

## SUCCESS FACTORS IN MANAGING OF INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES IN SRI LANKA

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This study intends to recognize success factors in the managing of international conferences in Sri Lanka. Special emphasis was given to understand the relative usefulness of those working in conference management. The seven hypotheses of the study were formulated based on the conceptual model comprised from seven independent variables. A quantitative online survey questionnaire was used to obtain data from the respondents: professional conference organizers. Hypotheses were tested using statistical methods of regression analysis and one-way ANOVA analysis utilizing SPSS 16.0. All hypotheses were proven by the analyses. Six important success factors and one less important success factor in managing international conferences in Sri Lanka were identified by this study. Stakeholder commitment and attitude, availability of competent human resources, marketing & promotion, financial management, techniques of project management, cooperation and communication among stakeholders are important success factors while leadership is the only less important factor. Stakeholder commitment and attitude was recognized as the most useful determinant for the success of international conferences of Sri Lanka in this context. It was concluded that human factors are more important than technical factors as success factors.

Key Words: *Event Management, Event Tourism, Success Factors, MICE tourism, Conference Studies*

### Introduction

Conferences are one of the most important types of events in the event and tourism industries of the world. Conferences have gained this prominence with the growing demand for conducting all kinds of convention events at significant levels (World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2006; Sikošek, 2012). International Congress and Convention Association [ICCA] (2018), states that the number of meetings doubles in every 10 years and further elaborates that there is a slow transcend towards a more mature, solid growth pattern. 12,558 rotating international association meetings were conducted throughout the world in 2017 (ICCA, 2018). During the last several decades, the meeting industry has become a significant contributor for national economies. It has been recorded that 269,800 conventions/ conferences /congresses were conducted in USA with

participation of 51,104,000 participants contributing 25% of the MICE industry (Convention Industry Council [CIC], 2011).

Sri Lanka was ranked 71st place at a global level and 18th place in Asia Pacific ranking in international meeting destination ranking for 2017 (ICCA, 2018). The island has recognized the importance of MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions) tourism in which conferences or conventions exists as one of the major components out of the four, and has taken certain steps in order to develop the sector with special emphasis. The Sri Lanka Convention Bureau was established to promote Sri Lanka as a MICE destination by Tourism Act No. 38 of 2005 (Tourism Act, 2005). Both national level tourism development plans of post war Sri Lanka (after 2009) have addressed the issue of MICE tourism

development (Ministry of Economic Development, 2011; Ministry of Tourism Development and Christian Religious Affairs, 2017).

But, in contrast to that growth of the sector in comparison with other sub sets of tourism by the number of tourist arrivals, by percentage of tourist arrivals the number of conferences doesn't show a healthy development. There is a decline of the percentage of tourist arrivals for conferences and meetings after 2006 (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority [SLTDA], 2018). The largest figure within last 12 years from, 2006 – 2017 was 3% in 2006 which cannot be considered as a considerable contribution. It has fluctuated even down to the very low figure of 0.2% in 2015 (SLTDA, 2016). It is noteworthy, in contrast that facilities for small and medium size conferences have been increasing specially, at hotels and resorts.

According to the SLTDA statistical information (SLTDA, 2018) on the number of international conferences held at Bandaranayake Memorial International Conference Hall (BMICH), Colombo and the number of foreigners attending the conferences during last 30 years clearly depict a decline in 21st century in comparison with the last decade of the 20th century. When it is compared with the highest figure during the 30-year period which was recorded in 1992 with 33 international conferences at BMICH, the highest figure within the last decade was recorded in 2012 with 10 international conferences is even lower than one out of three. And only one international conference was held at BMICH in 2010 in accordance with the information. There is a decline in the number of foreigners attended the conferences at BMICH during the last decade in comparison with 1990s. Largest figures recorded were 4,500 (in 2012) and 5,540 (in 1993) respectively. Since, BMICH has been considering as

the main conference venue of the country, the figures can be considered as an important case about the nature of conference statistics, although, there may be impacts from some other factors.

