Managing the corporate traveler

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Abstract

South African travel management companies service corporate travel needs. Those based within South Africa provide local, regional and trans-continental services to corporate clients. Travel services rendered are many not limited to airline and hotel bookings but involving complex integrations of clients travel data, travel industry trend analysis, personal skills in business acumen and emotional intelligence to provide tailored travel solutions. The success of supporting the corporate with travel related services is a competitive differentiator in the global travel management market. This research explores the value that South African based travel management companies can bring in supporting South African based clients by applying a qualitative methodological approach within a case study design. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with nine respondents, four with corporates and five with travel account managers responsible for service to South African based corporates. The findings showed that technological advancements and individualised service play an important role in supporting corporate travellers but the value that the travel account manager brings to the service through experience (tacit travel experience and training) and explicit (knowledge of the travel policy, macro and micro environmental trends) on innovation and change can be denigrated by the culture and leadership style of the corporate client. The value of this research is that it begins to unfold the complex role of the travel management company in terms of the personal and service attributes required to be a successful corporate account manager.

Keywords: TMC, Africa, South Africa, travel, management

Introduction

This article contributes to literature highlighting influences at play in dyadic relationship of corporates and travel management companies (TMC). The study focuses on the role of African corporates that travel for business across Africa and out of Africa and who have well developed travel management policies applied in the context of their business employees' travel. The study specifically looks at the attributes and knowledge required of a TMC account manager dedicated to the service of a particular corporate(s) and who has an intermediary role to identify and manage all travel services offered to the corporate (Boehmer, Pestronk & Harris, 2015). Commercial dyads are theoretically thought of as two parts, a buyer and a seller, but in service contexts the relationship is frequently "moderated and influenced" by other actors (such as the TMC account manager) and the "situational context" (Andersson-Cederholm & Gyimóthy, 2010:267).The situational context, specifically that of Africa, is discussed in the next section. The research question posed was – what influences the quality of the dyadic service relationship between South African corporates and TMC corporate account managers?

This article is structured firstly with a literature review of selected theoretical business concepts of the relationship of the corporate and the TMC, is undertaken. This provides a background of existing academic literature relevant to the research focuses, of travel business trends, and of variables and influences that act in and on such a relationship. An overview of the complexity of the relationship on a macro and micro business level is established. The empirical research strategy adopted is then presented and argued as appropriate to an interpretivist approach in order to grasp the subjective nature of the research in so doing, answering the research question. Jackson (2011:39) notes that interpretivism is suitable for the subjective nature of the research

as employees are "interacting" with the organisation, each interpreting their individual role in different ways but collaborative in activities for success. Jackson (2011:32) notes that in adopting a systems approach to analysis, the situation, the context and people must be seen in a holistic manner and interpreting them must use "joined up" thinking which tries to understand the influence of the whole by the parts. In this case the whole is the how success in rendering service in the corporate-TMC relationship, is encouraged. The research design adopted is a qualitative interview approach and is argued as suitable for gaining rich insight into the South African corporate-TMC relationship. The findings are presented, discussed and limitations of the study stated. Recommendations for future research are made.

Literature review

The TMC-corporate relationship is complex to describe from a service viewpoint. A holistic systems thinking approach was therefore taken to analyse this business situation in that the *whole* of the research context as much as possible needs to be briefly described to eliminate what is not included in this research focus and highlight what is included (Jackson, 2011). Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross and Smith (1999) has a useful definition noting "a system is perceived as whole whose elements hang together because they continually affect each other over time and operate for a common purpose". Adopting a holistic approach suggests that in further research eliminated elements should be reviewed as they do effect the complexity of the business system described in the dyadic relationship.

To understand what delivers service satisfaction for the TMC-corporate there is emphasis placed on what is expected of the relationship. George (2015:163) notes that TMCs are travel agents that offer "extremely specialised services" to corporate business. George (2015) describes this market for corporate travel business, from a TMC perspective, as highly competitive. TMCs compete to win the opportunity to work with a corporate as the financial value of the relationship can be substantial. To grasp the potential value of TMC-corporate relationships some financial trends are presented. The Global Business Travel Association (GBTA) predicted total global business travel spend to reach U.S. $ 1.25 trillion in 2015, a 6.5% growth above 2014. GBTA noted in 2014, that the Middle East, emerging Europe and Africa segment accounted for U.S. $ 77 billion of world-wide travel spend. If the 6.5% growth in 2015 held true for all segments then the Middle East, emerging Europe and Africa segment could have claimed U.S. $ 82 billion in travel spend in 2015. In 2014, Middle East, emerging Europe and Africa segment spend exceeded 2014 travel spend in India at U.S. $ 26 billion and Latin America at U.S. $ 52 billion (Global Business Travel Association, 2016).

Cohen (2015:9) cites South African industry expert Meyer of travel group Massmart who notes "spend on business travel is miniscule in contrast to the United States in global budgets but it [Africa] also has the greatest growth potential". GBTA (2016) reports business travel spend in the U.S.A. at U.S. $ 318 billion in 2014. A 2014 survey of 230 international corporate travel managers indicate agreement with the potential for the Middle East-Africa segment growth anticipating an increase of 27% travel spend over 2014 in 2015 (Cohen, 2015). However, only 47% of the international corporate respondents indicated they were using or working on using African based TMC solutions while 53% said they use only a global TMC policy which has no African localisation (Cohen, 2015). The latter leads to a high level of management complexity for local African TMCs and is discussed later.

