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Exploring the vital role of human resource management in the progress of Uzbekistan's tourism sector

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ABSTRACT

The tourism sector has enormous potential to positively impact the socio-economic dimension of Uzbekistan. The nation is ready to take advantage of globalization as a central theme and in this process, human resources will play a crucial role. In this research, the authors have delved into the status and problems of human resources and provided a managerial pathway to success. This research study includes both primary and secondary methods of research. We analyzed various reports on human resources from developmental and international organizations to understand the existing structures and gaps in Uzbekistan. This work formed the theoretical background for mixed-method research (MMR). For the qualitative approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with stakeholders to obtain a real picture of the tourism sphere. To support the findings from the interviews and to provide a quantitative analysis a total of 55 companies were surveyed through online questionnaires. The data has been analyzed and presented in the form of pie charts answering the research questions. The statistical findings of this research are unique in nature as such research has never been performed in Uzbekistan. The authors found that human resources management is missing amongst the stakeholders and has led to low profitability in the sector. The results are presented in line with the stakeholder collaboration theory which makes this practice-based research. As the world now reopens to trade and travel, it will be vital to direct the efforts in a structured way to harness the potential of this sector for socio-economic progress.

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Background

Uzbekistan is home to great historical, archaeological, architectural, natural, and cultural treasures. After its independence, it unlocked the door of the ancient Silk Road to the world as an extraordinary tourism product (Kantarci et al., 2016). The tourism sector has received meticulous attention from the government, and it is believed to be a noteworthy socio-economic booster. The sector reform and revitalization in Uzbekistan began in 2016 to create employment and new business prospects; enhance the progress of regions; boost foreign exchange earnings; and advance the nation's overall image and engagement in the global tourism trade. The President of the Republic released a decree dated December 2, 2016, No. UP4861 'On measures to ensure the accelerated development of the tourism industry of the Republic of Uzbekistan'. In November 2018, Uzbekistan held its first International Investment Forum to expand international engagement in the sector and disseminate information about the country's tourism potential. Further, on January 8, 2019, at a video conference, The President addressed the implementation of investment projects, emphasized tasks in the social complex of the Cabinet of Ministers, and reinforced attracting foreign direct investments to the tourism field.

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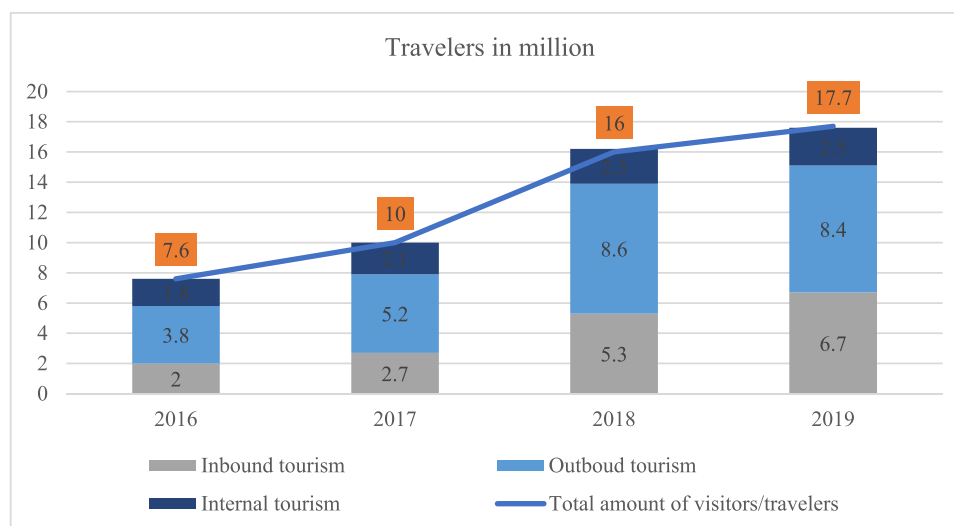


Figure 1. Travelers in Uzbekistan. Source: Statistical Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan (2019).

The strategic advancement was very successful until the COVID-19 pandemic struck the country dropping the tourism exports to just \$260 million (see Figure 1). The number of foreign tourists was expected to rise to 7 million by 2025, and the annual foreign currency earnings from foreign visitors will reach as much as \$2 billion¹. However, at this moment such a target seems very unlikely as the pandemic continues to hinder the progress of tourism-influenced countries around the world.

On studying the secondary data, it was found that human resource management in this sector is completely neglected. Baum (2016) notes that for a country to properly utilize its tourism resources, human resource management plays a vital role. Holistically, even if the infrastructure and historic sites are appropriately designed for touristic needs, the absence of a trained human resource deeply impacts the overall progress of this sector. Training of human resources could be defined as the acquisition and development of knowledge, skills, and attributes that enhance performance in the job environment. Training should impart new knowledge and skills and if training is relevant, based on employee and organizational needs, and effectively designed and delivered (Tharenou et al., 2007). Thailand as an emerging economy is an exceptional example in the area of human resource training and development. For more than two decades the stakeholders in Thailand have worked extensively to foster entrepreneurial opportunities, accessing the knowledge, technology, and innovations resulting in sustainable tourism, quality livelihood, and sustainable ecological management of communities (Hareebin, 2020; Ritsri & Meeprom, 2020; Koodsela et al., 2019). Human resource development in the tourism sector has helped the nation to achieve substantial socio-economic growth and it continues to be an inspiring example for other Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Napathorn & Kuruvilla, 2017).