According to SLTDA, 27,455 international MICE tourists have visited Sri Lanka in 2017 (SLTDA, 2018), representing only 1.28 % of the total arrivals. It is evident that the percentage of MICE tourists is representing a small figure out of the total arrivals. Convention tourists are only a fraction of that which is not known due to unavailability of data. Since, Sri Lanka has considerable amount of facilities for small and medium size conferences, it can be assumed that those facilities are underutilized. Potentials of international conferences for enhancement of event and tourism industries has been not properly addressed. Failures of some conferences in tourism industry has made negative impacts as well.

Lack of emphasis on success factors in managing international conferences can be considered as one of the main reasons for these failures. In the attempts of using conferences for tourism development, application of success factors in managing international conferences relevant to context of the host destination can be considered as a crucial issue.

Although, event management has started to emerge as a kind of a prominent industry in Sri Lanka, some event management companies confronted business failures leading to termination of operations in number of companies. International conferences have opened lots of business opportunities for event management companies. Lack of proper knowledge and related guidelines for organizing successful international conferences in Sri Lanka with special emphasis on relevant success factors has created a gap in this context. Based on the factors discussed above, this research intends to identify success factors in the managing of international conferences in

Sri Lanka and attempts to recognize the relative importance of these. It covers success factors in the managing of international conferences which are organized by event management companies of the country in a professional business context. A conference is defined in a broader sense in this study covering events with same nature and characteristics including conventions, conferences, meetings, forums and symposiums. Practical usage of the terms in the event industry of Sri Lanka, was considered as a very important aspect. Only internal management aspects of the international conferences are explored by the present study.

Success factors in managing international conferences is crucial for planning and managing the events successfully. Adequate emphasis on conference studies and its subset of convention tourism have not been given by the researchers even in global level in accordance to the views of some scholars (Malhotra, 2004, as cited in Ismail, 2014; Yoo & Weber, 2005). It is difficult to find any published research works conducted on conferences or convention tourism of Sri Lanka. Therefore, any research study in this field would make at least initial contribution for development of research literature in conference studies. Although, Sri Lanka has given considerable emphasis to the development of MICE tourism in tourism development policies and strategies (Ministry of Economic Development, 2011; Ministry of Tourism Development and Christian Religious Affairs, 2017), adequate results were not obtained so far. Lack of research may be considered as a reason for this phenomenon.

Successful management of international conferences would help to attract more convention tourists to the island making a contribution for the development of the event and tourism industries. In this context, identification

of success factors in managing international conferences with their relative importance, assists conference organizers and event managers in order to stage more successful events. The organizing of successful international conferences will enhance foreign exchange earnings and the image of the country while generating more direct and indirect employment opportunities.

### **Literature review**

A small number of research studies have been conducted on the success factors for events mainly, from the view of project management (Abouhafs & Bellihi, 2013). Most of the studies on this regard were conducted on major sports events revealing various different factors and some researchers have categorized the success factors based on selected criteria.

Dancsecz (2008) has conducted research on success factors and criteria of international sport event projects based on selected event projects in Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Slovenia, Germany, Austria and Switzerland. (Dancsecz, 2008). The study has recognized three groups of success factors; task orientation, relation orientation, random impacts in the organizational activity with individual success factors under each category. The first category comprises from project objectives and contract strategy while project leadership, organizational culture, cooperation & communication, partnership are in the second category. Natural-weather events, social-political events, unforeseen events and managing of random impacts have been pointed out as success factors under the category of random impacts. The random impacts can be considered as elements beyond the internal management aspects of managing events except the last element. On the other hand, small sample size is an issue of this research as revealed from

the recommendations of the researcher (Dancsecz, 2008).

Another study focused on success factors of international sport events from the perspective of project management has identified eight success factors including clear objective of the event, clear concept of the event, feasibility of the event, event evaluation, good communication, management skills, volunteers & project team (Rofner, 2009). However, methods of data analysis of this qualitative study is not convincing. One can argue that event evaluation may not cause to the success of individual events, although, it can contribute to the success of future events organized by the same organizing body.

