

The Shortage of Tour Guides in Vietnam: Evidences, Reasons and Solutions

Thi Lanh Vu, Professor
Duy Tan University, Vietnam

Abstract:- This paper tries to explore the practical situation of tour guides to demonstrate that the shortage of tour guides impacts the sustainable destination management in Vietnam. It is shown that tour guides at many attractions in Vietnam like Danang, Ho Chi Minh and Hanoi city are insufficient in both foreign language ability and occupational skills, therefore leading to the gap between the long-term tourism development and labor forces. To achieve this objective, the author has conducted the qualitative analysis, discussions with members of Tour guide Association in Danang and managers of Viettravel agency. By analyzing the reliable data, the paper will look into the deep roots of that situation and suggest some solutions for Vietnam to improve the ability of tour guides in the future.

Key words:- Vietnamese Tour Guides, Shortage of Human Resource, Impacts.

I. INTRODUCTION

Vietnam has recently emerged as one of the most attractive tourism destinations in the world supported by natural resources, historical and heritage values, reasonable price and stable political environment. In 2019, The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has listed Vietnam as one of ten fastest-growing tourism destinations in the world. According to the data from Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, Vietnam is the midst of tourism boom for three recent years. In 2018, there were 15.5 million foreign tourists coming to Vietnam, increased by 19.9% compared to 2017. The total revenue of tourism industry reached to 620,000 billion VND, increased by 21.4% in 2017. It is predicted that Vietnam will served around 18 million foreign tourists, 85 million domestic visitors and total revenue will be approximately 700,000 billion VND in 2020. With the expansion of tourism industry and the increasing demand of tourism companies result in the shortage of skilled human resource in hospitality and tourism. As the main player of tourism field, tour guides play an important role in any tourism development and are directly linked to the level of satisfaction and retention of tourists as well as the destination image (Mehmet & Zafer, 2015). The competence of tour guides has vital effects on the tourist behavioral patterns as well as sustainable tourist destination.

In Vietnam, the shortage of tour guides is putting pressure on the long-term growth and expansion of tourism industry. It is a fact that under-qualified tour guides are harming Vietnam tourism in many ways such as delivering

wrong information about destinations to tourists, forcing tourists to pay higher price through “Zero Tour” disguise or using illegal certification. If this situation is still happening, it will cause long-term negative consequences on the future of tourism. This paper will analyze what is the real problem, clarify where it roots from, how it impacts the operation of good travel agencies and tourist destination image. Some solutions are suggested for Vietnam travel administration to give the effective management in Vietnam.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. The Role of Tour Guides in Tourism Industry

Tour guide is defined as a person hired to guide tourists, help them to satisfy their needs and interest. By involving all activities related to tourists' journey, from their arrival, tour activities and departure, tour guide is considered as a “buffer” among tourists, the social environment arranging transportation, interpreting, handling problems, insulating travelers from difficulties and making the environment safe for tourists because they act as ‘intermediaries’ between tourists and the ‘unknown’ environment (International Association of Tour Managers - IATM). A professional tour guide not only delivers the information but also presents it in an interesting and sincere way in order to give an unforgettable experience for tourists, enhance destination image and accomplish the goals of responsible tourism. A tour guide represents as a destination ambassador who helps tourists to engage in local culture, activities, customs and history. To some extent, tour guides has considerable contribution to the tourism development in terms of economic and social values.

As shown in the research of Tosun and Temizkan (2004), tour guides take over the big duties and responsibilities in the tourism industry. Their role is complex, diverse and multifaced. Black & Weiler (2005) has listed 10 specific roles of tour guides while Black (in: Pastorelli, 2003) has identified the following roles: as information provider, social facilitator, cultural host, motivator of conservation values, interpreter of the natural and cultural environment, people mover. Other roles including teacher or instructor, safety officer, ambassador for one's country, public relations, representative or company representative, entertainer, problem solver, confidant and counsellor. To fulfill their mission, tour guides should master immense knowledge related to local culture, heritage and multi-skills such as foreign language, communication and problem-solving.

Despite widely acknowledged significant roles in tourism system, guides still “represent a largely underrated, undervalued and underutilized human resource” (Dioko; Unakul, 2005). Many previous researches identified that tour guides see themselves mainly as only information givers. According to the research of Holloway 1981, there were 176 American participants of a sightseeing tour, 90% of them selected “information giver and educator”, whereas other options such as “cultural broker and mediator”, “leader and organizer”, “escort and caretaker” and “ambassador, PR and destination “protector”” had 2.4% each. In addition, many guides thought that the job of a guide is not particularly serious and even not so creative. Thus, they do not attempt to meet their standard tours such rarely focused on customers, their needs, motivation, wishes, preferences, cultural background, educational level – all being the key factors of individual tourist experiences (Rabotić, 2009a). Weiler and Ham (2002) identified that tourists share the same opinion because they generally do not expect much from the guided tour and guides, but only to spend several hours or days with minimum discomfort, some information and entertainment. Therefore, tour guides tend to resort to fabricated tales, narrate unverified stories, the practice dating back from the ancient times to make the story more interesting.