Currently, the gap exists in the training and development of the human resources that shall contribute to a progressive tourism sector in the nation. To begin with, this research shall investigate the key areas that contribute to the lower performance of human resources. It should be noted that human resources are not absent from the sector but are disorganized which delays the progress of the sector. The implementation of human resource management will direct the employees towards the organization's short- and long-term objectives that shall contribute to overall socio-economic progress. Further on, with stakeholder collaboration (Saito & Ruhanen, 2017; Nyanjom et al., 2018) the HRM implementation will be much more efficient and fast-paced. Based on these identified gaps in the existing literature, this paper assesses two questions-

RQ1. What are the existing structures and gaps in the tourism sector of Uzbekistan?

RQ2. How can strategic human resource management enhance the performance of the tourism sector in the nation?

Structurally, Section 2 of the paper presents an in-depth literature review on the role of tourism in socio-economic development, a geographic analysis of the sector, and existing skill gaps in human

resources. Section 3 explains the methodology used in the research. Subsequently, the authors developed the results achieved during the research in Section 4 of the paper. The study concludes with comprehensive managerial and theoretical implications in Section 5, thereby defining the avenues for practical implementation and future scholarly research.

Literature review

Tourism and socio-economic development

Tourism is an imperative economic activity and is considered a competent driver of sustainable development in emerging economies (Rai & Nayak, 2019; Fang, 2020; Scheyvens & Laeis, 2021). In countries where tourism has become a flourishing service industry, it has a far-reaching economic and social impact on national development as it generates services, products, an additional source of government tax revenues, foreign currency, employment/poverty reduction, investment in physical infrastructure and human capital development (Soh, 2008; Brida et al., 2016; Pablo-Romero & Molina, 2013; Folarin et al., 2017, Saarinen & Rogerson, 2014). An interesting point to highlight is that emerging economies have a rich variety of captivating tourist attractions. For instance, the Danakil Depression² (in the Afar region of northern Ethiopia is one of the world's active volcanoes and an active lava lake) and the hidden monasteries and Churches built in the 14th century. Similarly, in Uzbekistan, one can find the Khiva or the Aral Sea and the intricate Islamic architecture dating back to the 13th century. In both these cases it can be seen that the countries have not been able to harness the potential of the resources they have endowed from history. Knight & Cottrell (2016) suggest in the case of Cuzco, Peru that rich cultural heritage will not automatically result in or initiate enhanced well-being of indigenous communities. It requires substantial efforts from the stakeholders to utilize the heritage for socio-economic progress (see Figure 1).

The blame for delayed progress has often been passed on to poor infrastructure or information technology problems. However, the real problem exists in the unskilled human resource of the tourism sector. Mehrotra & Delamonica (2007) argue that tourism should strive to promote three specific objectives: *human development, poverty reduction, and economic growth*. In the case of Tourism and human development, it should be clearly understood that it is the degree and measure of human development that promotes tourism by creating a lopsided relationship and a virtuous cycle between human development and economic growth exists (Rivera, 2017). It identifies the fact that economic growth can't be achieved if human resources are not educated, and tourism as a sector can't be expanded and profitable for the nation. Biagi et al. (2017) suggest the need to further investigate the relationship between human development and tourism to develop this sector as an economic booster.

Through the above references it is clear that human development and human resource development are not similar in ideology, however, are interconnected. Human development growth comprises and strengthens one's health, education, and skill to contribute to tourism competitiveness, but little is known about these influences, their nature, and their potential regarding tourism competitiveness (Croes et al., 2020). Constant changes in technology, society, and the emergence of the global economy have created additional pressure to develop human resources at a national level (Johnson & Bartlett, 2013). Here it should be noted that human skill development also has a direct impact on reducing unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, violence, and other social issues (Wang & McLean, 2007; Johnson et al., 2010; Tynaliev & McLean, 2011). Rekha & Reddy (2013) further suggest that the human resource should be taken up as a management issue and the manpower must be educated in behavioral aspects of conduct and encounter, relationship management, comprehensive understanding of human nature, knowledge about the unique demands of a customer coming from a foreign country, knowledge of IT, exposure to money transactions, handling of grievances and professionalism.

Hence, for the government of developing economies, it becomes vital to skill human resources for progressive growth in the tourism sector. A skilled human resource shall emerge not only competitive factor but shall also establish a connection between the human development and socio-economic progress of the nation.

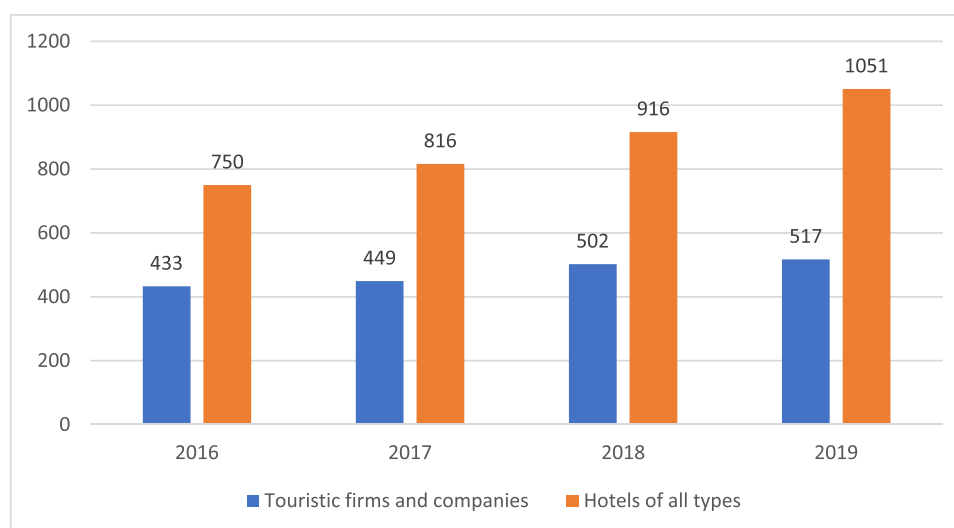


Figure 2. Tourism Companies. Source: Statistical Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan (2019).

