

# COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT DURING LIFELONG LEARNING. THE CASE OF FRONT-LINE EMPLOYEES IN LITHUANIAN TOURISM SECTOR

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of lifelong learning is relevant for business. It is well elaborated by researchers in various sectors, however tourism sector is not explored enough in this field. This paper focuses on lifelong learning and competence acquisition and development of front-line employees in tourism sector. The aim of the paper is to define how front-line employees in Lithuanian tourism sector develop competence during lifelong learning.

The paper consists of literature analysis on lifelong learning and competence development, empirical research and presentation of findings along with conclusions. The purpose of empirical research is to picture the competencies of employees in Lithuanian tourism information centers (TIC) as well as the learning forms the competencies are acquired by. The qualitative survey, semi-structured interview of seven TIC directors has been conducted in 2009.

The survey has identified a number of competencies of front-line employees in tourism sector. It has also disclosed how the competencies are acquired. The findings show that informal learning is considered to be more significant and occurring more often comparing with formal and non-formal learning in Lithuanian tourism sector.

Practical implications are revealed by disclosing the competencies significant for front-line employees in tourism sector and the learning forms having the biggest impact in competencies acquisition and development. It enables front-line employees to choose the most effective learning methods and save time and costs.

The paper is original in the way empirical research has been conducted. Qualitative research especially in tourism sector is still rare in Lithuania. Also the findings identify the most effective forms of learning of front-line employees in Lithuanian tourism sector.

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**KEY WORDS :**

lifelong learning, competence, informal learning, Lithuania, tourism, front-line employees

**INTRODUCTION**

In the environment of constant changes knowledge and intellectual capital become the primary resources for business to operate, the main competitive advantage. Tourism sector is not an exception.

Tourism sector is defined as one of the major components of economies or one of the fastest growing service sectors worldwide. As cited by Watson (2008, 758 p.), "the World Travel and Tourism Council (WWTTC, 2006) estimates that the travel and tourism industry generated jobs represent 8.7 per cent of total employment, growing to 9 per cent of total employment globally by 2016". The importance of tourism sector is reported in countries such as European countries in general (Collins, Buhalis and Peters, 2003), Australia (Chapman and Lovell, 2006; Braun and Hollick, 2006), Czech Republic, Greece and Spain (Marhuenda, Martinez and Navas, 2004), UK (Littlejohn and Watson, 2004; Morrison, 2003; Kyriakidou and Gore, 2005), Turkey (Aksu and Ozdemir, 2005) and Lithuania (Teresevičienė, Kaminskienė and Kabišaitytė, 2009).

Tourism sector encounters particular challenges: as Chapman and Lovell (2006, 78 p.) quote "visitors become more demanding of tourism and hospitality services, industry will require better strategies to meet visitor expectations", the globalization has made tourism and hospitality organizations to compete internationally, therefore the novel ways to compete have to be discovered (Lee-Ross and Pryce, 2005). As the nature of tourism products and services resemble competitive advantage might be achieved enhancing service quality provided by competent tourism sector employees. However sources report shortage of national skills, poor tourism employees' qualification, lack of practical skills and increased competition to attract young talents (e.g. in Australia, Chapman and Lovell, 2006; in Lithuania – Teresevičienė et al., 2009). Moreover, tourism sector is defined by long hours, poor working conditions, poor pay and lack of career opportunities (O'Leary and Deegan, 2005; Martin et al., 2006, as quoted by Watson, 2008) which eventually leads to high staff turnover (Chapman and Lovell, 2006; Buhalis and Peters, 2003).

Considering described challenges and obvious need of skilled tourism employees, the question is how do tourism sector employees become more competent? So far this question was explored fragmentally, focusing more on management development in tourism organizations (Littlejohn and Watson, 2004; Watson, McCracken, Hughes, 2004; Watson, 2008; Longenecker and Neubert, 2003), competence acquisition in formal education (Chapman and Lovell, 2006; Thomas and Grimes, 2003) or e-learning (Collins et al., 2003; Collins, Buhalis and Peters, 2003), prior learning recognition (Teresevičienė et al., 2009). However the question of tourism sector front-line employees' competence development during lifelong learning is not analyzed enough especially in Lithuania. Therefore, **the aim of the paper is to define how front-line employees in Lithuanian tourism sector develop competence during lifelong learning.** The following *objectives* are defined to reveal the aim of the paper:

1. to disclose the main concepts of the paper: lifelong learning, factors of lifelong learning, competence in general and in tourism sector in particular. To define the relationship between lifelong learning and competence development.
2. to describe and present empirical research on competence development in tourism sector.
3. to reveal how lifelong learning impacts competence development of front-line employees in tourism sector.

The *object* of the paper is competence development during lifelong learning.

The paper consists of literature analysis on lifelong learning and competence development

followed by empirical research and presentation of findings. The empirical research was conducted in 2009 using qualitative survey, semi-structured interview of seven TIC directors. Content analysis is used to process the survey data. The paper is finalized by discussions, analysis and comparison of the research of the sources related to the topics of this paper and conclusions.

The research limitations are defined as follows. The survey has been conducted in seven Lithuanian TICs only. Also only TIC directors have been interviewed. The broader further surveys of all tourism front-line employees could be more beneficial.

Practical implications of the paper are defined by disclosing the competencies significant for front-line employees in tourism sector and the learning forms having the biggest impact in competencies acquisition and development. It enables front-line employees to choose the most effective learning methods and save time and costs.

The paper is original in the way empirical research has been conducted. Qualitative research especially in tourism sector is still rare in Lithuania. Also the findings identify the most effective forms of learning of front-line employees in Lithuanian tourism sector.