Douglas and Lubbe (2006:1131) define corporate travel as "travel undertaken by employees of a particular organisation that has substantial travel volume and where travel arrangements are

generally managed and consolidated into a centralised function". This description gives an overview of the expectations of the corporate when contracting an external supplier such as a TMC. Reviewing extant literature on customer relationship management (CRM) Nguyen and Mutum (2012) summarise an encapsulation of customer management that supports the importance of the role of relationship development between TMC account manager and the corporate. The CRM proposition is founded on explicit and tacit knowledge sharing "a process of relationship building and dual creation of value between a firm and its customers to create win-win situations, enhance customer life time value and increase profitability" (Nguyen & Mutum, 2012:402). The role and attributes of corporate employees who manage the travel policy is not the focus of this research although the corporate travel managers' perceptions of what attributes they need from South African TMC account managers, is.

Corporate travel standards and principles are most often defined in a written policy known as the corporate's travel policy (Douglas & Lubbe, 2006). Explicit knowledge about how the dyadic relationship will work is codified by the policy (Cooper, 2015). For the TMC, this includes the definition of service requirements in an addendum to the policy known as a service level agreement (SLA). Clear definition of client risk minimisation requirements and, penalty for non-performance when managing the policy, are made clear to the TMC. The corporate travel policy describing the essentials expected of the TMC services contributes to the complexity of managing the quality achieved by the dyadic system. Complexity develops in providing the service required by the corporate travel policy, proving policy application with integrated operational solutions and, setting up feedback loops. TMC account managers must have the ability to integrate travel operational features from technology developments (Douglas & Lubbe, 2006; George, 2015). Information about travel generated in the relationship is continuously presented by the TMC to the corporate for travel management. The specific data generated in terms of monitoring and evaluation of relationship performance is of interest as the integration by the TMC account manager of tacit and explicit knowledge to deal with client needs suggests complex application of the TMC's knowledge and that of the corporate. An organisation's pool of tacit knowledge is held within the abilities and skills of its employees affecting the potential for organisational performance (Liao & Wu, 2010; Saarijärvi, Karjaluoto & Kuusela, 2013).

Tacit information describes "who knows how to do what" and "who knows what" (Aguilera, 2008:1111). It is generally informally communicated in a face-to-face manner which tends to initiate and encourage mutual trust and in doing so helps develop relationship interpretative skills (Guchait, Namasivayam & Lei, 2011). The corporate and TMC have contractually binding explicit precedents set out in the travel policy that indicate the common purpose of application of their combined needs and knowledge. Subsequent to this comes the role of a collaboration process of sharing knowledge for innovation and scenario planning building the strength of the relationship in terms of trust and mutual understanding (Nonaka, Umemoto & Senoo, 1996; Chen & Popovich, 2003; Gorelick, Milton & April, 2004; Masqood, Walker & Fibegan, 2007; Zhang, Viswanathan & Henke Jr., 2011; Chia-Jen, 2013).

Knowledge sharing creates distinctive knowledge which in turn enables wide-ranging scenario planning (alternative travel solutions) serving both dyadic members (Yiu & Law, 2014; Cooper, 2015; Grawe, Daugherty & Ralston, 2015). In the context of a TMC account manager working to continuously create new value for a corporate, the account manager learns about the client the more face-to-face time is spent understanding and building trust through the relationship. Premeditated facilitation of informal and formal meetings can support the transfer of tacit to externalised information making tacit knowledge available more widely for use by other people and functions of the system (Mayfield, 2010). Learning about the corporate in a tacit manner helps

the TMC account manager to understand many things about the corporate not written down. Collating and analysing information about client travel allows the TMC to support the corporate in running effective budgeting and expenditure but the combining of tacit with this travel data (explicit knowledge) provides a unique picture of the client. Knowledge sharing in travel service contexts has positive implications for the continuous improvement of processes and relationships that develop over and above the travel policy. There is an intimate understanding of client needs enabling the TMC to suggest "new processes, products and services" and "procedures, policies and organisational forms" (Jiménez-Jiménez & Sanz-Valle, 2011:409). Jiménez-Jiménez and Sanz-Valle (2011:414) claim in their research of service industries that the service seller will find value in encouraging distinct, positive relationships between firstly organisational learning leading to improved future organisational performance, and secondly encouraging learning leading to innovation (Jiménez-Jiménez & Sanz-Valle, 2011:414). From a TMC perspective, innovating for their clients creates opportunity to use client resources in a more efficient manner enabling the TMC to create a competitive advantage over close competitors. Only the medium of people talking to people and trading information creates this opportunity for new tacit knowledge generation.

