

**A Professional Competency Analysis of Travel Agency's International Airfare  
Ticketing Personnel in Taiwan**

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**Abstract**

As travel and tourism industries continue to face challenges, the relationship between travel agencies and airline companies has become increasingly inseparable. International airfare ticketing personnel are the first level service agents, and they must continue to improve on the quality of service to increase the operational competitiveness of the travel agencies. Quality of service rests upon the professional competency of the personnel. This is a qualitative research that incorporates in-depth interviews with professional experts, ten from the travel industry and ten from the airline industry, and these interviews have provided insights into the necessary occupational competency of an international airfare ticketing personnel. These conclusions include: 1. The major job responsibilities of an international airfare ticketing personnel are to provide service with international airfare ticketing products, to efficiently utilize necessary international airfare ticketing tools, and to comply to international airfare ticketing rules and regulations. 2. These personnel must be able to accomplish the following six tasks, including managing the business co-operation between airline companies and travel agencies, fulfilling passenger ticket sales and related services, ability to use the airline reservation system, sufficient knowledge of ticket price rules, and confirmation of passenger ticketing transactions and the related rules and regulations. 3. The related knowledge (K) competencies were: Travel industry experts focus on confirming and utilizing reservation records effectively and the familiarity with reservation codes and ticket rules, but airline experts place more importance on understanding the meanings of airline tickets and the usage guidelines, identifying a total of 24 key items. 4. The related skills (S) competencies were: Travel industry experts focus on friendly and courteous interaction with the customers and the ability to identify customer preference and recommend appropriate services, but airline experts place more importance on the ability to read and explain airline tickets

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effectively and to clarify the meaning of the ticket usage guidelines that relates to special needs, identifying 20 items. 5. The related attitude (A) competencies were: When emphasizing on a friendly relationship, travel industry experts focus on the drive to self-improve and the ability to be diligent, but airline industry experts have identified 16 key items, placing more importance on the ability to actively and aggressively identify and solve problems. In conclusion, academic institution must carefully organize a comprehensive study course that focuses on real life scenarios, and the corporate industry must also provide on the job training to further develop capable international airfare ticketing personnel.

*Keywords:* Keywords: Travel Agency, Professional Competency, Airfares and Ticketing, Competency Standard, OCS (Occupational Competency Standard)

### **Introduction**

World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) (2018) Global Tourism Economic Assessment Report states, the direct contribution of Travel & Tourism to GDP was USD 2,570.1bn (3.2% of total GDP) in 2017, and is forecast to rise by 4.0% in 2018, and to rise by 3.8% pa, from 2018-2028, to USD 3,890.0bn (3.6% of total GDP) in 2028. Taiwan plays an important role in the development of the tourism industry, and the competition is fierce. As of September 2018, there are currently 3,935 travel agencies in Taiwan (Taiwan Tourism Bureau, 2018), and these agencies, whether they are large and comprehensive or small and boutique, as the marketplace continues to evolve, the all face various challenges in management, professional competency, and communications (Chang & Chen, 2018). Travel agencies and airline companies have an inseparable relationship; their co-dependency and co-operation undoubtedly impact the quality of this relationship, and thereby influence a travel agency's performance and its loyalty to the airline companies (Tsaur, et al, 2000). As profit margin continues to shrink, effective decision making, problem solving, and the ability to withstand possible risks have become important issues in the continued development of the travel industry (Huang, 2002), and the sharing of knowledge has a direct and positive impact on a travel agency's innovation and performance (Tsai, et al, 2015). As first level service agents, international airfare ticketing personnel must continue to elevate their service quality so that the travel agency can be more competitive, and the key to service quality is the professional competencies of the personnel.

A talent with competency plays an important role in the development of an industry. According to Taiwan's Industrial Innovation Act, the government is to establish basic professional competency standards based on the need of the industry,

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and to formulate an internationally recognized certification process. Chang (2013) points out that the establishment of professional competency standards provides a base for related educational courses, transforming enterprises into learning organizations, and therefore elevating their competitiveness and the professional abilities of the individuals within. An employee's both potential characteristics and on the work performance are key factor for the travel industry to re-evaluate (Chang, 2016). For the purpose of elevating the overall professional competencies of international airfare ticketing personnel, and to further develop these talents, this research seeks to address the following:

1. Evaluate the professional competencies required by a travel agency's international airfare ticketing personnel, as well as its responsibilities and tasks.
2. Explore the knowledge (K), skills (S), and attitude (A) competencies required by a travel agency's international airfare ticketing personnel.
3. Examine the different emphasis on knowledge (K), skills (S), and attitude (A) competencies placed by travel industry and airline industry experts.

