



THE FORMATION OF HUMAN RESOURCES IN MOUNTAIN TOURISM – CONDITION OF SERVICE QUALITY ASSURANCE

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Abstract

Service quality assurance in general, and in mountain tourism, in particular, is based on having a well trained, sufficient workforce that also has the relevant experience in providing a specific service. This article highlights the past and present of the mountain guide profession in Romania, from the point of view of the evolution of the formation system of such specialists. The study reflects the fact that, although the legislation offers well defined standards to professional formation providers, the courses available on the market are heterogeneous, and the formation process is often insufficient compared to the requirements of practicing such a job. On the other hand, the structure and format of the mountain guides' courses offered in the Alpine countries are very rigorous, and should be taken as an example by Romanian mountain guides schools as well.

Key words:

Human Resources;
Mountain tourism;
Services; Quality

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1. Introduction

In Romania, the profession of mountain guide has its roots in the late 1800s and ever since then it has gone through a multitude of radical changes when it comes to its practices and the professional training programs of mountain guides. Given the specificity of mountain tourism offers, mountain guides are essential for leading tourists on mountain hikes and they should be thoroughly trained, especially seeing that they might have to face dangerous situations. Although it isn't very vast, the offer of mountain guide services is available in some regions of Romania, and in order to make tourists trust such offers they must respect certain quality standards. These standards are imposed first of all by the field's already existing legislation and secondly, by the deontological and professional code of those already working as mountain guides.

2. The stages of knowledge

The concept of quality is often interpreted subjectively, and is perceived differently by each of us. Therefore, in order to define quality objectively one must take into account the analysis perspective. Thus, quality can be determined through four approaches (Emilian *et al.*, 2006):

1. *Service or offer orientation*, in which quality is measurable, as it is provided by all the quality-related characteristics of the offer or service;

2. *Process orientation*, in which an offer or service is considered to be of quality if it is in accordance with specifications;

3. *Cost orientation*; in which quality is defined in accordance with the price demanded by the service provider from the buyer; here the cost-quality ratio is also an important element before deciding to buy.

4. *Client orientation*, in which quality is defined by the capacity of the offer or service to be appropriate for use, and to satisfy the client's expectations with regards to functionality, safety, price, reliability etc.

Currently, the concept of *total quality management (TQM)* is also very important; it applies to three basic principles (Emilian *et al.*, 2006), namely:

1. *Client satisfaction*, be they external or internal clients. From the client's perspective, quality can have numerous aspects such as: conformity, value, ease of use, guarantee or psychological impact. The quality of a service is determined by the result of the interaction between the service being offered and the client's perception of the service. The offered service results from the specific operations, it is concrete and operational, has well defined physical, technical, human and procedural characteristics, which makes quality an objective trait. The client, on the other hand, compares his perception of the services being offered with his or her expectations, which makes quality subjective.

2. *Employee involvement*, a process which implies activities such as modifying organisational culture, implementing professional development programs, granting of prizes and incentives for encouraging teamwork. From among these, professional development programs have the role of enhancing employee performance which has had a direct impact on the quality of offered services.

3. *Continuous improvement*, based on the fundamental elements of employee involvement, their understanding of their role within the ongoing process and the fact that they're in control of the tasks that must be completed. The process of continuous improvement of quality is based on the Deming cycle stages, namely: planning, applying, control, and implementation.

As for the quality of tourism services, it is defined by the United Nations World Tourism Organisation – UNWTO as being „the result of a process which implies satisfying all the legitimate needs for offers and services, demands and expectations of the client, at a reasonable price and according to the mutually agreed upon contractual conditions as well as the determinant factors which confer quality namely safety and security, hygiene, accessibility, transparency, authenticity and the harmony between the tourism activity and the natural and anthropic environments” (UNWTO, 2003).

In tourism, quality and sustainability are intertwined, resulting in a larger concept of quality which implies: the conventional execution of quality management in those units offering tourism services remains the foundation of the concept. To this is added the quality of the natural and cultural environment of the tourist destinations. Together, the two aspects of quality ensure the overall quality of the tourist experience (UNWTO, 2015).