Personalisation to corporate needs, is then an element of the specialised services offered by TMCs. It is a concept essential for differentiation of the TMC against similar competitors and achieved through ensuring continuous inter-connectivity with the client. Literature suggests personalisation includes ensuring geographical connectivity (knowing where the traveller is at any time and being able to communicate with them), collecting traveller profiles to ensure better future management of client needs and, being able to share information with the client and traveller on any of a wide range of communication platforms (Sickel, 2016). The trend of personalisation is also referred to by business travel commentary as "traveller centricity" (Baker, 2015:5). Brandon-Jones, Lewis, Verma and Walsman (2016:21) indicated in their findings that client face-to-face meeting time with the TMC as a travel consultant is often limited. However, a review of research on travel and worker mobility by Aguilera (2008) and another by Nguyen and Mutum (2012) suggest that the type of information being communicated dictates how it is communicated (face-to-face or by other means), and is affected by how long the communicating parties have worked with each other. Baker (2015) shows that corporates more and more are looking for TMC solutions that ensure their corporate employees get to travel with minimum stress and that TMCs continually investigate and apply any new travel technologies and options (for instance Airbnb and Uber) to be able to offer more than one travel scenario when suggesting travel solutions. On a more intangible level recent research by Gustafson (2014) suggests that TMC services need to address enhancing trip quality through an element of personalisation that ensures the business client arrives at their destination in a physiological and psychological state. Travel arrangements must support attainment of corporate business goals (Douglas & Lubbe, 2010). Ensuring corporate clients arrive at a destination in a manner fit for work draws attention to yet another influence creating complexity for the TMC in delivering a quality service.

The corporate business traveller needs to be in touch with the TMC to be able to make changes. The TMC needs to be able to communicate travel changes instantly to suppliers to get travel scenario solutions and then convey the options to the corporate traveller. To provide unique personalisation but adhere to the corporate travel policy TMCs need to be able to create ingenious travel scenarios using cross functional teams composed of the TMC account manager and both internal and external suppliers of services and knowledge (Devece, Garcia-Agreda & Ribeiro-Navarrete, 2015; West & Mandelbaum, 2015). The role of external suppliers in the supply chain servicing the client is not a focus of this research and is yet another complex influence acting on the dyadic relationship. The importance of being able to communicate with the client, is.

The role of the internet in travel has been extensively examined in the past two decades by many authors and is summarised by Kracht and Wang (2010). Most recently there is indication of the influence of the internet for a travel service extension through virtual collaboration activities between individuals (the TMC account manager and the corporate traveller) useable anytime - during journey planning and while the corporate traveller is on the trip (Kracht & Wang, 2010). TMC service is greatly improved "using a spectrum of tools to satisfy virtual collaboration needs and price points" (Bridgeman, 2016:10).

Another important influence is that of collaboration that results from being connected. Collaboration of the corporate and the TMC helps in identifying the most effective and appropriate travel choices at the levels of both business traveller and corporate policy. Shared processes and knowledge in turn help the TMC better manage the travel policy requirements, travel budgets, possible savings and importantly the individual corporate traveller preferences and needs. Gillespie (2016) notes the corporate travel budget manager requires continual TMC connectivity to ask the TMC for predicative financial analyses at any time via this cooperative symbiosis. TMCs use their highly personalised knowledge of the corporate and travellers (now an intangible resource for both parties) to reduce economic waste (loss of employee productive time, loss of financial resources) from trip disruptions that in turn can negatively affect corporate productivity sometimes even losing business opportunities (Warren, 2008; Gillespie, 2016). TMC employees work with the corporate employee on managing trip disruptions through collaboratively rescheduling meetings and associated travel. Collaboration acts as a feedback loop for the TMC account manager to learn what is needed to satisfy the corporate in doing so deriving a unique and distinctive competitive advantage over other TMCs to serve the customer (Yorks, 2005; Huff, Floyd, Sherman & Terjesen, 2009; Christensen, 2010).

Warren (2008:583) indicates that gaining this type of information related to capability requires "combining the skills of individuals with [that of] knowledge that may have been [already] captured". In this case knowledge of travel budgets, limitations and processing is captured in the travel policy, a policy composed of standardised procedural guidelines and requirements to minimise corporate resource waste. The policy is a corporate standard that is the current "best known method to perform a task" (Scholtes, 1998:120). Scholtes (1998) notes what is missing in a policy is that a standard cannot state the value of intangibles such as social (the value of relationships) and systematic (collaborative system management) in optimising outcomes that can result from collaborative interdependence. The travel policy plus collaboration produce added value in terms of service quality over and above the expectations defined by the policy because of collaborative knowledge. Warren (2008:577) notes this development cannot be derived from isolated collaboration incidents but is an outcome of ongoing collaboration from which the existence of "strategic architecture of a customer-base resource" is created. The collaborative knowledge results from what both organisations know about each, and, in how to do things that are valued by each other (Warren, 2008).

For the corporate, their employee is valuable only if capable of carrying out the corporate tasks that initiated the travel, so predictive abilities help the TMC to decide with the corporate more convenient and more comfortable travel options individualised for each traveller but still adhering to policy standards (Gillespie, 2016). Brandon-Jones et al. (2016) note in a study of the challenges for professional consultancy services offered by 18 top U.S.A. travel, tourism and hospitality firms that standardisation as dictated by a policy is not a stand-alone best suited to serving up highly customised customer solutions. The consultancy aspect of the relationship (the TMC) must provide the innovation that incorporates the policy guidelines but creates unique value travel propositions. In their findings, Brandon-Jones et al. (2016:17) found these respondents stressed

