

CHALLENGES FOR THE EUROPEAN SPA MANAGEMENT. RESULTS OF THE ILIS PROJECT

European spa management

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Abstract

Introduction. The spa industry has been rapidly growing throughout Europe in recent years, which has led to an associated increase in educational demand in spa management. The aim of the study was to identify the most important needs for training and the most significant skills among the spa managers and their personnel throughout Europe. Moreover, it was to research the background of spas where the study had taken place. **Material and methods.** 30 managers took part in semi structured interviews that used a pre-prepared questionnaire. The answers were analysed with Wilcoxon signed rank test and also the mean values were compared. **Results.** The needs for training and importance of skills vary from country to country but common areas of interest are: sales, marketing, quality and innovation management, legal regulations, operational and social skills. The complex character of answers to questionnaire was a result of different spa business models and differing domestic spa markets as well as variety of legal environments. **Conclusions.** Spa tourism creates a significant income among the other tourism disciplines since that further research is needed. Demands for the spa education differed accordingly to a stage of each country spa business development. Spa managers tend to express higher training needs for their employees than for themselves.

Key words: spa manager, European Union, Innovations and Learning in Spa Management (ILIS)

Introduction

Spa tourism is widely acknowledged as a core element of the health and wellness movement, which covers a broad spectrum of holistic, curative and preventative activities. Health tourism was defined by the International Union of Tourism Organisations – the forerunner to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) – in 1973 as the “provision of health facilities utilising the natural re-

sources of the country, in particular mineral water and climate”. Since this definition was accepted the development of health tourism and spa tourism as its main product offer has been rapid. It is possible to observe the drastic growth of spa supply and service differentiation as a result.

The findings of the survey on spa managers presented in this paper are a part of wider research carried out within the Innovations and Learning in Spa Management (ILIS) programme financed by the European Union. It is one of

the Lifelong Learning Programmes (LLP) Multilateral projects – cooperation between higher education and enterprises – selected in 2008 within the ERASMUS Programme. The ILIS project (2008-2010) combines the experience and knowledge of five academic partners and their industrial associates in spa management in Finland, Poland, Austria, the United Kingdom and Spain. In each of these countries the spa industry has developed according to local custom, practice and cultural requirements.

In the UK, Mintel [1] reports that there are currently almost 300 health spa resorts listed in the UK yellow pages. An estimated 35 million adults have been to a salon or a spa in the 12 months to September 2009. Mintel [2] also reports that the value of the UK domestic health and wellness holidays in 2008 (spa & holistic breaks) was £71 million. In Finland a total of 46 spas with 5617 rooms and 12 600 beds is found. The capacity has not changed a lot during the past years and the willingness to invest has stayed steady. Most investment projects have aimed for diversifying the wellbeing elements and service offer. Among the Finnish accommodation, business hotel recreation spas, have been the most successful during the last years with average occupancy rates between 60-80% [3]. Spanish main trends in spa business are reflected in figures given by recent DBK Spa report in 2009 [4]. A total number of establishments reported was 809 (109 thermal resorts + 700 other) with 196 724 beds (16 724 in thermal resorts + 180 000 others), which created the turnover of 3 375 000 euros (4.7% growth). Also in Austria the spa and wellness market has been growing rapidly in recent years [5]. The Polish resources have also indicated a rapid growth of spa tourism market [6] and show the trends in continuously developing spa product [7].

The variety of spa management concepts in the European countries is strictly connected with development of best practice and science. The academic resources referring to management of spas are very limited in each of the partner countries and most of literature are reports, conference proceedings and trade articles [1, 2, 8, 9, 10]. Published spa research is still very scarce in Finland where the most quoted are dealing with spas as part of the broader concept of health and wellbeing tourism [11]. The most advanced in research are German speaking countries (Austria, Germany, Switzerland), where some spa management surveys were carried out. They examine the level of education of spa managers [12] and spa staff [13]. In Spain the research carried out within the ILIS project [14] was most probably the first one taking the spa managers and their personnel into consideration. UK resources also present mostly spa supply [1] and market data [2] with a gap in spa manage-

ment field, except for academic handbooks[15]. Similar literature lacks on spa management are observed in Poland with only a few articles and books on the subject [16].