Geographic analysis of the tourism sector

Tourist firms and hotels are concentrated within Tashkent, Samarkand, and Bukhara. Tourism expert Michael Shashidov mentioned that tourism is switching its focus from visiting places to gaining experiences. Moreover, USAID has launched a project to help entrepreneurs in the agro sphere to stimulate agritourism and planning to invest 18.9 mln dollars. Such an initiative could help to switch the focus from just top historical cities to far regions of Uzbekistan or diversify the experience of travelers. [Figure 2](#) demonstrates the increase in the number of tour firms and hotels from 2016 to 2019. As could be observed the number of businesses is growing year by year. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that 99% of tourist firms and 94% of all hotels are considered small and middle-scale enterprises.

The nation has a plethora of tourist attractions. Across the country, museums, theaters, and parks that are visited by not only tourists but also by the people that reside in the country. [Table 1](#) below shows the number of attractions that can be visited during a tour of the country. However, it is important to note that these tourist places lack proper management such as online reservations, online ticket purchasing, virtual tours, lack of content in English overall, and most importantly lack of digital integrations which could have made the experience of foreign tourists more favorable.

Coming to Tour operators (see [Table 2](#)), more than 65% of all tour operators and agents are located in Tashkent city and region. Additionally, it could be mentioned that the majority of the Tourists/travelers arrive in Tashkent and then travel to other regions of Uzbekistan, as Tashkent is a major air hub in Uzbekistan.

Table 1. Touristic resources. Source: Statistical Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan (2019).

	2017	2018	2019
Museums	121	97	100
Theatres	50	50	50
Concert halls	67	66	72
Circus	1	1	1
Parks	189	193	192
Zoos	3	3	3

The above data points out that except for the capital city, there is very insignificant development of the sector in other parts of the country. Many regions with high touristic capabilities are not able to progress due to several managerial hindrances. Moreover, even if a tourist reaches a destination there are no people to guide them around or book a hotel digitally. In a personal experience, while traveling to Munyak (a city in Karakalpakstan next to the Aral Sea), there was absolutely no one to guide me in the city or any place to ask for information. The local tour guides do not even speak Russian, leaving aside English. Such circumstances are not favourable for a profitable sector as there is no involvement

Table 2. Location of tour companies. Source: Statistical Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan (2019).

Location	Tour operators	Tour agents
Tashkent city and region	253	93
Samarkand	56	12
Bukhara	23	14
Other regions	44	22
Total	376	141

of human resources to harness the potential. Hence, it will be essential to look at human resource development around the country rather than a few cities which are already famous.

The current skill level of human resources

Tourism generates a large number of jobs and thus, a variety of skill sets are required to support the sector. Starting at the low-skilled (cleaners, housekeeping, guards, bell boys) to mid-skill (receptionists, waiters, bartenders, tour operators, tour guides, chefs) and at the high-skilled (top and middle managers, entrepreneurs-hotels, restaurants, and tour companies) the authors saw a huge gap in the desired competitiveness. The process of a skilled human resource should begin at the grassroots level. Currently, the citizens serving in the tourism sector are not educated/skilled and often do multiple jobs for a better living. For instance, in hotels outside Tashkent, it was found that the receptionist is the owner, cashier, and waiter if required. This has led to minimum operational efficiency in tasks and dissatisfied customers and ultimately non-utilization of the main skill. Sami and Mohamed (2014) state that managers' high intellectual level increases the operational efficiency of hotels and positively affects financial performance. Thus, the skilling of human resources at each level will be vital for a profitable sector.

At the top skill level, the stakeholders have taken a step forward. In 2019, 15 higher educational institutions began to offer courses in Tourism and hospitality, out of which one is an international university - Management Development Institute of Singapore (in Tashkent) and one is private - Yeosu Technical Institute (in Tashkent). In 2020, Silk Road International University of Tourism was opened in Samarkand where approximately 100 students were enrolled. It is important to mention that Silk Road University is offering a double degree program that could be undertaken by its students, where the student will be expected to study on the campus of the partner University in China or Indonesia.

There has been a significant rise in graduates each year (see Table 3) which is quite appreciable. However, the main players in the market that offer Tourism and Hospitality degrees are just two universities- MDIS in Tashkent and Silk Road University in Samarkand. Despite the wide range of specializations offered Silk Road University accepts a limited number of students and has sharp quotas for student intakes for each course and even majors alike to local universities of Uzbekistan. Moving on to mid and low-level skilling of human resources, there are no training schools that are devoted to specific job functions. For instance, a basic level of English is absent from the tourism sector. If tourists wanted to move around the city by themselves, it's practically impossible to move around in the city. Similarly, in bars, café the waiters have no sense of selling the product. In some places, even the menu is in the Russian language so an English-speaking tourist might only order basic food like coffee or tea. In such an environment, the potential of tourism cannot be financially advantageous to the economy. Moreover, it's interesting to note that decision-making is the job of the high-skilled workers in the sector, whereas the majority of the movement happens at the bottom. A tourist might never be able to meet the owners of the companies; however, their memories essentially consist of the human resource that served them and made their journey comfortable. Hence, holistic skill development is the need of the hour for a profitable future in this sector in Uzbekistan.

