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# **Learning Preferences of Managers of Small to Medium-Sized Tourism Enterprises and Their Implications to Sustain Tourism Programs**

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## **Purpose**

Research has suggested that the transfer of knowledge from academia to industry has been inefficient (Ruhaven, 2008) and that environmental education programs should be instituted in businesses (Moscardo, 2005). Park et al. (2012) has suggested, specifically within hotels, that well-structured education, designed by hotel associations, local governments, or the headquarters of hotel companies would benefit the business and its adoption of sustainability practices. The present study takes these theories, and those focused specifically on hotels, to a more macro-level approach by attempting to better understand tourism managers' perceptions of sustainability in Indiana and how this plays into the way they are interested in learning. With such an understanding, the purpose of this research is to develop better translational tools about sustainable business practices (SBPs) through more effective educational outlets.

## **Literature Review**

Managerial perspectives and knowledge of sustainable tourism are crucial for the adoption of sustainable business practices. Scholars have noted that this process heavily relies on a top-down

approach. Park et al. (2012) argued that the environmental attitude of top managers, within tourism venues, directly influences the venue's environmental management activities. Lack of understanding of the intangible benefits of business sustainability and environmental responsibility is a key reason for the low level of current, voluntary environmental tools within the lodging sector of tourism. In addition, research has found that the current wealth of knowledge about sustainable tourism, while recognized within the field of academia, is not dispersed effectively to the destination level (Ruhanen, 2008). This oversight in identifying management's current knowledge is of particular concern, since previous studies have found that hotel manager environmental awareness is an important driver for implementing environmental tools (Ayuso, 2006). Understanding managerial knowledge of sustainable tourism may help shed light on the reasons why some destinations and venues have not fully adopted sustainable practices, despite twenty years of environmental research, demand, and concern by consumers.

Previous research has focused on countries outside of the United States, such as Wales and Spain, and has found that managers are open to adopt sustainable practices but need more internal marketing and education (La Lopa & Day, 2012; Ayuso, 2006). Future research for the present study attempts to determine if the tourism industry in Indiana should undertake more effort to educate its industry leaders about sustainability practices. The study addresses similar issues from previous work but it will focus on the United States, as management knowledge and motivation to adopt sustainability practices may be different due to cultural and demographic reasons. Managers throughout the tourism industry in the United States are at different stages of adoption and should be provided support to learn about the potential practices. The 'one size fits all' motto may not be conducive to helping people learn about sustainable tourism.

Scholars have argued that new learning techniques must be devised to "spread the word" about sustainable tourism (Ruhanen, 2008), but they have not addressed specifically the learning obstacles causing lack of adoption of practices. Other scholars have called for sustainable education programs. According to Moscardo (2005), due to the demand for sustainable tourism, hospitality and tourism companies have been driven to provide sustainable venues. They have started to cultivate their guests' knowledge and awareness of the natural environment by encouraging them to preserve the environment through practices such as waste minimization, energy and water conservation, recycling, and minimal disturbance to wildlife. A need has been created for managers' themselves to become educated about sustainable tourism. Learning techniques regarding sustainable tourism have been more difficult because individuals, stakeholders, employees, and guests interpret and implement them differently (Lu et al., 2009). The ability to develop and diffuse knowledge about sustainable tourism practices is the key to the future success of both the public and private sectors of tourism (Ruhanen, 2008).

To obtain a deeper understanding of the internal learning preferences and needs of the tourism industry, Knowledge Management (KM) practices are analyzed. They have been cited as a competitive tool for the future of sustainable tourism (Ruhanen, 2008). Specifically, the present study looks at Nonaka's knowledge creation model and applies the modes of learning to future surveys of Indiana tourism management. According to Nonaka (1991), for two people with tacit knowledge to transfer knowledge between each other, socialization must occur, which consists of communication, brainstorming, and imitating (Hildreth & Kimble, 2002). Examples of this within the tourism industry could be experimental or active learning through direct interaction among actors outside of the organization and employees within the organization. For individuals

with tacit knowledge to transfer knowledge to individuals with explicit knowledge, externalization must occur. Externalization involves articulation through sharing ideas through images, analogies, consulting experts, and other means (Nonaka, 1991). The stage of combination allows explicit knowledge to be transferred as explicit knowledge and utilizes technology to easily articulate a message through documents, e-mails, and Internet outlets (Nonaka, 1991). Internalization involves taking explicit knowledge and converting it to tacit knowledge by experiential learning. Such knowledge is held by the individual and can be shared through simulations or active learning. Using Nonaka's (1991) model, the present study attempts to use the four modes of knowledge conversion: socialization, internalization, externalization, and combination to assess the tourism industry's "best-fit" mode to address more effective ways to help individuals learn about sustainable tourism.

