

The Intelligent Destination Management Organization

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Abstract

Over time the acronym DMO has evolved from a meaning centered on marketing (i.e., destination marketing organization) to a meaning centered on management (i.e., destination management organization). Expanding the role of DMOs to one of management implies a greater need to engage stakeholders both with the destination and external to the destination. We assert that this places the DMO in a fundamentally unique position of being a boundary spanner between the internal destination environment and the external competitive environment. This boundary-spanning role requires higher capabilities in knowledge management. The successful DMO of the future will be an intelligent agent of the destination that is able to identify, engage and learn from disparate stakeholders both within and outside the destination. It must acquire, filter, analyze and prioritize data and information from various sources to create knowledge that can be used to fulfill its role in destination management.

We provide an organizing framework to help understand the DMO's role as an intelligent agent that acts as a boundary spanner to management and creates knowledge for destination management. Outside the destination, the DMO must gain knowledge about the competitive environment, opportunities and threats, and trends that will change the future competitive landscape. Within the destination the DMO must use this knowledge to strategically assess the strengths and weaknesses of the destination, align the resources of stakeholders, and formulate a strategy that is both competitive and sustainable. We conclude with a set of prescriptions for destination managers seeking to create an intelligent DMO that maximizes their knowledge management capabilities.

Keywords

destination management organization; knowledge agent; intelligence; stakeholder; collaboration

1. Introduction

In the past (and in most cases still today) Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) were focused on marketing. A rising scholarly tide now advocates that DMOs engage beyond marketing to include management of the destination (Morrison et al., 1998; Ritchie and Crouch, 2003; Presenza et al., 2005; Pike 2004, 2005). Notwithstanding this shift, Pike and Page (2014) point out that most DMOs are focused on the function or marketing as opposed to management.

Several authors (Ritchie and Crouch, 2003; Dredge, 2006; Bornhorst et al., 2010; Volgger and Pechlaner, 2014; Pike and Page, 2014) suggest that the sustainable and competitive development of tourist destinations is highly related to the ability of the DMOs to manage destinations. Indeed, the DMO has been defined as the actor that is in charge of managing and organizing destination resources (Pike, 2004; Presenza et al., 2005), working closely with governmental development agencies, local authorities, businesses comprising the tourism industry, and other destination stakeholders to facilitate sustainable development practices (Ritchie and Crouch, 2003).

In fulfilling the role of destination management, DMOs do not “produce” or own the destination’s tourism product. Rather, DMOs undertake actions of coordinating the constituent independent, and often, diverse elements (of the tourism destination supply) with the aim of facilitating destination development through tourism activity (Bornhorst et al., 2010; Volgger and Pechlaner, 2014). DMOs are conduits between suppliers of tourism products in their geographic area (local tourism firms) and buyers from outside the region. This notion is supported in the literature review on the function of destination management, realized by Pearce (2015: 2) who found the predominance of processes related to coordination, integration, collaboration, cooperation, and interrelationships between various agencies and stakeholders especially surrounding the link between tourism supply and demand.

Achieving success in these processes is challenging given the diverse stakeholder environment and disparate and, sometimes, conflicting interests that the DMO must try to serve (Sheehan and Ritchie, 2005; Sainaghi, 2006). In response, varying DMO organizational forms and governance structures have been developed, from single public authority to partnerships of public-private entities. Overall, they have a non-profit orientation, which means that they broadly share the political and resource based challenges of public sector organizations (Pike, 2004).

Often, DMOs have been criticized for their inability to reinvent themselves in face of the radical changes occurring in their external environment. The enormous transformations, that are happening, require significant changes in the organizational mind-sets of these organizations and call for answers to the questions “*Where are we going?*” and “*What are we here for?*” (Gretzel et al., 2006). This speaks to the need for DMOs to possess a more flexible and strategic approach supported by knowledge acquisition and knowledge management capabilities.

This paper contributes to the discussion about DMOs, suggesting a sort of shift from an old view (marketing and, then, management oriented) towards a new one based on an interpretation of the DMO as an *intelligent* agent. In other words, the DMO may be viewed as a “knowledge gatekeeper of the destination”. The key argument is in line with the knowledge-based organizations and destinations (Racherla et al., 2008) that enable tourist the exchange of information and create new possibilities to enhance the life experience.