3. Research methodology

In Romania, the mountain guide profession is not very developed yet; therefore information sources about this profession are still limited. The research for the present paper was based on secondary and external data. Thus, in the research process we have used legislative texts concerning the training of tourist guides in general and of mountain guides in particular, (Government Resolution no. 305/2001 and the Order of The Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Tourism, no. 637 of 1st of April 2004 for the approval of methodological norms concerning the conditions and criterion for the selection, training, accreditation and appointing of tourist guides) as well as the articles and texts of the most important associations and mountain guide schools in Romania.

4. Results

After analysing the already mentioned data sources we have obtained information regarding the evolution of the mountain guide profession, from its origins in Romania to the present day. Moreover, the main legislative aspects regarding the training and accreditation of mountain guides were synthesized, and were analysed by comparison with the practices already applied by the current providers of professional training in the field.

4.1. Short history of the profession

The mountain guide profession in Romania has its roots in the 1870s, ever since the inauguration of the Transylvanian Alpine Association in Braşov (SAK – Siebenbuergischen Alpenvereins in Kronstadt) and the Transylvanian Carpathian Association from Sibiu (SKV), when the coined term for mountain guides was that of „călăuză” (guide) (Anghel, 2014). The role of the guides was of accompanying groups on the mountain as well as providing the logistic organisation of boarding and transportation. Getting inspiration from Alpine countries, the training and organisation of the first official guides in Romania was done by the SKV, starting with 1884, when the first licences and badges of guides appear. Moreover, in certain mountainous areas guides began their activity without previous systematic training. (Anghel, 2014).

In the 1930s the guide profession became less attractive for the people living in the Carpathian regions, mainly because of the lack of demand for such services, and at the end of the 1940s this liberal profession disappears after the change of the political regime which divides mountain hiking in two activities:

- alpinism, sporting activity;
- mountain hiking, tourist activity.

The mountain guide profession reemerges in Romania after the foundation of the Bureau for Youth Tourism (BTT), after 1968; the organisation was responsible for the training of mountain guides at county level (Anghel, 2014). After the collapse of the communist regime, there was no other structure to solely organise the activity and training of mountain guides; instead there appeared several associations and private schools which offered these possibilities.

4.2. Legislative aspects

In Romania there are several categories of guides with tourist activity namely (GR no. 305/2001):

- local guide;
- national guide;
- specialized guide (mountain, art, overseer, animation, natural habitat, sports etc.).

According to the law, professional training of these categories of mountain guides can be done either within the national education system or within the professional training system for adults. In order to gain professional specialization as a national tourism guide or as a specialised tourism guide, one is required to have the certificate which attests him or her as a tourism guide (OMTCT 637/2004)

In order to be a tourism guide one must have a guide certificate – a document provided by the responsible ministry, which confirms the professional capacity of the individual persons qualified as tourism guides of being active in one of the aforementioned categories: local, national or specialised (OMTCT 637/2004).

According to the occupational standard for the profession of mountain guide, the main activities of those engaged in this profession are (Enache, 2007):

- granting specialised assistance to the clients;
- organising periods of training in mountain tourism;
- analysing the tourism potential of various areas, in order to identify the most interesting trails;
- establishing and maintaining links to the adjacent service and activity network on the trails;
- developing and promoting characteristic tourism products;
- moderating inter-personal relations within the tourist groups;
- leading and taking part in rescue and first aid operations;
- showcasing their abilities of team-work, foreign language communication, of administering and managing the available funds.

