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DIGITAL MICRO-ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND ONLINE GUIDING AS NEW INSTRUMENTS FOR EXPANDING EMPLOYMENT IN TOURISM UNDER THE DIGITAL ECONOMY

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ABSTRACT:

The development of the digital economy is creating new opportunities for expanding employment in the tourism industry. Digital platforms, online guiding services, mobile applications, virtual tourism, and freelance-based services are transforming traditional forms of employment and creating additional sources of income for the population. This article examines the role of innovative digital services in increasing employment opportunities in tourism, with particular attention to the development of local digital platforms and online tourism services. It proposes mechanisms for creating a unified digital marketplace that connects tourists with local guides, translators, accommodation providers, transport operators, artisans, catering enterprises, and other tourism-related service providers. Special attention is paid to involving young people, women, rural residents, and self-employed individuals in the digital tourism economy. The article also identifies organizational, technological, and institutional measures aimed at improving employment mechanisms through digital transformation. The proposed approaches can contribute to increasing self-employment, developing small businesses, expanding regional tourism services, and improving the competitiveness of Uzbekistan's tourism industry.

Introduction. Tourism is one of the important sectors of the modern economy, contributing to economic growth, income generation, entrepreneurship development, and employment creation. The development of tourism also stimulates economic activity in related sectors, including transport, accommodation, catering, trade, handicrafts, information technology, and cultural services.

In the context of the digital economy, traditional approaches to organizing employment in tourism are undergoing significant changes. The development of information and communication technologies has created opportunities for providing tourism services without requiring permanent employment in a particular enterprise. Through digital platforms, individuals can independently offer their professional services, communicate with tourists, receive orders, and generate income.

One of the important directions in this process is the development of online guiding services. Modern tourists increasingly use mobile applications, digital maps, audio guides, and online consultations to obtain information about destinations. This creates new employment opportunities for people who possess knowledge of local history, culture, architecture, foreign languages, and tourism resources.

Therefore, improving employment mechanisms in tourism requires not only increasing the number of traditional jobs but also developing new forms of digital employment, self-employment, and micro-entrepreneurship.

Literature Review and Research Methodology

The digital transformation of tourism has become an important research area in contemporary economic studies. UN Tourism emphasizes that digital transformation influences tourism employment by changing professional requirements, creating new occupations, and increasing the importance of technological and digital competencies.

Digital technologies make it possible to improve the accessibility of tourism services, strengthen communication between service providers and consumers, and expand the participation of small and medium-sized enterprises in the tourism value chain.

The transformation of employment is also associated with the development of online platforms and freelance services. These mechanisms allow individuals to provide services independently, without necessarily establishing traditional enterprises.

The research applies analytical, comparative, systematic, and conceptual modelling methods. The analysis focuses on the relationship between digital tourism services and employment opportunities, while the proposed model identifies practical mechanisms for involving the population in digital tourism activities.

The main research objective is to develop organizational and economic approaches that use digital platforms and online tourism services to expand employment opportunities among the population.

The Role of Digital Platforms in Creating New Employment Opportunities in Tourism

Digital platforms represent an important instrument for connecting tourists with tourism service providers. Unlike traditional employment systems, platform-based services allow individuals to participate in the tourism market according to their professional skills, available time, and local resources.

For example, a person who knows the historical monuments of Samarkand can register as a local guide on a digital platform and offer guided tours to domestic and international tourists. Similarly, individuals who speak foreign languages can provide translation services, while local residents can offer accommodation, transportation, traditional food preparation, and handicraft workshops.

The introduction of specialized digital platforms can create the following employment opportunities:

1. Online guiding services. Local residents with knowledge of historical and cultural heritage can provide online consultations, virtual excursions, and live guided tours. Such services create additional income opportunities for professional and non-professional guides.

2. Digital translation services. People who speak foreign languages can provide translation, interpretation, and tourist assistance services through online platforms.

3. Freelance tourism services. Individuals can independently offer photography, video production, content creation, digital marketing, and travel planning services.