the "highly knowledge-intensive nature of consulting work" noting that in the past their consultants were generalists but now they needed consultants who are "geeks that can communicate" to clients, and more than ever before "people with a higher degree of analytical skills". Brandon-Jones *et al.* (2016:20) found these respondents indicated a need for account managers who are both travel experts and able to integrate knowledge from their client's networks, describing this skill as being "sector experts by exploiting client networks". Respondents also noted that applying the co-created knowledge to serve the client with a solution or sets of scenarios of solutions is always dictated by the context of each problem situation. Context bound solutions were often unique but "not scalable or useable in other client solutions" (Brandon-Jones *et al.,* 2016:20). This points to the need for constant innovation by the TMC account manager as no single solution may be useful anywhere else other than a specific context. Tseng and Wu (2014:88) support this by reflecting on their research of Taiwanese corporates where the role of front-line customer service (such as supplied by a TMC account manager as the TMC front-line staff employee) requires these staff to have "excellent communication skills and adequate professional knowledge". Tseng and Wu (2014) note service quality outcome of the customer relationship as relying on having intimate customer knowledge. This in turn enhances service quality. This service knowledge should be innovative, unique and inimitable, applicable only to the client's needs to be truly valuable.

In order to complete an overview of the TMC-corporate relationship from the context of holism, Jackson (2011:125) draws attention to complexity in organisational systems because "organisations should be seen as emerging from the relationships of their members. They result from self-organising processes that are creative and unpredictable". As such, Jackson (2011) notes that organisations and their employees and suppliers co-evolve with their environments to remain viable. An excellent TMC manager will instinctively grasp changes they see in the environment and how it will affect their organisation. Responding to unpredictability by being sensitive to new patterns and trends allows for innovative responses minimising unwanted aspects of the change and maximising new opportunities.

In the case of travelling in Africa, business commentary has pointed out several macro-environmental challenges for the TMC managing African travel. The first challenge is the perception of disease. Cohen (2015) found that the Ebola outbreak penalised all of Africa as people outside of Africa perceived the entire continent as Ebola ridden. This affected what was expected of TMCs routing international business travellers into or through Africa. Local knowledge of exactly where there is Ebola (or any other contagious disease) relies on African TMC knowledge. The second macro influence is that of one-size fits-all for travel policy. Cohen (2015) notes international corporates with headquarters outside of Africa tend to regulate their African region travel management by their northern hemisphere policies. Cohen (2015:8) quotes Meyer, travel manager for the South African based retail and wholesale travel group Massmart to explain the reality of working in Africa "You can't march in here [Africa] with your size 10 boots". Knowledge of Africa is valuable and belongs to African TMCs who know African countries and travel conditions. Policies and TMC relationships need to reflect this if they want to be successful in Africa. African TMC relationships provide real information about disease, security, payment options and other travel issues and can be highly trusted in terms of this type of African knowledge. Cohen (2015:9) quotes Swart of the Africa Business Travel Association (ABTA) that local TMC partners continually face two types of challenge from corporate global TMC relationships, "they [African TMC offices] are either left in isolation to deal with the arduous task of managing a corporate travel policy with minimal input or interest from their global teams or, instructed to mandate a global policy locally, by a head office which has little or no understanding of the region".

The research strategy adopted is now defined.
Methodology

Research design

To gain an understanding of how South African corporates with travel policies interface with TMC account managers an exploratory case study approach was adopted. Exploratory was deemed suitable since firstly little exists in current literature on role of the South African TMC account manager in facilitating business travel while secondly giving approximate answers to the research question posed (Babbie & Mouton, 2015:80). Bryman and Bell (2016:112) agree this approach gives insight into the research topic which is valuable lending to comprehension of a specific research situation and its participants in advance of "wider-scale surveys" that apply themes uncovered by the exploratory research. This study was exploratory as it was also cross sectional in time so did not review how the corporate-TMC relationship changes under influences that drive changes (Babbie & Mouton, 2015). Supporting the exploratory stance, Andersson-Cederholm and Gyimóthy (2010) note that dyadic relationship exploration can give a sense of both the researched relationship and also of other influences or actors affecting the research context. The latter gives a partial understanding of those outside of the specific research context eluding to the complexity of the dyadic relationship for future research.

The use of case study research was adopted to understand the participation of respondents who exist in this research context (Bryman & Bell, 2016). The research context was an organisational case study of the business relationship which Babbie and Mouton (2015:281) indicate is typified by studies of "firm, company, corporation, trade unions etc." Babbie and Mouton (2015:281) note that areas studied in this context are usually business management practice such as "policy implementation and evaluation" and "management practice and organisational issues". The term case study was deemed appropriate for this study as all respondents are well-qualified in either corporate travel policy usage (the corporate perspective) or TMC account managers (the TMC account manager perspective). The field research required gathering the best available evidence of the research context to gain understanding and be able to make recommendations on improving service management practices.

Instrumentation

The research methodology adopted was to use a single, semi-structured, qualitative interview instrument. This was in line with the interpretivist nature of an exploratory study. Bryman and Bell (2016:14) suggest interpretivism is useful when "making sense of organisational events past, present and future". A qualitative methodology was adopted to be able to interpret the characteristics, roles and perspectives of participants typically involved in the corporate-TMC management relationship (Babbie & Mouton, 2015). The methodology was also deemed by the researchers as appropriate to gaining information from participants specific to their relationship experiences in this context from a historic perspective (Creswell, 2014; Bryman & Bell, 2016). By a historic perspective we as researchers needed to ensure that participant perspectives were derived from experiences of being in a corporate-TMC relationship guided by a travel policy. The South African corporate employees interviewed have extensively detailed travel policies in place with South African based TMCs. This was a criterion that needed to be fulfilled to gather useful information about the relationship.

