$)	Current ($\overline{X}$)	Sig.	Expected ($\overline{X}$)	Current ($\overline{X}$)	Sig.	Expected ($\overline{X}$)	Current ($\overline{X}$)	Sig.
G3: Conceptual skills	9.36	8.58	0.012*	8.14	7.79	0.373	7.60	7.30	0.279	7.00	6.93	0.869
G4: Adaptability skills	8.89	8.84	0.804	8.57	8.21	0.136	7.80	7.50	0.468	7.40	7.53	0.719
G5: Proactive communication skills	9.26	8.05	0.009*	8.57	7.93	0.156	7.10	7.10	1.000	7.20	7.00	0.595
G6: Adaptability cultural difference skills	9.26	8.47	0.039*	8.50	8.21	0.263	7.30	7.50	0.555	7.33	7.07	0.610
G7: Ability to work under pressure	9.31	8.53	0.018*	9.00	8.14	0.012*	8.10	7.30	0.153	7.87	7.67	0.695
G8: Self-management	9.21	8.68	0.037*	8.64	7.93	0.065	7.70	7.40	0.560	7.60	7.13	0.396
G9: Keeping promises	9.42	8.79	0.019*	8.71	8.07	0.069	8.40	7.60	0.087	8.13	7.40	0.094
G10: Self-motivation and willingness to learn	9.11	8.74	0.298	8.71	8.28	0.234	7.90	7.50	0.479	8.13	7.40	0.111

Table 1 (continued)

Competencies	Job Position											
	General Manager (n=21)			Assistant General Manager (n=14)			Senior Travel Consultant (n=10)			Travel Consultant (n=15)		
	Expected ($\overline{X}$)	Current ($\overline{X}$)	Sig.	Expected ($\overline{X}$)	Current ($\overline{X}$)	Sig.	Expected ($\overline{X}$)	Current ($\overline{X}$)	Sig.	Expected ($\overline{X}$)	Current ($\overline{X}$)	Sig.
G11: Determination and goal orientation	9.57	9.05	0.086	8.50	8.00	0.169	7.90	8.00	0.864	8.27	7.53	0.181
G12: Improvement activities skills	9.47	8.84	0.004*	8.86	8.07	0.006*	8.30	8.40	0.853	8.40	7.33	0.037*
G13: Decision-making abilities	9.53	9.05	0.083	8.43	7.86	0.135	8.30	8.00	0.563	7.67	6.93	0.135
Total	9.31	8.72	-	8.61	8.07	-	7.77	7.59	-	7.70	7.30	-
Specific Functional Competencies (HALAL)												
H1: Knowledge of Muslim culture	7.89	6.58	0.007*	7.50	6.79	0.246	6.50	6.00	0.322	7.00	6.27	0.143
H2: Knowledge of Islamic terminology	6.95	6.26	0.143	6.86	6.36	0.336	6.30	5.90	0.373	6.87	5.73	0.023*
H3: Understanding about HALAL	7.84	6.36	0.006*	7.43	7.00	0.459	6.40	6.50	0.847	7.00	5.67	0.011*
H4: Islamic expression	7.53	6.11	0.001*	7.21	6.71	0.336	6.50	6.20	0.576	6.40	5.73	0.215
H5: Arabic knowledge	5.89	4.74	0.035*	5.64	4.93	0.183	5.80	5.20	0.217	5.13	4.47	0.076
Total	7.22	6.01	-	6.93	6.36	-	6.30	5.96	-	6.48	5.57	-

Conclusion and Discussion

The comparison of expected competencies and current competencies of staff in four positions in travel agencies business found that for the special competencies on Muslims, the position of General Manager and Assistant General Manager had competencies at a medium level, whereas the position of Senior Travel Consultant and Travel Consultant had competencies at the low level and lower than the expected competencies in every position. Travel Agencies should stress on improving this special competency first, especially the position of General Manager and what should be stressed is an improvement in the understanding of Knowledge of Muslim culture, Understanding about Halal and Arabic knowledge.

In the position of Travel Consultant, the competencies that should be stressed are Knowledge of Islamic terminology and Understanding about Halal to be able to manage and offer Muslim-friendly service.

To improve Core Competencies for the General Manager, importance should be given to ability and willingness, etc., to change, while for the position of Travel Consultant, the focus should be on improving written foreign communication skills.

To develop the Generic Competencies of General Managers, the competencies that should be developed are Conceptual skills, Proactive communication skills, Adaptability cultural difference skills, Ability to work under pressure, Self-management, Keeping promises, and Improvement activities skills.

For the position of Assistant General Manager, the competencies of Ability to work under pressure and Improvement activities skills should be stressed, whereas for the Travel Consultant, staff should focus on Improvement activities skills.

Training for staff in travel agencies businesses should be given constantly, especially for the position of Travel Consultant, as they are the main service provider.

Finally, involving organizations under the tourism organization should implant fundamental knowledge of Halal in the curriculum of the Chiang Mai tourism training for tourism certificates.

Recommendation

On the Specific functional Competencies of Halal, it was found that current competencies were lower than expected in every position, thus the travel agencies should implement training plans to the development of Knowledge of Muslim culture, Islamic terminology, and Islamic expression in order to offer Muslim-friendly service.

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