B. Human Resource Shortage in Tourism Industry

Tourism has nowadays been one of the most important economic activities and the non-smoke industry. It serves people and relies mainly on labor forces. To gain the competitive advantage among competitors, tourism companies invest more on human and consider human resource as the most important asset. The competitiveness depends mainly on how to ensure high standards of quality and efficiency which satisfy tourists’ changing needs. While their behavior pattern, decision-making process and response are diverse and unpredictable, companies have to conduct training and developmental programs to improve employees’ skills, knowledge and abilities. All members from the top to bottom levels have to make their efforts to contribute to the organizational goals. In a tourism company, top managers rarely contact directly to tourists while tour guides work at the front line, directly contact with tourists. The assistance from tour guides can help tourists to overcome the language barrier. In addition, interpretation or mediation from guides will support tourists’ physical comforts, cultural understanding and heritage adaptation. Thus, any shortage of tour guides in terms of quantity and quality has negative impacts to tourism industry.

It is demonstrated that human resource in tourism industry has faced up with many challenges, especially regarding to shortage of the quality of manpower. Qiu Zhang, H. & Wu, E (2004) listed drawbacks to human resource development including: lack of qualified staff at both operational and managerial levels, high staff turnover rates, the unwillingness of university graduates to enter the industry, and the gap between what is taught in school, college and the realities of the industry itself. Anđelka Buneta, Draženka Ćosić & Dušan Tomašević (2016)

emphasized that challenges of employment in tourism are characterized by the high seasonal workforce fluctuation, insufficient ratio of highly educated personnel, the system of education aiming for tourist economy is below quality. In Vietnam, only 42 per cent of these workers are trained in tourism, 38 per cent have moved from other sectors and 20 per cent have had no official training. This means the industry lacks skilled and experienced employees and has too many unskilled workers. Each year, tourism schools meet only 60 per cent of the sector’s demand, leading to a serious shortage of tourism human resources.

Raymond, John, Barry & Patrick’s paper (2014) proposed options to reduce the situation of labor shortage in organizations including using employees in overtime, temporary employees, outsourcing, retrained transfers, turnover reductions, new external hires and technological innovation. Each option has benefits in short-term or long-term periods, but put constraints on the human resource in organizations. To overcome the situation of labor shortage, managers should forecast the labor needs of organizations to choose the right options, minimize the negative impacts on human resource in the long term.

III. THE SHORTAGE OF TOUR GUIDES IN VIETNAM

A. The practice of tour guide shortage in Vietnam

Vietnam tourism has gradually affirmed its position in the country’s socio-economic structure by providing new tourism products, the various services and the significant growth of international tourists. It is evident that many tourism destinations such as Ha Long bay, My Khe beach (Danang city) or Phong Nha Cave (Quang Binh province) has been viewed as must-go destinations in 2019 by international news agencies. The Vietnamese local authorities and government are increasingly aware of the importance of investment for tourism attractions. In the near future, the government will pour around 36.1 trillion VND (more than 1.55 billion USD) in 19 tourism projects in the central provinces such as Quang Binh, Quang Tri, Quang Nam, Thua Thien - Hue, Binh Dinh, Ninh Thuan and Da Nang City to boost tourism development. Because of the increasing growth of tourists, especially international tourists, the demand of tour guides increase rapidly. In 2018, there were 23,792 people are issued tour guide licenses, in which 15,080 international tour guides, 8,450 domestic tour guides and 262 on-site tour guides. In August 2019, the total tour guides reached 25,500. Although the tour guides have witnessed a continuous growth, the labor forces are insufficient to the growth of tourists. Nowadays, the number of tour guides only meets about 15% the demand from domestic tourists and 40% from foreign tourists.

According to Vietnam’s Tourism Law 2017, tour guides are divided into three categories: domestic tour guides who only serve domestic (Vietnamese) tourists, international tour guides who can serve both domestic and foreign tourists arriving to Vietnam and guide Vietnamese visiting other countries, and on-site tour guides who only

serve tourists at the certain tourism destination or area. The shortage of tour guides in each type of tour guides is various as well.

