



TRAVEL AGENTS

NATURE OF THE WORK

Travel agents help travelers sort through vast amounts of information to help them make the best possible travel arrangements. They offer advice on destinations and make arrangements for transportation, hotel accommodations, car rentals, and tours for their clients. They are also the primary source of bookings for most of the major cruise lines. In addition, resorts and specialty travel groups use travel agents to promote travel packages to their clients.

Travel agents are also increasingly expected to know about and be able to advise travelers about destinations, such as the weather conditions, local ordinances and customs, attractions, and exhibitions. For those traveling internationally, agents also provide information on customs regulations, required papers (passports, visas, and certificates of vaccination), travel advisories, and currency exchange rates. In the event of changes in itinerary in the middle of a trip, travel agents intercede on the traveler's behalf to make alternate booking arrangements.

Travel agents use a variety of published and computer-based sources for information on departure and arrival times, fares, quality of hotel accommodations, and group discounts. They may also visit hotels, resorts, and restaurants themselves to evaluate the comfort, cleanliness, and the quality of specific hotels and restaurants so that they can base recommendations on their own experiences or those of colleagues or clients.

Travel agents who work for tour operators and other travel arrangers may develop, arrange, and sell the firms' own package tours and travel services. They may use telemarketing, direct mail, and the Internet. They make presentations to social and special-interest groups, arrange advertising displays, and suggest company-sponsored trips to business managers.

Agents face more competition from travel and airline Web sites for low-cost fares, but some travelers still prefer using agents who can provide customized service and planning for complex itineraries to remote or multiple destinations. To attract these travelers, many agents specialize in specific types of destinations, travel to certain regions, or particular demographic groups.

WORKING CONDITIONS

Travel agents spend most of their time behind a desk conferring with clients, completing paperwork, contacting airlines and hotels to make travel arrangements, and promoting tours. Most of their time is spent either on the telephone or on the computer researching travel itineraries or updating reservations and travel documents. Agents may be under a great deal of pressure during travel emergencies or when they need to reschedule missed reservations. Peak vacation times, such as summer and holiday travel periods, also tend to be hectic.

Many agents, especially those self-employed, may work long hours. Advanced computer systems and telecommunications networks make it possible for many travel agents to work at home; however, some agents feel a need to have an office presence to attract walk-in business.

EMPLOYMENT

Travel agents hold about 75,000 jobs and are found in every part of the country. Nearly two-thirds work for travel agencies. Another 14 percent are self-employed. The remainder worked for tour operators, visitors' bureaus, reservation offices, and other travel arrangers.

TRAINING, OTHER QUALIFICATIONS, AND ADVANCEMENT

A love of travel and knowledge and enthusiasm for advising people about travel destinations and itineraries are important traits for a travel agent to have. Superb communication and computer skills are essential for talking with clients and making travel reservations. The minimum requirement for those interested in becoming a travel agent is a high school diploma or equivalent; although many travel agencies prefer applicants who have a college degree and business or travel experience. Much of the training is provided on the job, a significant part of which consists of instruction on how to use reservation systems.

Training specific to becoming a travel agent is available at the many vocational schools that offer full-time travel agent programs leading to a postsecondary vocational award. Travel agent courses also are offered in public adult education programs, online, and in community colleges. These programs teach students about cruise lines and sales techniques and how to use the reservations systems. They also provide general information about travel destinations. A few colleges offer bachelor's or master's degrees in travel and tourism. Some employers prefer agents who have backgrounds in computer science, geography, communication, foreign languages, or world history, because these backgrounds suggest an existing interest in travel and culture and help agents develop a rapport with clients. Courses in accounting and business management also are important, especially for those who expect to manage or start their own travel agencies. Continuing education is critical because the abundance of travel information readily available through the Internet and other sources has resulted in a more informed consumer who wants to deal with an expert when choosing a travel agent.

Travel agents must be organized, accurate, and detail-oriented in order to compile information from various sources and to plan and organize their clients' travel itineraries. Agents also must be professional and courteous in dealing with travel representatives and clients. Other desirable

qualifications include good writing and interpersonal skills and sales abilities. Personal travel experience is an asset because knowledge about a city or foreign country often helps influence a client's travel plans. Business experience or training increasingly is important because agents need to know how to run a business profitably. As the Internet has become an important tool for making travel arrangements, more travel agencies use websites to provide their services to clients. This trend has increased the importance of computer skills in this occupation.

Some employees start as reservation clerks or receptionists in travel agencies. With experience and some formal training, they can take on greater responsibilities and eventually assume travel agent duties. In agencies with many offices, travel agents may advance to busier offices or to office manager or other managerial position. Those who start their own agencies generally have experience in an established agency. These agents must gain formal approval from suppliers or corporations, such as airlines, ship lines, or rail lines to extend credit on reservations and ensure payment. The Airlines Reporting Corporation and the International Airlines Travel Agency Network, for example, are the approving bodies for airlines. To gain approval, an agency must be financially sound and employ at least one experienced manager or travel agent.

The National Business Travel Association offers three types of designations for corporate travel professionals—Corporate Travel Expert, Certified Corporate Travel Executive, and Global Leadership Professional. Experienced travel agents can take advanced self-study or group-study courses from the Travel Institute, leading to the Certified Travel Counselor designation. The Travel Institute also offers marketing and sales skills development programs and destination specialist programs, which provide detailed knowledge of regions such as North America, Western Europe, the Caribbean, and the Pacific Rim. With the trend toward more specialization, these and other destination specialist courses are increasingly important.

JOB OUTLOOK

Employment of travel agents is expected to decline by 12 percent from 2014 and 2024 to online travel sites. Clients who want customized travel experiences, such as adventure tours, will continue to require the expertise of agents. However, the ability of travelers to research vacations and book their own trips using the Internet is expected to continue to suppress demand for travel agents.

Opportunities should be better for agents who specialize in specific destinations, luxury travel, or particular types of travelers such as ethnic groups or groups with a special interest or hobby. The demand for travel is sensitive to economic downturns and international political crises, when travel plans are likely to be deferred. Thus job opportunities for travel agents will fluctuate with changing economic and political times. Many openings, though, are expected to occur as agents leave for other occupations or retire.