Table 3. Graduates in the field of tourism and hospitality. Source: Statistical Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan (2019).

For higher education	2016	2017	2018	2019
Student intakes in the current year	512	597	865	1507
Total number of students	1731	1932	1628	2799
The total amount of graduates in the current year	358	457	195	174

Methodology

This research study involved both secondary and primary research methods. To develop a theoretical ground, we studied the existing literature from developmental organization reports and government statistics websites. This gave us the direction to form the ground for mixed-method research (MMR). We were able to identify the sample for performing quantitative and qualitative methods. As the research involves all stakeholders in the sector it becomes vital to examine the opinion of all the industry forces. Truong et al. (2020) state that the main advantage of MMR is that integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches, provides deeper insights into research problems and helps better understand complicated social issues than either approach alone. We chose to begin with qualitative in-depth interviews to gain a real picture of the tourism sphere in Uzbekistan in real time. In-depth interviews were conducted with the deputy chair of the State Committee for Tourism Development in Uzbekistan, the Chair of the Association of Private Travel Organizations, the tourism sphere expert – Michael Shamshidov, and several business managers (sample size -15) working in tourism and hospitality sphere. Specific emphasis was drawn to the understanding current state of the tourism sector as well as HR needs. In this case, the qualitative approach was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the current state of the tourism sector and HR needs, which can provide rich insights into the complexities of the topic. This further confirms our opinions that were researched from secondary data.

The quantitative approach through the survey was then used to collect data from a larger sample size and provide statistical analyses to validate and support the findings from the qualitative approach (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The sample size was composed of 55 companies operating in the tourism and hospitality sphere. According to Johnson and Johnson & Onwuegbuzie (2004), mixed-method research can enhance the validity and reliability of research findings by triangulating data from multiple sources and perspectives. Furthermore, mixed-method research can provide a more complete picture of the research topic by incorporating both subjective and objective data (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The surveys form a way for implementing strategic human resource solutions in the sector. Overall, the use of mixed-method research, in this case, can provide a more comprehensive and robust understanding of the HR needs in the tourism sector (Khou-Lattimore et al., 2019). Table 4 below explains the sources of data and the aims achieved through each research method. As mixed methods study involves the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study, the data are collected concurrently or sequentially, and involves the integration of the data at one or more stages in the process of research

Table 4. Methodological Framework. Source: Authors (2023).

	Source of data	Method of Collection / Sample Size	Aims
1	The State Committee for Tourism Development of Uzbekistan	Face-to-face in-depth interview with the Deputy Chairman	-Identify tourism development potential -Identifying main challenges and opportunities -Skills and professions needed for the industry
2	Association of Private Travel Organizations	Face to face in-depth interview with the chairman	-identifying industry needs (skills development vise)
3	THE TOURISMOLOG (Consultant in Tourism and Hospitality industry)	Number of Expert interviews with the founder/director over the phone/online	-identifying segments in the industry to target
4	Interviews with industry experts (working in the tourism and hospitality sphere)	Online/phone/face-to-face semi-structured interviews (N=15)	-gaining industry insights, needs -preferences for professional development -industry
5	Quantitative survey (Online)	Companies in the tourism and hospitality sector (N=55)	-evaluating skill shortages, -identifying skills gaps -identifying the most demanded jobs in the industry where there is a lack of professionals -identifying current habits and preferences when it comes to professional development

Results

Through the questionnaires circulated to the experts, the authors have gathered critical areas of problems and the factors that were hindering the growing hospitality industry.

Demographic analysis of respondents

This research was performed in Tashkent, which being the capital city has the advantage of attracting human resources from all over the country. The pool of respondents is from all over the nation and thus has contributed to a rich source of data. In the quantitative survey (See [Figure 3](#)), the majority of the respondents have extensive experience in the hospitality sphere, working in the role of a director/owner (33%) or a manager of Sales/Marketing/Tourism/Customer Relations/Event/front office (54%). Independent opinions of specialists (4%) in the tourism sector were also considered.

Next, the authors wanted to research the type of hotels where human resources were employed.

In [Figure 4](#) it can be seen most of the employment is concentrated in the star-category hotels. It implies that mostly the international brands in Tashkent were able to employ and train the people. Guest houses, no star category, or homestays do not employ any trained staff. Several researchers (Janjua et al., 2021; Pasanchay & Schott, 2021) have stated the fact that homestays or other no-star category hotels contribute a lot to the economy if managed properly. Thus, skilling the labor for all hotel categories shall boost the trade holistically.

Educational infrastructure for professional development

Through the survey, the avenues for professional development were explored and it was revealed that the most used method (about 50%) by tour operators and hotels was reading books/internet. Hotels tend to conduct training using internal resources, as international hotels have to visit experts from other branches that come to conduct various training. However, the tour firms don't have such financial

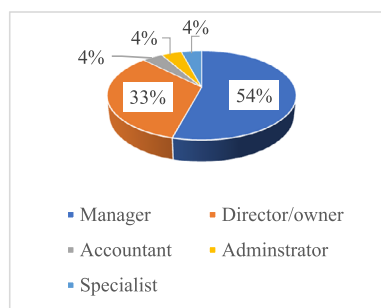


Figure 3. Respondents by job role. Source: Authors.