Firstly, Vietnam is facing with the serious shortage of tour guides who can communicate in unpopular languages such as Spanish, Thai, French or Italian. It is a fact that English is the most popular foreign language in Vietnam and the tour guides can speak English account to 51.85%. In contrast, tour guides can speak languages such as Spanish, German or Thai are rare, only less than 2%. Notably, the number of international tour guides is not

proportional to the number of foreign tourists coming from different markets. Comparing the figures from the Chart 1 and 2, it is seen that China and South Korea are two main international tourist markets to Vietnam. Chinese and Taiwanese tourists rank number one, accounting 35.09%, the second is South Korean amounting to 24.8%. In contrast, the number of tour guides speaking in Chinese is only 25.52% and in Korean is 1.95% respectively. Tourists arriving from English speaking countries like America, England and Canada are less than 8.0% while tour guides using English amount to more than 50%.

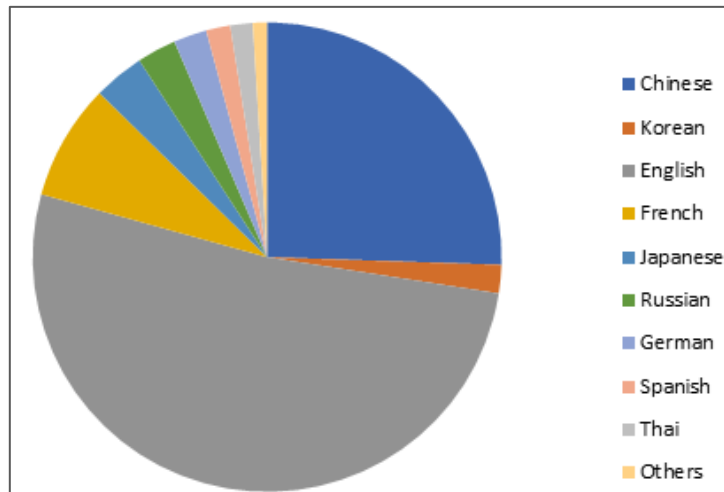


Chart 1:- Tour Guides Using Foreign Languages
(Source: The Administration of Vietnam Tourism, August 2019)

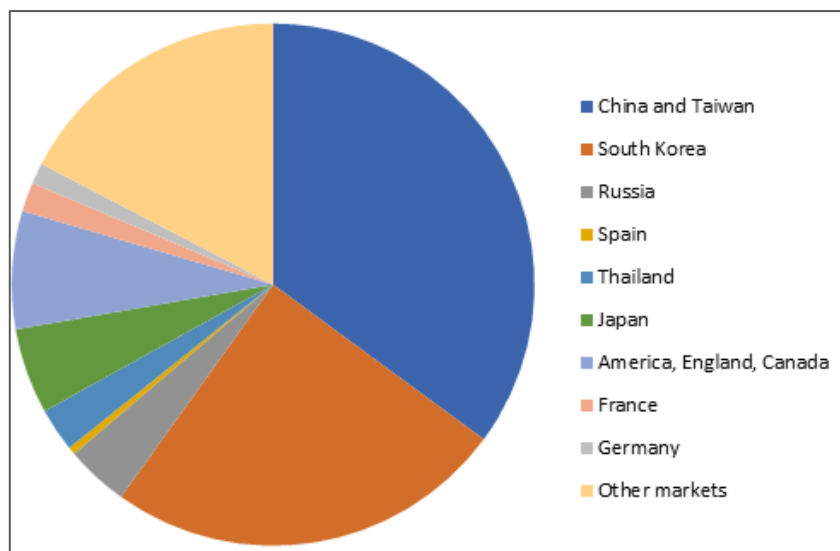


Chart 2: International Tourists Visiting Vietnam until August 2019
(Source: The Administration of Vietnam tourism, August 2019)

Secondly, because of the increasing labor demands in tourism industry, many people try to work as tour guides illegally. Each year, there are above 200 Vietnamese tour guides are identified to use the fake certifications such as fake qualifications to take a legal tour guide license. When these cases are identified, they are forced to stop the job, however resulting to increase the costs for travel agencies. Because companies have to reset the travel schedule, find

the new employees or even have to cancel the tours and compensate customers. Other important aspect is the phenomenon of foreign tour guides act illegally in Vietnam. Many tour guides from South Korea and China come to Vietnam and work as tour guides without getting any legal permission. It is demonstrated that the demand of Korean tour guides in Danang (2019) are around 5,000 while the official number of international tour guides speaking in

Korean is only 4,000. Thus, the rest is Koreans coming to Danang and working as tour guides. It can be reason for issues such as delivering incorrect information about destinations, illegal immigrant.

Thirdly, the quality of tour guides is below the standards in term of professional skills and attitudes. Actually, the skills of tour guides do not meet the demands of travel agencies and tourists. Tourism markets require more foreign languages, soft skills, professionalism, leadership and management skills, information technology, highly specialized skills while new tour guides only are equipped technical skills, and little practical skills. There is the gap between vocational training programs with Vietnam's Tourism Occupational Standards (VTOS). In addition, tour guides have not yet really understood the meaning of sustainable tourism concept, thus they tend to focus on short-term goals such as how much they earn on each tour without concerning for the long-term development of tourism industry.