## 1. BACKGROUND

### 1.1. THE CONCEPT OF LIFELONG LEARNING

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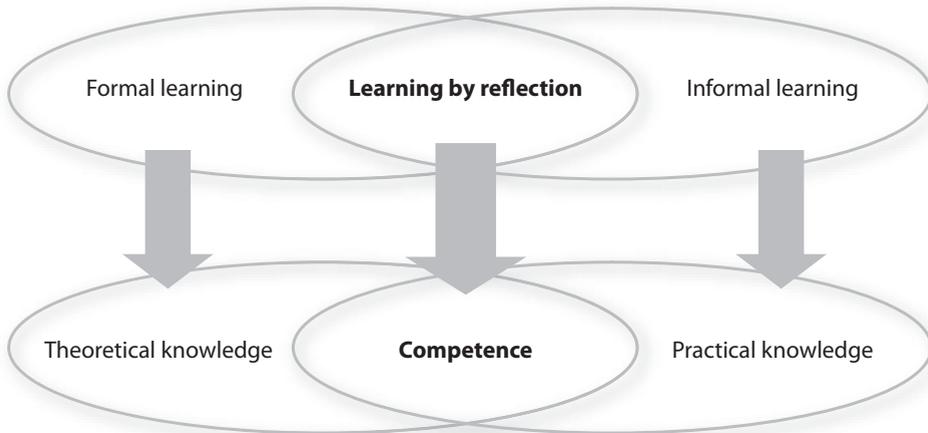
Lifelong learning (LLL) is a part of modern society. The concept is widely explored in political as well as scientific literature. The significance of LLL for social, political and economic development is well acknowledged in Europe in particular. The first attempts to talk about LLL are reported in 70-ies in the UNESCO conference. Now EU has set its strategic goal "to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world" where the role of LLL is vital. The learning of a human being starts in the early childhood and continues up till the grave although the types of learning differ. Therefore LLL is defined as "encompassing all purposeful learning activity, whether formal or informal, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence" (Eurostat, 2001). LLL consists of formal, non-formal and informal education/learning.

*Formal education* is described by intentionally organized learning events, with regular fixed duration and schedule, structured hierarchically with chronological succession of levels and grades, admission requirements and formal registration, held within established educational institutions and using pre-determined pedagogical organization, contents, methods and teaching/learning materials (Eurostat, 2001). Education in secondary schools and higher education could be as examples of formal education.

*Non-formal education* is defined again by intentionally organized learning events, which take place in an institutional setting but do not fulfill one or more of the conditions (hierarchy level-grade structure, admission requirements, registration, predetermined/not flexible teaching/learning methods, duration and scheduling) (Eurostat, 2001). On-the-job training, off-the-job in-class seminars and workshops might be the examples of non-formal education.

*Informal learning* is conscious and/or unconscious every-day process when the learner acquires competencies. Informal learning occurring in individual as well as organizational level is weaker related to formal learning environment, it is more accidental therefore, and it might not be recognized by the learner himself/herself (Alonderiene, 2009). It differs comparing with formal/ non-formal learning by the higher level of learner (as opposed to teacher) control, hardly defined physical location of learning as well as hardly predictable learning outcomes.

Even though LLL activities are frequently opposed to each other, the authors of this paper believe them to be supplementing. As Dale and Bell (1999) noticed formal learning cannot be replaced by informal one; they should instead be combined to achieve higher learning efficiency. Swenson et al. (2004) assume that competence is acquired only if formal and informal learning



**Fig. 1.** Dynamics of formal and informal learning  
 Source: Svensson et al. (2004)

together occur (see Fig. 1). Formal education enables ability to use informal learning at workplace while formal education itself has to be reinforced by informal one in order to stay effective.

The significance of LLL in tourism sector is identified in various sources. For example, according to Lithuanian State Department of Tourism at the Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Lithuania (2009) Lithuanian tourism potential is high however not exploited enough. The reasons related to human resources are as follows: insufficient qualification of tourism employees and lack of practical skills of new employees. Incompetent tourism employees are not able to provide quality service. Therefore competence development in LLL becomes crucial.

The challenges to acquire or develop tourism sector related competences lie in the educational system. Several countries (e.g. Australia, Lithuania) report about shortcomings in formal and non-formal educational systems, which are not able to properly prepare the students to work well in tourism organizations (respectively Chapman and Lovell, 2006; Teresevičienė, 2009). Therefore informal learning (self-directed learning, learning by doing) is used more often.

## 1.2. FACTORS OF LIFELONG LEARNING

To understand and test lifelong learning (LLL) the factors of it are defined. Alonderiene (2009) identifies the groups of informal learning factors: individual informal learning factors, informal learning methods and informal learning environment. On the other hand similar factors encompassing different content could represent LLL as well. The lifelong learning elements can either facilitate learning during the whole life or impede it:

- **Individual lifelong learning factors** are comprised of *motivation to learn*; *attitudes towards learning* (the individual might be willing to learn, appreciate the value of learning or he/she might have the opposite attitudes).

- **Lifelong learning methods.** As defined previously LLL is understood as encompassing formal, non-formal and informal learning. Therefore it requires different learning methods for different learning forms: e.g. lecturing in formal learning, teamwork and group discussions in non-formal one, learning by doing or watching, reflecting, browsing internet in informal one.

- **Lifelong learning environment.** The LLL is affected not only by individual but by learning environment factors as well. The individual might be willing to learn however the

surrounding might interfere. Therefore the following LLL environment factors have been identified: *commitment of resources and time for learning; attitudes of surrounding* (family members, friends, coworkers, supervisor) *towards learning; physical environment*, such as physical location of facilities, information accessibility, availability of learning material and tools.