4. Digital accommodation services. Owners of houses, guesthouses, and family accommodation facilities can promote their services, accept online reservations, and communicate directly with tourists.

5. Local gastronomic services. Families and small entrepreneurs can offer national cuisine, culinary master classes, traditional food preparation, and gastronomic experiences.

6. Digital handicraft services. Craftsmen can promote their products through online marketplaces, organize workshops, and provide cultural experiences for tourists.

These activities demonstrate that digitalization can expand employment beyond traditional tourism enterprises and involve a wider range of the population in economic activity.

Development of a Unified Digital Platform for Tourism Employment

One of the proposed approaches to increasing employment in tourism is the creation of a specialized digital platform that integrates tourism service providers and potential customers.

The proposed platform could operate under the conditional name "Digital Tourism Employment Platform". Its primary objective would be to connect people seeking employment or additional income with tourists and tourism enterprises requiring different types of services.

The platform could include the following functional sections:

Local Guide Marketplace. This section would enable local guides to register, indicate their professional qualifications, languages, service prices, and available working hours. Tourists could select guides according to their interests and make online reservations.

Online Tourism Services. This section would provide opportunities for offering virtual excursions, online consultations, translation, travel planning, and remote tourist assistance.

Freelance Employment. Individuals could register their professional skills and receive temporary or project-based orders from tourism enterprises.

Family Tourism Business. Rural households and family businesses could promote accommodation, traditional meals, agricultural activities, handicrafts, and cultural experiences.

Digital Training Centre. The platform would provide online courses in foreign languages, digital marketing, tourism management, customer service, and guiding skills.

Employment and Income Monitoring. This section would collect information about registered service providers, completed orders, income opportunities, and the number of individuals involved in tourism activities.

The proposed platform would not simply function as a tourism information resource. It would also serve as a mechanism for organizing employment, promoting entrepreneurship, and connecting the population with the tourism services market.

Online Guiding as an Innovative Form of Employment

Online guiding is one of the promising directions for creating new employment opportunities in the digital tourism economy.

Traditional guiding services generally require the physical presence of a guide and tourists at a particular destination. However, digital technologies allow guides to provide services through video communication, virtual tours, audio recordings, and interactive digital maps.

For example, a local guide in Samarkand could conduct a live virtual excursion to Registan Square, Gur-Emir Mausoleum, or Shah-i-Zinda. Tourists from other countries could purchase these services without physically visiting the destination.

The development of online guiding can create several economic benefits:

- Increasing income opportunities for qualified and independent guides.
- Expanding the market for foreign-language specialists.
- Creating flexible employment opportunities for young people.
- Providing additional employment opportunities for women and people living in rural areas.
- Promoting cultural heritage through digital services.
- Reducing the dependence of tourism service providers on seasonal tourist flows.

In addition, online guiding can be combined with traditional tourism services. For instance, a guide may provide virtual consultations before a tourist's arrival and organize an actual excursion after the tourist reaches the destination.

Thus, online guiding should be considered not only as a new form of tourism service but also as an additional instrument for diversifying employment in the sector.

Digital Employment Opportunities for Rural Population and Youth

The development of digital tourism creates opportunities to involve population groups that traditionally have limited access to formal employment in tourism enterprises.

In rural areas, local residents possess valuable knowledge of natural resources, traditional lifestyles, national cuisine, historical sites, and cultural traditions. However, insufficient marketing opportunities and limited access to tourism markets often prevent them from converting these resources into stable sources of income.

Digital platforms can help overcome these barriers by allowing rural residents to offer their services directly to potential tourists.

For example, rural households could register their services and offer:

- Traditional national meals and gastronomic experiences.
- Participation in agricultural and rural tourism activities.
- Traditional handicraft workshops.
- Accommodation in family guesthouses.
- Horse riding and nature-based excursions.
- Local cultural and educational programmes.

Young people can also become active participants in the digital tourism market by developing mobile applications, creating tourism content, managing social media accounts, producing promotional videos, and providing digital marketing services.

To support these activities, it is important to establish short-term vocational training programmes that combine tourism knowledge with practical digital skills.