Many training techniques rely on explicit to explicit knowledge transfer, or Nonaka's 'combination' stage. To gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of knowledge transfer and learning preferences, Knowles' (1984) theory of andragogy is also examined, as it highlights that other means of knowledge creation are sometimes more effective for adult learners. This theory is specific to adult learning and consists of four assumptions: adults need to know why they need to learn something and must be involved in the process, adults need to learn experientially, adults approach learning as problem-solving rather than content-oriented, and adults learn best when the topic is of immediate value to their job or personal life (Knowles, 1984). By examining adult learning behaviors, effective strategies can be devised to help articulate the commercial, along with the environmental, opportunities for businesses that undertake sustainable tourism practices. Forsyth (2009) argued that a better understanding of commercial opportunities may enable businesses to take a more hands-on role in adopting SBPs. Andragogy has been cited as a relevant theory to micro/small business, such as those surveyed for this study, because it focuses on the application of knowledge to the real-world (Knowles, 1980). Anagogical philosophy focuses on the mature learner and their motivation to learn due to a role they are to perform, a task they desire to accomplish, or to a problem they wish to solve (Knowles, 1984). This study argues that learning preferences of tourism industry management must be examined in order to devise effective learning techniques about sustainable tourism. Analyzing adult learning preferences and tailoring educational material to this audience may help managers adopt SBPs.

## **Methodology**

The present study used convenience sampling, by sampling tourism business managers in Indiana. To get responses from this sample, the voluntary, online survey was dispersed to various Convention Visitor Bureaus (CVB's), which represent their own counties of Indiana. Each CVB was contacted by Purdue University to see if they were interested in participating in the survey. This study is sampling all tourism venues, not just hotels, since sustainable tourism is applicable to all sectors of the tourism industry. "Sustainable tourism" was defined for respondents as, "tourism that incorporates a wide variety of business activities that: protect the environment and/or support the unique heritage of Indiana and/or support local businesses and the local economy". In cooperation with destination marketing organizations (DMOs), initial survey responses were collected from counties throughout Indiana of approximately 180 responses. Responses continued to be collected; this is a work in progress.

## **Initial Findings**

Survey results revealed that lack of time and money and limited support are the major constraints but that managers would consider SBPs if they could learn of inexpensive ways to do it. Additionally, Internet-based, printed, and digital "do-it-yourself" instruction materials are the preferred ways to learn. Results also revealed that companies are obtaining information on SBPs from Trade Associations and CVBs, not academically related materials such as peer reviewed journals or consultants. Understanding the reasons behind the adoption or interest in adopting SBPs is a major point of analysis in this study. Additionally, a larger portion of the sampled businesses have been adopting SBPs because they believe it is the "right thing to do", compared to those who adopt SBPs to help cut costs or improve the bottom line. Targeting the sources, reasons, and motivations behind the adoption of SBPs is a major focus of this study. Understanding *why* they are not adopting SBPs has potential to aid in creating more effective tools and educational programs to help management better understand the pros and cons of certain practices, the amount of resources their specific company must use, and other factors.

## **Conclusion**

The present study addresses gaps in literature related to the dissemination of knowledge about SBPs into the tourism industry by analyzing quantitative data on current knowledge and current practices of tourism industry management in Indiana. The research attempts to specifically address the learning obstacles causing the problem and to identify what aspects of the current tourism system weaken or decrease a property's readiness to change to SBPs. Management's responses are of primary concern for the present research, because the managerial viewpoint and knowledge of sustainable tourism are crucial for the adoption of sustainable business practices; scholars have noted that this process heavily relies on a top-down approach. Future surveying and research for this study will attempt to identify what aspects of the current tourism system weaken or decrease a property's readiness to change to more sustainable business practices, such as, ineffective ways of helping managers and owners learn about sustainable tourism. As a work in progress, the research has potential to contribute to the greater body of literature in the field of hospitality and tourism by identifying learning strategies, through Knowles' (1984) theory of andragogy, by uncovering better ways to share knowledge within the industry. This understanding will aid in identifying more effective ways to help hospitality professionals learn about sustainable tourism.

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*Keywords:* sustainable business practices, knowledge management, andrology, adoption

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