The defined lifelong learning factors are claimed to be important in tourism sector as proved below. Doyle (2004, as quoted by Watson, 2008, 759 p.) argues that development is "being shaped by its internal and external contexts". Individual tourism sector learning factors mentioned by Kyriakidou and Gore (2005) are as follows: willingness to learn, empowerment – activeness of employee.

Lifelong learning environment in tourism sector is more complex. Collins et al. (2003) emphasize importance of time and resources allocated for learning. Kyriakidou and Gore (2005) focus on organizational culture which favors learning and knowledge acquisition; open communication; favorable conditions and attitudes towards learning as well as free flow of information to create learning. Walmsley, Thomas and Jameson (2006) believe learning to be impacted by positive as well as negative experiences.

The literature sources also identify learning methods used in managers tourism sector: learning from the environment, action learning, experiential learning (Watson, 2008); "coaching, informal mentoring, opportunities to meet with other entrepreneurs, general peer learning and exposure to best practice exemplars" (Pauwe and Williams, 2001a, b; CFE, 2001a as quoted by Morrison, 2003, 798 p.).

### 1.3. THE CONCEPT OF COMPETENCE

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Balvociute and Skuncikiene (2007) provide analysis of competence definitions: competence is „combination of knowledge, skills and abilities to behave in particular situations“ (Bagdonienė and Hopeniene, 2004), „the main personal features such as motives, characteristics, abilities, (...) knowledge which might be used by individual“ (Boyatzis, 2002), etc. (28p.). It is not enough to know much or have highly developed skills, because competence is defined by how people can perform, not by what they know (UDACE, 1989 as quoted by Tight, 2000).

Competencies can be grouped as follows ("Mokomoji medžiaga vertintojams", 2006): functional competencies, cognitive competencies, core competencies. There are some particular competencies significant in tourism sector: functional (or professional) competences related to certain position, cognitive competencies (e.g. professional knowledge, foreign language knowledge) and core competences: ability to solve problems, being responsible, tolerant, and flexible).

Watson (2008) summarizes various sources to present a list of hospitality managers' competences: customer care, quality and standards, managing staff, achieving profitability and growing the business (Brophy and Keily, 2002); leadership, corporate and strategic skills (Raybould and Wilkins, 2005); global exposure, customer service orientation, financial management, market trends, innovation and commitment to work (Jauhari, 2006); cultural sensitivity, adaptive and flexibility and interpersonal skills (Kriegl, 2000); open mindedness, team playing and service attitude skills (Velo and Mittaz, 2006); developing trust, building relationships, flexibility and resilience (D'Annunzio-Green, 2002).

Recently more focus is being placed on social intelligence competencies in tourism sector. The mix of professional and social intelligence competencies affect customer satisfaction and perceived quality of service. The professional tourism sector competences are acquired in formal education while social intelligence is acquired and developed in LLL (Goleman and Boyatzis, 2008). Therefore LLL enables competence acquisition in tourism sector positions and ensures quality services (Lauzackas, Stasiunaitiene and Tereseviciene, 2005).

### 1.4. RELATIONSHIP OF COMPETENCE AND LIFELONG LEARNING

LLL is a process resulting in acquisition of knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes, etc. These learning outcomes affect competence of individual. Therefore LLL stays as basis for competence acquisition and development.

To understand the relationship of lifelong learning and competence better the approaches on learning evaluation should be described. Learning evaluation might be based on formative or summative approach. *Formative approach* focuses on evaluation of learning process while summative one emphasizes the main learning results, answers the question whether the learning objectives have been achieved. The *summative evaluation* allows assessing knowledge, skills attitudes acquired, competence developed and demonstrated.

Learning evaluation approach depends on LLL activity. Formal learning evaluation is based on summative approach. It assesses what has been learned, what competence acquired and pays less attention on the formal learning process itself (Doyle, 2006). Informal learning evaluation highlights learning process, less attention is been paid on the learning outcomes, competences acquired informally. The authors of the paper believe that all LLL activities – formal or informal – might be evaluated with reference to formative and summative approaches. This paper seeks to find out the relationship of LLL activities and the competence therefore evaluates competence acquisition formally and informally.

### 1.5. THEORETICAL MODEL

The lifelong learning and its relationship with competence is defined in the theoretical model of the paper presented in the Figure 2. To understand how tourism sector front-line employees develop their competence the qualitative research has been conducted.

