Chapter 3

The Human Side of Information Systems Development: A Case of an Intervention at a British Visitor Attraction

Brian Lehaney, Steve Clarke and Vikki Kimberlee
The University of Luton Business School, UK

Sarah Spencer-Matthews
Swinburne University of Technology, Australia

Information systems (IS) are growing in importance within the tourism industry, where one key application is database marketing. Evidence from the IS domain suggests systems failure may be due, at least in part, to concentration on technical rather than human issues in the development process. Through an empirical study of visitor attractions in the United Kingdom, the need for a more human-centered approach to IS development is supported, and an example of such an approach is outlined. Both in-depth focus group analysis and a broader questionnaire survey are used, and lend weight to the human-centered arguments. From the analysis of a failed tourism database marketing information system, and from evidence of similar successful systems, the value of technology-enabled database marketing within the sector is demonstrated, but its success is seen to rest on participative, human-centered approaches to development.

This paper investigates the use and success of information systems in the tourism industry. As a fairly young, growth-industry, tourism may be able to learn from some of the pitfalls already experienced in other sectors, where “...
analysis has been driven by what is technically possible rather than by what is organisationally desirable. The consequences of this include a number of failed investments in information systems, the disenfranchisement of management, and an accepted use of developmental methods that are insensitive to the social and political contexts within which the information systems are to be used” (Lewis, 1994, p.2). This paper suggests that the information systems within tourism may reduce the possibility of failure by the use of the participative and holistic approaches to development which address end user issues through the so-called ‘soft’ or human-centered methods.

The advantages to be gained can be judged from a brief analysis of the value of tourism to the U.K. economy. In 1991, 16.6 million foreign visitors are estimated to have spent £7,168 million within the UK, while domestic tourism accounted for 94.4 million trips and an additional £10,470 million of expenditure (British Tourist Authority, 1994, p.1). In 1995 tourism produced 5% of Gross Domestic Product (1% up on the previous year’s figure) providing £25 billion to the economy (The Times, 1996). The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) state that the industry is a “key economic driver,” and by the end of 1997 they expected it to be generating 11.6% of Britain’s Gross Domestic Product (The Times, 1996). In the same article, the WTTC said “travel and tourism is a key to future economic growth” (The Times, 1996, p.12). By any standards, travel and tourism are now major components of the U.K. economy, and information systems play an important role in its future success.

The paper begins with a general review of information systems within tourism, taken from the relevant theoretical and empirical literature. The incidences and causes of information systems failure are then outlined, and are seen to indicate human-centered methods as relevant within this domain. An analysis of human-centered approaches to information systems design, development and implementation, leads to the chosen methodologies for the study, which are strongly participant focused.

The specific area addressed by this paper is visitor attractions: a significant growth segment within the U.K. tourism industry. The empirical study is composed of two components. Firstly, focus group sessions are used at a major visitor attraction which has been the subject of a failed database marketing system. Secondly, a self-administered questionnaire was sent to the top 20 visitor attractions in the U.K., eliciting a 65% response, from which a broader perspective on the use of database marketing within the visitor attraction sector was elicited.
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