Our proposal (adapted from Presenza et al, 2005) is to move from the idea that DMOs are focusing on marketing for supporting the operators’ actions to the idea that they are agencies that acts a boundary-spanner between the external environment (where the goal is competitive

positioning) and the internal environment of the destination (where the goal is collaboration, operating a function of leadership). This requires further support of the knowledge agents and, therefore, a prominent role of them in the tourism governance.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we start by examining DMO and Knowledge Management concepts. In section 3 we develop our theoretical model. Finally, section 4 concludes the paper by discussing the several implications and highlighting some prescriptions of the insights of our study.

2. The Knowledge Era. Meanings and effects for DMOs

In general, DMO is oriented to organize “the various components of the territory, guiding them towards a strategy and a common value through a planned, governed and collective process” (Varra et al., 2012). If the objectives of the DMO include coordinating the relationships and interactions among destination stakeholders, they must consider the interrelationships among the various stakeholders within the destination, especially as seen from the perspective of the visitor (Stienmetz and Fesenmaier, 2015).

As stated by d’Angella and Go (2009, p. 429) “a DMO seeks to ‘orchestrate’ decision making on design, organization and management of relationships in the network, on which the economic performance of both DMO and its stakeholders depends”. It follows that DMOs incorporate a proactive function in fostering and managing the benefits of tourism development (Beesley and Cooper, 2008) so that their strategies and plans have to be integrated with programs and policies that have either a direct or indirect relationship to tourism, for instance policies for the economy, the environment, and transport (Davidson and Maitland, 1997; Manson, 2003). All this asks for an agile DMO able to respond to the complex task involving and supporting multiple dynamic relationships with stakeholders, each with their peculiar sensitivities, needs and priorities (d’Angella and Go, 2009).

As suggested by Pechlaner et al., (2009, p. 30), a DMO “must also have essential ‘soft’ functions that include building trust, absorbing uncertainties, and fostering common action orientation”. Clearly, benefits of this integration relate to advanced industrial organization and effectiveness of tourism supply, by means of encouraged cooperation and long-term planning, best use of resources, enhanced sources of finance, and strengthened opposition of undesirable development (Dwyer et al., 2003). All this points out that the role of the DMO is to act on behalf of the destination and it therefore also needs to obtain legitimacy for the destination it represents (Elbe and Emmoth, 2014).

In summary, “coordination and integration can thus refer to bringing different tourism functions together (e.g., tourism planning and destination marketing) and/or linking tourism functions with those of other sectors (e.g., incorporating planning for tourism in territorial planning or combining destination marketing with place marketing) (Pearce, 2015, p. 4).

Before introducing the theoretical model, we deepen the knowledge about possible connections between the role of the DMO and the challenges outlined by Knowledge Management and Learning Organization concepts.

2.1 DMO and Knowledge Management

A shift is occurring from commodity-based economies towards economies driven by knowledge development, innovation and commercialization (Cooper and Ruhanen, 2004; Baggio and Cooper, 2010). Nonaka (1991, p. 96) maintains that “one sure source of lasting competitive advantage is knowledge”. Knowledge is the central element of production and crucial input to competitive economic activity and the generating of economic growth (Bathelt et al., 2004).

It follows that the ability to create, disseminate and exploit knowledge assets is likely to be one of the key success factors for both the public and private sectors in the future. Tourism, as one of the world's largest industries and export earners, is not immune from such a paradigm shift and it is at the public sector and destination management level where knowledge management strategies and approaches will be needed.

As stated by McLeod and Vaughan (2015, p. 1) knowledge is "a key ingredient by which the tourism sector can adjust and adapt to its dynamic environment. However although its importance has long been recognized the fragmentation within the sector, largely as a result of it being comprised of small and medium sized businesses, makes understanding knowledge management challenging". This will require tourism destination planners and managers to utilize the collective knowledge assets of the destination, and the body of knowledge developed by researchers and governments to ensure the sustained viability and success of the destination in the global marketplace (Ruhanen, 2007).

As highlighted by Racherla et al., (2006), the features of the tourism industry and the extensive and growing use of Information Technologies (IT) give to the KM a central role in the new challenges that destinations have to manage (Beesley and Cooper, 2008). It follows that KM can contribute in a relevant manner to support competitive advantages among destinations (Cooper, 2006) so that new processes of tourism policies and destination management have to deal with KM matters.

