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Federal Department of Economic Affairs,
Education and Research EAER

State Secretariat for Economic Affairs SECO
Tourism policy

Co-funded by the
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OECD-EC Policy Workshop on
PREPARING THE TOURISM WORKFORCE FOR THE DIGITAL FUTURE

Thursday, 28 January 2021, Berne/Paris (virtual)

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Co-organised by the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs SECO and the OECD Tourism Committee, and co-financed by the European Union, this international workshop brought together tourism policy makers with representatives from the tourism industry, national and international institutions, and academia, to share experiences, best practices and policy guidance. In total, about 200 participants from 42 countries and all 6 continents registered for the workshop, with about half being tourism policy makers (full breakdown at Annex A). There was a strong participation from Switzerland due to the fact that SECO was a co-organiser and "local host".

Topics covered included i) The impact of digital technologies on the nature of work in the tourism sector, ii) Closing the skills gap to succeed in the digital tourism economy, and iii) Preparing the tourism workforce for a post-COVID digital transition. The workshop was undertaken within the framework of the OECD Tourism Committee's Programme of Work 2019-20.

Key messages from the workshop

o **Leadership attitude:** beyond promoting digital skilling of the tourism workforce, tourism leaders should be change-enablers, and positive thinkers in this challenging context. Managers and leaders were widely considered as the first priority to promote the digital transformation in tourism companies. Efforts are also needed to make the sector more appealing to retain a digitally skilled tourism workforce.

o **Ecosystems and networks:** the tourism sector, highly fragmented by nature (e.g. hotels, restaurants, attractions, transport, culture, etc.), need ecosystem approaches to be sustainable in the digital present (as the digital future is already a reality). This is essential to facilitate network creations specific for the sector, and foster collaboration.

o **Digital for resilience:** the Covid-19 pandemic is accelerating the digital transformation of tourism, and it provides a unique opportunity to drive the sector forward. Tourism remains equally analogue and digital, as such it is important to move the digital transformation to restore the tourism sector and ensure its long-term performance and sustainability. The use of digital tools to better produce and understand tourism evidence can be instrumental in promoting a more resilient sector.

o **Shared responsibility:** government and tourism associations need to work together to encourage entrepreneurial innovation, promoting a more sophisticated use of technology in the sector, and investing to incorporate technology into existing services. Destinations play a crucial role in ensuring the actual implementation of digital enhancement solutions. Restoring tourism investment will be essential to reach digital transformation goals.

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SESSION I: The impact of digital technologies on the nature of work in tourism

Session I examined the emerging role of digital technology in tourism, its impact on work organisation, including job displacement and the opportunities and challenges associated with digitalisation in an era of Covid-19, and whether there are particular implications for SMEs or different types of destinations.

Session I presentations

- **Anabela Silva** (Portugal), Partner and Leader of People Advisory Services, Ernst & Young, showed how innovation and digitalisation are transforming and reshaping tourism and what new opportunities and challenges are emerging for stakeholders, especially SMEs. Lessons learned from Covid-19 were also highlighted.

- **Jon Erni** (Switzerland), President "discover.swiss" and "MiaEngiadina", outlined the importance of digital projects and initiatives as enablers for economic development. In particular, the importance of a sustainable vision, eco-systems and personal ownership for the successful implementation of digital projects was highlighted.

- **Philip Mondor** (Canada), President and CEO, HR Canada presented the Canadian experience on the impact of Covid-19 on the tourism workforce and provided a preview of the digital response.

Key messages

The specific customer experience in tourism remains analogue. In the upstream and downstream processes, however, there is substantial potential that can be tapped through digitalisation. One of the prerequisites for exploiting this potential is a well-trained tourism workforce equipped with digital skills. It should be noted in this context that tourism as an employer has become less attractive in the Covid-19 pandemic.

The power of eco-systems also makes a central contribution to the planning and implementation of digital projects and initiatives. This includes the creation of strong knowledge networks. Especially in the tourism industry, which is characterized by SMEs, the eco-system approach can offer substantial added value.

SESSION II: Closing the skills gap to succeed in the digital tourism economy

Session II explored how digitalisation affects the demand for skills in tourism, including new and emerging skills needs, changing skills mixes, skills shortages and gaps, and how tourism enterprises can adapt to this fast-changing environment.

Session II presentations

- **Martin Sturzenegger** (Switzerland), CEO, Zurich Tourism, provided under the title "Chief VUCA[1] Officer – What?" insights into the organisational challenges of the VUCA-world and showed a few insights on the changed way of work at Zurich Tourism.

- **Urs Wohler** (Switzerland), Managing Director, Niesenbahn AG, presented the approach of the Niesenbahn AG, as a traditionally analogue mountain railway company, to digitalisation.

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[1] "VUCA": volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity

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He focused in particular on the importance of digital and analogue customer dialogue as well as the importance of trust and leadership in the advancing digitalisation.

- **Dr. Sheena Carlisle** (UK), Cardiff Metropolitan University, Next Tourism Generation Alliance, showed results of the Next Tourism Generation Alliance (NTGA) research on assessing and closing digital skills gaps for tourism employees.

Key messages from Session II

In order to be successful in an increasingly complex and volatile world, organisational adjustments and further developments are required. The Covid-19 crisis requires an even stronger customer orientation including sales orientation in the future. At the organisational level, the crisis demands a more frequent exchange between decision-makers. New digital tools facilitate the exchange and coordination of meetings.

The development of the leadership role is of predominant importance. Leaders and responsible people must be change-enablers and combine this with a positive image of the future, a "can do attitude" and trust in the employees. Trust in the employees should be expressed by granting a certain degree of self-organisation, giving employees the opportunity to try out new things and realise ideas on their own, and by reducing the amount of top-down guidelines.