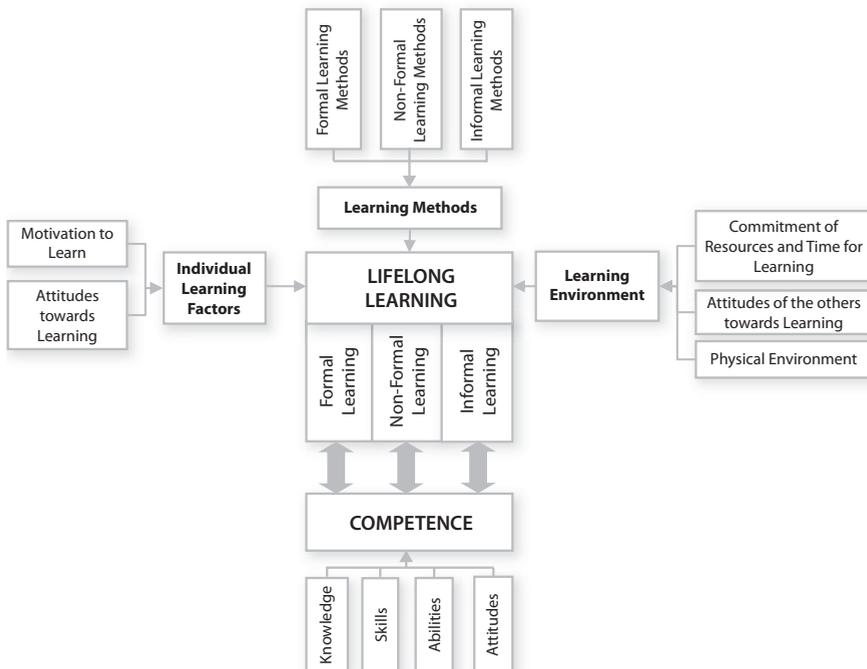


Fig. 2. Theoretical model of lifelong learning and competence relationship

## 2. METHODOLOGY OF THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

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The quantitative research methods help to explain statistically the competence needed, the learning methods applied. However they do not allow to reveal the deep causal relationships; to understand what is being affected and how. Therefore the qualitative method has been chosen in order to evaluate the necessity of lifelong learning concept and its adaptability in tourism sector.

The *aim of the empirical research* is to identify the approach of Lithuanian tourism informational centers (TIC) directors on lifelong learning and its impact on TIC employee competence development.

The standardized open-ended interview (Žydžiūnaitė, Rupšienė and Bitinas, 2009) has been chosen interviewing seven respondents – Lithuanian TIC directors or employees responsible for training and learning. Three questions were given:

- To your opinion, how is it possible to improve work skills?
- To your opinion how does constant learning affect the change of employee competence?
- What is your opinion on lifelong learning and how does it influence employee competence development?

The interviews took place in the workplaces of the respondents in February – March, 2009. Average time of interview with each respondent is 48 minutes. The sample sufficiency is justified by saturation. The anonymity of the survey is assured by coding the respondents No.1, No.2, No.3, No.4, No.5, No.6 and No.7. The survey is described by individual interpretation, emphasizing similarities of survey data.

## 3. FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

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After analyzing all seven interviews and structuring the data five themes (topics) were identified:

- Individual lifelong learning factors;
- Methods of lifelong learning;
- “Teachers” in lifelong learning;
- Lifelong learning environment;
- Competence acquired and developed.

It is possible to note that the topics represent parts of theoretical model (see Fig. 2). The first topic is **“Individual informal learning factors”**; it has six subtopics (see Fig. 3). The individual factors were mentioned by all the respondents as the significant ones in the tourism sector.

The first subtopic is *professional basics*. This subtopic claims that good professional basics help easier and faster develop already acquired competence. Good professional basics are “practical and theoretic knowledge, which allows to think deeper and wider, to assess the situations” (resp. No.4).

The second subtopic is *personal features of individual employee*. After systemizing interview information, we can see, that tourism sector specialist has to be exceptional personality possessing features such as communicable, fast orientation, honesty with customer, creativity, and understanding. All these features “let not only to work well, but also help to learn” (resp. No.3).

It was mentioned that *motivation to learn* is also important in lifelong learning of tourism employees. Respondents note, that learning “does not start in empty place...”, the internal willingness to learn and learn constantly is needed” (resp. No. 2).

The fourth subtopic is *creativity*. There was a prevalent opinion noticed that creative people achieve more, because non-traditional decisions and a ways of implementation show better results comparing with and consistent logical decisions. „The employees have many new

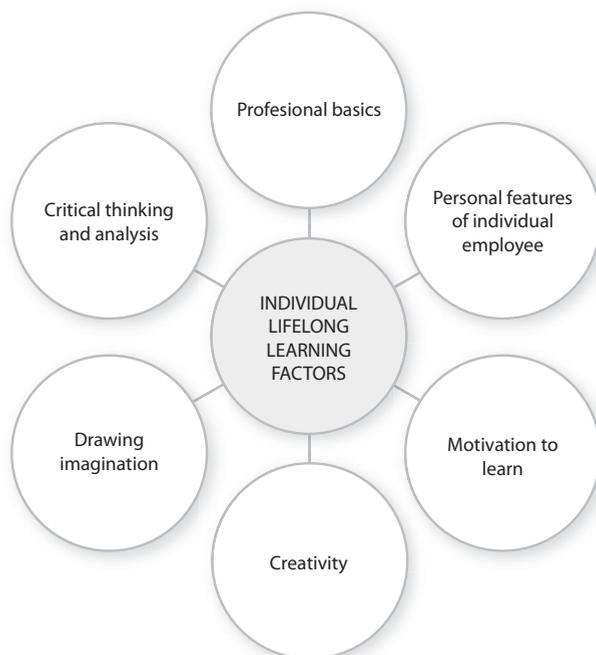


Fig. 3. Individual informal learning factors

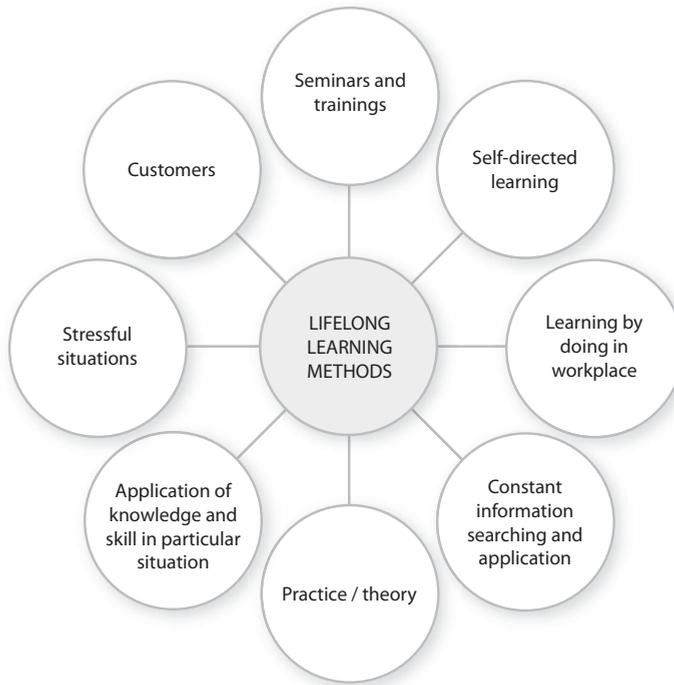
activities, so it would be difficult without creativity and it is very difficult to learn, if there is no creativity inside, and even if it is – you have an idea and everything is done, and after some time you see that you learned more, even if you don't notice it" (resp. No.2).