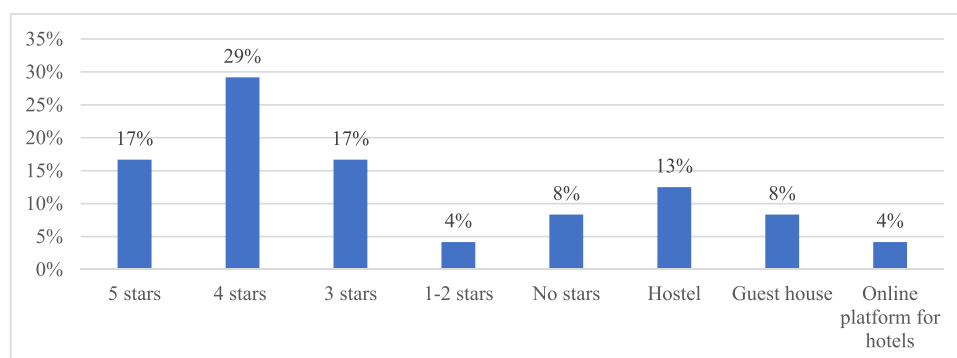


Figure 4. Hotel Categories. Source: Authors (2023).

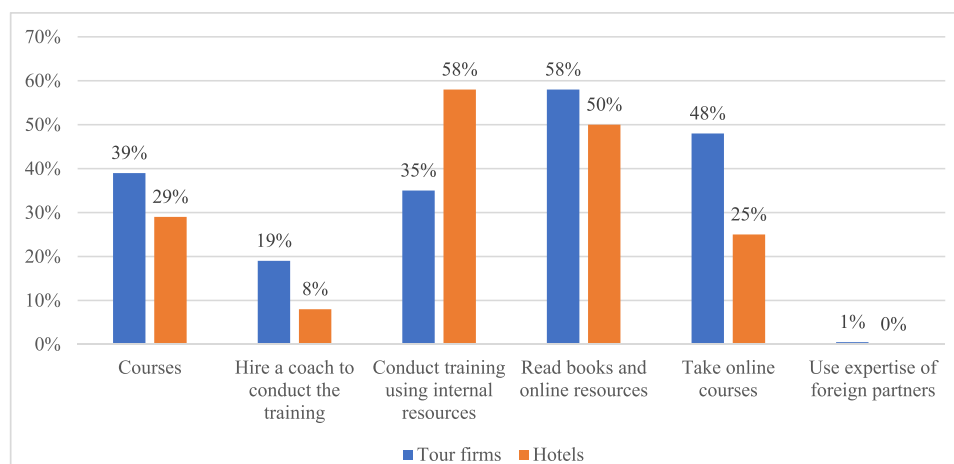


Figure 5. Professional development methods. Source: Authors (2023).

resources so the internal training is less amounting to be just 35% (see [Figure 5](#)). The third category for professional development amounts to offline and online courses. It is a bit surprising here that the professionals working in tour companies (40%) are more inclined to education as compared to those working in hotels (25%). One of the intriguing results shows that hiring a coach to conduct training is not a trend in the sector. Only 8% of hotels have hired professionals, which connects to the fact that the use of foreign experts is almost negligible (1%). Through this, the authors concluded that there is an urgent need for professional development to be implemented in this sector.

Shortages in specialized human resources

To successfully train human resources, it is vital to find where the gap exists and which departments need maximum attention. During the in-depth interview with the Chairman of the Association of Private Travel Organizations, she stressed two types of human resource gaps. First are the serving staff, they not only lack the mannerism of the hospitality but also small things like dress code and attending guests in time. Second, she mentioned that the organizations lack top management that directs the subordinates to achieve their goals on a day-to-day basis.

To substantiate the opinion above a survey was performed to analyze the opinion of 55 people that have extensive experience in the sphere. Staff needs for tour operators and hotels were explored separately, as the type of positions occupied significantly differ. For tour operators, the most needed job roles were identified to be managers that interact with the clients, more specifically – domestic tourism managers, account managers, tourism managers, and external tourism managers (See [Figure 6](#)). Currently, all these job profiles are done by a single person in small firms. Domestic tourism managers could have been identified as the most in need (65%) because of the closed borders due to the pandemic, and the promotion of domestic tourism is focal. Industry experts have suggested that the sector lacks innovative leaders that could develop new products/services/tour package offering and communicate it correctly to the target audience. Moreover, it was revealed that tour operators have connections in other countries that provide tourist groups and consequently receive less amount of income/profit from organizing tours. There are a few tour operators that invest in Search Engine Optimization (SEO) to acquire clients directly without any intermediaries (for example Advantour). Currently, the sector needs a large amount of personnel for marketing offline and online (52%) and then a strong sales (45%) force to solidify the profits. Subsequently, for a successful tour on both the consumer and company sides the sector needs tour operators and account managers which are also missing significantly (42-45%).

Staff needs in the hotel industry vary and ‘reception’ is considered a critical need (65%), where it is difficult to find appropriate staff. The hotel industry also significantly lacks marketing and social media communications. The past decade including the pandemic time has substantiated that digital marketing