The aim of this paper is to present the results of a questionnaire on spa managers jobs in spa centres across the five European countries. The results intend to show one common approach to spa managers positions in Finland, Poland, Spain, United Kingdom and Austria. This will provide a European perspective even though the culture, the economy and legal regulations vary from one partner country to another. The special emphasis of our research was to define the key features among different countries' managers and their staff in order to compare and contrast differences and similarities. This survey was also intended to fill the gap in research on spa management in the European Union.

Material and methods

The survey was carried out between March and September 2009 in selected spa centres in five European countries: Austria, Finland, Spain, Poland and the UK. The managers were interviewed to identify the needs for additional training for themselves as well as for their personnel. The questionnaire was used in 30 spa centres in all five countries with a close number of managers questioned in each country. Our sample size reached 30 managers who represented variety of spa centres of different organizational types. The managers worked in different legal, cultural and economic environments. Such approach was intended to be used during our studies. In addition, they reported training needs and importance of their staff's skills.

Semi-structured interview was used basing on a pre-prepared questionnaire devised by the ILIS academic partners during their project meetings. The results firstly show spa managers' job background in five represented countries (social and economic factors), which are necessary to understand the following results: needs for training and importance of skills. 32 skills in total were given to managers to assess where represented fields of competence were: managerial skills, social skills, technical skills and health treatments skills. The managers assigned value one through five (2.5 being the average), where five is the highest value, to the importance and training need for each skill.

The statistical analyses of the importance of skills and the needs for training were carried out using Wilcoxon signed rank test [17]. Following levels of significance were used: <0.05 significant, 0.05-0.1 close to significance, and >0.1 non significant. Furthermore, to present the areas of common interest, mean values calculated for all partner

countries were used, showing the top ten needs and ten most important skills throughout the partner countries.

The research adopted the definition of spa proposed by the members of the ILIS Project and based on FH prof. Kai Illing book on spa management [12]. A spa is : "A designated place of services in the continuum of health, wellbeing, relaxation and body styling (nutrition, gym, physical activities, plastic surgery, beauty care, etc.), which are offered holistically by skilled professionals often with aid of (healing) water."

Results

Management system in spas

It was found out that owners of the spa centres were responsible themselves for managing: 50% cases in Austria, 40% in Spain and about 30% in Finland. The company's board controlled over 50% managers in Spain, and only few (below 10%) in Austria, Great Britain, and Finland. In Poland, Austria and Finland it often (approx. 30%) occurred that the manager was controlled directly by the spa's owner. Spa managers working time was found to be in Finland, Poland, Spain, Great Britain, and Austria respectively: 38, 40, 44, 47 and 53 hours.

Spa size and employment

The number of employees varied from 25-35 in Spain and in Great Britain, around 50 in Austria and Finland, to an average of 54 in Poland. In all the surveyed companies the organisational structure was similar, approximately 25% of the staff being the administration officers, reception desk workers, management, maintenance. The rest of the personnel were instructors, masseurs, therapists, etc.

Spa managers characteristics and duties

The managers indicated leading tasks i.e: sales and marketing. Furthermore, in all countries the duties assigned to the management were: finances, human resources, strategic planning. Seldom mentioned, but also important were: customer service policy and quality management. On average, in all the countries, a manager was responsible for 6 main tasks. In Great Britain there were 8 (on average) responsibilities assigned to a manager.

Among the managers most (91%) had a higher education, the majority a Masters degree (59%), one third (32%) Bachelor's degree and 9% upper vocational training. More than 50% had over 6 years experience in spa centre management and 30% have worked between 1 and 3 years in the field. Also over 50% of spa managers had previously taken training in: leadership, IT, and quality control.

