
Travel Agents

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Significant Points

- Travel benefits, such as reduced rates for transportation and lodging, attract people to this occupation.
- Training at a postsecondary vocational school, college, or university is increasingly important.
- Travel agents increasingly specialize in specific destinations or by type of travel or traveler.

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 their destinations, such



Travel agents collect information from clients concerning travel dates and destinations before researching fares and routes on computers.

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 primarily work for tour operators and other travel arrangers may help develop, arrange, and sell the company's own package tours and travel services. They may promote these services, using 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 increasing competition from travel and airline websites for low-cost fares, but travelers still prefer using travel agents who can provide customized service and planning for complex itineraries to remote or multiple destinations. To attract these travelers, many travel agents specialize in specific interest destinations, travel to certain regions, or in selling to particular demographic groups.

Work environment. 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 who are self-employed, frequently work long hours. Advanced computer systems and telecommunications networks make it possible for a growing number of travel agents to work at home; however, some agents feel a need to have an office presence to attract walk-in business.

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.

Education and training. 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.

Other qualifications. Travel agents must be well-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 when 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.

Certification and advancement. 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.

Employment

Travel agents held about 101,000 jobs in May 2006 and are found in every part of the country. Nearly two-thirds worked for travel agencies. Another 13 percent were self-employed. The remainder worked for tour operators, visitor's bureaus, reservation offices, and other travel arrangers.

Job Outlook

Employment of travel agents is expected to change little through 2016. Travel agents who specialize in a travel destination, type of traveler, or mode of transportation will have the best chances for success.

Employment change. Employment of travel agents is expected to increase by 1 percent, which is considered little or no growth. As spending on travel and tourism rebound from recent recessionary periods and as more travelers begin taking more exotic and customized trips, the demands for the specialized services offered by travel agents will offset the service lost to Internet bookings for simpler itineraries. The ease of Internet use and the ready availability of travel and airline websites that allow people to research and plan their own trips, make their own reservations, and purchase their own tickets will result in less demand for travel agents for routine travel arrangements. There will be, however, many consumers who still prefer to use a professional travel agent to plan a complete trip; to deal with more complex transactions; to ensure reliability; to suggest excursions or destinations that might otherwise be missed; to save time; or, in some cases, to save money. In addition, higher projected levels of travel, especially from businesses and retiring baby boomers will offset the loss of routine transactions. Furthermore, luxury and specialty travel is expected to increase among the growing number of Americans who are seeking out exotic and unique vacations and a growing part of travel agents' business is organizing and selling tours for the growing number of international visitors.

Job prospects. Applicants for travel agent jobs should face fair to good job opportunities, depending on one's qualifications and experience. Opportunities should be better for agents who specialize in specific destinations, luxury travel, or par-

Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment, 2006	Projected employment, 2016	Change, 2006-16	
				Number	Percent
Travel agents	41-3041	101,000	102,000	1,000	1

NOTE: Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the *Handbook* introductory chapter on *Occupational Information Included in the Handbook*.

ticular 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.

Earnings

Experience, sales ability, and the size and location of the agency determine the salary of a travel agent. Median annual earnings of travel agents were \$29,210 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$23,020 and \$36,920. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$18,100, while the top 10 percent earned more than \$46,270. Median earnings in May 2006 for travel agents employed in the travel arrangement and reservation services industry were \$29,160.

Salaried agents usually enjoy standard employer-paid benefits that self-employed agents must provide for themselves. When traveling for personal reasons, agents usually get reduced rates for transportation and accommodations. In addition, agents sometimes take “familiarization” trips, at lower cost or no cost to themselves, to learn about various vacation sites. These benefits often attract people to this occupation.

Earnings of travel agents who own their agencies depend mainly on commissions from travel-related bookings and service fees they charge clients. Often it takes time to acquire a sufficient number of clients to have adequate earnings, so it is not unusual for new self-employed agents to have low earnings. Established agents may have lower earnings during economic downturns.

Related Occupations

Travel agents organize and schedule business, educational, or recreational travel or activities. Other workers with similar responsibilities include tour guides and escorts, travel guides, reservation and transportation ticket agents and travel clerks, retail salespersons, and hotel, motel, and resort desk clerks.

Sources of Additional Information

For further information on training opportunities, contact:

➤ American Society of Travel Agents, Education Department, 1101 King St., Alexandria, VA 22314.

Internet: <http://www.asta.org>

For information on training and certification qualifications for business travel management, contact:

➤ National Business Travel Association, 110 North Royal Street, 4th Floor, Alexandria, VA 22314. Internet: www.nbta.org