Organizational and Economic Mechanisms for Improving Digital Employment

The expansion of digital employment requires an integrated approach involving public institutions, educational organizations, tourism enterprises, and private technology companies.

The following mechanisms are proposed:

First, establish regional digital tourism employment platforms that connect local service providers with domestic and international tourists.

Second, introduce a system of digital registration and professional profiles for independent guides, translators, photographers, and other tourism service providers.

Third, develop short-term training programmes in foreign languages, digital marketing, online customer relations, and tourism service management.

Fourth, encourage tourism enterprises to cooperate with freelancers and self-employed individuals through transparent digital contracting mechanisms.

Fifth, provide technical and consulting support for women, young people, and rural households interested in developing digital tourism businesses.

Sixth, introduce electronic payment systems and transparent service evaluation mechanisms to strengthen trust between tourists and service providers.

Seventh, develop cooperation between universities, vocational institutions, local authorities, and IT companies to create innovative tourism employment projects.

An important condition for the effectiveness of these mechanisms is the protection of personal data, transparent platform commissions, fair access to digital opportunities, and compliance with labour and tax legislation.

Proposed Model for Expanding Employment through Digital Tourism Platforms

Based on the analysis, the following conceptual model is proposed for increasing employment opportunities in tourism.

The model consists of five interconnected stages:

Stage 1. Digital identification of employment resources. Identification of individuals possessing professional skills, foreign-language knowledge, cultural expertise, and tourism-related resources.

Stage 2. Digital training and qualification development. Providing access to online courses, professional training, and digital competence development programmes.

Stage 3. Platform registration and service integration. Registering service providers and integrating their offers into a unified digital tourism marketplace.

Stage 4. Digital service delivery and income generation. Connecting service providers with tourists, processing orders, organizing payments, and generating employment income.

Stage 5. Monitoring and evaluation. Assessing the number of active service providers, completed orders, income generated, and the sustainability of employment.

The proposed model is expected to improve the relationship between labour resources, digital infrastructure, tourism demand, and income generation.

Its effectiveness can be evaluated using the following indicators:

1. Number of individuals registered on digital tourism platforms.
2. Number of newly created digital tourism jobs.
3. Number of active online guides.
4. Number of self-employed individuals involved in tourism.
5. Volume of tourism services provided through digital platforms.
6. Number of women and young people participating in digital tourism activities.
7. Average income generated by digital tourism service providers.
8. Number of rural households involved in digital tourism.

These indicators can be used by regional tourism authorities and relevant institutions to assess the contribution of digital platforms to employment growth.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The digital economy is transforming the structure of employment in tourism and creating new opportunities for involving the population in economic activities. Digital platforms, online guiding, freelance services, virtual excursions, and electronic marketplaces can become important instruments for expanding employment beyond traditional tourism enterprises.

The research demonstrates the importance of shifting from a traditional employment-oriented approach towards a more flexible system that combines formal employment, self-employment, digital entrepreneurship, and temporary service provision.

For Uzbekistan, the development of regional digital tourism platforms is particularly relevant because of the country's rich historical, cultural, gastronomic, and natural tourism resources.

The following recommendations are proposed:

1. Develop a specialized digital platform connecting tourists with local guides and independent tourism service providers.
2. Introduce online guiding and virtual excursion services as additional sources of employment and income.
3. Expand digital tourism entrepreneurship among young people, women, and rural residents.
4. Organize training programmes focused on foreign languages, digital marketing, and online tourism services.
5. Encourage cooperation between tourism enterprises and freelance service providers.
6. Promote local gastronomic, cultural, ecological, and rural tourism products through digital marketplaces.
7. Establish a monitoring system to evaluate the economic and employment effects of digital tourism platforms.

In conclusion, the effective integration of digital platforms into the tourism employment system can contribute to increasing the economic activity of the population, developing new forms of entrepreneurship, diversifying household incomes, and strengthening the competitiveness of Uzbekistan's tourism industry. The main priority should be to ensure that digital transformation creates not only technological innovations but also accessible, sustainable, and economically beneficial employment opportunities for different population groups.

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