The researcher who conducted the interviews posed the same eight interview questions to each of the nine participants. The questions were to elicit perspectives of: the value of the service relationship as joint endeavour; whether the relationship was seen by each as a strategic partnership; the importance of being able to adapt to micro (internal) and macro (external) changes in environment; special capabilities or skills that the relationship needs to succeed; what is seen as quality aspects of the relationship leading to long term partnership; the degree to which innovation is needed to maximise value from the relationship; the degree to which the relationship could be impersonal with little or no collaboration on travel solutions; and, specific characteristics required of a TMC account manager. Semi-structured interviews allow themes that the research focuses on to be dealt with in the interview but also allow respondents an opportunity to digress to other logically linked topics the interviewer had not thought of (Flick, 2002).

The following were acknowledged in the research strategy and design (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982):

- External reliability - the specific social context of this research cannot be reproduced exactly due to time, macro and micro environmental changes. Thus exact replication of the research is impossible but the study is deemed exploratory to identify themes that further research of larger sample size can investigate.

Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olsen and Spiers (2002) indicate that sampling is underpinned by a theoretical framework and this is a strategy that helps lend to methodological coherence ensuring a degree of external reliability even in an exploratory study;

- Internal validity - which reflects the extent to which these research findings are reliable and credible. Only one researcher participated in all the one on one interviews ensuring the same interview methodology was applied throughout and with each interview review and transcription the researcher was more equipped to dig deeper into the system of the relationship with further interviews. Importantly this researcher was an experienced TMC manager with the ability to converse in industry terms recognisable to both categories of respondents. All respondents were asked to check and agree their transcribed interviews to ensure their perceptions were accurately captured;

Additionally, Morse *et al.* (2002) indicates that the sample has to be appropriate to the research context to give understanding of the research focus. We claim that the respondents were appropriate. We cannot claim that saturation was reached as TMC and corporates outside of Johannesburg were not interviewed but we indicate in the findings that several themes came up repeatedly across all nine respondents;

- Internal reliability – this is claimed in this study as the research questions were derived from influences and themes already academically researched as regards the service dyadic relationship;

- External validity – this aspect is limited because the research was not intended to make managerial recommendations but rather to shed light on areas of management for further research as regards the influences in and on a corporate-TMC relationship.

Sampling procedure

The sampling method was purposive and thus non-probability. Four corporate executives who travel and who apply use of very comprehensive travel policy to themselves and other work colleagues were approached.

All respondents were interviewed by the same researcher. The interviewing researcher had intimate industry knowledge and this opened the door to access four large corporates whose employees travel and who have policies with TMC relationships. The same researcher also used personal influence to gain interviews with five very experienced TMC account managers known to have large corporate clients all of which used travel management policies.

Due to the highly competitive nature of the TMC industry plus the confidentiality needs of the corporates as to the value of their travel transactions, the names of respondents and organisations that they work for, are withheld.

Interviews all took place in August of 2015 and each lasted from one to two hours. The interviews were one-on-one in seven instances (seven respondents) and in the 8th interview two TMC account managers of the same TMC firm but each with different clients attended the same meeting. The calendar time of the interviews is important as it has already been noted that the complexity of the TMC-corporate relationship is often related to macro environmental influences.

The interviews took place at a time and place suitable to the respondent but within Johannesburg. The interviews were recorded with a voice recorder and transcribed by the interviewer after each interview to a Word© document verbatim. Transcribing immediately after each interview helped the interviewer think deeply about emerging themes and improved the quality of further interviews. Morse *et al.* (2002:18) note that "collecting and analysing data concurrently forms a mutual interaction between what is known and what one needs to know". In doing this the reliability and validity of the research is encouraged.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed a procedure of reading the transcribed interviews and organising data by coding which allows the researcher to identify pieces of text related to a theme. The code is often represented by a single word (Creswell, 2014). The interviewing researcher used a combination of predefined codes derived from the literature reviewed and new codes that emerged from the information provided by respondents. The most important analytical themes are presented in the next section supplemented by quotations that represent an overriding respondent sentiment or theme, or a unique unexpected concept. The researcher who did not conduct the interviews and who did not do the first coding to themes, but is experienced in coding technique application, subsequently reviewed the first researcher's coding analysis looking for realistic linkages between transcript codes and literature themes. This review helped the coding analysis be deemed acceptable as internally reliable and valid.

Findings and discussion

Demographics

The four corporate respondents were all women aged between 45-55 years old. All four corporate respondents had been working in TMCs or travel agencies before joining their corporate. The TMC account managers were two male and the three females all aged between 35-45 years old.

The TMC respondents each had 10-15 years specifically of travel management experience although not all of those periods were in the position of a TMC account manager.

The difference in ages between TMC respondents and corporate respondents may be explained by the need for a corporate to recruit highly experienced travel consultants to manage and develop their travel policies. Thus it can be suggested that experience in travel is a prerequisite to internally managing the corporate travel programme. Brandon-Jones *et al.* (2016) and George (2015) indicated that the type of employee required in the TMC sector had to be very specialised and competent in travel management.