The fifth subtopic is *drawing imagination*. "Tourism specialists have to be included in the list of professions such as writers, journalists, painters, who need vivid drawing imagination in order to proceed" (resp. No.4), that is to develop current knowledge or acquire the new one. "Employee in tourism information center has to know and able to "draw" the picture of particular building or place for tourist, so that he/she could be interested and would like to go there, and even if (the tourism specialist) isn't able to draw in his/her imagination, he/she has to start doing it because the wide vision helps everywhere" (resp. No.4).

The sixth subtopic is *critical thinking and analysis*. Respondents have explained that employees in tourism information centers have to evaluate critically the work of their own and their colleagues in order to reach the highest quality. They also argue that "... ability to analyze allows accepting innovations and new knowledge easily" (resp. No.7). „Only constantly revising and assessing their work employees can avoid mistakes in future and accumulate knowledge and experience" (resp. No.1).

The individual lifelong learning factors identified by TIC directors as the significant ones are as follows. Professional basics is represented by prior knowledge or learning. If the person has learned previously it might be easier for him/her to develop competences later on in the workplace for example. Also personal characteristics as lifelong learning individual factor have been identified. According to the survey results features such as critical thinking, creativity, drawing imagination, might be helpful in lifelong learning.

Second topic identified in the interview is "**Lifelong learning methods**". This topic is explained by six subtopics (see Fig. 4). All subtopics present different methods of lifelong learning. For example *seminars and trainings* represent formal or non-formal learning, while *self-directed*



**Fig. 4.** Lifelong learning methods

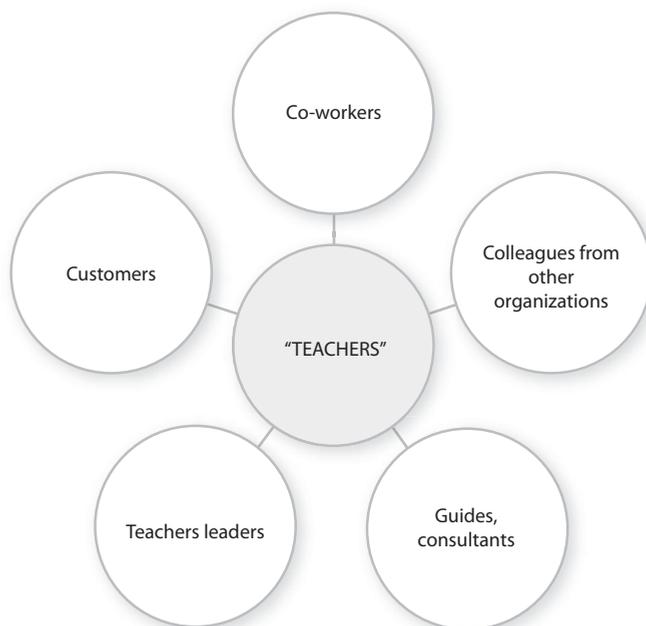
*learning, learning by doing, knowledge systemizing* and the others represent informal learning. Tourism sector is extremely dynamic and data flow is huge, constantly volatile. Therefore it is important to learn constantly, because customer expects to get right, useful and especially prompt information. The respondents state that "... practical situations make us learn. But it is very good, because you are able to implement acquired knowledge right away in practice" (resp. No. 5). „The seminars are also good, you learn some news there. Even though not everything is applied in practice you are self-developing in general" (resp. No. 2).

It is worth to mention that mostly informal learning methods have been defined. Therefore TIC directors appreciate informal learning of their employees more.

The survey respondents not only identified the learning methods they also stress out the people involved in their learning process. The formal teachers of the formal education were not identified however the people mentioned could be called as **"Teachers"** (experts, stakeholders), facilitators, mentors, coaches in some way. This is the third topic (see Fig. 5) with five subtopics.

First of all *co-workers* help to learn. "It is very good to learn from co-workers by constantly communicating with them, sharing information. And the best thing in improvement is to substitute the co-worker temporary while he/she is absent" (resp. No.7). As the respondents note they have to know at least minimally about co-workers job "...because when a co-worker leaves for a holiday, somebody has to replace him/her, to answer the phone calls and that helps to widen view, improve knowledge and experience" (resp. No.7). "When a new employee is hired you have to help him, advice, to train a lot of new things, for example to write applications. And that's how you learn from each other while constantly exchanging information and knowledge" (resp. No. 5). As one of the respondents states "... there is no education institution preparing specialists of tourism center, therefore they have to teach their employees by themselves" (resp. No. 1).

Respondents also have mentioned their *colleagues from other tourism information centers*.



**Fig. 5.** “Teachers” in lifelong learning

“It is possible to learn by observing the activities of the colleagues: what routes, objects do they offer to visit, what additional services they provide. Than after analyzing everything you can apply it or not in your own work” (resp. No. 3). „It is possible to collaborate with colleagues, e.g. from tourism information center in the other country. To create new ideas and projects together, share knowledge and experience, thus improve and develop competence” (resp. No. 4).