Fourthly, there is the shortage of on-site tour guides in many sports and adventure tourism destinations in Da Lat, Ha Long, Hue, Da Nang and Ha Giang. Sports and adventure tourism are attractive to tourists, but quite new in Vietnam. It requires tour guides to have intense knowledge related to kinds of sports and entertainment. Unfortunately, the tourism infrastructure for these types of tourism is not completed. The planning and design should be implemented in near future to attract tour guides in this area. Until now, there has been lacking of tour guides for these types of tourism in terms of quality and quantity.

B. The Reasons behind that Situation

The first reason is the weak cooperation between schools and tourism industry. Training in universities and colleges focuses on higher knowledge rather than practical skills. Moreover, there is not coherent relationship between universities and travel agencies. The collaboration documents are not very practical. While students have demands to engage more in tourism industry (working as collaborators, part-time employees), the working environment is not very advantageous. Businesses only need the support of students at the certain points of time, for example at the busy seasons. Even students can have chances to work at the businesses, their roles are still not important as well. For example, travel agencies cannot give students chances to guide tours because they have not yet been issued the tour guide licenses. These barriers cause difficulty in improving the quality of human resources in tourism industry.

Another reason comes from the ineffectiveness of legal framework. According to Tourism Law 2017, the standard for issuing tour guide licenses is easier than Tourism Law 2005. For example, to achieve the international tour guide licenses, people only get vocational college degree instead of bachelor degree (no minimum requirements of qualifications to domestic tour guides), then they finish the 3-month training course for tour guides to receive a tour guide license. The easing of policy aims to

encourage students who do not study tourism to work as tour guides. The number of tour guides is increasing but the quality is not improved. Moreover, when people do not have tourism background, they lack basic knowledge related to tourism development, working ethics in tourism and skills needed to work as tour guides. In addition, the ineffectiveness of management in identifying and punishing the cheating cases, leading to the quality of tour guides cannot meet the requirements of market.

Last but not least, the human resource training and development at businesses is underestimated. The training at businesses is conducted based on the transferring experiences rather than professional training. For senior managerial positions, businesses tend to hire experts from outside rather than investing on the current employees. Professional tour guides do not feel motivated, thus businesses cannot retain them for a long time.

C. Solutions

Contemporarily, travel agencies can hire freelance tour guides to meet the demands of tourists. They can encourage other people to work as tour guides by paying more and improving the working environment. However, this option will increase costs for companies.

For the long term, to resolve the shortage of tour guides, there is a need of cooperation among different stakeholders, from government, functional agencies, travel agencies and schools:

- The government should enact legal documents to manage and guide travel agencies. It is suggested to deliver the Code of Conduct in tourism industry, thus tour guides have to follow the principles. Administration of Tourism should cooperate with local agencies to manage travel agencies and punish the cases violating laws.
- In the long term, the government should issue supportive policies such as scholarships for students who choose to study tourism for their future career.
- Administration of Tourism should empower Department of Tourism and destination managers to manage on-site tour guides. It is necessary to plan tourism destinations for sports and adventure, follow the guidance of Decree 168/2017/NĐ-CP.
- Travel agencies should improve the training and development to motivate and retain professional tour guides. In addition, managers should create the information-sharing network among tour guides, thus they can cooperate and experience in the new environment.
- There is a need to improve the link between training schools and travel agencies based on common benefits. Schools should invite experts from businesses to share the practical experiences. Thus, learners have chances to access the working places and businesses do not have to retrain the human resource.
- It is necessary to upgrade the capacity of training schools such as training materials, teachers and experts,

adjust the training programs to meet the changing needs of working environment.

- It is essential to apply the technology to manage tour guides network effectively. The QR code should be integrated on tour guide licenses and software to manage, check, prevent and detect the cheating cases or using fake versions.
- Finally, there is a need to propaganda the regulations and requirements in Tourism Law 2017, thus tour guides make sense of following the legal principles.

IV. CONCLUSION

Vietnam has gradually become one of the potential and attractive tourism destinations in Asia. Tourism is predicted to be a key sector of Vietnam economy with a competitive market in the years coming. Vietnam government has set the strategy to make Vietnam become a special and attractive destination in South East Asia and tourism industry will be in a professional and effective manner until 2030. However, Vietnam has faced with the shortage of high-quality human resources who get sufficient knowledge, skills and attitudes. The insufficiency of tour guides in terms of quality and quantity has put more constraints on the sustainable development of Vietnam tourism. The reasons come from the ineffectiveness of legal framework and management; the inefficient cooperation of business and schools; and the strategy focusing on short-term of companies. These can be resolved through contemporary and long-term options. The most important thing is the cooperation among government, local authorities, schools and businesses.

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