Knowledge management addresses the critical issue of organizational adaptation, survival, and competitiveness in the face of increasingly discontinuous environmental change (Cooper, 2006). Knowledge management is an important tool to support destination management because it is connected with the ability to create values and to generate competitive advantage allowing to share tacit and explicit knowledge flows and specially transforming tacit knowledge into explicit (Ayala, 2000; Cooper and Ruhanen, 2004). Accordingly, management of knowledge refers to "any planned applications, utilizations, and transfer of it to accomplish the goals or missions of organizations and businesses; while its application is the ultimate goal of information dissemination, its management connotes the process and practices of transfer" (Xiao and Smith, 2007, p. 311).

Using the words of Denning (2000, p. 114), knowledge management might be seen as "comprising multiple dimensions including knowledge strategy, communities of practice, help desks, knowledge bases, knowledge capture, knowledge storage, knowledge dissemination, knowledge taxonomies, quality assurance, authentication procedures, budget incentives, and knowledge measures". Specifically to tourist destinations, knowledge management practices include acquisition, explication and communication of mission-specific professional expertise in a manner that is focused and relevant to tourist destination managers (Pyo, 2005). Knowledge management focuses on the identification, generation, use, transfer and preservation of knowledge within an organization and within a network. Building a knowledge network support quicker and more flexible, responds to challenges and needs of the market, to develop core competences based on the combination of common knowledge and other resources and to use the core competences of other network members in a systematic manner (Skyrme, 2001).

Therefore, the destination competitiveness is subject to the ability of the DMO to upsurge and disseminate individual knowledge using innovative knowledge management tools. Due to this deepen transformation, DMOs must possess the capability, structure and people to implement knowledge strategies successfully. One critical key is to establish a culture of learning within the DMO.

2.2 DMO and learning organization

The learning process is one of the foremost prerequisites for success of any organization. The concepts of organizational learning and learning organization in their core standpoint correlate the learning process with the organization's performance. The learning organization is a relatively new concept based on the concept of organizational learning. Furthermore, the learning organization is a contemporary management approach. It defines how an organization should operate in the ever-changing business environment (Kraleva, 2011). The learning organization applies new, modern concept of continuous learning, which entails learning on one's own experience and experience of others. Moreover, organizational learning is a continuous process of creating and improving the organization's competence (Argyris, 1992). Additionally, the organizational learning focuses on the process of how the organization can learn best, so that the knowledge which it possesses can be effectively put into use, and the organization excels in its performance level. The learning organization is a concept which empowers everyone in the organization, regardless of their position to be involved in creating and disseminating knowledge, which then can be used to gain profit (Kraleva, 2011).

Schianetz et al. (2007) advocate that the learning focus should be on the "understanding of how a tourism destination functions, how market possibilities can be enhanced, the requirements for adaptation to changing environments, how to promote collective awareness of economic, social and environmental risks and impact, and how risks can be minimized and/or countered" (Schianetz et al., 2007, p. 1486). About this argument they introduced the concept of the 'Learning Tourism Destination', thereby acknowledging that organizational, community and individual learning is strongly interlinked.

In this sense, a DMO, operating as a learning organization, "should be able to support the development of all the stakeholders toward a more open behavior capable of forming partnerships, networks and clusters; improving the quality and flow of timely information; accessing a higher level of learning experiences at the destination/regional level; creating quality products and services; demonstrating innovative capability; increasing performance and outputs to achieve greater competitiveness; being more autonomous; displaying greater workplace flexibility; operating in an entrepreneurial context; working with changing technology; developing adaptive strategies in the face of globalization and global change; understanding how to work in a more sustainable way; enjoying an increase in quality of life, based on fuller access to information" (European Commission, 2006, p. 11).

The changes in economic operational structures require DMOs to move from the current situation where their activities are purely based on operations, to a stage where, while still being operational, also becomes a development/learning organization which addresses current and future training needs. This new scenario requires a step further by saying that meeting a destination's learning requirements, and developing the tourism destination dynamic by stimulating good governance and firms' innovation through an ever-increasing quantity and quality of learning experiences, is the way to operate in the contemporary complexity of the overall globalization process.

DMOs should promote a 'no-fault learning culture' within the destination in order to facilitate learning transfer. DMOs are in a position to assist the industry adapt and proactively deal with change, to the advantage of both the industry and the tourism consumer. However, they can only do this if they are capable of developing and sharing appropriate knowledge.