Most of the studies regarding success factors for events are primarily considered about perceptions of stakeholders. The following study can be given as another example. This micro study has been conducted to recognize success factors of wedding projects in Marrakech, Morocco and found five key success factors for informal 'area' (sector) including trust, patience, control of the relational, discipline and seriousness, innovation and creativity in accordance with their importance respectively (Abouhafs & Bellihi, 2013). It has recognized innovation and creativity, good experience in the field of event, good communication and good organization as key success factors for the formal sector in wedding planning.

Michelle Marais & Melville Saayman (2011) have published results of a research on key success factors of managing the Robertson Wine Festival in South Africa. This study was able to identify seven key success factors including quality and good management, wine farm attributes, effective marketing, route development, festival attractiveness, entertainment and activities, accessibility.

Some studies have discussed the success of events as tourism products and

success factors for event tourism. While certain studies have focused on the success of events as a whole, others may consider on success factors in order to achieve a particular objective or task from an event. It is critically important to understand that success factors may not fit for all events (UNWTO, 2014) due to diverse nature of events, their internal & external environments.

The attractiveness and uniqueness, natural and anthropogenic values of the location, time and duration, quality of organization, number of visitors, location, content, rank, tradition of the event which are considered as main components that promote an event as a product cause to deliver successful tourism event (Bjeljac, Pantić & Filipović, 2013). They further state that event tourism products with greater value comprise from factors such as availability of a specific values, well planning, an attractive event venue, conducting at a time comfortable for visitation, prevailing of more interesting participants for the event. In the context of international sport events, it has been found that human aspects of organization, coordination, partnerships and communication are some of the success factors (Cserhádi & Polák-Weldon, 2015). Proper use of management methodologies and best practices cause to the success of the event organization.

The success factors identified by several studies on success of projects in generic senses, can be divided in to two segments as the factors denote technical side of project management and human side of project management (Cserhádi & Polák-Weldon, 2015). The first category comprises from project conception (clear and achievable goals), planning, structure, control, risk management and so on. Factors such as a competent and committed project team and project leader, client consultation,

communication, co-operation and participation belong to the latter segment.

Objectives can be considered as an essential requirement for production of events successfully and before, the establishment of vision and goals, requirements of internal and external environments should be analyzed (Getz, 1997). Getz (1997) has provided a general list of key success factor in event management and event tourism comprising: finding a suitable venue for the event; having suitable facilities that meet the event's criteria; ensuring that the venue is accessible; guaranteeing high levels of hygiene; paying attention to food safety requirements; ensuring a safe environment, managing crowds; applying risk management to all aspects of the event; providing quality service; implementing an emergency response process.

Feasibility of the event is an evaluation of costs versus benefits of the event which is very important for event success (Rofner, 2009). It is considered as a good practice to conduct a similar event specially, before a major event which play the role of a learning curve proving an opportunity to analyze assets and defects subsequently, helping to improve those capabilities while overcoming defects.

The event manager is another success factor beyond the factors related with the planning process frame (Masterman, 2004). Quality of the integration of various agents for meeting good results was pointed out as a key factor for success of tourism events (Hernández-Mogollón, Folgado-Fernández & Duarte, 2014).

In their review of 755 articles about event tourism, Getz and Page (2016 a) recognized meeting planners, technology, economic impact assessments, venue selection, evaluation of satisfaction, impact of destination image on attendance, and decision-making processes of attendees as main

themes of the research literature on 'convention and tourism'. Even a single article on success factors for conference /convention /congress has not been mentioned in their work. Therefore, it is clear that there is a gap of this theme in literature on conference studies and other related fields.

Proper facilities and the quality of the conference services have been pointed out as critical factors for the success of destinations in conference tourism (Crouch & Weber, 2002). A study in Malaysia addresses critical success factors in event management in the context of meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions (MICE) (Ismail, 2014). The research work has identified six critical successful factors for successful MICE event management comprising from clear objectives, location of venue, financial resources, code of conduct, marketing & promotion and event sponsorship.