### **Literature Review**

Based on Lin (1982, 1983) application of social resources theory and Patton (1995) in-depth interview theory, this study explores the current status of schools, industries and governments on the competencies of international air ticketing personnel. The literature related to this search can be organized into two parts, first, the basic competency required to serve as an international airfare ticketing personnel, and the second is its functional competency. They are explained as follows:

### **Social Resources Theory**

According to the Social Resources Theory (SRT) which mentioned by Lin (1982, 1983), social resources are resources embedded in one's social network and social ties, defined by a functional perspective and consists of different essences. Resources are divided into personal resources and social resources. Social resources, for example, help the school through the wisdom and experience of the industry. In this research, we developed the functions and advantages through the wisdom and experience of the industry. From the perspective of industry, we have built the competencies required in the workplace, which can be used as a reference for the cultivation of talents in schools. For example, the organization's knowledge sharing can promote productivity improvement, and it is applied to managers to pay attention to employees' professional skills and improve personal quality.

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### **Basic Competency of an International Airfare Ticketing Personnel**

The Workforce Development Agency has made available on its iCAP (Integrated Competency and Application Platform) the basic competency of travel industry operators. Based on this information, the Ministry of Education's UCAN (University Career and Competency Assessment Network) has identified the following competency requirements for operators / ticketing agents / travel agents: provide travel and tour consultations, arrange itineraries, organize tours and reserve tickets and accommodations. In detail, they must be able to (1) provide transportation, lodging, and touring information, (2) Arrange touring itineraries and reserve transportation tickets, admission tickets, and accommodation, (3) Assist customers to obtain the necessary travel documents, (4) Confirm travel documents, provide check in and luggage services, and (5) Organize business or pleasure tours, and market these tours to organizations or individuals.

According to the Research on the Supply and Demand of Tourism Talents conducted by the Taiwan Tourism Bureau of the Ministry of Transportation and Communications (2016), the function of an international airfare ticketing personnel is closely related to a touring consultant, tours operators, or a sales and marketing staff within a travel agency. Ticketing personnel can be further divided into agency ticketing and direct ticketing. Agency ticketing service other travel agencies, while direct ticketing service the general public.

### **Professional Competency**

Spencer & Spencer (1993) explain competency as an individual's underlying characteristic. In management, the managerial competencies required are influence, goal orientation, teamwork, analytical thinking, and assertiveness, but the required competencies of operation personnel are influence, goal orientation, assertiveness, interpretational relationship, customer service, and relationship building. CareerOneStop (2012) stated that competency is the "capability to apply a set of related knowledge, skills, and abilities to successfully perform functions or tasks in a defined work setting." Professional competency can be further divided into functional competency, role competency, and job competency, but what exactly are the professional competencies of an international airfare ticketing personnel? What are required for them to provide satisfactory services? This research seeks to address the importance of establishing and developing the necessary professional competencies for the international airfare ticketing personnel.

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## **Methodology**

This research uses in-depth interview to encourage a more thorough discussion on the subject and to collect a deeper, more comprehensive understanding (Boyce & Neale, 2006). For data relevance and reliability, the research uses the method of purposeful sampling to select ten senior travel industry executives and ten airline industry experts. The interview results are organized and analysed to present the professional competencies necessary for international airfare ticketing personnel. The list of these experts is presented with Table 1, and the basic framework of the interview questions are as follows:

- What is the main professional competency requirement of international airfare ticketing personnel? What are the job responsibilities, major tasks and goals?
- In your opinion, what are the professional knowledge, skills, and attitude that are required to fulfil this profession competency?
- With the rapidly changing environment, what are the additional abilities that are required for international airfare ticketing personnel? What is the most important knowledge, skills and attitude?

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Professional Competencies of International Airfare Ticketing Personnel**

This research follows the basic competency of travel industry operators published by the Workforce Development Agency on its iCAP (Integrated Competency and Application Platform), as well as the standard competency requirements that are available on the Ministry of Education's UCAN (University Career and Competency Assessment Network). It describes the duties and tasks of international airfare ticketing personnel as follows:

#### 1. Duties

Through customer consultation, provide ticketing services that includes planning, explaining, and sales, effectively fulfilling the customers' needs.