The outside experts – *guides and consultants* – are attributed to the third subtopic in the “Teachers” topic. The respondents outline that most probably the best way to learn is “... for example info tour, when guides and other specialists in such an info tour, expand their knowledge themselves, share their remarks or new information with the organizers, thus both sides learn in that way” (resp. No. 1). „Consultants, lectors are helpful to deepen the knowledge. Their remarks, guidance, advises are useful in work activities” (resp. No. 6). One respondent said that „... I have an opportunity to go to tours if I wasn't there, or even if I want to remember the route, however it is useful for me, because I have an opportunity to learn from the others” (resp. No. 5).

Respondents also single out the phenomenon of *teachers-leaders* (“practicians”, “fanatics”) who they could learn from. Respondents identify the leaders, value their theoretic as well as practice knowledge. One respondent said: “you learn only by talking with them” (resp. No. 2). Respondents learn from self-“created etalon – leader, fanatic, expert” (resp. No. 3). „Leaders having exceptional personal features serve as an example for others and can motivate the others to constantly improve” (resp. No. 3).

The topic describing *customer* as a teacher is also obvious. “Customers could be called teachers who assign homework. It happens that they give the questions you cannot answer. At that moment you get away somehow but try to find the answer anyway so when the customer comes back again you would be able to know everything” (resp. No. 4). “... it happens that you cannot get away then I tell directly I don't know but always add that I will find out and get back to you. The customers are usually satisfied and I feel good. And you are forced to learn anyway”

(resp. No. 4).

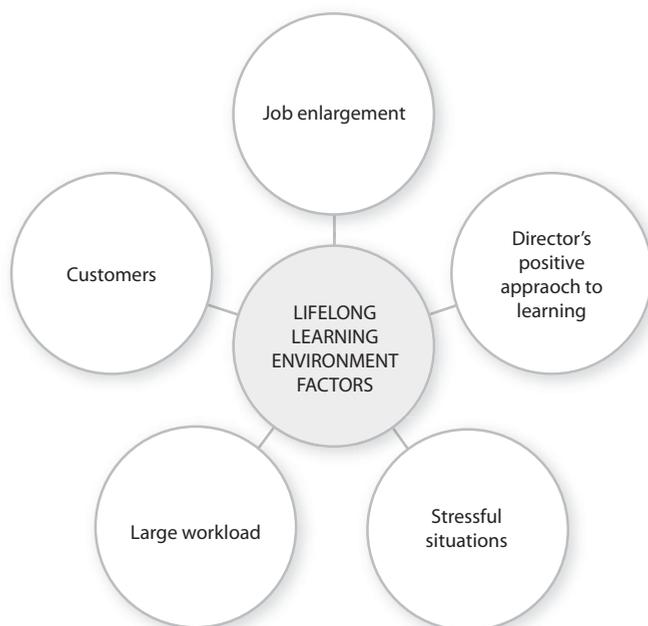
Although formal learning and formal teachers were not emphasized, the people involved in the learning process of tourism front-line employees could as well be called teachers in some way. Tourism front-line employees learn by watching, communicating, helping, working with their coworkers, colleagues from other tourism centers, outside guides, consultants and teachers (“fanatics”) as well as costumers.

The forth topic is **“Lifelong learning environment factors”** (see Fig. 6). There are five sub-topics in this topic.

The survey has showed that there are some environment factors which help or impede learning. For example *job enlargement*. “Especially during touristic rush-hour there are a lot of jobs and one have to know how to distribute the time in order to accomplish all of them” (resp. No. 2). „If something unexpected happens, usually you have to deal with not one, but more problems at once. Therefore I have to know how to manage time, how to stay calm and cool-minded” (resp. No. 7).

The respondents also admitted being focused on lifelong learning. *Positive attitudes of the directors* are one of the lifelong learning environment factors. “You have to learn constantly. At our workplace we even have “five-minute-breaks” when all of us gather in my office once a month and the assign person presents the monthly news in tourism sector. That is very good for everybody” (resp. No. 7). The respondents support their employees emotionally as well as financially: “we have training plan. It is prepared for every quarter – that is various courses, lectures. However not all the trainings are useful, but ... I always send employees there in order to raise qualification” (resp. Nr. 3).

“*Stressful situations* sometimes force to behave spontaneously and irrationally. However if one has been in similar situation before and has analyzed one’s actions, there are no problems – the right decision “jumps out” itself” (resp. No. 3). „It is very important for employee to gain new



**Fig. 6.** Lifelong learning environment factors

experience from situations like that, to ask advice of directors and colleagues and decide how to act best according to his/her opinion" (resp. No. 1).

When *workload is large* the mistakes are inevitable. Therefore employees have to know how to forecast them in advance and ensure some preventive means, "... because otherwise clients will go away, talk bad things about you. So you are trying the best for your clients, so that they would be happy, and then you would be happy as well" (resp. No. 6).

The *customer-based* situations allow starting learning. As a respondent tells, "there was a situation in the beginning of my job when unsatisfied customer came. It seemed as if he is going to explode soon. I got lost, did not know what to do, so I stayed silent. He has talked himself out and left. All I did was nodding head. ... Then I have started studying conflict management methods, even participated in particular trainings. Now none unsatisfied customer is scary. I have learned. I could say thank you the that first one..." (resp. No. 6).

As it has been mentioned the lifelong learning is affected by several factors. One of them is environment. Directors of Lithuanian tourism information centers have mentioned several situations which influence lifelong learning. Interesting to note that majority of respondents have positive attitudes towards various circumstances. E.g. they feel that even stressful situations and huge workload actually serves as conditions to learn how to deal with it.