### **Methodology**

The present research is a deductive research with the purpose of testing hypotheses taken from previous empirical research works. In deductive research, data is gathered with specific objective of examining the hypotheses utilizing statistical techniques (Getz & Page, 2016 b). Some scholars like Karl Popper (Popper, 2002 a, as cited in Sekaran & Bougie, 2010) have suggested that science is accomplished by deductive approach in comparison with the inductive approach. Usage of statistical techniques for the analysis provides more scientific characteristics to this deductive reasoning. This was the main factor which caused for the selection of a deductive method for the present study. On the other hand, most of the previous research works on success factors of events and some related studies in project management, have been conducted using this method (Cserhádi & Polák-Weldon, 2015; Rofner, 2009;

Abouhafs & Bellihi, 2013; Marais & Saayman, 2011; Jha and Iyer, 2007; Ismail, 2014). Since, certain level of consistence in research design can be maintained with the previous research works.

This is a quantitative study. Hypothetico-deductive approach was used in this study generally, causes to the application of quantitative methods (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010). It is considered as a scientific approach in nature (Daniel, 2016). It is perceived that quantifiable data has higher precision (Creswell, 2009, as cited in Crowther et. al., 2015). There are a number of advantages for the use of quantitative methods in a research study which have been discussed by Daniel (2016).

A research conducted on articles published in highly reputed international journals in the field of event management has found that 64% of the research works have followed quantitative survey-based methods (Crowther et. al., 2015). This may be an indication that most of the researchers in this field believe that quantitative methods are more important for event research.

The conceptual frame work of the present study was developed based on the literature review. It is noteworthy, that only the internal factors related with managing of the events were considered excluding external factors such as weather conditions. Most prominent seven factors appeared on the previous research studies on regular basis were taken as independent variables of this study.

According to the above discussed conceptual model, there are seven proposed separate individual direct relationships between the independent variables: techniques of project management; availability of competent human resources; leadership, marketing & promotion, cooperation and communication among stakeholders; stakeholder commitment & attitudes;

financial management and the dependent variable: success of international conferences. In addition to that, independent variables are divided in to two categories based on the nature of those as people factors and technical factors. The second category is represented by techniques of project management and financial management while all other five factors belong to the first division.

The following hypotheses for the present study were formulated based on the literature review and the conceptual frame work.

#### Hypothesis 1

The higher the application of the techniques of project management, the higher the success of international conferences.

#### Hypothesis 2

There is a relationship between availability of competent human resources and success of international conferences.

#### Hypothesis 3

There is a relationship between leadership and success of international conferences.

#### Hypothesis 4

There is a relationship between marketing & promotion and success of international conferences.

#### Hypothesis 5

The greater the cooperation and communication among stakeholders, the greater the success of international conferences.

#### Hypothesis 6

The greater the stakeholder commitment and attitude, the greater the success of international conferences.

#### Hypothesis 7

There is a relationship between financial management and success of international conferences.

A Likert scale is used as the main scale of measurement in this study. The Likert scale attitude indicator which is used in this study can be combined into an index

ensuring improved levels of reliability and validity (Neuman, 2014). 42 Likert scale questions' quantitative data of this study were collected using a questionnaire-based survey with utilization of Google Forms as the online survey tool.

According to Getz and Page, a questionnaire-based survey is probably the most popular data collection method which can provide lots of data cheaply and quickly (Getz & Page, 2016 b). It is considered as an efficient mechanism of data collection when the researcher is armed with the information on the requirement of data and the measurement of exact variables (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010). Veal (2011) has discussed reasons for the popularity of questionnaire based survey methods in leisure and tourism studies with merits of the method.

The population of the study is professional conference organizers (PCOs) who have experience of organizing international conferences in Sri Lanka. The sampling frame of the current study is the member companies under the category of PCO (Professional Conference Organizer) of Sri Lanka Association of Professional Conference, Exhibition and Event Organizers (SLAPCEO). There are 13 members under the category in accordance with the official web site of the SLAPCEO (Sri Lanka Association of Professional Conference, Exhibition and Event Organizers [SLAPCEO], 2020).