#### 2. Tasks

- (1) Examining the business co-operation between airline companies and travel agencies.
- (2) Receiving and processing customer airfare ticketing service requests and related demands.
- (3) Collecting information from the Global Distribution System (GDS)

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- (4) Examining basic knowledge of International Air Transport Association (IATA) prices, pricing structures, and technical terms.
- (5) Confirming customer airfare transaction guidelines.
- (6) Confirming customer airfare rules and regulations.

This brief description establishes the standard of professional competencies and abilities required by international airfare ticketing personnel.

### Begin Analysis of Professional Competencies

Ten senior travel industry executives and ten airline industry experts took part in the in-depth interview, and their backgrounds, positions and professional experience are listed below:

Table 1

*List of Executives and Experts*

Background	Position	Experience in Years
<b>Travel Industry Experts</b>		
1	Assistant General Manager of travel agency A	34
2	Manager of travel agency B	32
3	General Manager of travel agency C	30
4	Manager of travel agency D	30
5	General Manager of travel agency E	26
6	Ticketing Manager of travel agency F	26
7	Assistant General Manager of travel agency G	25
8	Ticketing Director of travel agency H	23
9	General Manager of travel agency I	23
10	General Manager of travel agency J	20
<b>Airline Industry Experts</b>		
11	Airline General Manager K	30
12	Airline Ticketing Manager L	28
13	Airline General Manager M	28
14	Airline Ticketing Manager N	27
15	Airline Ticketing Manager O	25
16	Airline Ticketing Manager P	24
17	Airline General Manager Q	24
18	Airline Ticketing Manager R	21
19	Airline Customer Service Manager S	20
20	Airline General Manager T	20

Through these in-depth interviews, we analyse the knowledge, skills and attitudes

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displayed by international airfare ticketing personnel when conducting their business and the findings are as follows:

Table 2

### *Job Responsibilities of International Airfare Ticketing Personnel*

<b>Responsibilities</b>	<b>Tasks</b>	<b>Indicators</b>
1. International airfare ticketing products and services.	1.1. Examine the business co-operation between airline companies and travel agencies.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Research on products offered jointly by airline companies and travel agencies and evaluate its effectiveness.</li> <li>2. Among affiliates, formulate different promotional plans and identify the best promotion schedule.</li> <li>3. Understand affiliate policies and agreements, and identify the potential influence of promotional schedules.</li> </ol>
	1.2. Receive and process customer airfare ticketing service requests and related demands.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Confirm and clarify customer preferences, demands, and expectations</li> <li>2. Recommend appropriate products and services to satisfy customers' needs.</li> <li>3. Request passports to verify customer name and passport validity.</li> <li>4. Quickly provide preferred products and services.</li> <li>5. Verify that customer needs have been fulfilled.</li> <li>6. Provide professional and personalized service to achieve a pleasant service experience.</li> <li>7. Maintain contact with team members and affiliated companies, and ensure all services can be provided efficiently.</li> <li>8. Share customer information with team members to maintain quality of service.</li> </ol>
2. Utilization of international airfare ticketing tools	2.1. Collect information from the Global Distribution System (GDS)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Confirm the use of GDS is appropriate.</li> <li>2. Recommend appropriate airline and class of service based on a customer's needs.</li> <li>3. Request passport from customer to verify names and other information, as well as flight record.</li> <li>4. Utilize the available airfares in the GDS.</li> <li>5. Actively provide customer with computer reservation records.</li> <li>6. Ask customers to verify names and reservation records.</li> <li>7. Ask customers to confirm special requests.</li> </ol>

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Responsibilities	Tasks	Indicators
	2.2. Examine basic knowledge of International Air Transport Association (IATA) prices, pricing structures, and technical terms	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Confirm the appropriate usage of special airfares.</li> <li>2. Confirm airfare prices, profit, and risk factors.</li> <li>3. Confirm IATA pricing structure.</li> <li>4. Confirm Billing and Settlement Plan (BSP)</li> <li>5. Confirm ticketing terms.</li> </ol>
3. Confirmation of laws and regulations related to international airfare customers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3.1. Confirm customer airfare transaction guidelines</li> <li>3.2. Confirm customer airfare rules and regulations</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Confirm airfare validity, length of stay requirement, and flight information.</li> <li>2. Confirm airfare change rules and refund policies.</li> <li>1. Confirm free checked luggage allowance.</li> <li>2. Process transaction according to each airline company's operation procedure.</li> </ol>

### Analysis of Knowledge

In analysing the knowledge required in professional competency, travel industry and airline industry experts both emphasize on the importance of confirmation of valid reservation record and the familiarity with the relationship between class of service and pricing rules. Airline industry experts pay more attention to the familiarity of airfare usage guidelines. There is a total of 24 items, which are listed in table 3 below.