Schianetz et al., (2007) note that a learning organization approach by DMOs could help create a shared understanding for adaptation to a changing environment. Adaptive management (AM) approaches are based on continuous and collective learning concepts that acknowledge uncertainties, and allow for timely adjustment of planning and management strategies (Holling, 1978). This implies that in order to advance sustainability in the tourism

industry, new approaches are needed that promote stakeholder collaboration and learning on an organizational as well as destination level (Schianetz et al., 2007). These new approaches suggest that “through the generation and intelligent application of knowledge (on customer needs, collaborating suppliers, environmental, and human and cultural resources) information asymmetries between stakeholders can be reduced. This leads to an enhanced innovation and collaboration capacity, which, in turn fosters market cultivation and improves service effectiveness by using destination resources in a more sustainable way” (Fuchs et al., 2013).

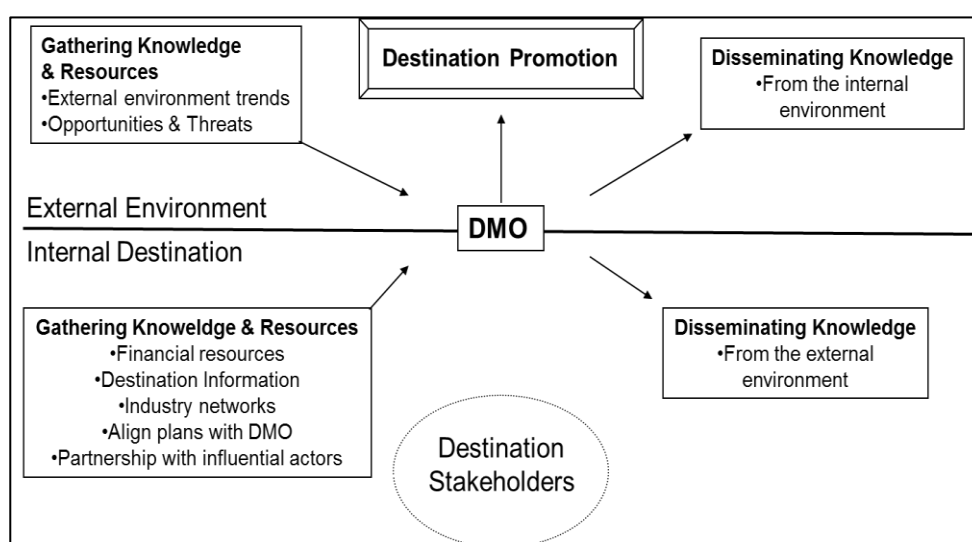
3. Theoretical model

The transition towards smart destinations (Racherla et al., 2008) impacts on how DMO strategies engage stakeholders belonging to a network, ensuring that they participate interactively within the social space (Shih, 2009; Munar and Jacobsen, 2013) and respond in innovative ways to the demands of consumers and other stakeholders (Gursoy and Umbreit, 2004; Munar, 2012; Ayeh et al., 2012; Munar and Jacobsen, 2013; Yoo et al., 2011).

The integration of the ‘inside-in’ and ‘inside-out’ perspectives (Sigala and Marinidis, 2012) results in participative bottom-up decision-making processes and stakeholder engagement aimed at establishing the common powers required to promote a new model of destination management (Hays et al., 2012; Munar, 2011, 2012).

DMOs may be viewed as boundary spanners that effectively operate in two worlds – the internal environment of the destination and the external environment of the marketplace. Key to success in both of these worlds is the gathering, analysis, and dissemination of information and knowledge created from this information. Figure 1 depicts the nature of the DMO as an intelligent agent that acts as a boundary spanner gathering information and resources to create knowledge and disseminate it to the appropriate actors. However the specific objectives and outcomes in each of these worlds differ.

Figure 1. DMO as Intelligent Agent



Sources: our elaboration

Being comprised of a collage of stakeholders, destinations require intense internal coordination of information, effort and other resources. The DMO as an intelligent agent is built upon the notion that the DMO largely brings coordination resources to the destination

(Sheehan et al., 2007). The DMO is uniquely positioned to coordinate various resources (financial, human, knowledge, etc.) that are critical to the success of the destination. DMOs that successfully execute this function contribute importantly to the success of the destination's competitiveness and sustainability (Bornhorst et al., 2010).