Importance and needs significance results

In all surveyed countries average importance of skills was statistically significantly higher for managers than for their staff (each country $p < 0.001$). On the contrary, when analysing the mean values of training needs, it was observed significantly higher (on average $p < 0.001$) level of needs for spa staff than for spa managers. Nevertheless in Spain, Great Britain and Finland Wilcoxon signed rank test result was $p > 0.1$. The average value result was still significant since the test analysed number of repetitions of the 32 skills in each of the 5 countries (Tab. 1)

Table 1. Wilcoxon signed rank test results and mean values of importance and training needs

country	manager (mean)	staff (mean)	significance
Importance			
AUSTRIA	4.22	3.25	$p < 0.0001$
SPAIN	4.26	3.68	$p < 0.0001$
FINLAND	4.4	3.62	$p < 0.0001$
POLAND	4.11	3.25	$p < 0.0001$
GREAT BRITAIN	4.09	3.61	$p = 0.0022$
Average 5 countries	4.22	3.49	$p < 0.0001$
Needs			
country	manager (mean)	staff (mean)	significance
AUSTRIA	2.2	2.5	$p = 0.0044$
SPAIN	2.48	2.65	$p = 0.1318$
FINLAND	2.30	2.27	$p = 0.8238$
POLAND	1.7	2.57	$p < 0.0001$
GREAT BRITAIN	2.73	2.85	$p = 0.3251$
Average 5 countries	2.29	2.57	$p < 0.0001$

Managers and staff significance results

Signed rank test results revealed that importance of skills for managers was significantly higher (each country $p < 0.001$) than their need for training. Similar situation occurred with the results for spa personnel. Even though the average level importance for staff was lower, it was still (except for Poland, $p < 0.0938$) significantly higher (each of other 4 countries $p < 0.001$) than their level of needs.

Training needs for skills and importance of skills among the questioned spa managers

The following figures show common areas of interests within the surveyed countries. In each case ten highest rated skills (average form five countries) are presented (Fig. 1, 2, 3, 4).

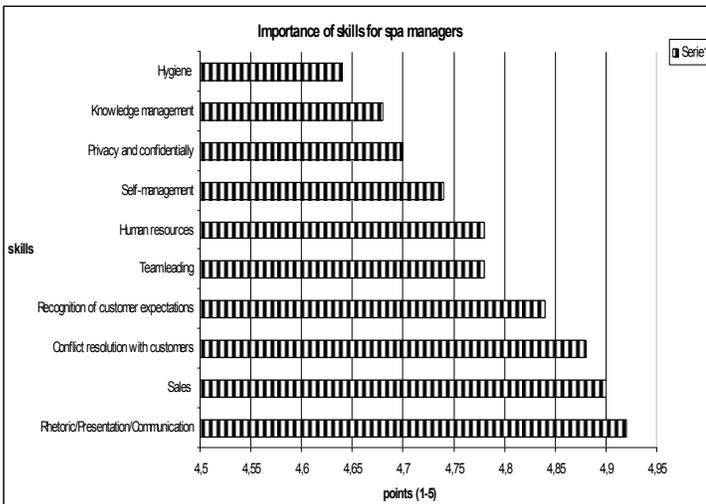


Figure 1. Importance of skills of spa managers (top 10 from all partner countries – mean values)



Figure 2. Training needs of spa managers (top 10 from all partner countries – mean values)

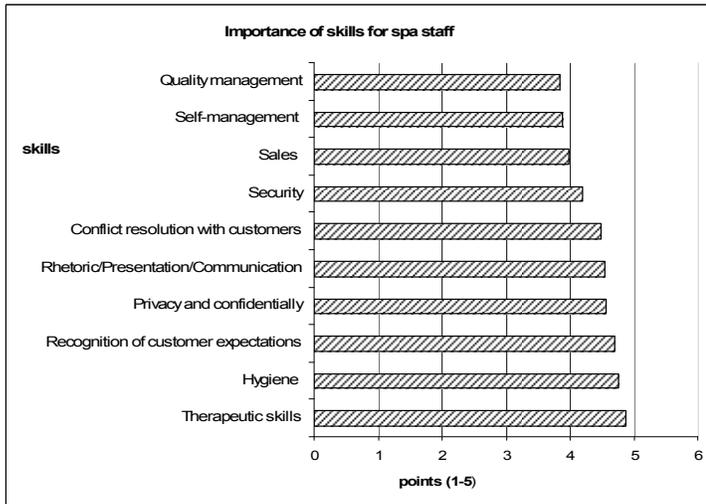


Figure 3. Importance of skills for spa staff (top 10 from all partner countries – mean values)