Table 3

*Professional Competency of International Airfare Ticketing Personnel – Knowledge (K)*

Item Number	Knowledge (K)
K01	Understand the structure of the airline industry and the source of airline products.
K02	Understand the ticket sale channels of airline companies and travel agencies.
K03	Understand cost and price structure and the principles and key factors behind it.
K04	The ability to identify validity and content of different passports.
K05	The ability to understand marketing norms of different airfares, such as high/low seasons, business days, holidays, etc.
K06	The ability to differentiate among passenger backgrounds, and to suggest appropriate class of service and price.
K07	The ability to understand airline destinations.
K08	The ability to understand airline fleet sizes.
K09	The ability to understand airline plane models and equipment.
K10	The ability to understand airline seat selection services.



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Item Number	Knowledge (K)
K11	The ability to understand special meal services, such as vegetarian, Muslim, seafood, children, infant, etc.
K12	The ability to confirm special needs services, such as wheelchair, transfer assistance, etc.
K13	The ability to differentiate among various airline reservation systems, such as Sabre, Amadeus, Travel port, Travel sky, and so on.
K14	The ability to verify information with airline reservation systems, such as timetable, available airfares, etc.
K15*	The ability to recognize and retrieve basic information in airline reservation systems, including customer name, title, itinerary, contact information, airfare validity, etc.
K16*	The ability to effectively utilize valid reservations records, and to differentiate among various classes of service.
K17*※	Confirmation of valid reservation record and the familiarity with the relationship between class of service and pricing rules.
K18	Understanding of airfare structure and development.
K19	Understanding of airfare types and related codes.
K20※	Understanding the meaning of various cells on an airfare.
K21※	Understanding of the airfare usage guidelines.
K22	Understanding of IATA (International Air Transport Association).
K23	Understanding of BSP (Billing and Settlement Plan).
K24	Understanding of the guidelines on international airfare transactions.

*Note: Items with a “\*” were identified by travel industry experts as more important (average score  $\geq 4.5$ ). Items with a “※” were identified by airline industry experts as more important (average score  $\geq 4.5$ ).*

### Analysis of Skills

In analysing the skills required in professional competency, travel industry experts focus more on friendliness and good interaction with customers, the ability to identify customer preferences, provide appropriate ticketing recommendation, and to provide ticketing services in a timely manner. Airline industry experts, on the other hand, emphasize more on the ability to read and explain airline tickets effectively, the ability to create travel itineraries, and the ability to clarify the meaning of the ticket usage guidelines that relates to special needs. There is a total of 20 such skill, which are listed below in table 4.

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Table 4

*Professional Competency of International Airfare Ticketing Personnel – Skills (S)*

<b>Item Number</b>	<b>Skills (S)</b>
<b>S01</b>	The skill to jointly create innovative products with airline companies and travel agencies.
<b>S02</b>	The skill to record, read, and presents numeric data, charts, and other reference materials.
<b>S03</b>	The skill to calculate product costs.
<b>S04</b>	The skill to calculate various commission and value-added structures.
<b>S05</b>	The skill to calculate the profitability of multiple products.
<b>S06*</b>	Friendly and courteous interaction with customers.
<b>S07*</b>	The skill to identify customer preferences and to suggest appropriate ticketing services.
<b>S08</b>	The skill to provide clear and correct information.
<b>S09※</b>	The skill to read and explain airline tickets effectively
<b>S10※</b>	The skill to arrange a customer's travel itinerary, and to clearly and correctly identify a customer's special needs.
<b>S11</b>	Actively promote and increase the profitability of airfare ticketing sales.
<b>S12</b>	The skill to work in a team setting to provide services.
<b>S13</b>	The skill to utilize the GDS (Global Distribution System) reservation system.
<b>S14</b>	The skill to utilize the five key factors in the GDS reservation system.
<b>S15</b>	To record service or product delay or defect, to act, and to ensure the customer is satisfied.
<b>S16*</b>	The skill to utilize speed, time, and productivity to provide customer service in a timely manner.
<b>S17</b>	The skill to record and identify the purpose of all ticket sale categories and their meanings.
<b>S18※</b>	The skill to write out the meanings of all the columns on an airfare ticket.
<b>S19</b>	The skill to reference and reads the important guidelines of international airfare transactions.
<b>S20</b>	The skill to effectively utilize international airfare transaction guidelines to identify and recommend a solution to a customer's problems.