Little about the financial value of the TMC-corporate relationships could be drawn out from the respondents except for one TMC account manager. This TMC manager gave an idea of the financial value of the TMC-corporate relationship. The TMC noted there were 13 corporates that the respondent's company considered very valuable. The financial spend of the top corporate in 2014 was South African (SA) Rand 377.5 million over 164,226 individual transactions and the second SA Rand 198 million on 124,717 individual travel transactions. At the other end of the scale the smallest of the valuable 13 spent SA Rand 51 million on 31,523 transactions. The total spend of the 13 in 2014 was SA Rand 1,526.4 million spent over 1 million travel related transactions. Even with only one respondent giving this information it can been seen why the competition amongst TMCs to win corporate clients is so high. The types of transactions could not be discussed due to confidentiality e.g. hotel, train, plane, visas.

All five TMC respondents declined to indicate if they were part of a global travel management policy completely untailored for Africa, or if they were part of a global policy in part tailored for Africa. The nine respondents indicated business interests or clients in a wide variety of industries situated within Africa and outside of the continent including oil, telecommunications, agriculture, mining, retail and consultancy. Again, the fierceness of competition to win corporate travel contracts was responsible for reticence in discussing any aspect of the corporate clients.

TMC respondents did indicate that all their corporate relationships discussed in these interviews were with corporates with offices in South Africa. The TMCs also indicated that some of their client accounts do indeed result from international global travel contracts seeking point of presence for African travel arrangements through South African TMCs. Some of these contracts were as a result of the corporate's global TMC seeking a local South African partnership (i.e. two different TMC companies one international, one local) while some were from a global TMC who approach their South African branch to deal with African travel (an international TMC with a branch in South Africa). This finding although tentative is interesting suggesting a research necessity to define the types of travel policy contracts that operate in Africa and the challenges and benefits of each in specific African situational contexts as suggested by Andersson-Cederholm and Gyimóthy (2010).

All nine respondents had at least 10 years practical experience in the travel industry attained in various positions not always within a TMC environment. Their experience had included in-house training for travel specialisations like travel technology software but not necessarily a tertiary education first degree. None had a masters or similar.

An interesting aside is that the job titles of TMC account managers varied between TMCs. Other titles included strategic account managers, business managers and customer relationship managers.

The next section deals with the questions asked and respondent answers consolidated under the heading of the theoretical theme to which they relate. In each case the corporate response is dealt with first followed by the TMC account managers' responses.

Strategically managing complexity through adaptation and innovation

Corporates

The corporate respondents indicated clearly that value derived from the service relationship was a joint endeavor which was determined by how committed the two partners were to finding effective and efficient strategic travel solutions. Impersonal relationships with little collaboration would not develop the degree of mutual understanding required and would not sustain over long periods. The relationship had to be strategic to be of value in that both businesses worked at delivering quality and value from the relationship. This finding agrees with Nguyen and Mutum (2012) that collaboration produces win-win situations. For the travel solutions to be truly strategic in nature required the TMCs to have a high degree of experience on what is currently best practice in the sector, what are each traveller's unique behavioural requirements and, how to streamline the complex travel service to fit corporate needs. The solutions offered had to exhibit efficiency through continually re-engineering travel scenarios.

> *"We have a large travel volume which means we need an account manager that delivers strategic analysis and understanding of the client"*

The corporates were all interested in having travel data continuously feed to them from their account manager. Solutions had to be proven by benchmarking the clients solutions against other TMCs. Data generated had to be continuously managed by giving the corporate detailed reports on not only financials but also adaptation of TMC processes to incorporate new technology. Global travel trends both in travel advancements and crises needed to be communicated to corporates. Examples given were geographically contextual managing travel in face of the Ebola outbreak 2015 and, an incident getting staff back to Europe when trapped by no-fly zones in a west African country during the explosion of the Icelandic volcano. The TMC account manager and corporate needed to find co-created solutions for alternative travel. Strategically the TMC has to be available 24/7. A competent call centre must take over when the account manager is off duty but it must be the account manager who designs reactive solutions when required. All actions of the TMC must be about minimising or eliminating risk for the traveller and the corporate. This espouses the traveller centricity concept Baker (2015) identified as an emerging corporate business trend. Risk wastes resources and denigrates efficiency and effectiveness of both companies.

A final unexpected comment by one of the corporates in light of the fact that all had stated they want cutting edge process design, was *not* to lead in immediate adoption of new trends but to run a follower strategy allowing others to iron out the teething problems experienced by the first use innovators. This may be driven by the need to reduce risk from introducing new unknown influences into the dyadic system of the relationship and this seems sensible in light of the multitude of other variables that the TMC manages

Overall the corporates felt that TMCs need to show the value of their business service over and over to prove they were up to the task of strategic travel planning.

TMC account managers

The managers indicated that they were very aware of managing the client's risk profile. This was part of servicing the client travel policy, SLA and the individual traveller. Being in a strategic partnership placed an onus on the account manager to produce results to ensure the client willing pays the TMC premium pricing. Risk management was essential to creating this value. SLAs generally have penalty clauses for non-performance focusing on risk management (time, human and financial) so competent risk management is proof of good business management skills.