An interview has also revealed the "**Competence**" acquired and developed by tourism center employees (see Fig. 7).

While working in tourism information center various situations occur; many different people come with their different features, wishes and complains. Learning helps to develop "*diplomacy* – the personal feature especially significant". "Working with groups of people sometimes one "pinch of salt" is present. You can't push that person and still work with the whole group. Diplomacy is a feature each of the employees has to develop. This feature helps to learn tolerance,

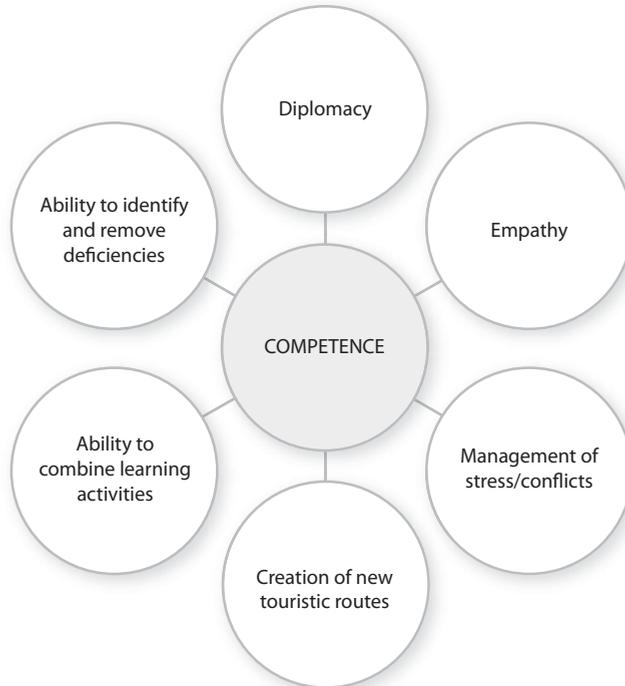


Fig. 7. Competence acquired and developed in lifelong learning

listening and hearing out customer wishes and requests, *conflict management* in a way beneficial for both sides. Diplomacy, ability to listen to the customer and allowing him/her to open up help to establish good interrelationship" (resp. No.2).

The interview analysis has also revealed the significance of *empathy*, since respondents showed how "very important it is to "step in the customer shoes", understand other person" (resp. No. 7).

Also tourism center employees learn how to *create new touristic routes*, because "...you can't all the time offer the same things, you have to prepare new "dish" every time" (resp. No. 2). „To create new routes employee has to use all knowledge, abilities and skills to create a new product. The constantly changing tourism environment motivates employees to change their work methods and to renew the information constantly. I, as a director, encourage my employees to create new routs" (resp. No.1).

The next subtopic is *ability to combine various activities*. „Employee has to have perfect management knowledge as well as knowledge in geography, history, publication design, exhibition organizing, and if he/she is able to combine it – it is very good" (resp. No.7). „There are four employees working in our Tourism information centre..., therefore often employees have to take on different activities . . . , to create new routes, serve the customers as well as write articles, gather information and design leaflets, organize exhibitions" (resp. No. 1). "... the employee has to know how to do a lot of activities which are not taught in educational institutions, therefore employee has to be extremely flexible and adaptable, curious and constantly interested in innovations" (resp. No.2).

One more competence is *ability to identify deficiencies and remove them*, because "it is very important for employee to be aware of deficiencies he/she has and being able to mask and remove them" (resp. No. 2). In the interview respondent has mentioned the guide's speech defects: „Tourism service is sold through the word, therefore it is very important for guide to be able to speak correctly, but now nobody checks and teaches the future guides to pronounce correctly" (resp. No. 5). "If the person himself is not able to perceive his/her deficiencies the educational institution has to highlight them and take actions to remove them or to define particular requirements for guide profession" (resp. No.1).

Learning informally mostly the tourism front-line employees acquire and develop competence. The interviewees have mentioned diplomacy, empathy, conflict management skills, ability to create new touristic routes, ability to combine various learning activities as competencies acquired. It is worth to mention that the number of competences is not finite and could be expanded in the future research.

## DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

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In the constantly changing environment competence development is inevitable. It is crucial process in tourism sector as well. Since the competition is high and tourism organizations have to compete providing quality services and product the competence of front-line employees has to be unquestionable. As the literature analysis revealed lifelong learning is a basis for competence development.

This statement has also been tested on Lithuanian tourism sector front-line employees. The research findings described above are compared to the results of surveys conducted previously.

Figure 3 reveals individual lifelong learning factors of Lithuanian TICs employees. Although the authors of the paper assumed that there are two main individual informal learning factors (motivation and positive attitudes towards learning) that affect lifelong learning, the survey showed a bit different results. The tourism information center directors believe that motivation to learn as well as prior knowledge and certain personal features (creativity, critical thinking, etc.)

are rather significant for lifelong learning. Motivation to learn and some personal characteristics coincide in the survey of Kyriakidou and Gore (2005) in UK tourism sector, too. The survey of Aksu and Ozdemir (2005) reports positive attitudes of Turkey 5-star hotel staff towards learning as individual LLL factor: 63.6 % of respondents believe in learning new things during work.