*Note: Items with a "\*" were identified by travel industry experts as more important (average score  $\geq 4.5$ ). Items with a "※" were identified by airline industry experts as more important (average score  $\geq 4.5$ ).*

### Analysis of Attitude

In analyzing the attitude required in professional competency, travel industry and airline industry experts both emphasize on the importance of friendly relationship. While travel industry experts focus more on the drive to self-improve and a diligent operational process, airline industry experts focus more on assertiveness, the drive to self-improve, and the ability to utilize new knowledge to complete tasks and solve

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problems. The 16 items discussed are listed and explained in table 5 below.

Table 5

*Professional Competency of International Airfare Ticketing Personnel – Attitude (A)*

<b>Item Number</b>	<b>Attitude (A)</b>
<b>A01*※</b>	Friendly Relationship: The ability to show understanding, friendliness, compassion, care, and courtesy
<b>A02</b>	Friendly Relationship: The ability to develop and maintain good relationships with people of different backgrounds
<b>A03※</b>	Proactiveness: The ability to act without being asked to do so, and the ability to solve problems when confronted with challenges
<b>A04</b>	Reactiveness: The willingness to actively take on additional responsibilities
<b>A05*</b>	Self-improvement: The wiliness to continue learning and to actively take part in learning opportunities
<b>A06※</b>	Self-improvement: The ability to acquire necessary knowledge and skills, and to effectively utilize them to complete tasks
<b>A07*</b>	Diligence: The ability to carefully examine all details during the completion of tasks
<b>A08*</b>	Diligence: The ability to precisely examine every step taken, and to maintain this attention to detail
<b>A09</b>	Pursue of Excellence: The ability to set challenging goals and accomplish these goals
<b>A10</b>	Pursue of Excellence: The willingness to actively complete tasks and go above and beyond the original goals
<b>A11</b>	Effective Communication: The ability to have an open mind, and the willingness to modify courses of action based on new information and changes of the surrounding environment
<b>A12</b>	Effective Communication: The ability to adapt and solve unexpected problems
<b>A13</b>	Problem Resolution: The ability to take necessary actions to better assess the situation and complete tasks
<b>A14※</b>	Problem Resolution: The willingness to take necessary actions to identify the exact problem and complete tasks
<b>A15</b>	Time Management: The ability to comprehensively set schedules to ensure efficiency
<b>A16</b>	Time Management: The ability to competently complete tasks regardless of time pressure

*Note: Items with a “\*” were identified by travel industry experts as more important (average score  $\geq 4.5$ ). Items with a “※” were identified by airline industry experts as more important (average score  $\geq 4.5$ ).*

The different emphasis on professional competencies by travel and airline industries is illustrated in table 6 below.

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Table 6

*Professional Competencies Emphasized by Travel and Airline Industry Experts*

<b>Professional Competency</b>	<b>Travel Industry Experts</b>	<b>Airline Industry Experts</b>
<b>Knowledge</b>	K15, K16, K17	K17, K20, K21
<b>Skill</b>	S06, S07, S16	S09, S10, S18
<b>Attitude</b>	A01, A05, A07, A08	A01, A03, A06, A14

### **Conclusion and Suggestions**

1. This research sheds light on the job tasks and responsibilities of international airline ticketing agents, and helps to better understand the importance of utilizing the interconnecting relationships among market demand, sales and promotion, and rules and regulations. A structured course syllabus is suggested, and case studies are recommended for every course section to ensure optimal understanding of real world situations.
2. Summarizing on all understanding of job tasks and responsibilities by travel industry experts, it is recommended that educational courses focus on the abilities to utilize the information provided by the reservation system to fulfill the customers' needs. Airline industry experts have suggested the familiarization of airfare codes and their meanings. Educational courses are recommended to focus more on reservation records and technical terms.
3. Summarizing on all travel industry experts' understanding of the importance of attitude and aptitude, educational courses are suggested to also focus on interpersonal communication, team motivation, task analysis, and problem-solving skills.
4. This research examined the professional competencies and responsibilities of international airfare and ticketing personnel. This could serve as a guideline for schools to better organize a comprehensive course of study, or for travel industry associations to provide on-job trainings and to develop more experienced ticketing personnel.

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