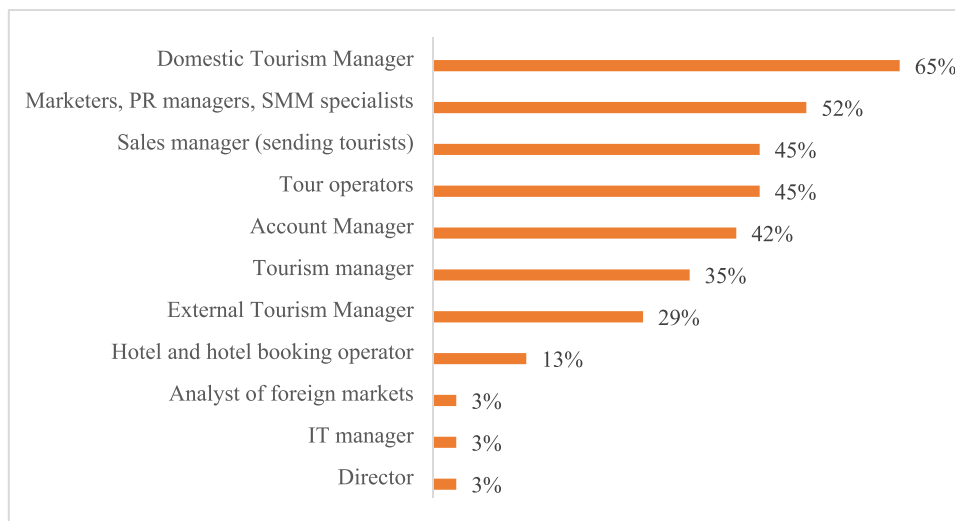


Figure 6. Staff needs (Tour Companies). Source: Authors (2023).

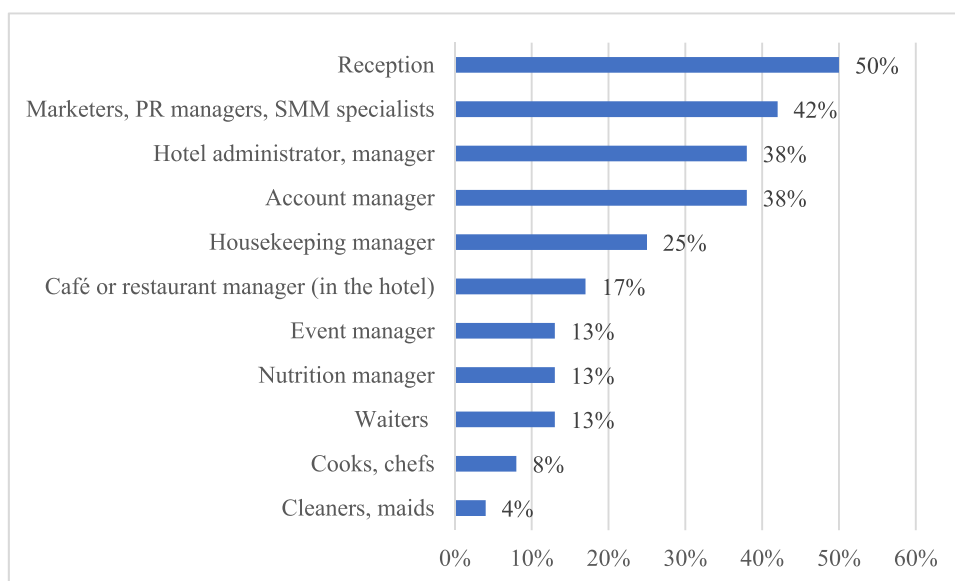


Figure 7. Staff needs (Hotels). Source: Authors (2023).

makes marketing more effective and marketing objectives are met with less cost and with a focus on intended market segments (Chan & Guillet, 2011; Kapoor & Kapoor, 2021; Alrawadieh et al.,2021). Hence, the need to develop human resources in sales and marketing is quintessential. Furthermore, as shown in Figure 7, internal operations (hotel administration, accounts, housekeeping, etc) of the hotel industry also need a lot of improvement. Account and hotel managers were chosen by almost 40% of them who responded to be the job roles in most need in their companies. Espino-Rodríguez & Gil-Padilla (2015) state that organizational performance is impacted by the operations strategy consisting of a pattern of decisions. This intends that human resource is a critical aspect of a successful strategy for hotel management.

Problems in hiring

Uzbekistan is a growing country with a young population seeking employment. A significant number of citizens migrate to Tashkent from other regions in search of jobs in the hospitality sector. Given the fact that there is a sufficient supply of labor, the survey reflects that the companies suffer a lot of hiring

Table 5. Main constraints faced in hiring experienced professionals. Source: Authors (2023).

List of constraints:	Tour firms	Hotels
Lack of industry knowledge	61%	54%
Lack of necessary experience	58%	46%
Lack of customer interaction skills (internal and/or external)	35%	50%
Reward expectations are too high	42%	38%
Lack of business acumen	39%	21%
The general shortage of candidates	32%	29%
Lack of knowledge of a foreign language	23%	33%
Lack of leadership qualities	26%	25%
Lack of project management skills	23%	25%
Lack of business management skills	16%	29%
Lack of knowledge of modern technology (for example Microsoft office)	10%	33%
Lack of certificates and/or diploma	19%	13%

problems (See Table 5). It was found that a large number of applicants either lacked industry knowledge (55-60%) or did not have the necessary experience (46-58%). One of the other highlighted problems is communication skills that include customer interaction (35-50%) and foreign language (33%) which make hiring very challenging in the sector. Then, as mentioned in Section 2.3, major skill gaps are found in the applying candidates. These gaps include leadership (25%), management (25), and business (29%). Lastly, the candidates are not educated/specialized in this sphere and hence, a lot of time and money goes into bringing out the desired output.

Discussions and recommendations

In this section, the authors recommend managerial solutions that would accelerate the progress in the sector and make it robust from future shocks. While providing these solutions three imperative considerations are kept in mind. *First*, the distinguishing ideology between Human resource development (HRD) and Human resource management (HRM). It should be clearly understood that HRD is a developing step towards HRM. Richman (2015) argues that HRM is the 'process of managing human talents to achieve organization's objective' whereas HRD intervenes with the natural learning process, driving employees to adopt behaviors and develop mental and physical attributes (Stewart & Sambrook, 2012). The authors have understood the problems that exist in human resource development and recommend managerial solutions to achieve productivity.