"Customers are definitely looking for a strategic partner and TMCs believe they are key strategic consultants"

The TMC managers noted specific influences that in their experience affected the relationship – they felt they have to satisfy three clients on the corporate side leading to greater complexity when reaching travel solutions. Budget management was critical agreeing with Gillespie (2016).

"The traveller is one customer, the corporate travel manager is another but the corporate budget holder is the real customer.
TMC's need to deliver a good experience for all three areas"

TMC account managers felt it essential for strategic success to pick up on the culture of the customer and adapt to fit into that culture in a way that a corporates then take TMC travel suggestions seriously. While developing the client relationship was considered essential, the managers were aware that this took time to understanding of all the customer needs.

Collaboration, communication and personalisation

Corporate

All corporate responses emphasised that the relationship with their TMC account manager was the backbone of quality service in travel operationalisation. Collaborative partnerships were highlighted as integral to understanding the client internal complexities and consequently being able to adapt travel planning successfully. The service relationship must be as a result of a joint endeavor to produce value agreeing with several authors reviewed on how to develop trust and mutual understanding (Nonaka, Umemoto & Senoo, 1996; Chen & Popovich, 2003; Gorelick *et al.*, 2004; Masqood, Walker & Fibegan*,* 2007; *Zhang et al.*, 2011; Chia-Jen, 2013). Collaboration and personalisation through truly effective communication was the only way this would happen. The communication options must be on many platforms of communication and at all times some form of communication must be in place with the traveller agreeing with Sickle (2016).

"Relationships are everything, I believe in people"

All respondents indicated that the TMC account manager must be obsessed with the personal convenience of the travelling business person. If hotel payment on terms are a problem as they are in some African countries, or credit cards not accepted to pay bills – the TMC account manager must fix the problem, not the traveller. Such issues as safety and security were high on all the corporates' minds and one corporate mentioned how their travel policy even dictated the

height of hotel perimeter walls and their proximity to the foyer area all of which the TMC account manager should prepare for. As travel policies are often 70-100 pages long before the attendant SLA, it means the TMC account manager has to be extremely familiar with the nuances of the travel contract.

All travel issues, big and the little, needed to be taken care of. Always the seamlessness of the travel scenario must be assured for the traveller. The corporates emphasised that their travellers should not need to worry about any aspect of the travel arrangements not working. Travel had to be the part of the corporate solution to get their employees where they needed to be to produce value for the corporate. This theme of travellers arriving fit to do work and how it is achieved by TMC account managers is not part of this study but agrees with Gustafson's research (2014) that in the current age of globalisation many corporate employees need to travel and must be able to work competently when they get to their destination. All respondents emphasised that travel spend is large if the right travel management solutions are presented so TMC account managers must be on top of all touch points as regards travel management. Trust evolves as the corporate realises the TMC account manager will get things that have to get done, done.

"Handing over the reins as such to a TMC is a trust issue"

Corporates emphasised personalisation indicating that they pay for a personal service, not for a TMC brand. With each demonstration of travel service their TMC account manager is expected to prove that the final travel solution was the right one for that traveller.

TMC account managers

Although corporates indicated that TMC managers were given responsibility in guiding clients on travel options, the TMCs felt this was not always the case with not all clients recognising the expertise the TMC brings to the relationship. In this research the interviewed corporates all came from backgrounds in travel but further research is needed to investigate what happens when the clients have a limited understanding of corporate travel and use a transactional form of management i.e. I pay for the service and so I get what I think is right. This obviously affects the communication and collaborative development of the relationship. Personalisation will be limited to what the client wants not always finding a co-created travel solution and of course, trust is unlikely to develop between the two parties under such conditions. Types of leadership styles and their effect on dyadic travel relationships is an area needing research with regards to TMC service relationships.

"There is a difference between a customer that understands travel and works with their TMC manager and a customer that understands travel and tries to manage the TMC manager with an iron rod because he/she thinks they understand travel"

Managing change with knowledge

Corporate

All the corporates emphasised the need for their account manager proactively managing macro environmental change and internally changing client needs. Needs and priorities are different in different situations.

"We do business the way we do business and we require service providers to shape themselves to fit and innovate/invent to provide value to us"

Adaptability was emphasised as required response to macro and micro change and often meant changing operational processes. Responding quickly and making process changes was important agreeing with Jiménez-Jiménez and Sanz-Valle (2011). Although situated in Africa the corporates expected their TMC manager to be aware of global change that could enable their operations in Africa. An unexpected aspect mentioned by one corporate was the fact that each corporate was in a different industry and this often affected the final travel solution that could be offered.

TMC account managers

TMC managers noted that client data output must be measurable and most importantly they drew attention to the fact that this data must mean something in the customers world and not presented in TMC's travel jargon a concept not discussed in reviewed literature on communicating.

As regards being adaptable and flexible in the solutions offered, TMC account managers pointed out that some clients place very strict structures within which there is little opportunity for flexibility. This could be detrimental to the client as it meant the client was not advancing their travel operationalisation in line with global travel new technology and trends for process improvement brought to the relationship through the TMC's specialised knowledge. The relationship is then definitely not collaborative and as such unlikely to optimise value. Account managers also warned of the dangers of working with a client who always wants to embrace technology change not using the TMC experience to collaborate on what technology changes will be useful as regards what should be left untested until others in the market iron out the kinks.