One member out of those is a sole venue provider now which doesn't organize any international conferences. Therefore, it was excluded in the sample units dropping the number up to 12. The sample of the study represents PCOs as respondents involved in international conference management for those 12 companies as employees. Finally, total number of 84 fully completed questionnaires were returned by the respondents.

The researchers used SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) Version 16.0 (IBM: Armonk, NY, USA) for the data analysis of this study. Regression analysis and ANOVA (analysis of variance) test were used for hypothesis testing.

## Results and discussion

According to the Beta values of the standardized coefficients obtained from the regression analysis, the independent variables with highest to lowest impacts on the dependent variables are shown in the Table No. 1 given below. The highest impact on the dependent variable; success of international conferences has been recorded from the independent variable of stakeholder commitment and attitude marking it as the most important success factor in managing international conferences in Sri Lanka. It is followed by availability of competent human resources which can be recognized as the second most important factor in this context. The third independent variable for the success of international conferences in Sri Lanka in accordance with the statistical values of the above table is marketing & promotion.

Table No. 1: Impact of independent variables on the dependent variable

| Rank | Independent Variable                      | Level of impact (Beta value of standardized coefficient) |
|------|---|--|
| 1.   | Stakeholder commitment and attitude       | .567   |
| 2.   | Availability of competent human resources | .473   |
| 3.   | Marketing & promotion                     | .448   |
| 4.   | Financial management                      | .403   |

|  |   |      |   |      |
|--|---|------|---|------|
| 5.                                       | Techniques of project management                  | .253 | Stakeholder commitment and attitude               | .000 |
| 6.                                       | Co-operation and communication among stakeholders | .241 | Availability of competent human resources         | .000 |
| 7.                                       | Leadership  | .177 | Marketing & promotion                             | .000 |
| Source: Regression analyses of the study |   |      | Financial management                              | .000 |
|  |   |      | Techniques of project management                  | .020 |
|  |   |      | Co-operation and communication among stakeholders | .027 |
|  |   |      | Leadership  | .007 |

Based on the decreasing order of the level of impact, financial management variable has been recorded as the fourth value which indicates that it is the fourth in the level of impact on the success of the international conferences. It is followed by techniques of project management. The second lowest value of the above table is related with co-operation and communication among stakeholders indicating it as the second least important success factor in managing of international conferences in Sri Lanka. The independent variable of leadership has the lowest value. Therefore, it is proven that it has the least impact on the dependent variable of the study making it as the least important success factor among the independent variables of this study in managing international conferences of Sri Lanka. Since, the Beta value of standard coefficient of leadership variable is less than .200, it can be considered as the only less important success factor in this context.

The significance values of the regression tables confirmed confidence of the result as well. Further, according to that one-way ANOVA analysis (Table No. 2), it is revealed that all effects of the independent variables of this study on the dependent variable are significant.

Table No. 2: Significance values of ANOVA analysis

| Independent Variable | Significance Value |
|----------------------|--------------------|
|----------------------|--------------------|

Thus, it is clear that all the independent variables: stakeholder commitment and attitude, availability of competent human resources, marketing & promotion, financial management, techniques of project management, co-operation and communication among stakeholders and leadership can be considered as success factors in managing international conferences of Sri Lanka.

As revealed from the results of the statistical analyses, all seven hypotheses of the present study were proven. According to the first hypothesis, higher application of the techniques of project management result in a higher success for international conferences. The Beta value of the standardized coefficient of the regression analysis is .253 which indicates that when 1 value of the techniques of project management increases there is .253 rise of the success of international conferences. Therefore, it is clear that the higher application of the techniques of project management, the higher the success of the international conferences in Sri Lanka proving the first hypothesis of this study. The significance value of the ANOVA analysis is .020 which indicates a significant impact of the independent variable on the dependent variable.