Second, our managerial solutions essentially focus on the Stakeholder collaboration theory (Byrd, 2007). Sheehan & Ritchie (2005) argue that an effective stakeholder collaboration is largely dependent upon understanding the stakeholder and considering their opinion in decision-making. In the context of a tourism destination, the position of stakeholders, their relationships with other stakeholders, and the groups or clusters of organizations in the various sub-sectors of the destination will influence the power dynamics that can obstruct success (Beritelli & Laesser, 2011). Furthermore, Nyanjom et al. (2018) state that when there are multiple and diverse stakeholders, an organic, circulatory, and progressive approach to stakeholder collaboration should be adopted to innovatively move towards inclusive tourism. A successful collaboration would stand on four emergent interrelated themes: control and coordination, communication, clarity of roles and responsibilities, and integration.

Lastly, these managerial solutions provide a strong defence against unprecedented economic shocks to the tourism sector. Various researchers (Yeh, 2021; Huynh et al., 2021) have pointed out that the recent COVID-19 pandemic has destroyed the global tourism industry as they were not prepared. In the time of economic recession, human resources suffered the most as they were immediately laid off due to a reduction in travellers.

Stakeholder collaboration for skill development

Through the literature review (Section 2.3) and our survey results (Section 4.3), it is evident that there are various lacunas in the overall skill sets of human resources in the sector. However, it can be argued that if an integrated and coordinated approach is not applied, it seriously limits the potential of skills

development to impact positively on tourism transformation and development (Kaplan, 2004). Therefore, segmenting the stakeholders (see Table 6) into six categories to visualize what level of skilling that is required for the existing human resources. Currently, it was observed that there exists a perceived gap between the academia and hospitality industry that needs to be bridged. Various researchers (Griffin, 2022; McCartney & Kwok, 2022; Wang et al., 2018) have highlighted the fact that there are research needs and priority gaps between the hospitality industry and academia and if this disparity is reduced it shall be mutually beneficial for both the stakeholders. From basic skill development to a degree-level education, academia shall help to enhance the productivity of the sector in a big way.

Anderson & Sanga (2019) discovered that internships (Zopiatis et al., 2021), innovative training (Gupta & Sahu, 2021), graduate employment, and financial contributions by industry in the form of skills development and tourism development are the key approaches to partnership for the provision of tourism education. Further on, Wang et al. (2018) highlight the notion of cooperative education programs that is extremely beneficial for both industry and academia. Cooperative education programs address major issues such as talent management and developing quality candidates that enhance industry standards and reduce attrition issues (Haldorai et al., 2019) that plague the hospitality industry. In light of these concepts, the following education programs are recommended (see Table 7) that are in line with the stakeholder's requirements.

From the table above it is evident that stakeholder collaboration will be key in imparting skills to the human resource. Skill development shall respond to the changing market and increase the ability to profit from globalization. High levels of productivity can be achieved only if both international and domestic tourists are entertained accordingly. The government has meticulous plans for tourism development, as per the Presidential decree of the Republic of Uzbekistan of April 6, 2021, No. UP-6199 'About Measures for Further Enhancement of System of Public Administration in Spheres of Tourism, Sport and Cultural Heritage' and No. PP-5054 'About the organization of activities of the Ministry of tourism and sport'. However, the process of attracting tourists and the activities they shall indulge in involve a varied skill set. At this instance, that digitization of services shall hold a key position in achieving the desired commercial success. Various authors (Pencarelli, 2020; Bassano et al., 2019; Marques & Borba, 2017) have stated that the way consumers buying decision process for tourism products and experiential value

Table 6. Tourism in segments/stakeholders. Source: Authors.

Segments	Description	Estimated size
Segment 1: Tour firms	Directors and mid-level managers of tour firms, or entrepreneurs.	517 companies (see Figure 2)
Segment 2: Hotels	3+ star hotel staff	104 hotels
Segment 3: Government organizations	Employees of Uzbek Tourism in every region.	400+ employees
Segment 4: Suppliers of tourism services	Suppliers of tourism services – transportation (railroad, airways, tour buses, etc)	500+ employees
Segment 5: Infrastructure	Tourism infrastructure – galleries, museums, attractions, visitor centres.	418 employees
Segment 6: Restaurants and cafes.	Restaurant of a premium and super-premium class.	200 employees

Table 7. Skill development for stakeholders. Source: Authors.

Segments	Description	Skill development Programs
Segment 1: Tour firms	Directors and mid-level managers of tour firms, or entrepreneurs.	Skill-specific Certificate programs in collaboration with local universities or online learning programs.
Segment 2: Hotels	3+ star hotel staff	Management Skills Training -Industry experts from hotel chains -Marriot/Hyatt.
Segment 3: Government organizations	Employees of Uzbek Tourism in every region.	Expert Training and research-led projects with The World Tourism Organization/ Tourism funded projects in Uzbekistan.
Segment 4: Suppliers of tourism services	Suppliers of tourism services – transportation (railroad, airways, tour buses, etc)	Training on digitization of services and promotion. Experts from Booking.com or Agoda.com
Segment 5: Infrastructure	Tourism infrastructure – galleries, museums, attractions, visitor centres.	Training experts from organizations such as the European Museum Forum / International Council of Museums.
Segment 6: Restaurants and cafes.	Restaurant of a premium and super-premium class.	Experts from Michelin-star restaurants.

propositions has reformed significantly and the new technologies have strongly increased their tendency to take part in value co-production and value co-creation processes. Hence, the need for digital skilling is a vital aspect for all stakeholders.