The importance of personnel selection will also increase in the future. It is important to select the right people with the right skills and cultural values for the right tasks and then show them enough trust in achieving the common goals or the overarching vision.

SESSION III: Policy responses to prepare the tourism workforce for the digital future

Session III considered the role and practice of government in creating the conditions for the digital transformation and in helping prepare the tourism workforce for those changes in a post-Covid-19 environment. It examined concrete industry initiatives, the strategic options for action for national and regional policy-makers, and the need for integrated policy responses.

Session III presentations

- **Prof. David Parsons** (UK), Expert to the OECD, outlined first findings from the ongoing OECD-study on "Preparing the tourism workforce for the digital future", and initial policy considerations.

- **Dr. Ueli Schneider** (Switzerland), Head of Business Development, HotellerieSuisse, presented the innovation and co-operation project "Hospitality Booster" of the Swiss Hotel Association and showed lessons learned from previous experiences in relation to the implementation of innovation projects.

- **Ana Paula Pais** (Portugal), Senior Director for Training, Turismo de Portugal, showed insights into the best practices from Portugal regarding digital skills in tourism including strategies, initiatives and future challenges in the digital transition and the digital education in tourism.

Key messages from Session III

The focus of policy makers should be on increasing the resilience of the tourism industry. All policy strategies and projects should be aligned to this goal. Challenges here are the unwillingness of SMEs to accept assistance and a partial lack of foresight with regard to future environmental developments on the part of SMEs.

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In addition, ***approaches to strengthen networks should be pursued further and the potential of public-private partnership approaches should be leveraged,*** with potential actors including public administrations and policy makers, tourism associations, destination management companies, academia and tourism companies. For associations or destination management companies, it is advisable to evaluate and further develop their own role (e.g. increased entrepreneurial orientation) and to place an additional focus on the development and transfer of digital competences.

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Annex A. Participant Composition

Origin of the participants

- Switzerland: 83
- Europe: 81
- Americas: 16
- Africa: 15
- Asia: 11
- Oceania: 2

Organisational background of the participants

- National Ministries: 47%
- Tourism agencies and associations: 21%
- Education & Research: 13%
- International Organisations: 11%
- Tourism Companies: 8%
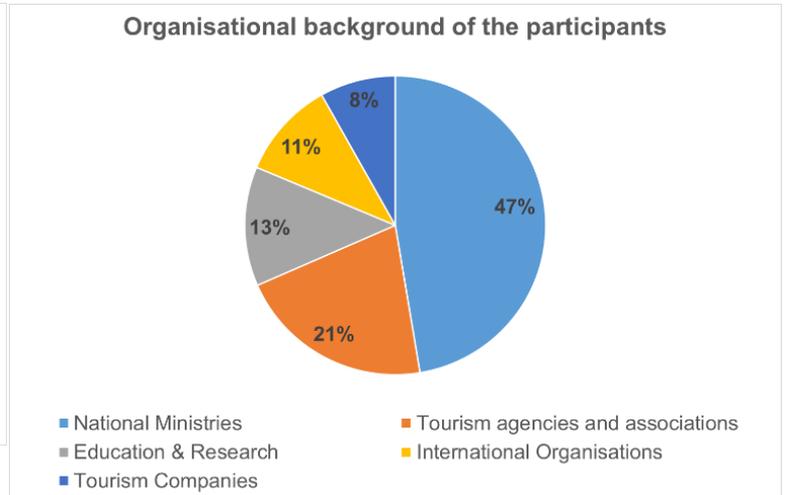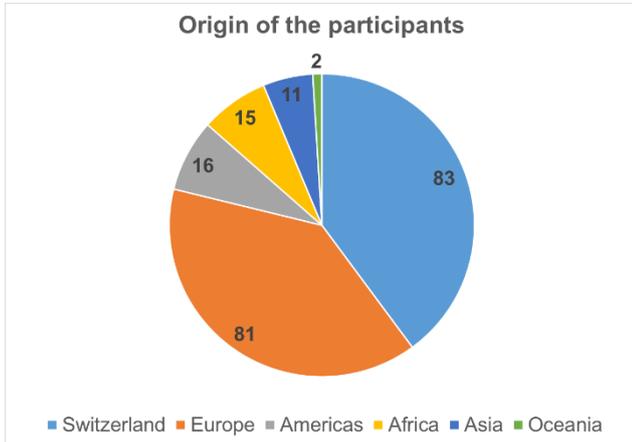
Annex B. Poll results

The pandemic crisis accelerated and supported the workforce attitude for digital change

- Yes: 99%
- No: 1%
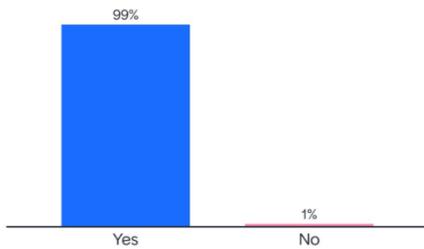
The following impacts support digital transformation in organisations / companies. Rank from 1 to 3

- 1st: Leadership attitude & support
- 2nd: Strategic projects among business partners
- 3rd: Government / public support for change initiatives
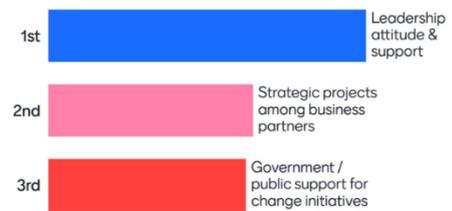
Networks or ecosystems are crucial for digital progress. Please assess the "potential" of the travel industry in creating digital networks

- Huge: 83%
- Moderate: 16%
- Little: 2%