Moreover, the occupational standard also defines the competence categories as well as the respective units of competence, which must be included in the structure of professional training courses for mountain guides. Under the category of fundamental competence are listed interactive communication, teamwork, professional development and communicating in a foreign language. Among the general competences we can also find the organisation of administrative activities, the development of mountain tourism offers, and communication with the tour-operator in order to promote mountain tourism offers and to manage the funding allocated to various activities. In the category of specific competences we can list actively protecting of the environment, mountain trail planning, promoting tourism-related information, ensuring a favourable climate for the tourists, leading mountain-related activities, playing an active part in the activities and ensuring group safety (Enache, 2007)

4.3. Professional training providers

Presently, professional training of mountain guides is entrusted to the system of professional training of adults, with several existing categories of organisations which offer professional training courses in the field. Among them there are various professional associations of mountain guides, non-governmental organisations, guide-training schools of certain tourist agencies etc. According to the National Qualification Authority and the National Registry of Adult Professional Training, 80 organisations are currently providing courses for the training of tourist agents/guides. From among these, 56 are qualification courses, 13 are specialisation courses, 5 are initiation courses and 6 are perfecting courses. In what follows, we will present the descriptions of the courses given by two of the aforementioned organisations:

4.3.1. The Romanian Mountain Guide Association (RMGA), Braşov

RMGA is the professional Romanian mountain guides association which lists amongst its objectives such activities as the training and schooling of mountain guides according to international tourism standards, the organising of initiation and perfecting schools for different mountain-related activities (hiking, alpinism, climbing, skiing etc.), the editing of pedagogical materials, the organising of tourism activities specific to mountain tourism etc.

RMGA organises both initiation as well as specialization courses for the profession of mountain guide, both courses being approved by the National Qualification Authority. Applying for either one of the two course-types implies a test which consists of a practical trial for physical abilities as well as a theoretical test for evaluating mountain-related knowledge. Moreover, there are also experience requirements for future course attendants as follows: in order to be accepted to one of the initiation courses, one must have completed 10 mountain trails during summer, 5 mountain trails during winter and 5 ski touring trails; and in order to attend the specialisation courses one needs to graduate the initiation course, as well as gain the recommendation of a RMGA member or that of another mountain club. The courses end with a written and oral exam based on the studied curricula; to this a practical test is added. Graduates receive a graduation certificate from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour with which they may obtain the mountain guide certificate and badge.

4.3.2. Guides of Romania Tourism Association (ATGR, Bucharest)

ATGR is a non-governmental youth organisation which aims at promoting tourism and ecology, the organisation of environmental protection events, mountain-related events as well as organising a school for guides. The ATGR guide school is a supplier of professional training for multiple guide categories, and it has the following course offers: qualification course for tourist agents/guides, specialisation course for national tourism guides, initiation course for mountain guides and specialisation course for mountain guides.

The specialisation course for mountain guides lasts 4 months, during which the course attendees are trained both theoretically and practically. The theoretical course curriculum includes subjects such as active environmental protection, management of mountain-related activities, group management, tourism marketing, management and administration. In order to graduate the course, those enrolled have to prove their consistent mountain-related knowledge, an exceptional fitness, mountain sports aptitudes and have to take part in at least two practical testing and perfecting applications. After passing the exam, the course participants are granted a certificate from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour with which they may obtain the mountain guide certificate and badge.

The two aforementioned schools for guides are listed in the National Registry of Adult Professional Training of the National Qualification Authority, thus proving that their training programs uphold the legal requirements, as well as those listed in the occupational standards of the mountain guide profession.

Conclusions

After analysing the information presented in the previous section one might conclude that, although Romania has a relevant legislative basis and well defined occupational standards for the profession of mountain guide, the current professional training system in the field is not homogenous

Therefore, the professional training services for mountain guides have to be aligned with the standards imposed by the International Federation of Mountain Guide Associations (IFMGA). This federation was created in 1965 by guides from Austria, France, Switzerland and Italy. Currently it includes members guide associations from over 20 countries. IFMGA sets clear requirements for every step of the training process: from admittance to initiation courses, graduation and signing up for specialized courses, as well as the specialization final exam. IFMGA recommends that the training process should be between 3 an 5 years, in order to grant those enrolled

the possibility of going through all stages of training and, most importantly, to gain the necessary experience for leading tourists safely on the mountain, with all responsibility and autonomy.

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