Figure 4. Training needs of spa staff (top 10 from all partner countries – mean values)

Discussion

Very little attention is paid to the field of spa centre management in Polish research. It is more often studied in the European literature [12]. The attempt to examine the role of the spa manager in different EU countries was made by all academic partners of the ILIS project. It was a part of a wider research on European spas. The crucial factor was to use the same questionnaire in all cases, which allowed for direct comparison across the countries. In this study the results of this survey were presented to discover the common areas of training needs of spa managers and spa staff in Europe. The character of analyses within the research was comparative. Wilcoxon signed rank test was used here

since it is a non-parametric statistical hypothesis test for the case of two related samples (which here are importance and needs levels) [17]. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that spas of different organizational type and a varying range of services were included in our survey.

The first element to be considered is the organizational structure where the managers of these centres work. If one looks at the data from all the surveyed countries together, it may be seen that in most cases it is the owner of a company who remains responsible for its management.

Noteworthy, is the varying length of the working week meaning that in Finland managers work the shortest weeks while the longest hours are worked in Great Britain.

In each of the surveyed spas there is at least one person responsible for management. In the case of Austria, Spain and Finland the number of managers in a centre may be greater, most probably due to the larger size of the companies. Looking at the size of the spa resorts it can be differentiated between smaller spas, mainly in Spain and Great Britain (25-35 employees) and larger, of around 50 employees which can be seen in the other three countries, Poland's spas being the biggest with the average of 54 workers (cheapest workforce?). In all the surveyed companies the organisational structure is similar with approximately 25% of the staff being administration officers, reception desk workers, management, maintenance. The rest of the personnel are instructors, masseurs, therapists, etc. Moreover, it was observed that experience is not the key element in becoming a manager but the education plays the most important role.

The questionnaires also asked the managers about vocational training and professional development. Wilcoxon signed rank test revealed that managers declared significantly higher level of skills importance for themselves than for their employees. That is probably a sign of regarding their positions as very important in decision making process. Further analysis indicated that managers see higher level of need to train their staff than they declare it for themselves. From these results it may be speculated that they overestimate their own abilities or that they are convinced of their sufficiently high level of education. Taking into consideration importance versus needs values, it was noticed that managers declared significantly higher level of importance than training need same for themselves and the spa staff. The managers seem to disregard the staff professional qualifications or else they admit hiring under-qualified personnel. The most probable is the simple over-self-confidence.

Trying to identify common fields of training for European spa employees, on both managerial and operational levels, it is easy to observe a different demand. Managers are willing to be additionally trained not only in strictly managerial skills but are also interested in some operational skills i.e. therapies (Fig. 2). That could suggest their thorough approach to their duties. On the other hand they declare their staff mostly need to be trained in skills that refer more to manager's position (Fig. 4) such as: quality management, sales, marketing. It should be assumed that nowadays managers expect their staff not only to be professionally trained in therapies but also to be a client oriented and aware of quality policies.

Conclusions

- There is a gap in literature resources regarding spa management in Europe.
- It is possible to identify fields of common training for spa managers in European Union although the background of the spa centre needs to be taken into consideration as well.
- Spa managers declare statistically significantly higher training needs for their employees than for themselves, while managers' level of education remains relatively high.
- Further research is needed to broaden the perspective on spa management across Europe.
- Common training of declared needs is generally referring to sales, marketing, quality and innovation management, legal regulations, operational skills and social skills.

Acknowledgements

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