It is evident that front-line employees in Lithuanian tourism centers mostly learn informally (Fig. 4). As some of the respondents mentioned there are not enough suitable formal tourism programs in formal education institutions. This latter statement is reinforced by research of Teresevičienė et al. (2009), Thomas and Grimes (2003), Chapman and Lovell (2006). Therefore employees take advantage of learning in their everyday activities: they learn independently (e.g. searching for information, applying theory in practice) and they learn together or from others. It appeared that tourism front-line employees highlight learning by doing, watching, communicating and sharing knowledge with different people, e.g. coworkers, colleagues from other organizations, outside specialists, etc. Similar situation is noticed in the other surveys: research of Teresevičienė et al. (2009) on Lithuanian hotel sector employees' shows competence mostly to be acquired at workplace, in the seminars and learning individually. Turkey five-star hotel staff (Aksu and Ozdemir, 2005) is involved in "making dialog with colleagues" ("often" – 59.7 %, "sometimes" 31.0 %) and "teamworking" ("often" – 54.3 %, "sometimes" 21.3 %). However Watson, McCracken and Hughes (2004) survey adds that 41 % of managers in Scottish visitor attractions do not receive any training.

"Teachers" emerged as a separate subtopic (Fig. 5) in this survey showing the importance of people who Lithuanian front-line employees learn from. As Morrison (2003) notices peer learning seems to be exclusive for tourism organizations' managers. This survey shows similar findings and adds other "teachers": customers, colleagues from other organizations, leaders, etc.

The lifelong learning environment is also important (Fig. 6). The authors have defined some environment factors relevant for lifelong learning, e.g. availability of funds and time for learning, accessibility of information, support of the others in the learning process. However in this survey the respondents have mentioned exceptional circumstances related to lifelong learning. Interesting to note that the situations which seem negative (stressful situation, huge workload, etc.) are perceived as suitable environment to learn. Lifelong learning environment elements of this survey differ from the findings of Kyriakidou and Gore (2005). They claim organizational culture, open communication, information accessibility to build the ability to learn. The survey of the paper authors' focuses more on director's positive approach, job enlargement, large workload and stressful situations. The latter findings coincide with Walmsley et al. (2006) arguments of negative experience ability to increase learning.

Watson (2008) groups competences of hospitality managers to operational and managerial ones. This current survey describes Lithuanian front-line employees' competences and focuses more on operational competences: ability to remove deficiencies, conflict management, creation of new tourist routes, etc.

The paper is original in the way empirical research has been conducted. Qualitative research especially in tourism sector is still rare in Lithuania. Also the findings identify the most common forms of learning of front-line employees in Lithuanian tourism sector. However some of the limitations have to be mentioned. The survey has been conducted in seven Lithuanian TICs only. Also only TIC directors have been interviewed. The broader further surveys of all tourism front-line employees could be more beneficial.

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## SANTRAUKA

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Nuolatinių pokyčių kontekste žinios ir intelektinis kapitalas tampa pagrindiniu verslo ištekliumi. Konkurencinį pranašumą įgyja tos organizacijos, kurios skatina mokymąsi visą gyvenimą ir kompetencijų įgijimą bei tobulinimą. Turizmo sritis – taip pat ne išimtis. Turizmo paslaugos vis labiau panašėja, todėl konkurencinį pranašumą įgyja tos įmonės, kuriose dirba kompetentingesni darbuotojai. Kyla klausimas, kaip turizmo srities darbuotojams įgyti ir tobulinti turimas kompetencijas? **Šio straipsnio tikslas – nustatyti, kaip kontaktiniai turizmo srities darbuotojai Lietuvoje vysto kompetencijas dalyvaudami mokymosi visą gyvenimą veikloje.** Iki šiol turizmo srities darbuotojų mokymasis ir kompetencijų įgijimas nėra pakankamai išanalizuotas, o šių dviejų sąvokų ryšiai nėra apibrėžti ar patikrinti.

Straipsnį sudaro mokymosi visą gyvenimą ir kompetencijų vystymo literatūros analizė, empirinio tyrimo eigos aprašas, gautų rezultatų pristatymas ir išvados. Empirinis kokybinis tyrimas atliktas 2009 metais, pusiau struktūruoto interviu metodu apklausiant septynių Turizmo informacijos centrų (TIC) vadovus. Tyrimo rezultatai atskleidė, kad Lietuvos TIC kontaktiniai darbuotojai daugiausia mokosi ne formaliojo, o savaiminio mokymosi būdu. Jų įsitraukimą į mokymosi veiklą lemia motyvacijos mokyti, ankstesnių žinių ir tam tikrų asmeninių savybių derinys. Taip pat pabrėžiama mokymosi aplinkos svarba – mokyti padeda informacijos prieinamumas, aplinkinių pagalba, tam skirtas laikas ir išteklių. Kontaktinių darbuotojų nuomone, mokyti skatina net neigiami veiksniai, pvz., stresą sukeliančios situacijos, didelis darbo krūvis ir pan.

Tyrimas turi tam tikrų apribojimų – jis atliktas tik septyniuose Lietuvos TIC. Rekomenduotina atliktant tolesnius tyrimus apklausti ir kontaktinius turizmo verslo įmonių darbuotojus: turizmo vadybininkus, gidus, kelionių vadovus.

Straipsnio praktinė nauda atskleidžiama apibrėžiant svarbiausias turizmo srities kontaktinių darbuotojų kompetencijas ir mokymosi formas, labiausiai lemiančias šių kompetencijų įgijimą ir vystymą. Tai leidžia kontaktiniams darbuotojams pasirinkti efektyviausius mokymo(-si) metodus, sutaupyti laiką.

Straipsnio originalumą rodo pasirinktas empirinio tyrimo metodas – kokybinis tyrimas – kuris, ypač turizmo srityje, Lietuvoje vis dar taikomas retai.

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**PAGRINDINĖS SĄVOKOS:**

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mokymąs visą gyvenimą, kompetencija, savaiminis mokymąs, Lietuva, turizmas, darbdaviai

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