The destination is a stakeholder-rich environment with actors in the public, private, and not-for-profit sectors. In the collection and creation of knowledge, the DMO gathers three types of stakeholder information - stakeholder-specific, sector-specific, and destination-specific. Stakeholder-specific information is that information uniquely pertaining to an individual stakeholder such as hotel (e.g., room occupancy patterns, expansion plans, marketing plans, etc.). Sector-specific stakeholder information is that information uniquely pertaining to a specific industry sector such as the food and beverage sector (e.g., a new service charge, serving smaller portions, lobbying for temporary summer patios, etc.). Destination-specific information is that specifically pertaining to the destination (e.g., signage needs, resident opposition to certain tourism development, city investment in new recreation facilities, changes to transportation or parking, etc.).

The role of DMO is the collaboration and coordination of stakeholders to transform these three types of information and knowledge into that useful for destination management, marketing and promotion. The DMO must also use this aggregated knowledge to effectively assess the competitive strengths and weaknesses of the destination.

The external marketplace consists of suppliers of tourism product (destinations) and buyers (tourists). In this world, the DMO has two roles. One role is to gather information about the suppliers of tourism product and buyers to create competitive intelligence about opportunities, threats and trends. It must then synthesize, interpret and transfer it as knowledge to stakeholders within the destination. Another role is to disseminate the positioning (offer) of the destination in the marketplace. This role fulfills the traditional role of marketing and promotion activities.

Spanning across all roles of the DMO in both the internal and external worlds is the recognition of the critical role of human resources to deliver on all aspects of creating a successful destination. This necessarily requires the DMO to look at its own complement of people as well as those of other stakeholder organizations.

A DMO functioning as an intelligent agent, as described above, will create optimal and appropriate destination management. This will increase the likelihood of creating a competitive and sustainable destination.

4. Conclusions and prescriptions

4.1 Conclusion

This proposal of a DMO as an Intelligent Agent is in line with the creation of Smart Tourist Destinations. Therefore, this new configuration of an Intelligent DMO has a crucial practical implication, leading us to a new look of tourism governance, now being revised for the sake of the effect of new technologies and the new concept of Smart Tourist Destinations. In this context, tourism destinations are challenged to check their operating systems and tools, as well as the services they provide, to adapt to the new situation and the new tourist. Globalization, interdependence and mobility that characterize contemporary societies, as well as the ongoing developments coming from the hand of technology and innovation, are substantive change factors that have affected tourism and will continue to do it with more intensity in the immediate future.

This reflection leads us to the field of tourism governance, which is subject to profound changes that are occurring as a result of technological developments and the potential

capabilities for knowledge management and learning they favor. Thus, one of the main challenges presented to managers and academics it is how to govern in this situation and how to overcome the evident dysfunctionality of existing models.

In short, we need to define a new model of governance in which attention is not only paid to the actions, but the interactions between its various partners (internal and external), configuring itself as a result of a dynamic relationship, which is what gives it its true complexity: the tourist destination designed as a woven mesh in which each actor (private and public) is a node of it that interacts with others and with the environment, in a continuous process of adaptation and self-production. In this way, we would move on the right path: that of setting up a Smart Tourist Destination on the theoretical basis of the complexity and chaos.

The rising star of Smart Destinations emerges as a recent response (with not well defined profiles yet) to the aforementioned changes, inspired by the broader phenomenon of "Smart Cities". However, the experience and the scientific literature show us that technologies alone are not a carrier of sustainable competitive advantages (they are necessary but not sufficient), but the combination of technological and non-technological resources (human and managerial ones). Therefore, technological developments should be implemented within a certain mental framework of how the tourism system works today, which boundaries are blurred; which it is open; evolving from the countless interactions among elements and their environment; in which all it influences each of its parts, just as each of them has a capacity to affect all other; which follows the principle of autopoiesis, so that is product and producer at the same time ... All these characteristics of complex systems adapt like a glove to the operation of a tourist destination.

The challenge is served: apply the developments arising from the application of the "Smart" concept (the Internet of Things) in a context of complexity in the tourism mosaic, which can be understood as a complex adaptive system that puts in check the traditional forms of governance, based on predictability and controllability.

Nothing more practical than a good theory to explain the reality of our time: to fit what we do and understand this fluid reality, changing, in which the dynamics are nonlinear and, therefore, with very limited predictability. That is the great difficulty and the work to be done. These ideas are summarized in the following table 1, in a traditionally labor-intensive industry, but now increasingly knowledge-intensive.