Sustainable and rural tourism

The key objectives of skill development are poverty reduction (Blake et al., 2008), increasing employment opportunities (Booyens, 2020), and infrastructure growth (Mamirkulova et al., 2020) in smaller cities of the nation. Smaller cities or regions are home to a country's deep-rooted culture and suffer from globalization in various ways (Khurana & Ryabchykova, 2018; Khurana, 2021). To protect the indigenous culture and rich heritage of Uzbekistan and yet take advantage of this resource, sustainable tourism would be a strategic option. This philosophy of tourism decreases the effects of tourist activities on the natural environment and the culture of the local communities and facilitates job opportunities for residents (Nair et al., 2015) and tourism infrastructure (Mamirkulova et al., 2020). For sustainable tourism in Uzbekistan, it is important to target non-historical rural areas that lack jobs and income. For example, on an abandoned wasteland, near the Tashkent-Termez highway, an Uzbek couple has created a true paradise. They dug two ponds and created islands with overwater gazebos, plants, yurts, and authentic decor. In a word, it is an eco-gastro-agro-tourist facility that quickly became a favourite place for Termez residents. The owner suggests that this wonderful desert oasis is only the beginning. There will also be a winter pavilion on a separate island, a quad safari along the perimeter, spearfishing, and lighthouses near the water for family holidays. This is a true example of socio-economic progress generated through sustainable and rural tourism.

Women entrepreneurship and gender equality

The importance of the women workforce in the tourism sector is well documented. Figueroa-Domecq et al. (2022) further state that female entrepreneurship as a driving force for achieving the goals of sustainable development is recognized by many international organizations, including the United Nations. However, their representation remains considerably low due to challenges namely equal opportunities, levels of remuneration, and work-life balance (Khitarihvili, 2016; Welter et al., 2017). Additionally, the success of women's enterprises is often delayed as they face major HRM challenges (Tabassum et al., 2019). The skilling of women's labor faces at all levels is focal for the success of women's participation in the sector. Moreover, the women in rural areas should be primary targets of such an action as there their level of education is very low. When women are skilled owners, they will be able to manage the workforce more constructively. In-depth research in this area must be implemented to bring out the micro problems in HRM amongst women enterprises and project teams must be established to re-engineer the existing HRM policies in companies.

Human resource analytics

The process of managing human resources is incomplete without a strong monitoring system. With increasing competition in the sector, the need to structure companies becomes vital. HR analytics is characterized as 'an HR practice enabled by information technology that uses descriptive, visual, and statistical analyses of data related to HR processes, human capital, organizational performance, and external economic benchmarks to establish business impact and to enable data-driven decision-making' (Marler & Boudreau, 2017). HR analytics has existed in the professional environment for a couple of decades, however, its use in the tourism sector is very limited. Currently, the nation needs a robust strategy for implementing and monitoring human resource for the desired amount of productivity. The successful utilization of analytics may be a significant contributor to the building of great, sustainable organizations in the future and a colossal HR career opportunity (Beatty, 2015; Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015). In essence, for the futuristic and innovative HRM data-driven decision-making will be quite instrumental.

Conclusions

This research study is unique in nature as it focalizes on the role of human resources in the tourism sector of Uzbekistan. Existing academic literature discusses the importance/potential of tourism to the country (Olimovich, 2015; Airey & Shackley, 1997); Cross-Border Tourism (Sergeyeva et al., 2022), and other business-related issues to the development of tourism. Practically, no study exists to date which has researched human resource management. The authors have provided a holistic view of the situation of existing human resources and have provided solutions on what should be done to enhance each stakeholder in the sector. In this research, the authors have also made a distinction between human resource development and management. It can be concluded that skills can be present or can be developed in human resources but without proper management skills do not lead to productivity and profitability in emerging economies. Further on, it is also evident that human resource management will be a key to utilizing the country's historic historical, archaeological, architectural, natural, and cultural treasures. Lastly, it was observed that the recent pandemic changed the global tourism atmosphere. It has subjected this sector to the most unprecedented shocks and thus, a whole new panorama of learning for future human resources.

Theoretical implications

From a theoretical perspective, the results of this study empirically establish the significance of human resource management in the tourism sector. It is evident from the research that HRM is neglected in the sector and hence, the companies are not profitable. This research provides managerial theories that could help to re-engineer the tourism experiences in the future. The recommendations discussed in the paper precisely aim at the problems that the sector faces in a holistic way and could be immediately implemented for a progressive reform.

Practical implications

This research study highlights various practical implications for businesses, managers, and practitioners of the tourism industry in Uzbekistan. First, strategic management of human resources is crucial for the success of the tourism industry. Second, the sector suffers from a high attrition rate, therefore, effective recruitment and retention strategies should be implemented in the whole value chain for achieving high productivity. Third, critical attention to training and development programs for enhancing the skills and knowledge of employees in the tourism sector; had a direct impact on improving employee satisfaction and enhancing customer satisfaction. English language proficiency will play a key role in a robust future. All of these recommendations are achievable through the successful collaboration of the stakeholders as discussed in the research.

Further scope of research

This research has paved the way for all stakeholders to think and work in a strategic direction. There are a lot of new areas in research and business which need immediate attention. Undoubtedly, digitization and artificial intelligence shall continue to enhance the performance of the sector greatly. Overall, this research serves as an example for neighboring central Asian countries as well that have a massive undiscovered tourism potential directed towards socio-economic progress.

Notes

1. <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/special-policy-brief-tourism-development-in-uzbekistan-challenges-and-opportunities/>.
2. <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/09/danakil-depression-hot-and-harsh-but-travelers-love-it.html>.

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Data availability statement

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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