The second hypothesis indicates that there is a relationship between the



availability of competent human resources and the success of international conferences. The related regression analysis yielded the result of .473 as Beta value of the standardized coefficient. It can be defined that 1 value rise of the availability of competent human resources effects .473 value enhancement of the success of international conferences. Thus, it is possible to interpret that there is a positive relationship between availability of competent human resources and success of international conferences confirming the validity of the second hypothesis. Related ANOVA analysis yielded the result of the significance figure as .000 which proves a significant effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable.

There is a relationship between leadership and the success of international conferences as depicted in the third hypothesis of the present study. When it was tested using regression analysis, the Beta value of the standardized coefficient indicated the value of .177. It can be understood that 1 value of growth of leadership impacts on .177 rise of the success of international conferences. It is obvious that there is a relationship between leadership and the success of international conferences in Sri Lanka. Therefore, it can be stated that the third hypothesis of the present study was proven. The significance value of the related ANOVA test reads as .007 depicting a significant effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable.

The fourth hypothesis says that there is a relationship between marketing & promotion and the success of international conferences. The hypothesis testing regression analysis provided .448 as the related Beta value of the standardized coefficient. It is possible to define that 1 value increase of the marketing & promotion of conferences causes a .448 rise in the success of

international conferences. Thus, it can be concluded that there is a relationship between marketing & promotion and the success of international conferences in Sri Lanka confirming the credibility of the relevant hypothesis. The ANOVA analysis between the two variables yielded the result of significance value of .000. It confirms that there is a significant impact on the dependent variable from the independent variable.

The fifth hypothesis of the present study is that the greater the cooperation and communication among stakeholders, the greater the success of international conferences. The related regression analysis showed the Beta value of standardized coefficient as .241. Therefore, it is possible to explain that 1 value increase of cooperation and communication among stakeholder's effects to .241 increase of the success of international conferences. Since, it is clear that the greater the cooperation and communication among stakeholders, the greater the success of international conferences proving the fifth hypothesis of the present study. .027 is the significance value of the ANOVA analysis on the above variables which proves significant impact of the dependent variable on the independent variable.

The sixth hypothesis states that higher stakeholder commitment and attitude leads to higher success of international conferences. When this hypothesis was tested using regression analysis, the resulted Beta value of standardized coefficient was .567. This clearly indicates that 1 value growth of stakeholder commitment and attitude causes to .567 increase of the success of international conferences. Thus, obviously, the greater the stakeholder commitment and attitude, the greater the success of international conferences ensuring the validity of the sixth hypothesis of the study. The significance value of the ANOVA analysis reads as

.000 which indicates a significant effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable.

There is a relationship between financial management and success of international conferences as indicated in the final; seventh hypothesis. The Beta value of standardized coefficient of the related regression analysis is .403. It can be explained that 1 value increase of financial management leads to .403 improvement of the success of international conferences. Therefore, it is clear that there is a relationship between financial management and success of international conferences in Sri Lanka proving the truthfulness of the final hypothesis of this research project. The ANOVA analysis of the above variable shows the significance value of .000. It proves a significant impact of the independent variable on the dependent variable.

### **Conclusion**

Sri Lanka has failed to make considerable progress in convention tourism with issues related with managing some conferences successfully, although, attempts were made to develop this sector of the tourism industry. Lack of emphasis on success factors in organizing conferences may be

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a factor related to this phenomenon. There is a clear gap of the research literature on the aspect of success factors of conferences. The present study has attempted to address the two issues of convention & event tourism industries of Sri Lanka and conference literature.

This quantitative research aimed to recognize success factors in managing international conferences in Sri Lanka with relative importance of those based on internal management aspects. An online questionnaire survey was applied as the method of data collection from the professional conference organizers. Data analyses were performed using SPSS with regression analysis and one way ANOVA test.

Stakeholder commitment and attitude was identified as the most important success factor in managing international conferences in Sri Lanka which was followed by availability of competent human resources, marketing & promotion, financial management, techniques of project management and co-operation and communication among stakeholders respectively. Leadership was recognized as the only less important success factor in this context.

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