Table 1. Tourism Governance and DMOs

TRADITIONAL TOURISM DESTINATION	SMART TOURISM DESTINATION
Special attention to actions (especially of a commercial nature).	Preferential attention to the interactions among its various actors; the mesh of interwoven relationships between them and their environment.
Creating standardized products and one-way marketing.	Co-creation (based on conversation) and product customization.
Dynamic configuration of fate, the result of a continuous process of adaptation and self-production; open system, with fuzzy boundaries.	Dynamic configuration of the destination, the result of a continuous process of adaptation and self-production; open system, with fuzzy boundaries.
Relatively simple understanding of their behavior.	Much more complex understanding, with sometimes chaotic behaviors.
Predictability and controllability; linear dynamics (known cause-effect relationships).	Fluid reality, with nonlinear dynamics and very limited predictability.
Limited (and delayed) access to information.	Abundance of information (in real time); the problem is to select the relevant information.

Sources: our elaboration

To sum up, the technological brawn of a Smart Destination, as a fundamental pillar of it, requires changes in the functions of its management body (DMO) and the competences of the human capital attached to it.

The traditional competencies of planning and coordination are seen reinforced by strategic leadership skills aimed at creating meanings and the network of relationships/connections (at all levels) most suitable for the objectives of the destination.

Not so much to control as to bring about change in it from the proactivity that allows access to information, taking innovation and sustainability as core values that should be injected into its work and in the actors operating in the destination.

Nevertheless, in the transition from a Destination Marketing Organization into a Destination Management Organization, it is well known that in practice, many of the destinations still lack management bodies (Destination Management Organizations), standing at the preliminary stage of a mere promotion (Destination Marketing Organizations) without real coordination of sales efforts and other actions at various government levels without strategic planning, including the definition of the tourism model that constitutes the aspiration to the territory object of our attention. In this process, the knowledge transfer role of a DMO is essential, and therefore, the participation of the knowledge agents.

These competences of strategic planning (covering its implementation in all its aspects), coordination (able to generate synergies and resolve contradictions), knowledge management (knowledge gathering and dissemination) for decision making, mainly, are usually facing legal hurdles due to the various competences around the tourist activity at the different levels of government (local, regional, national...). This is a very significant barrier that requires a strong and accepted leadership to allow the process to move forward.

As declared by the UNWTO (2013), governance in the tourism sector is “A measurable practice of government whose aim is to effectively manage the tourism sector at the various levels of government, through efficient, transparent and accountable forms of coordination, collaboration and/or cooperation, for the pursuit of goals of collective interest shared by networks of actors impacting on the sector with a view to developing solutions and opportunities on the basis of agreements that recognize interdependencies and shared responsibilities”. This is much more in line with our view that other traditional definitions, such as this by Harrill (2003): “Destination management means perceiving the community as a package of special places,...instead of viewing the destination as a special place built around one or two primary attributes”.

In a nutshell, although it could seem paradoxical, Intelligent DMOs need to be much closer than ever to the Triple Helix model by Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (1997): knowledge agents, companies and public institutions working together.

4.2 Prescriptions

Within the destination the DMO is uniquely positioned to serve as a boundary spanner between the internal destination environment and the external competitive environment. This boundary-spanning role requires higher capabilities in knowledge management. The successful DMO of the future will be an intelligent agent of the destination that is able to identify, engage, and learn from disparate stakeholders both within and outside the destination. It must acquire, filter, analyze and prioritize data and information from various sources to create knowledge that can be used to fulfill its role in destination management.

The organizing framework provided here helps to clarify the DMO's role as an intelligent agent that must effectively act as a boundary spanner to create knowledge for the competitive and sustainable management of the destination. This requires intelligence and knowledge-building capabilities both outside the destination and within the destination.

Outside the destination, the intelligence function must facilitate gaining knowledge about the competitive environment in terms of opportunities and threats, and trends that will change the future competitive landscape. This requires the identification and prioritization of external environment stakeholders and the development of relationships with high priority stakeholders that will allow for the accumulation of important knowledge.

Within the destination the DMO must use this knowledge to strategically assess the strengths and weaknesses of the destination, align the resources of stakeholders, and formulate a strategy that is both competitive and sustainable.

We conclude with a set of prescriptions for destination managers seeking to create an intelligent DMO that maximizes their knowledge management capabilities. First, managers must be adept at stakeholder identification. Second, they must invest in stakeholder relationship management. Third, they must ensure that they have the human and technological resources configured to gather data, analyze it, and create knowledge that supports strategic decision-making and sustainable actions. Fourth, they must have effective communication capabilities to acquire and disseminate knowledge on both sides of the destination boundary. Finally, to maximize the intelligence of the DMO, a culture of learning must pervade the entire organization.

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