The role of a collaborative relationship in which both partners have business success is highlighted. The tacit and explicit knowledge a TMC manager draws on when making travel recommendations is not always recognised as a unique TMC ability by the client although reviewed literature supports recognition of the value of distinctive knowledge because in a travel context it enables broader scenario planning (alternative travel solutions) serving both dyadic parties (Yiu & Law, 2014; Cooper, 2015; Grawe *et al.,* 2015).

"Unfortunately TMCs that adapt too much to clients demands for technology give away too much of their own time and resources in meeting the client's changing demands. This means a TMC may change their processes too much and it actually impacts their own business success"

The influence of the corporate's culture played into responses on how much innovation to recommend. All TMC managers agreed they need to be innovative to keep up with sector best practice but pointed out knowing how much technology to integrate depended on their corporate audience and particular traveller profile. As clients do not generally know what would be useful for them it is important that the account manager assess travel change then recommend ways in which change can be dealt with or, in the case of technology, applied. The corporate should be ready to listen. In terms of business, the account manager has to understand the economics of both businesses ensuring value is always derived for both parties.

Account managers noted that their role was to know their client better than anyone else in their own TMC business. Interpreting their client needs requires skill and practice supporting Guchait *et al.'s* (2011) research on the advantage of being able to read the client at many levels to establish their needs. TMC managers claim a high level of emotional intelligence is needed to

pick up on subtle nuances of the relationship in communications and personalisation. Understanding the spoken (policy explicit) and unspoken (emotions tacit) definitely supports the relationship in terms of a collaborative development of solutions. Account managers mention emotional influences in the relationship as important yet corporates did not.

Unique attributes for managing travel

Corporates

Special attributes the corporates felt TMC managers needed were: having the authority to take decisions; having a clear hierarchy of accountability; always having contingency scenarios to offer and discuss. Past challenges when working with TMC account managers have been: TMC head office not enabling TMC account managers to do what they need to; lack of the ability to adapt and innovate; lack of awareness of industry advances especially in technology; not being able to provide accurate/quality data and if the data is available not being able to interpret it for client; not enough time spent engaging with the client leading to the TMC manager wrongly assuming client needs with wasted time on presenting inappropriate travel options. The last item concerning time spent on affecting the value derived from the relationship agrees with the research of Yiu and Law (2014), Cooper (2015) and Grawe *et al.* (2015) that valuable relationships develop over time.

TMC account managers

TMC account managers felt that they ensure the relationship success by having a high level of business acumen, strategic thinking and analytical abilities the latter both operationally in aspects such as risk and planning, and financially agreeing with Jones *et al.* (2016) and Brandon-Jones *et al.* (2016). TMCs note that inexperience in handling client relationships, lack of business skills, lack of travel experience and lack of ability to deliver to promises on time make for poor account managers.

Implications

The research question is answered and agrees with several themes about dyadic service relationships reviewed in literature in that personalisation, communication and collaboration are need for strategic planning and value creation. The role of leadership styles (corporate), culture (corporate and TMC) and emotional intelligence (TMC account managers) were not specifically noted in travel literature reviewed but were highlighted by the findings as important for further research as they influence value creation.

The demographics of respondents hint at aspects of travel management not well researched. For instance, while academic literature reviews the appropriateness of tertiary education systems in initially creating employees fit to work in travel, little research exists on what travel specialisations are required in terms of education and career pathing for a postgraduate qualification to fit a position such as TMC account management (Arionesei, Vranciu, Neamtu & Morosan, 2013). Yet, literature recognises the importance of life-long learning for employees if the travel sector is to be sustainable and economically valuable (Su, 2015). The implication of this finding is that research on how to create travel specialists is needed if only to win more global TMC contracts for South

African TMC companies and manage existing contracts with more optimised value creation - especially in light of the financial values that TMCs generate.

The actual contribution of South African TMCs to the South African tourism satellite account would be of great interest plus understanding where and how TMC contracts generate money flows to supply chain members nationally then out into Africa.

Conclusions

The value of tacit and explicit knowledge held by a TMC account manager leads to the conclusion that an excellent account manager intimately knows individual corporate travellers by their preferences, the framework and application of the travel management policy, and the travel options (technology based and explicit in travel regulations etc.). This surmises that the TMC account manager indeed holds a uniquely, powerful role in the corporate-TMC service dyadic relationship in terms of ensuring tangible and intangible value creation and profitability for the corporate and the TMC company. What makes the TMC account manager's knowledge more exceptional is that it is only accrued through continued personal encounters with the client as to travel needs and associated business goals plus knowledge of both the corporate's industry and geographic regions of business focus. The TMC has to simultaneously gather information about external macro influences and internal corporate aspects such as culture, and use them to present unique and innovative travel solution scenarios. In turn this offers the client better and better service. The findings indicate that the South African TMC account manager needs a highly individualised ability to service and retain corporate clients.

Limitations

During the course of holistically exploring the TMC-corporate relationship several limitations in terms of influences not explored that affect the productivity of the relationship, have been highlighted. In terms of research design the sample size was small so future research should review the dyadic relationship over greater sample sizes of corporate and TMC account managers to confirm the validity of the findings as regards the role, skills and capabilities required of a TMC account manager. Another influence that this research did not review was the culture of the TMC's own company in terms of what is done to support the development of unique relationships with corporate clients.

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